

STUDENT RESEARCH WEEK

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Continuation of the Pocahontas Paradox: Stereotypes of Aboriginal Women Presented in Halloween Costumes

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Abstract

The present study examined Halloween costumes to see how Aboriginal women are presented through costume descriptions. A content analysis was used to examine 52 Adult Women's costume advertisements with a Native American theme from Spirit Halloween and Costume Super Centre. All selected ads contained the words "Native", "Indian" or a word suggestive of Aboriginal culture such as "Pocahottie", "Wolf Warrior", or "Tribal" in the title. Each ad was examined on the basis of its costume title, costume characteristics and costume descriptions. Results showed that the majority of costume titles included words that emphasized sexuality such as the word "Sexy", "Hottie", "Temptress" and "Pocahottie". The second most prevalent word was "Indian". Other titles frequently included the word "Princess", or a cultural reference such as "Pow-Wow". The vast majority of the costumes contained a headdress (96%) and fringed clothing (95%). The most common theme evident in the descriptions was that of attracting men with the costume. With claims such "Plenty of men will be beating their American Indian drums for you..." and "Have all the men chanting your name...". The second most common theme was that of doing Indian activities, such as "beading" and "sending smoke". The third most common theme was that of being the "Warrior", "Rebellious Indian" and the "wild one". Unlike the representations, Aboriginal cultures are varied not only in their cultures and ways, but also in their clothing. Although it was mainly the Plains Indians that wore fringed clothing, and headdresses were not traditionally a woman's item, the majority of costumes contained both headdresses and fringed clothing. Stereotyped costumes give the impression that all Aboriginal cultures are the same, and not their own distinct peoples. Moreover, accompanying descriptions often either stated how the costume will help attract men, or how aboriginal ways will attract men, sexualizing the nature of Aboriginal traditions

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and activities. Other descriptions stated how one can become a rebellious Indian or a warrior in the costume and leave behind the boring Aboriginal ways. These descriptions undermine the ways of Aboriginal women, identify traditional ways as boring, and perpetuate the notion that Aboriginal life is an unsatisfactory one (i.e., themes of join the party, escape the reservation or find some men). These descriptions also suggest how one should act as an Aboriginal woman, how to view Aboriginal women and they ultimately reinforce the stereotypes about them.