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Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

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Abstract: This study focuses on the messages that Black women receive about singleness and their ability to maintain a healthy relationship with a Black man from movies that are distributed by mainstream media outlets as well as the implications those messages have on formation of potential relationships. This project analyzes the depictions of Black women in two blockbuster movies and explicates the messages of each character. The analyses and supported claims are heavily based in Social identity theory, Social comparison theory, and Gaze theory.

Keywords: *Black women, film studies, healthy relationships, media portrayals*

For as long as I can remember being Black in the United States is viewed as disadvantageous by the majority of society, especially for me as a woman. Because of that, as an African American woman, I have always feared for the fate of my future. When I was much younger I had the fear that American slavery would reemerge and I would be thwarted out of the education system and forced into the fields to work. But that has never happened. As I grew a little older a new fear had surfaced. I was then afraid that institutional racism and sexism would have such a profound hold on my life that no matter how great my efforts were I would unmistakably be forced into a life of mediocrity. But at this point, my head has not yet collided with the glass ceiling. So now that I am older with some life experience under my belt, a new fear has manifested; a deep seeded fear that has been reinforced by, societal pressures, my own observations, as well as by the media time and time again. It is the fear that as a Black woman, and an educated one at that, I will not be able to maintain a healthy long-term relationship, with a Black man.

It would appear as though singlehood *seems* to be so common of an occurrence for women in the Black community, that it could arguably be a gene encoded in our DNA. It would be marked as the "Black woman that can't keep a man" gene. The majority of depictions of Black women in our society are as mothers but not wives, or as professionals but not partners. When it comes to the portrayal of Black women and men in healthy intimate relationships together, it appears that either of the partners is utterly non-existent. Furthermore, the media's portrayal of Black women in relationships, or lack thereof, seems to reinforce the validity of my fear, through one-dimensional characters operating as one of the few tropes of Black woman singlehood.

As I tried vehemently to deny its existence, my fear of being indefinitely single had festered within me for quite some time creating an internal paranoia in regard to my own domestic future. I knew one day I wanted to be married, I wanted to not only have the great career but I also wanted the great husband, however based off of the messages I receiving internally and externally, I was never sure if that would ever happen for me.

Many of the depictions of Black intimate relationships that I have observed paint a picture of a dyadic laced with poor communication, lack of love, respect, understanding and compatibility, which would point me and women like me (whom either are or who are aiming to be educated Black professionals), in a direction devoid of companionship, excluding meaningful relationships, and especially marriage with the Black man. I have viewed the countless media images which present the message that no matter what type of woman she is, as long as she is Black, she is bound to a life of insecure unstable relationships with the Black man, which are plagued with drama and break-ups just for her to

1

one day settle for being alone. It did not matter if she was docile housewife, because she was too docile, therefore boring and needy; or if she was a fiery independent woman, because she was too independent therefore angry and un-wanting or undeserving of a relationship. The Black woman in media is bequeathed a double-edged sword, which not only damages her credibility as the character but also damages the identity of the Black female audience. It is apparent that the media vilifies the Black woman, simultaneously victimizing her into a role of solitude and single motherhood, a role that is not only unfitting, but also so unfair. Not to mention the poor depiction of her supposed Black male counterpart, who is often shown as being an uneducated, attractively rugged, commitment-phobe stereotype of the Black man, operating as a hindrance of some sort to the Black woman; and she, as an enemy rather than ally to the Black man.

I wasn't satisfied with the media's depiction of a Black woman's and Black man's relationship status. So I looked elsewhere for confirmation. I looked to my family, my mother in particular, my "Shero" of all things great. The woman who raised my brothers and I with pennies and made them feel like gold coins…all by herself. See, my mother was once married, but it was plagued with infidelity and pain. She dated before but it was enveloped in lack of respect and dishonesty, and now she was uncomfortably alone, settling for a monotonous solitude, and it was no fault of her own. To my dismay I found that she too appeared to carry the "Black woman that can't keep a man" gene, which kept her alone. But I was not satisfied with this. I was still not satisfied internalizing the multitude of messages that declare that the singleness of Black women was due in all parts to their inability to maintain a healthy relationship with Black men. I rationalized that the media's over sensitization to the Black woman's role as a romantic figure made the world and me hyper-vigilant to all cases of Black woman singlehood, setting them as the norm for dating and marriage practices of all Black women. I could not believe that specific cases of singleness amongst the African American female population or over

saturated television characters were not the representatives for all Black women in relationships.

So I took my hand at it. I dived so deeply into a relationship that I not only lost myself into the rock quarry that was our love, but at one point I even lost my shoes, along with some dignity one rainy May morning. Even my relationship was laced with disillusion and drama, forcing me to a tiny corner of solitude. So of all the fears in my life this issue of not being able to have and hold on to a healthy secure romantic relationship was a valid one. To further reinforce my fears, as I was freefalling off this cliff of love into the rock pit below, my friends who were also Black, were experiencing the same tumultuous relationship with their love interest. We were all able to commiserate on some level about our ass-backward horror movie of a relationship. Our late Friday nights mirrored scenes from the 1995 film *Waiting to Exhale*, and our banter sounded like one of the many R&B albums being sold on late night infomercials. While my Black friends and I waited tirelessly by the phone hoping "he" would call, my roommate, who was white, was frolicking in love's meadow with her future husband.

I turned back to the media, I studied and obsessed over the depiction they had for white women in relationships. These relationships were loving and understanding, utopian in a way. There was give and take, respect, honesty, and a mutual affection; all of the characteristics described as being desirable in healthy romantic interpersonal relationships. These were characteristics my White friend said she had and exhibited in her own relationship. Baffled by the completely different experience that she was having with *love* than I, coupled with the completely different experience that the media portrayed for white women, I came to believe that there is some sort of connection between the way people are portrayed in the media and the way in which they behave in society, especially when it comes to intimate relationships. With that in mind I sought out to answer: how has the absence of the media portrayals of Black women in relationships

manifested in the experiences of the majority of Black women?

The majority of depictions of Black women in the media are often negative because they make a mockery of the experience of the Black woman. Through songs, advertisements, sitcoms and movies it appears that the imaging of Black women is dedicated to vilifying and degrading her. In the media, there are either images of black women in over-stereotypical roles, like single poor welfare mother like we see in the movie *Precious* or the loud desexualized maternal figure in Tyler Perry's character *Madea*, or the complete opposite extremely idealistic woman who is excelling in every aspect of her life, however never takes part in the Black experience much like *The Cosby's* mother, Claire Huxtable or even more recent, The BET series, *The Game's* Melanie; all of these tropes are largely devoid of any basis in the reality of Black women. Thomas, Hacker, and Hoxha (2011) explain that often times the depiction of the Black woman takes into account her experience as a woman or as a Black person, but it never takes into account her experience as a dual minority, a Black woman. The depictions of her as just a woman tend to be much more positive, hopeful, and replete of any social or racial identity, conversely her depiction as an African American, though she is immersed in her cultural context, tend to be tragic and sad, however, for the black woman these two identifications are not mutually exclusive in fact, the separation of the two is what creates unrealistic characters.

Based off of the large numbers of unrealistic images of Black women, it would appear that there is no one in the mainstream media that is interested in telling their story, with any level of sensitivity to the unique cultural and social experience of the Black woman. Even more prevalent is the lack of Black women who are not involved in romantic relationships in any of popular cultures outlets. Often times the Black woman can be a good friend, an overzealous professional, an avid Christian, a scholar, and even a mother, however when it comes to being in relationships the Black woman is portrayed a

threat to true happiness and romance for any man, and especially the Black man. In the case of television and movies when a Black woman is interested in fulfilling her romantic desires she spends the span of the movie struggling to readjust who she is a Black woman to finally be seen as someone desirable and worthy of a serious relationship. In this research project we are going to look at all media outlets with a particular focus on film to create a greater understanding of what I call the media's attack on the Black woman. The purpose of my research study is to highlight and critique the roles of African American women in the media and show how these specific tropes can and do effect the social identity of African American women as it relates particularly to taking part in romantic relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The high number of images of Black women who are single in the media is extremely troubling. Though there is a small variety of roles African American women play in the media, a limited few of them are of Black women in relationships, and as I extend further in my analysis, I would argue that there are even fewer depictions of Black women in healthy happy relationships. In this paper, with a particular focus on singleness, I dissect the characters in some of mainstream media's movies and conjecture the implications that these images have on the levels of singleness for the Black women population today. The depictions of Black romantic relationships, or lack thereof, in mainstream media, generate a false awareness of reality for Blacks, and especially Black women. The media is an agenda setter for its audience, which is why the lack of Black female characters in relationships in television sitcoms and movies is problematic. Black women are greatly affected by how they are portrayed and perceived (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, & Chen, 2012).

In the *Black Woman's Burden*, the author Hayes (2012) writes about how prominent members of the Black Woman's Chamber of Commerce speak out against the silencing effect the media has on the Black woman. Black women

are frustrated with the portrayals of themselves in the media, and are even more tired of the silencing effect that society continues to have over them (Hayes, 2012). Not only in scripted television and movies can we see the lack of reality of the Black woman's experience, but it is also evident in news media. The lack of attention paid to the opinions of Black women in the media has starkly kept them out of the important conversations that they would like to weigh in on (Hayes, 2012). Often times groups will speak up in the place of Black women without even asking them their opinion. Hayes speaks about this phenomenon when referencing the media's assessment of how Black women responded to President Obama's administration. In the article, Hayes finds that Black women feel that they are never called on to speak in times that are of historic importance. Hayes found that in the case of the 2008 Presidential election many different demographics were called on to speak about their group's opinion of the then Presidential nominee Barack Obama, everyone except African American women. Black women for years have been denied a voice in society and this voiceless-ness has manifested in mainstream media's depiction of Black women. We find that until recently, almost all of the popular shows that feature at least one Black character were written, directed, and produced by White men; once again leaving out the creative and equally important voices of Black women.

There are a number of scholars that are interested in understanding the effect that the media's depiction of Black women has on that population. There are some authors that praise the medias' efforts (Miles, 2011) and there are others that argue that the media has the ability to create strong negative implications on the lives of Black women, especially those who have weak social and racial identity (Fujioka, 2005). The lack of positive and culturally inclusive imaging of Black women in relationships has a negative effect on how Black women view themselves in relationships.

In the article "Male Mammies: A Social-Comparison Perspective on How Exaggeratedly Overweight Media Portrayals of Madea, Rasputia, and Big Momma Affect How Black Women Feel About Themselves," written by Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, and Chen (2012), four students from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication, Syracuse University, found through a qualitative study of 36 Black women, that the media imaging of Black women does have an effect on the way that Black women in society view themselves. The idea that Black women and their esteem are greatly affected by media images that are put forth, including the positive and negative images, was also echoed in several other studies (Kelly & Floyd, 2001; Miles, 2011; Fujioka, 2005) proving that the mainstream media has a strong hold and effect on its audience. This effect far extends the realm of distaste and discomfort for the images, rather the unattainable images of Black women in the media generate conflicting feelings within the Black woman creating an inner turmoil for her. This idea will be discussed in greater detail in later sections of this paper.

The study of the "Male Mammies" of Black women in film, like *Madea*, *Big Mama*, and *Rasputia*, discusses how the Mammy depiction affects the way Black women view themselves (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, & Chen, 2012). The women in the study felt that the characters made a mockery of Black women and were embarrassing for them to watch. Participants reported that because the characters were not only stereotypically over the top, but were also played by men, in many ways "raped the Black women of her identity". These media characters took the identity of the Black woman (that some of the participants admitted in some ways reminded them of family members) and made her extremely off of the wall and stripped her of the virtuosity, womanhood, and beauty of a Black woman by having the character be played by a man. The article argues that the male mammy in today's media has a greater detriment than the female mammy of the past and present, because the depiction further disconnects Black women from media's standard of beauty, which is largely based

Tindall: Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

Where is the Black Barbie?

off of femininity, and even more pervasive, a white standard of beauty.

Black women largely feel that the media's standard of beauty and success leave them out, while simultaneously stripping away from them a media identity (Miles, 2011; Kelly & Floyd, 2001). Black women in many cases in the media merely serve as the antitheses to the standard of whiteness (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson & Chen, 2012). The use of Black women in the media, no pun intended, can be comparable to the purpose of the black night sky, which is to illuminate the beauty of the white moon and stars. So since society has attributed the connotation of success, superiority, intelligence, beauty, motherhood, and to be a desirable partner to being a white woman, to be a black woman is the complete opposite. Therefore, living in a media driven society where there is a great connection between beauty and power, the notion of being seen as the contrasting opposite to beauty can have a number of negative implications on the Black Woman.

Studies that have focused on the connection between physical attractiveness and self-esteem and/or racial-identity of Black women have found that those women with lower levels of self-esteem and racial-identity were more dissatisfied with themselves and reported lower levels of self-evaluations when compared to the white standard of beauty (Makkar & Strube, 2006; Fujioka, Ryan, Agle, Legaspi & Toohey, 2009). The contrary was true for Black women with high levels of self-esteem and racial identity.

The other reality that many Black women face is the fact that strength is a large part of the African American identity, however, the notion of a strong woman completely contrasts the media and society's picture of femininity, which entails submissive dependence (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). In the article, "Gendered Racial Identity Among Young Black Women" the authors discussed the salience of strength for African American women (Thomas, Hacker, and Hoxha, 2011). As a means of protecting herself from sexual exploitation and racism, Black women at a young age are socialized to be strong

in order to protect herself from those injustices. "As a result, African American girls and young women are socialized to appear strong, resilient, and self-sufficient" (p. 532). The research that the article has drawn from, has even proven that the strength, along with other defense mechanisms that have been socialized into African American women helps her to better cope with the onslaught of racial and gender issues that she will face in her day to day life (Fujioka, 2005; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). However, because this construction of strength that is attributed to the social identity of Black women gainsays what the media has defined as feminine, it further lengthens the gap between black women and society's standard of what is beautiful and what makes up a desirable mate.

In scholar Jonathan Gayles' (2012) article "Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman Redux: Masculinity and Misogyny in Blade," he divulges the historical relevance of the stereotypical interactions between Black men in women in the Blockbuster movie *Blade* (Gayles, 2012). From Gayles' analysis of the interactions between Blade and the three Black women in the movie he concluded that the movie *Blade* reinforced the negative stereotypes that surrounds the black male-female dyadic. The depiction of Dr. Jensen, *Blade*'s heroin, fell into the category of the "Superwoman" stereotype. This idea of the Black woman being seen as a superwoman was put forth by Michelle Wallace in her book *Black Macho and the myth of the Superwoman*. She describes the superwoman as having "inordinate strength with the ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work" (Wallace, pg. 107). The purpose of the myth of the Superwoman was to be a stark contrast between Black women and white women (Wallace, 1979; Gayles, 2012). In *Blade*, which is completely opposite of other superheroes movies, Gayles finds that Dr. Jensen is mistreated and disrespected by Blade, and rather than be seen as lady to be protected, Blade often abrasively uses her as means of succeeding in his fight against the antagonist Frost. Blade's interaction with his mother likens the relationship that he has with Dr.

Jensen. Both relationships are problematic, bringing to the forefront the media's portrayal of the dysfunctional relationship between Black men and women. Gayles argues that the relationship between Dr. Jensen and Blade brings up an issue as Black women being eternal servants in their relationship versus being actual partners. Time and time again Dr. Jensen sacrificed for Blade even though he never showed any amount of respect or affinity towards her. The message from that depiction would suggest it is the Black woman's duty to serve in her relationship, not be loved. "Romantic black love is rarely portrayed on the big screen…" (Gayles, 2012, p.289) however, in the few instances that it is often comical and/or dysfunctional, we can see that in movies like, *Why Did I get Married 1 and 2, Not Easily Broken,* and *The Preacher's Kid*. Each of these examples takes the concept of Black love diminishes the plausibility of it through countless scenes that reinforce disrespect and resentment between Black couples.

In a thesis written by Ramona Miles (2011), she makes the argument that overtime the images of Black women in the media, in specific single Black mothers, has improved substantially; coming from a slew of shows that depicted the black woman as an impoverished welfare recipient to a middle class woman who is educated and still raises her children responsibly. Miles gives an analysis of several Black sitcoms and points out many of the progressions that the media had made when it came to casting Black women in roles where they are single mothers. These more recent depictions have allowed the Black woman to excel as an educated professional and as a mother. At one point in her paper Miles analyzes the show of the late 1960's *Julia,* and protested that the show was revolutionary for its time, because it showed a beautiful Black woman raising her son on her own in a idealistic way. However, Miles further divulges that the sitcom was greatly contested by the Black audience, because it was a said to not be conscious of the race relations of the 1960s. Though Julia was a great role model she was not a realistic role model for single black mothers of the time.

Although Miles does an excellent job of explaining why the sitcoms were more positive in their depiction of single-black mothers, I feel that her dissection of the characters lacked a wholesome view of the experience of Black women. She only focused on the mother child relationship, and that is an inadequate view. Her perspective would have been much more powerful if she would have discussed romantic needs of the single Black mother. In her analysis, much like the media's depictions, she completely left out the Black woman's need and want for a relationship. This is problematic. Yes in comparison to shows from the past, recent sitcoms embrace a more optimistic approach when depicting Black women, however they do not take in to account the societal implications it will have on the way Black women view themselves. Though shows like the *Parkers*, *Hawthorne*, and *That's My Mama* (these are some of the sitcoms Miles used in her analysis) are seemingly great television programs that depict Black women as triumphant single mothers, I believe that they feed into the broad stereotype that Black women can be maternal, however she is unable to be a loving and caring partner. There are a multitude of shows and movies that depict the black supermom that is completely fulfilled as a mother, but has no husband, or stable relationship on the horizon. To me this represents a problem with the way Black women are characterized, and subtly feeds into the stereotypes of the early 1900's.

We find in the literature that Black women's voiceless-ness has played a major part in the poor depictions of her in the media. In fact it is this lack of voice that has for decades forced her into a role of uncomfortable solitude and single motherhood. The media's lack of portrayals of Black women in relationship and the over characterizations of her has angry, desexualized of over sexualized has made a major impact on the way Black women view themselves in the world as well as the way the experience the media images, this is apparent through the study of Male Mammies. Therefore I make the argument that the minimal depictions of Black in relationships coupled with the high number of negative

Tindall: Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

Where is the Black Barbie?

relationships that are shown by the media, also has an effect on the way Black women take part in romantic relationships with the Black man.

The African American has always held a unique position throughout United States history, and I would argue that four hundred plus years after slavery that the majority of African Americans still remain maladjusted in United States society. Indicators of this fact are the extremely high numbers of health issues, crime rates, incarceration rates, poverty levels, drug use, and decreased access to wealth and ownership. This maladjustment can be attributed to the onslaught of societal pressures and racist ideology that create a labyrinth of complex internal and external stresses for the African American. The racist ideologies and stereotypical images are largely distributed through popular culture's mass media outlets. Popular culture's depiction of African American relationship dynamics, or lack thereof, contributes another dimension to the unique experience of Black's in the United States. The massive amount of stereotypical images that African Americans are bombarded with on a daily basis, through television, film, and music, have the ability to deteriorate any chances of positive adjustment in society, if the attitudes and ideologies of the images are internalized by the African American audience.

Historical and Contemporary Overview

I believe that in order to understand the state of the Black woman's relationship status in the United States we must understand the historical and cultural context in her life. The Black family plays an integral piece in the situation of African Americans, especially in the case of romantic dating, because the suggested outcome of dating is marriage. Scholars from the field of Africana studies, psychology, sociology, economics, and political science have all weighed in on the anomaly that the Black family is portrayed as today (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). The study of the African American and the Black family structure dates back to the late 1880's and the early 1900's where "black scholars played the critical role in finally establishing a scientific

approach in the study of Afro-America" (p. 135). WEB Dubois was one of the primary scholars to begin the conversation concerning Black people and the state of the Black family in scientific terms, which contrasted the majorly racist anthropological discussion that had been taking place previously (Lange, 1983; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Dubois and other scholars in the field (Drake, 1945) focused on multiple aspects of Black life in the United States, ranging from the black community to the black family structure; they saw each aspect as necessary connections to understand when dissecting the African American experience. In many of Dubois' writing he addressed the necessity of illuminating and understanding the unique historical situation of African Americans in order to wholly understand the situation of the Black family (Lange, 1983).

During the Dubois era there were numerous attacks on the freedoms of African Americans in the United States, which thwarted Dubois into a passionate activism for the plight of Black people. Dubois was very much so involved in the movement of Black liberation, and the subjectivity in his many scholarly works are reflective of that fact (Lange, 1983). The severe circumstances that Blacks were subjected to in rural southern towns as well as in northern urban cities along with the implications those circumstances had on their physical, psychological, and emotional adjustment, was not of interest to many Black scholars of that time, rather they looked at the implications racism had on class and socioeconomic status of Black Americans. There were a number of studies done during the time to make sense of the Black experience from a "within the Veil" perspective. During the early 1900s many scholars drew on ethnographic accounts and qualitative accounts to study and understand the Black experience.

Many scholars looked to the Black family as a means of community and an "instrument of socialization" (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995) for Black people. With a holistic view of the African American experience, scholars were able to discern then that there was ailing family

dynamic within the Black culture, starting with the Black male-female dyadic. There was empirical information that alludes to an absence of the Black male in the home, however, prior to the 1940s there was not enough substantial data collected from census bureau to make explicit conclusions about the actual number of women-lead households (Morgan, McDaniel, Miller & Preston, 1993). In spite of the perceived African American norm, which is under the premise that the deterioration of the Black family has much to do with the absent Black male and not the absent Black female, it is clear that more black children did not live with their mothers at that time than white children, however, there were still more Black homes led by women than white homes (p. 801).

In the late 1950s Frazier (1948) attempted to make sense of the Black family structure in his article "Ethnic family patterns: The Negro family in the United States." Since Blacks were compared to the norms of the white family structure, also referred to as the nuclear family structure, and were expected to conform to those standards, when they didn't the Black family structure was deemed "pathological" and "deviant". Frazier accredited the lack of male-led households in the Black community to the institution of slavery. He argued that Black people were so severely scarred from slavery that they were unable to replicate familial structures based off of their African ancestry, and because of that Black women became the heads of households, due to her connection to the children, where as men did not have that same connection. Frazier further attributes, what he calls the "disorganization" of the Black community, to the woman-led-households. Frazier postulated that because the Black woman in a woman-led-household is dually responsible for child rearing as well as financially supporting the household, her actual absence from the household, permits Black children to pursue deviant behaviors, which diminishes the importance of family values, education, and socialization.

In 1965 (revised in 1967), the Office of Policy Planning and Research of United States department of Labor put a 78-page report forth to the American public, regarding the state of the Black family, the article was entitled, "The Negro family: the case for national action", which is most commonly known as The Moynihan report. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, at the time, was the Assistant Secretary of Labor for the United States department of Labor, and the principal writer of the report. The purpose of his report was to conduct social scientific research on behalf of the government to aid in the public policy making process, in regard to the Black community (Geismar & Gerhart, 1968)

> The Moynihan report places the broken and unstable Negro family at the heart of the problem facing the Negro community, citing broken families, illegitimacy, matriarchy, economic dependency, failure to pass armed forces entrance tests, delinquency, and crime as evidence of the Negro family's pathology. (p. 480)

The Moynihan report (1965/1967) largely reiterates the point that Frazier made in reference to the Black family structure being pathological in nature, and Moynihan makes the argument it is this pathology that creates a spiral of disadvantage for African Americans (Moynihan, 1967; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). "Moynihan's monograph not only generated a heated controversy but spawned a substantial revisionist literature which continues to be influential in African American family studies" (p. 5).

Many scholars challenged the Moynihan report in defense of the Black family structure, arguing that it was not pathological but adaptive to racial and socioeconomic stresses (Morgan, McDaniel, Miller & Preston, 1993). In the article written by Morgan, McDaniel, Miller & Preston (1993), they discussed that Moynihan was accused of "blaming the victim" for his report on the Black family. "Blaming the victim" entailed attributing the disadvantages that blacks endured as a direct cause of the self-inflicted deterioration of the black family structure. Moynihan failed to take into consideration external factors like racism, sexism, capitalism, and Judeo-Christianity

that are just as responsible, if not more, for the subjugation of the Black family (Aldridge, 2008). However, many studies done on the Black family were not cognizant of the unique pressures put on the Black family, therefore it was often compared to the structure of the majority of white families at the time.

Allen (1978) found that there are three manners scholars can go about looking at the Black family, cultural equivalence, cultural deviance, and cultural variance. From a cultural equivalence perspective the different racial experiences of white and black families is de-emphasized, and blacks are expected to live up to white middle class norms, especially when it is concerning the family structure. In the case of cultural deviance the primary focus is on the Nuclear family with a male provider, any family structure to deviate from that is seen as pathological and dysfunctional. Many studies prior to the 1970s studied the Black family from either the cultural equivalence view or the cultural deviance view. For a large majority of studies on the Black family, comparative work and racial difference is at the center of analysis on the Black family (Allen, 1978). Comparative work is the most divisive form of analysis because it frames any family that deviates from the nuclear family structure as pathological and in need of help in order for them to stabilize. The third perspective is cultural variance, this views the Black family structure positively and sees it as being an adaptation to the many cultural and societal stresses the Black family has undergone since slavery. Upon the Moynihan report many Black scholars begin to position their reporting of the Black family in the social variance perspective.

In many ways, the Moynihan report reignited Scholar's interest in the Black family. The emergence of scholars in defense of the virtuosity of the Black family argued that Moynihan's findings were not representative of the majority of Black families during the time (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Allen,1978). His writings were a "deficit model" that focused on the sub group of African American families, which were lower class urban families (Tucker & Mitchell-

Kernan, 1995). This critique of the report was brought forth scholars Billingsly and Scanzoni, they contended that Moynihan had a limited view on the black family structure, where there is a broad range of family structures, Moynihan only focused on the one structure that contrasted most to the nuclear family structure, he conducted his studies from a cultural deviance perspective. Whereas, scholars like Hill felt that taking a more holistic approach to understanding the Black family dynamic took into account historical and contemporary relevance. The Black family is an important aspect to understand, because it is this structure that the Black male-female dyadic exist.

Following in the steps of W.E.B. Dubois, many other scholars have echoed the same holistic philosophy when it comes to understanding the Black male-female dyadic in the United States. According to Robert E. Staples (1970) research on African American relationship dynamics, and in particular the black family, he suggests that in order to completely understand African American relationship dynamics you have to look at the Black family structure from a historical perspective. It has been proven that prior to the transplantation of African Americans into what is now known as the United States the Black family structure was stable and functioned off of a patriarchal and in some cases a matriarchal system, nevertheless it functioned positively. However, once being displaced during the transatlantic slave trade many familial bonds were broken. These bonds were further severed during slave auctions where Black males were separated from their families, leaving the mother to be the head of the household. "Under slavery the father's function was biological rather than sociological or economical. The mother reared and cared for the children and they were considered hers" (Staples, 1970). It is Staple's assumption that the ailing family dynamic in the African American community is the African American's nurtured response to the trauma that slavery was. Staples further postulates that the African American male resents his position in society because of the socioeconomic pressures that he endures making it extremely hard for him to support himself and

family, either delaying his willingness to have a long-term relationship or halting it all together. All of these factors Staples has attributed to the wavering stability and strength of African American households, and in my opinion this reasoning can be attributed to the weak dyadic relationships.

Wilma J. Henry (2008), an associate professor at the University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, has also com"when trying to understand the process of selecting a partner"e to the same conclusion that race and gender are important when it relates to African American's forming romantic interpersonal relationships. In her article she takes a look at African American college women and the generational and cultural factors that attribute to their low levels of engagement in romantic relationship. Much like Staples, she makes the argument that you cannot understand the situation facing heterosexual romantic Black relationships without first understanding the immense struggle and strain that has been put on the relationship during and after slavery. The generational cultural stresses that stem from slavery have an immense effect on how, when, and with whom African Americans choose to engage in romantic relationships. "When trying to understand the process of selecting a partner, one must note certain social, cultural, and economic hardship variables that influence choices (Surra & Longstreth, 1990; as cited in Myers, 2008, p. 9). When adding these variables to the selection process, the process can increase in difficulty, especially for Blacks in America" (Myers, 2008, p. 9). Societal, cultural, and economic stresses make an integral difference on the dating experience of African Americans because so much of their experience is plagued by those disparities.

Other factors contributing to the singleness of African Americans is the ever-increasing trend of fewer men than women in the population. The influx of Black males in the penitentiary has had an adverse effect on the dating trends within the Black community. It has created a large disparity of viable Black men in the community and on college campuses, which is in turn has shrunk the options for dating partners for Black women (Henry, 2008; Myers 2008). The social imbalance has created a unique situation for Blacks and has further decreased the number of Blacks in relationships, and greatly effects the social and psychological adjustment of these individuals in their respective communities. The male/female imbalance is grotesquely evident on College campuses where "65% of females comprise the Black student population on college and university campuses across the country" (Henry, 2008). The equation is simple, more women than men are going to college diminishing the amount of available black men to choose for potential long-term romantic relationships.

The other factor that adds to the decreasing number of available Black men is interracial dating. Henry finds that attitudes towards interracial dating are far more positive than in recent generation, however, she finds that Black men are more likely to date outside of their race than Black women. Henry postulates that with Black men being far more willing to date outside of their race it is the Black woman that she feels that she must maintain the traditions and identity of the race by marrying within her race and having Black children. Therefore, many Black women are reluctant to date outside of their race, leaving them one of the largest demographics of people to remain single throughout their lifetime.

The always-popular hip-hop culture has also created a difficult dynamic between African American men and women. Over sexualized images of Black women have created an unfair stigma that has been attributed to her identity. Much like the caricatures of earlier decades like the *Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel*, today's hip-hop culture has created their own depictions of Black women through eight sexualized characters which are, *the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster, Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama* (Stephens & Few, 2007). Each of these depictions of what it means to be a Black woman further demeans the dating and romantic experience for her. The idea is that these depictions at some level reinforce racist ideologies that Black women are not suitable for

Tindall: Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

Where is the Black Barbie?

marriage are ideal mating partners, or lack thereof. Hip-hop culture also brings into the forefront the notion of color discrimination and body type discrimination. Historically, lighter skin is what is a valued attribute of the American culture; through the music videos and songs depictions of a highly ambiguous woman who is brown skinned (not too light or too dark) has become the definition of beauty for popular culture. These depictions have major effects on the Black woman's developmental identity and self-esteem (Stephens & Few, 2007; Henry, 2008). "African American adolescents must recognize their value and worth not only in terms of their gender, but also their race, if they want to develop healthy identities" (Stephens & Few, 2008). A lack of healthy self-identity tends to have negative effects on romantic relationships, and in particular Black relationships, because of the many stresses they will be subject to as a couple.

Throughout the history of America when it comes to the Black woman, her unique struggle is often lost in the efforts of other movements like the Black liberation movement, Civil Rights, and the many waves of the Feminist movement. The particular struggles of the Black woman were subjugated to the back of the movements for equality, while the issues of black men and white women were pushed to the forefront. Over time the Black woman has had to deal with racism, sexism, work-place harassment, the "glass-ceiling", higher rates of single-motherhood, severe economic disparity, multitudes of negative stereotypes, and a mass negative ideology that attacks her femininity and virtuosity. She is carrying the weight of being Black and woman in a society which functions majorly off of racism and sexism.

Each of the equality movements only focused on bettering the situation for one aspect of the Black woman's experience, which in many cases has created an internal and external tug-of-war effect on the Black woman. The external groups vie for the support of the Black woman in their movement, and internally the Black woman must battle with satisfying her need as woman or her

need as an African American. The reality is, is that there has yet to be a movement comparable to the magnitude of the Black movement and Women's movement for the Black woman, and her involvement in the prior movements have rendered minor gains for her, and in some cases the Black woman has been attacked for her involvement. For her efforts in the Feminist movement she was chastised and blamed for being the downfall of the Black Liberation movement. For the Black liberation movement and Civil Rights, her needs as a Black woman were dismissed based off of the claim that the Black man should have his rights first. The Black woman in all of the movements was denied her rights, and only received servings after everyone else was fed. I say this not to minimize the efforts and large contributions of women like Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, Ida B. Wells, and Sojourner Truth; I say this to highlight the complex position the Black woman has been put in throughout history, which has created an interesting and evenly complex dynamic on Black male and female interactions.

The Black woman has worked tirelessly to be heard and decades after slavery, she is still being silenced, alienated, and vilified for her efforts. In the 21st century we still see this going on but it has manifested through mainstream media. Stereotypical depictions from the past are still very prevalent in the media today. The most enduring and pervasive image is that of the single black woman. She comes in all forms, the Jezebel, Mammy, and the Sapphire images. Even in situations where she has achieved success she is often educated, successful, and alone. This depiction has a great impact on the Black female audience because it is a message to the Black woman that she cannot have it all, it is a message to the Black woman that she is the most undesirable woman that not even her alleged ally, the black man, wants to be with her. And it is no fault to him or her, because her lack desirability is an innate flaw within her.

Because of cultural and historical findings it would appear as though the media's depiction of the single Black woman is accurate, and therefore

it only makes sense that there would be a multitude of Black women in the media portrayed as characters who are single because they are innately flawed. However this view is extremely one sided. According to the Relationship Editor for Essence magazine, Demetria L. Lucas, an aspect of the contemporary Black woman's experience that is not televised or advertised in the media, is in fact that Black women can and are in stable relationships and those relationships do end up in marriage. She found in a study by professors from Howard and Morehouse 75% of Black women by the age of 35 have been married, she also found in that same study that marriage rates increase as the level of education the Black woman has increases (Essence). With this also being a reality for the Black woman, I sought to understand why these images were not bolstered in the media as much as the negative images were, and more importantly in what ways can the lack of this positive imaging effect romantic relationships of the Black female audience?

Theoretical Framework

The social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) is an important theory to understand when analyzing the messages that media images have on Black women in relationships, and the implications of those messages. In many cases, social identity is subjective to the situation taking place in the social environment (grade level; political affiliation; sports fanatic), but in cases like race and ethnicity, social identity can go past situational circumstances and become a permanent factor of an individual's social identification (ethnic identity; racial identity; gender identity). Race is a distinct physical characteristic that is difficult and nearly impossible to mask, where as groups that are based off of religion or sexual orientation or political affiliation can go more easily undetected, therefore race is more frequently referred to for purposes of comparison and categorization. This fact makes race a salient form of social identification for minorities, especially in a race conscious society like the United States.

The focus of the social identity theory is on group based interactions, categorization, and depersonalization (Fujioka, 2005). "Social identity theory posits that a collection of individuals become a group when they share a self-categorization, such as race, and in that sense, social identity becomes a "'socially structured field' within the individual mind" (Turner, 1987, p. 207) that provides members with a shared "psychological understanding and representation of themselves" (Fujioka, 2005). The social identity theory posits that there are two groups that must exist within the theory in order for it to function. The two groups are the in-group and the out-group. The in-group is the group that the individual shares the self-categorization with based off of some commonality, an example on a micro scale would be a family unit or neighborhood, and on a macro scale it would be national identity or race. The out-group is considered to be everyone else that does not conform to the in-group ideology or in the case of race, physical attributors. Upon entering the in-group the concept of depersonalization occurs, as the individual has converged their identity to the group identity, he or she is now a group member. The act of denouncing one's own individuality for a group-centered ideology is depersonalizing one's self. It is not uncommon for communal cultures like African American, Native American, and Hispanics to believe in the importance of depersonalization in regard to their cultural heritage (Borrdas, 2007). In the social identity theory, the existence of the out-group is important to the members of the in-group, because the idea of "us" cannot exist without the idea of "them" (Stets & Burke, 2000). In-groups build a collective identity based off of shared values and beliefs as well as how they compare and/or contrast to the out-groups.

It is important for members apart of the in-group to view themselves positively, especially in relation to other groups. When they see themselves portrayed in a negative light cognitive dissonance happens. Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort an individual feels when he or she is simultaneously presented with conflicting values

and beliefs (Festinger, 1957). So in the case of Black women, if they have a strong belief that they are capable of being loving partners and wives to the Black man, but are confronted with image after image of negative portrayals of that relationship they can experience a strong level of discomfort and confusion. In this respect social identity and social comparison relate, because when in-group members see portrayals of images that are meant to represent them they have the need to compare themselves, opinions, and abilities to that image.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory posits that individuals have the innate inclination to compare themselves to others that are like them in some way, based off of a "drive to evaluate our opinions and abilities" (p. 145). As human beings it is natural for us to look for validation of our actions. We can get that validation through objective forms of evaluation, like standardized test or school grades; however, if those means of evaluation are not available, we rely heavily on getting our validation from the active and passive feedback of others. Active feedback would be another's voiced and/or demonstrated opinion on an individual's performance, and passive feedback would be a self-comparison to how others are performing in comparison to our own performance, as well as their subtle reaction to the performance. The theory affirms that without a social comparison or objective evaluation our own evaluations can become unstable, which creates an uncomfortable situation for most people. The social comparison theory also posits that "the tendency to compare oneself with some other specific person decreases as the difference between his opinion or ability and one's own increases. There is a self-imposed restriction in the range of opinion" (Festinger, 1954). People will not gage their own progress based off of someone who's abilities exceed their own, for instance a middle-class Black couple would not compare their relationship to the Obamas, because they feel that would not be a fair comparison. Individuals will choose to compete with others that are most like them in range of ability. This theory along with the social identity theory is

extremely important in understanding the Black woman's media experience, especially as it relates to her perceived ability to form healthy romantic relationships with the Black man. These theories inform us that Black women will compare themselves to others that are like them and either adopt or refute practices of those in-group members. Therefore if the media's characterization of Black women in relationships is either non-existent or extremely negative it is problematic because these are the images that Black women assess their progress in relationships. These theories are not only for the internal identity for Black women but it also reinforces how they are viewed and are treated by the larger society.

The Cultivation theory affirms that the more access humans have to television and other media outlets, the more likely they are to believe these images as reality (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). With media taking such an integral role in human's everyday lives it is safe to say that their bases in reality might be slightly skewed. Based off of the Social Learning Theory individuals are likely to learn behaviors as well as how to interact in social situations based off of media images that they identify with. Based off of a study that combines the Cultivation theory and the Social learning theory, they found that children who grew up watching Disney movies associated the elderly with evil and negativity (Martin, 2009). In this study it proved that the socialization and identification processes of people could be greatly affected by the media. The conjunction of both of these theories illuminates the integral position media takes in the formation of Black women's identities. Because Black women do have constant access to a multitude of negative images in regard to their relationship status, they are more likely to internalize these negative images as well as act out the negative behaviors.

Foucault (1977/1995) conceptualized the Gaze theory in order to explain the pervasive connection between power and subjectivity in a society. He references the relationship between the inmate and the institutional symbol that is the penitentiary, in order to illustrate his point, which

is power of the norm will make an individual monitor his or her own behavior. The self-monitoring behaviors of inmates in a prison are due in part to the knowing that they are always under constant surveillance, but they don't know who the surveillance is and where they are. Foucault posits that the combination of knowing that oneself is always being watched but not knowing by whom, forces individuals to conform to the norms and regulations of the institution and/or society. This conception has been applied to women, minorities, tourist, "schoolchildren, factory workers, or anyone who internalizes the norms of an institution to such as extent that they fail to realize what they are doing because the norms become so *normal*" (Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, and Chen, 2012, p. 12). The authors used this theory to conceptualize how Black women unknowingly internalize society's ideals of beauty because of how pervasive the norms are in our society.

This conception of the gaze is also important to be familiar with when trying to grasp how Black women view their competency to engage in a healthy romantic relationship, based off of what society expects of which is propagated by way of mainstream media. Black women may feel the need to interact in certain ways in order to reinforce those societal stereotypes or refute those stereotypes. The unusual but very real pressure of having to go against the norms that are set in place about Black women's propensity to emasculate the Black man may make some Black women feel that they must be more docile in a relationship to break that stereotype and bolster the esteem of the race. On the flip side, Black women may feel that those stereotypes are the prototypes to follow in a relationship. Both examples add an extra dimension to what Black women feel they must do in order to maintain a relationship with a man.

Many Black women in the United States have formed a collective social identity of Black womanhood and often find that identity being portrayed negatively in the mainstream media. She is often portrayed as being overbearing and abrasive or mischievous and ill intended, which causes her to be unable to be a part of a loving relationship. Based off of the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) we find that in-group members do not like when images that are comparable to in-group members are portrayed in a negative light, therefore they experience cognitive dissonance. The conflicting messages of what they see played out in movies and sitcoms and what they believe can have a great affect on how she copes with the imaging. Coping mechanisms to images that cause cognitive dissonance can range from refuting the messages and fighting against them, avoiding the messages, or reflecting the behaviors of the message. The way an individual copes largely has to do with level of social identification that they have with group.

Cultural Context

In this paper the unique African American experience is a phrase that is used often, and it references the unique framework that United States is built on as well as the cultural context that African Americans operate in. The term cultural context references the structural framework of the society that an individual or a group of people operates in. For the Black woman in America she operates in a society largely based off of capitalism, sexism, racism, and Judeo-Christianity (Aldridge, 2008). Of the four aspects of the American structural framework, the majority of Black women are adversely affected by three of the four components; capitalism, sexism and racism. In terms of capitalism, the Black woman is the least likely of Americans to attain wealth and ownership throughout her life-time (Wealth Gap is Greatest for Women of Color), and her status as a dual minority [an African American and a woman], allows her to fall victim to racism and sexism. Racism today for the Black woman is not as abrasive as it was 50 years ago, however, the effects are just as detrimental to the well-being of the Black woman. The manifestation of racism in the Black woman's life takes the form of institutional racism where her room for advancement is minimal in the work place, however there are exceptions. The Black woman's social identity is largely created off of

Tindall: Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

Where is the Black Barbie?

images of structure In Aldridge's article, "Our last hope: Black male-female relationships" (2008) she maintains that the structural framework of American society inhibits the Black community and further strains the Black male-female dyadic.

Colorism: "If you're black get back. If you're brown stick around. If you're light you're alright."

The notion of colorism is deeply embedded in the African American experience and dates all the way back to the first interactions between Africans and Europeans. Skin complexion within the African American community to an extent is an indicator of how valuable an individual is in society; it has even been referred to as human capital (Stephens & Few, 2007). In the Black community, skin color is an indicator of one's ascribed status. People with lighter skin in society are seen more favorably in society than those with darker skin. Though this ideology was imposed on African people during colonization, Blacks have internalized colorism into their cultural structure. During colonization Europeans felt that Africans with lighter skin were more like them, therefore were less barbaric than those with darker skin. In the United States this ideology spread quickly in the antebellum south as slave owners divided the slaves duties and worth by skin color. The slaves that were lighter had less labor-intensive jobs and were often appointed to positions that were superior to the field hands. Often times the lighter slaves were products of the slave masters force upon African slave women (Toplin, 1979).

Upon the abolishment of slavery the colorism positively relates to the rise in racism. Lighter skinned people, often referred to as Mulattoes (mixed raced peoples), further distanced them from the other African American by using color as a means of identification. They created organizations for light skinned people often referred to as the "Blue vein society" which major purpose was to promote prejudice ideologies about dark skinned Black people as well as get lighter and lighter with each generation. Skin color was also used as barometer for admission into Black colleges and universities, clubs, and

even sororities. Light skin was so valuable back then because it afforded Black people the opportunity to infiltrate white society unnoticed and if they were noticed they were less likely to be ostracized. The idea of passing for white came about during that time along with the saying "If you're black get back. If you're brown stick around. If you're light you're alright." This saying exemplified the value placed on skin color during that time. Lighter skinned people had a much easier time being accepted into the mainstream world than dark skinned people because they were less noticeable and white people felt that they were more like them. That is how the idea of skin color being an ascribed status came to be. White people felt like they were superior to Black people, and because light skinned people were more like white people depending on their shade, then they were naturally superior to dark skinned people. Color within the African American community is greatly associated with beauty, talent, intelligence, and acceptance.

The pervasive legacy has endured throughout generations and is still evident in contemporary society. We can hear this in hip hop songs, we watch this in music videos, we read this on twitter trending topics, we see this on magazines, and in movies and television shows, and commercials. The value of skin color is huge for Black America because it is a direct reflection of how one is seen by the masses. Beauty magazines ads and commercials have been criticized for whitening up Black beauties like Beyonce, Rihanna, and Queen Latifah. These women are often pictured much lighter than they really are with light long hair and light eyes. The message being conveyed to Black women is that in order for them to be seen beautiful like these celebrities, they have to buy into the Eurocentric idea of beauty. However, the reality is that most black women will never achieve that image which further marginalizes them from viewing themselves in the mainstreams image of beauty. Black people have internalized these messages about color and it has created a rift between light skinned Blacks and dark skinned Blacks; this further adds to the complicated situation of Black people.

We can see this idea of colorism play out in mainstream film in the depiction of Black women. Characters with lighter skin are usually portrayed as being loyal, caring, wholesome individuals that are capable of being in a healthy relationship. She is seen as attractive and a gift to men. The depiction of the light skinned Black woman is often times most comparable to the depiction of the white woman. As time has progressed we see more and more brown skin women depicted in these roles, however, for the most part, those roles are maintained by light skinned women with long hair. Dark skinned women are often portrayed as loud, angry, asexual or hypersexual characters who are incapable of being in a healthy relationship with a black man because of their propensity to be an enemy to him rather than his ally. The act of categorizing black women based off of their physical attributes and "personality" is nothing new and like colorism can be traced back to slavery.

Colorism across gender lines tends to affect men and women much differently. The research has found that the relationship between skin tone and Black males concerns presumed criminal activity, lack of education, and low work and intellectual ability, whereas the relationship between Black women and skin tone has much to do with beauty, self-esteem, and a number of intrinsic characteristics (Thompson & Keith, 2001). In those circumstances it becomes much easier for the Black male to prove himself in society through economic and educational advancement. Moreover, dark skinned men who have achieved a certain level of socioeconomic status is able divorce himself of the negative stereotypes attributed to Black males with dark skin and wager his wealth to attract a much lighter woman, which allows him to achieve a higher social status (Stephens & Few, 2007). Skin color for men is often related to their ability attain the Westerners' concept of success, once they have mastered that level of success then they are not as affected by skin color as they were once before.

However, because in the case of women, skin color is closely related to beauty, mate selection, and favorable qualities, it is not easy for a Black woman to separate herself from her skin tone, regardless of her educational or socioeconomic prowess. Black women are greatly affected by colorism because that largely determines her level of worth in society, especially in the Black community. Women across cultural lines are judged far more by their physical appearance than men, therefore in the case of the Black woman skin tone is a huge determinant of her desirability, and least likely to be dismissed on the bases of her achieved status. Research suggests that women's idea of beauty is largely based off of what men find attractive. In a study conducted by Stephens and Few (2007) on adolescent girls and boys and the effects hip hop images of African American women have on their perceptions of physical attractiveness and interpersonal relationships, found that the male participants desired women who exemplified a greater number of Eurocentric physical features; light skin, long hair, thin nose, and slim body, images that are reinforced by popular culture. These participants also maintained women who are not overtly sexual, feminine, and attractive are the most suitable types of women for marriage, but they would mess around with a woman who is considered to have a nice body, large buttocks, breast and legs, which are majorly attributed as Afrocentric features. They viewed the physical characteristics of a woman as commodities. Based off of their perceptions of the physical attractiveness of Black women in hip hop culture, dark-skinned black women are the least likely to be seen as a potential wives or even partners in healthy relationships. Colorism for Black women, dark-skinned Black women in particular, is yet another form of alienation that marginalizes her from the mainstream media, and in the case of Stephen and Few's study hip hop culture's, definition of beauty and desirability of a romantic partner for the Black man.

What do they call me? Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire

The black woman's media depiction largely operates off of images that are representative of the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel caricatures of the past. The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire

Tindall: Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

Where is the Black Barbie?

caricatures came about in slavery. The section is named "What do they call me?" after a repeated line the famous Four Women song by Nina Simone. This song was created in 1966 and was about the stereotypes of women in the Black community. "Stereotyping leads to "homogenization and depersonalization of out-group members" (Tajfel, 1982, p. 28), where individuals become almost interchangeable because they are seen in terms of shared characteristics, not personal differences (Turner, 1987). For African American women, stereotypes have been used to dehumanize them, depriving them of their "womanhood, self-respect, and social status" (King, 1973, p. 14)".

The Mammy character is often a dark-skinned overweight Black woman who is maternal by nature but not to her own children, because she does not get to raise them because she has to work with slave master's children for her whole life. She is a loving woman who gives advice to the lady of the house when asked. She nurtures the children into their adult years and she dedicates her entire life to them. The Mammy never has a mate and is depicted as being a sexual and completely loyal to her slave masters. We can see the contemporary extensions of Mammy in movies and in television. However, in the present she is characterized as being a mother like figure to much of the community, if she ever had a husband he has passed on, and she is boisterous, loving, and comical. Present day examples of the Mammy image are Madea, Big Mama in Soul Food etc.

The Jezebel character is often a light-skinned woman who has an amazing body, long hair, and is beautiful however, she is promiscuous and often uses sex as a tool to manipulate men and putting her in advantageous positions. The Jezebel is not able to be in a relationship with a man because her carnal desires control like drugs control addicts. She is a seductress who in slavery would manipulate the slave master into her sleeping with her. This was how Black women were blamed for their own rape. They were vilified as sex feigns who were able to put men under some sort of spell to make them desirable in

that moment. This stereotype is divisive because it gives the message that Black women can only be sexually desired and is not suitable for healthy relationships, especially not marriage. This role also de-feminizes Black women by way of pacifying claims of rape. When a woman is seen as an ally in something as viscous as rape it removes the softness and virtuosity that is closely attributed to femininity.

The Sapphire character can either be dark skinned or light skinned. Regardless of her skin tone she is extremely disagreeable and angry even more disconcerting is her opposition to the Black man. Rather than being seen as an ally to the Black man, the Sapphire is portrayed as the enemy. She is often lacking education and speaks in broken southern dialect and she is extremely unattractive and unpleasant. The majority of her efforts go towards breaking down the Black man and devaluing his contributions. This character came out of the post slavery era where Black women were unable to stay in the home she had to work to help support the family too. She was then seen as an emasculator and often referred to as a Matriarch.

Though there is some variety in the depictions the large commonality that each of the stereotypes has is their singleness. Black women throughout history have been portrayed as undeserving of a romantic male figure, because she is either his opponent rather than an ally, too focused on her task at hand (work or parenting), or too promiscuous to be with one man. A deeper analysis of this observation is that in the eyes of society Black women are not in need of the protection and support of a man. In society the man is seen as being the protector of his family as well as the support system to his partner and family. Therefore when the Black woman is constantly portrayed alone this is construed as an attack on her femininity and her identity as a woman, because the Black woman can take care of herself. Whether it is her breaking the mold or further emulating the stereotypes, the stereotypical images are the backdrop to the characterization of Black women in contemporary film.

Movie Analysis

In this analysis I will cover two different movies. The movies are *Jumping the Broom* and *Think Like a Man*. These films will be analyzed because they are some of the most contemporary depictions of Black women in or pursuing relationships. Each of these characters are representations of college educated Black women, with the exception of one. A much larger critique of Black women in film, across generations, is that they are extremely over-stereotypical and poorly delivered characters, and they are often one-dimensional. It appears that the complexity of the character is never built up, and still largely operates from a place of American stereotypes. Previous stereotypes do not bother building up the complexity of the character they offer image and one context that image operates in. This does not differ much from the depictions of Black women in the contemporary media.

Think Like a Man

Think Like a Man debuted in late spring of 2012 and a great amount of success in the box office bringing in 3.2 million dollars. This film was adapted from Steve Harvey's advice book to women on how to get and keep a man, *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*. This film was a majority Black star studded cast with actors like Gabrielle Union, Taraji P. Henson, Megan Goode, Kevin Hart, Michael Ealy and the list goes on. Though the movie was said to be one of the best Black films of the year it too has many pitfalls as it relates to the depiction of Black women. Like the majority of Black films the characters are highly one-dimensional and over-stereotypical. In the case of the Black women in the film the audience is able to hand pick what "type" of Black woman each lady is supposed to portray. Christine (Gabrielle Union) is the White Black girl, Mia (Megan Goode) is the whore/jezebel, Lauren (Taraji P. Henson) is the angry Black woman, and Candace (Regina Hall) is the Baby mama looking for love. These stereotypes are supposed to be representative of the different types of Black women that operate in society, and the major commonality that connects all of these women is

their inability to get and maintain a healthy relationship with a Black man. In this paper I am going to focus on two characters from the film, Kristen and Mia.

Kristen is an African American woman who is wants her boyfriend of 10 years to finally propose to her. She and her boyfriend Jeremy have been dating since college and they are now living together in their adult years. Kristen is a real estate agent and Jeremy has not yet entered a career path that will allow him to advance. This is a typical storyline about a woman wanting her man-child of a partner to grow up, take responsibility, and truly commit to her in marriage. Feeling very desperate in her situation she seeks out advice from Steve Harvey's relationship book and begins to hopefully lead Jeremy in the direction toward marriage. Kristen, as described by Jeremy's friend is a "Great girl" and an ideal partner to her boyfriend. She is Ivy League educated, successful, supportive, understanding, docile, patient partner, as well as a great friend to him. It would appear that the Steve Harvey film has finally depicted a positive Black woman in a relationship in the media. However, it becomes quite apparent that the only characteristics about Kristen that are actually Black, are her physical features and in particular her skin complexion. In the film Kristen has long brown hair, which she wears very comfortably and her style is very casual. Her only friend in the film is a white woman whom she works with and the only time she interacts with other Black people is on a professional basis. There is not much depth in her character leaving the audience unaware of her familial relationship; the only time she speaks of family is when she speaks of Jeremy's white family. Therefore her characterization is extremely problematic for Black female viewers because in so many and on so many levels she is un-relatable. Though she is able to healthily function in a relationship she is not able to simultaneously be a Black woman, she is not even in a relationship with a Black man. This image gives the message that in order for a Black woman to be a part of a healthy relationship she cannot openly identify with Black culture, or

be with a Black man. This so common trope suggest that In order for a Black woman to have effectively play a dual role, strong yet vulnerable and stern yet loving, in a relationship she must adopt a Eurocentric way of life. Despite the fact that Kristen is an ideal partner in a relationship, she cannot be seen as an ideal media role model for Black women in search of an intimate relationship with a Black man because the relationship that she accomplished in the movie is not realistic and will not be able to resonate with a Black woman who has a connection with her Black identity.

Mia is another character in the movie *Think Like a Man*. Her role in the movie is promiscuous woman who lacks meaningful relationships because of her own sexual indiscretions. Like Kristen she is seeking a meaningful relationship with a man and has not yet had luck, so she took turns to Steve Harvey's advice book. She finds that in order for her to attract and maintain a relationship with a man she must stop sleeping with men so soon, it is her folly as a sexual being that is to blame for her lack of relationship, not the superficial and often sneaky intentions of her male partners. So Mia imposes a 90-day rule before sex. This depiction of the Black woman as the unaware whore is found throughout media tropes. It portrays the Black woman as a victim of her own self-imposed misery, suggesting that if only added some value to her sex then men would see that value too and no longer disrespect her. In the film there is a scene when Mia is explaining her new approach to dating to her friend, and her friend says "Girl, ain't it going to be hard to wait that long?" That statement further reinforces that idea that Black women are hypersexual beings, the idea of waiting a mere three months to have sex is such a difficult task that her friend thinks that she has gone crazy. Throughout the movie Mia has to monitor herself so closely to make sure that she doesn't have a slip up. On her first date she has to through several different wardrobe changes just to find an outfit that is not too sexy, on later dates she has to go to drastic measures like wearing underwear with holes in them just to remind her not to have sex. These drastic

measures further reinstate that idea of Black women being sexual predators who, if they desire to be in a relationship, must train themselves to respectable chaste young ladies worthy of a man's commitment. The depiction of the Black woman as this sexual predator starkly differs from the depiction of white women as sexually liberated individuals. In the movie *Sex in the City* where one the main characters Samantha Jones has sex with multiple partners, it is never a question of her not being able to get a man to commit to her it is always her choice to not to commit to a man and in that choice lies her power. However, in portrayals of Black women like Mia she is powerless and has no choice, she must her ways in order to even be considered a possible candidate for a relationship. This trope suggests that Black women must feed into a man's fantasy in way or another to be seen as a partner in a relationship. Though she does end up getting the man at the end of the message to the Black female audience is the only way to get is a man is to change yourself, for better or worse, and game playing.

Jumping the Broom

Jumping the Broom is a romantic comedy about a young Black couple getting married and the culture differences that they will have to overcome in regard to their different family backgrounds. Sabrina is a highly educated and successful woman who comes from an affluent background and Jason her fiancé is also highly educated and successful however he was raised in a lower class household. When both of their families meet they find out just how different they really are. In this movie, there are three major roles played by black women, Sabrina, her mother and Jason's mother.

The 2011 film *Jumping the Broom*, which features a majority Black cast, was reveled as one of the best Black films of the time. *Jumping the Broom* is a romantic comedy about a young Black couple getting married and the culture differences that they will have to overcome in regard to their different family backgrounds. Sabrina is a highly educated and successful woman who comes from

an affluent background and Jason her fiancé is also highly educated and successful however he was raised in a lower class household. When both of their families meet they find out just how different they really are. In this movie, there are three major roles played by black women, Sabrina, her mother Mrs. Watson, and Jason's mother Mrs. Taylor. In this film, the stereotypical caricatures are easily detected, as each woman, represents one of the roles we discussed above.

Despite the positive intent this movie had when looking at the portrayal of Blackness in particular the portrayal of the Black woman, it becomes apparent that this movie too is just as guilty as Tyler Perry movies for vilifying, stereotyping, and one-dimensionally portraying the Black woman. Throughout the movie there are a number of different stereotypes operating in the film, which really reinforce the fallacious depiction of black women. Although many of these stereotypical images are operating with Mrs. Watson in the role of the Sapphire, Sabrina as the Oreo, and Blythe as the Jezebel, for purposes of this paper I want to look at the portrayals of the mothers in *Jumping the Broom*. I will focus on explicating the role of Mrs. Taylor as the Mammy and Mrs. Watson as the Sapphire.

The two mothers Mrs. Watson (Angela Basset) and Mrs. Taylor (Loretta Devine) were characters of interest for several reasons. One because they were mothers, spouses, and breadwinners therefore should have made room for them to have larger characteristics, and two because they are older and I wanted to show that this depiction of the Black woman no matter her age, status, and accomplishments in life still is very subjective and negative. Women who could have played roles that were paramount in portraying a Black woman in a positive light and was conscious of her experience as a woman and a Black person, were made out to be unkind and unlikeable.

First we are going to look at Mrs. Taylor. Mrs. Taylor is Jason's mother and the soon to be mother-in-law of Sabrina Watson, much like most films, there is obviously a rift between the mother

and daughter-in-law. We've seen this in films like Monster-in-Law… Monster-in-law was one of the famous films of this decade for it because it showed a battle of the wits between the mother and daughter-in-law. Jane Fonda was well aware of her intentions to sabotage her son's relationship with his soon to be wife and Jennifer Lopez was too. Therefore, the movie was comical and a constant game for the characters and the audience. Some may say that there are plenty of depictions of tumultuous mother and daughter in-law relationships. And I would agree with that we can see that in the film *Monster-in-Law*; however the difference between that mother in this mother in *Jumping the Broom* is the mother in *Monster-in-Law* is very aware of what she is doing and is intentionally sabotaging the relationship between her son and girlfriend, therefore it becomes a battle of the wits. In *Jumping the Broom* the mother is unconsciously sabotaging the relationships and her lack of awareness becomes an embarrassing joke on her further reinstating that picture of the Mammy character. However, in this film the rift between the mother and the soon to be daughter-in-law is problematic because the Mrs. Taylor is not aware of her own intentions to sabotage the wedding or the many other underlying factors that surround her dislike for Sabrina, she just doesn't understand why she doesn't really like Sabrina she just says "There is just something about that girl that I don't like", and she does and says evil things and justifies them through religion or her need to protect her soon. Mrs. Taylor's lack of awareness of how her emotions affect her attitudes and behavior draw heavily on the angry irrational Black woman stereotype. We can see this stereotype operating in many films off of the premise that women in general but Black women in specific are too emotional too express their thoughts and feelings effectively and efficiently therefore, Black women because they lack vulnerability and femininity, do not cry, they angrily lash out at everyone around them. We see this in Mrs. Taylor's character over and over again in her relationship with Jason, with Keisha, Sabrina, Unc, and her nephew. Throughout the film it becomes hard to watch and the audience can easily began to sorry for Mrs.

Tindall: Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

Where is the Black Barbie?

Taylor because she continues to embarrass herself, her son, and family through her numerous child-like antics.

The child-like protector role is also very representative of the Mammy stereotype. She is very loving and protecting over her son Jason and her family members however, because she is so emotional and doesn't seem to know how to "act right" in social situations she often needs someone to monitor her behavior and keep her in line. We can see this several times in the film as her family has to censor her behavior and in many ways respond to her and reprimand her as if she is a child. Her physical appearance also represents the Mammy stereotype. Her dark skin, heavy exterior, short hair, and homely clothing are all physical characteristics of the mammy caricature. I am not commenting on her physical appearance from my own opinion, however, the Mammy caricature was created as the antitheses of White Beauty, and off of that premise, dark skin, heavy weight, and short hair are not desirable attributes in popular culture. That fact that she speaks grammatically incorrect is also a marker of her representation as the mammy. Much like the mammy Mrs. Taylor still plays a servant role in society. She has a job as a civil servant as mail clerk in the US post office. Her job as a civil servant starkly parallels to the mammy's role as the house servant. Her socioeconomic status also compares to the situation of the mammy. Mrs. Taylor is low-income working class citizen who makes just enough to get by. This is evident by her home, the lifestyle she has, as well as the neighborhood she lives in.

Mrs. Taylor is also a widow and her singleness and lack of attention to wanting to find love is also a major characteristic of the Mammy, who is a sexless human being. Mrs. Taylor's unlikeable character makes it easy for the audience to see her as not only sexless and undesirable but also deserving her single status. There is one scene at the beginning of the movie where Mrs. Taylor is nostalgically looking over photos of her life with her husband but that is the only scene in the movie where you see her vulnerability as a mother and wife. Any other

instance of her interacting with a Black man is when she is being over-bearing to Jason, dismissing and insulting Unc., or being handled like a child by Mr. Watson. In none of these roles is she portrayed as a desirable or even potential partner to the Black man. She gives off a very negative depiction of the Black woman and her relationship with the Black man further reinstating that idea that the relationship is rarely existent and when it is it is problematic and unhealthy on because of the Black woman.

Mrs. Watson is the mother of the bride Sabrina. She is an affluent woman, who inherited her fortune from her family, who were able to create the fortune because they were freed Blacks of French decent. She lives in Martha's Vineyard with her husband who is a businessman and a maid who has been with the family since she was a child. Mrs. Watson is a stunning woman who is loves her daughter very much, however it would appear that is the extent of her love. She is very condescending to the Taylors as well as her estranged sister, and wedding planner. She plays the role of the ice queen or sapphire caricature. In all of the other relationships that she somewhat maintains in her life she is extremely cold, condescending, and emotionally unavailable, especially when it concerns her husband. Mrs. Watson is convinced that Mr. Watson is having an affair with his assistant however, she does not react in the way one would assume which is crying about the emotional state that she is in, she lashes out at her husband and speaks very rudely to him, in the hopes of keeping herself and family together for Sabrina. There is a scene at the rehearsal dinner where all members of the family are together and, Mrs. Watson says to her husband in French, "Go be with your whore." In that scene, the woman that is portrayed to the audience is not a woman who is hurt and longing to fix her marriage but a tired a woman who does not need or want a man in her life. The way she treats her husband throughout the movie up until the end makes the audience feel that she is deserving of her situation much like Mrs. Taylor. Mrs. Watson shows her husband no love or respect, which is the opposite of what he receives from his white

assistant. The character that Mrs. Watson plays does not allow the audience to empathize with her rather she is meant to be hated.

CONCLUSION

Whether it is mainstream media or Black based media whenever the broadcast involves the depiction of a Black woman it is sure to be narrow casted and nearly devoid of any true reality of the Black woman's situation in America. There are two major categories that the depictions fall under, the first would be over dramatized versions of historical caricatures from the past, and the other, which is much more recent, are depictions of Black women are seemingly harmonious and considered to be a positive portrayal of Black women, however the only characteristic about her that identifies that she is actually Black is her skin tone. Both of these examples sit on opposite ends of the spectrum and have no bases in the actual reality of Black women. Even more prevalent is the lack of Black women who are not involved in romantic relationships in any of media cultures' outlets. Often times the Black woman can be a good friend, an overzealous professional, an avid Christian, a scholar, and even a mother, however when it comes to being in relationships the Black woman is portrayed a threat to true happiness and romance for any man but especially the Black man. In the case of television and movies when a Black woman is interested in fulfilling her romantic desires she spends the span of the movie struggling to readjust who she is a woman to finally be seen as someone desirable and worthy of a serious dating relationship. There are songs, sitcoms, and movies dedicated to vilifying and degrading the Black woman. In this research project we are going to look at all of these media outlets to create a greater understanding of what I call the media's attack on the Black woman.

The broad generalization that media culture makes concerning African American women and romantic relationships is that African American women are innately flawed and nearly incapable when it comes to contributing to a healthy happy relationship with any man, and in specific the black man. The majority of media outlets that depict Black women in relationships tend to place upon them horrific character flaws, like a terrible moody attitude which borders a personality disorder, or a nearly uncontrollable sexual drive which makes her unable to be monogamous, both of which keeps them from being able to have a relationship; versus circumstantial flaws like a bad smoking habit or not having fashion sense, which can both be rectified much faster and easier than the former. These flaws that media bestows on African American characters are so aggressive and are so deeply ingrained in each of the characters that in most cases they must transform their entire personality's and life practices in order for them to be considered a potential candidate for a man. This extremely negative image of Black women portrays the message that Black women seeking a relationship with a man is so much of a of an anomaly that in many ways this act is fighting against her own humanity, because if she were to remain who she is a person in her pursuit of a man she would not be able to function in a relationship for long. This pattern of the innately flawed Black woman is ubiquitous in all media outlets. It is evident in movies like *Deliver Us From Eva* where the eldest sister is so angry and bitter that she is not only not able to keep a man for herself but her wrath is broadly extended she is not runs off the men her sisters' lives. Images like this reinforce the ideology that African American women are hyperemotional beings that are not only unable to control their "instincts" but are unable to positively and effectively rationalize through situations that may draw on pleasant or unpleasant emotions. The media would have the audience think that Black women do not know how to articulate their thoughts and emotions in relationships because either they don't know how to or they don't even know what is going on within themselves. For instance the character Tasha in Tyler Perry's movie *Why Did I Get Married 1* and *2*, is extremely volatile in her relationships is verbally, emotionally, and at times physically abusive to her husband Marcus. When she is asked why does she do the things she does to him she will say things like "I don't know I just get so mad." On the opposite side of the spectrum is the Black woman that can communicate

Tindall: Where is the Black Barbie? An Analysis of the Media Portrayals of Single Black Women

Where is the Black Barbie?

effectively she is able to function in a relationship however, she is still unhappy and furthermore her character is desexualized. In the same movie we that character being played by Patricia who is a successful book writer and psychologist and the wife of an architect who is a Black man.

Often times when the media portrays African American women in a role where she is educated, successful, and a part of a happy loving relationship she tends to lack any cultural context in her life. In movies and sitcoms this woman is highly educated most times with an Ivy League education, affluent, and has ultimately removed herself from the Black community; that is if she ever had access to the Black community. She does not keep black friends in her circle, nor does she desire to. The only Black people who she does have contact with are her immediate family, who like her, are not placed in cultural context. Often times this character is portrayed as being unaware of prejudice and discrimination and lives her life as if she is not Black at all but just a woman. Though this would be an ideal situation for many Black women, the reality remains that at this point it is impossible and so very out of touch with reality. These images of the "Unaware Black woman" make the argument that in order to live a well-rounded life she must shape her life after Eurocentric models, furthermore if she does not acknowledge her struggle then it is in fact a latent reality that she will not ever have to face. The problem with this depiction is that it creates a false identity for Black women to ascertain. Studies have shown that African Americans who deny their ethnic identity, which is tightly woven with struggle are more likely to have lower self-esteem. Based off of that fact, as well as the fact that self-esteem plays a monumental role in the success of healthy relationships, it is nearly impossible for a Black woman who has a Eurocentric ideology to be a contributing member in a relationship, which is quite contrary to the picture that the paints. The media's depiction coupled with the reality creates a false consciousness for Black women who aim to be in relationships because on one hand there is the culturally unaware woman who has the

relationship and on the other hand there is the reality that that cannot be attained without a positive view of self, which once again leaves Black women stuck, between a hard place and a fantasy.

Another dimension to this argument is that in order to even attain the ability remove oneself from their cultural context she must have the necessary educational and economic advancement. In the majority of film Black women who are a part of the middle class or lower middle class are not allowed to divorce their ethnic identity at all whereas Black women who have money are much more likely to do so. The media depicts money and education as the aspects that are able to level the playing field for black women, and put them in a situation to healthily contribute to a relationship. Though there is research that would agree the relationships that have less money troubles are more likely to have less conflict, it does not state those couples will have higher levels of trust understanding and compassion. However, that is what the media would have its audience believe. Regardless of the fallacious connection this still creates an unattainable image because the majority of African American women do not have that level of money, and when they do they are often vilified, which creates a strong antitheses between media and reality. It is apparent that the media does play a major role in the way people view themselves and the way in which they are treated by the society at large. Therefore it is extremely important for Black women to be aware of the messages that they are internalizing and it is even more important for Black women to take part in the writing, directing, and producing of the widespread media images of Black women.

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