

Research suggests American Indians are finding 'image power' with social media

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Female teenager, playing a drum. Credit: ThinkStock

Throughout the United States' history, American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities have struggled with misrepresented portrayals in media and entertainment, ranging from silly

characterizations to harmful stereotypes.

To understand how these communities are taking action on their own behalf, researchers in the College of Information Sciences and Technology (IST) are exploring ways AIAN communities are using [social media platforms](#) like Instagram to reclaim "image power"—the ability to visually craft their own narratives about their culture. Instagram is particularly interesting because it emphasizes images.

Rich Caneba, a doctoral student in IST, is working to understand how members of AIAN communities self-represent their culture, in part because "the visual representation of American Indians by this broader Western society hasn't typically been done by the American Indian community itself."

This was highlighted for him during a previous research effort, when Caneba interviewed an American Indian man and asked him what he wanted people outside of his reservation to know about him and his culture.

The subject, a 64-year old former truck driver who hasn't had a drink in 40 years, said, "I'd like them to know we're not all drunks. Sure every society has one or two. But when they assume everyone is, that's just wrong."

Topical examples ranging from the names and logos used with sports teams like the Cleveland Indians and the Washington Redskins, to popular films like Disney's "Pocahontas," demonstrate how the community's narrative and visual identity is largely constructed by those external to the AIAN communities.

"These images are especially powerful in today's media environment, where we can share images more easily," Caneba explained.

To conduct his research, Caneba explored how AIAN populations represent themselves on Instagram as a way to uncover not only how these populations want to be viewed from a broader societal perspective, but also how they perceive themselves.

The result is his study, "Native American Cultural Identity through Imagery: An Activity Theory Approach to Image-Power," which was co-authored with Carleen Maitland, associate professor of IST, and was recently published in the Proceedings of the 2017 annual conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development.

In a qualitative effort, Caneba and Maitland identified 29 Instagram accounts, and fully examined seven that were determined to be appropriate advocates for the AIAN community.

Through their results, Caneba said these advocates were able to portray "a more complete, nuanced picture of their community. [Through Instagram], that image representation is shared broadly, not just with their community, so it does a play a powerful role in our awareness of what a group is."

The examples he found most poignant were photos surrounding the recent protests related to the construction of the Keystone Access Pipeline.

"While I was conducting the analysis, I could see it playing out in front of my eyes," Caneba said. "You would see the emotions, the anger, the hope—these were all conveyed through powerful imagery by members within these communities. And those images, shared on social media, become incorporated into a broader awareness."

By posting about their experiences, AIAN advocates are able to provide a window into their culture, rather than being resigned to the stereotypes

foisted upon them by external groups.

Caneba also readily admits his background, as ethnically Filipino, doesn't fully inform his research into the AIAN communities.

"There is an inherent limitation to my ability to understand, at a nuanced level, what the community is trying to say with an image," he explained. "That's not to say there's no value in what a cultural outsider can bring to analysis, but it's important to be forthcoming."

As the use of [social media](#) grows, Caneba believes these communities will be able to wield more control over their image power.

"Where this effect has been strongest is with its youngest members," he said. "Instagram will continue to be useful going forward, as these advocates become older and have more to say."

More information: Native American Cultural Identity through Imagery: An Activity Theory Approach to Image-Power Conference Paper. November 2017. [DOI: 10.1145/3136560.3136581](https://doi.org/10.1145/3136560.3136581)

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