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# Black Themed Reality Television & Racial Identity: Gendered Perceptions from Black College Students

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BLACK THEMED REALITY TELEVISION & RACIAL IDENTITY: GENDERED  
PERCEPTIONS FROM BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

By:

CALVIN MONROE

Under the Direction of Jonathan Gayles, PhD

**ABSTRACT**

Using the Black Themed Reality Television (BTRT) show, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHoA) as a medium, the purpose of this study was to understand the degree in which Black men and women perceive realism while watching RHoA. By employing racial identity and perceived realism scales as variables, the researcher sought to determine the degree in which racial identity levels contributed to a difference in perceived realism from each gender.

After watching a full episode of RHoA, 36 women and 20 men specified their perceptions of reality based on depictions of Black women on the show. Using the Mann-Whitney U-test, no statistical significance of variables was found during analysis. Three general conclusions about racial identity and media preference were drawn from the findings.

INDEX WORDS: Reality TV, Racial Identity, Perceived Realism, Gender Differences

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PERCEPTIONS FROM BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

By:

CALVIN T. MONROE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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PERCEPTIONS FROM BLACK COLLEGE STUDENTS

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May 2015

## DEDICATION

This thesis and Masters degree is dedicated to all those who have not had the same opportunities that I have been presented with. This is for those who have attempted to make the right decisions in life, yet have fallen short. My work is proof that it is never too late to make a change. Never give up and push through the mental roadblocks, you can, and will make it.

This thesis is also dedicated to my immediate and extended family: The Monroes, Hearn & Canadys. My mother, Angelia and Brothers Antonio and Vincent. To Darla Monroe, Jonathan, Kimberly & Lyric Hearn, Leon Canady, Glenda, Keelan and David Tobia.

Finally, to Dr. Winnie LaNier, Kenneth Cooper, and my entire Cosumnes River College family. Your spiritual and life guidance from thousands of miles away has always been felt and continues to make a lasting impact on my life. Thank you.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide definitions of key terms and explain the background of the research. The problem statement, purpose, significance of the study and nature of the study follow. The research questions and theory employed in this study are also explained. Finally, assumptions, as well as the scope and limitations and are discussed.

#### 1.1 Definitions

The following definitions are provided due to the specific nature of the study. They are as follows:

- Reality Television (RTV): “Programs that film real people as they live out events in their lives, contrived or otherwise, as they occur” (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, Stitt, 2003:304).
- Black Themed Reality Television (BTRT): RTV shows that embody: (a) “recognition of race (Blackness) as a predominance of cultural difference (Gray, 2004:87”); (b) employ a predominantly Black cast.
- Racial/ethnic identity: “one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial/ethnic heritage with a particular group” (Helms, 1989: 229).

#### ***The Real Housewives of Atlanta overview:***

- *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is a RTV series that debuted October 7, 2008, and airs on the Bravo Network. It is the third installment of *The Real Housewives* (RH) franchise. The series follows six women living in and around the metro Atlanta area as they balance their home life, business ventures, and their social endeavors while a production crew follows.

## 1.2 Background

Before delving into the controversial, yet critical discussion of Black women on BTRT, it is advantageous to discuss previous research on racial identity to fully understand its complexity and relationship with Black audiences.

Racial identity is not simply the classification of an individual belonging to a racial demographic. Early racial identity researchers Yancey, Erickson, and Juliani (1976) and Taylor (1979) argued that racial identity was a phenomenon that arose from structural conditions and processes in American society. Although American society certainly played a role in the development of racial identity, Demo & Hughes (1990) believed that internal structures like “primary socialization experiences, particularly parental messages concerning the meaning of being Black are what truly shape racial identity” (p. 364). Thus, their research sought to examine the impact of socialization experiences of racial identity cultivated in childhood among Black adults. Their findings supported their hypothesis, “group identity is shaped by the content of parental socialization.” They also found that Black group identity is a multidimensional phenomenon and means different things to different segments of the Black population (p. 371).

Fujioka (2005) also confirms the effect that internal structures have on racial identity. She found that people are not inherently born with knowledge about oneself; instead, people tend to learn about who they are and what they do from the social environment in which they are raised.

However, according to Gandy (2001) academic researchers who study race and media effects seem to ignore the multidimensional complexity and especially the notion that there are different segments within the Black population. Generally, media effects studies of African American audiences are usually simplified to the race they belong to. Gandy (2001) claims that

these studies focus more on general race norms instead of the individual choices that Blacks can make within the context of their group identity. He asserts that only researching racial identity factors “lead to high levels of generality” (Gandy, 2001: 601).

Gandy emphasizes that media producers understand this notion of choice, thus, they segment audiences into racial group demographics, often generalizing show content based primarily on race. Schement (1998) agrees that there is evidence that African Americans prefer different television programs from those of Whites; which explains the multichannel media environment that has expanded the number of options available. Although grouping audiences simply by racial media preferences may be beneficial to media producers, it does not adequately inform researchers of “the role that group identity plays in determining which of the specific choices are actually made (Gandy, 2001: 602).

Gandy (2001) believes that there are variations of preferences within each racial group that may lead to an individual choosing to watch a particular television show. Some variations include: appreciation of culture, humor, style, conflict resolution or familiarity of characters. These variations can all influence an individual to select, or not to select a specific media program, even though they all identify (some strongly) as Black. These preference variations for choosing a program reveal aspects of an individual’s racial group identity; highlighting Demo & Hughes (1990) study of multidimensional complexity of African American media audiences.

Many racial identity scholars (Cornell & Hartmann 1998; Cross 1985; Demo & Hughes 1990; Hecht, Collier, & Ribeu 1993; Jaret & Reitzes 1999; Porter & Washington 1979; Resnicow & Ross-Gaddy 1997) all agree that racial identity is not monolithic, but multidimensional; however, the “operational definition and measurement of racial identity tends to be group specific” (Gandy, 2001: 603). I assert that it may become more advantageous to

understand racial group identity levels to fully understand why individuals choose to watch certain shows. Fujioka (2005) and Appiah (2004) both conducted research which garnered similar results: the way people respond to media depends on not only the mere membership of a specific group identity, such as White or Black, but also the strength or the level of racial or ethnic identity.

The notion of individual racial identity levels within ones racial group, leading to specific media choices, capture to the purpose of this research. The popular Black Themed Reality Television (BTRT) show, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHoA) depicts Black women who are independent, wealthy and members of the upper class. In this show, new attitudes of intersections of race, gender and class merge, allowing the world to witness how this demographic, who have been historically marginalized by race, class and gender, navigate life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, it becomes valuable to understand the different aspects of why Black audiences, with varying degrees of racial identity choose to watch this show.

RHoA embodies a multitude of cast personalities and personas; one cannot simply suppose that Blacks watch it simply because it depicts women from their own racial demographic. Instead, this study seeks to understand how individual racial identity levels contribute to realism perceptions between genders.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

RHoA seemingly attracts Black audiences with a variety of individual racial identity levels. Since its launch in 2006, the show has broken numerous ratings records including being the number one watched RTV show in all of cable television (Kissel, 2014). In spite of its immense popularity, some (Bunai 2014; Moody 2014; Sission 2012) believe the Black women depicted in these show are often boisterous and controversial in the way that they are depicted.

Studying these depictions become important because one scholar believes that “television plays a significant role in how audiences shape their racially stratified and gendered world, providing a means for members of different social, cultural and ethnic groups to learn about each other (Bunton, 2012: 35). Realizing the shortage of quantitative research on BTRT, it becomes important to gauge the view of these depictions by people of their same race/ethnicity.

Although this research study will examine racial identity levels and realism perceptions of the women depicted on RHoA, gender differences in perceptions are also an important factor to consider because Collins (2005) believes “mass media images of Black masculinity and Black femininity can have an especially pernicious effect on how Black men and women perceive one another” (p. 255). This statement provides an example of why research of this nature is important; the potential harm that the media can have in gendered perceptions in the African American community.

Lastly, author, Catherine Squires (2008) suggests that future authors should launch analyses of the next generation of RTV shows and quantify audience reactions to those shows. “As viewers compare their reality to those processed on TV, we need a keener sense of what the salient comparisons are, and how those interactions shape racial realities in the world (p. 440).

#### **1.4 Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between gender, racial identity and the perceived realism of Black women depicted on the BTRT show RHoA.

To date, media scholars who focus on Black representation on television (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, Stevenson 2014; Albarran & Umphrey 1993; Bales 1986; Boylorn 2008; Brooks & Herbert 1999; Chavez & DiBrito 1999; Coleman 1998; Collins 2004; Collins 2009; Comstock & Cobbey 1979; Davis & Gandy 1999; Devine & Elliot 1995; Dixon 2000; Entman &

Rojecki 2001; Fujioka 2005; Fujioka 2011; Gates 2013; Greenberg 1972; Havens 2000; Jhally 1992; Macey, Ryan, Springer 2014; Martin 2008; Northrop 2010; Potier 2002; Smith-Shomade 2002; Stroman 1991; Ward 2004) have mainly focused on scripted television and the impact the mass media has on race and gender. Others (Collins 2005; Gray 1995; Hall 1993; Squires 2008) have attempted to offer mass media analysis to intervene against the harm that problematic depictions of African Americans can have on race and gender. For example, Gray (1995) speaks on the symbolic struggles over meaning on television, “certain media depictions can have an effect on citizenship, social policies, morality, rights, entitlements and access to resources” (Gray 1995, xiv). With a lack of academic research on BTRT and RHoA, this research seeks to bridge the gap of empirical research between depictions of Blacks on scripted television compared to those of BTRT. It also seeks to increase the low number of BTRT empirical articles.

### **1.5 Significance**

This research is significant in several ways. First, although research is rich with studies of gender differences (Arnett, Dennis, Kinney & Hung 1999; Gauntlett 2002; Klein, Brown, Dykers, Childers, Oliveri & Porter 1993) in television choices, there is a shortage of research on internationally popular BTRT shows like RHoA in the way they affect, and have an effect on racial identity. This becomes problematic due to the high number of viewers who watch this show each week and see the often-controversial depictions of Black women. Thus, this research aims to fill this gap in literature to inform the general population of BTRT of ways that the Black demographic perceives the depictions of Black women on RHoA. Finally, it also has the ability to inform BTRT producers of how Blacks perceive their cast members and show content.



## 1.6 Nature of study

A quantitative approach is best suited to answer the research questions in this study. Holton & Burnett (1997) assert, “one of the real advantages of quantitative methods is their ability to use smaller groups of people to make inferences about larger groups that would be prohibitively expensive to study” (p. 71). Zhou & Sloan (2011) suggest that in quantitative research 30 participants serves as a general representation of society at large. Thus, this research seeks to recruit a minimum of 30 participants to mimic a general representation of society at large.

A survey design was used because it “provides a quantitative or numerical description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying the sample of that participation” (Creswell, 2014: 155). To assess beliefs, opinions and current situations, the following three surveys will be administered. (1) A simple demographic survey will inform the researcher of the gender and television watching habits of each participant. (2) A Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES) will allow participants to rate their individual racial identity levels. (3) A Perceived Realism Scale (PRS) will allow participants to rate their perceived realism of the Black women depicted on RHoA.

## 1.7 Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

- Using *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a point of reference:
  - 1) What is the relationship between gender and perceived realism in depictions of Black women on RHoA?
  - 2) To what degree do racial identity levels create different impacts on men and women’s perceived realism from watching RHoA.

These questions were designed to examine and understand the degree of gendered differences from those who have varying degrees of racial identity levels. These questions were constructed from existing literature on scripted television choices of African Americans and why they choose to watch specific program. Furthermore, the gendered questions derived from Patricia Hill Collins (2004) book, *Black Sexual Politic (BSP)*. Collins defines BSP as “a set of ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race and sexuality that frame Black men and women’s treatment of one another, as well as how African Americans are perceived and treated by others (p. 7). This book highlights the reason for analyzing gender realism perceptions on RHoA, “social problems take gender specific forms and none will be solved without serious attention to the politics of gender and sexuality” (Collins, 2004: 7). Thus, men and women will be asked the same questions in the same context while watching the same episode of RHoA to determine how different questions and media depictions are perceived.

### 1.8 Theory

First developed by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s, social identity theory has been used as a tool to investigate social perception, social categorization, and social comparison. Tajfel & Turner (1986) define it as “knowledge that one belongs to a particular social group with significant emotion and value connecting oneself to the group’s membership” (p. 292). Others described this social identity perspective as a “social-psychological based way to analyze self-conception and in-group membership” (Hogg & Reid 2006: 8). Stated differently, social identity is a part of an individual’s self-concept, which is informed by their membership of certain groups.

Social identity is directly connected with racial/ethnic identity. Racial/ethnic identity is categorized by Hogg & Abrams (1988) as self-identification and social comparisons. This self-

identification, Phinney (1990) states, “also called self-definition or self-labeling, refers to the ethnic label one uses for oneself” (p. 10), like “Black,” or “White.” Stets & Burke (2000) believe “the consequence of self-categorization is an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members” (p. 225). Hogg & Abrams (1988) agree when they state that social categories that individual place themselves exist only in relation to contrasting categories (Black vs. White); each has more or less power, prestige or status. Thus, people come to believe that their racial/ethnic identity or sense of self in part from the social categories to which they belong.

As humans, we find it beneficial to attempt to categorize and define people and things in our surroundings. “One of the easiest ways to categorize people into groups is by using visual cues of race” (Davis & Gandy 1999: 373). By using physical attributes like skin color, texture of hair or distinct facial features like nose and lip size, individuals classify people for a general understanding of who they are and what they may stand for.

Besides the visual cues of race, stereotypes that are perpetuated in the media are often used to categorize individuals to satisfy this general understanding. This type of stereotypical categorization, according to Tajfel & Turner (1979) “often creates a person’s place in society” (p. 40). In the context of the media, certain groups are commonly placed in certain situations, which either perpetuate or negate stereotypes that have the ability to harm their perceived racial identity.

It is also common and beneficial for individuals to categorize themselves into groups. For example, if one enjoys eating delectable food, they may want to classify themselves as “foodies.” If one enjoys reading novels, they may initiate a book club with likeminded

individuals to discuss certain books. And if people like a certain sports team, going to the sporting events together while acting in unique ways will signify their unique group membership.

In terms of self-identification in research, Phinney (1990) justifies the racial identity survey approach that will be used for this study. He confirms, “the approach used in a number of studies is to have subjects rate themselves or to match labels of themselves in terms of similarity to individuals from particular cultural background” (p. 10). This research plans to utilize this method, allowing for participants to rate their individual racial identity using the CSES.

In regards to communications studies, much of the empirical research that utilize social identity and self-categorization theory (Appiah 2004; Fujioka 2005; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Hogg & Abrams 1988; Stets & Burke 2000), typically address how varying levels of racial identity determine specific media selection or even how the selected mediated choices affect an individual’s social identity.

The following section shows the specific ways in which social identity has been examined through research.

### ***1.8.1 Social Identity in the Media***

Researchers have found, “when media messages target a specific cultural background by using symbols, characters and values, audience members will better identify with the messages and the source of that message” (Appiah 2004: 315). Thus, Appiah (2004) concluded, “Blacks with stronger racial identities should exhibit a greater sense of awareness from racially targeted cues and should feel more acknowledged by these efforts” (p. 317). Conversely, his results also concluded, “those with weaker racial identity possessed attitudes and behaviors that were not strongly tied to Black culture and resembled dominant mainstream culture” (p. 318). These findings also assisted with hypothesis for the two RHoA research questions.

Appiah's (2004) confirmed hypothesis is consistent with social identity theory as it adds to the idea that "individuals choose entertainment in connection with their selected group memberships" (Bryant & Yoderer, 2013: 260). Abrams & Giles (2007) concur, "Blacks consciously watch television shows to gratify their ethnic identity needs" (p. 125). These scholars found that people intentionally look for media messages that are supportive of their individual social identity. Abrams & Giles (2007) also reported that Black college students with high racial identity were "more likely to select TV content presenting positive images of Blacks and more likely to avoid television content that did not foster Black culture" (p. 118). Although many may not watch RHoA for specific identification purposes, due to the low number of TV shows that cater specifically to Blacks, the researcher believes that the show may be watched for familiarity of cast member actions, culture and psychology.

Davis & Gandy's (1999) research also highlights the goal of this experiment, "media representations play an important role in informing the ways in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences" and "racial identity may play an especially powerful role in shaping our responses to mass media" (p. 367). Furthermore, Dawson (1994) and Davis & Gandy (1999) conclude that racial identity continues to be stronger than identities based on class, gender, religion, or any other social characteristic as a predictor of attitudes towards a range of policy issues (Davis & Gandy: 373).

Additionally, hypothesis justification is also informed by scholars' belief that "viewers and listeners will seek out information they find to be in harmony with their own cognitive schema. Audience members will choose the path of least resistance" (Davis & Gandy 1999: 377). Finally, Gandy & Matabane (1989) find that while racial identification can "influence media choice, media exposure will also potentially influence racial identification" (p. 333).

## 1.9 Expected Results

Based off similar social identity and perceived realism studies, the researcher expects results that are consistent with tenants of social identity theory. Social identity theory researchers have found that “when media messages target a specific cultural background by using symbols, characters and values, audience members will better identify with the messages and source of that message” (Appiah 2004: 315). Appiah (2004) hypothesized, “Blacks with stronger racial identities should exhibit a greater sense of awareness from racially targeted cues and should feel more acknowledged by these efforts” (p. 317). Results of his study showed that “those with lower racial identity possessed attitudes and behaviors that were not strongly tied to Black culture and resembled dominant mainstream culture” (Appiah, 2004: 318). This study and findings will assist with hypothesis for the current RHoA research questions.

Appiah’s (2004) confirmed hypothesis is consistent with other social identity theory research as it adds to the idea that “individuals choose entertainment in connection with their selected group memberships” (Bryant & Yoderer, 2013: 260). Abrams & Giles (2007) study also confirms, “Blacks consciously watch television shows to gratify their ethnic identity needs” (p. 125). These scholars found that people intentionally look for media messages that are supportive of their individual social identity. Abrams & Giles (2007) also reported that Black college students with high racial identity were “more likely to select TV content presenting positive images of Blacks and more likely to avoid television content that did not foster Black culture” (p. 118).

Furthermore, Fujioka, Ryan, Agle, Legaspi & Toohey (2009) conducted a study which explored the connection between racial identities in response to the media’s infatuation with thin body ideals. Like the previously presented social identity theory studies, they hypothesized that

“participants with higher racial identity would find group norms and values more relevant and important as compared to those with lower racial identity” (p. 456). The experiment yielded results that were consistent with social identity theory; based on ethnic culture, “white women reported more importance of thinness compared to Black women” (p. 464). Black women did not aspire to obtain the thin bodies as frequently as white women.

Appiah (2004) conducted a slightly different social identity experiment after observing increased advertising efforts to target media messages toward African Americans. Knowing that most social identity studies explored media content, his experiment uniquely situated social identity to understand Black responses to news-based websites. By creating a replica website with special tracking software, he intentionally and explicitly depicted racial symbolism and values on this site. Appiah (2004) found that “those who surveyed with higher racial identity, spent significantly more time on websites with Black symbolism than did the lower identifiers” (p. 326-328). Conversely, “weaker ethnic identifiers were not affected by the racial target of the sites, spending equal time on both sites” (p. 326).

In conclusion, Fujioka (2005) and Appiah (2004) both conducted research which garnered similar results: the way people respond to media depends on not only the mere membership of a specific group identity, such as White or Black, but also the strength or the level of racial or ethnic identity. These results warrant the investigation in self-rated racial identity to understand perceptions that Black college students have in response to Black representations on BTRT shows.

This discussion leads to the overall expectation of this study that Blacks with stronger ethnic identities will cite depictions of Black women on RHoA more critically and will believe that they are less realistic than those with lower ethnicity. Whereas, Blacks with lower ethnic

identities should cite depictions of Black women as being more realistic due to their lack of identification with the race. More specifically:

*H1: Stronger Black ethnic identifiers will cite depictions of Black women on RHoA as being less realistic.*

*H2: Lower Black ethnic identifiers will cite depictions of Black women on RHoA as being more realistic.*

### **1.10 Scope & Limitations**

This study will quantify responses from Black male and female students enrolled at Georgia State University. The findings in this study will serve as a general assessment about Black male and female audience members who watch and have an opinion about RHoA. Although this study will only survey Black men and women in college, the number of participants does not necessarily limit the results. Zhou & Sloan (2011) suggest that in quantitative research 30 participants serves as a general representation of society at large. Thus, this research seeks to recruit a minimum of 30 participants. Furthermore, this study will utilize convenience sampling and only recruit participants from African American studies courses.

#### **Summary**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the proposed study, including its background and significance. Research questions and definitions were given to establish an understanding of the study. Also, the scope, hypothesis and limitations were addressed. The next chapter covers a review of the literature surrounding the inception of television, Blacks in television, RTV and RHoA.



## CHAPTER 2

### 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the proposed study was to determine the degree in which gender and racial identity affect perceived realism of RHoA. It sought to understand if Black men and women with stronger or lower racial identity levels read and perceive RHoA the same way. The research question that guides this study is as follows:

- Using *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a point of reference:
  - 1) What is the relationship between gender and perceived realism in depictions of Black women on RHoA?
  - 2) To what degree do racial identity levels create different impacts on men and women's perceived realism from watching RHoA.

The literature presented in this chapter is interdisciplinary and uses a variety of research databases; most frequently were EBSCOHost, JSTOR, and Academic Search Complete. This literature review is presented in five sections. First, the history and evolution of television is presented. Secondly, African Americans & television, followed by stereotypes of Blacks in the media. RTV and BTRT will then be presented. The final section addresses concerns and interpretations of RHoA depictions.

#### 2.1 The History and Evolution of Television

Television is the source of the “most broadly shared images and messages in history” (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan 2002: 43). In fact, scholars believe that “ever since it was placed within our living spaces, it has been the main source of information distribution and cultural storytelling; it has been the medium in which the public has access to information on just about

everything” (Macey, Ryan & Springer 2014:2). Furthermore, television differs from other media in its “centralized mass production and ritualistic use of a coherent set of images and messages produced for total populations” (Gerbner et al., 2002: 43). When considering the fact that “the three things that occupy most of our time are sleep, work/school, and television” (Good 2014: 213), it becomes imperative to fully understand not only what is being consumed on television, but the effects of consumption as well.

The Nielsen Company, an enterprise that reports television-viewing data, found that in 2008, “Internet and mobile devices continued to increase and reached new heights” (Holmes, 2008:1). As of 2012, the average American adult watches “157 hours and thirty-two minutes of television per month” (Good 2014: 213). New technologies like that of the Digital Video Recorder (DVR), Netflix and TiVo work similar to the, now archaic, Video Cassette Recorder (VCR), in that one is able to record a live show for later viewing, a sort of “time shifted” viewing. It has been calculated that “thirteen hours of ‘time-shifted’ viewing of television occurs per week” on these new technologies (Good, 2014: 213).

These statistics are strikingly similar for school age children who, in 2012, watched an average of “three hours of television per day” (Boulos, Vikre, Oppenheimer, Chang, Kanarek 2012: 147). Further, “thirty percent of youth live in homes where the television is on most of the day, and two-thirds of young people (8-18 years old) have a television set in their bedroom” (Brown, Pardun 2004: 266). “Of all electronic mediums, television continues to be the most popular medium among youth of all races and ethnicities” (Strasburger, Jordan, Donnerstein 2010: 757).

New technologies seem to be the catalyst of the rising TV watching statistics. With the proliferation of new media, which includes the DVR, Internet video services like YouTube and

Hulu and mobile devices, the term, “the three screens,” has been coined to embody “new media outlets in which American citizens now watch most of their television on” (Holmes 2008:1).

High watching statistics and the proliferation of the three screens has prompted some authors to attest that “television has become our species preferred and most powerful means of mass communication” (Kubey & Csikzentmihalyi 2013: xl).

## **2.2 African Americans and Television**

For African Americans, television consumption habits are significantly higher than other ethnic minorities (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, Stevenson 2014; Adams-Bass, Stevenson, Kotzin 2014; Bales 1986; Blosser 1988; Greenberg 1993; Smikle 2012; Ward 2004). Black youth consumers of television watch the most of all ethnic minorities, spending nearly “5 hours per day in front of the screen” (Ward 2004: 285). Analysis of data from The Nielsen Company confirms, “since 2004 African-Americans have traditionally consumed more hours of television than other segments of the population” (Ward 2004: 285).

Furthermore, research suggests, “African American children have a more positive orientation toward the media” (Ward, 2004:285). This positive orientation, according to (Comstock & Cobbey 1979; Graves 1996; Stroman 1991; Ward 2004) has led to Black children believing in the reality of TV more than other groups (Ward, 2004:285). Cultivation theorists Gerbner et al. (1986) believe this may lead to vulnerability in this demographic. According to their studies, “heavier media exposure leads people to cultivate expectations about the real world that coincide with the media images presented” (p. 28). Using this logic, many of television shows that depict African Americans as “lazy, unintelligent, and criminal will lead heavier viewers of all races to believe that these attributes characterize Blacks in the real world” (Ward, 2004: 285), especially when direct contact is lacking.

The findings from these scholars bring awareness to the reductionist thought that media messages and images that target Blacks are “just entertainment.” Stroman’s (1991) empirical study suggests, “African American children are more conscious to the lessons and modeling presented on the television shows that they watch that it becomes more than just entertainment” (Stroman, 1991: 319). Research from presented scholars believes that this demographic learns to identify traits and values from what is being broadcasted on the television.

In addition to the previously presented media effects of African American television statistics, (Fujioka 2005; Gauntlett 2002; Hill 2005; Martin 2008; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; Tyree 2011) all consider psychological and identity implications of media messages toward African American television consumption. This statement leads to a paradoxical relationship with Black underrepresentation on the screen and overrepresentation with audience viewing and how it can impact identity. Martin (2008) believes that this paradox “can have a negative effect for Black adolescents who are in the process of developing their racial identities” (p. 395).

Similarly, Shaun Moore (2000) speaks on the power of media on identity formation, “broadcasting provides viewers and listeners with a constant ‘stream’ of symbolic materials from which to fashion with senses of self... this flow of images and sounds is creatively appropriated by social subjects as they seek to put together personal identities and lifestyles” (p. 139). David Gauntlett (2002) also believes that “information and ideas from the media do not merely reflect the social world...but contribute to its shape and are central to modern reflexivity” (p. 98). These facts lead author Annette Hill (2005) to conclude, “when we watch television we can collect information and ideas that may help us to construct and maintain our own self-identities, or life biographies (p. 90).

Based on this research, we know that television has the power to shape the personalities and identity formation for younger viewers who are still in the process of developing their identities. Previously presented research shows that African Americans watch longer hours than any other ethnicity and may be considered vulnerable to the messages and images depicted. Indeed, it is ironic that one author claims that although African Americans are the “most active media consumers, they are one of the most critical ethnic groups in terms of how the media portrays their in-group members” (Gandy 2001: 602). This notion furthers the paradox and relationship with television viewing of this demographic.

### **2.3 Stereotypes of Blacks in the Media**

Although blatant stereotypes of Blacks in the media used to be extremely prominent, Riggins (1992) claims, “the social influence of ethnic minority media is not well understood because the topic has been relatively neglected” (p. 3). Since this claim in 1992, scholarship has been rich with those who have researched Black stereotypes in mass media and popular culture (Adams-Bass, Edwards, Stevenson 2014; Boskin 1986; Collins 2004; Collins 2009; Downing & Husband 2005; Geist & Neslen 1992; Guerrero 1993; hooks 1992; Hughey 2009; Jacobs 2000; Lemons 1975; Moisik 2013; Rome 2004; Swain 2014; Tucker 2007; Tyree 2011; Ward 2001). Scholars Cowan & Hoffman (1986) believe that stereotypes are cognitive constructs that are often created out of a kernel of truth and then distorted beyond reality. Similarly, another author insists, “stereotypes of Blacks were so ingrained into American culture that few people were aware that they truly degraded Blacks” (Lemons 1975: 102). The following section will define notions of stereotypes as well as popular stereotypes of Black men and women throughout television history.

In defining the word stereotype, scholars acknowledge that a stereotype is a “cognitive categorization, which is not necessarily the result of blatant or overt prejudice, which we consciously or unconsciously apply to individuals” (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, Harrison 2008: 132). Another author goes deeper than simply defining the term, “not all stereotypes are negative, and nearly everyone has a positive stereotype of himself, his group or his nation. It is the way we want to see ourselves. Since the dominant popular culture was created by and for whites, they showed themselves in a flattering fashion, while blacks were usually exaggerated in the worst way” (Lemons 1977: 112).

Furthermore, someone who embodies a negative stereotype is considered the “other.” That group is determined to be a “polar opposite of the dominant and acceptable group, thus solidifying their place as subordinate” (Bunai 2014:9). bell hooks, in an analysis of the “other,” finds that they are more sensational to people “because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (hooks 1992: 21).

Additionally, an enlarged sense and effect of ethnic stereotypes in the media, do more than present us with images or stereotypes for us to accept or reject, to learn or forget, or maintain at the back of our minds” (Downing & Husband 2005: 43). These statements suggest that stereotypes, although not inherently derogatory, can, and have been used to denigrate certain ethnicities throughout television history.

Some scholars believe that “characters who embody negative stereotypes about Black people have dominated the U.S. media and entertainment industry throughout history” (Adams-Bass et al., 2014: 368). Early film and television shows, called “Minstrel Shows,” “often featured White actors who wore black make up (usually shoe polish) to both exaggerate and distort their representations of Black people as being uncivilized, illiterate, and/or unintelligent”

(Adams-Bass et al., 2014: 368). Due to stereotypical and racist traits of Blacks as being lazy, buffoonish and uncivilized sexual beings throughout television history, “audiences began to rely on this type of comedy as a convenient and safe form of Black entertainment” (Coleman 1998:5). This is why Coleman (1998) believes “Blacks are still most prevalent in situation comedies; they appear much more often as compared to the drama genre” (p. 5). Although these racist depictions were prominent in America over a century ago, RTV scholar Tia Tyree (2011) insists, “racial stereotypes are still present because they are entrenched within the cultural fabric of the United States” (p. 395). Even into the new century, Stuart Hall (2000) believes that “all programmes are impregnated with unconscious racism because they are all predicated on the assumption that the Blacks are the source of the problem” (p. 274).

Many controlling images were “constructed to target Black women in particular, both before and after slavery” (Bunai 2014: 9). More recently Kretsedemas (2010) argues, “much of the recent criticism of black media stereotypes has focused on portrayals of women” (Kretsedemas, 2010:149). This same scholar says that these media depictions have become distinctly more negative over the past two decades.

The first controlling stereotypical image of the Black woman was the “Mammy.” Characterized as large and sexually unattractive, “the Mammy is a faithful and obedient domestic servant. She was also responsible for essentially raising the master’s white children” (Bunai 2014: 9).

Opposite the caring and nurturing stereotype of the Mammy was the “Welfare Queen.” Bunai (2014) states, “poor Black women became stigmatized symbols of what was wrong with America” (p. 12). This attribution is said to have occurred when President Ronald Reagan was

elected president in 1980. After his election, according Bunai (2014), the “Welfare Mother” shifted to the “Welfare Queen.”

The sexuality of Black women has often been targeted and stereotyped. The “Jezebel” is similar to the “whore” or “hoochie momma.” One author claims that this stereotype is the “representative of deviant black female sexuality, and sometimes typified as a ‘gold digger,’ or a woman whose main intent is to exploit her own sexuality in an effort to find financial gains from her sexual partners” (Bunai 2014: 13). An important and dangerous aspect of the Jezebel stereotype, according to Collins (2004), is that it began during slavery and portrayed black women as sexually aggressive. This led Collins (2004) to conclude, “it provided a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by black slave women” (p. 89).

A positive stereotype later emerged in an attempt to contradict the other negative stereotypes. This positive stereotype is “Black Lady.” In 1975, one author asserted that in an attempt to gain “dignity, acceptance and recognition,” positive stereotypes began to emerge to replace derogatory and exaggerated ones (Lemon 1977: 113). The Black Lady refers to a middle-class professional Black woman who “works hard, stayed in school, and has made many achievements” (Bunai 2014:13). Patricia Hill-Collins (2004) claims that the Black lady was deliberately designed to counter the claim that most Black women were promiscuous (Collins 2004: 139). One author believes that Claire Huxtable, the wife of Bill Cosby in, *The Cosby Show*, could have embodied the Black Lady stereotype. “She was the head of the household, a lawyer and married to a doctor” (Bunai 2014: 13).

The “Sapphire” is the opposite of The Black Lady. She is a “talkative, dramatic, and bossy black woman who does not trust others and complains consistently” (Reynolds-Dobbs et



al., 2008: 137). These authors further explain that this stereotype became prominent during the 1950's radio show, *Amos 'n' Andy*, where the Sapphire character embodied a “loud, hostile, wisecracking” black woman who got her enjoyment from belittling Black men (p 138).

According Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) the Sapphire also perpetuated depictions that reinforced Black men as irresponsible and deceitful.

Finally, the “Crazy Black Bitch” and the “Angry Black Woman” stereotypes hold similar characteristics. First, the Crazy Black Bitch stereotype is usually embodied in the workplace. Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) find this stereotype as depicted by Omarosa Manigault, a contestant on the Donald Trump's 2004 RTV show, *The Apprentice*. Omarosa was depicted as “angry, unstable, and vindictive black woman, who is not trusted by others and appears overly aggressive at times” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008:138).

The Angry Black Woman stereotype, according to another author, has become a permanent part in RTV, and has been synonymous as the “Diva with Attitude” (Pozner 2010:166). Further, characteristics of The Angry Black Woman embody being “loud, hostile, aggressive, rude, strong, and sometimes lazy” (Bunai 2014: 15). These stereotypes of women are often still found on television and especially on RTV and BTRT alike.

For men, racial stereotypes were also prevalent throughout the history of television. According to Boskin (1986), one of the most enduring comic stereotypes in American history is that of the “Sambo,” which evolved from England and “drew his first breath with the initial contact with West Africans during the early slave-trading years” (p. 7). This author claims, “Mirth and merriment were his trademark in a society in which entertainment came to assume major proportions in the lives of the people” (p. 4). Additionally, “Sambo was the lord of humor, both the instigator and the butt of humor; he played both sides” (p. 10).

Similar to Sambo was the “Uncle Tom.” “Old Uncle Toms were sentimentalized on the minstrel stage, saintly dedicated and content blacks who, though mercilessly treated by their masters, knew the role assigned to them by white society and forgave their torturers” (Geist & Nelson 1992: 268). According to Bogle (1998), “Tom was the first in a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters” (p. 4). Black actor, James B. Lowe portrayed an Uncle Tom in the Universal Pictures film *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1927. It is said “Lowe acted this characters so well that he was sent to England on a promotional tour” (Bogle 1998: 6). This character stayed in the media well into the twentieth century.

Similar to the Uncle Tom was the “Coon.” “He appeared in a series of black films presenting the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon” (Bogle 1998:6). The coon was characterized as a “harmless little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (Bogle 1998: 7). Coon or “cooning” is still a term used today to describe Blacks who are overtly playful and clueless.

These socially accepted stereotypes began in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and still are present in today’s mass media depictions. These stereotypes have made their way into new situation comedies, dramas and on the silver screen. Another place where you can often see these stereotypes is on RTV and BTRT. The following sections review literature and characteristics of RTV and BTRT.

#### **2.4 Reality Television (RTV)**

Although television was first introduced to American society as early as 1950, “there is much we still do not know about why people watch as much as they do or how the medium affects them” (Stroman 1991: 317), “nor are we at all certain about television’s larger cultural

impact” (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 2013: xii). This uncertainty is due to the major changes that have occurred in the last fifty years. “The big three of television, (ABC, CBS, NBC), no longer dominate the television landscape” (Macey, Ryan and Springer 2014:3).

Currently, there are hundreds of cable and satellite channels that offer a wide variety of programming that provides viewers something that will peak their interest. With the addition of online video sites: YouTube, Hulu and Netflix, audiences have even more choices for watching specific types of shows.

Although media choices have grown, scholars (Corner, 2002; Gates 2013; Holmes & Jermyn 2004; Miller 2011; Murray & Oullette 2008; Nabi, Biely, Morgan & Stitt 2003; Segrin & Nabi 2002; Tyree 2011; Vandenbosch & Eggermont 2011; Warner, 2011) contest that the burgeoning genre of RTV is what is being watched the most in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One author attests, “reality television started taking over primetime television slots in the mid 1990’s” with shows like *Candid Camera* and *COPS* (Bunai 2014: 3). The difference in RTV compared to scripted TV is explained by Miller (2011), “the genre of RTV depicts actual events rather than fictional, scripted events, and feature normal, everyday people rather than actors” (Miller 2011:185).

In terms of the popularity of RTV, some scholars believe, “as we embark upon a new century of broadcasting, it is clear that no genre form or type of programming has been as actively marketed by producers, or more enthusiastically embraced by viewers, than reality-based TV” (Holmes & Jermyn 2004: 1). Others claim that RTV’s popularity is due to “its ability to remain on the cusp of development in media convergence, interactivity, user-generated content and greater viewer involvement in television” (Murray & Ouellette, 2008:2).

Popularity of RTV has led major television networks to alter their programming choices. As of January 2003, “one-seventh of all ABC’s programming was reality based” (Murray and Ouellette 2008: 6). More recent research by Bunton (2012) says that “US television network aired almost 600 different prime-time reality programs between 2000-2012, and some observers contend reality is the most popular television genre in the world (p. 35). Hill (2005) is not surprised by this major production shift, explaining, “the rise of reality television came at a time when television networks were looking for a quick solution to the economic problems” (p. 24).

Other empirical articles (Holmes & Jermyn 2004; Murray & Ouellette 2009; Tyree 2011) attest the factual nature of this statement when they note the proliferation of RTV is due to inexpensive production cost. For example, Murray & Ouellette (2008) claim that RTV has cheap production costs, high appeal to the overseas television market and does not have to concern itself with unionized acting and writing talent (p. 10).

The popularity of this genre, according to Nabi (2007), “has not only garnered millions of dedicated viewers each week but has attracted a myriad of disciplines to engage in scholarly research of the genre” (Nabi 2007:371). Articulated another way, “as reality TV has proliferated and evolved, critical scholarship has followed suit” (Murray & Ouellette 2008: 3).

Despite the high popularity and economic success of RTV, there has been an inability for scholars to define and accurately classify the genre. “This lack of classification and definition of RTV is primarily due to the misleading nature of the genre’s name” (Murray & Ouellette 2008: 2). The genre is hard to define because first, the term “RTV” is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of specialized formats and sub-genres. Murray & Ouelette (2008) list these sub-genres as: “The Gamedoc (*Survivor, Big Brother, The Apprentice, America’s Next Top Model, Project Runway*), The Dating Program (*Joe Millionaire, The Bachelor, Next, Beauty and*

*the Geek*), The Makeover program (*What Not to Wear*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*), The Docusoap (*The Real World*, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*)” The Talent Contest (*American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*), Court Programs (*Judge Judy*, *Court TV*), Reality Sitcoms (*The Simple Life*, *The Osbournes*, *Family Jewels*)” (p. 5). It should be noted that there is not a single BTRT show listed or categorized in this exhaustive list of RTV genres.

Secondly, defining this genre is challenging because although RTV is claimed as “real” depictions of life, “much of reality television is constructed and contains fictional elements” (Murray & Ouellette 2008:2). These fictional elements lead to a frequent accusation by audience members of some RTV shows as being partially scripted, staged and constructed to be similar to situation comedies or dramas. According to Griffen-Foley (2004) & Reiss & Wiltz (2001) the genre has been heavily criticized for being anything but “real.” Another scholar confirms this by stating, “much evidence has surfaced to corroborate such claims,” citing that “many scenes are staged, participants are coached, celebrities are purposefully chosen, and shows are highly edited in order to convey particular messages challenging and/or affirming stereotypes, teaching lessons, and saving face” (Miller 2011: 136). Clissold (2004) notes that the illusion of transparency to “capture life as it happens” is one of the ways in which RTV attempt to create their meaning (p. 49). Thus, the broad characteristics and subgenres of RTV as well as false claims of reality make classifying and defining the genre a challenging task.

Although challenging, scholars have still attempted to define the genre. Nabi (2007) offers a highly descriptive and specific definition: “programs that film real people as they live out events in their lives, as these events occur. This programming is characterized by several elements, (a) people portraying themselves (i.e., not actors or public figures performing roles),

(b) filmed at least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set, (c) without a script, (d) with events placed in a narrative context, (e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment” (Nabi 2007: 304).

Editors Holmes & Jermyn (2004) offer a less specific definition: 1. “The attempt to simulate real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction. 2. Recording ‘on the wing’ and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals and groups” (p. 2). A broader definition by Murray & Oulette (2008) reads, “an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment” (p. 3). Although the presented definitions of RTV vary, there is a consistent emphasis of the presented definitions; “real life” and “real people” are the main criteria for genre classification. For the purpose of this study, RTV is defined as: “programs that film real people as they live out events in their lives, contrived or otherwise, as they occur” (Nabi et al., 2003:304).

A fundamental difference between scripted television and RTV is that within scripted television, audiences know that the content was created with fictional strategic planning. RTV, however, skews these lines. For example, in scripted television, “adolescents are able to use a variety of clues to judge the reality of media content” (Adams-Bass et al., 2014: 82). These clues in RTV are entirely eliminated, leaving the audience to primarily use their varying levels of personal experience as the key barrier to judging the reality of the show.

To further explain these skewed lines, Baruh (2009) conducted a content analysis that sought to identify unique features of RTV. She concluded, “reality programs promise and often deliver the thrill of bearing witness to something intimate in a remote fashion and without accountability” (p. 192). This absence of accountability is part of the main difference between

scripted and RTV. “While people can typically go into watching scripted television with the idea that it is not regular, ‘real’ life, with reality television, the viewer is inclined to believe that what they are watching could happen to someone like them, a regular person” (Bunai 2014: 4).

RTV’s connection to real life situations also contributes to its popularity. According to Kavka (2008), “connecting with audience members after having watched something interesting on RTV will add to the exhilaration at that very moment” (p. 18). On the contrary, Bunai (2014) believes that scripted television has an inability to immediately connect with the audience, “having to wait for a rerun of a television show or watching a taped version later on your own diminishes this feeling and your ability to interact with others immediately” (p. 5).

These skewed lines of reality as well as notions of false reality depictions have produced research in investigating the morality and ethicality of RTV. Scholarship by RTV critics (Miller 2011; Scarborough & McCoy 2014; Wyatt & Bunton 2012) considers the possibility of moral impairment in RTV.

For example, author James Poniewozik (2012) considers a few ethical concerns of RTV: from “‘frankenbyting’, which is the trick of spicing together quotes from different contexts to make participants say what the producers need to, or, more egregiously, creating dangerous situations or at least encouraging them, whether by plying house-guests with booze or making entertainment out of addiction or extreme weight-loss competitions,” (Poniewozik, 2012: x) Poniewozik believes that some RTV shows poses a serious moral impairment.

Likewise, an ethical concern for Boylorn (2008) is the danger embedded in the inability of “some audience members to be unable to distinguish differences in fiction and reality on the television screen (Boylorn, 2008: 421). According to past research of African Americans, this may be a real issue.

In terms of the ethicality of stereotypes in “reality” TV, one researcher attests that “stereotypes on reality television are consumed by millions of viewers” (Bunton, 2012: 35). This author then considers two primary questions: “(i) Do reality producers have a duty not to cast and edit their shows in ways that foster stereotypes? (ii) Do reality viewers have a duty not to accept the stereotypes some reality programs contain?” (p. 27). No matter your stance on these questions, creating or viewing RTV requires some sort of ethical compass by both producers and audience members of RTV.

Authors Probyn & Lumby (2003) would argue that the previous two questions are related. They believe that audience members do not watch television with a “blank slate.” Meaning, “when we watch television, we bring factors of our unique upbringing, interests and preconceptions of the world” (p. 4). The socialization of the individual audience member directly determines the way in which they will interpret the messages from the mass media, or whether they will validate or deny stereotypical depictions. It is possible that RTV producers know this; thus they continue to create content that will resonate with certain audiences for ratings, increased sponsorship and other economic purposes. Unfortunately, these messages usually embody deeply seeded stereotypes of Blacks.

These notions of audience socialization and interpretations of meaning are similar to cultural scholar Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding media messages. Hall (1993) asserts, “broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse” (p. 130). That is, encoded messages from broadcasting structures will have an intended meaning; however, these messages will not have an effect on audiences until it is “decoded.” This decoding is based on the varying socialization of the individual audience member.



Hall (1993) continues, “before this [intended] message can have an ‘effect’ (however defined), satisfy a ‘need’ or be put to ‘use,’ it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse... it is the set of decoded meanings which ‘have an effect,’ influence, entertain, instruct or persuade” (p. 130). These assertions by Hall suggest the direct influence that personal identity and socialization has on media choices and their intended meanings.

In conclusion, research on the prevalence of RTV reveals that this hybrid genre of television has become a leading genre in TV since the turn of the century (Bunai 2014; Holmes & Jermyn 2004; Nabi 2007; Murray & Oullette 2004; Tyree 2011). Not only do audiences watch RTV shows in high numbers, but “scholars have also taken an interest into the phenomenon and aesthetics of RTV” (Nabi 2007: 371). Combined with the focus of this research are the statistical watching habits of African Americans with BTRT television. It has been shown, not only do African Americans watch more television than all other ethnicities in America (Ward 2004: 285), but depending on the level of racial identification, African Americans are “more critical audiences when evaluating how the media present in-group members” (Davis & Gandy 1999:390). This notion leads to the discussion and differences of RTV vs. BTRT.

## **2.5 Black Themed Reality Television (BTRT)**

Researchers (Adams & Stevenson 2012; Jeffres 2000; Park 2009) found that television watching a prime source of leisure, thus they found it important to understand what is being watched and interpreted by African American young adults. Research on African American television viewing habits exposes a relationship between the level of racial identity and exposure to ethnic media (Appiah 2004; Fujioka 2005; Parks 2010:5). Likewise, Jeffres (2000) confirms, “ethnic media use often leads to stronger racial identification over time” (p. 503). Furthermore,

Orbe (2001) believes that television can be assumed to provide a form of para social interaction, which may suggest that people who are favorably oriented toward people of their own race would tend to prefer content that enables such an interaction, even if it is indirect.

However, no matter what specific African American show is being watched, some scholars believe “any person of the African ancestry who is presented in the mainstream media are limited to a small group of Black celebrities or images that tend to be stereotypical” (Adams & Stevenson 2012: 28). These celebrities and stereotypical personas seem to saturate BTRT according to both scholars and critics. Bunton (2012) asserts, “reality programs too often use a single character to represent a racial or ethnic minority community (p. 35). In the case of RHoA, this single character has turned into six Black women who, many believe are embodiments of problematic stereotypical behavior.

Due to an alarming lack of research on BTRT, there has been no attempt to date that defines or classifies the genre. This thesis defines BTRT as: reality-based television shows that (a) offer, “recognition of ethnicity & culture (Blackness) as a predominant source of cultural difference” (Gray, 1995:87) and (b) employ a predominantly Black cast. Current and previous BTRT shows in this category include, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *College Hill*, *The Flavor of Love*, *Love and Hip-Hop*, *T.I. and Tiny: The Family Hustle*, *Basketball Wives*, *I Love New York*, *Married to Medicine* and *Black Ink Crew*. These listed BTRT shows depict Blacks in all aspects of intersectionality and situations that depict not only the struggles and stereotypical nature of Blacks in America, but highlight the complexity of Black life which includes belief structure, lifestyle, psychology and social struggles.

There are only a few published academic resources (Bunai 2014; Moody 2014; Tyree 2011) specifically and exclusively on BTRT, and even less on RHoA. In response to Black

depictions in BTRT, one author believes “the continued limited representation and prevalence of stereotypical behavior on [BTRT] shows have now altered what it means to be a member of the Black upper-middle class in the United States” (Moody 2014: 267). Another author attributes this class differentiation as stemming from the “racial desegregation in the post-civil rights era due to the need for new images of racial difference for a color-blind ideology to work” (Bunai, 2014: 2).

Patricia Hill-Collins (2004) concurs that post-civil rights changes were the catalyst for Black media changes in TV depictions,

Historical images of Black people as poor and working class were joined with and often contrasted against representations of Black respectability within the growing Black middle class in the 1980s and 1990s, hence the influx of television shows such as, *The Cosby Show*, *Family Matters* and the like to combat these images because of the emergence of issues of authenticity within Black culture: poor and working class Black culture was routinely depicted as being ‘authentically’ Black whereas middle- and upper-middle class Black culture was seen as less so (Collins, 2004: 122).

Considering these scholars’ views on class depictions in mass media, the next section will share characteristics of various BTRT shows that have previously and are currently are on the air, beginning with the first ever BTRT show, *College Hill*.

In studying televised depictions of HBCU’s (Historic Black Colleges and Universities), Adam Parrott-Sheffer (2008) states “beginning with the fictional Hillman College on *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, the spin-off that takes place at the same college, to the modern

“reality” situations of BET’s widely controversial *College Hill*, there have only been three significant portrayals of HBCU’s on television” (p. 207). After the cancellation of *A Different World*, the remainder of the 1990s would not see another HBCU on television, “it wasn’t until January 28, 2004, that an HBCU would be on television. It came in the form of a highly controversial BTRT show entitled, *College Hill*” (Sheffer 2008: 209). Black Entertainment Television (B.E.T.) claimed that *College Hill* would be the first Black dramatic RTV show. B.E.T. then created the slogan of the show as: “8 Students+1 house= 2 much drama” (Parrott-Sheffer 2008: 209). The final season this show aired was in 2009; a description of the show is as follows:

BET's COLLEGE HILL returns for a gripping sixth season in South Beach Miami. Pulling no punches, the new cast members clash almost immediately within minutes of meeting one another. Tune in for undeniably the most controversial season yet, as the co-eds attempt to live under the same roof, which proves to be a little too close for comfort. Will all the roommates survive the semester? Will everyone make it in the house? Will love bloom among the roommates (TV.com, 2009).

The format of this show was similar to other RTV shows like, *The Real World* and *Big Brother*. Students from HBCU’s like Virginia State University, Tougaloo College, Howard University as well as Morgan State University were placed in a communal home while audience members watched as they attempted to navigate school, engage in romantic relationships, all while partaking in other college extra-curricular activities.

*College Hill* is the first example of BTRT being highly exaggerated and stereotypical. Parrott-Sheffer (2008) argues that representations of HBCU's on television are not aligned with what the research on HBCUs suggests, and that "much of the tension between HBCUs being viewed as intellectual entities and television traditional casting of African Americans as clowns" (p. 208). Bunton (2012) believes that "stereotypes on reality television matter because they can be a potent agent of social learning" (p. 35).

Since the first season of *College Hill* in 2004, differences in this show emerged from traditional RTV content. First, one author claims that the show producers did little to combat and negate traditional stereotypical portrayals of Blacks on television, as *College Hill* features a "nonstop party of sex and alcohol" (Parrott-Sheffer 2008:219). Parrott-Sheffer (2008) also cites the completely non-existent academic life on the campuses as portrayed on *College Hill*, coupled with the fact that all of the students featured on the first two seasons of *College Hill* are Black, "further perpetuates the traditional negative stereotypes on Blacks" (p. 215).

Many BTRT shows that followed shared the same stereotypical characteristics as *College Hill*. *Making the Band 2* (2002-2004), *I Love New York* (2007-2008), *The Flavor of Love* (2006-2008) *Love and Hip-Hop* (2010- ) and *Basketball Wives* (2010-2013) all depicted men and women as they embodied one or more of the previously listed stereotypes: The Angry Black Woman, Coon, Jezebel & Mammy. Speaking on representations of women on RTV, one scholar believes that "few women of color are allowed to represent themselves on television with much nuance; frequently, they are reduced to stock characters like mammies and Jezebels that deny them full, complex humanity" (Sission, 2014, para 1). However, there is one BTRT show that, according to Nielsen ratings, is the most popular of all-previous BTRT shows, RHoA.

## 2.6 The Real Housewives of Atlanta (RHoA)

Airing on the Bravo Network, RHoA continuously has proven to be one of the top reality shows in all of television and “the most popular between the *Real Housewives* (RH) franchise” (Hawley 2014:4). Because the program continues to be the highest-rated show on Bravo and one of the highest-rated on cable television, one author explains that in addition to the millions of weekly live viewers, “the program has been a great success on the Internet, citing RHoA’s twitter hashtag (#RHoA) as it frequently trends globally on Twitter during Sunday night airings (Hawley 2014: 4). This show is the 3<sup>rd</sup> installment of the RH Franchise, coming after *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006-Present) and *The Real Housewives of New York* (2008-Present)” (Hawley 2014: 1).

According Buani’s (2014) research, “season 6 of RHoA, which ended on May 20, 2014, grew 20.35% over Season 5 and 30.45% over Season 4” (p. 17). Bunai (2014) highlights the consistent viewership for the show, stating that viewership in the United States has grown consistently for each season.

Viewers watching the first episode of each season increased from 656 thousand in the first season to 2.66 million in the second season, 2.419 million in the third season, 2.896 million in the fourth season, and 3.22 million in the fifth season, making that season the most watched premier in franchise and network history, and also highest rated season premier to date in the history of the series (Bunai, 2014: 17).

The popularity of RHoA is in stark contrast to the other RH franchises, which, according to one writer, “has posted season-to-season decline in ratings” (Van Kempen 2009, para 5).

Besides Kim Zolciak, the only previous white cast member on RHoA, who left the show during season 5 due to “the fighting, the stress, the gossip and the drama” (Schumann 2014: para 4), RHoA is the only RH franchise to depict an all-Black cast who lives in a predominantly Black city, Atlanta, GA.

Although this popular BTRT show enjoys stellar ratings from both loyal and curious fans each season, not everyone agrees with the content of BTRT shows such as this. Due to the all-Black woman cast of RHoA, Boylon (2008) warns that “(re)presentations of Black women are especially harmful because Black women are often assumed to represent their entire race and gender through their personal choices and actions” (p 423). This powerful statement sheds light on the need to critique such depictions of Black women in the media.

Patricia Hill-Collins (2008) highlights that critics of problematic depictions of Black women should be proactive in their critique of Black women in the media. According to Collins (2004), “neither scholarship, nor middle class status is needed to contribute their thoughts on social theory” (p. 17). Similarly, Boylorn (2008), in her auto-ethnography, declares, “all Black women should be willing to critique the images that they find of Black people in the media” (p.430).

The current problematic depictions of Black women on RTV were seemingly predicted to Phylicia Rashad, the lawyer and wife of Bill Cosby on the 1980’s show, *The Cosby Show*. Rashad said that NBC executive Brandon Tartikoff predicted that after *The Cosby Show* went off of the air in 1992, “things were going to get much worse before it got better in terms of diversity” (Samuels 2011, para 4). In this same *Newsweek* article, Dianne Carroll, the first Black woman to star in her own television show entitled, *Julia*, in 1968, offers the following insight to

contemporary television saying, “what I see now on television for the most part is a disgrace, as far as how we’re depicted” (Samuels 2011, para 4).

In direct response to problematic RHoA depictions, Gretchen Sisson (2012) of the magazine simply titled, *Bitch Media*, negatively critiques the show, saying that it “does a disservice to all women, particularly Black women, and to Black Americans of all socioeconomic backgrounds” (para 12). Similarly, the blog site, “*What Tami Says*, offers the following critical interpretation of the show:

To be sure, the women on [*The Real Housewives of Atlanta*] are no role models. They are alternately bullying, narcissistic, back-stabbing, money-grubbing, cliquy, disloyal, arrogant, self-involved, willfully ignorant, poorly spoken, wasteful and tackily nouveau riche. The show features street fights, wig tugging, name dropping, pole dancing, sugar daddy-funded goodies, ‘baller’ fetishizing, vanity business projects, cattiness, loud arguments in nice restaurants (and nice offices...and nice homes), and whole lot of “flossing” and faux importance (Winfrey 2009, para 3).

Bloggers and local magazine writers are not the only people who see RHoA as problematic. Allison Samuels (2011), a *Newsweek* writer states, “the small screen is awash with black females who roll their eyes, bob their heads, snap their fingers, talk trash, and otherwise reinforce the stereotype of the ‘Angry Black Woman’” (para 3).

No matter how critical the response of the questionable representation of Black women, RHoA continues to thrive in ratings each week. In a statement from Frances Berwick, President of Bravo Media, audiences are assured that those depictions of Black women on RHoA are not racist, “we certainly do not intend for these shows to suggest any one group of people act a



certain way. With *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, we found a group of women who were actually all friends, and one of them happened to be white. We saw their friendship as something fascinating and relatable and the audience agreed” (Samuels, 2011: para 5).

In terms of scholarship interactions of RHoA, Warner (2011), at an academic conference, found that other scholars singled out RHoA from the other RH shows. When asked about RHoA, they quickly claimed that, “they don’t watch that show, sparking laughter from other scholars” (para 1). In popular media, C.N.N. anchor Anderson Cooper shared his response to the uniqueness of the show. In an interview with talk show host, Ellen DeGeneres, Gates (2013) recalls the shock that Cooper had after finding out that DeGeneres did not watch RHoA. Cooper stated, “You mean you don’t know about NeNe?” Cooper goes on to proclaim that NeNe Leakes is the “realist” of all of the housewives (p. 141). In this interview, Cooper exalted a form of excitement with RHoA that could not be found in other RH shows. However, no matter the criticism or celebrity endorsement, in terms of ratings, the show has been a phenomenal success by depicting the complexity of life, through Black women, a population who has historically been marginalized.

One author concludes that the success of BTRT shows like RHoA depends on the negative representation of women. Pozner (2004) claims “the more successful and profitable the RTV show, the more derogatory and controversial its representations of women are” (para 5). Further explaining these controversial depictions are scholars who assert that in terms of Black women, “there is ultimately a lack of diversity and dimension” (Adams-Bass et al., 2014: 80).

This statement is not entirely true in more contemporary times. Putting the notion of diversity and dimension of Black women characters into context, the 1990’s and 2000’s found Black women placed in prominent positions on television. For example, in the 1990’s show,

*Living Single*, Maxine was a witty, no-nonsensical lawyer, and her roommate Khadija was the editor-in-chief of a profitable magazine. On the sit-com, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, Vivian Banks was a brilliant collegiate professor, and finally, on the 2000's UPN show, *Girlfriends*, Joan Carol was an esteemed lawyer at a prestigious law firm. However, with the recent prominence of RTV and BTRT, women, especially Black women have become trivialized and as Winfrey (2009) puts it, full of "vain business projects" (para 3).

However, not everyone has something bad to say about RHoA or consider their business projects to be "vain." An article in *Black Enterprise* magazine highlighted a "different, more substantial theme from RHoA." The magazine cites the November 6, 2011 season four premier which depicted each woman "venturing into new paths that they hope will enrich their brands, fill their pockets, and build a legacy that can stand the test of time" (BlackEnterprise.com, 2011, para 2). The article cites "NeNe Leaks as capitalizing on being on the RTV show *Celebrity Apprentice*. Kandi Burrell as expanding her music empire into the adult toy empire and Cynthia Bailey as founding her own modeling agency" (BlackEnterprise, 2011, para 3). Although the popular sentiment from news sources and blogs seems to dwell on the continuous stereotypical depictions of Black women, some classify these problematic depictions as complexities of Black womanhood and find some of the depictions to be positive.

The presented literature on RHoA provides notions of complexity and controversy of how Black women are represented in RTV. From a business standpoint, it is advantageous for cable and network television companies to duplicate successes of shows like RHoA for economic reasons. Thus, it can be inferred from high television ratings and dedicated social media interactions that the same problematic depictions will surely continue into the near future.

## Summary

This chapter has presented the literature surrounding the history and evolution of television, statistics of African American viewing habits and shed light on the current status of RTV and BTRT. This chapter ended with both positive and negative sentiments from the controversial BTRT show, RHoA. The next chapter will explain the specific nature of the study and its goals.

## CHAPTER 3

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the proposed study was to determine the degree in which gender and racial identity affect perceived realism of Black women on RHoA. It sought to understand if Black men and women with higher or lower racial identity levels read and perceive RHoA the same way. The research question that guides this study is as follows:

- Using *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a point of reference:
  - 1) What is the relationship between gender and perceived realism in depictions of Black women on RHoA?
  - 2) To what degree do racial identity levels create different impacts on men and women's perceived realism from watching RHoA.

This chapter includes a discussion of the research design and method appropriateness. Also included in this chapter is an explanation of the population, sampling, data collection procedures and rationale. Finally, the validity and type of data analysis that will be used will be presented.

### **3.1 Research method and Design Appropriateness**

To find a participant sample, convenience sampling was used in this study. According to Marshall (1996) “convenience sampling involves the selection of the most accessible subjects. It is also the least costly to the researcher, in terms of time, effort and money (p. 523). This convenience sample consisted of Black students recruited from three Introduction to African American studies courses and one African American Community course Georgia State University. These specific classes were chosen due to the high number of Black undergraduates typically enrolled as well as the variety of majors that it often attracts. Other criterion is as follows:

- Identify as Black or African-American
- Be 18 years of age or older;
- Are willing to record answers freely on perceptions of race and gender as depicted on RHoA
- Have access to a smartphone or computer during the study

In quantitative research, Holton & Burnett (1997) assert, “one of the real advantages of quantitative methods is their ability to use smaller groups of people to make inferences about larger groups that would be prohibitively expensive to study” (p. 71). Knowing this, this study will rely on survey methodology and plans to use at least 30 participants in the study.

### **3.2 Population**

College students are a frequent demographic for RTV research. There are numerous examples of scholars examining college student’s perceptions of RTV (Abowit, Knox, Zusman, McNeely 2009; Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, Yellin 2003; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer 2006; Kahlor & Eastin 2011; Lee & Bichard 2009; Markey & Markey 2010; Nabi 2007; Rose & Wood

2005; Segrin & Nabi 2007; Tiggermann 2005). One author confirms, “reality-based programming is largely targeted toward younger audiences, and reality viewers are 40% more likely to be aged 18-32” (Nabi 2007: 375). Further, many of the sitcoms, commercials, and RTV shows directed at this age group “promote a culture of pleasure seeking, instant gratification and casual attitudes about relationships and sex” (Trotter 2010:72). These researchers have found success in proving hypothesis to their research questions and have advanced theoretical assumptions in their fields.

The informed consent form (see appendix) that each participant read and signed notified that participation in this experiment is completely voluntary. It was further explained that at any point, participants could change their mind and would be taken out of the study without penalty. All records obtained throughout the experiment were kept in a private place in the office of the researcher.

The survey was conducted in a large classroom at Georgia State University. This classroom seated at least 50 individuals and was equipped with a large projector to show the episode of RHoA. Participants were encouraged to silently complete both surveys before and after the episode.

### **3.3 Recruitment**

The researcher conducted this study on the campus of Georgia State University, who, according to *Atlanta Magazine*, “represents more African American undergraduate students than Morehouse, Spelman and Clark Atlanta combined” (Rehagen, 2012: para 6).

Participants were recruited from three Introduction to African American Studies Courses and one African American Community course at Georgia State University. Instructors gave permission for a five-minute recruitment presentation and agreed to offer extra credit as an

incentive for student participation. In my 5-minute presentation, the contents of the study were given, including time commitment, survey tools and the specific RHoA episode that would be showed. After the presentation, participants were asked to text their email address to an exclusive, local phone number generated by the “Google Voice” texting system, 678-871-6431. The Google Voice interface was used because it allowed received text messages to be viewed on a computer screen and simplified steps to reply back to each participant.

The researcher replied to participants from the texts received. Multiple text messages and emails were sent to remind students of the study and to give specific information on when and where to meet for the study. Participants were sent back an email with the following message: “Thank you for your participation in the study, the total time for participation will be about 1.5 hours. Below is the information for participation.

**When:** Tuesday, 3/31/2015 & Wednesday, 4/1/2015

**Where:** Tuesday: Sparks Hall 328. Wednesday: Classroom South 205

**Time:** Tuesday: 3:00-4:30 pm. Wednesday: 1:30-3:00 pm.

**What to bring:** Smart phone or computer

Refreshments will be provided.

Participation in this study is voluntary and the option will be available for withdrawal without penalty. Participants who complete the survey will be given extra credit points by their class instructor. Participants are asked to remain silent through each of the surveys administered. All surveys will immediately be collected and kept private throughout analysis.

If you have questions, please contact the primary researcher, Calvin Monroe at: 678-871-6431.”

### 3.4 Experiment

The surveys were administered online through a popular online survey creation system called “Survey Monkey.” This free survey creation site allows for various surveys to be administered online. This site was used because of the automatic data analysis and exportation to the Microsoft Office software Excel. The demographic survey, CSES and PRS were all administered on this site. At the official start of the study, which was 5 minutes after the designated time, participants were told to go to the website, <[surveymonkey.com/s/RHOA1](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/RHOA1)>.

#### 3.4.1 *Collective Self Esteem Scale (CSES)*

After completion of the demographic form, participants were told to begin the Collective Self Esteem Scale (CSES). The CSES measured racial identity from each participant. This scale was created by Luhtanen & Crocker (1992) as a way to assess social identity theory. More specifically, this scale was constructed to “assess differences in collective, rather than personal, self-esteem, with four subscales (Membership esteem, Public collective self-esteem, Private collective self-esteem, and Importance to Identity)” (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992: 302). Each subscale includes four items.

Luhtanen & Crocker (1992) make it clear that this scale can be used in broader research contexts than simply the framework of social identity theory. “The notion of collective self-esteem may have implications for a variety of social psychological domains and phenomena, including organizational commitment and behavior, political participation and psychological adjustment (p. 302). More specific to this research is the study of ethnic identity by Phinney (1990) who noted that ethnic identity and attitudes have been operationalized in many different ways. She then recommends for future research “that the most serious need in ethnic identity research is to develop reliable and valid measures (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992: 302).

Validity of this scale was first tested in 1992. It was the first time this scale was administered; its sample in this test was to 887 psychology students. “Reliability analyses indicated that the scale and its subscales are internally consistent, revealing substantial alphas (ranging from .73 for the Membership subscale to .80 for the Public subscale)” (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992: 307). Continued high validity and reliability from this scale has prompted scholars (Fujioka 2004; Fujioka et al. 2009; Gangadharbatla 2008) to utilize this survey. Fujioka (2004) found the “level of racial identity to be relevant when young women assessed their cultural values” (p. 470). Likewise, Gangadharbatla (2008) found a “positive association between results on the CSES and participant motivations for joining certain social networking sites” (p.11).

The aspect of the CSES that is most relevant to the present study is the “Membership subscale,” which assesses how participants feel about their membership of their racial group. This subscale uses a 4-item, 7-point Likert scale to assess membership of a given ethnic identity. Following data analysis suggestions from Luhtanen & Crocker (1992) lower scores (1-4) were considered negative racial identity whereas higher scores (5-7) were considered positive racial identity. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986) positive scores show the extent that one’s social groups are valued and compare favorably with relevant comparison groups. Contrarily, “persons with negative or threatened social identity may leave or disassociate themselves from a social group” (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992: 303).

An experiment conducted by Yuki Fujioka (2005) shows that it will be important to assess the racial identity level of all participants before the full episode of RHoA is viewed. Fujioka (2005) suggests, “those who possess high group identity are more likely to perceive themselves as being more similar to typical in-group members and will act in line with in-group



norms more than will low group identifiers” (p. 454). Due to the influencing factor that RHoA may have on participants, racial identity was assessed before the show.

Furthermore, Fujioka’s (2005) study also argued that racial identity was important when women evaluated cultural and social norms (p. 470). Unfortunately, Gangadharbatla (2008) notes, “the relationship between CSES, group membership and audience participation remain under-researched” (p. 9). This research seeks to bridge the gap between the CSES and media perceptions of realism because perceived realism is considered an aspect of audience participation

The CSES asks participants to consider a variety of group memberships based on sex, race, religion and ethnicity. For this study, only the Membership subscale answers will be analyzed. The 4 items on the Membership subscale include:

- “I am a worthy member of my race/ethnic group;”
- “I feel I don’t have much to offer my racial/ethnic group;”
- “I am a cooperative participant in the activities of my racial/ethnic group;”
- “I often feel I’m a useless member of my racial/ethnic group.”

### **3.4.2 RHoA Episode Screening**

Following completion of the CSES survey, participants will watch the highest-rated episode in RHoA franchise history. According to *Mstars News*, “the highest episode was on January 26, 2014, pulling in 4.63 million viewers” (Thorpe, 2014, para 2). This episode lasts 44 minutes and “focused on the drama between cast members at a pajama party hosted by star NeNe Leakes” (Thorpe 2014, para 2). Amazon.com, who sells individual episodes of RHoA offered the following description of the episode: “NeNe invites all of the couples to a sexy pajama party for a little pillow talk. However, the lighthearted frivolity turns into an unforgettable, all-out

brawl, leaving relationships changed forever” (Amazon.com). The second highest episode came in January 30, 2011 with the season 3 finale, “which ranked an impressive 4.4 million viewers” (Taylor, 2011, para 1). The third highest episode in franchise history came on April 20, 2014 with the season 7 reunion show, which garnered 4.13 million viewers (Lear 2014, para 2). The pajama party episode will be shown to participants in its entirety. Soda and chips were offered to participants during the Tuesday episode screening. Following this episode, participants will then take the perceived realism scale (PRS).

### ***3.4.3 Perceived Realism Scale (PRS)***

To examine the degree to which participants feel that RHoA represents reality, the researcher used Alan Rubin’s (1981) Perceived Realism Scale (PRS) as a variable in the experiment. The PRS was used because “it has been the most frequently used instrument for measuring perceived realism on television” (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008: 247).

According to Rubin (1993), perceived realism is considered to be an “attitudinal perception toward a medium that may mediate viewers’ behaviors and beliefs” (p. 100). For example, Rubin’s (1993) research suggests, “media that is perceived as “real” would affect scheduling and modeling behavior from television shows” (p. 101). Research (Berkowitz & Alioto 1973; Egbert & Belcher 2012; Rubin 1981) also suggests that media introduced as an account of a real-life event may result in more pronounced media effects; thus, it becomes important to consider the influence of perceived realism.

The PRS was utilized by Rubin & Perse (1987) in a study that measured viewers’ perceived realism of soap opera characters to examine the contribution of audience activity with media content. Results showed that the level of perceived realism of audience members explained media involvement. Media involvement is a broad categorization and can include

anything from scheduling time to watch certain shows to para social involvement, which is one person extensively knowing the other (show cast member), but the other does not. Specifically, their research suggests “para social involvement reflects attention to realistically perceive content during the viewing experience” (Rubin & Perse, 1987: 262).

In Egbert & Belcher’s (2012) RTV study, the PRS assisted in measurement of the research question, “how does exposure to different sub-types of RTV programs relate to viewers’ body image?” In studying RTV depictions of thinness, Egbert & Belcher (2012) used the PRS for RTV cast members as a variable to understand its role in the audience’s desire for thinness. Although results showed that participants did not believe the shows were an accurate depiction of reality, this scale explained a total of “32% of the variance in the desire for thinness measure” (Egbert & Belcher, 2012: 420-425).

Finally, more specific to this research, Punyanunt-Carter’s (2008) study attempted to measure perceived realism perceptions of African Americans on television. Variables included: reality perceptions of occupational roles, negative personality characteristics, low achieving status and positive stereotypes of African Americans on television. The PRS scale was found useful in that “viewers perceived the occupational roles and negative personality characteristics that African Americans portray on television as real or true to life” (p. 251). Furthermore, the PRS assisted in determining that viewers did not perceive the low-achieving status roles and positive stereotypes of African Americans on television as real or accurate portrayals (p. 251).

### **3.5 Validity**

For the current study, Rubin’s PRS will be modified to match RHoA depictions and will assist in measuring viewers’ perception of how true to life RHoA depicts Black women.

Researcher, Pearse (1994) asserted, “although perceived TV realism has some evidence of

construct validity, content-specific adaptations of the scale might be more valid measures of the construct” (p. 284). Furthermore, (Kerlinger 1992; Potter, 1993; Punyanunt-Carter 2011) posit that to increase validity of the PRS scale, elements in the construct should be “clearly defined” to establish face and content validity. They also suggest that items must be written explicitly rather than vaguely.

Thus, I have modified the PRS scale and focused each item to relate to depictions of Black women on RHoA. To increase validity of the scale, I will use a strategy from Punyanunt-Carter (2008) study, “the more specific the content, the more valid the findings would be” (p. 246). Therefore, “the abstract word *things* in the original scale was replaced with more concrete words,” such as *RHoA* or *Black women*. Original and modified items in this scale are as follows:

- Original: “Television presents things as they really are in life”
- *Modified: “RHoA presents life as it really is for Black Women.”*
- Original: “If I see something on TV, I can’t be sure it really is that way”
- *Modified: “If I see something on RHoA, I can’t be sure that Black women really are this way.”*
- Original: “Television lets me see what happens in other places as if I were really there.”
- *Modified: “RHoA lets me see what happens between black women in other places as if I were really there.”*
- Original: “The people I see on TV are just like people I meet in real life.”
- *Modified: “RHoA shows the lives of Black women as they really are.”*
- Original: “The same things that happen to people on TV happen to me in real life”
- *Modified: “RHoA lets me really see how Black women really live.”*

Participants will record their agreement with each statement using a 5-point likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Responses will be coded so that a 5 indicates a positive score, while a 1 represents a negative score.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

For gender differences in perceived realism, I will use a non-parametric, Mann-Whitney U-test. According to Nachar (2008), “non-parametric tests differ from parametric tests in that the model structure is not specified a priori but determined from the data” (p. 13). A non-parametric study was used because “a non-parametric test is necessary when the distribution is asymmetrical” (Nachar, 2008: 13). Furthermore, it is theorized, “the Mann-Whitney U-test can be used to answer the questions of the researcher concerning the difference between his groups” (p. 13). Another benefit of using the Mann-Whitney U test is that it can be used when the variable measure were recorded with an arbitrary and not very precise scale. Due to the modification of the PRS, the Mann-Whitney U-test seems beneficial.

Kasuya (2001) calls the Mann-Whitney U test as one of the most commonly used non-parametric statistical tests. “The Mann-Whitney U-test null hypothesis stipulates that the two groups come from the same population” (Nachar, 2008: 14). This is true for this study, Black men and Black women enrolled at Georgia State University. Nachar (2008) cites the basics of the Mann-Whitney U-test more specifically to this study, “if two independent groups have to be compared and each group contains a number of observations, the Mann-Whitney test is based on the comparison of each observation from the first group with each observation from the second group (p. 14). Nachar (2008) also believes that “the Mann-Whitney U test is less at risk to give a wrongfully significant result when there is a presence of one or two extreme values in the sample under investigation” (p. 14).

After application of the Mann-Whitney U-test, which will determine the differences from the two variables, I will conduct a Fisher r-to-z Transformation test. This test will determine the “significance of the difference between two correlational coefficients” (vassarstats.net). More specifically, this test will calculate a value of z that can be applied to assess the significance of the difference between two correlational coefficients found in two independent samples. This test will determine if there is a significant gender difference in the relationship between perceived realism and racial identity between men and women.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4 RESULTS

The purpose of the proposed study was to determine the degree to which gender and racial identity affect perceived realism of RHOA. It sought to understand if Black men and women with higher or lower racial identity levels read and perceive RHOA the same way. The research question that guides this study is as follows:

- Using *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a point of reference:
  - 1) What is the relationship between gender and perceived realism in depictions of Black women on RHoA?
  - 2) To what degree do racial identity levels create different impacts on men and women’s perceived realism from watching RHoA.

Students were introduced to the topic of study during a 5-minute presentation on 3/31/15 & 4/1/15. During this presentation, the researcher informed potential participants of time commitment, survey tools and RHoA episode screening. Following the presentation, students were given a local “Google Voice” generated phone number to provide their email to be included

in the study. From the responses, students were contacted via text and email where they were told when and where the study would take place.

The study took place on 2 different days and in 2 different classrooms on the campus of Georgia State University. The first day, 3/31/15, 11 students came to participate in the study. The second day, 4/1/15, 45 students were in attendance to participate in the study. All who participated in the study were eligible to receive extra credit upon completion.

This chapter has four sections. The first section presents the research questions and hypothesis that guided the study and shares basic results. The second section presents the specific sample that was used to obtain the data. The third section specifically speaks to the racial identity levels of participants. The fourth section presents the specific details of data obtained for the PRS. The final section speaks to the results of the Mann-Whitney U-test conducted.

#### **4.1 Limitations:**

The survey design of this study was utilized due to financial and time constraints. Furthermore, utilizing convenience sampling from the African American Study Department in this study decreases the generalizability of results from those outside of the university system. Additionally, some items in the demographic survey limits conclusions. For example, the demographic survey asks if participants watch RHoA, but does not ask if other BTRT shows are being watched. If participants state overwhelmingly that they do not watch RHoA, this survey does not account for shows that they do watch.

## 4.2 Research Question and Abbreviated Results

The Mann Whitney U-test yielded histograms for the Collective Self-Esteem (CSES) and Perceived Realism Scale (PRS) that was not normally distributed but positively skewed: These histograms are displayed in figure 1 and figure 2.

**Figure 1:**

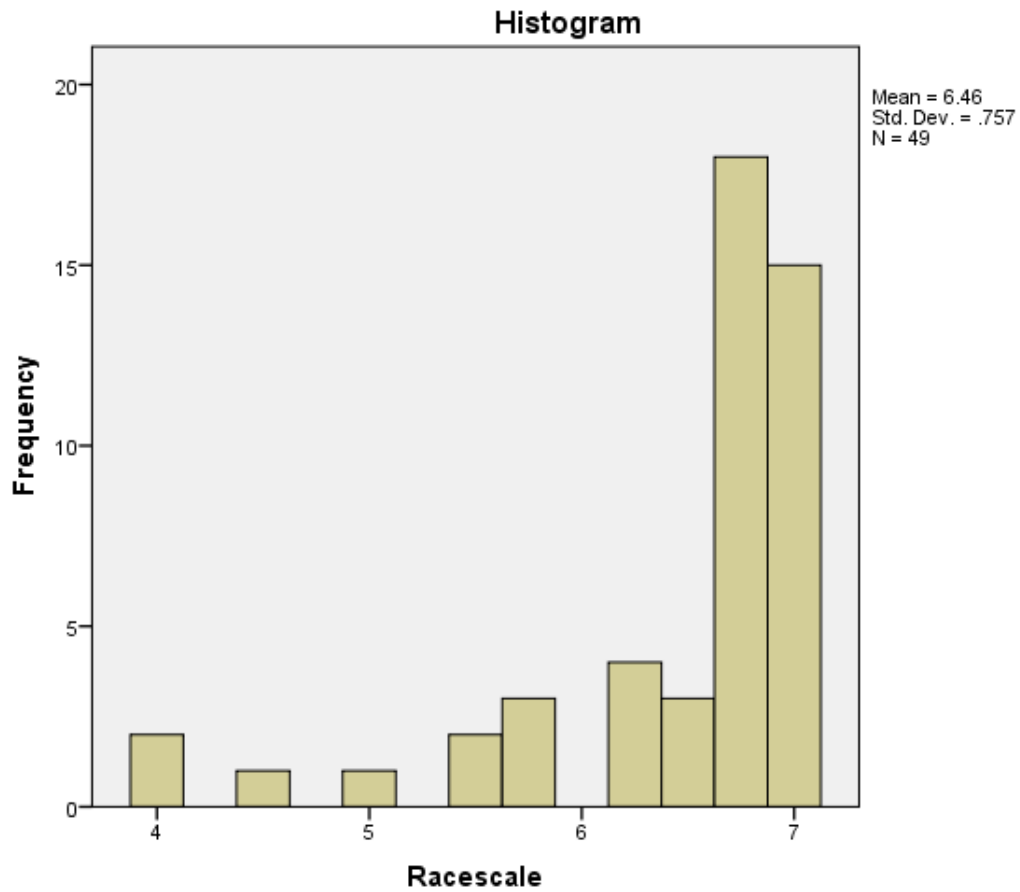
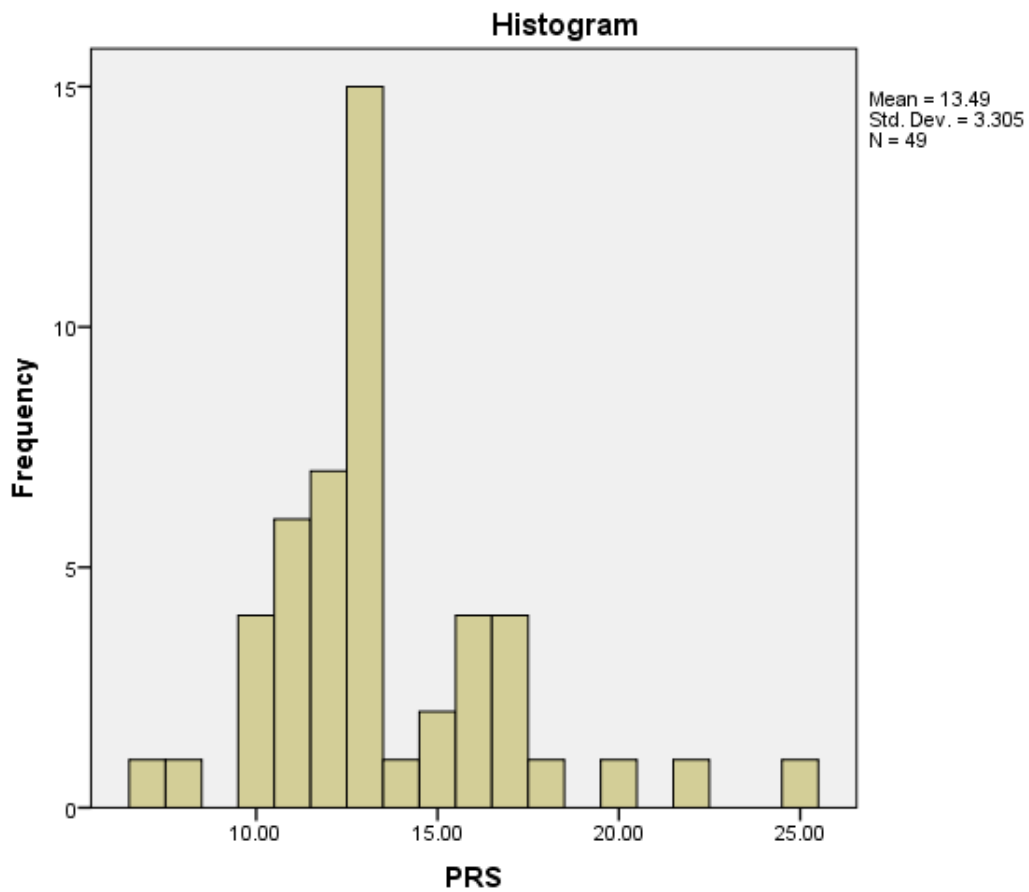




Figure 2:



Following this test, the Fisher r-to-z Transformation test was utilized to determine the null hypothesis, determining if there were statistically significant differences for the following research questions;

*RQ 1: What is the relationship between gender and perceived realism in depictions of Black women on RHoA?*

H0: The analysis revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female perceived realism of depictions of Black women on RHoA.

*RQ 2: To what degree do racial identity levels create different impacts on men and women's perceived realism from watching RHoA.*

H0: The analysis revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between men and women's racial identity and perceived realism from watching RHoA.

The remainder of this chapter will show specific detailed analysis of the data.

### a. Sample

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling from three "Introduction to African American Studies" courses and one "Issues in the African American Community" course at Georgia State University. Table one indicates that this study garnered 56 participants in total, twenty men and thirty-six women.

**Table 1:**

| What is your gender? |                  |                |
|----------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Answer Options       | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Female               | 64.3%            | 36             |
| Male                 | 35.7%            | 20             |

### Television Per Week

The next question in the survey asks participants to report how many hours of television they watch per week. Table 2 shows the median amount of television watched between genders.

To obtain the gendered mean of television watched per week, answers were coded as:

"Less than 1 hour per week" = 0.5

"1-3 hours" = 1.5

"4-7 hours" = 5.5

“More than 7 hours” = 7

**Table 2:**

| <b>GENDER</b> | <b>MEDIAN OF HOURS WATCHED PER WEEK</b> |
|---------------|---|
| Female        | 1.5                                     |
| Male          | 1.5                                     |

Table 2 shows that the median amount of television watched per week for participants was 1.5 hours per week.

### **RTV Watched Per Week**

The next question on the survey asked participants to report how much RTV they watched per week. To obtain the median of hours for this question, answers were coded as:

“Less than 1 hour” = 0.5

“1-3 hours” = 1.5

“4-7 hours” = 5.5

“More than 7 hours” = 7

Table 3 shows the amount of RTV watched per week:

**Table 3:**

| <b>GENDER</b> | <b>MEDIAN OF RTV HOURS WATCHED</b> |
|---------------|------------------------------------|
| Female        | 1.5                                |
| Male          | 0.5                                |

Analysis of the television watched per week and RTV watched per week data reveals that women watch slightly more television and RTV per week than men. This difference came in

RTV viewing per week. Data reported in table 3 shows that women watch 1 hour of RTV more than men per week, giving them more overall time watching television than men.

### Do You Watch RHoA Regularly?

Another question in this demographic survey asked to participants if they watched RHoA regularly. This question is important for 2 reasons. First, this question will assist the researcher in finding out if participants are familiar with cast members and depictions. Secondly, it assists in understanding if participants watch BTRT on average more than RTV. Figure1 depicts a pie chart that aids in understanding if participants reported watching RHoA regularly. The term “regularly” was not defined to participants. Instead, the term regularly was left open for participants to define themselves.

**Figure 1:**

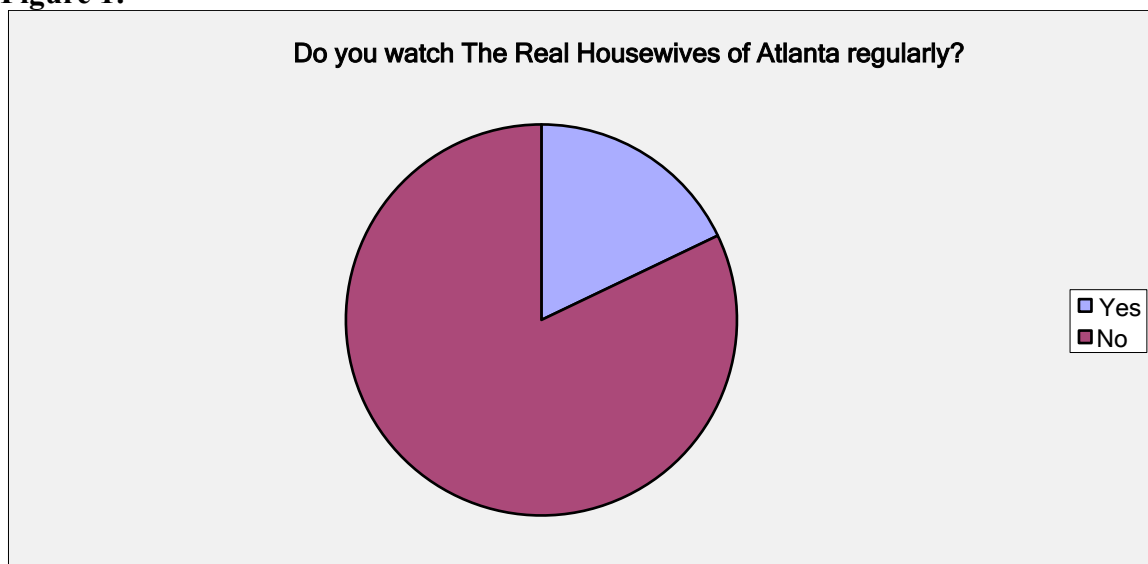


Table 3 offers a percentage breakdown of the figure 1 pie chart.

**Table 3:**

| GENDER | DO YOU WATCH RHoA REGULARLY? |
|--------|------------------------------|
| Female | 70%                          |
| Male   | 100%                         |

Table 3 indicates that while 70% of female participants reported that they do not watch RHoA regularly, 100% of men said that they do not watch regularly. Although the term “regularly” was individually defined by each participant, it can be inferred that some participants do not watch this BTRT show at all.

### **4.3 Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES)**

A goal of this scale was to understand the degree of racial identity for each participant. The aspect of the CSES that was most relevant to the present study was the “Membership” subscale. This subscale assessed how participants felt about their individual membership of their racial/ethnic group. Following instructions from the creators, membership subscale items 1, 5, 9 and 13 were asked on a 7 point likert subscale which varied from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Membership subscale items were:

- 1. “I am a worthy member of my race/ethnic group;”
- 5. “I feel I don’t have much to offer my racial/ethnic group;”
- 9. “I am a cooperative participant in the activities of my racial/ethnic group;”
- 13. “I often feel I’m a useless member of my racial/ethnic group.”

Analysis of the CSES scale was provided by its creators Luhtanen & Crocker (1992). They suggested that although it is possible to create an overall or composite score for collective self-esteem, “we strongly recommend against doing so, because the subscales measure distinct constructs” (Motivation Lab, 2011, para 3). Luhtanen & Crocker (1992) also suggested that to properly analyze the data, scores must be reversed for Membership subscale items # 5 and 13 such that (1 = 7), (2 = 6), (3 = 5), (4 = 4), (5 = 3), (6 = 2), (7 = 1). Researchers are then told to sum the answers to the four items in the Membership subscale score and divide them by 4.

Following their suggestions, participants with lower scores (1-4) are considered to have negative racial/ethnic identity whereas higher scores (5-7) are considered to have positive racial/ethnic identity (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax & Blaine 1994: 504).

Table 4 displays the mean and range of racial identity results from each statement in the membership category:

**Table 4:**

| <b>MEMBERSHIP IDENTIFICATION STATEMENT</b>                                  | <b>GENDER</b> | <b>MEDIAN RACIAL IDENTITY LEVEL</b> | <b>RANGE OF RACIAL IDENTITY LEVEL</b> |
|---|---------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| I am a worthy member of my race/ethnicity                                   | Female        | 7                                   | 6                                     |
|   | Male          | 7                                   | 3                                     |
| I feel I don't have much to offer my racial/ethnic group                    | Female        | 1                                   | 5                                     |
|   | Male          | 1                                   | 4                                     |
| I am an cooperative participant in the activities of my racial/ethnic group | Female        | 6                                   | 5                                     |
|   | Male          | 6                                   | 6                                     |
| I often feel I'm a useless member of racial/ethnic group                    | Female        | 1                                   | 2                                     |
|   | Male          | 1                                   | 2                                     |

Table 4 represents the median racial identity level and range from each gender for each item in the CSES membership subscale. Analysis of this table reveals that each gender's median racial identity level was the same for each item. Differences in the range of responses show that men and women differed in their level of agreement or disagreement of each question. For example, for item 1: "I am a worthy member of my race/ethnicity," some female participants significantly varied in their membership of being Black; with a range of 6, this indicates that

some women did not believe that they are not worthy members. Whereas, the range of item 1 with men did not show the same distance variation; male participants generally felt as if they were worthy members of their race/ethnicity.

Data also indicates that racial identity tends to be significantly stronger when the items offer statements that affirm their membership to their specific racial group. For example, item 5, “I am a worthy member of my racial/ethnic group,” and item 9, “I am an cooperative participant in the activities of my racial/ethnic group” had the strongest racial identity levels due to the affirming statement. Contrarily, lower racial identity was apparent in the statements that challenged ones membership in their racial identity. These examples are show in item 5, “I don’t have much to offer my racial/ethnic group” and item 13, “I often feel I’m a useless member of my racial/ethnic group.” These differences in statements signify participants’ membership identity by offering a look at both ends of confirmation and challenging their identity.

Table 5 signifies the average of gendered racial identity based on results from the CSES. Results indicated that 54 of the 56 participants (96%) were calculated to have stronger racial identity. These results will have an impact on later analysis.

**Table 5:**

| <b>GENDER</b> | <b>RACIAL IDENTIFICATION AVERAGE</b> |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| Female        | 6.5                                  |
| Male          | 6.2                                  |

Analysis of racial identification average shows that female participants had slightly more racial identity levels than men.

#### 4.4 Perceived Realism Scale & RHoA Screening

After participants completed their CSES, they viewed an entire episode of RHoA. The episode screened was episode 6 of season 13 of RHoA. This episode was purchased on Amazon.com for \$2.99 and lasted a total of 44 minutes. This purchase allowed the researcher to stream the episode on campus using a room equipped with Internet access and a projector. This particular episode was being screened because it is “the highest rated ever in the RHoA franchise, pulling in 4.63 million viewers” (Thorpe, 2014, para 2). Soda and chips were served during the Tuesday screening.

To examine the degree to which participants feel that RHoA represents reality, the researcher used Alan Rubin’s (1981) Perceived Realism Scale (PRS) as a variable in the experiment. The PRS was used because “it has been the most frequently used instrument for measuring perceived realism on television” (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008: 247).

The scale has been modified to focus each item to relate to depictions of Black women on RHoA. To increase validity of the scale, I will use a strategy from Punyanunt-Carter (2008) study, “the more specific the content, the more valid the findings would be” (p. 246). Therefore, “the abstract word *things* in the original scale was replaced with more concrete words,” such as *RHoA* or *Black women*. Original and modified items in this scale are as follows:

- Original: “Television presents things as they really are in life”
- *Modified: “RHoA presents life as it really is for Black Women.”*
- Original: “If I see something on TV, I can’t be sure it really is that way”
- *Modified: “If I see something on RHoA, I can’t be sure that Black women really are this way.”*
- Original: “Television lets me see what happens in other places as if I were really there.”



- *Modified:* “RHoA lets me see what happens between black women in other places as if I were really there.”
- *Original:* “The people I see on TV are just like people I meet in real life.”
- *Modified:* “RHoA shows the lives of Black women as they really are.”
- *Original:* “The same things that happen to people on TV happen to me in real life”
- *Modified:* “RHoA lets me really see how Black women really live.”

Participants recorded their agreement with each statement using 5-point likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Responses were coded so that a “5” indicates a positive score, while a “1” represents a negative score. Thus, those who score higher to a “5” consider depictions on RHoA to be realistic. Those who score closer to a “1” find depictions to be unrealistic. Individual scores from men and women were averaged. Table 6 displays these results.

**Table 6:**

| <b>PERCEIVED REALISM STATEMENT</b>  | <b>GENDER</b> | <b>AVERAGE RACIAL IDENTITY LEVEL</b> |
|---|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| RHoA presents life as it really is for Black women.                                     | Female        | 2.4                                  |
|   | Male          | 2.5                                  |
| If I see something on RHoA, I can't be sure that Black women really are this way.       | Female        | 3.9                                  |
|   | Male          | 3.4                                  |
| RHoA lets me see what happens to black women in other places as if I were really there. | Female        | 2.5                                  |
|   | Male          | 2.8                                  |

|   |        |     |
|---|--------|-----|
| RHoA shows the lives of Black women as they really are. | Female | 2.3 |
|   | Male   | 2.2 |
| RHoA lets me see how Black women really live.           | Female | 2.2 |
|   | Male   | 2.2 |

Table 6 shows that both male and female participants cited similar perceptions of reality from depictions on RHoA. The statement that participants felt was more realistic was, “If I see something on RHoA, I can’t be sure that Black women really are this way.” This statement may imply distrust toward RHoA producers.

#### **Fisher r-to-z Transformation Test**

Analysis of the Mann Whitney-U test indicating that there was not a statistically significant relationship between the racial identity scale and perceived realism for either men or women  $p = (0.18)$ . Next, “Pearson’s correlation” will be used to measure the degree of the interrelation between racial identity and perceived realism. Pearson’s correlation “measures the degree of interrelation between two sampled data size variables” (Mudelsee, 2003: 651).

Although data from Pearson’s correlation is only appropriate when used with normally distributed data, and results from the current Mann-Whitney U-Test yielded results that were not normally distributed, I used Pearson’s correlation because there currently is not an equivalent test to understand the interrelation between two variables with this type of data. Thus, I will be utilizing Pearson’s correlation a proxy for the coefficient correlation so I can examine the relation between the two variables.

In order to determine if there was a correlation between the coefficients of racial identity and perceived realism, the Pearson coefficient correlation data will be placed in the Fisher r-to-z

Transformation Test. This test will calculate a value of  $z$  that can be applied to assess the significance of the difference between two correlation coefficients,  $r_a$  and  $r_b$ , found in two independent samples.

Table 7 indicates Spearman's rho data. This table separates women (1) from men (2) and provides correlational coefficient data.

**Table 7:**

|   |                |           |                         |       |       |
|---|----------------|-----------|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| 1 | Spearman's rho | Racescale | Correlation Coefficient | 1.000 | -.211 |
|   |                |           | Sig. (2-tailed)         | .     | .247  |
|   |                |           | N                       | 35    | 32    |
|   | PRs            | Racescale | Correlation Coefficient | -.211 | 1.000 |
|   |                |           | Sig. (2-tailed)         | .247  | .     |
|   |                |           | N                       | 32    | 32    |
| 2 | Spearman's rho | Racescale | Correlation Coefficient | 1.000 | .203  |
|   |                |           | Sig. (2-tailed)         | .     | .433  |
|   |                |           | N                       | 18    | 17    |
|   | PRs            | Racescale | Correlation Coefficient | .203  | 1.000 |
|   |                |           | Sig. (2-tailed)         | .433  | .     |
|   |                |           | N                       | 17    | 17    |

Table 7 provides Spearman's rho data from gender on both the CSES & PRS. In this study, CSES data was correlated with PRS for women  $r(32) = -.211$ , and for men  $r(17) = .203$ . Applying table 7 data to Fisher's  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation test indicates that  $z = (-1.29)$  and  $p = (0.19)$ . These calculations show that there is not a statistically significant relationship between CSES & PRS for both men and women.

Similarly, Table 8 shows the Pearson's Correlation data from both genders. In this table, females (1) are compared with men (2).

**Table 8:**

|   |           |                     |       |       |
|---|-----------|---------------------|-------|-------|
| 1 | Racescale | Pearson Correlation | 1     | -.144 |
|   |           | Sig. (2-tailed)     |       | .433  |
|   |           | N                   | 35    | 32    |
|   | PRS       | Pearson Correlation | -.144 | 1     |
|   |           | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .433  |       |
|   |           | N                   | 32    | 32    |
| 2 | Racescale | Pearson Correlation | 1     | .020  |
|   |           | Sig. (2-tailed)     |       | .940  |
|   |           | N                   | 18    | 17    |
|   | PRS       | Pearson Correlation | .020  | 1     |
|   |           | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .940  |       |
|   |           | N                   | 17    | 17    |

Table 8 provides Pearson's Correlation data from gender on both the CSES & PRS. In this study, CSES data was correlated with PRS for women  $r(32) = -.144$ , and for men  $r(17) = 0.20$ . Applying table 8 data to Fisher's r-to-z transformation test indicates that  $z = (-0.51)$  and  $p = (0.61)$ . This data is represented in Table 9.

**Table 9:**

| Sample A |            | Sample B |      |           |
|----------|------------|----------|------|-----------|
| $r_a =$  | -.144      | $r_b =$  | .020 | Reset     |
| $n_a =$  | 32         | $n_b =$  | 17   | Calculate |
| $z =$    |            | -0.51    |      |           |
| P        | one-tailed | 0.305    |      |           |
|          | two-tailed | 0.6101   |      |           |

The Spearman's rho and Pearson's Correlation tables show similarity of data. From the Spearman's rho table & the Pearsons Correlation data, it can be concluded that there is no statistical significance in difference of racial identity and perceived realism among male and

female participants. Furthermore, these results highlight the similar nature of both men and women's responses to items in the CSES & the PRS scale. It is concluded that in this study, there is no relationship between gender and perceived realism. Moreover, there is no relationship between racial identity level and perceived realism between men and women.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the study was to determine the degree in which gender and racial identity affect perceived realism of RHoA. It sought to understand if Black men and women with higher or lower racial identity levels read and perceive RHoA the same way. Using a Mann-Whitney U-test and a Fisher r-to-z Transformation Test, results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in the way the different genders perceive the realism on RHoA. Moreover, there was also no statistically significant difference in the level of racial identity and the way the genders perceived realism of RHoA. Ultimately, these tests determined that Black men and women, with varying degrees of racial identity, did not perceive the depictions of Black women on RHoA as being real to life.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of the proposed study was to determine the degree in which gender and racial identity affect perceived realism of RHOA. It seeks to understand if Black men and women with higher or lower racial identity levels read and perceive RHOA the same way. The research question that guides this study is as follows:

- Using *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a point of reference:
  - 1) What is the relationship between gender and perceived realism of depictions of

### Black women on RHoA?

- 1) To what degree do racial identity levels create different impacts on men and women's perceived realism from watching RHoA.

This chapter includes detailed discussion regarding the conclusions of the study, implications of this research and recommendations for future research.

This study garnered 56 total participants, 36 Black women 20 Black men. Data was collected and analyzed collected and analyzed from the online survey creation interface, "Survey Monkey." There was three survey tools utilized in this study: A demographic survey, PRS and CSES. PRS data indicated that 70% of participants strongly disagreed that RHoA shows the lives of Black women as they really are. CSES data analysis indicates little variation from both genders. Results indicated that 96% of participants had stronger racial identity levels.

According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), positive scores on the CSES show the extent that one's social groups are valued and compare favorably with relevant comparison groups. Contrarily, "persons with negative or threatened social identity may leave or disassociate themselves from a social group" (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992: 303).

Furthermore, data analysis from the Mann-Whitney U-test and the Fisher r-to-z Transformation Test also shows that there was no statistical significance between racial identity level and perceived realism.

Table 10 provides the gendered averages of: hours of TV watched per week, Hours of RTV watched per week, racial identification level and perceived realism:

**Table 10:**

| <b>GENDER</b> | <b>HOURS OF TV WATCHED PER WEEK</b> | <b>HOURS OF RTV WATCHED PER WEEK</b> | <b>RACIAL IDENTIFICATION LEVEL</b> | <b>PERCEIVED REALISM LEVEL</b> |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| FEMALE        | 2.3                                 | 1.6                                  | 6.5                                | 2.6                            |
| MALE          | 2.3                                 | 1.1                                  | 6.2                                | 2.8                            |

This table shows that both men and women had similar averages for all aspects of this study. It also highlights the final determination of no statistically significant differences in men and women's racial identity level affecting perceived realism of RHoA.

### **5.1 Discussion**

First, it should be stated that the data did not yield very much variation; men and women answered similarly on a variety of the survey questions. These limitations are discussed in the conclusion section. For example, conclusion 2 provides data analysis, but has to infer for deeper analysis about the current stronger racial identity levels of participants. Thus, presented conclusion may be limited due to inadequate results from survey tools. The analysis of the data showed no statistical significant differences between racial identity level and perceived realism of depictions on RHoA, two conclusions were drawn from the findings. The conclusions are:

1. Stronger racial identity by 96% of participants may be caused by length of time enrolled in the African American studies courses, gender of the instructor, and perhaps recent national attention of racial turmoil,
2. Participants may have interpreted depictions on RHoA by using an "oppositional gaze."

*Stronger racial identity may be caused by recent national attention of racial turmoil, length of time enrolled in the African American studies courses and gender of the instructor.*

Ninety eight percent of participants who responded to the CSES were calculated as having stronger racial identity. Unlike the other presented racial identity studies that took place in 2004-2008, this study did not garner a large population with lower racial identity, making it challenging to juxtapose their responses to these studies (Appiah 2004; Fujioka 2005 Fujioka et al.2009; Gangadharbatla 2008). However, I conclude that the large number of participants with higher racial identity may be different comes from two factors: (1), selection bias (convenience sampling) and (2), the current, sustained national attention to racial tension in America.

**Selection Bias:** Due to time constraints and access to a high population of Black students, I utilized convenience sampling from courses offered in the African American Studies Department. Due to my sample not being random as well as the critical engagement of Black issues and perspectives throughout the semester, this population cannot be generalized and is believed to have been more critical of the topic of study than those who were not enrolled.

A possible explanation for the large number of participants with stronger racial identity may have come in the recruitment process. Three Introduction to African American Studies courses and one African American Community course was utilized for recruitment. During the recruitment process, I informed the students about time commitments, the dearth of literature of BTRT and the episode of RHoA that would be viewed. Stated differently, participants knew that this study would use race and racial identity as a measure. According to Gandy (2001), “racial identity is more likely to have an influence on the processing of information about topics that are explicitly about matters of race” (p. 607).



Also, African American women were the main instructors for all four of the courses that were utilized for student recruitment. Perhaps showing participants a new view of African American women if they never had a woman instructor from this demographic.

Furthermore, after review of each syllabus, all courses used for recruitment discussed a variety of scholastic and social topics from an African American perspective including: sociology, political science, religion, economics and interpersonal relationships. Finally, considering that the study was conducted on 3/31/2015 and 4/1/2015, students had already had over three months of classroom content by studying African American issues in these courses; perhaps increasing their racial identity with each class.

*Media Race Relations:*

Although the data did not suggest media race relations as a reason for stronger racial identity, it was inferred by topics addressed in their selected courses as well as the amount of time the mainstream media has been dedicating to race relations.

With the resurgence and rise of racial violence and discriminatory incidents in the country, it seems as if Blacks and Whites are becoming more polarized. Near obsessive national media attention given to racial events like: the killing of Oscar Grant by a white police officer in 2012, which also was turned into a major motion picture. The 2013 scandal of Paula Dean and her use of the “N” word, the 2013 Trayvon Martin murder case, the untimely deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 and the 2014 incidents, which led to the Black boycott movement, “Boycott Black Friday.” Also in 2014, The Los Angeles Clippers NBA owner Donald Sterling was caught on tape condemning his girlfriend for “bringing Black people to his games”. Most recently (2015), there has been increased national media attention geared toward

the predominantly white fraternity Sigma Alpha Epsilon, who was caught on video chanting racist slurs.

National racial tension is intensified with each exposed case. The aftermath of such blatant disdain for Black lives by non-white perpetrators has led to the coining of popular phrases like “Black Lives Matter,” “Hands Up Don’t Shoot,” and “I Am Michael Brown.” These phrases were turned into global trending hashtags on social media outlets like Twitter, and could often be seen on T-shirts worn by professional athletes and celebrities alike. Lee (2013) believes that these examples of blatant racism has saturated news and television programs and have become so salient that it has led many non-blacks to rethink that notion that America embodies a post-racist society.

Bakari Kitwana, an urban social critic cites the current racial trends in America as “the new crises in African American culture.” His examples include, “high rates of suicide and imprisonment, police brutality, the generation gap, the war of the sexes and Blacks selling Black self-hatred as entertainment (Kitwana, 2008: xi). Kitwana then calls to attention the still perpetuated notion that the “hip hop generationers” have done little to combat current racism compared to those who took part in the civil rights movements in the 1960’s. “The grim reality that concrete progress within the civil rights arena has been almost nil for nearly four decades (p. xxi). However, recent social initiatives by “hip hop generationers” seem to disprove this notion. For example, Alicia Garza, the creator of the hashtag “#Black Lives Matter,” says that they created this hashtag “as a call to action for Black people after the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin...it was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements” (Rojas, 2014: 1). She defines “Black Lives Matter” as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and

intentionally targeted for demise (p. 1). High racial identity, as indicated in the results of this study may result from initiatives like the “Black Lives Matter” movement; which has had a direct impact on the students of Georgia State University.

Although this study does not inform these conclusions, participation and recruitment for Black Lives Matter demonstrations on the campus of Georgia State University may have had a part in strengthening racial identity levels of participants.

Since 2013, Georgia State University has held several successful efforts to recruit and charter busses to New York City, where the “Million Hoodie March” was held, Ferguson, Missouri to protest the killings of Michael Brown and several local protests in Atlanta, GA to show solidarity for the death of Eric Garner. These direct action initiatives from Georgia State University “hip-hop generationers” can serve as a response to Kitwana, who criticized this generation for not upholding their civic responsibilities by enacting proactive solutions to social problems of African Americans. Participation and knowledge of these pro-Black movements can have the ability to increase racial identity.

*Participants may have interpreted depictions on RHoA by using an “oppositional gaze.”*

Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1992) describes a concept of resistance called the “oppositional gaze.” She suggests that individuals should take an oppositional gaze toward stereotypical media images of Black women. Adopting this oppositional gaze would require one to challenge, critically examine, and deconstruct negative media images of Black women to reflect a more positive and accurate representation. “Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it opens up the possibility of agency” (bell hooks, 1992: 116). Furthermore, bell

hooks believes that this oppositional gaze leads to agency because “there is power in looking” (p. 115).

Boylorn (2008) documents her challenges in adopting an oppositional gaze of RTV shows that depict stereotypical images of Black women in her auto-ethnographic article on race and RTV. This article is believed to be an example of how participants in this study perceived perceptions of Black women on RHoA.

While Boylorn was analyzing images of Black women in RTV, she wondered, “how can I possibly be annoyed and entertained in the same moment? I had promised myself (lied to myself) and said that I was not going to watch another reality television show that typecast Black women into the negative and limiting roles” (p. 418). Having high racial identity, Boylorn expressed shame from watching the shows, “I know I should not be watching, I should be doing something to help, to clean up the debris and salvage the damage but all I can do in this moment is watch” (p. 419). After grappling with understanding why she was ashamed to be watching stereotypes on RTV of Black women, she realizes that no matter how negative the depictions of Black women were on RTV, she would always be connected to these women. “I am in conflict, I relate to Black women on reality television in more ways than one. Though I resist some of the way that they choose to express themselves and ‘represent the race,’ I understand the desperation to have your voice/experience heard after being silenced for far too long” (p. 420).

After much deliberation, Boylorn found that she could be a fan of RTV shows that depicted problematic images of Black women, while simultaneously critiquing these depictions. “I concurrently enjoy watching the shows that reiterate stereotypes while also engaging them as a critical practice” (Boylorn 2008, 423). This realization of the oppositional gaze came after reading bell hooks’ view of the stereotypical show *Amos and Andy*. bell hooks shared this same

“fascination” and “repulsion” of images of the sapphire on *Amos and Andy*. bell hooks (1992) writes:

I laughed at this black woman who was not me. And I did not even long to be there on the screen. How could I long to be there when my image, visually constructed, was so ugly? I did not long to be there. I did not long for her. I did not want my construction to be this hated black female thing...Her black female image was not the body of desire. There was nothing to see. She was not me (p. 120.)

Boylorn (2008) found motivation from this statement from bell hooks. She realized that it was ok to be both fascinated and critical of the roles that Black women play on RTV.

Oppositional gaze as an act of self-agency is similar to Wallace’s (1993) work which sought to “promulgate ‘cultural reading’ as an act of resistance” (p. 122). This type of resistance according to Wallace, challenges hegemonic gaze while simultaneously recognizing or relating to what they see.

The data reflected in the PRS suggests that participants, after viewing the episode of RHoA have challenged, critically examined and deconstructed the images and perceived them as negative, supporting presented characteristics of the oppositional gaze. Using reasoning based on the oppositional gaze from bell hooks (1992) and Boylorn (2008), these participants utilized self-agency and challenged dominant power structures by simply proclaiming their disbelief of the reality of these images on the survey.

I conclude that the participants in this study that viewed the depictions of RHoA used this same type of oppositional gaze. “They were fascinated, connected and disgusted by images of

Black womanhood that were derogatory” (Boylorn, 2008: p 424). This study, I believe, allowed an opportunity for self-agency on behalf of the Black men and women who participated. I believe that they may feel like Boylorn (2008) did after realizing that it was ok to be both a fan and a critic of controversial images of Black women in the media:

I need to say it loud though, I need to express my frustration with how being a Black woman is becoming synonymous with the roles and representations that are being reiterated in the media. I need to find a space to speak out or write about my conflict with being a stereotype and an anomaly simultaneously (Boylorn, 2008: 425).

Research on racial identity, the concept of the oppositional gaze, and the presented PRS results all work cohesively to inform a conclusion of this study. Previously presented racial identity researchers Demo & Hughes (1990) believe that there is a multidimensional complexity of African American media audiences. They showed that African Americans watch television shows directed at them for a variety of individual reasons, not simply because of their race. The oppositional gaze concept confirms that even audience members with strong racial identities have the ability to watch television shows with overt stereotypical depictions, enjoy them, while simultaneously being critical of them, confirming Demo & Hughes’ (1990) study on the multidimensional aspect of racial identity.

## **5.2 Implications**

This study has implications for not only the academic community but mass media producers as well. This study sheds light on the fact that although BTRT is over a decade old (2013-Present) the dearth of literature on the subject is still in the development stages and

hinders quantitative results, like this one, due to the inability to juxtapose them to similar studies. Conclusions drawn in this study are not fully comparable to similar research of the BTRT shows. Instead, some analysis of this research must rely on outdated genres and areas of study that do not accurately mirror the changing racial plight in America for African Americans.

Another implication of this study is that it may encourage producers of RTV and BTRT to consider the way that the African American audience views their programming. Much of the empirical research that utilize social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Appiah 2004; Fujioka 2005; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Hogg & Abrams 1988; Stets & Burke 2000), typically address how levels of social identity determine specific media selection. This study suggests that media producers of BTRT should understand that strong racial identifiers did not feel as if their productions and depictions of Black women are true to real life, although it is under the guise of “reality” television.

It may be advantageous for media producers to note the emotional nature of the growing national attention to unjust discrimination and violence toward African Americans. Although this study does not make clear the specific media programs that the Black audience is watching, one can infer that the controversial depictions of Black women on RHoA is not the choice for this demographic. As social identity theory and this study confirms, stronger racial identity will lead to individuals seeking media productions that satisfy their *new* racial identity needs.

Abrams & Giles (2007) also reported that Black college students with high racial identity were “more likely to select TV content presenting positive images of Blacks and more likely to avoid television content that did not foster Black culture” (p. 118). The results suggest in this study that RHoA does not satisfy the needs of those with stronger racial identity. Similarly, “viewers will seek out information they find to be in harmony with their own cognitive schema.

Audience members choose the path of least resistance” (Davis & Gandy 1999: 377). Thus, if audience members with stronger racial identity do not watch RHoA regularly, they may find RHoA to be resistance to their racial identity.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Future Research**

A quantitative methodology was implemented to quantify perceptions of the BTRT show RHoA. Based on the research findings, the following recommendations have been proposed for future research:

- 1) Conduct studies with a larger sample size.
- 2) Conduct a similar study with students not enrolled in African American Studies courses.
- 3) Repeat this study using a general racial sample pool
- 4) Repeat this study using focus groups
- 5) Explore how the social climate of African Americans has had an effect on racial identity
- 6) Account for Response Bias

#### *Conduct Studies with a larger sample size*

Although Zhou & Sloan (2013) state that a quantitative sample size of thirty generalizes to a population at large, this sample size was not large enough to accurately gauge significant differences in racial identity. A larger sample size is suggested to ensure a broad variety of racial identity levels.

#### *Conduct a similar study with students not enrolled in African American Studies courses.*

Students enrolled in an African American studies course are rigorously exposed to the social, economic and political plight of African Americans on a weekly basis. This fact may lead



to strengthened and sustained racial identity levels for students. This exposure may cause the participants to be more aware and critical of discrimination, stereotypes and general social plight of African Americans. This weekly reinforcement of knowledge may not be the same for individuals who are not exposed to such a rigorous examination of racial topics on a weekly basis. Participants that do not get this type of exposure may site more stratified racial identity levels, making their answers to questions more realistic to the general Black population at large.

*Repeat this study using a general racial sample pool*

Repeating this BTRT study using a general racial sample pool can determine if there are significant differences from other ethnicities in regards to BTRT depictions. For example, BTRT research would greatly progress when researchers can juxtapose quantitative data for other racial demographics, identifying which ethnicity feels as if RHoA depictions are perceived as being real to life.

*Explore how the social climate of African Americans has had an effect on racial identity*

In light of the controversial 2012 Trayvon Martin case and the untimely and controversial deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014, protests have saturated news and social media over the past two years. It may be advantageous to quantify how this exposure to pro Black sentiment has had an effect on racial identity levels and views of Black depictions on BTRT.

*Account for Response Bias*

According to Gandy (2001),

Response bias may be introduced whenever the questions we ask cue the respondent to the underlying racial concerns of our inquiry. Affirmative racial identification, rather than a more generalized tendency toward social desirability, may influence the response of persons for whom racial identity is highly salient. This bias may be increased further by interaction with the race of the interviewer (p. 604).

During my recruitment presentations, I justified my research by condemning the lack of research of BTRT and Black audiences in academia. This process may have cued the participants that the focal point of the study was race. Furthermore, I identify, and have physical characteristics of being a Black man, which may have also accounted for response bias.

### **Summary**

This study adds to the dearth of BTRT literature in academia by quantifying responses from Black men and women on their perceptions of realism of depictions on RHoA. It sought to determine the degree in which gender and racial identity affect perceived realism of RHoA. It also sought to understand if Black men and women with higher or lower racial identity levels read and perceive RHoA the same way. Three general conclusions were derived based on data analysis using the CSES and the PRS. They included: (1) Participants with stronger racial identity do not identify with media message simply because the media depicts cast members of the same race/ethnicity; (2) Stronger racial identity by 54 of the 56 participants may be caused by recent national attention of racial turmoil, length of time enrolled in the African American studies courses and the gender of the instructor; and (3) Participants may have interpreted depictions on RHoA by using a “oppositional gaze.” These conclusions, along with implications and recommendations for future research were provided.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A RHOA Perceived Realism Survey

This survey is designed to understand how you feel you perceive depictions of Black women on RHOA. For each of the statements below, circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about the statement, where: 5= Strongly Agree,

4 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 2 = Strongly Disagree, 1 = Neither Agree or Disagree

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|   |          |          |          |          |          |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>Appendix A.1: RHOA presents life as it really is for Black women</b>                       | <b>5</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>1</b> |
| <b>If I see something on RHOA, I can't be sure that Black women really are this way</b>       | 5        | 4        | 3        | 2        | 1        |
| <b>RHOA lets me see what happens to Black women in other places as if I were really there</b> | 5        | 4        | 3        | 2        | 1        |
| <b>RHOA shows the lives of Black women as they really are</b>                                 | 5        | 4        | 3        | 2        | 1        |
| <b>RHOA lets me really see how Black women really live</b>                                    | 5        | 4        | 3        | 2        | 1        |

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## Appendix B: Demographic Survey

This study is concerned with understanding perceptions from Black men and women who watch *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. The study seeks to understand if there are differences in perceptions of gender from depictions of Black women on the show. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can decide not to participate at any time.

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First I'd like to ask a few questions about you:

1. What is your gender? Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_ Transgender \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your Ethnicity? Black \_\_\_\_\_ African American \_\_\_\_\_
3. Approximately how many hours of TV do you watch per week? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Approximately how many hours of Reality TV do you watch per week? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Collective Self-Esteem Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: We are all members of different social groups or social categories. We would like you to consider your race or ethnicity (e.g., African-American, Latino/Latina, Asian, European-American) in responding to the following statements. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these statements; we are interested in your honest reactions and opinions. Please read each statement carefully, and respond by using the following scale from 1-7.

|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Neutral | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| I am a worthy member of my race/ethnic group.  | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| I often regret that I belong to my racial/ethnic group.  | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| Overall, my racial/ethnic group is considered good by others.  | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| Overall, my race/ethnicity has very little to do with how I feel about myself.                         | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| I feel I don't have much to offer to my racial/ethnic group.   | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| In general, I'm glad to be a member of my racial/ethnic group.   | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| Most people consider my racial/ethnic group, on the average, to be more ineffective than other groups. | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| The racial/ethnic group I belong to is an important reflection of who I am.                            | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| I am a cooperative participant in the activities of my racial/ethnic group.                            | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| Overall, I often feel that my racial/ethnic group is not worthwhile.                                   | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| In general, others respect my race/ethnicity.  | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |
| My race/ethnicity is unimportant to my sense of what kind of a person I am.                            | 1                 | 2        | 3                 |         | 5              |       | 7              |

|  |   |   |   |  |   |  |   |
|--|---|---|---|--|---|--|---|
| I often feel I'm a useless member of my racial/ethnic group. | 1 | 2 | 3 |  | 5 |  | 7 |
| I feel good about the race/ethnicity I belong to.            | 1 | 2 | 3 |  | 5 |  | 7 |

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

### Georgia State University Department of African American Studies Informed Consent

**Title:** Black Themed Reality Television & Social Identity: Gendered Perceptions from Black College Students

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jonathan Gayles  
Student Principal Investigator: Calvin Monroe

#### I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to examine gender, racial identity and realism in the TV show, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

You are invited to participate because you are at least 18 years old, identify as being African American and attend Georgia State University. A minimum of 30 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation is for one day and will last about 1.5 hours.

#### II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will report to:

**Date:** 3/31/15 & 4/1/15

**Location:** 3/31/15: Sparks Hall 328. 4/1/15: Classroom South, Room 205

**Time:** Tuesday: 3:30 pm. Wednesday: 1:30 pm

There are three sections to this study. After arrival:

1. You will complete a short survey giving basic information about yourself. This will include gender, race, and the amount of TV you watch.
2. You will complete a survey about your own racial identity.
3. You will watch a full episode of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, which is rated: TV-14.

4. You will complete a short survey to see if you think the women on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* are the same as women in real life.

### III. **Risks:**

1. In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. However, it is possible that some of the questions on the racial identity survey may make you feel uncomfortable. If this happens, you are free to not answer any questions that you do not wish to answer and stop participation at any time.

2. Participation in this study may last up to 1.5 hours, so you may become tired or bored.

### IV. **Benefits:**

Participation may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about how African American college students think of the women on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

### V. **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:**

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. Your professor has agreed to offer extra credit for your participation. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### VI. **Confidentiality:**

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Only Calvin Monroe and Dr. Jonathan Gayles will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)).

Instead of using your name, we will use a gendered number system for identification purposes. For example, M-1 would be for the first male participant. Likewise F-1 would be for the first female participant. The information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of the researcher. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally. To receive extra credit from your professor, you will be given a number with the Student P.I.'s initials on the back. Once you provide this number to your professor, they will grant the earned extra credit to you.

### VII. **Contact Persons:**

If you have further questions about the study, you may call Calvin Monroe at (404) 573-8219 or Dr. Jonathan Gayles at (404) 413-5142. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the

study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or [svogtner1@gsu.edu](mailto:svogtner1@gsu.edu) if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

VIII. **Copy of Consent Form to Subject:**

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date