

Running head: MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC  
RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP  
EXPECTATIONS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF APPLIED AND PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

OF

RUTGERS,

THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

BY

BRITTANI N HUDSON

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

AUGUST 2020

APPROVED:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Shalonda Kelly, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Ph.D.

DEAN:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Francine Conway, Ph.D.

# MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

Copyright 2020 by Brittani Nicole Hudson

# MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

## Abstract

Television media has long depicted Black or African American women and their romantic relationships in stereotypical ways. Studies have consistently found that these stereotypical portrayals negatively impact Black women in many salient life areas including well-being, self-esteem, and racial identity. There is, however, a dearth of literature that specifically examines these stereotypical portrayals on Black women's expectations of romantic relationships. Through the lens of Cultivation Theory, the current study examined 15 single, professional Black women's perceptions and feelings regarding televisions messages about their identity group and their romantic relationships, its impact on their identities and well-being, as well as their related expectations of romantic relationships. The findings show that because of stereotypical portrayals, Black women experience stereotype threat, diminished self-esteem, diminished mental health, and lowered expectations of finding and maintaining successful romantic relationships. Yet, despite these impacts, current study participants still discussed having positive racial identity and higher self-esteem.

# MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

## Acknowledgements

I first have to acknowledge the incredible God-given grace and mercy I've experienced throughout my journey to this point. I thank God for ordering my steps and guiding me through both the moments of success and the moments of strife that pushed me to grow, and also confirmed and transformed my passion for this field.

I've been blessed with a beyond supportive village, and I'm incredibly grateful for the copious amounts of encouragement and love that have carried me through to this point. I can never adequately express my gratitude to my family, my mentors, my sorority sisters, and my friends. All of you have believed in me when I could not do so myself. All of you have cheered for my wins when I was too lost in the mire to recognize them. All of you have shown me who I am through the reflection of your love and belief in me in moments when I was unable to offer either to myself. Thus, this degree is not at all mine alone.

To my mother, I am only here because you, in your own accomplishments have inspired me to follow in your footsteps. I knew that if you earned your doctorate, I had no choice but to do the same. I've seen all the ways you've shown incredible fortitude to overcome and do everything you set your mind to do, and that has been my blueprint. My personal mission remains to make you proud in everything that I do, just so that I can have the opportunity to live up to the example and the standard of excellence you've set. I can't think of a single moment or way that you didn't support me and hold me up as only MY mother can. I know whose daughter I am, and the stock from whom I come. The word for the level of "thank you" you deserve does not exist, but I only hope that my daily life will serve to express it for me. I just love you so much!

## MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

To my father, being pushed through some of my toughest moments has shown me just how much we are alike. I thank you for gifting me your quiet strength and the moments you may not have recognized that you've shown up for me to give me the push I truly needed to make it through some of my toughest days. I hope that I make you proud of who I am and that I can live up to the ways you expect me to be great. I love you!

In effort to avoid writing a dissertation that proceeds my dissertation, I will thank the rest of my family together for your love, and pride, and support, in the multitude of ways that you all have done. Please do not take my failure to enumerate individual acknowledgments as devaluing any of you who are invaluable in my life. There are pointed moments of recognition that I could list for everyone which have all served to carry me through this journey. I am thankful that I belong to you all, I love you, and I hope that I can make you proud always!

To my mentor and chair, Shalonda, I came to GSAPP specifically to work with you and I know that that decision was the most important one I could have made for this academic and professional journey. I thank you for your unwavering support, and advocacy, and encouragement so that I would complete this dissertation and degree no matter what. I also thank you for your patience and steady expectation that I grow to be the best and most fulfilled Black woman and psychologist I can be. I love you and am forever grateful!

To my mentor and co-chair, Nancy, from the moment of interview day, if I ever underestimated myself, you never let me forget that I was absolutely and positively capable. I do not consider myself a quitter, but there are surely moments that I would have very strongly reconsidered continuing along this path if not for you stepping in in perfect timing, with the perfect words, and the perfect reminder that my only option was to keep going. Every way that you have supported me has been incredibly invaluable. I love you and am forever grateful!

## MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

To the dean of GSAPP, Fran, thank you for being a great example just for who you are and for the many ways I've been able to know you are in my corner, even though I am only one of many students.

To my sorority sisters the world over, but especially those of you spread across California and New Jersey, I thank you. The blessing to be amongst your number is motivation and inspiration enough, but you all have been true sisters, in ways that I never could've imagined or even known I needed. I left sisters in my hometown who did not let 2,000 miles separate us or cause you to wane in your love and support for me. I moved to New Jersey completely alone and from the day I found sisters here, I have never been lonely or in need of even the single, slightest thing. You all have been there to allow me, and even sometimes make me lean on the shield in moments of weakness and triumph. How I can repay that or express enough gratitude for that, I honestly do not know. I do know that this sisterhood, this love, and this bond are all truly a serious matter! I love you all so, so much! Thank you all so, so much!

To my friends, my circle across all spheres is amazing! Daily I am inspired to rise up and be the best version of myself, because I see the majestic, intelligent, powerful, successful, beautiful Black excellence that is my most inner circle. I am so proud of who we have become and who we are continuing to grow to be. Thank you for every check-in, encouraging word, lunch date, night out, vent session, and the list goes on, that have all been exactly what I needed to keep me going! I love you all!

To Doc, my therapist, I thank you for giving me permission to be fully me, for holding me in esteem, and teaching me to be just a little less hard on myself. Without creating HIPAA violations or crossing boundaries, I truly needed to acknowledge how much therapy has been so important in building me up along this journey. I know, without a doubt, it would look very

## MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

different if I had not landed in your office. Of all didactics and training I've now amassed, you've been the best teacher! Thank you so, so much!

To my girlfriend, Emani, this last acknowledgment is certainly not the least. Though we are still fairly new, I can't imagine that this last stretch of this process would look the same without you. While I would've seen it through, it might have been with far fewer happy days than I have been fortunate to have now that you are by my side. Already you've been the most incredible supporter, and motivator, and encourager I could possibly hope for in a partner. Your words and your deeds have been exactly what I needed to continue to refresh me so that I could push when I have felt that I was running out of steam. While this culmination has been a long time coming, your arrival has left a significant mark along the path. I truly thank you so much for everything that you are to me! I love you!

# MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN'S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	2
Cultivation Theory.....	2
Media & Black Women.....	5
Effects of Media Depictions.....	8
METHODS.....	13
Participants.....	13
Procedures.....	16
RESULTS.....	19
DISCUSSION.....	34
Limitations.....	42
Implications.....	43
Future Research.....	45
CONCLUSION.....	46
APPENDICES.....	48
REFERENCES.....	56



# MEDIA’S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN’S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Participant Demographics.....	14
Table 2: Television Viewing Habits.....	16
Table 3: Participant Pseudonyms.....	17

MEDIA’S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN’S ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP  
EXPECTATIONS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Genres Watched.....	15
-------------------------------	----

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of media portrayals of Black women and their relationships on the real-world beliefs and experiences of Black women. As Black women have made great strides in educational attainment, workforce participation, and earned income, there has been increasing discussion in popular media about who they are as a group, including about discussion about how they are portrayed in entertainment media (Harris, 2015). However, the academic literature has not quite caught up to the popular media discussion to thoroughly examine the media's impact on Black women as a specific group.

Further, media has increasingly focused on professional Black women's lower marriage rates (Wanzo, 2011). As Black women have made these great individual strides, Black couples continue to face unique challenges (Kelly & Hudson, 2017). Academic literature has examined the broad impact of the portrayals of romantic relationships in the media on the development of relationship beliefs and expectations. However, an examination of the media's specific influence on Black women and their relationships is a gap in the literature that this study seeks to fill.

From the perspective of clinical psychology, understanding the impact of the media on Black women is important, as media messaging can play a role in the symptoms Black women are experiencing when they present for treatment (Ashley, 2014). This study also has interdisciplinary implications, as an exploration of the impact of media is an important contribution to the mass media and communications literature. The specific focus on Black women is further important for ethnic studies, as well as women and gender studies literature.

## **Literature Review**

### **Cultivation Theory**

There are many theories that address how media can impact individuals' perceptions of self and their identity groups. The current study will focus on Cultivation Theory to examine if and how Black women's beliefs and expectations about themselves and their romantic relationships are cultivated through the television shows that they watch. Cultivation Theory states that cultivation is the process in which societies develop shared beliefs about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence through mass media messaging, including messaging that does not have to be true (Gerbner, 1969). Particular emphasis of the theory's application to television is placed on the effects of exposure on entire communities and not individuals (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015). Specifically, television programs present a systematic distortion of reality and frequent exposure to these distortions leads whole communities to internalize them (Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2004; Shrum & Lee, 2012). This is because those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent television messages (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

As it was originally developed, Cultivation Theory incorporated six main tenets. The first three established television as sending pervasive and homogenous messages: 1) television is the most prevalent form of media, 2) television is more convenient than other media, 3) television requires no literacy and allows nonreaders to share culture with the literate (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015). The next three tenets posited that there was no differentiation in how communities consume television media because 1) the totality of the system of messages is most important for it to serve its social function, 2) there are no separate systems of narratives based

on any differentiated groups (i.e. messages sent/received are the same across demographic groups), and 3) minority groups are forced to see their image reflected through the perspective of messages designed by and for the majority (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015). It is important to note that beliefs that are cultivated through media exposure are based on individuals' perceptions of realism of television portrayals (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Jerald, Ward, Moss, Thomas & Fletcher (2017) studied media's contribution to endorsement of traditional gender ideologies and stereotypes about Black women and found that frequent media consumption and attributing greater realism to media content was associated with accepting more stereotypical notions of Black women in a sample of 404 Black college students.

#### *Genre-Specific Cultivation Analysis*

Modern television includes producers who are targeting specific demographic segments of the population through genre-specific content (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Thus, an examination of modern television requires analysis of specific television genres and the different possible effects on their targeted demographics. Researchers that examine genre-specific cultivation share the view that different types of programs present diverse views of the world and cultivate distinct conceptions of social reality (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015). More recent cultivation studies have found evidence that genre-specific television exposure predicts beliefs about the social world, and different genres are likely to have divergent effects on real-world beliefs. These associations have been shown to be stronger than associations based on total television consumption (Lee & Niederdeppe, 2011). As an example, television network news frequently reports negative images of Black people and their communities, including poverty and criminality, and body of research has previously determined that viewing network news television shapes racial perceptions (Dixon, 2008). A study of 506 diverse individuals in a large

city found that network news exposure was associated with the endorsement of racism as well as the specific stereotypes that African Americans are poor and intimidating. Segrin and Nabi (2002) surveyed 285 undergraduate students and found that viewing television shows whose topics are specifically about relationships (i.e. romantic comedies and soap operas) is associated with idealistic expectations about marital relationships and marital intentions. These studies are evidence that specific genres have different effects on views towards marriage and romance (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015), as well as beliefs about race (Dixon, 2008). However, studies have yet to look at the specific genres of television most popular amongst Black women and their impact on Black women's mental health and relationships. The current study will examine the genres most watched by Black women and examine these specific genres to understand their association, if any to Black women's racial identity, self-esteem, mental health, and their beliefs about romantic relationships.

An important factor that has been found to contribute to differential effects of different genres is content. Content analyses have revealed that television genres vary in structure, like production quality, which includes camera and editing techniques, and content, and these differences have varying influences on audiences (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Structural differences, such as production quality influence information processing, including comprehension and memory for content, which impacts cultivation, and there are findings that nonfiction genres more strongly correlate with cultivation effects than fiction genres, specifically in cultivating perceptions of crime, fear of it, and protective behavior (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Findings such as these may be particularly important for Black women as they are increasingly represented in variable genres of television. Previously, most portrayals of Black women were found on Black situation comedies (Gordon, 2008). For these reasons, the current study will examine the impact

of the currently most popular shows amongst Black women, with particular consideration of the way the main Black women characters are portrayed.

### **Media and Black Women**

The intersection of African American women's unique identities as ethnic and gendered minorities creates attitudes and beliefs about them such as that they are seen as hostile, unfeminine, overbearing, and aggressive (Ashley, 2014). These attitudes and beliefs are often developed, in part, through exposure to stereotypical portrayals of Black women. Television media, in particular, serves to perpetuate assumptions about who are Black women (Harris-Perry, 2011). These women are frequently portrayed in media as unattractive, threatening, hypersexualized, and inferior to all others (Williams & Gonlin, 2017). In American television, Black women have traditionally been either absent or portrayed with unidimensional and stereotypical characters (Pixley, 2015; Toms-Anthony, 2018). In recent decades, iterations of these stereotypes have created an either/or binary for Black women characters in which they are either reinforcing negative stereotypes or skewing completely towards representations that are highly respectable (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014). As examples, they are commonly either extremely educated or high school dropouts, ambitious or listless, sexy or ugly (Boylorn, 2008). Brown (2015) states that,

"Black women are almost always situated on either side of these different binaries that trap them in essentialized character portrayals. While there is meaningful push back against the 'single-mother-on-drugs' roles that were often relegated to Black actresses in years past, the over-correction of playing characters who are respectable, hair-flipping, boardroom bosses also works to pigeonhole Black women into stagnant portrayals."

Media depictions of Black women are often centered on their femininity and sexuality. For Black women, the expression of their sexuality may be influenced by media images. These images and portrayals, with their lack of variability and predominant reliance on negative stereotypes, create sexual scripts by which Black women experience their own sexuality and the lens through which others perceive their sexuality. Three scripts have remained dominant throughout the history of depictions of Black women, stemming from slavery (Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010). These are the Jezebel, who is perceived as seductive, manipulative, and unable to control her sexual desire; the Mammy who is asexual and commonly the nanny, housekeeper, and cook; and the Sapphire who emerged with the advent of television and is seen as loud, crude, callous, argumentative and who takes pleasure in emasculating men (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014; Lambert, 2017; Townsend et al, 2010).

Television consistently updates these scripts as culture changes, which gives more freedom to how depictions of Black women represent these stereotypes (Boylorn, 2008). Stephen and Philips (2003) identified modern stereotypical sexual scripts of African American women. These scripts include the Freak, the Video Girl, the Gold Digger, the Gangster Bitch and the Diva on one end of a spectrum representing hyper-sexuality, and the Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and the Dyke on an opposite end representing hypo-sexuality or sexuality to spite male partners. As an example, the Dyke chooses homosexuality as an act of revenge against male partners who have hurt her. The last script is the Baby Mama. Additional research has identified a newer script, the Superwoman. Each of these scripts are defined below.

Many common scripts include hypersexuality. The Freak is sexually aggressive and wild, while the Gold Digger seeks material and economic gain (Stephens & Philips, 2003). The Diva is representative of higher socioeconomic classes of women and while her sexuality is less overt,



it is still obvious through her ultra-feminine appearance and behaviors that reflect middle-class beliefs about women's sexual role behaviors (Stephens & Philips, 2003). The Video Girl uses her sexuality to advance her career in the entertainment industry (Ross & Coleman, 2011). The Gangster Bitch embodies aggression and emotional strength, comes from underserved neighborhoods, and supports her male partners under any circumstances. The Gangster Bitch script is also akin to the Welfare Queen, who is a modern Jezebel described as exuding sexuality, urban, lower-class, sexually and verbally promiscuous, and fertile (Boylorn, 2008).

Conversely, the hyposexuality scripts are on the other end of the sexual spectrum. The Sister Savior's view is that sex is to be avoided due to moral issues within her religious context. The Earth Mother has a more developed sense of self and sexual identity and values Afrocentric political and spiritual consciousness. The Dyke is portrayed as sexless or deriving her sexual pleasure from rejecting men by choosing lesbian relationships (Stephens & Philips, 2003). The Baby Mama script can be perceived as all encompassing, as this script is enacted once a child is born or present, and her sexuality is only important in that she had sex and produced a child for a man. Usually a representation of a single mother, this script is non-binary in terms of negativity and positivity because single motherhood is not abnormal and is often glorified amongst the African American community (Stephens & Philips, 2003).

The Superwoman or Strong Black Woman is also a common depiction, described as a middle-class professional and highly educated African American woman who ably juggles multiple professional and personal responsibilities as a high achieving, selfless, go-to person (Lambert, 2017; Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). A common belief about African American women that is frequently depicted on television, is that the strong Black woman is not vulnerable to hardships (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). This stereotype is seen as

culturally ideal and a psychological coping mechanism for Black women (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019). The Superwoman or Strong Black Woman prioritizes other's needs and manages multiple adversities while remaining emotionally resilient (Jerald et al, 2017). The stereotype of the Superwoman or Strong Black Woman is also often characterized by personal sacrifice within family, community, or workplace at the expense of personal mental and physical health (West, 2008). Central to the superwoman script are her achievements, professional advancement, and productivity, with minimal attention paid to her sexuality.

Stereotypical depictions extend to the characterization of Black women's relationships as well; her relationships with men are always daunting, because either she is too educated and independent or she is desperate and lost without him (Boylorn, 2008). Even the earliest depictions of Black women in relationships depicted them as dominant and their relationships as comical inversions of White male-female relationships (Kretsedemas, 2010). No study has looked specifically at the impact of these portrayals on Black women. This study seeks to directly assess Black women's relationship expectations as they may relate to their intake of television shows that depict Black women's relationships.

### **Effects of Media Depictions**

A major effect of media depictions, particularly of ethnic minorities like African Americans, is the development of stereotypes. Stereotypes are a primary means by which media messages, through character portrayals, cultivate attitudes and beliefs. Studies have shown that viewing stereotypical characterizations of race and ethnicity offered in the media influences the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of audience members (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). Many research findings have shown that exposure to negative portrayals of African Americans in the media significantly influences the evaluations of African Americans in general, and this is

true across all ages and races (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008), though the direction of the influence does vary based on in group and out group membership (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). Positive media representation of ethnic minorities, in general, can have pro-social effects (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015).

Black women audiences can use their gaze and personal experiences to both resist and relate to media representations, finding both commonality and contradictions (Boylorn, 2008). Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight (2004) in a study of 186 African American women ages 18-63, found that for African American women, endorsement of the Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Superwoman stereotypes were negatively related to self-esteem. In particular, African American women's internalization of the Mammy stereotype is negatively correlated with self-esteem, suggesting that self-esteem is diminished when they feel as if their role is solely to be nurturing and serve others. There is also evidence that individuals with higher levels of ethnic identity have more motivation to protect their ethnic group's status. They also exhibit higher self-esteem and are less likely to be impacted by negative images of their in-group (Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012).

Real-world experiences of Black women which require them to be resilient, and their endorsement of the Superwoman or Strong Black Woman stereotype may be a means of counteracting other negative stereotypes and derogatory images of Black women (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Jerald et al, 2017). Strength has been found to be an important part of Black women's racial identity (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010). Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha (2011), determined that even as young women, they are socialized to be strong, tough, resilient, self-sufficient and to engage in self-determination as a means of protecting their self-esteem from negative images of themselves, and when they have this sense of strength, findings

indicate that they experience healthy psychological outcomes. However, conversely, identifying with this strength has been shown to lead to negative outcomes including distress, depression, and anxiety as Black women have reported overwhelm from the pressures to embody strength and be resilient for their families and communities (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019). When Black women internalize this perception and develop a façade of having that strength, this can prevent them from expressing their needs and seeking appropriate help like counseling when they are in distress (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). And high endorsement and acceptance of the Strong Black Woman ideal report more emotional avoidance and are at greater risk for depression and denying themselves appropriate self-care (Jerald et al, 2017) Further, they may fear being judged based on stereotypes so much that they inhibit themselves or act out in way that validate the stereotypes or cause them to reject other African Americans who remind them of the stereotypes (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004). This can lead to negative outcomes; they can develop an imposter syndrome in which they become preoccupied with failure and being discovered as a fake intellectual, or experience stress in their interpersonal relationships (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004).

Newer scripts originated within the context of hip-hop music and culture, and Ross & Coleman (2011) argue that the way Hip-Hop has been commercialized and commoditized has had a significant negative impact on African American women's sexuality. These modern sexual scripts have a two-fold influence, they provide guidelines for individual self-concept and behavior, as well as a gauge by which African American women measure how they do or don't meet the expectations of appropriate patterns of sexuality (Ross & Coleman, 2011). As Stephens and Philips (2003) explain, sexual scripting theory applied here means that the available sexual

scripts for African American women can lead to behaviors that serve as self-fulfilling prophecies of these scripts; even as they try to resist.

Sexuality scripts are also important for Black women and their relationships. Ross & Coleman (2011) found evidence that amongst young adult African American women, the Gold Digger and Video scripts were readily identifiable; this cohort of women endorsed, for themselves, dimensions of these scripts, namely her appearance, attitudes, personal interests, desires, and interactions with others. This further supports a long-ingrained ideology of objectifying African American's sexuality as a resource. Young African American women, Ross & Coleman (2011) found, hold a common view that sexuality can be a bartering tool or a means to an end. Most importantly, these types of scripts do not portray African American women as having identities outside of male-defined desires, and they focus on interpersonal relationships only as a means for material gain and social success (Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Further, sexuality scripting can create adversarial relationships between Black men and women (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996), and they do not depict healthy female-female relationships, either platonic or sexual (Stephens & Few, 2007).

Across disciplines, the academic literature has examined how television media cultivates beliefs and expectations in individuals, and the impact of sexuality scripts on Black adolescents. A focus on the portrayals of Black adult women and their romantic relationships as it possibly relates to their specific lived experiences is missing from the literature. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of media portrayals of Black women and their relationships on the real-world beliefs and experiences of Black women. This study explored the following research questions:

1. What does self-identification as a Black woman mean to Black women?

2. What are the general thoughts or expectations Black women have of romantic relationships?
3. What messages do Black women perceive about themselves, their identity group, and their romantic relationships through watching television shows featuring predominately Black casts or featuring a Black female lead character?
4. How are Black women impacted by the television media messages about their identity group?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

#### **Recruitment.**

The current study used a sample of 15 women who identified as Black or African American. They further fit the inclusion criteria of being single and never married, between the ages of 25-45, with at least a Bachelor's level of education, and television consumption of at least three hours a week. Further, all participants had at least one significant romantic relationship in their lifetime, including some with a current romantic relationship. Recruitment occurred via social media, including Facebook and Instagram, using posts including recruitment information and contact information for the principal investigator (Appendix A). These posts were shared in various social media networks of Black women, including groups for Black women generally, groups for members of international Black women's Greek-lettered organizations, groups for Black women in higher education, as well as groups for Black college alumni. These postings requested snowball sampling, in that the women were asked to share the recruitment information with other networks of Black women in which they were a part. Interested participants contacted the principal investigator via telephone, email, or social media direct message. Upon contact, participants were provided a standard, anonymous Qualtrics link to complete the online questionnaire. Recruitment goals were greatly exceeded, as the overall sample size was 187. The 15 participants included in the study were randomly selected from amongst the overall sample.

#### **Demographics.**

Table 1 presents the participant demographics (also see Appendix C). As shown in the table, the average age was 32.8 ( $SD = 5.45$ ), participants equally identified with the labels "Black

and African American”, all but two identified as straight, and while all of them were single and never married, some additionally identified themselves as dating (13%), in a committed relationship (33%), or cohabiting (13%%). All had advanced or professional degrees, and 80% endorsed an income range between \$30,000-\$60,000 (range = 30K-90K). Thus, the participant group was mostly homogenous and consisted of predominately single, heterosexual women between the ages of 25-45 with advanced degrees who were employed in academia.

*Table 1*  
Participant Demographics

Partic.	Age	Ethnic (Racial) Identity	Sexual Orientation	Marital Status	Education	Annual Income
1	28	African American	Straight	Current Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$60-75K
2	38	Black	Straight	Dating	Professional Degree	\$75-90K
3	26	African American	Queer	Committed Relationship, Cohabiting	Advanced Degree	\$30-45K
4	35	African American	Straight	No Current Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$30-45K
5	26	Black	Straight	No Current Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$30-45K
6	31	Black	Straight	No Current Relationship	Professional Degree	\$30-45K
7	30	African American	Straight	No Current Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$30-45K
8	36	Black	Straight	Committed Relationship	Professional Degree	\$45-60K
9	44	African American	Straight	Dating	Professional Degree	\$45-60K
10	31	Black	Straight	Committed Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$30-45K
11	36	Black	Queer	No Current Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$45-60K
12	38	African American	Straight	Committed Relationship	Professional Degree	\$30-45K
13	37	Black	Straight	No Current Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$45-60K
14	25	Black	Straight	No Current Relationship	Advanced Degree	\$45-60K
15	31	African American	Straight	Committed Relationship, Cohabiting	Advanced Degree	\$45-60K



### Television Consumption.

Participants were asked how much time they spend watching television weekly and how much of that time is spent watching television shows featuring predominately Black casts or a Black female lead. They were further asked to endorse which genres of television they watched and if they watched any of the shows that are most popular amongst Black women in the same age range, based on Neilson reporting. Participants predominately watched Drama, Comedy, and Reality genres (also see Appendix C). Figure 1 presents the number of participants who reported watching the various television genres. Table 2 presents their television viewing habits (also see Appendix C). Most participants reported that their television consumption consisted of 51-75% television shows featuring predominately Black casts or a Black female lead, and all but two participants reported watching at least 50% of the most popular shows according to Neilson reporting. Participants varied on the amount of time they spend watching these shows. Three women were outliers and reported 76-100% television consumption of shows featuring predominately Black casts or a Black female lead.

Figure 1

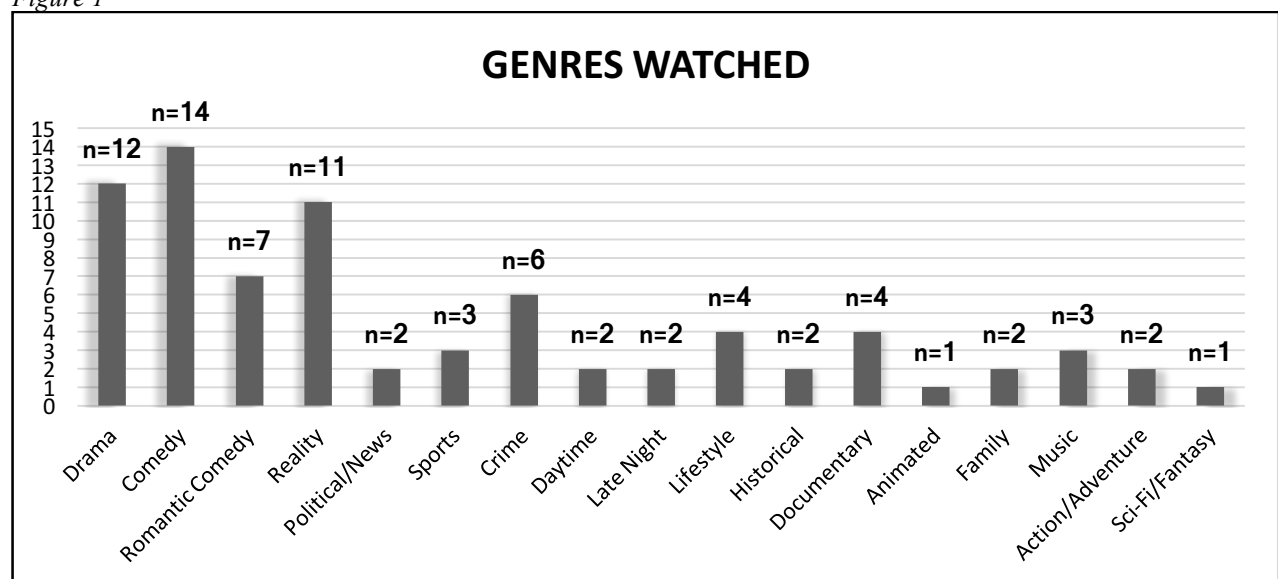


Table 2  
Television Viewing Habits

Participant	% of Popular Shows* Watched	% Time Spent Watching Popular Shows*	% Time Spent Watching TV w/Predominately Black Casts/ Female Leads
1	50%	76-100%	51-75%
2	85%	51-75%	51-75%
3	40%	51-75%	51-75%
4	65%	51-75%	51-75%
5	60%	11-25%	51-75%
6	70%	26-50%	76-100%
7	70%	76-100%	76-100%
8	50%	51-75%	76-100%
9	50%	51-75%	51-75%
10	80%	76-100%	76-100%
11	10%	11-25%	51-75%
12	60%	51-75%	51-75%
13	20%	1-10%	51-75%
14	50%	11-25%	51-75%
15	70%	76-100%	51-75%

\*Popular Shows: *Empire*, *The New Edition Story*, *Star*, *The Haves and The Have Nots*, *Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta*, *Scandal*, *Queen Sugar*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Love & Hip-Hop*, *If Loving You Is Wrong*, *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Love & Hip-Hop Hollywood*, *Greenleaf*, *NFL Sundays*, *Basketball Wives*, *Shots Fired*, *Power*, *Lethal Weapon*, *T.I & Tiny*, *Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta Special Broadcasts*

## Procedures

### Consent Procedures.

The Qualtrics link included a consent form that preceded the rest of the survey. Participants were asked to read and complete the consent form by endorsing “I agree” prior to proceeding. The consent form explained the purpose and procedure for participation, risk and benefits of the study, confidentiality, limits to confidentiality, and provided contact information for all individuals affiliated with the study (also see Appendix B). The consent form explained that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants had the right to terminate

participation at any time while completing the survey by closing their browser window. The end of the consent form included contact information for the principal investigator and participants were informed that they could call the principal investigator if they had any concerns or questions about the study, or if they had additional thoughts. Participants had the option of saving the online consent form for their records.

### **Questionnaire.**

Participants who were interested in the study and contacted the principal investigator were provided the Qualtrics link to complete the questionnaire independently. The questionnaire consisted of 14 open ended questions as well as seven demographic questions and five questions about their television consumption (also see Appendix C). No identifying information was collected from survey participants. Respondents were assigned a number and corresponding pseudonym for the purposes of data analysis. Table 3 lists participants' numbers and pseudonyms.

*Table 3*

Participant Pseudonyms

Participant	Pseudonym
1	Brandy
2	Felicia
3	Dawn
4	Alicia
5	Teresa
6	Monica
7	Nicole
8	Lisa
9	Shelley
10	Toni
11	Janelle
12	Kelly
13	Maya
14	Janet
15	Jasmine

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the questionnaires was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Unlike quantitative methods of analysis utilizing statistical measures to interpret findings, in this qualitative method, the principle investigator interpreted findings from open ended responses collected in the questionnaires. The grounded theory approach was utilized to examine the racial identity of Black women and impact of media messages on this identity and their view of romantic relationships. Grounded theory, as an approach, generates hypotheses as they naturally emerge based on the data. Grounded theory consists of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The process of open coding utilizes the raw data from the questionnaires in their entirety and categorizes similar words, phrases and concepts together. This stage concludes when emerging categories can no longer be identified. The process of axial coding consists of identifying relationships between the categories that emerged via open coding. Finally, the process of selective coding involves generating central themes based on the interview responses and coding procedures. For the current study, the principle investigator first grouped the responses from the surveys by specific concepts. Refined categories were developed from these concepts, and finally, core themes identified from the raw data of the questionnaires.

## Results

### *“Being a black woman is significant.”*

The current study's first research question was, what does self-identification as a Black woman mean to Black women? Answers to this research question provided an understanding of the study participants' racial identity. First participants were asked, “What does your identity as an African American/Black woman mean to you?” Then they were asked, “What are some characteristics or traits that you would use to describe African American/Black women?”

Overall, this group of women was very strongly identified with their Black womanhood, reporting its significance in their lives and ascribing predominately affirming character traits to themselves as an identity group. In reporting characteristics that they ascribe to Black women, they specifically listed “Magic” and described their importance to society and their communities by discussing their ability to nurture. They further acknowledged the necessity of the sense of belonging and connection they feel to the collective and historical resilience of those who share their identity, as well as the uniqueness of their collective culture. However, they were also aware of the difficulty this identification creates in multiple facets of their daily lives. This can be understood from their frequent reflection that their identity is determinative in the burdens they carry, including the oppression and marginalization that is attached their identity as Black women.

Further, this collective cultural experience also specifically included mention of “Black Girl Magic,” the “magic” of Black women that is in direct opposition to the lesser position to which broader society attempts to relegate them. The respondents continued, with eight (53%) out of 15 referencing and defining the “magic” of Black women. Here they listed characteristics that referenced that Black women are magical, beautiful, creative, and unique. To illustrate this,

they used words such as “magic,” or “magical,” “beautiful,” “lovely,” “creative,” “trendsetter,” and “unique.” “Brandy provided a list reflective of the beauty and the magic that most women reported. She included, “*magical, queens, trendsetter, creative, beautiful.*” Lisa’s list also included, “*beautiful, innovative, trendsetters, magical.*” Toni’s list encompassed the creativity and uniqueness of Black women. She listed, “*innovative, creative, versatile.*” Kelly’s list included, “*creative, beautiful, unique.*”

Importantly, a majority of respondents also provided lists of characteristics that explained nurturing as an important element of Black women’s identity. In consideration of all of the other ways that they positively described their identity group, it can be understood that they communicated through their list of words that part of their value is in service to broader society. Though they are oppressed and burdened and ascribed a lower position within society, they importantly are mothers and family members who serve the important role of nurturing those connected to them. Common words listed that embodied this included, “love, “loving,” “caregivers,” and “nurturing.” Brandy listed, “*loving, moms, sisters, wives, girlfriends.*” Felicia stated, “*motherly.*” Maya listed, “*nurturing, protectors, healers.*” And Janet stated, “*home, affirming, love.*”

When asked directly what their identity as African American/Black women meant to them, participants referenced their identity as significant. They explained that their identity is everything to them, in both good and bad ways, and it is salient as a motivating factor in their daily lives. Within this discussion, respondents noted that their identity derives its daily salience from their experiences interacting with both their external and internal worlds. They viewed it as determinant in the limitations placed on them by society. They also viewed it as the thing that influences the way they carry themselves as they move through the world, and that it motivates

them to overcome obstacles. Brandy responded that her identity was valuable and positive, stating, *"My identity as an African American woman definitely holds a lot of meaning and weight behind it. I associate my identity with someone that holds a lot of impact {and is} driven and strong..."* As Teresa explained, *"Characteristics of my blackness interact with my gender to uniquely shape my everyday experiences and outcomes."* Nicole delineated the gender and ethnic identities referenced in the question, but she ascribed the same value to both and described them as, *"Everything, they are my most salient identities and I'm conscious of them every day."* Janelle also noted multiple concepts previously mentioned and wrote that her identity as a black woman is: *"Everything. How I move about the world, my political context, is dictated by historical implications of the skin I'm in and the experiences I have..."*

Participants also described a rich, layered, collective, and historical experience of Black women. This importantly included discussion of the burden of oppression and devaluation they face in being ascribed a lower value and position in society. In discussing their burdensome experiences of oppression, they often provided lists of words that included, *"disrespected," "underappreciated," "oppressed," "suppressed,"* and *"burdened."* Also in illustration of the combination of all the elements of their shared culture, Dawn described feeling connected to the broader culture that encompasses her identity as a Black woman because of shared history; she responded,

It means that I follow and embrace African American culture. I am connected to other African American women because of our shared histories and position in society. We are despised for our black skin and oppressed for our womanhood but these experiences are shared and our art, culture and technology are built from these experiences.

Teresa explained, "*As a black woman, I have a unique cultural history and identity shaped by geography, collective struggle, and physicality...*" Toni explained that, "*Our experiences in this world would love to describe us to trope us into strong black women who suffer through their resiliency. I reject that notion.*" And Janelle directly referenced using identity to feel positively connected as she responded,

I am learning not to define myself or my kin by the standard of oppression. Which means I am constantly in a state of Sankofa. I am always trying to reconnect, remember, reach back to that which defined blackness and womanness before the colonizers came. And our history is grand.

But they also referenced that this collective and historical experience is a source of strength, pride and a means of resilience, resistance, and self-determining their position in society. They also provided lists demonstrating resistance to and resilience in the face of this oppression through strength, including Maya's list of characteristics, as an example, "*strong, problem solvers, self-reliant, self-sufficient, perseverance, fighters.*" To illustrate the ways in which this experience is historical and collective they used words like "shared, "heritage," "legacy," "culture," and "community." Maya stated, "*It means a legacy of strength, pride, power, and perseverance and it is a great honor that I try to uphold as I make my way through the world.*" While Janet explained how embracing her identity is her means for self-determination and that collective/community is, itself, the value of her identity, she stated that being a Black woman meant,

It's sacred and dear to me. Healing. Resistance. Figuring things out on my own/self-sufficiency because so many spaces were not created to help or support Black women and Black women's pain/needs have long been ignored/unmet. Community of belonging



where there's sameness and multiplicity within. It means honor, legacy, and a source of pride.

Further, Jasmine provided a list of characteristics and explained that the value of her identity is that it provides strength and motivation to overcome. She wrote of her identity, *"It is a source of strength and a reminder of those before me who were able to overcome obstacles and have great accomplishments."* Her list included, *"strong, resourceful, determined, driven, leaders."*

Overall, these women were strongly and positively identified with being a Black woman, even as they recognize they experience the burden of oppression because of their identity. They attributed many positive characteristics to Black women, such as being magical and nurturing, which suggests that they have positive self-esteem and positive racial and gendered identities. For this group of women, their positive racial identities were drawn from a connection to a collective legacy that was a source of pride and shared history of resilience in the face of being devalued and disrespected. They also noted that their identities make them proud and gave them the strength to overcome current oppression.

***"Black women can have romantic relationships, but it is difficult."***

The second research question was, what are the general thoughts or expectations Black women have of romantic relationships? Participant beliefs were ascertained through their responses to a multi-pronged question. They were asked, "What are your thoughts on romantic relationships for African American/Black women?" They also were asked, "Are they necessary/important? Why or why not?" Additionally, they were asked, "Are they obtainable?"

Why or why not?" Finally, they were asked, "Are they difficult or easy to maintain? Why or why not?"

In answering the question of necessity of romantic relationships for Black women, respondents commonly referenced the value of companionship as a universal need, including elements of affection, romance, and support. They also frequently noted additional specific reasons Black women need and deserve it. These reasons included positive characteristics of Black women that were resonant with the positive racial identity they reported in previous questions. Participants frequently mentioned the integral role Black women play in the care, support, and advancement of society, their communities, and Black families. Participants also often referred to the need of companionship to offset the historically negative and difficult experiences Black women often face in society. Monica referenced Black women's role in their communities and stated, "*Black women do so much for their community and all of society that they deserve a soft and safe place to retreat.*" Nicole referenced the basic human need of companionship, explaining, "*Companionship is necessary because we were not made to be alone.*" Janelle referenced the historical experiences of Black women and reported, "*I do think it's important for Black women, given our historical experiences, to experience romance.*"

When asked if romantic relationships are obtainable for Black women, most respondents explained that they are obtainable but there are unique challenges Black women face and obtainability is dependent upon and often limited by internal and external factors. Some of the external factors they referenced included negative experiences of the broader Black community, though no participants provided specific explanations of what these experiences are. Internal factors noted included Black women's personal expectations of what they view as desirable and what makes potential partners eligible. Importantly, they frequently mentioned stereotypes as

external factors, including the ways in which they influence potential partners perceptions of Black women. Felicia discussed positive characteristics as well as stereotypes that can be limiting in Black women's desirability to potential partners, *"This is not always easy, especially as Black women continue to move up the ranks in terms of education, status, and employment. A large number of people have negative stereotypes regarding black women, therefore some Black men aren't interested in dating Black women as a result."* Kelly illustrated Black women's perspectives on the eligibility of potential partners, *"Yes, though I believe it is challenging to find a quality romantic relationship. I honestly feel that the quantity of 'eligible,' faithful black men that we find mutual attraction with is sparse."* Janelle reported on Black women's expectations of relationships, as well as experiences of the broader Black community,

I do think it's hard to find love, but I also think our ideas about love are lofty. I do think that there is a narrative that it's hard for Black women to find love, especially educated Black women. And there are a number of factors external to the Black community that contribute to this problem.

When asked if romantic relationships are maintainable for Black women, participants noted that all relationships require both partners to work together to maintain them, including communicating effectively. However, they also explained that Black women face unique societal pressures and experiences that impact their ability to maintain relationships, though they did not specify what these pressures and experiences are. Teresa reported that there are numerous influential factors, *"I think that romantic relationships for Black women are difficult to maintain because there are many forces influencing the quality of their relationships."* Lisa discussed external factors and stated, *"They are difficult to maintain. There are lots of external pressures on Black people that influence our abilities to cultivate viable romantic relationships."*

Kelly explained that relationships generally require work, *“Easy overall to maintain if you are with the right person and are both willing to do the work (even though that can feel very challenging at times).”*

Overall, participants reported that romantic relationships are important for Black women because they need and deserve companionship. In keeping with their positive racial identity, they noted the value of Black women to broader society and Black families as reasons Black women deserve companionship. However, they also noted that Black women face unique challenges in their ability to obtain and maintain romantic relationships, including internal factors like their own judgment of what is desirable or eligible in potential partners. Further, they discussed external pressures, such as potential partners' attitudes and behaviors, specifically faithfulness and stereotyping and perceiving Black women as unable to have successful relationships.

***“Television portrayals of Black women are limited and negative.”***

The third research question was, what messages do Black women perceive about themselves, their identity group, and their romantic relationships through watching television shows featuring predominately Black casts or featuring a Black female lead character? Participants responded to two questions directly asking what messages they perceive from television shows that they watched. They were asked, “What are the messages these television shows present about African American/Black women?” They were also asked, “What are the messages these television shows present about African American/Black women in relationships?”

Generally, participants explained that they perceived predominately negative messages about Black women from a limited range of portrayals. They specifically noted that these

portrayals and their messaging reinforced common stereotypes of Black women. They also reported that the messaging of these shows persistently pertains specifically to Black women's relationships, either to families or partners. In particular, they reported that the messages they perceived regarding relationships were that Black women face significant challenges or are unable to maintain balance between their romantic relationships and their career success.

Participants reported that the limited and non-diverse portrayals on television mostly depict Black women in stereotypical ways including being strong, stereotypically angry, aggressive, and full of drama and conflict. They also noted that different stereotypes are reflected depending on the genre. Reality television shows were frequently used as an example that portrays angry and aggressive Black women. They often explained that this includes Black women competing with each other for potential partners. Brandy explained the limited range of portrayals and, similar to a couple of other participants, noted that even portrayals of Black women that are largely positive, still include stereotypes,

A lot of them show that Black women are promiscuous and sexual beings. Often we are portrayed as the 'Jezebels' in these shows. Many of the women participate as a mistress or fighting for men that are in relationships. Some of the shows do show Black women as entrepreneurs and business owners, but within those shows Black women are still full of drama, angry, and aggressive.

Maya specifically addressed the negativity of reality television shows, "*Reality tv reflects Black women in the most negative way which is why I stopped watching. They show the world and young Black girls (and women) that we are animals that cannot control our anger and resort to violence as a means of communication.*" Janet explained the lack of diversity amongst the portrayals of Black women,

The shows rarely feature dark skinned women, women with disabilities, queer women, fat women, kinky natural hair (not the curly loose pattern), etc. so it sends the message that those women aren't desirable by men as potential partners in relationships. When they are present, they are a joke/punchline, or not engaged in a meaningful way.

In discussing the predominate portrayals of Black women and their romantic relationships, participants explained that Black women characters are single and often hindered by their strength or success. They frequently referenced strong lead characters that are unable to maintain balance between all of their personal and professional responsibilities, and thus do not fulfill the expectations of their partners. They further explained that the portrayals of Black women frequently include messaging that successful romantic relationships are only achieved or maintained after enduring a great deal of emotional pain and mistreatment. To this point, they often referenced infidelity or absentee partners. Felicia referenced the negative messaging in specific television shows targeted to and most popular amongst Black women,

Many of the shows (Greenleaf, Scandal, How to Get Away with Murder) that you listed promote the message that Black women cannot keep a man. They feature strong woman leads and often these leads have careers that men either cannot keep up with their commitment to their job or men want them to be in submissive positions.

Monica explained the messages that indicate that challenges Black women must endure to obtain relationships, *"That Black women will endure a lot of hurt and disrespect and that it is even necessary to endure so much to finally 'earn' a 'real' or 'true' love."* Kelly reported on the general difficulty that successful Black women are portrayed to have as they seek relationships and balance, *"The combination of romantic relationships, successful careers, and healthy*

*families is rarely attainable. The Black women with successful careers are typically alone or have been in a slew of unsuccessful relationships."*

Overall, participants reported that television portrayals of Black women predominately depict them negatively, specifically that they are angry and aggressive, as well as full of drama and conflict. While they reported this to be true for television generally, they noted that reality television, specifically, is the strongest example of Black women being depicted in this way. They further noted that portrayals of Black women in relationships are predominately negative. They convey that Black women are either single because their strength and professional success hinders them from being able to maintain romantic relationships, or they endure a great deal of emotional harm in order to maintain and remain in their romantic relationships.

***"Black women feel stigmatized by negative television messages."***

The fourth research question was, how are Black women impacted by the television media messages about their identity group? Participants were asked a number of questions to address this. For each question, they were asked their thoughts on what Black women as a group feel and what their individual feelings were. The first questions were, "How do you think these messages make African American/Black women feel?" and "How do these messages make you feel?" Next, they were asked, "Do you think watching any of these television shows impacts African American/Black women's self-esteem or racial identity? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?" They were asked this same question for their own self-esteem and racial identity. Next, they were asked, "Do you think watching any of these television shows impacts African American/ Black women's mental health and overall well-being? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?" They were asked this same question for their own mental health and well-being. Participants were then asked, "Do you think watching any of these television shows impacts

African American/ Black women's expectations of romantic relationships? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?" They were also asked this same question for their own expectations of romantic relationships.

Participants reported experiencing feeling stigmatized by the negative stereotypes, negative mental health symptoms, negative relationship expectations. Importantly, participants commonly reported that the felt impact often reinforces negative experiences of their real worlds. Further, when asked, participants often distinguished between impacts on themselves as individuals and Black women as a broad group. Though a majority of the participants consistently described that they, as individuals, and likely Black women broadly are impacted in these ways, a few participants described protective factors against internalizing negative messaging and the reasons that they try not to internalize the negative messages they perceive.

Participants discussed the stigmatization they, and Black women in general, feel as a result of the stereotypic portrayals they see. They reported an awareness of how they are viewed in the real world because of these stereotypes, including experiencing stereotype threat, which Aronson & Steele (1995) defined as the threat of possibly being judged and treated stereotypically, or of possibly self-fulfilling such a stereotype. Monica explained this awareness, *"I'm sure it impacts how Black women feel the world sees them or how it thinks of them."* Brandy reported her experience of stereotype threat as a result of the depictions of Black women, *"Makes me feel inferior to the world and often judged, especially in my professional world. I often find myself policing myself to not come off as a woman that people see in media. I am always in my head 'challenging' the stereotype."* Dawn explained that Black women's self-worth can be impacted because these portrayals influence how others view Black women, *Well, I think shows like Love and Hip Hop are trash and these types of shows can definitely devalue our self-worth.*



*These are the popular shows that everyone sees and for some, this is how they build their idea of Black women.*

In their discussion of how stereotypic portrayals impact negative real-life experiences, participants explained how shows can reinforce poor self-esteem, things they hear in their daily lives, negative experiences they have in real life, as well as negative beliefs they already hold in their real lives. These included real world romantic experiences they have and beliefs they hold. Their responses reflected this for both themselves and Black women broadly. Teresa reported that television messages are often a reflection of messages Black women hear in reality,

I think that Black women are familiar with these messages. The media only reflects what they often hear from their families, friends, coworkers, etc. I don't think it impacts their racial identity, but it could impact their self-esteem. If women are already challenged with their self-esteem outside negative messages could further reinforce this".

Dawn explained that Black women's actual dating experiences are influenced by the stereotype these shows portray, *"These shows create stereotypes that we as Black women have to face when we enter the dating world."*

Participants further explained negative impacts to their own and Black women's general mental health, including emotional distress, trauma reactions from shows reflecting upsetting things happening in daily life, and shifting moods. Janelle explained the range of emotional distress and responses that Black women likely feel,

I can't speak for all Black women and I'm sure Black women feel all different types of ways about it...I also think it makes some of us angry. Because we know better, even if

we aren't doing better. And we want better portrayals of ourselves and our love interests.

And yet it still probably makes some of us sad, and embarrassed to be a Black woman.

Dawn explained feeling trauma reactions as a result of watching television shows that depict the negative real-world experiences of Black people, *"Shows like Seven Seconds definitely affect my mental health. It's difficult to see shows and movies capture the murder of young Black kids. It is so close to my own experiences and fears for my family that watching things like that can trigger PTSD."* Janelle explained the various mental health symptoms that result from negative television portrayals,

Yes, like I said earlier, TV programs us at a subconscious level. I do think seeing these portrayals of ourselves over and over impacts our anxiety, depression, and overall mood from day to day. If you are enthralled with a character, you're going to see some of you in her and some of her in you. We take these things on whether we know it or not.

Most respondents noted that stereotypic portrayals also extend to the portrayal of romantic relationships and thus their own expectations of romantic relationships are lowered and they generally believed this to also be the case with most Black women. These lowered expectations most frequently referred to either expectations of their own and their partners' behavior, as well as the likelihood of finding a relationship or being successful. Lisa explained feeling saddened by the portrayal of difficulty Black women have in their love lives, *"A little bit disheartened because the women on these shows are typically powerful, intelligent, and beautiful, but still have difficulties navigating their love lives."* Brandy reported that Black women likely don't expect successful relationships, *"I think it does. A lot of black women anticipate failure in their relationships because of these shows."* Kelly explained fears that her expectations of her partner are negatively impacted, *"It increases paranoia for me that my*

*partner will cheat... I find that TV shows me how 'easy' it is to lie to your partner. I don't know that I now expect this of my partner, but I definitely get paranoid about it."*

Importantly, reporting for both themselves and Black women broadly, participants commonly referenced that ego strength, real world positive examples, and ability to view television as purely entertainment, are factors that can determine whether or not television messages impact self-esteem and racial identity. They also frequently explained efforts to avoid negative messaging. Jasmine explained that for herself, and for Black women broadly, negative impacts are lessened or avoided by taking the perspective of television as purely entertainment, *"I think there is a potential for it to have an impact, but I think if it is viewed as entertainment then the impact is lessened...I see these messages as just entertainment so I do not internalize them."* Dawn illustrated that her ego strength will not allow her to be personally negatively impacted and explained avoiding particularly negative portrayals, *"My mother taught me how to love myself at a young age. I've never relied on television to find value in myself. I think some shows can be affirming of my identity (Pose, Insecure, Being Mary Jane) but I won't let any show tear me down. And shows that are completely trash, I will not watch."* Maya reported that she does not feel impacted because of real world examples she's had, *"No because I had generations of marriages in my life – parents, grandparents, great grandparents, etc."* Monica explained that she chooses to watch more positive television to prevent negative impacts, *"It can be frustrating, but I watch way more uplifting and positive portrayals, so I don't believe it's impacting me very negatively."*

Overall, though they sometimes distinguished between themselves as individuals and Black women broadly, participants reported feeling stigmatized and experiencing stereotype threat in response to stereotypic portrayals of Black women. They explained mental health

impacts including emotional distress and other symptoms, including anxiety and depression. Further, participants felt that television shows both reflect and reinforce their real-world experiences and beliefs, including in their romantic relationships. Importantly, many also discussed ways that negative impacts can be reduced or avoided.

### **Discussion**

The current study examined media portrayals about Black women and their romantic relationships presented in television shows featuring predominately Black casts or a Black female lead character. Particularly, the study sought to understand participants' perception of the messaging of these portrayals and the impact on Black women. Special attention was given to the impacts on self-esteem, racial identity, mental health, overall well-being, and romantic relationship expectations. Specifically, based on media cultivation theory and previous literature about the impact of television messages regarding Black women, four research questions were developed.

The first research question was, what does self-identification as a Black woman mean to Black women? The participating Black women were strongly and positively identified with being a Black woman and possessed higher self-esteem, based on their provision of lists of overwhelmingly positive characteristics they attribute to Black women as a group. They maintained this positive and gendered racial identification even as they acknowledged historical and modern experiences of oppression as a collective experience. In particular this noted collective history of gendered racial identity as a source of strength is consistent with previous research that has established that Black women assign meaning to their identity through resilience and strength in the face of the oppression they endure (Jones & Day, 2018), and

findings that gendered racial identity is more salient for Black woman than race and gender identity separately (Jones & Day, 2018).

The second research question was, what are the general thoughts or expectations Black women have of romantic relationships? The participants reported that Black women need and are deserving of romantic relationships, mainly because their roles in society warrant companionship. However, they noted unique challenges for Black women in finding and maintaining romantic relationships due to both internal factors like their judgment of potential partners and external factors like potential partners' judgement of and behavior towards Black women as well as oppressive experiences of Black people as a whole. These factors that Black women discussed are reflective of media messaging about Black women, particularly professional Black women's relationships. Wanzo (2011) examined prominent media representations of the romantic desires of successful Black women and determined that the prominent narrative blames Black women for their single status. This included portraying Black men as perceiving Black women as having unrealistic expectations and standards, being unwilling to see relationship potential in men whom they've outpaced professionally, and not possessing desired gendered characteristics like sensuality.

The third research question was, what messages do Black women perceive about themselves, their identity group, and their romantic relationships through watching television shows featuring predominately Black casts or featuring a Black female lead character? Participants reported that most television portrayals of Black women are predominately negative, including the portrayals of their romantic relationships. Specifically, they reported that Black women are portrayed as angry, aggressive, full of drama as well as single because of their professional success or in emotionally harmful relationships.

Still, the majority of participants referenced that when Black women characters had positive traits, like professional success, they still overall are negative representations, typically as it pertained to the portrayal of their romantic relationship experiences.

The fourth research question was, how are Black women impacted by the television media messages about their identity group? The Black women surveyed reported that they are negatively impacted by limited television portrayals that reflect predominately negative stereotypes, including specifically regarding their romantic relationship prospects. When discussing these impacts, they distinguished between themselves and Black women collectively when asked, but there was frequent agreement between individual and collective experiences. They reported that Black women feel stigmatized and experience stereotype threat in response to stereotypic portrayals of Black women. They also reported emotional distress and specific disordered mental health symptoms. Further, participants felt that television shows both reflect and reinforce their real-world experiences and beliefs, including in their romantic relationships. Importantly, when discussing themselves individually, they more commonly maintained a positive racial identity, reported higher self-esteem, and explained protective factors and efforts to minimize or avoid negative impacts of television portrayals. These factors included ego strength, avoiding negative portrayals, and compartmentalizing television as entertainment. Though less common, they noted that these factors could also minimize felt impacts for Black women collectively.

Current study participants' positive racial identity and higher self-esteem was consistent with prior literature that African Americans' self-esteem and well-being is associated with positive racial and ethnic identity. Current study participants acknowledged that self-esteem can be negatively impacted by negative stereotypes, but also noted that having high self-esteem

protects against internalizing the stereotypes that diminish self-esteem. Their responses were consistent with the body of research which establishes that membership in a stigmatized group protects Black people from the consequences of stigmatization, and thus Black people have higher self-esteem and racial identity than other racial groups even though they experience negative effects of racism (Oney, Cole, & Sellers, 2011). Further, current study participants' overwhelmingly positive characterization of Black women, and their frequent report of purposely rejecting and choosing not to internalize stereotypical portrayals of their identity group is also supported by previous research. Sanders & Ramasubramanian (2012) found that individuals with higher levels of ethnic identity have more motivation to protect their ethnic group's status and exhibit higher self-esteem and are less likely to be impacted by negative images of their in-group.

#### **Genre-Specific Cultivation: Reality Television.**

In their discussion, participants frequently referenced reality television as the specific genre that most strongly perpetuates negative stereotypes about Black women and that has the most negative impact on Black women. The association between genre-specific television and real-world beliefs has been found to be stronger than association based on total television consumption (Lee & Niederdeppe, 2011). In the current study, participants readily identified that stereotypical portrayals of Black women are most prominently presented in the reality television genre, specifically the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman. Participants' report of reality television is consistent with previous content analysis that has found that reality television continues to reinforce negative stereotypes of African Americans, and specifically that the Angry Black Woman is presented in a majority of reality television shows (Tyree, 2011).

Participants directly connected the stigma from stereotypical representation of their identity group to their experiences of being stigmatized in society, including particularly by members of society who have little real-world exposure to Black women. This is consistent with a prior study that conducted critical discourse analysis of discussions of the television show *Love and Hip-Hop* with seven high-achieving Black female high school students. That study found that young Black women are able to identify the racist and sexist workings of racialized reality television. Moreover, these participants expressed concern that people with limited experience with people of color could take the representations on the show to be accurate representations of people of color (Edwards, 2016). This is important as reality television is an increasingly popular genre and one in which Black women are increasingly represented in the television media. Nonfiction genres have been found to more strongly correlate with cultivation effects (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Based on findings like these, the overwhelmingly negative representations of Black women in reality television suggests that stereotypes commonly purported by reality television are more likely to develop into strongly held beliefs society has about Black women than stereotypes from other genres. While negative stereotypes about Black women are not new, with its growing popularity, it is possible that reality television is playing an increasing role in maintaining the persistent stereotype of the Angry Black Woman.

Importantly, participants were distinctly asked about Black women's perceptions and feelings generally and participants' perceptions and feelings as individuals, and though participants referenced the potential collective impacts of negative stereotyping of Black women in reality television, they commonly distinguished this from the felt impacts on themselves as individual Black women. Though not a majority, a number of participants consistently reported that, as individuals, they were not impacted by and often refused to watch and internalize the



portrayals of Black women on reality television shows, including as it specifically relates to romantic relationships. This is consistent with Edwards' (2016) study, which found that participants expressed not being personally influenced, including particularly in their love lives. Participants in the current study also specifically rejected the stereotypical portrayals of Black women and did not endorse beliefs that common stereotypes are accurate. This is consistent with a study by Coleman, Reynolds, and Torbati (2020) who surveyed 115 Black female participants who spent most of their TV viewing time watching reality television shows with primarily Black casts, and found that they did not endorse stereotypes of Black women.

**Racial Identity: The Superwoman or Strong Black Woman Script.**

Participants' racial identity was predominately positive. Central to this positive racial identity was their explanation of their valuation and pride in the multi-faceted strength of Black women. This was noted through their frequent labeling of both Black women in real life and Black women television characters as strong, resilient, leaders, hardworking, resilient, and nurturers, amongst other characteristics. Further, throughout their responses to various questions, they frequently referenced Black women's educational and professional accomplishments, as well as their central roles and responsibilities within their families and communities, including the work it takes to balance these. Further they frequently noted that television portrayals persistently reflect Black women with these characteristics as having difficulties in romantic relationships. Thus, importantly, participants' discussion reflected an awareness of and identification with the Superwoman or Strong Black Woman stereotype, a more recent sexuality script common to media portrayals of Black women.

It was evident in the participant's responses that, in their personal view, being strong as a Black woman is a positive collective trait, similar to previous findings which evidence that Black

women endorse strength as a positive cultural identity (Jones & Day, 2018). However, in discussing the impact of television portrayals, this study's participants noted an awareness that these same characteristics are depicted negatively, particularly as they are presented as extreme and identified as a hindrance in romantic relationships. This finding is consistent with findings of a prior study conducted with 220 Black college women by Jones, Harris, & Reynolds (2020). For those women, being a strong Black woman was positive and salient, however they were also aware that other cultures' stereotypic perception of Black women's strength is overwhelmingly akin to the angry Black woman.

Previous research has found that African American women's identity is connected to their racial and stereotypic attitudes about African American women. There is tension that arises from the Superwoman or Strong Black Woman stereotype serving as both a stereotype and an identity trait (Jones, Harris, & Reynolds, 2020). Black women's identification with the Superwoman or Strong Black Woman stereotype does not exist dichotomously as positive or negative. The range of endorsement of characteristics of strength for Black women range from high to ambivalent to rejection (Jones, Harris, & Reynolds, 2020). Consistent with the current findings, Black women's relationship with the archetype can be impacted by personal difficulty in their own internalization of it, as well as the awareness that is perceived as a negative stereotype by others (Jones, Harris, & Reynolds, 2020). Similarly, Jones & Day (2018) studied 240 Black women to assess gendered racial identity and found that Black women understand the differences between how they see themselves and how others see them. In particular, their findings highlighted Black women's ability to internalize positive senses of self while rejecting negative societal views held by society. However, there is also evidence to the contrary. Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery (2017) studied 609 college Black women and found that their awareness

that society holds stereotypical views of the Superwoman or Strong Black Woman negatively impacted their mental and physical health.

Importantly, when reporting their individual identification with the Superwoman or Strong Black Woman stereotype, participants reported unique elements of this stereotype to be of shared historical and cultural value. The Superwoman or Strong Black woman stereotype does have foundational cultural relevance for Black women and as such is promoted by family and important adults and is passed down through intergenerational socialization as a means of surviving Black women's unique racialized and gendered oppression (Donovan & West, 2015; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). The current study's finding of both positive and negative endorsement of the Superwoman stereotypes is supported by Nelson, Cardemil, and Adeoye's (2016) study of 30 Black women's perceptions of the Strong Black Woman or Superwoman role. They found that participants expressed both negative and positive perceptions of strength and the Strong Black Woman, based on their own experiences. Still, those same women also desired to maintain connection to cultural representations of Black women's strength, as is it positively valued amongst Black people. In this way, Black women in their study consciously redefined the role of strength and the role of the Strong Black Woman, feeling empowered to reclaim them in a way that asserts power over what they perceive as problematic (Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016).

### **Expectations of Romantic Relationships.**

Participants' mixed report of their expectations of romantic relationships suggests that, for this group of women, television portrayals are not the only influencer of their relationship expectations. While they did note that these television portrayals can be disheartening, the current group of study participants endorsed alternate impacts on their expectations including

real-life examples of relationships, messaging they hear in their daily lives, and their own relationship and dating experiences. Importantly, alternate factors were reported by participants whose expectations of romantic relationships were lowered, those who believed Black women broadly likely expect failure in their relationships, as well as those who reported no impact at all. It is important to note that even though participants reported alternate impacts that have greater influence on their romantic relationship expectations, they still reported experiencing mental health and emotional impacts as a result of persistent stereotypical portrayals of Black women's relationships. Previous studies have also found that television media does present messaging about Black women's relationships (Boylorn, 2008; Stephens & Few, 2007) and this has been found to impact young Black women's views of their sexuality (Ross & Coleman, 2011; Ward, Jerald, Avery, & Cole, 2019). The current study findings are an important addition to the literature due to the specific discussion of the impact of television portrayals on the Black women's expectations of the success and availability romantic relationships.

### **Limitations**

The current study examines the perspective of a fairly homogenous group of Black women regarding their romantic relationship expectations as Black women, and how they may be impacted by television portrayals of Black women. These women are homogeneous in that their relationship status, education levels, socioeconomic status, and careers are fairly similar. While this is a strength in that the findings present the perspective of single Black women who have earned advanced or professional degrees, and career success, it is also a limitation in that demographically, the responses of this group may not be generalizable to the broader, more diverse population of Black women. As an example, while two participants reported an LGBTQ identity, the specific experience of women who were a part of the LGBTQ community was not

examined. Also, women who were currently married or divorced, under the age of 25 and over the age of 45, and who possessed less than a bachelor's degree were specifically excluded. Further, there are likely multiple factors that moderate the influence of television portrayals on the examined areas in which Black women can be impacted, which are outside of the scope of a qualitative study.

### **Implications**

The current study has implications for mental health treatment, as African American women may present to treatment with symptoms related to negative impacts caused by television messages. Clinicians should be able to recognize presentations indicative of the Strong Black Woman or Superwoman stereotype and assess for any hesitance or treatment resistance, as well as associated pathology or difficulties it is creating in these clients' lives. There is tension since Black women feel pressured to embody strength but also reject resources that will help them maintain that strength. Watson & Hunter (2016) interviewed 13 Black women and found that embodying psychological durability also meant not utilizing psychological wellness behaviors, such as accessing professional mental health services and taking medication. Further obligation to manifest strength, emotional inhibition, resistance to utilize mental health self-care resources, rejection of dependence on others, determination to succeed, resisting dependence or vulnerability, and caretaking are strongly held characteristics of the Strong Black Woman stereotype and these can act as barriers to treatment (Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombe, Robinson, Carthon, Devane-Johnson, & Corbie-Smith, 2016). Additionally, the tension that Black women feel between believing strength to be positive but recognizing that others perceive it negatively can contribute to emotional distress or poor mental health outcomes.

Awareness of the stereotype can be distressing, and overidentification with the Strong Black woman stereotype can also create stress. Clients presenting to therapy may be feeling overwhelmed by a constant expectation to display strength and further, this may cause them to silence their own needs and suppress their emotions which can increase depression (Abrams, Hill & Maxwell, 2019). West, Donovan, & Daniel (2026) surveyed 113 Black women college students and found that they were able to identify the mental health consequences of identifying with the Strong Black Woman ideal, even as they endorsed it as a positive and aspirational. High endorsement of the Strong Black Woman stereotype has been found to increase the connection between stress and depressive symptoms (Donovan & West, 2015).

Clinicians should seek to practice cultural competence in working with Black women clients and the findings of this study provide information that can be used to inform assessment as well as helpful context for clients' well-being, racial identity, self-esteem, and difficulties with romantic relationships. Even though many participants minimized the impacts for themselves, the current participants made it clear that the stereotypes presented through television portrayals contribute to Black women feeling stigmatized and this can be harmful. It is important that clinicians are generally aware of the ways in which their clients can feel this stigma, recognizing the ways that this contributes to symptomology, as well as make efforts to avoid further stigmatizing them. Further, the current study participants' responses indicated that they value their ability to define themselves for themselves, and clinicians should work from a strengths-based perspective and empower Black women clients to also define their own identities in treatment. Clinicians working with Black women clients should also be open to exploring all of the resources and supports that exist in clients' lives outside of treatment and be invested in helping them to identify and develop resources that are not readily present. Further, clinicians

should work with Black women clients to understand the significance of characteristics like strength, and process and restructure their beliefs about vulnerability and help-seeking in a way that is more adaptive for their psychological well-being.

The current study further has interdisciplinary implications as the exploration of the impact of media is also an important contribution to the mass media and communications literature. Particularly as there is a dearth of literature in these disciplines that looks at Black women's perspectives and impacts on their romantic relationship expectations. This is particularly important as stereotypical media portrayals have been found to have harmful effects on Black women's mental health and well-being and steps should be taken to change these portrayals and decrease these effects. The specific focus on Black women is also important for ethnic studies, as well as women and gender studies literature contributing to discussion to the broad experiences of Black womanhood.

### **Future Research**

The current study surveyed a homogenous group of Black women, though Black women broadly are a very diverse group. Future research should include a more diverse sample of Black women to yield results that are more generalizable. However, studies that replicate the current study and examine different groups of Black women would also be important. As examples, women who identify as LGBTQ, women who have less education or are over lower socioeconomic status may experience variable effects of television media portrayals.

A couple of the current study participants also referenced protective factors against internalizing television messaging, such as positive messaging and examples in their real lives and a strong sense of self. Importantly, being married predicts fewer anti-Black and mixed attitudes (Kelly & Floyd, 2006). Thus, for Black women being married may be a protective

factor against internalizing negative television messages. Replicating the current study and surveying married Black women, who were specifically excluded here, would be important. Future research studies, generally, should examine protective factors specifically to understand the ways Black women use them to mitigate effects of negative television portrayals and personally manage stigma or related symptoms.

Further it is important to note that at least one participant mentioned that social media is likely a more salient modern influence on Black women's well-being, self-esteem, racial identity, mental health, and expectations of romantic relationships. There is a growing body of research that examines the impacts of social media, future research should be expanded to continue to examine the influence and impact of social media on the same areas specifically for Black women. A possible direction is a specific examination of social media and expectations of romantic relationships, as there is a dearth of research with this specific focus, particularly for Black women.

### **Conclusion**

The current study sought to understand the perception of the messaging of television portrayals and the impact on Black women, particularly in the area of romantic relationships. Most findings were consistent with the literature. Black women's' romantic relationship expectations are impacted by television media portrayals of their identity group and their romantic relationships. Stereotypical portrayals have long been found to negatively impact Black women in many salient life areas including well-being, self-esteem, and racial identity. The current participants, representative of a specific group of educated, professional Black women importantly reported minimizing or blocking effects of television media via things like personal characteristics of having a strong sense of self and compartmentalizing television as



entertainment. This tendency appeared to be both a reported and observed protective factor that moderated the effects of felt stigmatization and stereotype threat. Results of the current study conformed to prior literature that has established that Black women maintain and are protective of their positive racial identity as well as possess higher self-esteem than other groups. However, they are aware that they are stereotyped by others and are not immune to hurtful effects and stereotype threat as a result of stigmatization from these stereotypes. They experience tension around their identity as Strong Black Women including valuing their strength but being aware that it is negatively stereotyped. This can also create pressure to maintain an image of impenetrable strength that can lead to distress and mental health symptoms while simultaneously resisting help-seeking in effort to avoid looking weak.

The study participants were a very specific group, notably all with a minimum of advanced degrees and stable employment. These were purposeful inclusion criteria because of their proximity to the Superwoman stereotype that commonly is portrayed on television as having unique and great difficulty in romantic relationships. Despite positive identification with characteristics of this stereotype, participants still reported experiencing expected difficulty. The current group of professional Black women importantly demonstrated that the various impacts of television media portrayals are nuanced and likely work in concert with other real-life influences to affect Black women.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Recruitment Posting**

# **African American/Black Women Needed for Research Study**

**Participants needed for a research study on African American/Black women's television habits and attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of romantic relationships.**

### **Participants must:**

- self-identify as African American or Black
- be between the ages of 25-45
- have at least a Bachelor's level education
- be single/never married (can currently be in a romantic relationship)
- have had at least one significant romantic relationship
- watch at least three hours of television a week

### **Study involves:**

- Completion of a brief survey about your television habits
- An approx. 60 min online questionnaire about your ethnic identity and thoughts on romantic relationships and the television shows you watch.
  - The questionnaire length may vary depending on the depth of the answers provided.

This research study will serve as my doctoral dissertation in Clinical Psychology at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Confidentiality will be strictly observed, and participants will be encouraged not to disclose any information they are not comfortable sharing.

If you are interested in participating, please contact: Brittani Hudson – (732) 419-4735, [brittaninhudson@gmail.com](mailto:brittaninhudson@gmail.com)

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent**

### **CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Media & African American Women's Relationships

**Principal Investigator:** Brittani N. Hudson, PsyM

This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. It is your choice to take part or not. After all of your questions have been answered and you wish to take part in the research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. You will be given a copy of the signed form to keep. Your alternative to taking part in the research is not to take part in it.

#### **Who is conducting this research study and what is it about?**

You are being asked to take part in research conducted by Brittani N. Hudson, PsyM who is a student in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of media portrayals of African American women and their relationships on the real-world beliefs and experiences of African American women.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

The questionnaire will take about 60 minutes to complete it. We anticipate 15 subjects will take part in the study.

#### **What are the risks and/or discomforts I might experience if I take part in the study?**

As a result of participating in this study, you may experience some discomfort as a result of answering questions concerning personal ethnic identity and relationship prospects. The incidence of this discomfort is rare. If you object to any of the interview or survey questions, you are free to skip them. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview or survey questions. You are also free to discontinue your participation in this study at any time for any reason without penalty. Breach of confidentiality is a risk of harm but a data security plan is in place to minimize such a risk. If you decide to quit at any time before you have finished the questionnaire your answers will NOT be recorded.

#### **Are there any benefits to me if I choose to take part in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this research. You will be contributing to knowledge about positive impacts of positive media representation of African American women, but this benefit is not guaranteed.

#### **Will I be paid to take part in this study?**

You will not be paid to take part in this study.

#### **How will information about me be kept private or confidential?**

All efforts will be made to keep your responses confidential, but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. We will use Qualtrics to collect and forward your responses to us. We will not know your IP address when you respond to the online research. We will ask you to provide your, age, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, marital status, job title, annual income, and level of education

when you complete the questionnaire. Identifiable information will not be stored with your responses. Instead, your responses will be assigned a subject # which will be stored separately from your responses so others will not know which responses are yours. We will securely store the key code linking your responses to your identifiable information in a separate password protected file which will be destroyed after data analysis is complete and study findings are professionally presented or published. No information that can identify you will appear in any professional presentation or publication.

**What will happen to information I provide in the research after the study is over?**

The information collected about you for this research will not be used by or distributed to investigators for other research. This information will be permanently erased and destroyed three years after the study ends.

**What will happen if I do not want to take part or decide later not to stay in the study?**

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part now, you may change your mind and withdraw later. If you do not click on the 'submit' button after completing the form, your responses will not be recorded. You may also choose to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. You may also withdraw your consent for use of data you submit, but you must do this in writing to the PI, Brittani N. Hudson, PsyM.

**Who can I call if I have questions?**

If you have questions about taking part in this study, you can contact the Principal Investigator: Brittani N. Hudson, PsyM., Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University, (732)419-4735 or bnh19@gsapp.rutgers.edu. You can also contact my faculty advisor: Dr. Shalonda Kelly, (848)445-3922 or skelly@gsapp.rutgers.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call the IRB Director at: New Brunswick/Piscataway ArtSci IRB (832)235-2866 or the Rutgers Human Subjects Protection Program at (973) 972-1149.

Please print out this consent form if you would like a copy of it for your files.

If you do not wish to take part in the research, close this website address. If you wish take part in the research, follow the directions below:

**Subject's electronic 'signature' is REQUIRED:**

I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older and have read and understand the information. I agree to take part in the research, with the knowledge that I am free to withdraw my participation without penalty.

Click on the "I Agree" button to confirm your agreement to take part in the research.

I Agree

I Do Not Agree

### **Appendix C: Questionnaire**

Please answer the following general questions about yourself. As a reminder, you can choose to end the survey at any time by closing your browser.

Age

Ethnic Identity (i.e. African American, Black, Mixed Race, etc.)

Sexual Orientation (i.e. Straight, Queer, Lesbian, etc.)

Marital Status (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Never Married
- ☐ Dating
- ☐ Committed Relationship
- ☐ Cohabiting
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed

Highest Level of Education

- ☐ High School Diploma
- ☐ College Degree
- ☐ Advanced Degree
- ☐ Professional/Terminal Degree

Current Job Title

Annual Income

- ☐ < \$30,000
- ☐ \$30,001-\$45,000
- ☐ \$45,001-\$60,000
- ☐ \$60,001-\$75,000
- ☐ \$75,001-\$90,000
- ☐ \$90,000+

Please answer the following questions about your current television habits. As a reminder, you can choose to end the survey at any time by closing your browser.

Which television genres do you watch most? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Drama
- ☐ Comedy
- ☐ Political/News
- ☐ Music
- ☐ Sports
- ☐ Daytime
- ☐ Action/Adventure
- ☐ Reality
- ☐ Sci-Fi/Fantasy
- ☐ Romantic Comedy
- ☐ Lifestyle (Home improvement, cooking, etc.)
- ☐ Late Night
- ☐ Crime
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Historical

- ☐ Religious
- ☐ Horror
- ☐ Documentary
- ☐ Animated
- ☐ Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

How much of the television that you watch features all-African American/Black casts, predominately African American/Black casts, or an African American/Black female main or lead character?

- ☐ 1-10%
- ☐ 11-25%
- ☐ 26-50%
- ☐ 51-75%
- ☐ 76-100%

Which of the following shows have you watched? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Empire
- ☐ The New Edition Story
- ☐ Star
- ☐ Have and The Have Nots
- ☐ Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta
- ☐ Scandal
- ☐ Queen Sugar
- ☐ How to Get Away with Murder
- ☐ Love & Hip-Hop
- ☐ If Loving You Is Wrong
- ☐ Real Housewives of Atlanta

- ☐ Love & Hip-Hop Hollywood
- ☐ Greenleaf
- ☐ NFL Sundays
- ☐ Basketball Wives
- ☐ Shots Fired
- ☐ Power
- ☐ Lethal Weapon
- ☐ T. I & Tiny
- ☐ Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta Special Broadcasts
- ☐ None

If you have not seen any of the shows above, please list any shows that you watch that feature all-African American/Black casts, predominately African American/Black casts, or an African American/Black main or lead character.

Of the time that you spend watching television weekly, how much is spent watching the shows you selected?

- ☐ 1-10%
- ☐ 11-25%
- ☐ 26-50%
- ☐ 51-75%
- ☐ 76-100%

Please answer the following questions from your perspective. If you are uncomfortable answering any of the questions, you can skip them. As a reminder, you can also choose to end the survey at any time by closing your browser.

What does your identity as an African American/Black woman mean to you?

What are some characteristics or traits that you would use to describe African American/Black women?

What are your thoughts on romantic relationships for African American/Black women?

a) Are they necessary/important? Why or why not?

b) Are they obtainable? Why or why not?



c) Are they difficult or easy to maintain? Why or why not?

Earlier you answered a question and selected from a list of specific television shows you may have watched. Please answer the following questions, from your perspective, thinking about television show(s) you selected from that list. If you have not seen any of those listed shows, please answer the following questions thinking of any television shows that you have seen featuring predominately African American/Black casts or a Black female lead character. If you are uncomfortable answering any of the questions, you can skip them. As a reminder, you can also choose to end the survey at any time by closing your browser.

What are the messages these television shows present about African American/Black women?

What are the messages these television shows present about African American/Black women in relationships?

How do you think these messages make African American/Black women feel?

How do these messages make you feel?

Do you think watching any of these television shows impacts African American/Black women's self-esteem or racial identity? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you think watching any of these television shows impacts your self-esteem or racial identity? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you think watching any of these television shows impacts African American/Black women's mental health and overall well-being? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you think your mental health and overall well-being is impacted by watching? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you think watching any of these television shows impacts African American/Black women's expectations of romantic relationships? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you think your expectations of romantic relationships are impacted by watching? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you think African American/Black women are impacted by watching these shows in any other ways? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

### References

- Abrams, J. A., Hill, A., & Maxwell, M. (2019). Underneath the mask of the strong Black woman schema: Disentangling influences of strength and self-silencing on depressive symptoms among US Black women. *Sex roles*, 80(9-10), 517-526.
- Adams-Bass, V. N., Bentley-Edwards, K. L., & Stevenson, H. C. (2014). That's not me I see on tv...: African American youth interpret media images of Black females. *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, 2(1), 79-100.
- Ashley, W. (2014). The angry black woman: The impact of pejorative stereotypes on psychotherapy with black women. *Social work in public health*, 29(1), 27-34.
- Boylorn, R. M. (2008). As seen on TV: An autoethnographic reflection on race and reality television. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25(4), 413-433.
- Brown, C. (2015). Black, queer and powerful: Annalise Keating is tv's most overdue anti-hero. *Paste Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/11/black-queer-and-powerful-annalise-keating-is-tvs-m.html>
- Coleman, M. N., Reynolds, A. A., & Torbati, A. (2019). The relation of Black-oriented reality television consumption and perceived realism to the endorsement of stereotypes of Black women. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*.
- Dixon, T. L. (2008). Network news and racial beliefs: Exploring the connection between national television news exposure and stereotypical perceptions of African Americans. *Journal of Communication*, 58(2), 321-337.
- Donovan, R. A., & West, L. M. (2015). Stress and mental health: Moderating role of the strong Black woman stereotype. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 41(4), 384-396.

- Edwards, E. B. (2016). "It's Irrelevant to Me!" Young Black Women Talk Back to VH1's Love and Hip-Hop New York. *Journal of Black Studies*, 47(3), 273-292.
- Gerbner, G. (1969). Toward "cultural indicators": The analysis of mass mediated message systems. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 17(2), 137-148.
- Gordon, M. K. (2008). Media contributions to African American girls' focus on beauty and appearance: Exploring the consequences of sexual objectification. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32(3), 245-256.
- Grabe, M. E., & Drew, D. G. (2007). Crime cultivation: Comparisons across media genres and channels. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 51(1), 147-171.
- Harrington, E. F., Crowther, J. H., & Shipherd, J. C. (2010). Trauma, binge eating, and the "strong Black woman". *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 78(4), 469.
- Harris, T. W. (2015). *The sisters are alright: Changing the broken narrative of Black women in America*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Harris-Perry, M. V. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America*. Yale University Press.
- Hines, P. M., & Boyd-Franklin, N. (1996). African American families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, & J. K. Pearce (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (pp. 66-84). New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.
- Jones, M. K., Harris, K. J., & Reynolds, A. A. (2020). In Their Own Words: The Meaning of the Strong Black Woman Schema among Black US College Women. *Sex Roles*, 1-13.
- Jones, M. K., & Day, S. X. (2018). An exploration of Black women's gendered racial identity using a multidimensional and intersectional approach. *Sex Roles*, 79(1-2), 1-15.

- Jerald, M. C., Cole, E. R., Ward, L. M., & Avery, L. R. (2017). Controlling images: How awareness of group stereotypes affects Black women's well-being. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 64*(5), 487.
- Jerald, M. C., Ward, L. M., Moss, L., Thomas, K., & Fletcher, K. D. (2017). Subordinates, sex objects, or sapphires? Investigating contributions of media use to Black students' femininity ideologies and stereotypes about Black women. *Journal of Black Psychology, 43*(6), 608-635.
- Kelly, S., & Floyd, F. J. (2006). Demographics, marital status, and racial factors in Black couple relationships. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations, 161-185*.
- Kelly, S., & Hudson, B. (2017). African American couples and families and the context of structural oppression. In S. Kelly (Ed.), *Diversity in couple and family therapy: Ethnicities, sexualities, and socioeconomics*, 3-32.
- Kretsedemas, P. (2010). But she's not Black! Viewer interpretations of "Angry Black Women" on prime time TV. *Journal of African American Studies, 14*(2), 149-170.
- Lambert, C. A. (2017). Post-racial public relations on primetime television: How Scandal represents Olivia Pope. *Public Relations Review, 43*(4), 750-754.
- Lee, C. J., & Niederdeppe, J. (2011). Genre-specific cultivation effects: Lagged associations between overall TV viewing, local TV news viewing, and fatalistic beliefs about cancer prevention. *Communication Research, 38*(6), 731-753.
- Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J. (2010). The state of cultivation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 54*(2), 337-355.
- Morgan, M., Shanahan, J., & Signorielli, N. (2015). Yesterday's new cultivation, tomorrow. *Mass Communication and Society, 18*(5), 674-699.

- Oney, C. N., Cole, E. R., & Sellers, R. M. (2011). Racial identity and gender as moderators of the relationship between body image and self-esteem for African Americans. *Sex Roles, 65*(7-8), 619.
- Pixley, T. L. (2015). Trope and Associates: Olivia Pope's Scandalous Blackness. *The Black Scholar, 45*(1), 28-33.
- Punyanunt-Carter, N. M. (2008). The perceived realism of African American portrayals on television. *The Howard Journal of Communications, 19*(3), 241-257.
- Reynolds-Dobbs, W., Thomas, K. M., & Harrison, M. S. (2008). From mammy to superwoman: Images that hinder Black women's career development. *Journal of Career Development, 35*(2), 129-150.
- Ross, J. N., & Coleman, N. M. (2011). Gold digger or video girl: the salience of an emerging hip-hop sexual script. *Culture, health & sexuality, 13*(2), 157-171.
- Sanders, M. S., & Ramasubramanian, S. (2012). An examination of African Americans' stereotyped perceptions of fictional media characters. *Howard Journal of Communications, 23*(1), 17-39.
- Segrin, C., & Nabi, R. L. (2002). Does television viewing cultivate unrealistic expectations about marriage?. *Journal of Communication, 52*(2), 247-263.
- Shrum, L. J., & Lee, J. (2012). Television's persuasive narratives: How television influences values, attitudes, and beliefs. *The psychology of entertainment media: Blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion, 2*, 147-167.
- Shrum, L. J., Burroughs, J. E., & Rindfleisch, A. (2004). A process model of consumer cultivation: The role of television is a function of the type of judgment. In L. J Shrum

- (Ed), *The psychology of entertainment media: Blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion* (177-191). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(5), 797.
- Stephens, D. P., & Few, A. L. (2007). The effects of images of African American women in hip hop on early adolescents' attitudes toward physical attractiveness and interpersonal relationships. *Sex Roles*, 56(3-4), 251-264.
- Stephens, D. P., & Phillips, L. D. (2003). Freaks, gold diggers, divas, and dykes: The sociohistorical development of adolescent African American women's sexual scripts. *Sexuality and Culture*, 7(1), 3-49.
- The Neilson Company. (2017). *African American women: Our science, her magic*. New York, NY
- Thomas, A. J., Hacker, J. D., & Hoxha, D. (2011). Gendered racial identity of Black young women. *Sex Roles*, 64(7-8), 530-542.
- Thomas, A. J., Witherspoon, K. M., & Speight, S. L. (2004). Toward the development of the stereotypic roles for Black women scale. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 30(3), 426-442.
- Toms-Anthony, S. (2018). Annalise Keating's Portrayal as a Black Attorney is the Real Scandal: Examining How the Use of Stereotypical Depictions of Black Women Can Lead to the Formation of Implicit Biases. *National Black Law Journal*, 27(1).
- Townsend, T. G., Thomas, A. J., Neilands, T. B., & Jackson, T. R. (2010). I'm no Jezebel; I am young, gifted, and Black: Identity, sexuality, and Black girls. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 34(3), 273-285.

- Tukachinsky, R., Mastro, D. & Yarchi, M. (2015). Documenting portrayals of race/ethnicity on primetime television over a 20-year span and their association with national-level racial/ethnic attitudes." *Journal of Social Issues*, 71, 17–38.
- Tyree, T. (2011). African American stereotypes in reality television. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 22(4), 394-413.
- Wanzo, R. (2011). Black love is not a fairytale. *Poroi*, 7(2), 5.
- Ward, L. M., Jerald, M., Avery, L., & Cole, E. R. (2019). Following their lead? Connecting mainstream media use to Black women's gender beliefs and sexual agency. *The Journal of Sex Research*.
- Watson, N. N., & Hunter, C. D. (2016). "I had to be strong" tensions in the strong black woman schema. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 42(5), 424-452.
- West, L. M., Donovan, R. A., & Daniel, A. R. (2016). The price of strength: Black college women's perspectives on the strong Black woman stereotype. *Women & Therapy*, 39(3-4), 390-412.
- West, C. (2012). Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and their homegirls: Developing an "oppositional gaze" toward the images of black women. In J. C. Chrisler, C. Golden, & P. D. Rozee (Eds.), *Lectures on the psychology of women* (4th ed., pp. 286-299). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Williams, A., & Gonlin, V. (2017). I got all my sisters with me (on Black Twitter): second screening of *How to Get Away with Murder* as a discourse on Black Womanhood. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(7), 984-1004.
- Woods-Giscombe, C., Robinson, M. N., Carthon, D., Devane-Johnson, S., & Corbie-Smith, G. (2016). Superwoman schema, stigma, spirituality, and culturally sensitive providers:

Factors influencing African American women's use of mental health services. *Journal of Best Practices in Health Professions Diversity*, 9(1), 1124-1144.