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Media, Culture, & Identity

Dr. Tilton

Reflection: Media’s Role in the Declination of Justin Bieber’s Mental Health

Why did you select this topic?

When I was in 5th grade, I heard *One Time* by Justin Bieber for the first time. I immediately became infatuated with Justin’s music, talent, cute looks, and overall essence. I had no idea the impact he would make on the next 11+ years of my life. He became my idol. My walls were covered with so many posters that the paint was invisible. My teachers in middle school called me ‘Mrs. Bieber’, everybody knew that I was a superfan, and everybody supported me. I even made it on the news in 2012 when I fainted at his Madison Square Garden concert after I threw my phone on stage and he took selfies on it. However, as Bieber grew older, all negative aspects of his teenage years were highlighted in the media, and his impeccable reputation declined, as did mine. People would make fun of me for idolizing somebody who was represented in such a gruesome light, and I became very frustrated. I followed his life closely through news, his own social media, movies, fan accounts, and even met him a few times. I knew that deep down he was a good person, but it was hard for me to explain that to people when the media had such a different idea of who he was. I chose to focus my Final Cut on Justin Bieber’s mental health declination due to media **representation**, **ideology**, and **surveillance** because it is a discussion I’ve been trying to share since I was 11 years old. When given the opportunity to map out, through media (which was the largest proponent to his downfall) the ways that his life had been affected by these 3 keywords, it seemed like a [no brainer](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxloC1MKTpg) (pun intended).

What is the argument of your piece?

In my piece, I argue that Justin Bieber developed mental health problems due to the media’s negative representation of him, the constant surveillance he was put under by the public, and the perfect ‘celebrity ideology’ that he was unable to fulfill. In 2013, Justin Bieber was diagnosed with depression and quickly began using drugs like Adderall, marijuana, cocaine, lean and Xanax. Bieber never had a normal childhood, as he has been under the media spotlight since he was 12 years old. He never got to be a ‘normal teenager’ because every mistake he made was turned into a news story. Not only did he face this white-hot spotlight, but the paparazzi often harassed him and put him in uncomfortable situations in order to get a reaction out of him, so that the negative representation could continue. He didn’t know how to deal with all this pressure, having few real mentors or close friends, which ultimately led him to cancelling his tour with 14 shows left and pausing his music career for years. His story is an exceptional example of how the media and these three keywords can completely alter somebody’s life. This is something we’ve seen through other keywords like *stereotype* as well, as black stereotypes can ultimately result in fatal outcomes. Overall, I argued that through the media, Justin Bieber combatted surveillance and negative media representation, which resulted in his inability to be the ‘ideal’ celebrity, which affected his mental health and personality as a whole.

What are the three keywords that you chose to apply and why? Did you consider other keywords? If so, why did you choose the ones that you did?

The keywords I chose were surveillance, representation, and ideology. The term *surveillance*, or “watching over”, encapsulates Bieber’s life[[1]](#footnote-1). As demonstrated in my video, simple tasks like walking to his car or going grocery shopping were nearly impossible for him as his privacy was totally invaded by money-driven journalists, paparazzi, and fans who sometimes disregarded him as a human. As he went through his teenage life and tried to find himself, each mistake he made was dramatized and **represented** negatively in the media.[[2]](#footnote-2) One platform that has always stood out to me in particular is TMZ, a site that aggressively and heartlessly grilled Bieber’s every action for years.[[3]](#footnote-3) I believe that this media platform *alone* is one of the main reasons Bieber’s mental state was affected so intensely, as he sometimes would publicly refute and shame the site. Finally, I used the keyword **ideology** to demonstrate Justin’s inability to be the ‘ideal celebrity’ or role model.[[4]](#footnote-4) Unintentionally, Justin became a role model for millions of young people worldwide. His fame happened somewhat randomly and quickly, when he was discovered by now-manager Scooter Braun in 2008. Justin was just 13 years old. This pressure that was thrown upon him at such a young age eventually became tremendously difficult to uphold and fulfil, as he was unable to live his life, find himself, and grow up while maintaining the ‘ideal celebrity’ status that the media so desperately demanded of him. I also considered incorporating other keywords like media, **power**, and identity, but felt that they were too broad and that the other three keywords that I chose alluded to them sufficiently.

How and why did you make decisions for the pieces of media that you used?

Being such a big Bieber fan, I struggled with picking which pieces of media I wanted to use. Within the past 11 years I have seen him being represented in interviews, movies, concert tapes, social media platforms (both his own, fan accounts, and critics’), news articles, and more. I eventually decided to include YouTube compilations like *Justin Bieber Funniest Moments*, clips from his movie, *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never*, and some of my favorite interviews.[[5]](#footnote-5) [[6]](#footnote-6) Those are the pieces that stood out to me most when I was young– they made me, and so many others, so obsessed with him because he was represented and celebrated to such a high extent. In the second half of my video essay, I included a mix of YouTube clips like *Justin Bieber: Angry Worst Paparazzi Moments*, negative news articles and video clips by TMZ, and snippets from his 2019 interview with Vogue.[[7]](#footnote-7) [[8]](#footnote-8) I chose these pieces because they were the media I remember aggravating me the most throughout Bieber’s career, because of the way he was disregarded as a human. There are so many articles and videos of Justin Bieber living online that I found it challenging to include everything I wanted in order to articulate my argument effectively. I thought about including interviews of Bieber on shows like *Jimmy Fallon* and In *Between Two Ferns*, in which he was called out face-to-face about the immature decisions he has made, but decided to focus more on surveillance and negative media representation instead in order to keep my video essay consistent.

How did the process of making your video shape how you understand media, culture, and identity?

Prior to taking this class, when I thought of the term ‘media’ I mainly thought of social media. I had never studied different types of media, their historical significances, and the impact that they can have; the partial idea of ‘media’ that I had in January was evident in the landscapes we drew on the first day of class. Through my own video essay and after viewing my classmates’ videos, I have come to understand the tremendous impact that media can have on culture and society. I have learned to notice specific film tactics, like a black screen, silence, fast/slow clips, different types of shots, and music selection, and analyze their effect. In my own video, I used silence, black screen, screenshots and screen recordings, and different types of shots in order to create a dramatic effect to strengthen my argument.[[9]](#footnote-9) Additionally, I noticed the importance of including a variety of media in order to effectively portray an argument, as I struggled doing this within the 5 minute limit. This process taught me to organize an outline prior to starting the project, and to be selective in the media I choose to include. I used effects and transitions to make the most of my media selection. Finally, I learned a lot about my personal topic, which would have been impossible if I hadn’t studied the media so intently. I had always understood that Bieber disliked the media, but until I sat down and studied specific media and laid them out in chronological order, I hadn’t seen the severity of the connection. This project forced me to recognize the **power** of the media and the ways people can use this power in a strong, negative and harmful way, which in turn made me reflect on the way that I share and repost my own media on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Things that count as ‘public information’ that journalists have the “duty” to post in order to inform the public can sometimes be life-altering for somebody like Bieber. My project made me wonder, what would Justin Bieber be like if he existed in a pre-social media era? Would he still be pursuing his music career, would he be on tour, would he be successful, and would he have been able to escape the mental health disaster that he has struggled with for six years?

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