

BLACK WOMEN AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIA:  
THE STRUGGLE TO SELF-DEFINE BLACK WOMANHOOD

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to myself,  
I am the first and the last  
I am the honored one and the scorned one  
I am the whore and the holy one  
I am the wife and the virgin  
I am the barren one and many are my daughters  
I am the silence you cannot understand  
I am the utterance of my name  
I am the Black woman.

(taken from Julie Dash's, "Daughters of the Dust")

Black women, particularly those of us who have chosen radical subjectivity, can move toward revolutionary social change that will address the delivery of our experiences and our needs. Collectively bringing our knowledge, resources, skills and wisdom to one another, we make the site where radical black female subjectivity can be nurtured and sustained.

(hooks, 1992:60)

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis began long before I entered graduate school. The ideas put forth into the analyses began with my own experiences as a Black woman. I must thank the people who contributed to these experiences: my family, especially my parents and siblings who have sacrificed and shown the support that keeps me motivated.

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have accomplished, for if you do settle you will never reach your full potential. I was listening.

## **Abstract**

Tilicia L. Mayo

### **BLACK WOMEN AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIA: THE STRUGGLE TO SELF-DEFINE BLACK WOMANHOOD**

The images reflected in the media have the ability to teach many different lessons. Amongst these lessons are life lessons that teach each of us about who we are. Contemporary films and television shows deliver images that communicate ideologies such as class, standing, and position in society. This thesis sought to understand the messages Black women receive from contemporary images and how these messages may be used to help them develop a sense of womanhood. The framework for the analysis used in this research lies within the feminist standpoint theory and Black feminist thought. The interviews conducted for this research helped to reveal that young Black women recognize patterns within the images of Black women in contemporary media. The images help them to understand the treatment of Black women and about the Black women they want to be.

Catherine A. Dobris, PhD, Committee Chair

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review .....	5
Positive Images of Black Women on Television	
Negative Images of Black Women on Television	
The Mammy, The Jezebel, and The Sapphire	
Images of Black Women in Videos	
Blacks Behind the Scene	
Socialization of Black Women	
Rationale and Thesis	
Methods .....	20
Participants.....	22
Results.....	23
Impressions of Black Films	
Films with a Positive Influence	
Black Female Role Models	
Struggle	
Self Defined Images of Black Women	
Outward Appearance	
Discussion.....	31
Positive Images	
Black Female Role Models	
Struggle	
Self Defined Images of a Black Woman	
Outward Appearance	
Theoretical Implications	
Practical Implications	
Limitations of the Study .....	42
Future Research.....	43
Conclusions.....	45
Appendix 1 .....	47
Appendix 2.....	48
References.....	68

## Curriculum Vitae



## Introduction

The intent of the abolishment of slavery was to give Blacks the freedom to govern their own lives without being under the control of White Americans. This was accomplished through constitutional amendments but only to a certain extent. Without legal control over Blacks, White Americans were forced to find new ways of maintaining social control. Sociologists Turner and Singleton argue that out of this need for social control a system evolved based on prejudice and discrimination against Blacks and that legitimated patterns of racial hierarchy in American society. Racial hierarchy positioned Black women at the bottom because they possessed characteristics of two minority groups in terms of race and gender. As a result, in contemporary American society, Black women are less likely to have power and control than White men, White women, and Black men. The oppression of Black women continues to exist through constructions created to reinforce ideals about racial hierarchy and inferiority. Media scholar, Sidra Wahalere (2007) argues that presentations of Black women in the media by the dominant class work to control Black women. She suggests that as an ideological tool of [the] state, mainstream film has historically been utilized to promote hegemonic notions and stereotypes about the Black woman that reinforce the conditions that are necessary to support and maintain “the control and exploitation of her body, her productive, and reproductive labor” (p.viii).

Author Mark Reid posits that the presence of Blacks as directors and producers in the film industry has redefined the images of the Black community in contemporary film. According to Reid, “Black films” avoid dramatizations of sexism and classism in the Black community. It is literature such as Reid’s (1993) *Redefining Black Film* that

contributes to the creation of positive images of the Black community generally and specifically to the women in the Black community. Contemporary Black women have the power to counter their oppression through the use of media. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how images of Black women in contemporary television influence the socialization of Black women. King and Thomas (2007) argue, "Socialization includes the preparation of children to accept adult roles and responsibilities in society through the teaching and learning of conventional beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior" (p.137). Furthermore, King and Thomas note that the purpose of socialization is to transmit values and ideas around lifestyles based on cultural knowledge of the adult roles within society. Their definition was used to study the development of African American daughters. For the purposes of this study, the term socialization refers to the process of Black women's development of self-perception through mediated images of other Black women in contemporary American culture. These definitions differ in that the latter indicates a specific form of preparation, which utilizes mediated images. Furthermore, the definition utilized in this study acknowledges that Black women consider both their values as well as their standpoint in society. The literature explored will focus on the history of African American women in television beginning in the 1980s when Blacks began to have artistic control over the content in film as evidenced in the films of Robert Townsend and Spike Lee. Focusing on the 1980s to the present will allow for analysis of how more productive roles in television have impacted the images of Black women in television and how those images help Black women develop a sense of identity. The framework for such an analysis will be feminist standpoint theory and Black feminist thought.

Feminist standpoint theory focuses on the ways that social location shapes knowledge. It critiques existing power relations and the inequality they produce in the lives of women. The theory was developed during the 1980s. Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins are amongst the scholars involved in the first stages of the theory's development (Wood, 2005). According to Harding, the women's movement needed knowledge that was for women. Standpoint theory starts with the material conditions of women's lives and then reflects on the struggles needed for women to construct a dominant stance in society. Furthermore, Harding (2004) argues that feminist standpoint theory promotes constructionist materialism, which is the idea that how we interact with the world around us shapes what we can and know about the world (Harding, 2004). Collins, who contributes to feminist standpoint theory, expands on this point by applying feminist standpoint theory to the Black woman and the Black woman's experience.

Collins posits that Black feminist thought is the reproduction of Black womanhood through the experiences of the Black woman. According to Collins, "Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (p.22). Black feminist thought can be understood using a five key dimension of a Black women's standpoint. These dimensions are: a) the core themes of black women's standpoint, b) variation of responses to core themes, c) the interdependence of experience and consciousness, d) consciousness and the struggle for a self-defined standpoint, and e) the interdependence of thought and action.

The core themes of Black women's standpoint is a concept based on the idea that Black women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that "denigrates" (p.22) women of African descent. One core theme, for example is a legacy

of struggle. This history of oppression unites Black women and therefore creates one unique standpoint.

I argue that Black women learn about their identity, including race, class, and sexuality, in part through watching other Black women in contemporary television. This literature review was conducted in order to discover the role of contemporary television and contemporary film in the socialization of Black women. It is clear that many sociologists believe there is a history and a purpose regarding the exploitation of Black women. According to many scholars, slavery may be over, but it has left its mark on the Black female community. The treatment of Black women in the past is still reflected in contemporary television. These images help to create racial and sexist hierarchy in American society. The influence of these images on Black women is the naturalization of oppression amongst this marginalized group. Without the social control of sanctioned slavery, dominant groups rely on other techniques, such as media, to teach subordinate groups their role in society.

The present literature review is divided into seven sections: Positive Images on Television, Negative Images on Television, “The Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire”, Video Images, Blacks Behind the Scene, and Socialization of Black Women. My thesis will include five chapters: introduction, literature review, methods, results, and conclusions.

## Literature Review

### Positive Images of Black Women on Television

There has been much research into the construction of Black women on television and in film. In her article, “Black Women in All My Children,” media critic, Stephanie Larson argues that there are images, which portray Black women in positive roles. She explores this position using Debbie Morgan’s character, Angie Hubbard, in the daytime drama series *All My Children*. According to Larson (1994), the stereotypes challenged by Hubbard’s character are single parenthood, promiscuous characterization and the matriarch image. Angie is portrayed as a self sufficient and well-respected physician. She is constructed as not being promiscuous illustrated by her virginity until her wedding night. The downfall discussed by Larson is that Angie’s success overshadows the qualities of her Black husband. Angie’s strengths are so encompassing that they make her husband look weak in comparison (Larson, 1994). Although Angie’s strengths as a Black woman supersede the accomplishments of her husband, her characterization reinforces an increased sensitivity to the portrayal of more positive images of Black women. Larson (1994) concludes that Angie has been given a black consciousness and can expect for this trend to continue with other minority women. Angie’s character was removed from the show in 1991 and returned in 2008.

In contrast, Celeste Fisher (2005) discusses “Liberating Images,” in her analysis of portrayals of the highly sexualized Black women through the use of the Black woman’s body. Fisher employs Halle Berry’s role in *Monster’s Ball* to illustrate her argument. On the surface, Halle Berry’s role is seen as yet another role that perpetuates the decontextualization of the Black female’s body. But, Fisher suggests, that it is not the

role itself that defines this portrayal but what occurs after the film is released. Halle Berry receives an Academy Award for her performance in the film. Due to Halle Berry's continual success as an actress, Fisher (2005) does not believe Berry's win of an Academy Award is a movement. She does, however, imply that this success in the film industry is a step away from marginality in the Black community (Fisher, 2005). According to Fisher, Halle Berry's role in *Monster's Ball* is negative only if the images in the film are addressed through the context of images of Black women in film. If the images within the film are viewed through a larger context, such as the award received for the role, it can be determined that producers, actors, and directors are acknowledging Black achievement in film.

Fisher's use of *Monster's Ball* also illustrates Black Studies professor, Kim Vaz's argument in *Black Women in America*, that Black women are portrayed as highly sexual because this is the image white European Americans want to portray. Vaz (1995) posits that the image put forth by white European Americans serve as justification for the marginality and exploitation of Black women. With the creation of these images comes the creation of the "flat" character. Stereotypes limit the range of behaviors viewers are willing to ascribe to a stereotyped group. Vaz suggests that the characters reinforce preconceived notions of the status quo about people outside of mainstream society and negative stereotyping provides the social function of justification. According to Vaz, "...it is through stereotyping that the ruling majority rationalizes its maltreatment of people it has designated as inferior" (p.222). As a means of counteraction, Black women have had to redefine Black womanhood. Vaz (1995) relies on the experiences of Black women to support her argument that over the past two centuries Black women have

continually reconstructed the definition of Black womanhood. While Vaz and other scholars previously mentioned in this literature review have contributed to research on positive images of Black women, there are still few articles, which reflect on positive contemporary images of Black women in media.

### Negative Images of Black Women on Television

According to Manatu-Rupert in, “The Filmic Conception of the Black Female,” film works to perpetuate the objectification of women. In particular, as discussed earlier, film portrayals work to depict black women as being “oversexed.” Hutchinson (1997) makes the same argument yet provides insight into two additional portrayals of black women. She suggests Black women are typically portrayed as fitting one of three images: highly sexual, overweight, or as fair skinned mulattoes (Hutchinson, 1997). These three roles illustrate what Hutchinson calls- the paradigm of power. While Hutchinson’s assertions explain how the media works to construct images of Black women, Rupert discusses how such depictions of Black women emerge. This history helps illustrate how the portrayals posited by both Manatu-Rupert (2000) and Hutchinson (1997) were developed and how these portrayals are constructed within society today.

The images of Black women as sexual beings were developed during slavery. During this time Black women, according to Hutchinson, were viewed as objects for sexual gratification. Furthermore, Hutchinson (1997) argues black women are culturally viewed as highly sexualized women who lure unsuspecting white men to depravity. While Rupert focuses on where the images derived, Hutchinson devotes focus into the current power structure produced through the construction of images of Blacks. According to Hutchinson, film supports European hegemony over Blacks. She utilizes

films such as “Birth of a Nation” to illustrate what is referred to as the “dominant gaze” or the tendency to of mainstream culture to replicate through narrative and imagery, racial inequalities and biases which exist throughout society. Rupert suggests that even films that were created more recently by Black filmmakers such as Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* continue to perpetuate the representation of negative black female sexuality. Such films counter Hutchinson’s claim that it the majority population that formulates and maintains negative stereotypes of Black women in the media. Thus, according to this perspective, despite Black filmmaker’s contributing to the development of Black women’s images, the media continues to serves the majority population and their interests. This idea supports Hutchinson’s paradigm of power.

Manatu-Rupert (2000) and Hutchinson (1997) differ in their approaches to the study of Black women in the media. Manatu-Rupert focuses on textual analysis of film while Hutchinson focuses on the paradigm of power. Spencer (2005) offers her perspective on the subject of Black women in the media by employing historic materialism as a theory and methodology. Spencer uses this theory to make similar arguments as Manatu-Rupert and Hutchinson Spencer suggests that mainstream film is used to exploit Black women. Spencer categorizes the images of Black women into five categories: the jezebel, the mammy, the sapphire, the welfare queen, and the neo-jezebel. Spencer explores a similar perspective to Hutchinson. She suggests that stereotypes are used by the dominant class as an attempt to control the representation of Black women. Such representations reveal the sources of oppression, racism, and patriarchy in American society (Spencer, 2005). The categorical representations of Black women will further explored in the next in the section.



## The Mammy, The Jezebel, and The Sapphire

In “From Aunt Jemima to Anita Hill: Media’s Split Image of Black Women,” Audrey Edwards (1993) discusses the image of the Black woman as the “Mammy”. Edwards describes the mammy as, “a nonthreatening, desexualized...dominating ball-busting matriarch” (p.216). One common image of the mammy is Aunt Jemima. Furthermore, Edwards states that the mammy is a prevalent image of Black women in television. It has been a successful image in television for the past 40 years. Edwards argues that the mammy image is worth discussing because it is an image of Black women that is accepted by White Americans. In her study, Edwards found two cases where successful Black women were portrayed negatively. In the first case, highly successful television mogul, Oprah Winfrey is portrayed in a Saturday Night Live skit as a mammy. In the second case, Johnetta Cole, president of Spelman College, was congratulated with a film presentation at a *Working Woman* ceremony. However, none of the women in the film were Black, emphasizing that there is no place for the Black woman in the world of success. According to Edwards, these images illustrate the concept that Black women are either portrayed in manner that is acceptable by white Americans or they are not present in images at all. This is one way the message is sent that Black women are not important and in many ways do not exist (Edwards, 1993). Furthermore, Edwards found the mammy still does exist but not as the image of Aunt Jemima. She argues that the mammy is now slimmed down and wears what comes close to business attire. While this is a step up from Aunt Jemima, Edwards concludes that the message behind the images of Black women in television has not changed much during Black women’s history in America.

Professor of African American studies Gloria Gibson-Hudson (1994), builds on the idea of stereotypes by exploring the recreation of “the mammy,” “the jezebel,” and “the sapphire” in American film. She discusses how these stereotypes were developed and leads into how they are perpetuated today. According to Hudson images of Black women are put forth by members of the dominant race in an effort to “...reflect patriarchal visions, myths, stereotypes, and/or fantasies of black womanhood” (p.248). To support this argument, Hudson employs identity politics and the politics of power to help explain why these images exist. She argues that the images help to place Black women at the bottom of society’s power hierarchy. Hudson argues specifically that Black women need to become owners of media outlets so that they can present their own self-images. The second solution, according to Hudson is for Black women to build coalitions in their communities to counteract stereotypical images.

Cultural theorist Linus Abraham (2002) contributes to the study of perpetuating images of Black women in film. Abraham conducted a critical analysis of the 1995 film, *The Scarlet Letter*. The film, *Scarlet Letter* is an adaptation of a book written in 1850. IN this article, Abraham argues that films such as *Scarlet Letter* serve to win consent over those whom power is exercised. He argues that this specific film reflects the Westernized ideology of white supremacy and perpetuates negative myths about not only Blacks but specifically, Black women. Abraham posits that while film may challenge dominant ideals within American society, these challenges do not include stereotypes of Black women. Moreover, he suggests that in *The Scarlet Letter* ideals surrounding sexuality and the Black woman are enforced. Abraham points out differences between the film and the book. In the film the main character has a Black female servant. Contrary to the portrayal

in the novel, the servant is highly sexualized in the film. Her actions include having affairs with two men. The key idea here is that the film is a representation of ideas about Black women that were prevalent in the twentieth century when the film was made rather than in the seventeenth century when the book was written. Harris continues with the study of stereotypical images of Black women in film.

In “Interrogating Representations of Black Female Identity in the films *Waiting to Exhale* and *Set it Off*,” film critic, Tina Harris (1999) conducted a textual analysis of mainstream filmmakers and their ability to entertain yet educate the public on traditional ideologies about Black women. Black Feminist Thought is used as a conceptual framework in order to understand the media’s role in constructing Black female identity. Harris suggests that using Black Feminist Thought offers Black women a voice and a standpoint about Black womanhood. Both films were studied and a comparison and contrast analysis was conducted. As a result of the qualitative study conducted, Harris found that even though both films portray realistic circumstances for Black women, they films continue to perpetuate stereotypes of the Black woman. The stereotypes noted by Harris (1999) include “the jezebel,” “the mammy,” “the welfare queen,” and “the matriarch.”

#### Images of Black Women in Videos

In study, “Where My Girls at?: Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos,” sociologist Rana Emerson (2002) sought was to identify how music videos exhibit and reproduce the stereotypical notions of Black woman hood faced by young African American woman. Emerson used theoretical sampling as a method of analyzing 56 music videos. Analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage was to code the videos. A part of this process was to conduct contextual analysis of the videos. The second stage

was to focus on selected videos that represented common themes throughout. Emerson posits that Black women are able to reclaim their space of representations in music videos by reconstructing themes of Black womanhood in videos. Themes illustrated in her sample include, self-evaluation, self-determination, and oppression. Furthermore, Emerson relies on Collin's (1991) *Black Feminist Thought* to support her findings. Emerson notes Collins' observation of how the controlling images of Black womanhood are disseminated and legitimized through social institutions. Emerson extends Collins' study by illustrating how images of Blacks in videos provide "space for the proliferation of controlling images" (p.116). Emerson's study is limited in that it fails to provide the reception of Black women in music videos by other Black women.

In their study, "Hip Hop Honey or Video Ho: African American Preadolescents' Understanding of Female Sexual Scripts in Hip Hop Culture," psychologists Few and Stephens (2007) provided research on understanding female sexuality in the hip-hop culture. According to the authors, the reality of preadolescents is socially constructed through both individual and collective definition of their knowledge about Hip Hop culture. Few and Stephens conducted a qualitative study where Black female participants in a focus group ranging from age 11-13 were asked to view images that represented African American sexuality within the hip hop culture and discuss their responses. The images were broken into 8 separate categories: the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama. The study revealed that the 11-13 age group, subjects were knowledgeable about the meanings of the images given. More importantly, the participants were able to assign value to these meanings.

Discussions in the study revealed that the images helped the participants conceptualize their own sexuality as well as African American female sexuality in general.

Feminist media critics, Railton and Paul (2005), discuss in “Naughty Girls and Red Blooded Women: Representations of Female Heterosexuality in Music Videos,” the ways in which raced identity is defined within popular culture videos. The authors begin with an analysis of the scene of a Christina Aguilera video, “Can’t Hold Me Down.” In the scene discussed by Railton and Watson, Black rapper Lil Kim joins Latin singer Christina Aguilera. The authors observe a significant contrast between the two performers. Specifically, according to Railton and Watson, Lil Kim is only seen as a Black woman performing Black sexuality whereas Aguilera can take on the characteristics of multiple racial identities. The authors also compare and contrast sexuality in two additional videos, Beyoncé Knowles’ “Baby Boy” and Minogue’s “Can’t Get You Out of My Head.” Knowles is a Black female whose video depicts her as having an animalistic sexuality. Minogue is a white female whose sexuality is depicted as “pure” and “controlled”. The authors argue that the contrast in the two videos is based upon limits in each racial group. According to Railton and Watson, Black females are depicted consistently as possessing sexuality that is animalistic and hypersexual whereas the sexuality of white females is defined as asexual.

In her study, “She was Workin’ Like Foreal’: Critical Literacy and Discourse Practices of African American Females in the Age of Hip Hop,” literacy critic, Richardson (2007) seeks to answer the question, “How do young African American females negotiate stereotypical representations of African American culture, gender, labor, and sexual values in rap music videos?” (p.79). Richardson conducted a qualitative

study where she interviewed three African American girls ranging from 17-19 years old. Richardson played rap videos and asked the interviewees to comment on the viewed images. The study reveals that there is a struggle for Black women to overcome the dominant ideologies about manhood and womanhood presented by Anglo Americans. Richardson argues that young people are aware of such dominating forces but are not able to escape it. She extends her argument by stating that young Black people are equipped with the knowledge that occupations presented within the images are not suitable occupations however, they are not encouraged to critique the society that produces such images. With the power to critique such images, Richardson concludes that they may also have the ability to make societal changes.

#### Blacks Behind the Scene

In her dissertation, “A Historical Materialist Analysis of African American Women in Media,” media critic Wahaltere (2006) focuses on how Black Film writers challenge mainstream images of Black female identity. The study also discusses how black female characters identify themselves as racial beings. Wahaltere uses critical race theory, black feminist theory, performance studies, psychoanalysis, and textual reading as the framework for her study. The author’s thesis is that black female social identity “is almost always determined by externally assigned readings of the black woman’s body and its historical function in a racist patriarchal society.” Wahaltere asserts that Black women have difficulties establishing one identity due to the characteristics they have been ascribed by social identities and self-authorized identities.

In, “The Ties that Bind: Cinematic Representations by Black Women Filmmakers,” Black film critic Gloria Hudson (1994) provides a critical analysis of the

struggles Black filmmakers face when trying to challenge images of Black women presented by the dominant class. Hudson's argument is that the representations of Black women by Black filmmakers are constructed using aspects of Black women's cultural identity. Hudson utilizes the Black feminist perspective as a framework for the discussion of Black women's cinema. She applies four principles as a framework for an analysis through the lens of black feminist cultural perspective: a) Acknowledgement that Black women worldwide share a history of patriarchal oppression b) Validation of Black women's experiences as real and significant c) Investigates the cultural history of Black women, including the survival techniques Black women employ to resist oppression and (re) formulate concepts of "womanself" d) Acknowledgement and respect for alternative knowledge systems and the means by which Black women "recall and recollect" (p.27).

Hudson (1994) analyzes four films in order to explore how each filmmaker expresses his/her perspective on Black women's cultural identity: *And Still I Rise*, *Sidet: Forced Exile*, *Daughters of the Dust*, and *Sisters in the Struggle*. Hudson found that filmmakers relied on cultural memory to construct their images. Such images utilize the historical experiences of Black woman that serve to resist marginality.

In "Black Women Decisionmakers in Entertainment Television," Janette Dates offers an analysis from 1999 and 2004. The influences Black women have had in the television industry. Dates interviewed several Black women whom are considered decision makers in the television industry. As a result, Dates found that these women felt they had a responsibility and duty to portray the Black perspective in television. In addition, Dates looks at broadcast television networks and cable channels to determine the timespan that shows featuring African Americans and their experiences last. It was

found that shows which proved to be more successful either were not defined as Black shows or viewers did not grasp the idea that they were taking in messages of the Black experience. Dates points to *Any Day Now* and *Soul Food* in order to illustrate her argument that the involvement of Blacks behind the scenes has increased the number of shows addressing Black issues. She concludes, however, that even as recently as 2004, Black issues are layered deep within the storylines rather than being the main storylines in order to align with traditional images that do not include Black issues or Black women in the forefront.

In *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, and Gender in Film*, Benshoff and Griffin (2004) illustrate the success Black filmmakers have had in expressing issues within the Black community. Benshoff and Griffin discuss the counteractions of Black filmmakers in the 1980s. They discuss the success of Black filmmakers such as Spike Lee and Haile Gerima who created “Do the Right Thing” and “Sankofa” respectively. According to Benshoff and Griffin, Lee’s films depict racial events in American society during the 1980s. The authors refer to Spike Lee as instrumental in training African American filmmakers today. For example, filmmakers such as Haile Gerima have released films that explore aspects of the African American experience. The authors discuss the fact that although black filmmakers have succeeded in producing positive images of African Americans, these images have not been accepted by conservative groups and in many cases have been protested by television stations.

#### Socialization of Black Women

In her book, *Television’s Imageable Influences*, Cosby (1994) argues that if television’s negative images of African Americans override the minds of African Americans, then these images can be used to produce negative self-perceptions. Cosby



conducted a qualitative study in order to determine the influence of television images of African Americans on the self-perceptions of young adult African Americans. Cosby interviewed ten African American adults. Each subject was asked to view television images of African American women and then was asked to respond to those images. The result was that each participant had a different perspective on which images had an impact on how each participant perceived themselves. Cosby suggests increased involvement of African Americans would result in more accurate portrayals of African Americans. Such portrayals, she claims, should produce positive images of African Americans because African Americans are less likely to produce negative images of themselves. This idea is supported by Reid as previously stated, argues that active participation by Blacks can result in the in the ability to counter oppositional images of Black women in the media. As a result, African American viewers would be more likely to feel empowered by the positive images of themselves.

King and Thomas (2007) contribute to the study of identity development amongst African American women. According to King and Thomas, messages given to African American daughters by mothers and the relationship between gendered racial socialization and communication. The authors conducted a study with 36 African American mother daughter dyads. Questions asked of the daughters included, “What are specific messages that your mother gives you on being an African American woman/girl?” (p.138) Results indicated that mothers try to instill messages of self-determination regardless of racial barriers. These results were important as they implied that African American daughters are receiving positive messages about identity from their mothers. It was also found that African American mothers have to combat

mainstream ideas about culture and self-identity. This idea, according to King and Thomas, is an indication that media relayed messages that are focused on denying racial heritage can influence adolescent girls negatively. The concerns of African American mothers can be illustrated by studies conducted by other media scholars. Monahan and Givens take a look at the social implications of the media on Black women in, “Priming Mammies, Jezebels, and other Controlling Images: An Examination the Influences of Mediated Stereotypes of African American women.”

Monahan and Givens (2005) provide a study, which examines how mediated portrayals of African Americans influence the judgments of African American women in social situations. The authors used a schematic approach in order to explore how storylines about social groups enable to viewers to develop knowledge about the group members. Information sought in this study included personality traits, behaviors and social status. Participants were asked to view a stereotyped image and then asked to watch a mock interview and discuss the traits of the interviewee. The result was the participants describe the interviewees in terms of the stereotypes viewed. The research conducted by Givens and Monahan contribute to studies that contend social views can encourage unintended acts of social discrimination.

#### Rationale and Thesis

As reflected through the literature review, there have been numerous studies conducted that contribute to the research on the images of Black women in the media. However, there is a lack of research that is inclusive of the experiences of the Black women in the audience. The Black women in the audience receive messages about other Black women through watching them in the media. As suggested by Cosby (1994), each

Black woman has a different interpretation about what that message means to her. Cosby comes to this conclusion by having her participants view images and respond to those images. My study proposes to go to the source and ask them to reflect on images that have played a role in defining their Black female identity. Such reflection is critical to the study because it supports the feminist standpoint framework that a woman's, or Black woman's, socialization is not limited to the images viewed but also how she uses those images to interact with the world around her.

As the literature suggests, Black women have the power to become the agents of change. They have the ability to create images that counter the traditional portrayals of the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Matriarch. Through producing images that challenge hegemonic ideals, Black women are able to reconstruct the definitions of Black womanhood. More importantly, they have the ability to redefine Black womanhood from their own perspective and experiences (Collins, 1991). The background literature supports the hypothesis that will be researched for this thesis. The hypothesis for this study is, Black women learn about self-identity, including race, class, and sexuality, in part through watching other Black women in contemporary film and television. The two theories used in support of this thesis are feminist standpoint theory and Black feminist theory.

Based on the preceding review of literature, it is clear that mediated images have an affect on Black women. However, there is still a need to determine the extent of this affect. The questions this thesis addresses are, "To what extent does viewing images of Black women in contemporary media play a role in the socialization of Black women?" and "How are Black women using these in creating ideals of womanhood?"

## Methods

Qualitative interviews were used for this study. This method was chosen because a qualitative interview allows the researcher to have a one-on-one relationship with the respondents and allows the researcher to gain firsthand insight from the perspective of the group being researched. Open-ended questions were developed (See Appendix A). The interviews were conducted with Black women between the ages of 18-22. One of the aspects of becoming an adult is making independent decisions. At this age, the women would be in a variety of positions such as, graduating from high school, getting a job, getting a GED, and/or graduating from college. Using women older than 22 could increase the chances of interviewing women who have had more life experiences that have helped them determine their self-identity.

Interviewing will take place in a large Midwestern city, Indianapolis. Snowball sampling was primarily used for this study. Interview participants were audio recorded. Side notes were taken as each participant was interviewed. Once the interviews were complete, they were transcribed. This led into the coding process. The transcripts were viewed as texts that were to be coded, or sorted into relevant categories. While sifting through the transcripts, common themes were found. Finding these themes was one of the first and most important steps in the coding process. The purpose of coding the data was to determine what segment of the data, in this case the interview transcripts, helped answer the research question. Coding allowed the researcher to locate specific data. This data is critical to making sense of the research problem. With the themes and common ideas identified, analytic tools could be used to shape the data in a manner that is consistent with a particular cultural or social scene, or theory.

This study followed the tenets of grounded theory. The grounded theory has been one of the most influential models for qualitative data. There are two features of grounded theory: 1) theory is grounded in relationships between data and the categories into which they are coded and 2) codes and categories are mutable until late in the project because the researcher is still in the field and data from the new experiences continue to alter the scope in terms of his or her analytic framework (Babbie and Baxter, 2004).

## **Participants**

Ten participants were interviewed for this study. Of these participants five were 22 years old, two were 21 years old, two were 20 years old, and one was 19 years old. The education level of the participants were as follows: 1 participant whose highest level of education was 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 1 participant whose highest level of education was 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 3 participants with some college experience, and five participants receiving bachelor's degrees.

## Results

The responses to the questions indicate that there is an overall belief that images of Blacks in the media in general are negative. However, responses did reflect that there are some positive images of Blacks in the media. Both the positive and negative images have an impact on the lives of Black women, but in very different ways. To help illustrate the findings, the participants' responses have been coded into seven overall themes that emerged from the data: impressions of Black films, films with a positive influence, Black female role models, struggle, self defined images of a Black woman, and outward appearance. These themes will be discussed.

### Impressions of Black Films

The first question in the interview process asks, "What are your impressions of Black film and television in general?" All of the women interviewed believed that contemporary films and television overall display Blacks in a negative light. These negative images include stereotypes discussed in the literature review such as, Black females in videos, angry Black women, and Black males participating in illegal activity. For example, as one participant explained, "I believe some films need to show Black people in a more positive role instead of the typical drug dealers, rappers, ball players, and women degrading themselves. I think they should shed more light from a positive aspect." The interviewees overall, stated that the images of Black women put forth in the media do not display accurate images of Black women. The Black women in the media relay negative images. The women interviewed use the negative images to determine how they want to be and how they do not want to be. The way the women would like to carry themselves contrasts the way Black women behave in the media. According to the

participants, the creators of the media images believe Black women are angry and highly sexual. For example, one participant stated, "Seeing Black women in music videos and playing the lowest roles in films makes me feel like I have to be better than them to lift the reputation of all Black women." The women interviewed do not see themselves in this manner.

In addition to the stereotypes portrayed of Blacks in general, Black women have to battle their own stereotypes. Black women are said to be uneducated. For example, one participant even included her ideas of the percentage of Black female portrayals, "In 75% of the media, Black females are portrayed as strippers, video hoes, welfare queens, and gold diggers. In the other 25%, females are hardworking individuals taking care of business. The 25% that impact me as a Black female do not get displayed that often, unless they are helping the white man in some way, shape, or form. And if it's Black history month." The interviewees choose to counter these images by working for a higher education. This is reflected in the fact that 50% of the participants were receiving college degrees in May 2009.

It was also found that there are not enough Black films or Black television shows. Two participants responded to question one not by stating that there are stereotypes but by acknowledging the lack of Black films. For example, a participant stated, "In general I feel there are not enough Black films and television shows. Especially not enough newer TV shows but thanks to dvr and cable I can watch my favorite Black shows of yester year." This participant spoke for Black films and television shows in general while another participant stated, "I don't think there are enough Black films."



## Films with a Positive Influence

Several of the interviewees mentioned that in cases where Blacks were in films and television shows created by Blacks, the images were more positive. Specifically, interviewees named Tyler Perry as a producer and creator that depicts Blacks and more specifically Black women in positive roles. According to one participant speaking of Tyler Perry, “The women in his films are always appropriately dressed. They look very classy, stylish, and cutting edge, but they’re not like in hoochie shorts or with their boobs hanging out.” One participant went on to express that Tyler Perry films are influential because they include messages such as struggle, love, religion, and humor, which are all aspects of the Black family unit. She stated, “The Tyler Perry films incorporate all the Black family humor, struggles, and love which is needed because it is something we can relate to. This participant also acknowledged “The Great Debaters” as being an influence. “The Great Debaters is an excellent film that motivated me to become a better student and appreciate higher education.” This film was directed by Black actor, Denzel Washington.

The participant’s responses showed that in instances where they were influenced by a Black show, the shows were Black shows created by Black writers or producers. For example, “A Different World” was created by Bill Cosby. As one participant explained, ““A Different World” is based off Black people. They were in college and would join fraternities and sororities and were getting an education and they were going off and getting married. Like that’s what I want to do. Like I wanted to go to college and find my husband and get married and have my job and my college degree like in a different world. I think they were influential because they kind of went against the grain of like

how you normally see African Americans portrayed in television and in film. It was like you saw all of these African Americans, you saw these Black people and they were doing the things you really want to do like they were in school, they were getting degrees, they were having these traditional families. And it was like the marriages and the jobs after college and graduation and this and that. It was something that you could look up to and be like wow, this is what I want to do with my life.”

Alice Walker originally wrote the “Color Purple.” One participant reflected on this film by stating, “The Color Purple” was about the strong Black woman. It showed a time when women were trying to get away from the bad. When she had been beaten and taken advantage of, she got away at the end. So there is something always at the end of the road.” For this participant, “The Color Purple” serves as motivation to continue moving further in life. Another participant listed her Black film as being influential for a different reason. She stated, “I would have to say, “Boycott.” It illustrates the history of “the struggle” Black America had to go through just for us new generation of Negroes can live halfway decent.”

#### Black Female Role Models

Robin Roberts, Soledad O’Brien, Melody Hobson, Michelle Obama, and Oprah Winfrey were mentioned as being role models for young Black women. However, there were two women mentioned throughout all of the interviews, Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama. One participant explained, “Strong headlining Black women like Michelle Obama and Oprah make me feel like I can do anything I put my mind to, whether it is being the best housewife on earth or a lawyer. They are very positive role models who exhibit great qualities all Black women should have, integrity and pride.”

Oprah is a representation of Black women who have occupations in the media. Michelle Obama represents the Black women in the media whose position in society keeps them in the constant limelight for others to see. According to the participants, these women were considered examples of who young Black women model themselves after. One of the reasons the participants model themselves after these women is that their images counter the stereotypical images that are prevalent in the media. One participant said of Oprah, “I think Black women do not get the praise they should. Positive Black women impact the media very effectively and determined such as Oprah. She has impacted so many lives. I view myself the same way positive, strong and determined.” A participant said of Michelle Obama, “Black women in the media such as Michelle Obama carry herself with dignity. That makes you want to show the same.”

The women chosen as role models had the same characteristics of the participants that mentioned them as roles models. For example, one participant mentioned Melody Hobson as her role model. This participant majored in accounting and marketing. Melody Hobson is the president of Ariel Investments, LLC based in Chicago. “Melody Hobson who may not be known by many is my little finance guru and I respect her desire to share her financial knowledge to teach those who may not know much about their financial health.” “Probably how I am. If I was to create a role, I would want them to be like me.” Which would be how? Single mother, trying to work on furthering my education. Yeah because that’s basically what I’m doing now.”

### Struggle

It was unanimous that young Black women do not agree with the stereotypes of Black women portrayed in contemporary media. It seems that there is a struggle for

Black women to get across accurate images of themselves. In addition, the young Black women interviewed expressed that they also have to work harder for a place in society than white women. According to the participants, while white women are portrayed as a housewife/mother or career woman, Black women have to both. In addition, they are not as accepted in the workforce as white women are. For example, one participant reflected, "...Black women have to work harder than let's say I don't know if you want to put it that Black women have to work harder than white women but if that's how you want to look at."

Black women are also faced with the fact that they are a double minority. They are first a member of the Black minority and second as a female, the subordinate the Black minority group. One participant stated, "It seems like Black women are portrayed to be maybe housewives and not on too many films do you see like the woman playing the primary role and it just seems that women have to fight harder and work harder to make a difference or to get somewhere." Despite the fact that this participant recognizes several images of Black women as housewives in films and contemporary television, only two participants described her Black woman as being a mother. One participant stated that her Black woman would be, "like me...a single mother, trying to work furthering my education. Another participant stated that her Black female character would be. "...a strong, independent, yet married mother and disciplinarian, community leader, college graduate with her master's degree, working as a college level professor at a HBCU.

## Self Defined Images of Black Women

As a part of the interviewing process, participants were asked to describe what a Black woman's characteristics would consist of if they were able to create a contemporary television show where a Black woman would be the main character. Several characteristics were mentioned in every interview. None of these characteristics was negative. Their Black women would have a higher education, be religious, and many of them would be CEOs. Of these traits there were two that were prevalent throughout the responses, education and occupation. With the exception of one interview, all of the Black women in the self-created television shows would be successful career women. Out of the ten interviews conducted, seven interviewees stated that their self-created Black women would be college educated and a successful CEO. For example, one participant stated, "Her personality would be that she is smart, hardworking, loving, and strong. She knows her self-worth, puts God first, and she is driven to accomplish her goals. Her occupation would be the CEO of a magazine and she would be a college graduate with two degrees."

## Outward Appearance

The interview questions did not specifically ask for opinions of what a Black woman should physically look like. However, those participants who mentioned appearance as a factor for images of Black women in contemporary media having an influence on them described the women in these images as being chubby and/or dark skinned. For example, one participant stated, "So my character would be very realistic, no Hollywood types, just a little chubby Black girl trying to find herself in the cold hard world."

Skin color was very important to the participants. The participants expressed the feeling that in the media, light skinned Black women are more accepted than darker skinned Black women. Due to these portrayals, the interviewees that mentioned skin complexion felt inferior because they were darker than the complexions seen throughout the media. One participant stated, "I feel like oftentimes when you see Black women in the media especially like let's say like CNN, you see Soledad O'Brien who I think is Black. So you see her and she's like a lighter skinned African American woman and you're just like that's what they want. I feel like they a lot of times like that's what white America wants, a lighter skinned African American Black woman. It's almost like a darker skinned African American girl has a negative connotation and it's just like not what they want to see even though we come in different colors." Oprah and Michelle Obama are Black females who are seen as paving the way for darker skinned Black females.

## **Discussion**

### Positive Images

Participants were asked to describe Black films in general. However, they were not asked to distinguish whether or not a Black film meant that Blacks were the main characters in the film or if the films were created by Blacks. Some participants spoke of the stereotypes of Blacks seen in contemporary film and television. For example, one participant noted, “Well personally, I think that a lot of films are either most of the Black people in them are dying or they portray us to be unintelligent, and... I don’t know. It’s just a lot of stereotypes that they put us into.” The fact that the participants spoke of the prevalence of stereotypes of Black women in the media was an indication that the participants are consistently being presented with static interpretations of Black women rather than realistic interpretations of what it means to be a Black woman.

Participants also responded with reflections to positive images of Black women in general. A positive image of a Black woman in the media would consist of a woman who is well educated, is not angry, is strong, is successful, and dresses in sophisticated clothing. Many of the participants noted that they felt like they exhibited these qualities. These are the characteristics that the participants look up to and the type of women they want to become.

### Black Female Role Models

Robin Roberts, Soledad O’Brien, Mellody Hobson, Michelle Obama, and Oprah Winfrey were mentioned as being role models for young Black women. As previously stated Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey were the only two women mentioned in almost every response. Although Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey are

seen as staples in the Black female community, the other successful Black women were discussed because each woman had an individual importance to the participants that mentioned them respectively. The fact that only two of these women were consistently mentioned can be interpreted as the participants being conscious of who these women are and what they mean to the Black community. The questions then become, “Why are participants conscious of Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey?” and “How did these women become the focal point in the lives of Black women?” These women have a constant presence in the media and are prevalently known for their efforts in the Black community. These women while having similar characteristics are known in the Black community for very different reasons. More importantly, Obama and Winfrey share a characteristic that the participants stated as defining Black women, strength.

The women felt as though any Black woman who was going to be success had to be strong. For example, many of the participants used “The Color Purple” as a film that influenced them because the Black women in the film were considered strong women. This film, about strong women is a film that Oprah Winfrey will always be remembered for doing. It is a film that she publicly acknowledges. It is interesting to see that the Black female community supports a film that is also supported by their role model. However a question can be asked here, “If a Black woman is not considered to be strong, can she not be a role model?” One of the qualities representative of a strong woman, according to participants, is that she has overcome adversities. This idea of strength and struggle leads to the idea that even within the group of minorities standards are set really high as to who can be considered a role model and who cannot.



## Struggle

The study revealed a struggle for Black women to be portrayed as positive images in the media. The participants stated that the images of Black women in videos, Black women in films, and even in television programs were not accurate portrayals of what Black women represent in real life. While these statements are true, the mediated images are not representative of all Black women, the respondents failed to acknowledge that there are Black women who did fit into these stereotypes. If the media in the media arouse positive behavior in some Black women, they could also arouse negative behavior that mimics the behavior seen in contemporary film and television.

One of the struggles mentioned by participants is that they have to work harder than white women. Specifically they work harder because they have to have jobs and then they have to go home be a single parent. Participants also believed that Black women have a more difficult time in the workforce than white women do. Black women, work, white women do not work. In “Black Feminist Thought,” Collins references a Black woman who works in the home of a white woman. The woman explains the difference between her and the white woman. The difference is within the worries of each woman. As she explains, Black women who have to work do not have the same worries as white women who do not have to work. If they did share these same experiences their thought process would be more comparable.

## Self Defined Images of a Black Woman

All of the occupations listed as successful occupations were extraordinary by American standards. The participants listed occupations such as a lawyer or CEO of a magazine. The fact that these women wanted their Black characters to be so successful in

their careers brings forth a question, “Do Black women have to obtain the highest levels of occupational success by American standards in order to be considered successful in the Black community?” None of the participants stated that they would want their women to become schoolteachers, nurses, or even entertainers. These are respectable positions yet there were not mentioned by any of the participants. In addition, even by educational standards Michelle Obama and Oprah meet the expectations set by the participants. It was interesting to see that these were the occupational expectations set by participants considering that only 18% of all Blacks had graduated from college in 2004.

#### Outward Appearance

The women stated that their Black female characters in their shows would be dark skinned and chubby. In their eyes, this is what a “real” Black woman looks like. It was interesting that despite all of the negative remarks the participants spoke of about how the media portrays them, none of the women stated that appearance does not or should not matter. One of the ideals that Black community embraces is that Black women come in all shapes and sizes, so how is it that many of the participants seemed to care about outer appearance even when the questions did not ask what a Black woman should look like. It is also interesting to see that the women chose as their role model a woman who has publicly battled with her weight. This same woman is a dark skinned Black woman.

#### Theoretical Implications

Standpoint theory seemed to be an effective theory for this study. According to Littlejohn and Foss, standpoint theory focuses on how the circumstances of an individual’s life affects how the individual understands and constructs a social world” (Foss and Littlejohn, 2005). The theory is founded on the idea that social locations,

including race, class, and gender shape people's lives (Wood, 2005). Standpoint theory argues that, "group location in hierarchal power relations produces shared challenges for individuals in those groups" (Collins, 1990). One of the reasons that the ideas of standpoint theory resonate with Black women's experiences is that they resemble "the norm of racial solidarity." Since standpoint theory remains predicated on the notion of a group with shared experiences and interests, addressing these questions requires revisiting the connections between Black women's identities as individuals and Black women's historically constituted group identity. These ideals lead to the creation of a Black women's standpoint.

Patricia Hill Collins defines Black feminist standpoint as, "those experiences and ideas shared by African American women that provide a unique angle of vision self, community, and society, and theories that interpret these experiences" (p.22). The basis for Collins' theory of Black womanhood is ground in five dimensions. These dimensions will be used to analyze the results of this study. The dimensions are: 1) the core themes of black women's standpoint, 2) variation of responses to core themes, 3) the interdependence of experience and consciousness, 4) consciousness and the struggle for a self-defined standpoint, and 5) the interdependence of thought and action.

The first theme Collins posits is the "legacy of struggle." The issues included in the legacy of struggle are white supremacy and male superiority. These ideals are prominent in American society. As Katie Cannon states in, *Black Feminist Thought*, "throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle-a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and

oppressive, the other Black, exploited, and oppressed”(p.22). This legacy of struggle is the common thread that binds Black women. No matter what Black women experience individually, they are born into a society where being Black and being a woman classifies you into two marginalized groups. According to Collins, “Age offers little protection from legacy of struggle. Far too many young Black girls inhabit hazardous and hostile environments” (p.23). Black girls are born into this struggle and as a result come to view life through the eyes of someone with a history of struggle. The obstacles that stem from being Black and being a woman can, and will develop at any age. How each Black woman and each Black girl deals with these obstacles will be a direct result of each individual’s experiences with these struggles.

The second core theme Collins posits is variations of responses to core themes. The fact that young Black girls were born into a double minority only constitutes a commonality for these women. The way each woman deals with issues of male supremacy and white privilege will depend on the woman’s individual experiences. For example, one participant is a single mom. Therefore, her idea and experiences are based on those of a single parent, a single mother. Also her highest level of education was the tenth grade. As a result, her ideas about how to deal with issues in American society will contrast those of the participants who have no children and are about to complete their college degrees.

The third theme to a Black feminist standpoint theory is the interdependence of experience and consciousness. According to Collins, “Black women’s work and family experiences and grounding in traditional African American culture suggest that African American women as a group experience a world different from that of those who are not

Black and female” (p.24). The argument can be illustrated using a response from one of the participants in this study. The participant stated that all women have to work harder than men in the workforce and yet Black women have to work harder than white women. This idea is interesting because it recognizes that women as a subordinate will struggle in American, however, the struggles of white women will differ from those of Black women because of the experiences that come from being born into a double subordinate group.

The fourth theme Collins posits in the Black feminist standpoint theory is, consciousness and the struggle for a self-defined standpoint. Collins argues that Black women, as a group, have experiences that provide a unique perspective. However, “expressing a collective, self-defined Black feminist consciousness is problematic precisely because dominant groups have a vested interest in suppressing such thought” (p.25). The media is one domain where the interests of dominant groups are contained. As long as these dominant groups maintain control over the types of images displayed of marginalized groups, the true depictions of the marginalized cannot be portrayed. This ideal was evidenced by the responses of the participants in this study. As Patricia Collins posits, “An oppressed group’s experiences may put its members in a position to view things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult”(p.26). One woman, according to Collins, realizes that those who control the schools, media, and other cultural institutions of society prevail in establishing their viewpoint as superior to others” (Collins, 1990). It is for this reason that it is important for Blacks to take more participation in putting out images of Black in the media. If this were accomplished,

Blacks would be able to control or define accurate portrayals of Blacks and Black women.

The final theme in the Black feminist standpoint theory is the interdependence of thought and action. Collins posits, “One key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups are suppressed is that the self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance” (p.28). The experiences of the participants led them to not only resist the stereotypical images in contemporary film but also to take action against those images. This action started within each participant. Every step each participant took to rise above the negative images in the media was and is a step toward the progression of Black women. These steps are important in the Black female community because each action stems from the individuals personal experiences. As Collins notes, “Being Black and female may expose Black women to certain common experiences, which in turn may predispose us to a distinctive group consciousness, but it in no way guarantees that such as consciousness will develop among all women or that it will be articulated as such by the group. Many Black women have grasped this connection between what one does and how one thinks” (p.24). While it would be ideal for every Black woman to develop a sense of consciousness, not every woman will grasp the concepts behind a Black women’s standpoint theory.

While standpoint theory was the chosen method for analyzing the responses there are several theories that would have been beneficial to this study. The first is the feminist rhetorical analysis. A feminist rhetorical analysis would first identify the implications of the construction of gender and lead to an analysis of the ideology being reinforced. In this study, the construction of women as well as the construction of race in contemporary media would be analyzed. It would then be determined whose interests these

constructions serve. The final step would be to determine the ideology being reinforced such as white supremacy. While this theory would have been beneficial in analyzing a study that deals with marginalized groups, the theory fails to develop an understanding of the individual's personal experiences (Foss, 2004).

Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner argues that heavy television viewing cultivates attitudes that are already prevalent in society (Foss and Littlejohn, 2005). Such an argument would have been beneficial to this study since it deals with the effects of television viewing. However, this theory does not penetrate the cultural ramifications behind viewing the images in the media. According to James Anderson and Timothy Meyer, media audiences participate actively in mediated communication (Foss and Littlejohn, 2005). They construct meanings from the content they receive. This would be beneficial to the study, however it does not touch on the cultural ramifications nor does it focus on the personal experiences of the viewers. The purpose of this study was to gain insight knowledge from the Black woman's experience.

#### Practical Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which media plays a role in the lives of Black women in creating ideals of womanhood. Because the participants' responses indicated that they use the images in the media to dissect positive and negative messages to help them understand American society and their place in it, it is important to maximize the amount of positive images of Black women in the media. In order for this to happen a social change must occur. Social change starts with changing the images of Black women on film and in television. In order to determine which images should be changed, an awareness of these images, the effects of these images, and how change can

come about needs to be identified. According to Patricia Hill Collins, “Individual Black women have long displayed varying types of consciousness regarding our shared angle of vision. By aggregating and articulating these individual expressions of a focused group, consciousness becomes possible. Black women’s ability to forge these individual, unarticulated, self-defined, collective standpoints is key to Black women’s survival” (p.26).

Since Black women experience double minority status in the United States, how they come to utilize these experiences along with the images they view in everyday contemporary television helps them define their identity. As Audre Lorde points out, “It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and our detriment” (p.26). Through my examination of the results of the study, it became evident that the images in contemporary film and television while prevalent in socialization are not the only impact that plays a role in the socialization of Black women. How Black women utilize and make sense of these images is just as important because as reflected in this study, women develop an idea of how Black women should and should not behave and are perceived in American society, in response to their interpretation of these images. For example, the participants’ responses to how they believe a Black woman should appear in contemporary media was the result of the combination of the participants’ experiences and how they have come to view Black women previously through media. Some participants noted that they struggled with personal issues such as skin tone and weight and that their struggles are informed by exposure to media. They believe that mainstream American culture has set a standard for which Black Americans will be accepted based on the shade of their skin and body type.



Some participants also noted that Black women have to work harder than white women in order to achieve the same level of success. These issues are representative of how media depictions shape how Black women view their roles in society and provide evidence for prompting social change in contemporary media.

Of course, every Black woman in America is not going to understand how the images in media are shaping them. It was taken for granted that not all of the participants would be consciously aware of the influences the media has on them. According to Collins, just because a Black women's standpoint exists, does not mean that all Black women will appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize the potential that a fully articulated Afrocentric feminist standpoint has as a catalyst for change (1990). Many of the participants noted that the images of Black women in the media do not have a direct influence on them yet their responses to the questions indicate otherwise. For example, when many participants described their role models, their role models shared the same characteristics of the participants respectively; thus revealing that even in cases where there was no perceived effect, the participants had inadvertently processed the messages in the media. The understanding that images of Black women in contemporary culture will have an effect on young Black women regardless of their consciousness further substantiates the need for an increase in positive images of Black women.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of snowball sampling is that participants tend to be homogenous. Since a preponderance of academic research takes place in academic settings, participants tend to be young and to share other demographic similarities. This study was no exception. While the purpose of this study was not to generalize beyond the sample-size, the participants did represent the demographic features of a large Midwestern city. As a result of what seemed to be a combination of age and education, some participants had difficulty responding to questions that delve beyond the surface level. Reconstructing the questions seemed to alleviate this issue. Therefore, future research will have to account for question construction. This could be a future concern for research that involves participants with less education.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, only one age group, 18-22 yr olds, was utilized. Homogeneity in age may explain, for example, why several of the participants mentioned Oprah Winfrey as being someone in the media they looked up to despite the fact that there are other Black women role models who might be noted in an older sample-size. It would have enhanced this study to have accessed a wider demographic in order to achieve a better understanding of the Black female influences in the media on Black women.

## **Future Research**

In order to build on the information obtained in this study, Communication scholars may consider three research options. First, researchers might conduct a second round of interviews. When conducting one-on-one interviews, there is the possibility that a participant might not fully understand the meaning of a question. The second round of interviews would allow an analysis of the quality of the interview questions. It would also allow for an assessment of how well the interviewees understand the wording of the questions. Once this is determined, a revised set of interview questions would be implemented in order to achieve useful results for the study. For example, question four asks, “How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?” Participants had difficulty understanding what “factors aside from media” meant. This ambiguity was overcome by providing examples to participants. The question was rephrased as, “How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors such as home environment, family, and friends in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?”

After initial interviews, focus groups could provide a second research option. Focus groups would allow differences in views of portrayals of Black women in the media. Focus groups would also allow for interaction between participants. This contrasts the individual interviews because participants have the opportunity to develop their responses using similar experiences from other members of the group. In addition, the interaction between participants in a focus group might prove to be beneficial because the participants are able to feed off of one another’s reactions. They are able to reflect on ideas from other participants that they otherwise may not have been able to gauge.

The third research option would be to conduct a survey before conducting interviews. A survey would allow for responses from more people than may be available for one-on-one interviews. Surveys also allow for more responses from multiple groups with multiple backgrounds. It would also allow for group differences. The survey would help develop the interview questions based on responses from the surveys. The use of a survey would provide an understanding of the clarity of each question from the perspective of the participant and would also allow the researcher to determine whether or not the responses to questions are aligned with the types of responses sought by the researcher.

Finally, it would notable to observe an older age group than that identified in this study. For example, this study used 18-22 year olds because they are still at an impressionable young adult-age yet society considers them to be adults. Black women within the 30-35 year age range may have a very different perception of the influence of media in shaping their lives because they have more experiences and were exposed to Black women in media who were prevalent prior to the 1980s.

## Conclusions

This thesis sought to answer the questions, “To what extent does viewing images of Black women in contemporary media play a role in the socialization of Black women? and how are Black women using these images in creating ideals of womanhood?” It was hypothesized that Black women learn about self-identity, including race, class, and sexuality, in part through watching other Black women in contemporary film and television. The images reflected in the media have the ability to teach many different lessons. The lesson each individual captures from those images is a result of the life experiences each person employs to make sense of the images. Contemporary films and television shows have the ability to deliver images that communicate ideologies such as class, standing, and position in society. This thesis sought to discern the messages Black women receive from contemporary images and address how these messages may be used to help them develop a sense of womanhood. Feminist standpoint theory and Black feminist thought were used as frameworks for the analysis in this research. It was found that the images help young Black women to not only understand the messages conveyed about the treatment of Black women but also empower them to be the Black women they want to be. The value in the results of this study is that it utilizes the voice of the Black woman to support the claim that Black women in American society come to understand what it means to be a Black woman in American society in part through combining their experiences with the information transmitted to them through viewing other Black women in contemporary media. This study allows others to gain knowledge from Black women about real life experiences that are comprised of ideologies in society that were once thought to be beyond their control. Black feminist standpoint theory brings to light

the fact that these women have chosen to act against stereotypical beliefs by not allowing them to deter them from their goals or diminish their accomplishments. Participants in this study revealed that their unique experiences within individual family units assisted in combating or alleviating stereotypes about Black women.

In the future more Black women need to become conscious of and conscientious about the messages behind images which are displayed in the media. Being conscious of such images is the first step to self-defining Black womanhood. Since the 1980's Blacks have played a role behind the scenes of creating images for the media. By controlling the images displayed of Blacks and in particular Black women, more accurate portrayals can be put forth. Black women can learn the true meaning of what it means to be a Black woman. Demeaning images of Black women in the past and in the present are evidence that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves others will define us. All Black women have the power to become social agents. As agents we have the power to change the images in the media and create more positive images for ourselves and for women of other ethnicities who are also learning about Black womanhood. Through this process we can begin to transform our culture.

## **Appendix 1**

### Pre-Interview Questions:

How old are you?

What is your highest level of education?

If employed, what is your occupation?

### Interview Questions:

- 1) What are your impressions of Black films and television in general?
- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in your life? Follow Up: Why do think these films or shows were influential? (If no films or shows influence you, please explain why not)
- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?
- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?
- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of? (i.e. personality, occupation, education)

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

## Appendix 2

### Interview #1

#### Pre-Interview Questions

How old are you? 22

What is your highest level of education? Some college, 2 yrs of college

If employed, what is your occupation? JCPenney, Customer Service

#### Interview Questions

- 1) What are your impressions of Black film and television in general?

*“Well personally, I think that a lot of films are either most of the Black people in them are dying or they portray us to be um, unintelligent, and... I don’t know. It’s just a lot of stereotypes that they put us into.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“I don’t really think there are any TV shows that have been influential in my life because most of the TV shows to me are either stereotypical or unrealistic.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“Um, some actually encourage me to do better no matter what the situation is or try to do better in my community, in school.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“Hmm... I couldn’t really compare anyone in the media to someone in my family or how they would, I don’t know, develop, help me develop because I don’t know. It’s like the way they do different things, most people like especially the talk show hosts and things like that, they do some things that to me or they act to me like they have this opinion that they’re opinion is right and what you do is not. So, I don’t know, they give me this impression that they want to be perfect.”*



- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of? (i.e. personality, occupation, education)

*“I would have to say she would be an intelligent woman who’s gone through school, graduated from college and become a professional business woman with goals that not only included herself but the people around her to try and bring them to where she is at a certain level. Um.. Basically to want to help others become just as successful as she is.*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

## Interview #2

### Pre-Interview Questions

How old are you? 22

What is your highest level of education? 4 yrs of college

If employed, what is your occupation? Supervisor, UPS

### Interview Questions

- 1) What are your impressions of Black film and television in general?

*“Um, I don’t feel that there are enough black films.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“No, not really.” **Why not?** “There’s nothing really on TV that you can say you can look up to, I guess.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“It seems like Black women are portrayed to be maybe housewives and not on too many films do you see like the woman playing the primary role and it just seems that women have to fight harder and work harder to make a difference or to get somewhere.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“I wouldn’t turn towards tv and film to dictate my lifestyle just because some shows go off of personal experiences from women but they’re not what is it logical or realistic, yeah realistic.”*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of? (i.e. personality, occupation, education)

*“I’d say kinda like the man in Pursuit of Happiness. Kinda like Will Smith in Pursuit of Happiness. Somebody who fights to get what he wants and not necessarily struggles but to show that not everything in life is easy and can be handed to you but you have to work hard for it and eventually it will pay off in the*

*end.*” **So would that be more realistic than the images you see now?**  
“*Pretty much. I think so, because that’s true. Like black women have to work harder than let’s say I don’t know if you want to put it that black women have to work harder than white women but if that’s how you want to look at it.*”

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

### Interview #3

#### Pre-Interview Questions

How old are you? 20

What is your highest level of education? 1 year of college completed

If employed, what is your occupation? Community assistant in dormitory at Butler University

#### Interview Questions

- 1) What are your impressions of Black film and television in general?

*“I think with Black films and Black television, we oftentimes have characters that kinda like are kinda like fools. I hate to say fools, that’s really strong. But they kinda like play characters who are made to be the dummy and that we make the mockery out of them. It’s like a common strand or a common factor in a lot of Black television so I feel as though a lot of times our stuff centers around comedy. I don’t find that Black dramas have meaningful material but it seems that comedy is our genre of choice.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“Ooh, “A Different World.” A different world is based off Black people. They were in college and would join fraternities and the sororities and were getting an education and they were going off and getting married. Like that’s what I want to do. Like I wanted to go to college and find my husband and get married and have my job and my college degree like in a different world.”*

**Follow Up answer:** *“Um..I think they were influential because they kind of went against the grain of like how you normally see African Americans portrayed in television and in film. It was like you saw all of these African Americans, you saw these Black people and they were doing the things you really want to do like they were in school, they were getting degrees, they were having these traditional families. And it was like the marriages and the jobs after college and graduation and this and that. It was something that you could look up to and be like wow, this is what I want to do with my life.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*I feel like oftentimes when you see Black women in media especially like let's say*

*like CNN, you see Soledad O'Brien who I think is Black. So you see her and she's like a lighter skinned African American woman and you're just like that's what they want. I feel like they a lot of times, like that's just what white America wants, a lighter skinned African American Black woman. It's almost like being a darker skinned African American girl has a negative connotation and it's just like not what they want to see even though we come in different colors." **So do you say that because you're dark skinned?** "Yes, I do."*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*I feel as though when I see women in the media, they have good traits and good qualities that I want to have in my life. But I also feel like you have to step outside to get confidence and just like someone pushing you saying you're good and giving you the type of support that you want. I feel those are the outside factors and I feel like I have to put those together to become the type of person I want to be. Like I see her, like Soledad O'Brien, I always say her because I really like Soledad O'Brien. I think of her and I see her like oh yeah she's really good you know good hardworking woman, you know job this and that. But then, you have those factors because I feel like since I'm darker skinned you just, it's now that I think I'm looked down on in society but I not the first one that's chosen, I'm not the prettiest girl or I'm not the one that dies light. So you just have to find your comfort level and people that support you somewhere else." **So who would give you that support?** "I feel like family members oftentimes give you that support. Sometimes you can even get it from friends. I just feel like you have to have it. You have to get it from other people but then you have to foster it yourself. You have to actually believe that you can do what you want to do and that the tone of your skin shouldn't dictate your life."*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of? (i.e. personality, occupation, education)

*"Um...she'd be strong, she'd be witty. What else would she be? She'd be beautiful. Well beautiful is not really a trait but it would describe what she looks like." **In your eyes, what does a beautiful woman look like?** "I think she'd be a darker skinned African American woman, with really nice long hair. And she'd be successful with a really nice job. I feel like her show would center around her workplace exploits and she'd be witty and successful and she'd have a relationship with a guy or something, a really nice relationship. What else would she be, um? She'd be educated. I feel like we need to stress the fact that she's*

*educated on the television show. That's a big one for me. Even if we have to see a degree on her back. Like her back picture is a degree. I feel like we need to stress*

*the fact that this is an educated woman. That's all, she's smart, successful, witty and ooh she dresses nice too. She doesn't dress skanky, she dresses appropriately. It would be believable. I could really believe that this woman was a part of corporate America going to a job. This is her life." **Do you think Black women in films dress "skanky"?** "Just depends on what films we watch. Let's take Tyler Perry films. The women in his movies are always appropriately dressed. They look very classy, stylish and cutting edge but they're not like in hoochie shorts or with their boobs hanging out." **Tyler Perry films, if I'm correct are written and produced by an African American.** "Yes. It's just so sad that we some the people that make these films are African Americans who exploit these women. It defeats the person. I understand, you know we have a lot of people who kick us down so why would we do it to ourselves? I feel like we need to portray each other in a more positive light. So I want to make sure my character is positive, like radiating goodness.*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

## Interview #4

### Pre-Interview Questions

How old are you? 21

What is your highest level of education? 11<sup>th</sup> grade

If employed, what is your occupation? Not Employed

### Interview Questions

- 1) What are your impressions of Black film and television in general?

*I think a lot of Black films now are into what's going on in the world for Black people instead of fiction or fake life.*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“No.” **Why not?** “I guess I never really paid attention to them like that. What going on in my life, I guess I don't really look at them like that.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“Well my cousin has a big affect on my life so I would say that she more than anything affects my life more than television.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“I don't think there is a comparison. I don't think you can compare Black women in the media to people in my life because you always hear so much about Black women in the media so I don't think you can really compare. Plus I don't think Black women in the media portray strong Black women in media, which is what you see in real life. Black women are strong Black people.”*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of?

*“Probably how I am. If I was to create a role, I would want them to be like me.”*  
**Which would be how?** *Single mother, trying to work on furthering my education. Yeah because that's basically what I'm doing now.*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.



## Interview #5

### Pre-Interview Questions

How old are you? 21

What is your highest level of education? 4 yrs of college

If employed, what is your occupation? Not employed

### Interview Questions

- 1) What are your impressions of Black film and television in general?

*“I believe some films need to show Black people in a more positive role instead of the typical drug dealers, rappers, ball players, and women degrading themselves. I think they should shed more light on the positive aspects.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“I don’t think there are any films or television shows that have influenced my decisions.” **Why do you think that is?** “It’s like I said, I can’t say the shows that I have seen show anything positive.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“Black women in the media such as Michelle Obama carries herself with dignity. That makes you want to show the same.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“The images in the media are full of stereotypes about black women. Black women are angry, degrading, and loud etcetera. I just try not to fall into those categories.”*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of?

*“Her personality would be that she is smart, hard working, loving, and strong. She knows her self-worth, puts God first, and she is driven to accomplish her goals. Um...her occupation would be the CEO of a magazine and she would be a college graduate with two degrees.”*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

## Interview #6

### Pre-Interview Questions

How old are you? 19

What is your highest level of education? High school

If employed, what is your occupation? N/A

### Interview Questions

- 1) What are your impressions of Black films and television in general?

*“Black films are not degrading. They are helping us live our lives better and helping us realize and open our eyes more to find objectives and things like that.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“Sure, “The Color Purple.” I would say “A Raisin in the Sun.” and then there’s a new one. It actually came on last summer on MTV but many people caught it. It’s coming out on the 24<sup>th</sup> in theaters. I think it’s called, “The Soloist.””* **Follow Up Answer:** *“Because they are about strong Black women and “The Color Purple” was about the strong Black woman. It showed a time when women were trying to get away from the bad. When she had been beaten and taken advantage of, she got away at the end. So there is something always at the end of the road. “A Raisin in the Sun” was about taking care of your family. It doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor; there is always something better at the end. And then “The Soloist” is about being able to do whatever you want to do as long as you put your mind to it.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“Let’s see...I wouldn’t say that anyone has an impact on my life like that. Everyone makes mistakes and I think the way they put it in the media, it makes it seem worse than what you really are. **So are you saying that seeing Black women on television helps you understand that you are not like the images you see?**”* *“Right. Seeing Black women on television helps me separate myself. You have the video girls who aren’t good or don’t send positive messages and then there are actress who don’t portray reality.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“Most of those people have come from where I came from, like from the bottom of the barrel, middleclass. But they worked themselves up because they were determined to get out there and do what they wanted to do or to get their goal or dream. Whether it was to be on TV or radio. It lets me know that I can do anything. **So how would you say that seeing them compares to things in real life that help you determine how it is that you want to be?** “I think when it comes to real life situations my family would have more of an impact than people on television.”*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of?

*“I’m going to tell you that she would be from a middle class family, maybe a little chubby. She would have a bubbly personality but she is also going to be shy. She’s going to go off to college and move away to do whatever she has to do to make it big. She’s going to become a lawyer and one day someone is going to need her. The person who is going to need her once turned her down when she needed help but she is going to help them.”*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

## **Interview #7**

### **Pre-Interview Questions**

How old are you? 22

What is your highest level of education? 4 yrs of college

If employed, what is your occupation? Resident Assistant in campus housing

### **Interview Questions**

- 1) What are your impressions of Black films and television in general?

*“Black films have a bad reputation of misrepresenting the black community. Most films only show the negative aspects of being black in America. Lately, black films and television shows have started to show positive aspects of the black community. The story lines are getting better by showing more realistic representations of black people.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“I cannot think of a black film or tv show that has influenced personal decisions. I love all Tyler Perry and Bishop T.D. Jakes productions because of the religious aspect they present as well as the good relationship advice.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“Seeing black women in music videos and playing the lowest roles in films makes me feel like I have to be better than them to uplift the reputation of all black women.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“Strong, headlining black women like Michelle Obama and Oprah make me feel like I can do anything I put my mind to, whether its being the best housewife on earth or a lawyer. They are very positive role models who exhibit great qualities all black women should have, integrity and pride.”*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of?

*“ She would be a strong, independent yet married mother and disciplinarian, a community leader, college graduate with her master’s degree, working as a college level professor at a HBCU.”*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

## **Interview #8**

### **Pre-Interview Questions**

How old are you? 20

What is your highest level of education? Some college, 2 yrs of college

If employed, what is your occupation? Assistant in dorm hall

### **Interview Questions**

- 1) What are your impressions of Black film and television in general?

*“I think that the Black Film industry has lost their touch, it seems that most of the characters have negative roles. These television programs that they air today don’t teach or instill the same things the older black television shows did in the past.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“The Great Debaters is an excellent film that motivated me to become a better student and appreciate higher education. The Tyler Perry Films incorporate all the black family humor, struggles, and love which is needed because it is something we can relate to.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“I think Black women do not get the praise they should. Positive Black women impact the media very effectively and determined such as Oprah. She has impacted so many lives. I view myself the same way positive strong and determined.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“I tend to look at certain positive Black women in the media to inspire. So the type of women I would want to be is one that possesses positive energy, intellect, and poise.”*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of?

*“If I were given the opportunity to create a television show with a Black woman in a leading role, it would be great. She would possess grace, poise, and an occupation that she is proud and passionate about. Higher education is a must just because it is so vital and necessary for a Black woman to obtain a degree shows her determination and independence.”*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study

## **Interview #9**

### **Pre-Interview Questions:**

How old are you? 22

What is your highest level of education? Bachelor Degree

If employed, what is your occupation? Customer Service Rep.

### **Interview Questions**

- 1) What are your impressions of Black films and television in general?

*“In general I feel that there are not enough black films and television shows. Especially not enough newer TV shows but thanks to the power of a dvr and cable I can watch my favorite black shows of yester year.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“I do not think any black films or television shows have directly influenced decisions in my life, it is possible that they may have indirectly influenced me but I am not really aware of that. One black film in particular that maybe in the slightest way has influenced me is Boomerang. It was a movie with a black ensemble that came out in the early 90’s. It just sticks out in my mind as being one of the first movies that I remember seeing where African Americans had nice corporate jobs. The main characters worked for a marketing firm and I minored in Marketing. I wanted to major marketing but my school did not have that as a major. This could just be a coincidence, however I ended up majoring in accounting but I really did not know any black accountants on TV that may have been influenced by Enron”.*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“Black women in the media really don’t impact the way I view myself as a black woman. I know that they do a lot to portray “us” the way that they want us to be for the situation. For Example, We all knew they were lightening Beyonce up for the L’Oreal Hair Dye box, Why? I really don’t know maybe because Blonde hair looks better with lighter skin. We all know Beyonce is African American but maybe the marketing people felt that if they changed her skin tone they could sell more dye. However I do get extremely upset when I watch reality TV. I don’t like the way black woman are portrayed on reality TV, we are either angry and black*



*or we are promiscuous, but since we don't have many black shows I do find myself watching more reality TV. I just feel that when you are in the public eye you should make sure that you are portraying yourself in a way that is positive and respectful because you not only represent you but others that look like you."*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*"Well I have my favorite black media personalities: Oprah, Mellody Hobson, and Robin Roberts and I feel that they all have different characteristics that I admire. Firstly O is a mogul and I decided that since I have so many interests, why just settle for one not to mention she is blessed with so much and has such a giving heart. Mellody Hobson who may not be known by many is my little finance guru and I respect her desire to share her financial knowledge to teach those who may not know much about their financial health. Now Robin is my little survivor, she publicly battled cancer on good morning America and she was influential in hurricane Katrina/Rita Coverage. I admire her strength and authenticity and her ability to report the news in an unbiased fashion. I know somebody that met her and they said she is just like the way that she appears on tv and even helped a young aspiring African American male to get a paid internship at good morning America. I admire these women not necessarily because of a image but because of their individualism and ability to stand out in a positive and influential way."*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of?

*"Well, in my untitled book that I would love to turn into a film my leading character is a black woman and I am using certain aspects of my life and some fictional events to build a memorable character. It is really me 5-7 years from now. So my black woman is a single accountant with a MBA who is trying to pursue her career and realizes that she needs a social life too. So my character would be very realistic no Hollywood types, just a little chubby black girl trying to find herself in the cold hard world. The most important part of my story is that it has to be real and something that everybody could identify with no matter what color. I wouldn't want a Black show or Film, because the world is not Black and White I would want the main characters to be black but I would want a cast filled with all different races of people."*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

## Interview #10

### Pre Interview Questions:

How old are you? 22

What is your highest level of education? Bachelor Degree in Science of Nursing

If employed, what is your occupation? None

### Interview Questions

- 1) What are your impressions of Black films and television in general?

*“Black films are mostly stereotypical.”*

- 2) Can you think of any Black films or television shows that have influenced decisions you have made in life? Follow Up: Why do you think these films or shows have been influential?

*“I would have to say, “Boycott.” It illustrates the history of “the struggle” Black America had to go through just for us new generation of negroes can live halfway decent.”*

- 3) In what ways, if any, do Black women in the media impact the way you view yourself as a Black woman?

*“In 75% of the media, Black females are portrayed as strippers, video hoes, welfare queens, and gold diggers. In the other 25%, females are hardworking individuals taking care of business. The 25% that impact me as a Black female do not get displayed that often, unless they are helping the white man in some way, shape, or form. And if it’s Black history month.” **How is it that they impact you?** “What ways do they impact me? Well, they give me an inkling of hope that I don’t have to lower any standards to be a welfare hoe on crack to make it. The show me I can be independent, not having to rely on no one but GOD.”*

- 4) How do images of Black women in the media compare to factors aside from media in helping you develop into the type of woman you want to be?

*“Well I just try to be rational, picking the more realistic aspects from the unrealistic portrayed in the media. Then I sort out which characteristics better fit me and implement them into my life.”*

- 5) If given the opportunity to create a television show or film where the leading role was a Black woman, what would her traits consist of? (i.e. personality, occupation, education.)

*“My Black woman would be suited from head to toe. She would have a Harvard PhD, she would be the CEO of some major company or two or three. She wouldn’t be afraid to keep her hands dirty. She could hang with big boys and would be the boss and she would still come back to her community to give back and help with outreach programs.”*

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

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### **Education**

Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN  
Master of Arts, 2010  
Applied Communication

Butler University, Indianapolis, IN  
Bachelor of Arts, 2006  
Electronic Media- Major  
Communication Studies-Minor

### **Conferences**

Joseph Taylor Symposium, 2008-“Technological Expressions and Uses in Politics: An Analysis of Various Co-Cultures’ Expressions”

Central States Communication Association, 2008-“Technological Expressions and Uses in Politics: An Analysis of Various Co-Cultures’ Expressions”

IUPUI Communication Week, 2009-“The Impact of Media Technology on Black Males: An Intervention on the Health Literacy of Prostate Cancer”

IUPUI/Volgograd, Russia International Conference, 2009-“A Crisis Within a Crisis: An Analysis of the Communication Between Sickle Cell Patients and Healthcare Providers”

### **Professional Experience**

Health & Hospital Corp. Indianapolis, IN

Environmental Health Specialist, Housing & Neighborhood Health 2006-Present

- ◆ Investigate housing complaints to determine if they meet minimum codes
- ◆ Conduct housing inspections and prepare paperwork once those inspections are completed
- ◆ Responsible for organizing and keeping track of housing cases for court
- ◆ Evaluate health status of neighborhoods and communicate that status to the community

### **Internship**

Girls’ Inc. Indianapolis, IN

Media Literacy Instructor August 2005-October 2005

- ◆ Created Lesson Plans
- ◆ Implemented lesson plans for two classes: 5-8yrs and 9-13yrs
- ◆ Taught girls lessons on self-esteem, media images, media constructs