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Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels Don't Marry: Televised Media, Black Stereotypes, and Low Marriage Rates

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MAMMIES, SAPPHIRES, AND JEZEBELS DON'T MARRY: TELEVISED MEDIA, BLACK

STEREOTYPES, AND LOW MARRIAGE RATES

by

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Under the Direction of Marian Meyers, PhD

ABSTRACT

Black women are one of the most progressive minority groups in the U.S. in terms of

business and economics. While they may excel in the area of career, Black women hold the

lowest rates of marriage in the country. The goal of this study was to uncover what role, if any,

do media stereotypes of Black women play in the marriage gap. Findings suggest that Black men

and Black women are, perhaps dismissing one another in terms of romantic relationships because

of the images they see on television. 11 self-identified single, heterosexual, Black women were

interviewed for the study and my focus was to learn if they perceived that media representations

have impacted their belief in their viability to marry. Employing constant-comparative open

coding process to analyze the responses of the participants for emerging trends, this analysis will

help further understand Black women's perceptions of the media's portrayal of them and if they

believe these representations impact their marriage rates.

INDEX WORDS: Black women, Media stereotypes, Media influence, Cultivation theory, Low
marriage rates, Black feminist thought

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DEDICATION

To my Godmother, Annette Smith, who put forth every effort to make sure I received my college education. For the many single Black women, who strive every day for a life they've never seen. For my son, Jaelyd who inspires me every day.

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1   INTRODUCTION

American women have been socialized, even brainwashed, to accept a version of American history that was created to uphold and maintain racial imperialism in the form of white supremacy and sexual imperialism in the form of patriarchy. One measure of the success of such indoctrination is that we perpetuate both consciously and unconsciously the very evils that oppress us. -bell hooks (Hooks, 2000, pg. 374)

Black women in U.S. society today have made significant gains as a minority group in terms of educational and economic advancement over the last 60 years (Crowder & Tolnay, 2004; Romano, 2018; Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014). For example, Black women outnumbering Black men in both undergraduate and advanced college degrees from both historically Black colleges and universities and predominantly white institutions (Butler-Sweet, 2017).

While Black women are undoubtedly advancing in the areas of education and the workplace, they statistically hold one of the lowest rates of marriage in this country. White and Latina women are three times more likely to become married, and sustain healthy, romantic relationships (Banks, 2011). Crowder and Tolnay (2000) note that "between 1970 and 1990 alone, the percentage of Black women over the age of 18 who were married declined from 62% to 43%" (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000, p. 792). Many studies have attributed the marriage gap among successful Black women to the small pool of eligible prospects available from Black men due to incarceration, unemployment, and lower life expectancy (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Romano, 2018; Butler-Sweet, 2017).

Crowder & Tolnay (2000) described the "marriage squeeze" as the deficiencies in the marriage market of the Black population, significantly impacting rates of matrimony and the disproportionate racial gap. Other researchers have attributed the low marriage rates of Black women to their ambivalence to marriage and their focus on other fulfilling objectives, such as career (Beamon, N., 2009; Barros-Gomes, Baptist, J., 2014). However, as was shown in the 2017 publication *Marital Expectations in Strong African American Marriages* (Vaterlaus, J., Skogrand, L., Chaney, C., & Gahagan, K., 2017), premarital ambivalence could largely be shaped by the portrayal of romantic relationships in the media or, as BreOnna Tindall (2012) suggests, a lack thereof. While much research has focused on the "marriage squeeze" that exists among successful Black women (Butler-Sweet, 2017; Crowder & Tolnay, 2000; Romano, 2018; Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014), a large gap exists in the literature regarding Black women's perceptions of this disparity.

Our understanding of society as a whole and the world in which we live is often shaped through our exposure to mass media (Edwards, 2016; Fujioka 2005; Bryant & Zillmann, 2002). Thus, perceptions influenced through media exposure are especially important to analyze among Black women since they consume more TV programming that any other group (Coleman, 2019; Fujioka, 2005). A 2013 Nielsen study suggests Black women consume 37% more TV than other demographics.

Research indicates that Black women tend to consume media content involving Black women characters. Historically, these characters have typically consisted of stereotypical figures such as promiscuous Jezebels, strong, asexual Mammies, and aggressive, angry Sapphires (Coleman, 2019; Goldman, 2014; Fujioka, 2005). Defining this content as "Black-oriented", Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati (2019) suggest that Black-oriented media influences how self-

concepts and identities mature and may have more impact on Black media consumers than that of other media. A common theme or ideology that guides much media content, according to Staples and Jones (1985), is white cultural superiority:

> Television, controlled by American advertisers, regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, and influenced by the American public has chosen to adapt a white American cultural ideology based on the glorification of white norms, mores, and values. This ideology glorifies whiteness and demeans blackness by establishing, maintaining, and refining a society based on race and racial privilege. In television programming this is evident in the historical portrayal of blacks and other minorities in a patronizing, demeaning, childlike and stereotyped way. Television, then, like radio, and even newspapers support this white cultural ideology that works to maintain a status quo for black Americans as second-class citizens. (p. 15)

In fact, Staples and Jones (1985) suggest romance and love affairs featuring Black characters were "forbidden territory," with the media failing to display the dynamic of the Black experience while presenting models of single-parent homes or unmarried relationships. While much has changed since Staples and Jones's study 35 years ago, BreOnna Tindall (2012) more recently states that "the majority of depictions of Black women in our society are as mothers but not wives, or as professionals but not partners. When it comes to the portrayal of Black women and men in healthy intimate relationships together, it appears that either of the partners is utterly non-existent" (p. 117).

This study asks whether TV viewing of negative stereotypes may be linked to an ambivalence to marry. It seeks to learn how single, heterosexual Black women think the media portrays Black women in relationships. More importantly, do they think these representations

have influenced their viability to marry? Given the prevalence of unmarried Black women in the media, this study questions whether the message to Black women is that they are unsuitable or unworthy of marriage, and if Black women feel they are receiving such messages.

Argyle (1999) posits marriage as the most significant source of social support for most individuals, above that of friends and family. Argyle highlights how many married couples practice better habits, such as less smoking and drinking, and having better diets. The benefits of marriage stem from the equity and intimacy that is experienced through loving and healthy marriages (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999). Patricia Roberson, Jerika Norona, Katherine Lenger, and Spencer Olmstead (2018) found that both low and high conflict marriages result in a higher quality of life compared to that of unmarried individuals (Roberson, Norona, Lenger, & Olmstead, 2018, p. 2180). In addition, Schwarz (1999) noted that:

> In the United States almost two-thirds say their marriage is "very happy." Three out of four say their spouse is their best friend. Four out of five people say they would marry the same person again (Greeley 1991). The consequence? Most such people feel quite happy with life as a whole. (p. 379)

Several scholars have supported the concept that married people are generally happier. Argyle (1996) suggests that the intimacy and emotional advantages received in marriage behooves Black women to engage in these healthy romantic relationships. "It may also be beneficial for Black women to challenge their own unfavorable perceptions and recognize the potential for negative stereotypes to influence personal judgment" (Abrams, Maxwell, & Belgrave, 2018, p. 158).

Previous research has proven that Black women are skeptical of marriage (Schoen & Kluegel, 1988; Beamon, 2009; Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014), but the source of that skepticism has not been studied.

Media messages are agencies of "symbolic socialization and control" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and are imperative to the systems that cultivate worldviews and our impressions of ourselves and one another. Cultivation theory implies that constant media messages interpreted by audiences creates a homogeneous understanding of the groups represented in the media. In this study, we ultimately seek to understand if Black women think they may be internalizing negative media messages regarding romantic relationships and if this may be impacting their ambivalence toward marriage. For whatever reasons, many Black women do harbor negative perceptions regarding Black men, romantic relationships, and marriage and have chosen to remain single (Abrams, Maxwell, & Belgrave, 2018; Schoen & Kluegel,1988).

Not all single Black women hold this view. Barros-Gomes and Baptist (2014) state that some Black women have positive perceptions of marriage and of Black men, and though some hesitation about marriage exists for these women, marriage is desirable. It is possible that the media content consumed by Black women could be deleterious to their perceptions of what could be one of the most rewarding experiences in their lifetime. With Black women shattering ceilings in all areas except romance, cultivation theory provides a useful lens to analyze how Black women could possibly internalize negative stereotypes produced in the media resulting in an inability to view themselves as successful candidates for romantic relationships. While many factors may play a role in their outlook concerning romantic relationships, what role has the media and possibly Black women themselves played in contributing to the marriage squeeze? Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) states that it is important to recognize how many Black women have

begun to adjust to distorted images of themselves in ways to "accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them" (p. 29). Much research has focused on media effects specifically pertaining to violence and youth, but little has emphasized whether Black women's perceptions of marriage are shaped by the media. The impact of the media, pervasive stereotypic images, and low marriage rates among this group could result in self-endorsement of negative stereotypes ultimately preventing some single Black women from a better quality of life consisting of romance.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of single Black, heterosexual women through in-depth interviews regarding how Black women are represented in the media, and to understand from these women if these portrayals affect their beliefs about their viability to marry. As a single African American woman, I have become critical of the content that I view, and I realized that my favorite Black female characters, such as Issa Dee from the HBO show *Insecure*, Mary Jane Paul from BET's *Being Mary Jane*, and Olivia Pope from ABC's hit drama *Scandal*, are successful in the areas of business and friendship but are single. Very few television shows or films portray Black characters in healthy, successful marriages. Thus, this study will attempt to analyze how single Black women perceive they are portrayed in the media in terms of romantic relationships, and what parts of those portrayals, if any, have become internalized as truth.

RQ1: Do Black women feel that the way they are represented on television has impacted their belief in their viability to marry?

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Black Stereotypes in the Media

Fujioka (2005) suggests that Black-oriented media influences how self-concepts and identities are developed. Research indicates that Black women tend to consume Black-oriented media content (Coleman, 2019; Fujioka, 2005) that primarily consists of Black characters. These characters are usually stereotypical figures of Black women, such as promiscuous Jezebels, strong, asexual Mammies, and aggressive, angry Sapphires (Coleman, 2019; Goldman, 2014; Fujioka, 2005). Each of these stereotypes and their significance to the historical views of Black womanhood was developed during slavery.

The Mammy generalization is usually one that represents Black women as loyal caretakers of white families (Harris-Perry, 2011) while perhaps neglecting their own children (King, 2015). The mammy stereotype is often associated with domestic duties like cooking and cleaning as "assuming primary duties for the slave owner's household" has been depicted as the primary role for this stereotype in the media (Jewell, 1992, p. 38). Jewell (1992) argues that the Mammy trope is the "foundation for imagery that symbolizes African American womanhood" (Jewell, 1992, p. 38). One historic representation of this image was Aunt Jemima, who became popular for her ability to cook delicious pancakes (McElya, 2007). The stereotypical imagery of the Mammy displays the domestication of Black women while denying them beauty, femininity, and marital status associated with depictions of white housewives

K. Sue Jewell (1992) notes how media characterizations of the mammy convey her as submissive to White employers but aggressive in her relationships with Black men. Mammy's appearance is usually depicted as obese in size, dark skinned, and unkempt which does not align with white standards of beauty (Jewell, 1992). "The unusually large buttocks and embellished

breasts place mammy outside the sphere of sexual desirability and into the realm of maternal nurturance. In so doing, it allows the males who constructed this image, and those who accept it, to disavow their sexual interests in African American women" (Jewell, 1992, p. 40). As the image has evolved into more current depictions of Black women, the strong Black woman profile, or SBW, has emerged most recently (Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati, 2020). Combining the Superwoman and Mammy stereotypes, the SBW is represented as a matriarch who sacrifices her own needs to her family and community (Romero, 2000) and other times is portrayed as emasculating to Black men (Hall, 2017; Stephens & Few, 2007; Freeman, 2019).

The Sapphire stereotype, also known as the "angry Black woman" is common among television depictions of Black women. "In the mid-20th century, the Sapphire stereotype was introduced through a controversial sitcom, *The Amos 'n Andy Show* (Van Keuren, 1951). She is defined as a loud, aggressive, and combative woman who is never satisfied, and dominates and emasculates men through her verbal assaults (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995)" (Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati, 2020, p. 2). The name "Sapphire" was from a character on the show named Sapphire Stevens. Freeman (2019) compares Black women's role during slavery and how their need to be "tough" to work in the fields evolved to an illustration of Black women being angry. She states how this tough-skinned trope exhibits sentiments of resentment, particularly towards Black men being the reason for her emasculating nature towards them.

Rather, she is expected to show negative emotion, but that emotion is anger, not sadness. The neck-tolling, finger-snapping, tooth-sucking demands of an angry black woman are entirely consistent with the myth of strength. But this no-nonsense, take no prisoners woman offers no expectation that the black woman is supposed to be happy, content, or

fulfilled. Her sometimes explosive anger is part of that distinguishes her from the ideal of white femininity. (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 215)

Arguably, the angry Black woman may be the most dominant of the stereotypes discussed and has had a lasting impact on the public's impressions of Black women. Harris (2015) examines how some of today's most popular Black-oriented reality shows still perpetuate this stereotypical figure.

"The Jezebel is depicted as an attractive promiscuous woman, who is sexually aggressive, and interpersonally manipulative (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995)" (Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati, 2020, p. 2). The sexually deviant Jezebel is depicted as "primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly, and dirty" (Freeman, 2019, p. 661). Sheena Harris (2015) highlights how Sara Bartman, also known as "Hottentot Venus," was forced by white slave owners to "shock and entertain London audiences" due to her voluptuous body parts, particularly her large buttocks and labia (p. 15). Bartman symbolized admiration and repulsion as she prompted thoughts of lust or love among her audiences, but also "signified all that was strange, disturbing, alien, and possibly sexually deviant" (Harris, 2015, p. 17). She is one of the earlier examples of the Black female body distorted by white, patriarchal moderators of the public arena.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) terms the media tropes of Black women as controlling images. She states, "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice to appear natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday" (Collins, 2000, p. 70). Collins (2000) suggests that this intersection of race and gender ultimately justifies the oppression of Black women in the U.S. These stereotypes were not designed to meet

the white standards of beauty, which include being feminine, dainty, and "proper" (Collins, 2000, p. 282), and they degrade and dehumanize the women they represent.

Consistent with prior scholarship, each of these stereotypes may have influenced how Black women view themselves. "In one study, 97% of 333 Black women sampled were aware of negative stereotypes about Black women and endorsed characteristics associated with the Jezebel, Sapphire, and SBW stereotypes (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003)" (Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati., 2019, p. 2). Coleman and colleagues (2019) go on to assert that the depictions of the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire in Black-oriented media are consistent with highly sexualized, stereotypic images, and they advise researchers to explore if and how self-deprecation occurs through this type of media exposure.

Few, if any, of the Black women portrayed in the media, are engaged in healthy, successful marriages. Given the prevalence of unmarried Black women in popular media, this study questions whether the message to Black women is that they are unsuitable or unworthy of marriage. Researchers have argued that images of Black women prevalent in the media today neglect to portray Black women as desired life partners (Harris, 2015; Staples & Jones, 1985).

> Most television shows depict blacks as being in single parent homes or unmarried, thus providing no model of a stable nuclear family for the viewing audience. When a black married couple is shown, it is the most persistent, and damaging of all black stereotypes: the weak man-strong woman concept. And, these black couples are rarely shown in a loving relationship but tend to exchange insults with each other. (Staples & Jones, 1985, p. 18)

Staples & Jones (1985) go on to argue that sex and romance have been historically forbidden for

Black actors which essentially denies viewers the ability to view characters like themselves

maintaining healthy marriages.

2.2   Lack of Black Wives in the Media

Breonna Tindall (2012) states her fears of never becoming married stems from the lack of

Black wives she has observed in the media and society. She explains that the representation of

Black characters in the media and a failed marriage by her mother influenced her belief that she

and other Black women are destined for singledom. Tindall emphasizes how her exposure to

Black romantic relationships was limited to depictions of dysfunction, creating hopelessness

around the idea of becoming a wife.

> Many of the depictions of Black intimate relationships that I have observed paint a
>
> picture of a dyadic laced with poor communication, lack of love, respect, understanding
>
> and compatibility, which would point me and women like me (whom either are or who
>
> are aiming to be educated Black professionals), in a direction devoid of companionship,
>
> excluding meaningful relationships, and especially marriage with the Black man. I have
>
> viewed the countless media images which present the message that no matter what type
>
> of woman she is, as long as she is Black, she is bound to a life of insecure unstable
>
> relationships with the Black man, which are plagued with drama and break-ups just for
>
> her to one day settle for being alone. (Tindall, 2012, p. 117-118)

She suggests that media is structured to vilify and demean Black women through these

portrayals. Tindall concludes that the lack of Black women portrayed as wives in the media

sends a message to Black women viewers that pursuing a successful marriage is an extreme

rarity for them due to the socially constructed qualities that prevent this group from nurturing

long-term relationships. In this way, Tindall says, the identity of Black women is largely shaped by the media. A recent study of 39 Black heterosexual couples shows that the media influenced their marital expectations more than was the case for any other ethnic group (Vaterlaus, J., Skogand, L., Chaney, C., & Gahagan, K., 2017), suggesting that Black viewers tend to heavily rely on media to form ideas on marriage. "This media reliance for marital expectations may be more common

among African Americans than other ethnic groups. Compared to other ethnicities, African Americans spend more time watching television (Nielson, 2014) and have fewer marriage role models because of the high rate of single parent households (National Kids Count, 2016)" (Vaterlaus, et al., 2017, p. 894). Segrin and Nabi (2002) employs a 1996 study from Jones & Nelson that suggests the absence of salient role models makes individuals more vulnerable to views of marriage communicated through society and the media. "Signorielli (1991) argued more specifically that 'television may be the single most common and pervasive source of conceptions and action related to marriage and intimate personal relationships for large segments of the population'" (Segrin & Nebi, 2002, p. 121). In a 2012 study, Jeremy Osborn examined 392 married individuals to examine the intersection of television viewing and perceptions on romantic relationships. He concluded that an individuals' belief in television portrayals was a much stronger indicator of their outlook on marriage than the actual time spent viewing television. ""Living constantly under the domination and contempt of the white man, the [Black Woman] came to believe in [her] own inferiority whether [she] ignored or accepted the values of the white man's world' or not (Frazier, 130)" (Harris, 2015, p. 26).

2.3 Low Marriage Rates

While marriage rates have declined in general for all racial groups, Black individuals have seen a significant plunge in nuptuals in recent years (Schoen & Kluegel, 1988; Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014; Lichter, D., Batson, C., & Brown, J.B, 2004). "Higher percentages of Black women (42%) have not married by the age of 35, compared with Hispanic (17%) and White women (12%) (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009)" (Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014, p. 285). Many studies have attributed this marriage gap among Black women to the small pool of marriageable prospects due to the incarceration, unemployment, and lower life capacity of Black men (Crowder & Tolnay, Romano, 2018, Butler-Sweet, 2017). "Lichter, McLaughlin, et. al. 1992 found that unmarried Black women outnumbered available and employed Black men by at least two to everyone in every age category and outnumbered Black men with earnings above the poverty threshold by at least three to one" (Crowder & Tolnay, 794, 2004). Studies suggest that Black women, with their educational and economic advancements, refuse to settle for marriage partners lacking the same level of educational and economic success; and "as a result, scholars are finding that middle-class Black women may prefer to remain single rather than settle for unions with less-educated men" (Butler-Sweet, 2017, p. 374-75). However, these marriage pools only apply for Black women who do not consider interracial dating, and studies suggest that not many women do.

Black women who are critical of Black men dating and marrying outside the race pointed out that they did not have the same option to do likewise. The had little confidence that white men would find them attractive or suitable marriage partners. Black women had never been "forbidden fruit" to white men. Unlike in the case of Black men and white women, there were no

existing cultural stereotypes that might make Black women and White men particularly attracted

to one another (Romano, 2018, p. 131).

2.4   Perceptions on Marriage

A large gap exists in the literature regarding Black women's perceptions of their viability

to marry. Black women are found to be more skeptical of marriage (Lichter, D., Batson, C., &

Brown, J. Brian, 2004; Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014; Schoen & Kluegel, 1988) compared to

white women. Lichter, Batson, & Brown (2004) found in an analysis of 1,605 single women,

ages 28-37, that racial minority women had lower expectations of marriage than their white

counterparts, regardless of their economic status. In a study of five single Black women, ages 45

to 65 years old, Barros-Gomes & Baptist (2014) discovered that four of the participants desired

married but were hesitant. Lichter and colleagues (2004) also suggest that a low expectation of

marriage may stem from a perceived lack of opportunity to marry not necessarily a lack of desire

to marry.

> Low marital expectations may also reflect a negative self-assessment of one's own
>
> marriageability. Single mothers, for example, may have a low expectation of marriage
>
> because they believe that men are reluctant to assume a parental role or to share time with
>
> children (Lichter and Graefe 2001). Conversely, a high expectation of marriage
>
> presupposes the desire to marry, the belief that marriage opportunities exist, and a belief
>
> in one's attractiveness for marriage. (Lichter, D., Batson, C., Brown, J. B., 2004, p. 8)

These researchers suggest that the anticipation of marriage is largely determined by a woman's

confidence in her viability to marry. Schoen and Kluegel (1988) assert that in addition to

improved economic status, a negative perception of marriage may have also led to the decline in

marriage rates among Black individuals.

2.5   Media as Social Control

The media influences the way we perceive, interpret, and analyze the people and the world around us. Many researchers note the power of mass media to influence the outlook and behavior of viewers. Scholars have developed multiple models to categorize media effects as direct, conditional, cumulative, and cognitive-transactional. For this study we will focus on the "direct effects" of media (Pearse, 2000, introduction), which suggests that media content is the most important aspect of the media's influence on society. Pearse (2000) goes on to describe realism as a variable of direct effects. He emphasizes how the more realistic the media images appear; the more control media companies have on the mental perceptions of an audience.

Historically, media images have been primarily controlled by white, privileged men (Harris, 2011; Jewell, 1992; Staples & Jones, 1985). Many gender and racial concepts upheld by white patriarchal thought have prevailed in the media. Robert Staples and Terry Jones (1985) highlight the dynamic that dictates TV images:

> Television, controlled by American advertisers, regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, and influenced by the American public has chosen to adapt a white American cultural ideology based on the glorification of white norms, mores, and values. This ideology glorifies whiteness and demeans blackness by establishing, maintaining, and refining a society based on race and racial privilege. In television programming this is evident in the historical portrayal of blacks and other minorities in a patronizing, demeaning, childlike and stereotyped way. Television, then, like radio, and even newspapers support this white cultural ideology that works to maintain a status quo for black Americans as second-class citizens. (p. 15).

Staples and Jones explain how white-controlled media not only influences viewers but also sustains a social scale whereby Black Americans, specifically Black women, are consistently assigned to a lower rank.

In the publication *From Mammy to Miss America*, K. Sue Jewell (1992) states that individuals directing the media have power over social institutions and operate to retain their authority. In fact, K. Sue Jewell (1992) suggests the main social purpose of television is to emphasize, validate, and confirm the structures of power and authority. Jewell (1992) states that "mainstream media have historically served the interest of the privileged, who have defined African American women and other disenfranchised segments of the population as possessing certain values, belief systems, and lifestyles that do not entitle them to receive societal resources, but account for their marginal status in salient societal institutions" (as cited in Harris, 2015, p. 21). These social elites utilize what Jewell (1992) describes as ideological hegemony-- an indirect form of social control through power and domination of pervasive generalized messages important in maintaining societal norms. Ideological hegemony occurs as dominant ideas of social elites become accepted or internalized by subordinates of a society.

Collins (2002) describes how this hierarchy creates objectification of the subordinates. "Domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group" (Collins, 2002, p. 70). Once the subordinates are reduced to objects, they no longer define their own realities; instead, their identities are covertly constructed by the media and the consumption of repetitive images affirming their subservient role in society (Collins, 2002).

2.6   Cultivation Theory

Looking at the pervasive nature of the media and the ideological hegemony that influences Black women daily, it is important to consider how Black women may internalize media

messages and these concepts into their real lives. Cultivation theory states that viewers who consume a large amount of television content have a high propensity to internalize those messages and perceive reality as reflective of those mediated themes (Jewell, 1992). Cultivation theory, initially known as cultivation analysis, was developed by George Gerbner in 1968. Gerbner's theory stemmed from his analysis of how a small group of global conglomerates monopolizes media for both profit and control, with advertising for 67% of all network TV produced by the top 100 advertisers (Shanahan & Morgan, 2003). As it pertains to Black women, cultivation theory implies that Black women viewers could be internalizing stereotypical messages and demeaning images that promote a negative self-identity.

Long-term TV viewing has been found to cultivate pessimistic outlooks that involve an exaggerated sense of danger, inequality, anxiety, shame and mistrust of society (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014; Shanahan, J. & Morgan, M., 2003; Harris-Perry, 2011). Participants who watch television more frequently have a higher sense of fear and victimization than those who consume less television content.

> Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) is premised upon the assumption that television viewing is the primary source of storytelling in American society. This theory suggests that higher rates of TV exposure is associated with internalizing the stories (images) as representative of reality… Cultivation Theory has proven consistently useful for confirming associations between level of TV exposure and real-life perceptions (Gerbner, 1998). (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014, p.369-370)

Since Black women have been proven to be the highest consumers of television content, Black women may have internalized some of the stereotypical images that are so prevalent in the media. Cultivation theory is so essential in the social construction of ideas that Shanahan and

Morgan (2003) inquire: "If some people learn to be violent from watching television, then might not others learn to be victims?" (p. 49). Cultivation theory suggests that the pervasive stereotypes mentioned earlier could cause Black women to begin internalizing some of the negative qualities of Black women TV characters into their relationships, potentially yielding negative results.

Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) uses "The Crooked Room" as a metaphor to explain how some Black women tilt "and bend themselves to fit the distortion" of stereotypes that have been nurtured internally due to the pervasiveness of these images over time. These women essentially adapt to their environment. While some critics may not agree with a Black woman's choice to seemingly adopt historical stereotypes by becoming sexual objects in hip hop videos or accepting a movie role that embodies the historically degrading role of Mammy, Harris-Perry (2011) suggests it may take exceptional effort for Black women to become conscious of the overt, negative messages that the media has forced upon them all their lives.

> To understand why black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior. It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room. (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29)

Cultivation theory may explain why Black women adapt to this "crooked room" and how media images reinforce this warped view. Harris-Perry (2011) suggests that some Black women may adapt to and internalize these tilted images as a means of survival and recognition. A study published by Tia Tyree (2011) about MTV's hit reality show *The Real World* used textual analysis to analyze stereotypical qualities of members of the cast, from appearance to dialogue, as depicted on the show. She found that 58% of the Black characters fit into stereotypical scripts.

Recently, Fisher and Coleman (2017) found in a study of 112 heterosexual Black men and women that endorsement of the Jezebel stereotype contributed to lower relationship satisfaction. (Coleman, Reynolds, & Torbati, 2019, p. 2). Coleman and colleagues (2019) challenge researchers to employ cultivation theory as a lens to explore if self-deprecation occurs as a result of viewing media tropes.

As Tindall (2012) states "The broad generalization that media culture makes concerning African American women and romantic relationships is that African American women are innately flawed and nearly incapable when it comes to contributing to a healthy happy relationship with any man, and in specific the black man" (Tindall, 2012, p. 138). Cultivation theory could explain how some Black women hold a negative perception of their ability to marry.

2.7   Black Feminist Thought

Looking at Black women's perceptions and ideas, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) presents Black feminist thought as the most effective lens to analyze and clarify their experiences. In describing Black feminist thought, Collins explains the interlocking oppressions of race and gender in U.S. society and how this allows the perpetuation of stereotypes that justify Black women's inferior social status. Collins describes this framework as an effective tool to reflect political factors that concern Black women as a group. Equally important, Black feminist thought provides a space for Black women to articulate and share those reflections. Black feminist thought provides a framework to help understand how some Black women establish truth. In fact, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) suggests "traditional epistemological assumptions concerning how we [Black women] arrive at "truth" simply are not sufficient to the task of furthering Black feminist thought" (p.18).

When examining Black women's perceptions and the phenomenon of low marriage rates, I will employ Black feminist thought alongside cultivation theory as the theoretical framework to study how some Black women determine their viability to marry. At the core of Black feminist thought lies a critical social theory that resists a larger system of oppression that continues to suppress Black women's voices (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought provides an ideological lens designed to specifically combat injustices affecting Black women's personal lives. This epistemology is critical in examining how Black women's view on stereotypes in the media shape their philosophy on marriage attainment.

When analyzing traditional marriage and Black women's perspectives, it is imperative to examine how the politics of respectability may guide their interpretation. Politics of respectability was introduced by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) as she detailed survival strategies of Black women in Baptist churches during the Jim Crow era. She emphasizes how these women developed strategies in which honorable conduct in public may challenge the prejudices of White people, establishing a more positive outlook for Black people in general. "By claiming respectability through their manners and morals, poor Black women boldly asserted the will and agency to define themselves outside the parameters of prevailing racist discourses" (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 192). Higginbotham (1993) suggests that respectability was a tool that these women implemented to fight against negative perceptions and assumptions of them as it related to race proving racial relations was socially constructed. The politics of respectability also signified that these women bought into the hegemonic social values of the white elite (Higginbotham, 1993; Hill Collins, 2004). "African American women who value those aspects of Black womanhood that are stereotyped, ridiculed, and maligned in scholarship and the popular media challenge some of the basic ideas inherent in an ideology of domination"

(Hill Collins, 2004, p. 115). Hill Collins suggests that these women may be conforming to the messages that convey to Black women behavioral standards established by the White elite. One of the core themes of Black feminist thought is Black women's ability to create self-defined interpretations of their existence instead of adhering to the society's definition of womanhood.

"A collective, self-defined Black women's standpoint remains a core theme in Black feminist thought" (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 99). The foundation of this analysis therefore will be the viewpoints of the Black women in the study based on their unique experiences and understanding regarding traditional marriage. Their viewpoints are influenced by what Hill Collins (2004) describes as "heterosexist, Eurocentric gender ideology—particularly ideas about men and women advanced by the traditional family ideal—on African American men and women" (pg.152). Therefore, when researching television, Black women stereotypes, and marriage, Black feminist thought provides a model for analyzing data casting a special consideration on race and gender oppression in the U.S.

3   METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, I interviewed 11 self-identified single, heterosexual, Black women in their 20s and 30s, which is a prime demographic for marriage. Qualitative, in-depth interviewing is an effective methodology in allowing researchers to uncover the perspectives of participants and how they arrive at meaning regarding the phenomenon in question (Lindlof, 1995). Qualitative researchers aim to understand the views of participants to analyze how interpretations become meaning. This research usually focuses on rich data that involves an analysis of people, places, and conversations that cannot easily be quantified by statistical measures (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). By utilizing a framework of qualitative research, I developed, designed, and executed my research to evaluate how some Black women view

marriage and their prospects for marriage, and whether the messages and meanings Black women have derived from TV have helped to shape their views.

By taking a qualitative approach, I attempted to understand how participants have come to interpret the phenomenon of low marriage rates among Black women. This approach helped me understand how participants in my study view Black women tropes in TV programs and what meaning they have created because of these images regarding their ability to marry. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the primary goal here for researchers is to not make claims that their data is true, but to assert that they are possible due to the collected data. This will allow me to uncover how Black women interpret their circumstances of low marriage rates and whether they feel the media has shaped those ideas.

Human subjects research and adhering to standards of ethics is necessary to mitigate potential negative outcomes for the participants. Before beginning my study, I completed CITI Program courses for Responsible Conduct of Research to become fully aware of ethical principles. I completed this prerequisite in June 2019. These courses inform aspiring qualitative researchers of the procedures necessary to conduct an ethical and effective study involving human subjects. Since the study will focus on human subjects, I was required to gain permission to perform my study from the Institutional Review Board. I submitted an expedited application for a full study within the Integrated Research Information Systems database, detailing my plan to conduct my study while minimizing potential harm to my participants. Being granted permission from the IRB board to perform a research study involving human subjects is mandatory before I began recruiting participants. It was also necessary that I adhered to COVID-19 safety procedures so as not to put participants at unnecessary risk. Toward that end, interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing software.

The participants in this study are Black women who identify as heterosexual, single, and were born in the U.S. While all women's perceptions on marriage are valuable, traditional marriages and traditional representations of Black women throughout the life of this age group was a focus. I focused on heterosexual women to make the data more representative consisting of fewer variables. Also, I thought this was appropriate to evaluate traditional marriage and traditional stereotypes. This study will focus on U.S. Black women because their media experiences may be different from non-U.S. Black women. These women were knowledgeable about popular culture and Black-oriented media content. This was determined through a series of questions identifying how much participants watched television and their familiarity with shows featuring Black women. While I would prefer the study to emphasize Black women in a metropolitan U.S. city, the location of participants was determined by accessibility during recruitment. The women were located in multiple U.S. cities ranging from Buffalo to Los Angeles, but of the 11 interviewees 7 of them grew up in the Southern region of the U.S. The education level of the women varied ranging from some college to master's degrees. The median age of the women was 33. A report by Population Reference Bureau, which presents statistics from the 2018 U.S. Census that states the average age of marriage for women as 27.7, up from 26.3 in the year before. However, Caroline Allen (2020) found the average age of women to marry is 35.7, based on data from the Office for National Statistics. The study required respondents to be at least 18 years old. The definition of single for this study is defined as not being involved in a committed romantic relationship and unmarried. While the women in this study did share some commonalities, the diverse sample asserts that these perceptions were pervasive across a large demographic.

Interviews were conducted with 11 Black women, as this number of participants allowed the ability to analyze trends and patterns. I recruited women through Facebook and Instagram, and I also contacted women I knew who met the criterion and invited them to take part in the study. This convenience sample was recruited during a time when social distance was mandated due to COVID-19; safety concerns were addressed by recruiting women through the internet and phone.

Participants reviewed the informed consent form and verbally consented to participate in this study. Once the participants gave their verbal consent, we scheduled a time to talk using Zoom. This video conferencing tool provided face-to-face interactions with participants with the ability to maintain social distancing protocols.

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather rich, descriptive data from participants. Thomas Lindlof (1995) describes the dynamic of interviews as "the respondent takes on the perspective of the researcher in telling his or her stories. At the same time, the researcher begins to understand important properties of the informant's world, from that person's own situation" (p. 177). This method aligned with my goal of understanding the perceptions of Black women about media representations of Black women and marriage. I implemented several research practices for conducting interviews that were recommended by Berger (2000), such as implementing anonymity through pseudonyms, being nonjudgmental, and performing good listening skills. Berger (2000) emphasizes how interviews can be essential in understanding the past experiences of subjects as observations do not have this advantage. "Unless we have the chance to observe people for a long period of time, we cannot know much about their past experiences, their history… we can discover this information by asking them about it" (Berger, 2000, pp. 112-113). Interpersonal conversations allow researchers to gather information from

participants in the form of ideas, motivations, and attitudes by asking the right questions (Berger, 2000). Qualitative data can be gathered by several methods, but for a study looking at the perspectives of Black women, I concluded that engaging in conversation with these women was the most effective method to do so. These conversations with a purpose were the most effective way for me to learn the perspectives of the women in my study. The conversations were guided with questions and probing. The open-ended questions that guided this research are below:

1. What role has television played in your life?

2. What are some specific shows you watch that feature Black women? (probe)

3. What do these shows say about Black women and marriage? (probe)

4. What do you think about the portrayal of Black women on these shows?

5. Do you think those representations have shaped your views as a Black woman about marriage? (probe)

6. Do you want to get married? (probe- why or why not?)

7. What are your views on your prospects of marriage?

8. Do you think you'll get married?

9. What other media outlets do you consume other than television?

10. Do you believe that you are a good candidate for marriage? Are you a good catch? Why or why not?

11. Would you say TV has been the most impactful media source throughout your life?

12. Is there a television or film character that you personally identify with? Who is it? Why?

13. Who do you think men find desirable based on what you've seen in the media? Why is that?

14. Are men attracted to Black women?

15. What do you think of the portrayal of Black men as potential or actual husbands in the media?

16. Are you open to dating outside of your race?

Interviews were recorded using Zoom Video Meeting to ensure accuracy. This method was free, and the software technology was compatible with the most common cellphones and computers. After accepting an invitation to become a part of the study, participants received an email including a link to the virtual interview at the confirmed date and time. Meeting over video gave a similar effect to meeting face-to-face with the ability to make eye contact and match body language to increase rapport. Building rapport with my participants was essential to gathering descriptive data. Approximately one hour was allocated to each interview.

I used multiple data sources to conduct my study. I employed the video conferencing tool mentioned earlier, in addition to hand-written notes. Documenting my interpretations with hand-written notes was key to initially capturing my understandings of participants' interviews. The interview recordings presented me with a tool to provide accurate transcripts for the analysis process. As Lindlof (1995) suggests, recording the interview gave me more time to focus on an engaging conversation and provided the "closest thing to a verbatim record" (p. 209). The transcript was compared to the video recording for both accuracy and to include non-verbal cues.

Qualitative researchers should expect the analysis of text as data to be a continuous process throughout the study (Lindlof, 1995). The transcripts from these recordings were analyzed using the constant-comparative open coding process. The benefit of this joint coding and analysis method, as described by Barney Glaser (1965), "is to generate theory more systematically" (p. 437). This analysis technique provides qualitative researchers with the ability to explore themes and patterns during textual analysis. Glaser asserts that constant-comparative theory is derived

through four stages: "comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory" (p. 439). He explains that the process of data collection and analysis are the fundamentals of developing theories related to social problems. When attempting to evaluate the perceptions of the Black women in my study, coding the data allowed me to identity conceptual trends and to uncover and refine the theory developed in my research. The coding process here involved reviewing the text transcribed from my interviews to recognize similarities and differences so as to develop categories based on the text. Theoretical saturation occurs when themes in the text become persistent and no new information adds new value to the content (Lindlof, 1995; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Once I achieved "theoretical saturation" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 75) and began to identify redundant ideas, analytical coding helped me categorize these patterns to begin to produce a theory based on my findings.

"Two features of the [constant-comparative] method are crucial: It specifies the means by which theory grounded in the relationships among data emerges through the management of coding (hence, grounded theory), and it shows explicitly how to code and conceptualize as field data keep flowing in" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 222-223). Grounded theory was introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 to validate qualitative research and to assist researchers with interpreting the data. After utilizing the constant-comparative method for coding and analysis, the resulting categories are refined exclusively from the data collected.

Due to the gap in the literature regarding Black women's perceptions of media messages about marriage and their viability to marry, no current theories exist on the issue. The grounded theory approach provided a method to aggregate the categories created during the analysis

process and form a theoretical model concerning Black women's perceptions of marriage, the relationships of those messages to TV programming, and the phenomenon of low marriage rates.

Properly organizing and storing my notes was important in ensuring the accuracy and privacy of data. As recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I kept my notes accurate and organized. To ensure data protection, I typed both my descriptive and reflective notes and saved them to a secure cloud storage site. I stored my handwritten notes in a locked file cabinet for future reference. All content from the video recordings were removed from physical devices and saved to my private cloud. Reassuring participants of this privacy was also key in obtaining sensitive information that was necessary for the theory development of this study. I utilized two third-party transcription services, Happy Scribe and Temi, to eliminate self-error during the process.

Ethically, I wanted to be careful not to offend my participants regarding their relationship statuses. I did so by employing empathetic listening to their personal disclosures. I did not want to cause harm to these Black women by creating anxiety in asking questions on a subject that may cause emotional distress, such as marriage. Open-ended questions were an effective method in allowing these women to disclose their feelings with minimal influence from myself. I used a strategy of humility and implemented suggestions by IRB to minimize harm.

With an emphasis on Black women who identify as heterosexual, I am omitting data that could be valuable from women who identify as bisexual, transgender, or who aspire to marry their same-sex partner. However, their lived experiences and perspectives may differ from those of heterosexual women, and thus confound the findings of this study.

For the current work, it is relevant to point out that self-reported data presents the potential for biases, errors, and exaggeration. As suggested by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), I

intended to publish a study that I would be eager to read. With this acknowledgment, I recognize that my own experiences could impact the way I interpreted the insights of the women in my study. To avoid including my own biases in data interpretation, I performed a self-assessment prior to data collection to identity my own biases. This assessment helped me more easily recognize and balance these prejudices once I begin my research.

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the only access I had to participants would occur virtually. This virtual environment created few obstacles of distractions and privacy, as the participants spoke from the privacy and comfort of their homes. I had minimal control over the subjects' environment during the interview, but I included guidelines for best practices during interviews on the informed consent form.

Importantly, I hope this study encourages Black women to become more critical of how they are represented in the media. My participants are among the cohort I am writing for - single, Black women who perhaps rarely envision themselves as being married, even though they may desire to be. This cohort consists of Black mothers, daughters, and aunts who aspire to have both love and autonomy for their daughters, nieces, and selves. This work is for the many Black women who have been represented as a trope, stereotype, or statistic asserting their low likelihood of ever becoming a wife.

4   FINDINGS

The Black women interviewed for this study expressed a perception of Black women characters in the media, specifically television, that has evolved over the years. During their formative years, participants indicated positive perceptions of Black women television characters. However, those ideas changed over time with the popularity of reality television. General findings from participants suggest that Black women's views of television changed from

being a source of enlightenment to simply a source of insult. As television content has evolved, so, too have Black women's perceptions of how they are portrayed as wives in television.

These women were dissatisfied with many of the current portrayals of Black women and how stereotypical behavior is often depicted and glorified through television. Similarly, these women also expressed dissatisfaction with the representation of Black men as husbands, highlighting how they are largely shown as disrespectful and unfaithful. In fact, each of the participants associated Black male husbands with infidelity. They provided numerous examples of Black marriages on television that were unhealthy and unappealing.

Even still, each of these women expressed an interest to be married someday, hoping to maintain a healthy union such as those that were depicted on television in their early years. This was true even though the women specifically linked marriage today to portrayals of the settling and suffering that they saw concerning Black wives on television. Regarding their views on their own ability to marry, each woman expressed both a desire for and a hesitation towards marriage. They overwhelmingly stated that the reason for this hesitation was the possibility of being cheated on by their husbands. Due to this fear, many women expressed hope for but a low viability of becoming wives themselves.

Notably, a few participants in the study expressed a belief that marriage would occur in their future but were able to provide few examples of Black women in relationships on television that they would like to mimic. The majority, however, were not confident that marriage would happen in their lives and acknowledged the instability of marriages for Black women on television, recounting several examples of these unstable, yet popular, relationships. The Black women in this study revealed that being single is mostly their choice, and they implied that self-improvement was a focus to prevent self-sabotage when they do become wives. As we will

discuss, these women also expressed that their Black male friends or family members often denounced Black women as wives. While these women viewed being single as an autonomous choice, they emphasized that becoming married is currently "out of their hands," as one participant explains. This may be due to their perceptions of their prospects for marriage.

The Black women in this study have mixed feelings about the Black men who are eligible for marriage. All of the women implied that commitment was the core trait that they desired most in a husband. They also implied that many Black men are not stable in terms of career, and that this shortcoming could prevent them from being providing husbands. As we will discuss further, Black women may have applied the perceptions of how they are portrayed as wives in television to their own viability to marry. This illustrates that televised media and the depiction of Black women stereotypes does in fact impact their belief in their ability to marry.

4.1   Television and Black Women

4.1.1   Black Women Stereotypes on Television: In Their Own Words

Conversations with the participants revealed that they identified with the Black women they watch on television, which may indicate that Black women viewers are directly impacted by television depictions featuring Black women characters. The participants said that the negative tropes on TV personally offend them and have created a negative perception among them regarding how Black women are represented on the small screen.

"I feel like every time I see a Black woman on the screen" a participant said, "like 90 percent of the time, feel like I identify with her." This was also illustrated when participants used words like "us," "we," or "our" when discussing Black TV characters. When asked her feelings about how Black women are portrayed on TV, one participant stated, "Black women are looked at as, you know, emotional and hot tempered or short tempered, and we're angry and blah, blah,

blah." When describing the Black women on TV using the pronoun "we're," this participant made no attempt to distinguish herself from them, indicating that she does identify with these characters, the participant perceiving these portrayals of Black women as negative.

On the other hand, another participant referred to producers of television content as "they" when discussing her perception on how Black women are portrayed. This participant recognized these portrayals as "ugly" but "true." She said:

I feel like in some scenarios they're portraying our ugly truths. They're hitting on concepts that they know a lot of African American women are probably feeling, or probably can relate to because that's how you advertise…So when you say portray, I feel like they portray our ugly truths. Like our struggles, you know. I can't tell you a white woman's struggle.

This participant's outlook makes it evident that some Black women perceive television producers as having the power to control the images that are projected of them. More telling, her comment suggests that these women may view the negative portrayals as imitating of reality. Lastly, this participant's views conveyed that she rarely views such diminishing images of white women, further supporting the concept that some Black women feel stereotypical representations on television reaffirm their inferior social status.

The findings suggest that these women interact with the images they consume on television and may even link themselves to them. Discussing her favorite show *Girlfriends*, one of the women who participated in the study stated:

It's created by one of my favorite people. It's also one of my favorite shows. And I think how I was watching it as a nine-year-old, I was just taking in this information that I didn't know. That's probably going to be pertinent to my life like today. So now I'm watching

this show and I'm like, oh, my God, like that literally is kind of me. I'm really having

these experiences. When I was nine years old, it was just kind of like, oh, interesting to

see those ladies having that experience, you know? But then now I'm like one of those

ladies.

The participant emphasized that in her television viewing, she engaged in a manner

where she associated the depictions with similar real-life experiences of her own. Her

perspective also made it clear that the similar experiences are what connect her to the show.

However, when this fails to happen, it appears that these viewers began to disconnect from

watching television.

The Black women in this study conveyed that their inferior social status is sustained

when negative tropes are endorsed by Black men. The interviewees recounted compelling

examples of their Black male family and friends rejecting Black women because of the

anticipated stereotypical demeanors. When explaining a conversation that occurred between

herself and her cousin, one of the women recalled:

Because of the image that's been portrayed of [Black] women today, I've actually had a

couple of cousins of mine, Black males, who've come to me and tell me they're done with

Black women. I'm like, what do you mean? [He replied] 'I'm just done cuzz. Every Black

woman is like this or like that, or got the attitude, or only want money, or gold diggin',

or whatever the case may be, a THOT.'[1] You name it. They're saying that. And it's like,

dang, so you think like that about me cuzz? I'm a Black woman. I don't act like that.

This viewpoint suggests that Black women feel some Black men accept the offensive

stereotypes that condemn Black women on TV as truth and reject Black women as a result. This

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[1] THOT is a popular slang term that means "That Hoe Over There"

participant's comment confirms that she feels negative stereotypes of Black women may disparage her as the preferred partner for some Black men. It also reveals that this rejection from Black men may be disheartening to Black women, and this is exhibited in the participant's response, "Dang, so you think like that about me cuzz? I'm a Black woman. I don't act like that."

Similarly, another participant described an interaction with her Black male friends and stated how common the concept of rejecting Black women had become among them. She said:

> I've heard a lot of men say they can't stand the fact that some Black girls have the attitude like 'I don't need a man.' Like, 'I can do A, B and C and I don't need this.' That's what I've heard in the past…I can see if it was just one guy who said that, but it's another guy, and it just makes me think maybe all guys, or most guys, have that mindset…And I don't really see any Black women that I know [who think] like that.

In other words, this participant suggests that the independence of Black women has been interpreted as emasculating to them as it conveys that women do not need them. However, she explains that she does not know of any Black women with this mindset and that these men are mistaken. Here, the discourse supports the notion that today's television images are detrimental to the personal lives of Black women, particularly as it relates to their acceptance by Black men. One of the participants recalled a recent video that she had watched on YouTube where a Black woman appeared to be conducting a survey regarding teenage males' preference for dating Black or White girls. She recalled:

> I just watched a video and this Black girl was going around asking young Black men, do you like Black women? Would you prefer a Black woman or a White woman? And some of them were White, too. But they all went against the Black women. And these were

teenagers, so they were like 18, 19, maybe 17. And they already have it in their heads at such a young age, and that's because [that's] what the grown men are doing.

This participant emphasized that while the ages of the young men in the video was a bit surprising to her, it was clear that for both races of males, Black women are not their first choice for a romantic partner. The Black women in this study believe that stereotypical imagery and negative TV tropes cause some Black men to denounce them and disregard them as potential wives.

4.1.2   Television now: the Disconnection

Data from the interviews suggest that Black women are attempting to separate themselves from the damaging effects of stereotypical images on and off the television screen. In disconnecting themselves, Black women appear to be navigating away from television. Most of the women confessed that the time they spend watching television today has decreased significantly since childhood. For a group that has historically consumed television more than any other group, it appears that their disapproval of these images has played a key role in this disconnect.

The views of the Black women who participated in this study suggest that while some television does show good qualities of Black women, such as their independence and wealth, they feel that it also consistently highlights negative conduct that makes these women appear uncivilized. One woman who participated to the study referred to these depictions as "piss poor and distasteful." Another participant said:

Back then, I feel like Black women were portrayed in a greater light, as far as we knew how to conduct ourselves. Nowadays, [on] reality TV, they portray us in another light that's not necessary… They portray all of us to be like ghetto, always want[ing] to fight,

aggressive, bad tempers. Now that's really all you see on reality TV today, *Love and Hip Hop* [is a] prime example. I stopped watching it.

The results also show that Black women not only criticize these images, but in many ways may be disturbed by some of these tropes. Even more, it shows that Black women viewers are exercising agency to disengage from offensive television shows, further suggesting that Black women take these images personally. This study also indicates that this group is interested in consuming television shows that are encouraging in nature. When discussing the television content that portrays Black women as stereotypical or as "toxic," one of the participants stated: "Honestly, that's one of the reasons why I don't watch TV." This response shows that some Black women are opting to navigate away from television in general. It appears that Black women could be exhausted by these harmful images and may be choosing to disregard them altogether. One participant recalled that she stopped watching the TV show *Blackish* once the Black married couple in the show were portrayed as having marital problems. She stated:

> *Blackish*, I honestly fell off the show that season they split Bow and Dre up because I'm like, here goes the unnecessary drama. And I don't watch the show for this. So honestly, that's when I stopped watching that show so frequently, is that season when they split up.

This participant indicated that she watched the show *Blackish* for positive portrayals of Black men and women. However, when she felt the show became stereotypical in depicting "unnecessary drama", she disconnected from it. This further suggests that Black women are choosing to remove themselves from television images that they find degrading. *Blackish* is one of the few shows mentioned by participants in this study that portrays a healthy Black nuclear family on television. This participant's action shows that Black women are becoming fatigued by the negative imagery and are executing self-care through dismissing them.

One participant said, "I know there are these new shows that personally I've never seen, like *Sistas*. I've never seen that because I don't have cable. I just have like streaming and I don't pay for the BET streaming."

Many of the women in the study expressed that they no longer watch broadcast TV today; instead, they are investing more into streaming services. If this is the case, dispassion may not be the only reason Black women are navigating away from television. The data suggests that these women are gravitating more to newer platforms, such as Netflix. One of the participants highlighted this evolution, saying:

> Television has evolved over the years. Netflix wasn't around like 10 years ago and now it exists. One thing I've been thinking about lately is the resurgence of shows that I was watching like 20 years ago, and now I'm watching them again as an adult. I've been self-reflecting on my life. How did I take in this information when I was like 10 years old versus how I'm taking it in now?

The participant's view highlights how the availability of Netflix has allowed viewers to revisit their past viewing history. This is insightful because it shows that when possible, these women are utilizing new options like Netflix to navigate back to television shows that brought them happiness growing up. It further conveys that Black women want to watch television imagery that uplifts them. In disconnecting from broadcast television, Black women may be refusing to watch negative television images of themselves, further suggesting that they may perceive that television images have a direct impact on how they feel about themselves and how they are viewed by society.

4.2   Black Women and Marriage on Television: Settling, Suffering, and Sex outside the

Marriage

4.2.1   Black Husbands on Television: Images of Infidelity

The views of the participants in the study further reveal that they believe prevalent

images of cheating Black husbands on television may have distorted their views of marriage. The

results suggest that these Black women may have developed a fear of infidelity induced by the

persistent images of Black husbands depicted cheating on their wives. The interviews indicate

the participants think that television viewing impacts how Black women perceive marriage in

their lives.

All 11 women who participated in the study expressed that they believed television

associated Black husbands with cheating. They recalled instances when these Black husbands are

depicted in a negative light, particularly as unfaithful to their wives. One of the participants

recounted a Black husband by the name of Stevie J, who was featured on the reality TV show

Love and Hip-Hop Atlanta. Stevie J was portrayed as simultaneously dating two women, Mimi

and Joseline, both of whom are Black. He ends up marrying Joseline. The participant recalled:

Stevie J, for example, clear as day, he played two women on TV and they made it seem

like it was OK…[He was]cheating and being disrespectful, verbally abusive, because the

way he talked to those women was ridiculous. And it's kind of sad considering he has a

daughter, but they talk to those women any type of way on *Love and Hip-Hop* and you

have women fighting over their own husbands.

The interviewee acknowledged she felt Stevie J blatantly disrespected two Black women

on television with very little ridicule from viewers. In fact, Stevie J may have gained acclaim due

to the manner in which he disrespected these women, further supporting the idea that negative stereotypes are possibly endorsed by Black men and women viewers.

The participants' views largely indicated that many of the Black women on television appear to be settling in their marriages because they tolerated ill treatment from their husbands, specifically infidelity. Through their responses, the interviewees made it clear that they believed Black marriages on television today were depicted as unappealing.

For example, when speaking about Ghost, a Black husband portrayed on the television show *Power*, one of the women recalled of his infidelity, "You see a prominent Black man cheating on his wife…and eventually you see his family being torn apart by him just being a habitual cheater." This participant believed this marriage suffered grave consequences because of the cheating.

Recounting the portrayals of these Black men as "rappers, cheaters, dogs, disrespectful, thugs," one participant stated, "I don't even know if I can name a TV show with a good Black husband, because they don't [show it on TV]. But yeah, I don't think Black men are portrayed very well on TV." Moreover, it could be speculated from the results that in representing these Black husbands as "habitual cheaters" television is also stereotypically depicting Black husbands as oversexualized and disdainful towards their Black wives. One of the participants recalled of televised Black husbands:

> I feel like there are decent portrayals, but not very many. I do feel like you do have some
> shows that show the loving father or the provider, the loving husband, that type thing. But
> more often than not, I don't feel like you get that from Black men in the media. I don't
> think that they're always portrayed in the best light…I would say they're not always
> faithful.

These results indicate that the pervasive images of Black husbands cheating on their wives persist among these Black women. These televised tropes may certainly influence their beliefs about their potential husbands and marriage overall. As one of the participants explained, "I just think that they make the Black man a little bit untouchable for the Black woman [on TV]. Either they're thugs or in jail. Homosexuals or these successful businessmen who cheat."

While negative images of Black husbands were mentioned most often by participants, a few of them acknowledged that some Black husbands are depicted as ideal on television. A positive portrayal of a Black husband on television mentioned by participants was Andre, as portrayed on the television show *Blackish*. One of the participants stated:

> Is it *Blackish*? I think Anthony, I can't think his last name, but I feel like his portrayal in
> that show is very good. They have a loving relationship. They work as a team. He's
> funny. He's a provider. I mean, they both provide. But I feel like that show shows a
> typical Black family that is not dysfunctional, you know.

Here the participant discussed why this Black husband was ideal in the way that he respects his duties as husband and father. This portrayal is reminiscent of the Black husbands that these women grew up watching on shows like *Family Matters*. As she reflected on the Black husband on the show *Family Matters*, she recalled:

> Is it *Family Matters* where Carl, he was like a police officer? He took care at home. He
> loved his kids. So, there were, especially growing up, you did see these depictions of
> positive Black men in the media and they did have families. So, there are some [good
> Black husbands portrayed on television].

These findings may suggest that constant portrayals of Black husbands as cheaters have affected the image of Black husbands among Black women. Participants' views overwhelmingly

suggest that the portrayals of cheating Black husbands on television may have promoted a fear of infidelity within Black women, causing them to be hesitant of marriage.

4.2.2   *Black marriages on Television*

"Instead of having that fairytale escape, it's like now you don't get any escape. But then that scares us single women, because now we look at them like, well, shit, I can do bad by myself, you know?" one participant said about how Black marriage is depicted on television today. When discussing the representation of the Black family and Black marriage, the participants' responses formed a common theme: then and now. This theme emphasizes that these women believe past television images of Black marriage were more appealing than today. One of the Black women explained:

> I think in the 90s, we were still living off the old-school shows [like] *Family Matters*, *The Cosby's*. So we saw regular African American families, you know? Either working to make a living for their family or prominent Black families where they made it and they can actually provide for their kids. And now they're struggling with trying to find time, you know, for their family. In today's society, when I look at TV and [Black] marriage, I feel like I don't really see it, because the shows nowadays they're their reality [TV]. So, I think the tables have turned.

This participant viewed the "old-school" shows as portraying devoted husbands and wives, whereas on "today's" television shows Black marriage appears nonexistent. "It's not a lot of shows left that show Black women as married," one of the other participants explained.

Some of the women expressed that "common marriages", with Black husbands and wives with average careers were no longer depicted, as well. When reflecting on Black marriages that are shown on television today, a pattern emerged among the women's perceptions that marriages

with ordinary Black people are nonexistent. "TV will have you thinking that if he's not a doctor or a lawyer, then he's not worthy enough to be your husband" one of the women stated. This suggests that by portraying Black husbands in prestigious careers, television may influence ones "thinking" to only desire the type of men displayed on these shows. This further suggests that Black women do perceive television as impacting their views concerning Black husbands. Another participant stated:

> [TV] says to me like common marriages are not normal, it's not OK to just have a normal marriage. This is not something that is praised or televised, you know. Just a regular family living in the suburbs. The mom is a teacher and the dad is a manager at a grocery store. Like, we don't get to see those type of things on TV. Just a regular happy, normal [Black] family. It's always, they got the big house in the hills, or my husband is the Black Bill Gates, you know, things like. They never really just show a regular family.

This participant feels that television does not display "common" people like herself as becoming married. Furthermore, she believes that television only depicts prominent couples and in doing so, may suggest to Black women viewers that normal marriage is not valued. As a result, Black women could become discouraged from believing that they can't get married until they reach a high status in society, or until they meet someone who's wealthy. For example, one of the women stated:

> It just means to me, if you don't find a man who is already well-established and already has things going for himself, I feel like, it's not going to lead to a marriage for you. Like, if I was just to meet a guy who was working at a local gas station, to me, with those ladies it seems like, oh, he's not worth it.

In other words, because Black marriages on TV show Black couples as rich and glamourous, this participant suggests these images can promote the idea that wealth is now a standard for marriage, thereby making marriage unattainability for Black women influenced by their TV viewing. One participant also noted that the wealth of these Black husbands and wives does not prevent infidelity. She explained: "It's like you have all of this stuff going on. You have all this money. You have big beautiful houses, and all this stuff, and you still get cheated on just like a regular person." Thus, the prominence displayed on television still does not save these televised marriages from negative outcomes an may suggest to viewers that Black marriages are destined to fail.

According to these women, Black marriages on television consistently represents "chaos", as one of the women described it. When discussing her perception on how Black marriages are portrayed on television, another participant stated:

Now, don't get me wrong- there were some where it [the marriage] worked out. But especially the ones that appeal to younger women, especially my age group, I don't feel like it was [successful]. Either they had a hard time [or] it wasn't successful. Because if I go back to *Girlfriends*, even when Toni got married, it was very short lived, and it was mainly because of her own attitude.

This participant emphasized that the marriages on television that attempt to appeal to Black women her age, are usually problematic. She referenced Toni, another Black woman starring in the show *Girlfriends,* whose marriage was ended, apparently due to her demeanor. These participants indicated that they are often bombarded with images of failing marriages on television. More importantly, it should be considered how Black women interpret these images; one of the participants referred to these depictions as "scary."

For example, an interviewee highlighted the Black marriage dynamic between a church bishop and his wife on the television show *Greenleaf.* She recounted, "Listen, that [show] let me know no matter who you are, [or] who you may believe in, marriage—that's scary…you see the real, ugly truth." This participant identified the irony of a show that is "based on the church" but still depicts a failing Black marriage. Her perception of marriage as "scary" makes it clear that these women are applying these stereotypical images to their own lives. One of the participants' made this clear in her response. She said:

> It [marriage] don't seem like that's something I would like to do, especially if that's what it looks like. Because when you're little and you read all these fairy tales, it's like this prince is coming, and he's gone take you away. But then when you see this stuff on TV now, you're just like—ain't nobody comin'. Why should I do this?"

The negative representations of marriage on TV have caused this participant to question the wisdom of pursuing marriage in her own life, leaving her and possibly many others to ask themselves, "Why should I do this?" This suggests that stereotypical images impact how Black women view marriage and furthermore may be causing them to remain single.

4.3   Black Women on Their Viability to Marry

4.3.1   *Never Will I Ever, But I Want To?*

Ironically, many of the participants indicated that they never envisioned themselves becoming married during childhood, even after recalling the numerous shows they watched growing up that featured Black women as wives. One participant explained that her professional goals and ambitions were of more interest growing up than being a wife. She stated:

> I never thought about getting married and just, honestly, it's nothing that I really had thought about for my life. I guess I just always talked about like, what are my dreams,

what are my hopes, my goals. And none of that revolved around getting married. It was more so like professionally, if I'm being honest, and I guess I never thought about it until I was in my first real relationship.

In other words, becoming successful was more of a focus than becoming married. Experiencing a "real relationship" prompted her first thought of marriage. This result is surprising due to the number of participants who acknowledged the positive images of Black women as wives when they were growing up. A different participant confessed that she, too, has ignored marriage. She explained, "lt's just something that I've pretty much ignored, like most of my life." This was a trend among the participants. Another one of the women explained:

First of all, even though I had positive marriages around me, I never had the desire to be married prior to meeting my ex-husband...You know, most girls plan out their weddings, choose the color of their bridesmaid's dresses, and things like that. I've never wanted [to get married].

Even here, the participant acknowledges the positive marriages that she witnessed in her personal life, but for some reason she did not imagine becoming a wife. The women admitted that they did not envision marriage for themselves early on, but as they grew older the idea became more frequent. Another interviewee shared similar thoughts:

I've never been the girl that dreamed of marriage, you know. I've had friends that knew exactly what they wanted their [wedding] colors to be and knew exactly the venue and talked about marriage when I was in junior high. I've never been that person. Like within the last three to four years have [the possibility of] marriage even become an idea for me. So now when I think of marriage and I think of these women [on TV], I do think that

I have to be a certain way or, I have to be successful…Like, I pretty much have to have my stuff together. Because if I don't, then what do I have to offer?

The participant here appears to believe she needs financial stability to have something to "offer" in the marriage, because that is what she sees with the women on television. This indicates that some Black women may feel that television influences them to feel unworthy of marriage until their "success" is obtained. These women believe that they must maintain a certain level of achievement to be a good candidate, as reflected on television.

In discussing their desire for marriage, 10 of the 11 women who were interviewed confessed that they do desire to be married someday. A major theme that emerged was the aspiration of having a life partner or a soul mate to support them through negative life experiences. One of the participants stated that she wanted to get married "just to feel good, to know that you have someone that has your back. And when life gets hard, to know that you can go home and cry on somebody's shoulders, or you just don't feel like you're in this world alone." So while Black women may be hesitant to marry, many of them do desire to do so.

The primary desire to marry for these women was to obtain a soul mate. One participant confessed, "I want to have a soul mate. I want to have that somebody that, you know, I'll forever have that connection with, somebody that I will forever be able to call on." Another participant said the reason she desired marriage was for "friendship." These single Black women aspire to marry to primarily mitigate having to handle life's challenges alone. Phrases like "cry on somebody's shoulders," "be able to call on," and "friendship" suggest that a primary reason these women desire marriage is for support, particularly emotional support. This could be due to the exhaustion that these women have experienced due to handling these challenges "alone," and they appear to desire some relief in the form of a husband.

A secondary theme that became apparent in the desire to marry was related to having assistance with raising their children. One of the participants said, "With me having three boys, I wouldn't say that they need a dad, but if I was to find someone who can have that positive male reinforcement [it would be a relief]." This participant wants marriage primarily to have a husband present for the development of her male children. Another single mother shared similar feelings:

> Of course, I want to get married. I'm a single mother. I have one son. I've been in one relationship, which was with his father, who is now deceased. So, I mean, of course I want to get married…He needs a male figure. I'm not one of those parents that's like, "yeah, I can do it on my own." No, I need a man. I want a man! I don't need him, but you know, my son needs one.

The responses from the single mothers in this study indicated that becoming married was desirable because it could provide a steady father figure for their sons. These women are interested in marriage to relieve them from parenting in this world "alone," specifically as it relates to a positive male influence for their sons. Another participant explained:

> I want that other half…and then I have three boys, and it's certain things that I can't teach them, and I'm not even trying to attempt to be a father to them. I am their mom. I am not their dad. So I want them to see how they are supposed to treat their significant other when they get them. I want them to see that type of relationship.

This participant's views further suggest that single Black women with children, particularly sons, want marriage to fill a void of not having a father in the home. It appears that these women believe that their parenting as a single mother may be inadequate. This could be

because these women feel their sons deserve to have the family dynamic that they grew up watching on television.

A small number of the women shared that they wanted to get married to have a soulmate as well as future children. One of the women expressed, "I want to get married because I want to have children. I know that may sound cliche, but I do want to have children and I want to have somebody I can grow old with." Another participant similarly said, "I want to be able to have someone who I can be one with, you know, and I want to be able to have kids." These women suggest that even though they may not have grown up desiring marriage, they yearn for support and encouragement throughout life. Whether it's for themselves or for their families, the interviews suggest that these women crave the dependability of marriage for relief and support.

4.3.2 Black Women on Their Viability for Marriage

While most of the women desired to become married, many of them were not confident that they would. Most the women in the study used phrases like "prayerfully," "I don't know," and "hopefully" when asked if they believed that they would get married. The reason for this uncertainty varied amongst the women, but it was a pattern. One of the participants answered:

> I don't know because, like I said, it's just not something that I'm actively putting any time into. And I do date, but a lot of times I just lose interest because I don't have time for that. I get very annoyed when people need more of my time than I'm willing to give, especially because I work, and I have a child.

Here, the participant was not willing to put in the time and effort to become married because of her responsibilities as a parent and as a worker, a choice that could interfere with her chances of marrying.

One of the women expressed that she had "little hope… the fear for one, I'm fearful of myself, that I may come across the right person and just kind of push them off, because one little thing may trigger [me]." This participant also suggested that she was fearful that she may eliminate her chances for marriage by becoming frustrated with potential candidates. In doing so, she feels this could prevent her chances of becoming a wife. Only two of the women in the study were optimistic that they would marry someday. One of them proudly professed, "I know I'll get married… I just feel like it's destined in my life." Another participant said that she felt she would get remarried eventually because she is "very good with men" and had been engaged several times. However, she was clear that she was currently not a good candidate for marriage. When asked if she thought she would marry someday, another participant answered, "I don't know, but just a gut feeling if I have to answer that honestly, yeah I do think I will." These participants' answers suggest that while they believe that they will get married, it appears that they do not have any concrete reasons or strategy to obtain this union. It appears that the women felt marriage may be inevitable. The women in the study attributed being single to choice, but they seemed to have expressed that getting married was, as one participant put it, "out of my hands."

Two of the participants who did not believe that they would get married could not provide reasons as to why. Another participant suggested the reason that she wouldn't marry was because, "The [male] selection out there again, like, and then I'm not really putting myself in a position to be found. You know, I go to work and I come home." This participant didn't believe she'd marry because of the lack of prospects, as well as her daily routine.

Another emerging trend from the data was that most of the women in the study attributed great importance to performing duties of cooking and cleaning as core aspects for a potential wife. In fact, 6 of the 11 women interviewed in the study mentioned that adopting these tasks as

daily habits was either a quality that made them a good candidate for marriage or a quality that they currently lacked and desired to master before considering themselves as wife material. For example, one participant said when explaining what makes her a good candidate for marriage, "I cook, clean, wash clothes, fold them, [and] know how to separate them. The only thing I ask is you make sure the oil is changed. Do the manly stuff." Here this participant seems to attribute the fact that she cooks and cleans to the qualities of a good wife, but as a standard for women overall, as ensuring that "the oil is changed" is expected of her husband.

Another participant said, "I'm a pleaser, most women will start something and can't finish it. I'm getting up, I'm fixing breakfast, I'm packing lunch, you don't eat soup and sandwiches for dinner. I'm cooking, cooking-cooking dinner, every night." Here the participants emphasizing how her ability to consistently prepare extensive meals was a trait that differentiated her from other women. A third participant that echoed these sentiments expressed regarding her ability deliver exceptional meals, "I cook, I clean, you know, I'm a Southern girl, so I cook, cook, you know?" When the participants say "cook cook" they are referring to their ability to prepare full course meals and make it clear that the believe men appreciate this ability in a woman.

A few other participants agreed with this concept and said that their unwillingness to regularly cook and clean was a focus of self-improvement in preparation of them becoming a wife someday. One of the participants stated,

> So especially in the South, you know, women are expected to do certain things,
> especially if you see yourself [feeling] like this is someone I can be with, you have to
> cook, clean, and validate them and tell them where you're going [at] this time. And I just
> feel like there's just so much extra work that you have to put in...Because a relationship

takes work and if that's what you want, you have to be able to put that kind of time in, because at the end of the day, you want that reciprocated.

This shows that the participant articulates how she feels the "work" of performing the duties of cooking and cleaning is expected, especially of Southern wives. She conveys that her unwillingness to do the "work" currently is a factor in her choice to remain single. A second participant expressed similar views when stating, "it seems like men want the wifey type, the one who, will, you know, bear his children, and cook and clean, but also hold down a job. You know? It seems like men want strong women, but not too strong, if that makes sense?" Her perception demonstrates that she believes that men disliked their wives being "too strong", but clearly stated that a commitment to cook and clean was necessary for the role. Another woman interviewed in the study discussed how her current negligence of domestic duties damages her chances of becoming a wife. She revealed,

> I'm not perfect. Sometimes I come home. I may not wash dishes or, you know, I may leave dirty clothes on the floor. I got to get myself together because I have a house. If I'm not keeping my house clean, what makes you think, God is gon' bring me a man. And I ain't doing right because 9 times out of 10 you have a lot of guys now these days [who] are expecting to come home to a home cooked meal, et cetera, et cetera. I think He [God] knows I'm not ready for that because I don't come home and cook every night. So I think as a person, yes, I have to do better…I don't cook a lot. I feel like that's something I really need to work on. Some days I'm lazy when I get off work. I don't like to clean up sometimes. It's a lot of things that I feel like before He [God] brings someone in my life, I just need to get better at. Like the laziness is real as a single woman sometimes if you don't have any other responsibilities.

This participant claimed that self-improvement is essential before becoming a wife because her weakness of not cooking and cleaning every night may be hindering her viability to marry. She inferred that God is not going to bless her with a man until she begins to implement these domestic duties into her daily routine. She expressed that her "laziness" could potentially be sabotaging her.

4.3.3   Self-Sabotage

The findings suggest that television viewing of negative tropes may influence Black women viewers to become just as critical of themselves as they are of the Black women they watch. The study indicates that some Black women may unconsciously assign to themselves the very negative stereotypes that they condemn on TV. Many of these women expressed that they felt that they were a good candidate for marriage, but all of them implied that they felt it necessary to better themselves before being ready for marriage. From a lack of energy to a lack of confidence, each participant described at least one reason why she was currently not prepared to enter marriage. A participant who described herself as "lazy" explained how she has adapted to the single life as it relates to domestic duties:

I'm not perfect. Sometimes I come home. I may not wash dishes, or I may leave dirty clothes on the floor. I got to get myself together because I have a house. You know, if I'm not keeping my house clean, what makes you think, God is gon' bring me a man?

This participant reiterated what many of the participants expressed regarding the importance of "getting themselves together" to feel deserving of marriage. She believed she should put more effort into keeping her home clean, and that this is necessary for God to send her a man. This also highlights the stereotypical traits that women are assigned based on gender, such as cooking and cleaning.

Another Black woman said she is a good catch, but that she may be getting "in her own way" by allowing negative past relationships to prevent her from establishing new ones. Another participant who was critical of her own demeanor confessed that the reason she wasn't ready to marry was, "because I'm grudgeful. And I thought through tarrying and going through things that I went through, I prayed, and I sincerely asked God some years back to help me be a forgiving person I wanted to have a forgiving heart." This participant expressed her need for improvement in terms of resentment related to her experiences in past relationships. She also brought up the need for a higher power to assist with her personal growth. The constant images of "angry Black women" in negative relationships on television could explain why she feels that she's "grudgeful."

When reflecting on some of the areas in which she could improve, one of the women admitted she lacked "patience and just being able to listen. To know that everything does not go my way, but I can admit there are some things I need to work on." One of the women said she believed she lacks self-confidence due to abandonment issues, and that developing a healthy self-esteem was an obligation before being qualified for marriage. The interviews found that many of the women felt a need to improve their attitudes. A common concern was having their career and finances together before being qualified for marriage. One of the participants confessed:

> I don't feel like I am solely independent right now, and I say that because, you know, government assistance. I want to be at a point where I am working, I am paying my bills, I'm paying my rent, my mortgage or whatever, which it's coming from me, it's not coming from the help of, you know, the state of Georgia or wherever I may live. So, I just want to get to a point where I'm really just on my own before I can take a step into, you know, potentially having a relationship period or a fiancé/husband.

This participant perceives that she needs to be independent to become married. Like the wealthy and successful women that the participants observe on television, the interviews suggest that the women are accepting the idea that to be worthy of marriage, they must be established. One of the women described how her accomplishments reaffirmed her quality as a potential wife. She explained:

> A couple of years ago, I wouldn't have been because I was so focused trying to figure out who I was and what I needed to do. And how I needed to get all this stuff in order. I was just always stressed out. I would have stressed out anybody I was with. Now that I am more settled with who I am and what I've accomplished… I am way more at peace. And I felt like I wouldn't bring peace to somebody else when I was always creating storms for myself. I felt like I wasn't doing enough, and I wasn't bringing in enough.

 Another woman echoes those sentiments as she highlights that she would be a good marriage candidate by asserting "I have a career, I feel like I have all my ducks in a row, I have my own house, I have my own stuff." This information now provides evidence that single Black women may be influenced by the images of wealthy and successful Black women they see on TV. More importantly, these women's self-views may have become distorted by these images causing them to refrain from marriage until they feel they hit the mark financially. It is clear that these Black women feel that they need to improve their demeanor and their debt-to-income ratio before being deemed wife material. One participant explained:

> I think I just need to work on myself. I don't know. Like, I feel like I have some things to work on, you know, before I can really be in a relationship all the way through. I mean, I don't know how to express that or describe it, but I just feel like, the next relationship I get into, I would like it to work. Especially if I'm really interested in the guy and he's

interested in me, I want it to work. So I need to figure out maybe things that I've done in the past to where my relationship didn't work out. But you need to, you know, like me and my daughter's father I'm not saying it's like my fault we didn't work out, but I know I wasn't perfect. You know there's things I've done, there's things he's done. Really, I want to focus on what I can do better. You know if that makes sense.

When considering this perspective, it is clear some Black women believe that they must focus on self-improvement to prevent ruining the opportunity for marriage when it does present itself. Other participants had obligations like parenting, which was their primary concern, and admitted to not putting enough time aside for romantic relationships. One of the women implied that she is single due to a lack of time to invest in dating. She noted that marriage takes a lot of time and effort, and because she lacks both, she is choosing not to date at all. She explained:

It takes a lot of work for relationship, and I don't have that kind of time right now.

My main goal is making sure that my daughter is good, that making sure that my career is going well. I don't know. I'm just not, I'm not dedicating the time to it right now to really say that it's bad or good or in-between. I feel like finding a man, having a man, is not hard, but I feel like building an actual relationship that you see going towards marriage takes a lot more time than a lot of people are willing to put into it. And I just don't date for the sake of like something to do.

This participant feels that she is not "dedicating" the time that it takes to truly develop a marriage, specifically because of the focus on her daughter and career. She indicated that a marriage may require more time and energy than she can produce. Another mother reiterated this belief, noting that when her daughter is away on the weekends, she spends time completing tasks

and admitted to not "putting myself in a position to be found" as it relates to meeting potential men to marry.

Nevertheless, these participants overwhelmingly imply that the fear of self-sabotage may be behind their choice of a single lifestyle. When explaining why she's not currently ready to marry, one participant stated:

> There's some things that I want—the things that I want or some other things that I want to acquire—and I'm working on right now. And a marriage may hinder that. But, you know, if the Lord's saying, "Hey, next year you're going to get married," then OK, I will.

This participant indicated that she may be open to marriage if it is divinely ordained, but her ambition is toward self, not a romantic partner. One participant said she was sabotaging her relationship and admitted that this was currently a flaw that she was "working on." She explained:

> And I was just self-sabotaging, finding any reason to stop talking to somebody. I stopped talking to a dude because he needed an oil change…my friend said I was tripping, that's something I should have let slide. But I guess I did, stopped talking to a lot of guys for small stuff, and I realized that was me self-sabotaging because I was, I guess, afraid of feelings that I wasn't ready for because of past relationships.

Here the participant admits that past relationships have caused her to be critical of the men that she dates and, in doing so, this may have caused her missed opportunities for romance. The study suggests that while participants are very critical of the tropes of Black women on television, they may ascribe some of these judgements to themselves.

4.4   Available Prospects for Marriage and the Lack of Commitment

4.4.1   Lack of Commitment to Fidelity

In addition to a fear of self-sabotage, these Black women may have also developed a fear of infidelity as it relates to marriage, which may be influenced by the negative images of the adulterous Black husbands on television. One key example was one of the participants who shared that her parents' marriage had never consisted of infidelity to her knowledge, and that she had never been cheated on in previous relationships. However, her main "fear" of becoming married was being "cheated on" by her future husband. She said:

> I think about whether like, dang, is my future going to feature a significant other cheating
>
> on me?…I'm not going to be content with that. Whoever I'm with, that's who what I want
>
> to be with, and I shouldn't have to worry about, in the back of my mind, on whether

you're   cheating on me or not.

> She went on to say regarding her previous romantic relationship:
>
> It just wasn't meant to be then. But we're still really good friends, but not one time in the
>
> back of my head did I have to question him or ask him if he was cheating on me or
>
> talking to anyone else and vice versa. And I can honestly say it's been like that with
>
> a couple of other people I've dated.
>
> And regarding her parents' marriage not consisting of infidelity she added:
>
> My mom and my dad, even when they were together, my dad never cheated
>
> on my mom. [They had] irreconcilable differences. I don't know if it's crazy, but my
>
> mom has never instilled in me, oh, a man is going to cheat on you, let him do that. It's sad
>
> that some females feel that way, but yeah cheating. That's one of my biggest fears when it
>
> comes to marriage.

This participant made it clear that her personal relationships have not involved her romantic partners cheating on her. In addition, her parents were married, and she recalled that they did not experience infidelity in their marriage, either. Nevertheless, her primary fear of becoming a wife is having an adulterous husband. Some Black women anticipate infidelity as a result of marriage, and to avoid this fate, they refrain from marriage altogether. One could argue that the prevalence of cheating Black husbands on television may be inducing this fear, especially if these women are not experiencing infidelity in their relationships. This data further suggests that television may impact these Black women's real-life decisions.

Other women in the study suggested that this fear of infidelity has emerged from having married men approach them romantically. One of the participants stated:

This is another thing, as far as me thinking about marriage. What kind of gives me

that fear [is that] I've been hit on by married men. Like, I know you're married, and it

can even be some people that I actually know. And I'm like, so this is what goes on [in a

marriage]. You know what I mean? And that's a big holdup.

This participant admitted that because of the married men she has met who openly disregard their vows, she is now fearful that her future husband will enact the same behavior, causing her to avoid marriage. Another participant conveyed similar views:

I'm gonna say all of these niggas ain't shit, they're dogs, I don't care what profession

they're in. You know what I'm saying? They're dogs, it doesn't matter. It could be a

teacher. He could be the mayor. He could be the president. He can be a scientist. He can

be a doctor. You get what I'm saying? What I've noticed, same patterns, same

characteristics, and same capabilities. So, to view them in a whole, I want to say my

brothers is winning, but they scare me because I also see them married. And when I see

them married, that scares me.

This participant viewed of Black men as all "dogs" or in other words, cheaters. She made

it clear that she thought most men were cheaters regardless of their occupation or their marital

statuses. She added that this behavior "scares" her from becoming married. Either way, many of

the views from the women in this study revealed that one key factor in their fear of becoming a

wife was the possibility of their husbands cheating on them.

As for what their marriage prospects found desirable in a woman, a primary theme that

emerged from the women's perspectives was appearance, specifically the "perfect body." One of

them explained: "You have to have this body shape because this is the only way they are going

to like you. Even though I am nowhere near any of these shapes." She highlighted "big butts" as

the most preferred component of these "perfect bodies." This participant also believes men like

women unlike herself because she does not have the "body" that they desire. This could be

disheartening for Black women. If they feel that they are not desirable in terms of appearance,

how does this perspective influence their views about their chances to marry?

When participants described some bodies as "fake", they were referring to the women

who received plastic surgery to achieve some of these "perfect bodies." Another one of the

women revealed of her marriage prospects,

They glorify the women that gets talked about in rap songs, and women they see on

reality [TV]. Fake bodies. Women just with the perfect bodies, quote unquote, big

booties. And I'm not knocking anybody for doing anything, if they like it, they love it. I

just feel like that's what our men try to go for nowadays.

This participant believes Black men's desires are influenced by television and other media outlets. Her viewpoint conveys that she believes Black men's attraction to women is determined by her appearance. Another participant's views echoed this perspective. She expressed:

> I think they definitely find the women on TV, the Instagram girls, you know, the ones who look a certain kind of way. You know, no stomach, a small waist, a big behind, pretty. Those girls, I feel those are the ones of that men desire, what they see on TV and social media.

In other words, these women concluded that who their prospects desired to marry was directly impacted by television. Specifically, these women believed that they felt many of their prospects for marriage were superficial, hinting that, which compromises the quality of their potential relationships. Furthermore, these women may have determined in their minds that because their prospects fail to value the specific qualities in a wife that they hold, that these men may always seek other women based on their appearance. As one of the women stated, "If men, if their heads, are easily turned by, I guess, the biggest butt walking, that doesn't make you feel like that's something I'm trying to be a part of because we're not mentally on the same level." This supports the idea that these women are refusing to minimize their value to only appearance, but it may suggest that this fear of men being "easily turned by the biggest butt walking" may have these women reluctant to commit to marriage due to the fear of being hurt by their partner.

These participants overwhelmingly agreed appearance is what men desire most in a woman. However, when asked to describe the characteristics that make them good candidates for marriage, they used words like: "good cook," "clean," "selfless," and "loving." Not one of the women acknowledged aspects of their appearance as a quality. One woman described herself as:

I'm a hardworking person, I'm very loving, caring. I'd do anything for anybody, anything. Anybody that I care about, I'll go to war about. I cook, I clean, you know. I'm a Southern girl, so I cook cook.

This woman adhered to traditional gender roles as a woman, such as cooking, cleaning, and being loving. More importantly, when she says "cook cook," she emphasized the extent to which she can prepare meals as a wife. Another one of the participants described the characteristics she would bring to a marriage:

I'm faithful in my marriage. I'm thankful. I'm selfless. So, I'm the type of person: I get up and fix breakfast every morning. I'm a pleaser, so I have no problem. Most women will start something and can't finish it. I'm getting up, I'm fixing breakfast, I'm packing lunch. You don't eat soup and sandwiches for dinner. I'm cooking. Cooking-cooking dinner, you know, every night.

Like many Black women attribute their ability for "cooking-cooking" as a primary trait that qualifies her as a wife. The data shows that these women attribute their ability to perform in domestic duties as key traits that make them a wife. Another one of the participants disclosed,

I know that being understanding is a gift because not everybody understands. Because everybody's for themselves, you know? That's a selfless characteristic to have. So I do have a selfless characteristic. Um, I cook, clean, wash clothes, fold them, know how to separate them.

In addition to her ability to be "understanding" and "selfless," this participant indicated that cooking, cleaning, and laundry skills would possibly be important to a potential husband. In addition, many of the women said their ability to perform as a reliable "helpmate" and their ability to be "loving" was key. One of them shared, "I'm caring. I feel like I have a lot of

compassion. I feel I'd be a good help mate, you know, like I'm a good helper." Another participant stated her qualifications for being a wife as: "I am smart. I know how to be a help mate. So, if my husband is falling short…I can come in on the back end and I have his back."

4.4.2   Lack of Commitment to Career

The Black women in this study were not only skeptical about their potential husbands' ability to commit to them in a relationship, participants were also weary that these men could commitment to an occupation to provide financial stability. When reflecting on the potential men available to marry, the women expressed concern that their candidates were able to dedicate themselves to a stable profession. Participants disclosed that many of their potential partners seemed to be unstable or "confused," particularly in terms of career. For example, one of the women said, of the men she knew: "Definitely not marriage material. As far as personally, the guys that I've talked to and dated, it seems as if they might be a little confused on exactly what it is that they want to do as far as a relationship, [and] what they want to do in life." Another one of the women stated, "They don't seem to know as far as what they want to do career wise, something long-term, something stable, something kind of permanent. They're kinda here, there, or I want to try this." These participants believed that many of their potential husbands have been unable to maintain a profession for a steady amount of time. These women desire stable providers for husbands and want their husbands to be financially reliable. Another participant elaborated:

> From experience, that [dating] pool has looked like guys that are still trying to figure it out. Guys that really haven't quite made it in their minds. So they're trying to figure out a million ways to make it....I don't know when the last time I can say I met a guy [and] he

actually knew where he was headed, where he was going, how he was going to get there, or if he's already at where he wants to be in life.

This participant recalled her personal experience of meeting men who were undecided on a career choice. When reflecting on her ideal candidate, one of the participant said that she is interested in men who are "engineers, barbers, tattoo artists, and then there's one who's like an accountant," but she goes on to describe the men that she attracts as "drug dealers, scammers, people in the street."

This theme of unreliability continued to emerge among these women on the topic of their prospects for husbands. They want dependability in a potential husband, but they feel many of the men are lacking in this characteristic primarily because of inconsistency in maintaining a career.

The participants also expressed concern for the quantity of men currently available for them to marry. "I feel like they're slim," one participant stated. While television may be the lens for this study, systemic structures may play a major role in the number of potential mates that Black women have. When discussing the quantity of available men, one participant addressed mass incarceration. She said, "I mean, some people are imprisoned because they really are supposed to be there, but actually a lot of people should not be in prison. And a lot of those people are people that a lot of Black women would be married to, quite honestly." The same participant provided the example of Maya Moore, a professional basketball player who quit her job to advocate for a man who was wrongfully imprisoned. "Long story short, eventually they fell in love and they actually got married," she said.

Some of the women expressed a concern that some Black men don't value Black women, and that similar to the Black husbands seen on TV, will betray their Black wives for racially

ambiguous and non-Black women. When describing the traits that she believed men found desirable, a participant stated:

> Non-Black women that have had a lot of surgery—or some of them don't even have surgery, as long as they're nonblack, as long as they consider them foreign. But yeah, definitely not Black women…I don't even think that the women have to be successful for them. I think as long as they're not Black and they're pretty, they have long hair and they, you know, like I said, look exotic.

Similarly, another participant explained how she thinks men desire these "racially ambiguous women" because their minds having been "trained" to do so. She explained:

> If I'm being honest, I do feel like there's this stereotypical, like racially ambiguous, long, curly hair, lighter tone, but like, you know, racially ambiguous stereotype that I think it's hard for me to say whether men find that desirable just because they think it's desirable or like, it's because their brains have been trained that way.

This participant suggests that Black men are attracted to these racially ambiguous women simply because they are being "trained" to do so. The responses from the women in this study indicate that they believe Black men reject them because they are Black.

5   DISCUSSION

This study found that the Black women in this study feel that the way they are represented on television has impacted their perceptions of their viability to marry, particularly due to Black men's endorsement of these images. The women interviewed said that they believed negative tropes about Black women may have convinced their potential marriage candidates, mostly Black men, to devalue them as wives, promoting the mistreatment of Black women in marriage, as often depicted on television. Aside from stereotypes of Black women, the

results suggest that stereotypical imagery of the unsuccessful Black marriage —specifically

consisting of the cheating Black husband— on television has led many Black women to conclude

that marriage, "doesn't look like anything I want to do." Due to this anticipated marital ill

treatment, some Black women are choosing to abstain from marriage today. By abstaining from

marriage, these women feel they are actively avoiding the potential disrespect of Black

husbands, specifically those of infidelity and unreliability.

The participants described how, during childhood, television images were positive, but

over time they became more critical of television images that displayed them as aggressive and

angry, and these images began to offend them. The women stated that television, specifically

reality TV, often portrayed them as "hard to deal with". Similar to previous findings (Edwards,

2016), this study suggests that while Black women have watched this stereotypic behavior, they

are doing so "from a position of agency" and choose to "use their own definitions to guide them"

(Edwards, 2016, pg. 290). The Black women in this study also appear to be exhausted with the

stereotypical images, and so they are electing to navigate away from traditional television as a

way to reject stereotypical images that they feel harm them. Streaming platforms, such as

Netflix, allow these women to choose the programming of their preference. More research

should be conducted to analyze if Black women feel they are using Netflix as a source of

empowerment.

The traditional Black women stereotypes of the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel discussed

earlier were covertly referenced during the study, particularly the Sapphire and the Jezebel tropes

as the Mammy stereotype was referenced more covertly. Most of the participants in the study

emphasized the obligation for potential wives to be accustomed to cooking and cleaning as a

qualification for the role. I conjecture that these findings could suggest that most of the Black

women in this study link domesticity to the value of their womanhood, and this in inline with Jewell's (1992) theory that the Mammy stereotype is the "foundation for the imagery that symbolizes African American womanhood" (Jewell, 1992, pg. 38). The connection was also apparent when the women acknowledged characteristics like "caring" and "selfless" when describing other traits that qualify them as good candidates for marriage. Finally, none of the participants mentioned beauty as a characteristic that made them wife potential, but they all indicated appearance as the main trait men desire in romantic partners. In my opinion, this is in line with the asexual imagery ascribed to the Mammy stereotype as discussed earlier. These women could possibly be assigning domesticity as a value to their womanhood, while neglecting their beauty and sexuality much like the Mammy stereotype has done on television.

Participants recalled the many Black women, specifically on reality TV, appear "ghetto" or "toxic" in demeanor as they are depicted fighting one another. They emphasized how these depictions frustrate them. In a study of 186 Black women, ages 18 to 63, Thomas, Witherspoon and Speight (2004) found a link between the Sapphire stereotype and self-esteem among Black women. They found that because the Sapphire is viewed as "argumentative and harsh," Black women who internalize this trope may fear being perceived as aggressive (Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight, 2004, p. 437). The participants of this study favored depictions of respectability and suggested that traditional tropes, such as the Sapphire, may foster negative perceptions of them in society, especially regarding romantic relationships. These women's views appear to support previous literature (Higginbotham, 1993; Hill Collins, 2004) concerning how some Black women believe that public displays of morals and manners for Black women is necessary to challenge the notion that they are "ghetto" or unpleasant. Many of these women adhere to traditional beliefs concerning the politics of respectability and the guidelines for White

approval, rejecting the representations of Black women on reality TV. It appears that many of them believe that they personally reap the negative consequences of these performances in real-life.

Another traditional stereotype referenced was the Jezebel, which the Black women in the study described as the type of woman who they perceived men desired. Participants described these objects of desires as scantily clad women with the "perfect bodies" consisting primarily of "big butts" and other body enhancements providing more sex appeal, such as plump lips and big breasts. The women made it clear that their prospects for marriage were limited by women who exemplified the Jezebel traits of sexual promiscuity, sexual freedom, and the "ideal" Black female body. The participants did not appear to condemn these women when describing them, but it was clear that they did not believe they could compete with them for men. Coleman, Reynolds, and Torbati (2019) found in a study of 115 Black women that participants identified less with the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes, compared to the Strong Black Woman stereotype. Findings from the participants in the current study indicate they similarly reject the stereotypes and are aware of the damaging effects of these tropes on their lives. It is important to note that these women admitted to identifying with Black women characters on television, primarily based on race and gender. This could be due to the lack of Black women characters displayed on television in the past. However, the participants seemed to reject stereotypical behavior exhibited by those Black women on their television screens.

These Black women feel that these stereotypical images depicting them as unrefined are impacting their personal lives by presenting them as unworthy of marriage. More specifically, in line with previous studies (Bethea, 1995; Childs, 2005), this study suggests that Black women believe that Black men internalize these negative concepts about them being "undesirable,

domineering, and second best" (Bethea, 1995, p. 92). Similar findings were produced in a 2016 study of 113 Black youths, when researchers found that "males were less likely to identify negative media stereotypes, but more likely to endorse the negative messages than females" (Bass, Stevenson, and Kotzin, 2014, p. 384). Black women in this study believe that Black men's endorsements of stereotypical tropes promote the degradation of Black women as wives on an off the screens. This rejection of Black women was illustrated by some of the participants' Black male family and friends as they vowed to "be done with Black women." As Collins (2014) notes, "rejection by Whites is one thing- rejection by Black men is entirely another" (p. 160). Based on the interviews conducted for the study, I conceptualize that these Black women believe that television has impacted their ability to happily marry because of the distasteful portrayals influencing their marriage prospects on four common themes: (a) fostering rejection of Black women by Black men; (b) creating fear of infidelity; (c) judging Black women on an unrealistic standard of beauty; (d) and promoting the degradation of Black women. This concept is consistent with previous findings (Bethea, 1995; Childs, 2005).

Aside from stereotypes of Black women, the results suggest that stereotypical imagery of the unsuccessful Black marriage —specifically consisting of the cheating Black husband— on television has led many women to perceive marriage as "scary." The depictions of struggling Black marriages, or what Patricia Hill Collins (2004) terms as "this love trouble tradition," have exemplified to these Black women what happens when a Black man marries a woman that he does not value (p. 152). Constant portrayals of failing Black marriages on television today perhaps are more discouraging to these women than traditional Black women stereotypes. As Patricia Hill Collins (2004) states, Black marriage is represented on television as "struggle, settling, and pain" (p. 152). Similar to previous findings (Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014), results

from this study show that while many Black women do aspire to be married, they are hesitant

due to the fear of experiencing poor treatment by their husbands, as regularly depicted on

television. According to Staples and Terry (1985), "when a Black married couple is shown, it is

the most persistent and damaging of all Black stereotypes" but where they concluded "the weak

man-strongwoman concept", I introduce, the cheating Black husband concept (p. 18).

The cheating Black husband was prevalent during interviews with each participant as

they recalled Black marriage on television today. This stereotype involves a heterosexual, most

recently prominent, Black man who's apparently willing to jeopardize his marriage and family

for promiscuity. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) states "historically, African American men were

depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that

allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence" (p. 152). This representation

of Black men has evolved into the adulterous Black husbands that the participants frequently

mentioned during the study. Some scholars "have criticized the African American community

for its reluctance to hold Black men accountable for violence against Black women" (Meyers,

2007, p. 113). Participants noted that Black husbands disrespect their Black wives "clear as day,"

and the audience "made it seem like it was OK" because the men receive very little criticism.

The Black husbands mentioned most during the study was Ghost from the show *Power* and

Stevie J and Kirk, both appearing on *Love and Hip-Hop Atlanta*. The three Black men all have

the following in common: they are married to Black women, they appear to be wealthy, and all

of them have cheated on their wives. Participants were not hard pressed to recall these adulterous

Black husbands and specific examples of their adulterous behavior, such as when Stevie J

disrespected both Mimi, his daughter's mother, and Joseline, his alleged wife, on national

television. The cheating Black husband stereotype in line with what Patricia Hill Collins (2004)

describes when she questions if Black love has been reduced "to the genitalia and the paycheck" (pg. 155). Bethea (1995) suggests Black women "have often adopted the cultural stereotypes that African-American men are unreliable and preoccupied with sexual exploitation" (p.93). It may be important to understand how television images foster this image of promiscuous Black men and failing marriage, thereby inducing a fear of marriage for many women. This study found a correlation between the low marriage rates among Black women and the increase of negative depictions of Black marriage in TV today.

The women in this study noted that their biggest fear is loving a Black man who will cheat on them and disrespect them, as so often televised. This fear even was evident in the example of the participant whose married parents had never experienced infidelity, nor had she experienced it in any of her relationships. Nevertheless, it appears that her awareness of cheating Black husbands on television may have contributed to her apprehension of marriage because of her fear of infidelity. As previous scholars have found (Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014; Childs, 2005; Bethea, 1995), Black women in this study conveyed that they desire to marry, but are hesitant due to a lack of confidence that the marriage prospects they desire most, Black men, could provide the commitment that they wish for in a husband. These women appear to decline being undervalued by Black men. As one proclaimed, "I can do bad all by myself".

As Hill Collins (2004) stated, "dealing with the reality that Black men reject them leads other Black women to become devoted to their career" (p. 161). All of the women interviewed for this study attributed their current unmarried status to exercising agency and their priority of "getting themselves together," or in other words, focusing on their personal growth. These women emphasized the importance of self-advancement in areas of finance, career, and temperament. This choice of singledom aligns with what Patricia Hill Collins (2014) defines as a

"strategy of resistance" by these women to promote self-care (p. 114) and combat the effects

from the offensive messages and men —on and off the small screen —that communicate to them

that they are unworthy of marriage. As demonstrated in previous literature (Bethea, 1995), this

act of self-reliance is not to reject Black men, but instead is a coping strategy because of the

perceived rejection from them. In line with previous findings (Hill Collins, 2004; Bethea, 1995;

Childs, 2005), participants perceived that Black men are threatened by self-reliance and get

offended by a Black woman's desire to obtain "A, B, and C" on her own. The findings also

suggest that this ambition is motivated due to her distrust that a Black husband will value her.

Black women appear to implement self-care to create lives where they respect themselves in a

society where no one else seems to do so.

Jones and Sheftall (2017) describe this as "feminist therapy" and note that "specifically, it

allows Black women to be liberated from the internal psychological distress, societal barriers,

and promotes skills that assist them to be self-actualizing in their goals, their will power, and

their way to power" (pp. 206-207). Participants appear to exercise their autonomy and are

focused on personal and career growth for themselves "because having's one's own gives the

women the ability to choose their own relationships" (Hill Collins, 2014, p. 117). Black women

appear to be electing to implement self-reliance instead of succumbing to the inferiority

represented by stereotypical images. In doing so, they are resisting the dominant concepts of

Black women and are redefining how Black womanhood appears to them. Tucker and Kernan

(2003) found that "adaptive psychological and social resources can protect individuals and

communities from the full impact of problematic circumstances" (p. 69). One could only imagine

how it must feel for Black women to "sense that one is at the bottom of the scale of desirability"

(Hill Collins, 2004, p. 160). It could be devastating. However, they continue to overcome

society's cynical definitions and have self-defined themselves as valuable and deserving to promote a healthy self-esteem. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) suggests that this is not only admirable of these women, but necessary. "When Black women's very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definitions become essential to that survival" (Hill Collins, 2004, p. 112). It appears that even unconsciously, single Black women are choosing to not only survive, but thrive and are not allowing marriage to define them.

Like previous literature (Barros-Gomes & Baptist, 2014; Abrams, Maxwell, & Belgrave, 2017), this study found that Black women do desire to marry. However, participants' views show that they are fearful to become completely vulnerable with Black men who they feel may cheat on them and devalue them by not being reliable providers. Looking at this through the lens of cultivation theory and Black feminist thought, this study found that Black women are perhaps more critical of traditional stereotypes of Black women but may be accepting of Black male stereotypes, specifically the cheating Black husband. As a result, women may be internalizing negative stereotypes of Black men and making a choice to remain single because of this. Drawing on cultivation theory, this study suggests that both Black men and Black women are, perhaps dismissing one another in terms of romantic relationships because of the images they see on TV. These findings support Patricia Hill Collins' (2004) claims that "when internalized by African Americans themselves, this same Black gender ideology works to erase the workings of racial discrimination by keeping Black men and women focused on blaming one another for problems" (pg.180). The gender ideology and stereotypes that are created and maintained by the White elite may be impacting how Black people continue to view themselves, providing further evidence of how television images are internalized and affect personal relationships among Black lovers. Many of these women concluded that television has been the most impactful media

source in their lives, and it is necessary to understand how these images continue to shape their outlook on life, especially as it relates to marriage.

This study shows that Black women are focused on self-advancement to create a life they desire, instead of allowing society to convince them that they are underserving of happiness. By abstaining from marriage and stereotypical images of themselves, Black women are implementing strategies of resistance to dismiss society's insistence on their inferiority.

The number one aspect desired by all of the participants in this study was a husband who would commit to them through monogamy and support, both mental and financial. Barros-Gomes & Baptist's (2014) similarly found that "women's descriptions of their expectations for a husband suggest the desire for attunement and connection" (p. 302). Although these women may exhibit self-reliance, they continue to crave the emotional support of a partner.

I challenge television executives to create what Hill Collins (2004) describes as "television as a safe space," where Black women viewers are able to engage with issues and concepts that are concerning and appealing to them as this is "vital to [their] growth and well-being" (p. 110). More importantly, viewers should be able enjoy watching television without negative images of who they are. *Girlfriends* was one of the shows mentioned most by participants in the study, and it appears that this show encompasses "Black women's experiences within rounded narratives of identity, sexuality, health, and authority" (Shomade, 2013, p. 158). The show's creator, Mara Brock Akil, explains, "I'm doing a show about women —African American women— and I feel that a lot of times our issues don't get national attention. Prioritized" (Shomade, 2013, p. 157). Perhaps the show's popularity among Black women correlates with content that resonates with these viewers. Producers and creators of television content that feature Black marriage should be more imaginative in the plot development of these

shows to create content that inspires Black women. As other studies have noted (Coleman, Reynolds, and Torbati, 2000), Black women are no longer watching television as frequently as before, and perhaps if they were uplifted or empowered, instead of offended, by the lives of the characters depicted, they would engage with content more regularly. Content creators should acknowledge the impact of their messages during the planning of each aspect of the show. Single Black men should be represented as desired romantic partners who treat women like their mothers, sisters, and daughters as cherished and deserving. I encourage single Black women to become as critical of the images that they view of Black men as they are of the ones that they view of themselves. I recommend that they disconnect from the images of the cheating Black husband, because it could be damaging to their outlook on marriage. It is possible that these stereotypes are interfering with Black women's ability to create healthy relationships with Black men that could possibly lead to marriage and provide them the support that they crave.

One limitation of this study was the women-only sample. Perspectives from Black men could have provided additional context to analyze the effects of Black stereotypes on interpersonal relationships among singles today. A second limitation was the research design, as more could have been uncovered by including content analysis of some of the television shows mentioned most during the study. Identifying more concepts and patterns from these shows would have allowed for more dynamic study results, but time was also a limiting factor.

In conclusion, this study validates the effects that televised Black stereotypes have on the interpersonal relationships of Black women, specifically marriage. While many factors may impact the marriage rates of these women, this study specifically analyzed television and produced results that should encourage Black television viewers to be critical of any content featuring Black characters. Data shows that stereotypical images may be responsible for the

development and maintenance of distrust and degradation among Black women and could be directly impacting their ability to happily marry. In fact, the results suggest that Black women may be abstaining from marriage as a form of resistance to the rejection they anticipate receiving in romantic relationships due to the negative effects of these tropes. The results are indicative of the immense responsibility of media producers who develop and distribute content featuring Black characters. Due to the impact of these negative tropes, the findings of this study suggest that Black women and men may have healthier romantic relationships with each other without television. It also suggests that Black viewers should disengage from television content and images that they do not feel represent them well or make them feel good, especially about each other.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Research Questions:

1. What role has television played in your life?

2. What are some specific shows you watch that feature Black women? (probe)

3. What do these shows say about Black women and marriage? (probe)

4. What do you think about the portrayal of Black women on these shows?

5. Do you think those representations have shaped your views as a Black woman about marriage? (probe)

6. Do you want to get married? (probe- why or why not?)

7. What are your views on your prospects of marriage?

8. Do you think you'll get married?

9. What other media outlets do you consume other than television?

10. Do you believe that you are a good candidate for marriage? Are you a good catch? Why or why not?

11. Would you say TV has been the most impactful media source throughout your life?

12. Is there a television or film character that you personally identify with? Who is it? Why?

13. Who do you think men find desirable based on what you've seen in the media? Why is that?

14. Are men attracted to Black women?

15. What do you think of the portrayal of Black men as potential or actual husbands in the media?

16. Are you open to dating outside of your race?

Appendix 2

The following television shows were mentioned at least once during the study with the most popular shows in bold**:**

1. *227*

2. *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*

3. *B.A.P.S*

4. *Baywatch*

5. ***Blackish***

6. ***The Cosby Show***

7. ***Family Matters***

8. *The Flavor of Love*

9. ***The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air***

10. *The Game*

11. *Ghost*

12. ***Girlfriends***

13. *Greenleaf*

14. *Grey's Anatomy*

15. *Good Times*

16. *Half and Half*

17. *Harry Potter*

18. *How to Get Away with Murder*

19. *Living Single*

20. ***Love and Hip-Hop: Atlanta***

21. *Married to Medicine*

22. *Martin*

23. *Mister Rodger's Neighborhood*

24. ***Moesha***

25. *P. Valley*

26. ***The Parker's***

27. ***Power***

28. *The Proud Family*

29. ***The Real Housewives of Atlanta***

30. *Saved by the Bell*

31. ***Scandal***

32. *Sister, Sister*

33. *Texas Walker Ranger*

34. *That's So Raven*

35. *Veronica Mars*