

THE IMPACT OF 21ST CENTURY TELEVISION REPRESENTATION ON WOMEN
OF COLOR: COLORISM MYTH OR REALITY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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Master of Arts

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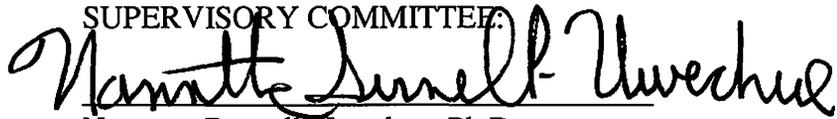
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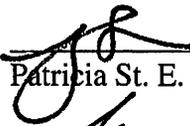
This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation advisor, Dr. Nannetta Durnell-Uwechue, School of Communication and Multimedia Studies, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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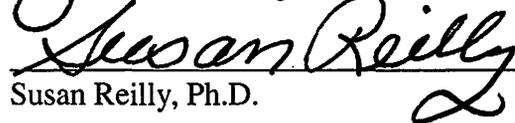


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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examined how colorism impacts the representation of young women of color in 21st century television shows. The thesis focused on how colorism affects one's idea of beauty and self-esteem, and how young women are portrayed. A content analysis of five television programs (*Black-ish*, *Dear White People*, *Empire*, *Grown-ish*, and *The Carmichael Show*) were analyzed. Through the analysis, darker complexion women were analyzed and it was found negative attributes were used to describe them in terms of beauty, and for lighter skinned females positives attributes were used throughout the show. In the five episodes examined that aired in the 21st century, beauty was defined based on one's complexion as it was before in previous centuries. Issues of colorism are still displayed in 21st century television shows and through positive and negative caricatures. Colorism has a direct impact on how women of color are perceived and it can directly impact their self-esteem.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this manuscript first to God, who equipped me with the knowledge and strength to fulfill a task I never imagined. I would also like to dedicate my manuscript to my mother, Paula Erves, who was selfless in putting her college education aside for 50 years while raising a family then later pursuing her dreams. Second, to my father, Carl Erves, who constantly was supportive of me throughout the process and who is the epitome of a hard worker. Lastly, I dedicate this manuscript to my grandfather, the late Eddie Lee Hunt Sr., who passed during this project but would want nothing but for me to successfully complete school, along with this manuscript. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The value of light complexion African American women over dark-skinned women has been a developing problem for years. The words often associated with darkness are negative in their own community. The words associated with lightness are positive. In 1982 Walker coined the term colorism to describe a phenomenon created during slavery in United States and still prevalent today. Colorism is defined as “prejudice or discrimination against individuals with dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group” (Walker, 1983, p. 290). African American women have tried to escape the stigma of colorism, but it has been difficult. Research indicates that darker complexion women who are from working classes have lower self-esteem and dark skin women are judged unattractive by African American men (Thompson & Keith, 2001, p. 349).

Women of color have fought the persistent battle of colorism for a long time and the stereotypes that are attached to being light skinned or dark skinned. In 1712 Willie Lynch, a slave owner, delivered a speech in Virginia to fellow slave owners. He said that one must keep the slave physically strong but psychologically weak and dependent on the slave master. During his speech, he said “you must use dark skin slaves vs. light skin slaves, and the light skin slaves vs. the dark skin” (Lynch, 1999, p. 1). Slave owners would assign the lighter complexion slaves to fulfill household duties and the darker skinned women to labor in the field. The lighter complexion slave was awarded special

privileges and was seen as more attractive and beautiful by the slave owner. In an article published by Hidden Truth (2018), this way of thinking often led the slave master to engage in non-consensual sexual relationships with slaves in the household, which led to lighter complexion children.

In the early to mid-19th-century minstrel shows emerged as entertainment. The minstrel shows involved a White actor putting on blackface to perform. To create the blackface actors used “burned bottle corks mixed with greasepaint or shoe polish to achieve a black shine when they got on stage” (Caesar, n.d.). Using blackface during the theatrical performances strengthened the belief that dark skin was ugly because the blackface performers portrayed slaves as stupid and as villains.

In the 1930s, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted their own test to assess African American childrens’ racial identity. The Clarks “asked children to choose between brown and white dolls in response to a series of questions” (as cited in Bergner, 2009, p. 299). The results of the test show that the Black children preferred the white dolls over the black dolls.

The Brown Paper Bag Test emerged in the 1900s and was prevalent in college campus sororities, and Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta were known for administering the test. If one’s complexion was lighter than a brown paper bag, they were accepted into the sorority. In 1928, on the Howard University campus, Taylor published an article in the student newspaper that accused fraternities of “splitting the various classes into groups of different shades — yellow, brown, and black” (Watch the Yard, n.d.). According to Taylor, “The light-skinned students are sought after by the fraternities and sororities as members and the dark ones passed by. The light skin brown students

then formed their own cliques while the blacks were left in the cold” (Watch the Yard, n.d.). Associating light skin with beauty is still evident with Blacks in the 21st century. Now, you will find dark skin women bleaching their skin to be found more attractive and lightening their photos on social media platforms. The media reinforces the idea of the lighter complexion being more attractive.

Purpose of the Study

It is obvious that colorism has played a vital role in developing and maintaining attitudes towards beauty since the days of slavery up to current times. There has been a major transition in the way notions of beauty are transmitted, first by word of mouth, then through pictures in magazines and now through the various forms of electronic/digital media. These changes suggest certain questions need to be addressed.

This thesis examined the representation of contemporary beauty in the eyes of young women of color in five different television shows broadcast during the 21st century. First, literature was reviewed from previous centuries to examine the evolution of beauty. Second, the methodology is discussed and conducted analyzing five different television shows. Then the analysis discusses themes that emerged while conducting the research. Lastly, the findings are discussed in relation to the four research questions posed. It is critical to examine whether the new technologies have affected the way in which women of color perceive their self-image, which can be examined through attitudes towards self-esteem and visual expressions of beauty.

Research Questions

The following research questions sought to address these issues.

1. Do young women of color in the 21st century have a better concept of their own beauty than in previous centuries in the United States?
2. Do issues of colorism still exist on television in the 21st century?
3. How are issues of colorism displayed in contemporary television shows?
4. Do issues of colorism impact the self-esteem, self-perception, and perception of others among women of color in the 21st century?

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to the Literature

The issues surrounding contemporary beauty within the African American society are not widely researched. The studies that do exist do not examine 21st century television shows where young women of color discuss their ideas about beauty.

This literature review examined the evolution of beauty in relation to colorism in the United States and reviewed previous research on the effects of beauty on self-esteem. This was followed by an examination of how contemporary television shows influence the self-esteem of viewers who are young women of color. Finally, research regarding the validation television provides on preferred skin tones was presented.

These areas of study were explored to support the following research questions:

1. Do young women of color in the 21st century have a better concept of their own beauty than in previous centuries in the United States?
2. Do issues of colorism still exist on television in the 21st century?
3. How are issues of colorism displayed in contemporary television shows?
4. Do issues of colorism impact the self-esteem, self-perception, and perception of others among women of color in the 21st century?

Conceptions of Color Among Women Prior to the 20th Century

It is necessary to understand the historical background of how conceptions of black beauty in the United States evolved over time. “By the late 1600s, white skin came to be synonymous with freedom and black skin with slavery” (Norwood, 2015, p. 592).

The well-known novelist, poet, and activist Alice Walker coined the term colorism in 1982. Walker (1982) defined colorism as “the prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (as cited in Norwood, 2015, p. 586). While the term colorism is new to the narrative about skin color, the effects have been evident since the days of slavery. With colorism, there is a specific discrimination against dark-skinned individuals. Colorism took root because the coalescence of “needs, beliefs, justifications, and practices had the effect of placing white skin at a premium and dehumanizing black skin” (Norwood, 2015, p. 592). Although the color hierarchy has existed within the African American culture for decades, the impact it has had on women of color has been understudied.

The institution of slavery existed in the United States from 1619 to 1865. During this period the color caste system among slaves was implemented and became noticeable on plantations. The clear distinction between female slaves who were lighter skinned and the darker skinned slaves was prominent on plantations. There were certain privileges granted to the female slaves who were lighter skinned that were not granted to the darker skinned slaves. The darker skin slaves were considered “better laborers while lighter-skinned blacks were better suited for intelligent tasks, such as craftsmanship, or lighter labor” (Kerr, 2005, p. 273). In slave records, it was noted that the light-skinned females were considered kinder, gentler, and more delicate. In fact, the word delicate “was the term most often used to describe light-skin enslaved women” (Kerr, 2005, p. 273). In documents detailing slave records, a slave mentions that “if the female slaves were destined to be field hands, being ‘blacker’ was favorable, as she would blend more effectively with the black male field slaves” (Kerr, 2005, p. 273). The light-skinned

female slaves with long hair and European features were valued at a higher price on auction blocks than dark-skinned slaves. It is clear in Kerr's historical research that light-skinned house negroes were favored over the dark-skinned Negroes who labored outdoors from sun up to sun down.

The White race considered itself to be superior and powerful during this time. Whites made the distinction among Blacks based on the various shades of African skin tone, categorizing slaves based on their shade of blackness. An often cited example of this phenomenon is recorded in a body of work attributed to a former slave owner named Willie Lynch, who in the early 1700s created rules regarding slave ownership. Lynch believed in instilling fear in slaves to control their minds. "You must use the dark skin slaves vs. the light skin slaves, and the light skin slaves vs. the dark skin slaves. You must use the female vs. the male. And the male vs. the female. You must also have your white servants and overseers distrust all Blacks" (Lynch, 1999, p. 1).

On Southern plantations the slave masters routinely put the lighter skin slaves in the "big house," and the darker skinned slaves in the field. Although the lighter skin women were given the privilege of working in the big house, with that so-called privilege came the violence of rape. Slave owners would force themselves on the lighter enslaved women working around them. Rapes produced lighter mixed breed babies. The babies produced would be "half black, half white, commonly called mulattoes" (Norwood, 2015, p. 592). Mulatto has been defined as 1. "now sometimes offensive: the first-generation offspring of a black person and a white person" and 2. "now sometimes offensive: a person of mixed white and black ancestry" ("Mulato," n.d.). During the slavery era to avoid "blacks with white ancestry" (Wilder, 2010, p. 186) from gaining legal status as

full-blooded Whites, lawmakers mandated the rule of the hypodescent, or the “one drop” rule” (Wilder, 2010, p. 186). This rule insured that any Black who had the slightest amount of African ancestry was legally Black by law. Three terms were used to describe light skinned negroes - mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon, referring to a people who had “three-eighths, one fourth, and one-eighth of African ancestry, respectively. Because of their partial white heritage, light-skinned blacks carried more economic value (Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 762).

Although slavery came to an end after the Civil War, the degradation of Blacks continued through the Jim Crow era; this included minstrel shows for the entertainment of Whites. In minstrel shows White actors performed in blackface. A performer named Thomas Dartmouth Rice, “borrowed a song and dance routine from a little Black slave boy he had seen perform on a street corner” (Wilson, Gutiérrez, & Chao, 2013, p. 65). Dartmouth’s stage name was Daddy Rice. He used burnt cork on his face and white chalk on his lips and clothed himself in rags, and performed the routine as the “Jump Jim Crow” dance. The minstrel shows allowed White society to continue the pretense that they were superior to dark skinned people. The minstrel shows reinforced the colorism that was still evident in Southern society. Even though slavery legally ended in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation, colorism had been established as part of the White racism that has continued to plague U.S. society during the following centuries.

Conceptions of Color During the 20th Century

During the early 1900s to 1950s, sororities and other social organizations were established in African American society . Unfortunately, colorism was commonly found within the sororities to which African American women belonged. The first Black

sorority was established in 1908 at Howard University; its primary purpose was for African American women to support each other, get involved in social movements, and come together to share the bond of sisterhood. Ethel Hedgeman-Lyle, the founder of the first African American sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, created the sorority with the intent to serve as a “network for women with like minds coming together for mutual uplift, and coalescing their talents and strengths for the benefit of others” (as cited in McNealey, 2010, p. 27). Other sororities followed, including Delta Sigma Theta in 1913, Zeta Phi Beta in 1920, and Sigma Gamma Rho in 1922.

Despite the charitable and lofty intentions behind the creation of these sororities, colorism among its members spread its negative influence within and among the organizations. A study conducted by Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey (2011) found that biases existed within these organizations. While conducting one interview, the interviewee was asked to describe members of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) . The participant used adjectives such as “classy, rich and well-to-do, delicate, pretty, dainty, snobby, prissy, and light-skinned with long hair” (Tindall et al., 2011, p. 41). The researchers interviewed a member of Delta Sigma Theta who described herself as “a tall, thin, pale straight-haired person” (Tindall et al., 2011, p. 41). The interviewee went on to say that people thought she should have become a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha because of her physical appearance. She explained that because of her skin tone people assumed she was an AKA “because of the stereotype that AKAs are lighter” (Tindall et al., 2011, p. 42).

Colorism was manifest in the social phenomenon described as the Brown Paper Bag Test, used to create separation and hierarchy between skin tones. The idea was that if

one was “darker than a paper bag, you are in one category, similar to the bag, you in another, and lighter was yet another and the most privileged category” (Als, 2003, p. 68). This test was used throughout the 20th century for “paper bag parties, paper bag churches, brown bag clubs, or brown bag social circles that resulted in a proscribed language of exclusion and exclusiveness” (Kerr, 2005, p. 272). Hence, the lightness of one’s skin came with privileges such as inclusion and acceptance into institutions, organizations, and social groups within the Black community. While conducting research at Rutgers University, Kerr (2005) spoke with an African-American junior who shared a story. She disclosed that

everybody knew that the AKA [Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority members] used to have what they called a paper bag test. In order to be considered for membership you would hold a paper bag up to your face, and you would have to be lighter than the bag. Of course, they don’t do that anymore. But if you look at most of them, you will see that they are mostly fair. AKAs on many campuses practice this. And at black schools, the rules are enforced even more. (Kerr, 2005, p. 286)

Another example provided by Kerr (2005) derived from a conversation the researcher had with an attorney at Howard University Law School in the mid-1980s; a classmate who was a native of Washington had organized an on-campus invitation-only graduation party named the “paper bag party.” The party was limited to fair complexion African Americans. The idea that a lighter complexion and White European features are more favored and viewed as prettier or “better” has resulted in “the disproportionate advancement and positive representation of lighter-skinned Blacks over darker-skinned

Blacks in many aspects of daily life, such as the workplace” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p. 761).

Social and Psychological Impacts of Colorism

Other research projects have been conducted in an attempt to determine the social and psychological impact that colorism had on the African American community. The doll test, a 1940s study conducted by Clark and Clark (1940), is still cited today. The researchers made their mark on history and broke barriers for African Americans with the study they pioneered. Nyman (2005) conducted a three-hour interview with his colleague Kenneth Clark in 1975 regarding the 1940s doll test. Clark described the watershed experiment where 3- to 7-year-old African American children were asked if they preferred a white doll or a brown doll (Nyman, 2005, p. 5). The results of the study indicated that a large majority of African American children said they preferred the white doll, saying “cause it’s pretty” and “cause he’s white” (Nyman, 2005, p. 5). They rejected the brown doll with comments such as, “cause he’s ugly” and “cause he doesn’t look pretty (Nyman, 2005, p. 5). When asked which doll “is most like you,” many African American children became distressed and a third of the children identified themselves with the white doll. Results of the doll study indicated that racism affected the African American children in a negative manner (Nyman, 2005, p. 6). The Clark’s (1940) research provided the Supreme Court with evidence that the society’s treatment of African American children was having a destructive impact on their core identities in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which dealt a lethal blow to the “separate but equal” doctrine of segregation established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, on the grounds that segregation damages African American children’s self-esteem” (Bergner, 2009, p.

299). The court case broke barriers and added substantial information to the Court's decision that

to separate [children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.

(Brown v. Board of Education, 1954)

Because of this psychological harm, the Court determined African American children in a segregated school could never get an education equal to that of White children, no matter how good the physical facilities or curriculum (Bergner, 2009, p. 299).

The historical review of colorism outlined previously indicates that the construct had and continues to have a profound impact on the way Blacks perceive themselves. This impact has endured from the days of slavery when female slaves were granted so-called privileges based on their skin color. Colorism was used to separate individuals into groups that were considered better or worse than others, and resulted in African Americans treating each other according to the color distinctions made by Whites during slavery. With the advent of mass media, the ability to disseminate attitudes and behavior has grown exponentially. Therefore, a question that must be addressed is whether television plays a role in helping to perpetuate or diminish the effect of colorism on people of color, especially females in the 21st century.

Effects of Colorism on Self-esteem

Clark and Clark (1940) indicated "that the society's treatment of African American children was having a destructive impact on their core identities" (as cited in Nyman, 2005, p. 6). One aspect of an individual's core identity is self-esteem, which has

been defined by scholars as a person's perception of whether he/she is approved by others, by being praised and being regarded as valuable due to what he/she does. However, self-esteem is also determined by being disapproved of or not being appreciated. These things influence whether or not the individual finds himself valuable (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003, p. 2).

In the interview with Kenneth Clark conducted in 1975 by Nyman, Clark explained that the doll study revealed the “damage to self-awareness, to self-esteem, which racial rejection was doing to human beings at such an early age” (Nyman, 2005, p. 6). The children in the study were still developing as human beings but they were aware that society rejected them based on their skin color. The results showed that the children “were incorporating into their image of themselves the stereotyped rejections and characterizations that they were inferior” (Nyman, 2005, p. 6). It wasn't until after the experiment that Clark realized the extent of the damage done. In the interview, Clark exclaimed that “it was disturbing to me to see the children in the test situation placed in this terrible conflict of having to identify with dolls to which they had previously ascribed negative characteristics” (as cited in Nyman, 2005, p. 6). Clark found differences between Southern children and Northern children. He recalled vividly the response from a child from the South when he asked the question “which doll is like you?” Clark recalled that the child looked up “into my face and he smiled, pointing to the brown doll, and said, ‘That’s me. That’s a nigger. I’m a nigger’” (as cited in Nyman, 2005, p. 7). The experiment showed that colorism directly affects self-esteem and that the two directly impact each other. Future research has been conducted since the Clark and Clark (1940)

doll test. Results of the research since the doll test proves colorism still exists and has a direct effect on one's self-esteem.

With the advent of television in the mid-1900s issues of colorism immediately surfaced. There were few adults of color, and even fewer children of color, on television. The image that was often seen was the pickaninny caricature, one of the first of the caricatures on screen. The pickaninny was usually a dark skin child who was described as “a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting” (Bogle, 2001, p. 7). These caricatures were also referred to as “child coons.” The pickaninny caricature was seen in the 1922 series *Our Gang* (Roach, McGowan, & Chertok, 1922), often known as *The Little Rascals*. The show featured an interracial cast with three main characters Farina, Stymie, and Buckwheat. Farina and Buckwheat were both represented as pickaninnies. They spoke in a certain dialect using broken language such as dat, dis, I is, you is, and we is. The characteristics that set a picaninny apart from other Black children was skin tone. The skin tone for the picaninny ranged from “medium brown to dark black -- light skinned picaninnies are rare” (Pilgrim, 2000, para. 8).

Portrayal of African American Women on Television

During the early 1950s major television networks refused to cast African American leads. When Black actresses started receiving more roles, they were faced with many challenges. Between 1951 and 1954, African American women struggled to escape the negative stereotypes that existed for Black women. After numerous years, Black women were finally given more opportunities on television screens. The Black actress played a role that “closely mirrored the image of all of the black women who occupied

spaces in the homes of the white families they had served” (Darlington, 2017, p. 129).

The familiar character was set to be made relatable to White viewers.

Changes in the casting of roles for black women did not begin until Ethel Waters and Hattie McDaniel made their mark early on as remarkable Black actresses playing the role of Beulah. On October 3, 1950, *The Beulah Show* (McKnight, Reed, & Thayer, 1950) transitioned from radio to being aired on ABC TV. Ethel Waters became the first Black actress to appear on a television sitcom that year on the show. Waters starred in the show for one season, and Hattie McDaniel joined the cast in September of 1951 to film six episodes. The Beulah character embodied the Mammy figure of slavery. Beulah’s characteristics dominated the screen with her massive round face and large Black features. Beulah’s “black skin accentuated the whites of her large protruding eyes. Her big dark lips and short flat nose were hallmarks of her African ancestry” (Scott, 2014, p. 744).

The image of Beulah “was, as intended, the personification of the black ‘mammy’ archetype made popular through the blackface performances and minstrel shows of previous generation” (Scott, 2014, p. 744). For a lot of White viewers who had little to no ties to African Americans, they believed that Whites often interpreted the blackface performers and caricatures seen on the screen as the whole African American race.

After Beulah appeared in the 1950s, Diahann Carroll played a nurse in a new series entitled *Julia* (Kanter, 1968), which aired 1968-1971. Carroll was one of the first Black women who played a character outside of the stereotypical mammy figure. Julia was at an advantage over the mammy figure by being portrayed as a single Black mom who had a young son. Throughout the series, her race was never mentioned, except once.

In one episode “her young son’s friend and playmate (white), pointed out to the boy with an air of surprise, that his mother was colored. To which the young son replied, ‘I’m colored too’” (Darlington, 2017, p. 132).

Another strong leading Black actress emerged during the 1970s. From 1975 to 1985 Isabel Sanford was cast to play the role of Louise Jefferson in the show *The Jeffersons* (Lear, 1975). The dynamic of the show varied from other shows on television during this time. The Jeffersons were featured living in a high-rise luxurious apartment and having a black maid named Florence Johnston played by Marla Gibbs. Not all families portrayed during this time period were seen living in a high-rise fancy apartment. Unlike *The Jeffersons*, the show entitled *Good Times* (Evans & Monte, 1974), premiered with another Black female lead and aired 1974-1979. Florida Evans, played by Esther Rolle, was a Black mom who loved and cherished her family daily. The family was barely making ends meet but continuously looked for the “good times in life.” During an interview in 1991, Esther Rolle explained in the documentary, *Color Adjustments* (Riggs & Kleinman, 1992), that when she was cast and contacted to play the role of Florida, the script and story did not include a role for her to have a husband. Rolle was

expected to play a black single mother, raising four children. Mrs. Rolle protested, and refused to play this role unless she had a partner. Fortunately, her request was accepted, and she was able to have an intact family unit, including a mother, father, and children. (Darlington, 2017, p. 134)

The more positive family dynamic and happy-go-lucky portrayal of the Black family dynamic and women continued to be played throughout the 1980s to 2000s. *The Cosby Show* (Werner, 1984) was a major turning point for Black actresses. One of the

most well-known actresses, Phylicia Rashad, made her impact in 1984 when she played Clair Huxtable. Rashad was one of the few Black actresses to land a lead role during this time. Her role of the wife and mother varied drastically from other Black women's roles. Clair Huxtable was a lawyer, a wife, and a mother of five children. *The Cosby Show* was one of the first shows to show a completely functional family structure with a successful father figure as a medical doctor, a wife working in an elite field, and five active children.

A woman who set the standard for African American women on television is Oprah Winfrey. She started her career as the first and youngest African American news anchor at Nashville's WLAC-TV (Darlington, 2017, p. 141). She went on to create and host her own talk show for 25 years; then she created her own production company, HARPO Studios, through which she produced several made-for-tv shows that empower and uplift work for women of color (Darlington, 2017, p. 142). She set the tone and paved the way entering the 21st century.

Thus far in the 21st century, the portrayal of the Black women on television has evolved once more. In 2008 *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Dunlap, 2008a) and *Real Housewives of New York* (Dunlop, 2008b) premiered on TV. Specifically regarding the representation of Black women in *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, it is easy for a viewer who is not associated with the specific African American race to get confused that all Black women are the same and act in such a dramatic way.

Since the 1950s to 2012, there has been an increase in women's roles on television, specifically for African American women. Shonda Rhimes is the writer and director of two of the most popular shows in the 21st-century, which star two Black female leads: *Scandal* (Rhimes, 2012, which aired 2012-2017), and *How to Get Away with*

Murder (Rhimes, 2014), which premiered in 2014 and is still on the air. Rhimes is known for placing women in the lead role in primetime shows written and created by her.

In 2012, *Scandal* premiered on primetime television and the female lead, Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, “dispels every notion of the mammy figure. She is a tough, brazen, hard-charging businesswoman who gets a President elected to office while sleeping with him under the nose of his wife” (Darlington, 2017, p. 140). Two years later, Rhimes debuted her second show in 2014, entitled *How to Get Away with Murder* in which the lead character is a Black woman. Viola Davis was cast to play the role of attorney and law professor Annalise Keating. Her character is portrayed as an alcoholic, hostile, and intelligent. Viola Davis has won five Emmys because of her impactful roles that influence women of color. Another show that premiered on FOX in 2015 is entitled *Empire*. The female lead for the hit show is Cookie Lyon, played by Taraji P. Henson. In the show, she portrays a strong, tough, fierce, sophisticated Black woman who is a mother, wife, and dominant leader when it comes to running the music industry. African American women were confined to only being casted in the Mammy role or similar roles for so long; however, as time progressed, the role of African American women on television evolved from the 1950s to what it is now in the 21st century.

Impacts of Television

Television serves as a medium for people to connect. It also serves as a medium that impacts and shapes the public’s perspective, thus influencing American society. Lasswell (1948) originally stated the media serves three dominant functions, which later were expanded to five functions by other researchers. These five major functions are:

1. Surveillance: the media has the lookout role of “scanning the society to define and describe the different racial and ethnic groups within it” (Darlington, 2017, p. 6).
2. Correlation: the media helps the “consumers of the media take stock of those groups and determine how and where they fit into the society” (Darlington, 2017, p. 6).
3. Transmission: media “defines what the social culture and heritage of the society are and transmits them to other members of the society” (Darlington, 2017, p. 6).
4. Entertainment: this function emphasizes “that communication can also entertain the society” (Darlington, 2017, p. 7).
5. Economic: the economic purpose of the media is to “sell people to advertisers” (Darlington, 2017, p. 7).

When understanding the impacts of television it is vital to understand that one might not have have the same lens or vision when watching television. Some viewers are not able to seek knowledge beyond what television provides. Viewers who are unable to seek credible information outside of what is portrayed on television are often subject to the impact of the negativism of television’s portrayals to a much greater degree than those who can, and often do, seek elsewhere for verification of what is seen in this medium. (Darlington, 2017, p. 7)

Colorism on Television and Films from 1940s-2000s

Throughout time there have been drastic changes with the portrayal of African American women on primetime television, which have caused conversations among

viewers to suspect colorist bias among Black actresses in the field. In 1990 the popular hit series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Jones, Borowitz, & Borowitz, 1990) aired on television for the first time and ran until 1996. The television show was centered around Will Smith, a young Black male who was born and raised in West Philadelphia but sent to live with his aunt and uncle in their mansion in Bel-Air, Los Angeles. The show featured Uncle Phil, Aunt Vivian, and their children Hilary, Ashley, Carlton, and Nicky. The cast stayed the same throughout all of the first three seasons. It was when Season 4 aired that fans saw an unfamiliar new face playing Aunt Viv.

After the third season, an adjustment within the cast occurred in which Janet Hubert, the darker complexion lead Black actress who played the role of Aunt Vivian, suddenly changed to light complexion actress Daphne Reid, who assumed the role of Aunt Viv for the remainder of the series. This visible change in characters caused an uproar from fans. When casting the new role the directors made a conscious decision to select Daphne Reid who happens to be a lighter complexion. Till this day, however, Janet Hubert is known as the “original” Aunt Viv.

This specific change that happened with the *Fresh Prince* influenced a trend and pattern that occurred in other popular shows during this time. *Family Matters* (Boyett, Bickley, & Miller, 1989), the well-known television show that aired on ABC from 1989 to 1997, was centered around the Winslow Family and their bothersome neighbor Steve Urkel. The Winslows are a Black middle-class family living in the suburbs of Chicago. The Winslow family consists of Carl Winslow, the father; Harriette Winslow, the wife and mother; Laura Winslow, the daughter; Judy Winslow, the youngest daughter; and Eddie Winslow, the oldest Winslow son. The cast remained the same up until the show

decided to change networks. After eight and one-half seasons, the show transitioned from the ABC network to CBS and the Black female lead, Jo Marie Payton, who played the role of the wife, Harriette Winslow, made the decision to leave the show but agreed to star in the first half of Season 9. Judyann Elder, a middle-aged, lighter skinned African American woman took over Payton's role of Harriette Winslow (Wood, 2015).

The last example where a dark complexion women was replaced on a primetime television show was during the show *My Wife and Kids* (Reo, Wayans, & Himelfarb, 2001), which aired on ABC from 2001 to 2005. The plot of the show revolved around a dysfunctional African American family. The family consisted of three children and the parents, Michael Kyle and Janet 'Jay' Kyle. The son Michael Kyle Jr. idolized gangster rap instead of the father. The favorite things of daughters Kady and Claire were asking their dad for money and giving him grief. The youngest daughter Kady never lets her daddy have the last word (Horvat, n.d.). A change occurred in the series when they replaced the smart, dark complexion, younger Claire with a lighter skinned young girl. The original Claire Kyle was played by Jazz Raycole, but during the first season, she was pulled and replaced by Jennifer Freeman. The switch was only acknowledged once during the series when Jennifer appeared in her first episode and Michael joked and said "I don't know what it is, but you look like a whole new person" (Butler, 2013, p. 4).

Based on these examples, the privilege was always granted to replace the darker skinned women with a lighter complexion woman. Colorism was not only seen on primetime television shows when replacing darker skinned actresses, but also it was seen in 2005 on the hit kids show, *The Proud Family* (Albrecht et al., 2001), the popular animated cartoon series on Disney Channel from 2000-2005. The "Proud Family was

among the first shows that was animated by a Black production company, with a Black primary animator, a large Black writing staff, a Black family as primary characters that was widely distributed on a mainstream platform” (Steele, 2016, p. 54). *The Proud Family* was created to depict a positive representation of an African American family to young kids. A study was conducted by Steele (2016) examined “issues of colorism in the kid’s animated series Proud Family” (p. 55). Through her research, Steele discovered that within the children’s animated cartoon series there was sublimely buried hegemonic imagery. The underlying colorist discrimination was being hidden through animation in cartoons. Steele described that “African American cartoons created by and for an African American audience are still a rarity on children’s television” (p. 54).

Despite the paucity of television shows depicting actors of color as compared to the dominant population, there is still a need to evaluate television content for their impact on viewers of color especially as it relates to the construct of colorism.

While there are numerous studies that clearly suggest that television has an unquestioned impact on audiences, there are few research studies that demonstrate the effects of television programming on viewers’ self-esteem, self-perception, perception of others, and myriad psychological effects. Based on current media content available as of 2019, there are still questions regarding the impact of media, especially television, on the self-esteem of young women. On the surface it may appear that media are making some superficial efforts to recognize the need to address issue of colorism. Television itself is a powerful medium that can influence and ingrain ideas and thoughts in one’s mind surrounding colorism.

Operationalization of Terms

In order to answer the study's research questions, which focus on different aspects of colorism, it was necessary to establish an operational definition of terms used within the project.

Approve. "To have or express a favorable opinion of" ("Approve," n.d.).

Angry Black Woman. "Aggressive, ill tempered, illogical, overbearing, hostile, and ignorant without provocation" (Ashley, 2014, p. 27).

Assertive. "Having or showing a confident and forceful personality" ("Assertive, n.d.).

Attractive. Defined as "having qualities or features which arouse interest" ("Attractive, n.d.).

Baby Mama. "A woman who becomes pregnant to keep a relationship with the father of her child, take his money, or keeps the child as a 'part of him'" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003, pp. 32-34).

Beauty. Defined as "A combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight" ("Beauty, n.d.).

Classy. "Having or reflecting high standards of personal behavior" ("Classy," n.d.).

Colorism. The "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (Norwood, 2015, p. 586).

Confident. "Feeling or showing confidence in oneself or one's abilities or qualities" ("Confident," n.d.).

Delicate. "Highly sensitive" ("Delicate, n.d.).

Disapprove. “To pass unfavorable judgment on” (“Disapprove,” n.d.).

Educated. “A woman who is very educated, but not just towards academics but towards learning and experiencing things from her own life” (L. West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016, p. 400).

Exclude. “Deny (someone) access to a place, group, or privilege” (“Exclude,” n.d.).

Fit. “In good health, especially because of regular physical exercise” (“Fit,” n.d.).

Independent Black Woman. “An ability to handle anything on one’s own” (L. West et al., 2016, p. 399).

Jezebel. “An overtly-sexualized, assertive woman” (Kretsedemas, 2010, p. 151).

Long Hair. Long hair “is usually shoulder blade length or longer” (“Long Hair,” n.d.).

Magical Negro. “The noble, good-hearted black man or woman” (Appiah, 1993, pp. 79-80), “whose good sense pulls the White character through a crisis” (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009, pp. 137-138).

Mammy. “A loyal, desexualized caregiver (with a penchant for ‘sassy’ comedic exchanges)” (Kretsedemas, 2010, p. 151).

Masculine. “Having qualities appropriate to or usually associated with a man” (“Masculine,” n.d.).

Matriarch. “Portrays the Black mother as the overbearing head of her household who ‘violates’ the appropriate gender behaviors set by the White patriarchal America” (Tyree, 2009, p. 52).

Natural Hair. “Hair whose texture hasn’t been altered by chemical straighteners, including relaxers and texturizers” (Sandeem, 2018).

Overweight. “Above a weight considered normal or desirable” (“Overweight,” n.d.).

Past. Defined as “having existed or taken place in a period before the present” (“Past,” n.d.).

Perception. Defined as “the way in which something is regarded, understood, or interpreted” (“Perception,” n.d.).

Praise. “To glorify (a god or saint) especially by the attribution of perfections” (“Praise,” n.d.).

Prissy. “Excessively proper; affectedly correct; prim” (“Prissy,” n.d.).

Reject. “Fail to show due affection or concern for (someone)” (“Reject,” n.d.).

Rich. “Having abundant possessions and especially material wealth” (“Rich,” n.d.).

Sapphire. The term “portrays black women as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing” (Pilgram, 2008).

Self-esteem. Defined by Baumeister et al. (2003) as a situation which means the individual’s being approved by others, being praised and being accepted as valuable due to what he does. Self-esteem is also explained as acceptance not only the positive actions but also being disapproved or not being appreciated, that is, it is the situation whether the individual finds himself valuable or not. (p. 2)

Self-perception. Defined as “perception of oneself” (“Self-perception,” n.d.).

Snob. “A person with an exaggerated respect for high social position or wealth who seeks to associate with social superiors and looks down on those regarded as socially inferior” (“Snob,” n.d.).

Viewer. Defined as “a person watching television or a film” (“Viewer,” n.d.).

Wannabe. “A person who tries to be like someone else or to fit in with a particular group of people” (“Wannabe,” n.d.).

Welfare Queen. “A lazy woman of color, with numerous children she cannot support, who is cheating taxpayers by abusing the system to collect government assistance” (Gilman, 2014, p. 247).

Worthless. ””Having no real value or use” (“Worthless,” n.d.).

Young woman. Defined as “a woman who is young; an adolescent or young adult female” (“Young woman,” n.d.).

Theoretical Framework

In order to answer the research questions it was necessary to establish theoretical frameworks. Three theoretical frameworks were applied in this analysis.

Racial Formation Theory

For centuries, race, which has been based on how individuals look rather than how they truly are, has played a central role in shaping the social world. Racial formation theory was created by Omi and Winant (1994) for individuals to view race as “a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion” (p. 184). Race was defined by Omi and Winant as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (pp. 68-69).

Cultivation Theory

Television has served as a medium that heavily influences viewers with the purpose to get a message across to viewers, for them to view images, and to serve as a main source for individuals to gain meaning. Television can heavily influence the viewers' perception on the real world. Cultivation theory, developed by Gerbner, Gross, and Gross (1976), aligns with the impact television has on viewers, stating that "the more time people spend 'living' in the television world, the more likely they are to believe the social reality portrayed on television" (p. 11). This study served as a pilot for other studies to be conducted that expanded upon the original study. The questions that stem from creating cultivation theory are the "effects" television has on the viewer.

The theory suggests that television influences the viewer's "social and cultural impacts of media, focusing on how television viewing, in particular, is related to our conceptions of social reality" (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015, p. 675).

Cultivation theorists assume this occurs when viewers lack knowledge or personal experience on subjects being viewed on television. The theorists assume that attitudes and behaviors about society or about oneself are shaped and influenced by messages being received and portrayed on television. The more influential television becomes in a viewer's life cultivates the viewer's perspective about society itself.

Social Dominance Theory

Social dominance theory (SDT), developed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999), argues that group-based social hierarchy is based on three main processes "aggregated individual discrimination, aggregated institutional discrimination, and behavioral asymmetry" (p. 39). It is a theory "of social and intergroup relations that focuses on how people develop

hierarchy supporting belief structures as a support for institutional dominance” (Islam, 2014, p. 1779). SDT focuses on the main influences supporting the hierarchy of groups that are based on different traits. These hierarchies can be based on “gender, race, age, economic status, and other characteristics - either naturally recurring or obtained” (Hawks, n.d.).

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In order to gain a better understanding of the overall content in the shows selected for this study, a content analysis was conducted. A content analysis is used to answer “the classic question of communications research: who says what, to whom, why, how and with what effect” (Babbie, 2016, p. 324). It offers meaning to the researcher by analyzing datasets, which allows for interpretation of meaning. According to Hesse-Biber (2017), the most common goal of a content analysis is to identify and unpack the play of dominant ideologies within mainstream texts.

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to allow the researcher to use categories to set limits and to gain an in-depth explanation. For this study, the medium of television was examined. When exploring media outlets for a qualitative content analysis, researchers found that using media texts are always polysemic (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 249). They contain a multitude of meanings that can be interpreted by the researcher in different ways for different reasons. To analyze the effects of colorism in the 21st century, five different television shows were examined to determine how colorism is represented in contemporary television.

Sample

To examine colorism and contemporary beauty among young women of color on television in the 21st century, the analysis covered five different episodes ($N=5$), each

from a different television series, and looked specifically at interactions and discussions about colorism and the dialogue around the idea of beauty.

The type of sample selected for this study was a purposive sample. According to Hesse-Biber (2017), a purposive sample is chosen “based on the particular research question as well as consideration of the resources available to the researcher” (p. 55). Hence, the sample was chosen purposefully rather than randomly. The sample was limited to only five television shows due to the lack of current episodes that discuss issues related to the ideology of colorism and beauty specifically within the 21st century. To answer the research questions, it was crucial for this study to select a sample that was centered around issues of beauty and race, including dialogue by women of color about the effects of and the issues around colorism. When selecting the television show, the determination was made to include television shows that aired between 2001 to 2018.

The shows were chosen because each show met the criteria for the purpose of the study. All of the shows selected are currently still airing on major networks or mediums such as Netflix and Hulu. The majority of the shows selected have Black female leads, which allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the portrayal of Black women’s experiences. It was imperative to select shows that put emphasis on Black women and beauty. The role of Black women has evolved throughout time; however, the medium insinuates certain ideologies to young women of color. Prior to coding, the entire season of the show selected was watched, which led the researcher to locate the specific episode selected. Watching the entire season or seasons allowed the researcher to have more context and a better understanding of the plot of the show and the characters’ background information. For this study the shows selected included *Black-ish* (Anderson, Dobbins,

Sugand, & Gross, 2014), *Dear White People* (Simien, Bowser, Allain, & Lebedev, 2017), *Empire* (Daniels, Grazer, Strong, & Calfo, 2015), *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al. 2018), and *The Carmichael Show* (Carmichael, Stoller, Nadan, & Sanchez-Witzel, 2015). Table 1 indicates the shows, the particular episode selected, and the air date.

Table 1

Episode Guide

Title of Show	Episode	Air Date
<i>Black-ish</i>	S5 E10 “Black Like Us”	January 15, 2019
<i>Dear White People</i>	S1 E4 “Chapter IV”	April 28, 2017
<i>Empire</i>	S1 E2 “The Outspoken King”	January 14, 2015
<i>Grown-ish</i>	S1 E10 “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp”	March 7, 2018
<i>The Carmichael Show</i>	S1 E1 “Pilot”	August 26, 2015

Show and Character Guide

Black-ish

Black-ish is a family television sitcom that is currently in its fifth season, airing weekly on ABC. The show follows the Johnson family, which is made up of Andre “Dre” Johnson and his wife Rainbow “Bow” Johnson and their four kids. Andre Johnson, played by Anthony Anderson, is a marketing executive who is worried “that his children are losing touch with black culture because they are growing up in an affluent, mostly white neighbourhood” (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d). Rainbow “Bow” Johnson is a hard-working, devoted, biracial mother and anesthesiologist. Andre and Rainbow have four

children and two of them are twins. The oldest daughter, Zoey Johnson, who is a smart, stylish, and social media addict, is played by Yara Shahidi. The second oldest son, Andre Jr. “Junior,” played by Marcus Scribner, is awkward and mocked for liking activities in which his White friends are interested. The youngest two children are twins Jack and Diane, played by Miles Brown and Marsai Martin. Diane, who considers herself the smarter twin, is sassy and brings her twin brother along for different schemes she has planned. Jack is portrayed as the less intelligent twin and is easily manipulated by his other siblings.

The episode that was examined for this study was from Season 5 Episode 10, entitled “Black Like Us” (21 minutes). In the episode Jack brings home the school photo of Diane and his class. Dre and Bow are furious because Diane cannot be seen in the photo because the lighting is not good. They “decide to talk to the principal about the need for sensitivity toward all complexions” (ABC, 2018). Junior, the eldest son, talks about how there is an issue of colorism among their own family that is not discussed.

Grown-ish

Grown-ish, a spinoff of the show *Black-ish*, follows the oldest daughter of the series, Zoey Johnson, played by Yara Shahidi. The show is currently in its second season, airing weekly on Freeform. Slaton (n.d.) stated the show is geared towards a younger audience - 15 and up. The series follows Zoey and her group of friends, Aaron Jackson, Ana Torres, Nomi Segal, Vivek Shah, Jazz and Sky Forster, and Luca Hall.

Aaron Jackson, played by Trevor Jackson, is an upperclassman and a young college activist. Ana Torres, played by Francia Raisa, is a young Catholic, Republican, Miami native who is the child of two Cuban immigrants; she also is Zoey’s roommate.

Nomi Segal, played by Emily Arlook, is a White, bisexual, Jewish woman. She is a liberated woman who does not conform to the stereotypical idea of how White, Jewish women should act.

Vivek Shah, played by Jordan Buhat, is a first generation Gujarati Indian born in a Hindu family who loves the singer Drake. He has always made straight As, is a National Merit Scholar, and aspires to become an engineer. He also is known as the campus drug dealer. Jazz and Sky Forster, played by Chloe and Halle Bailey, are twins who are highly recruited track athletes at the university on track scholarships. Luca Hall, played by Luka Sabbat, is a young, African American male whose eclectic style is driven from his love for fashion.

As Zoey enters her freshman year, she and her friends experience early classes, registration, school work, extracurricular activities, partying, relationships, racism, dating, and the everyday struggles of a young freshman in college. The specific episode selected for this study was Season 1 Episode 10 (21 minutes), titled “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp.” The episode aired on Freeform on March 7, 2018 and was directed by Marta Cunningham. The episode follows main characters Jazz and Sky as they struggle to hit a dating stride in a college landscape (IMDb, n.d.c). The episode takes place on campus at the local restaurant and bar. Discussions arise between the main African American characters regarding the hierarchy and exclusion of beauty on college campuses. This specific episode was selected because it aligns with the purpose of this study.

Dear White People

The original Netflix series, *Dear White People*, aired on Netflix in 2017. Currently, the show is filming its third season. The series takes place on a predominantly

White, Ivy League college campus, Winchester University. The show follows four Black students at the university who face adversity and different challenges. Each season is labeled by a volume number and a chapter number, depending on the episode. Thus far there are two seasons with 10 episodes per season. Throughout the first season, each episode focused on problematic issues that happen on the campus and the story of how the four main characters dealt with these issues.

The lead character is Samantha White, a biracial, light skin, light eyes, long hair, edgy college student played by Logan Browning. White is a junior at the university, a media studies major, and has a face that sticks out in the sea of White students. She is a well-known leader on campus for her radio show, *Dear White People*, which is an anonymous show aired over the student radio station weekly. The purpose of the show is to bring visibility and attention to the feelings of underrepresented groups outside the majority on campus. Sam's best friend, Joelle Brooks, played by Ashley Blaine Featherson, is a tall, darker complexioned collegiate women who is always supportive of Sam. Reggie Green, played by Marque Richardson, is an activist who admires Sam and is always involved with campus activities.

Another main character is Lionel Higgins, a gay Black male, who is slowly figuring out his sexuality. He was picked on in high school by Blacks for identifying with things that are for "White" people. He is a student journalist who writes for the newspaper. Troy Fairbanks, played by Brandon Bell, is the son of the first Black president on the Winchester campus. His father is part of the administration at Winchester and strongly influences Troy and dictates his every move. Troy is relatable to both the Black students and the White students on campus. Troy develops relationships

with many females throughout the series, but one of his most memorable relationships is with Colandrea “Coco” Conner. Coco is a darker skin collegiate women who is particular about her looks and everything she does. She is active on campus and serves as the treasurer for one of the Black activist clubs.

For this study, the episode selected was from Season 1 Episode 4, titled “Chapter IV” (28 minutes; Brown & Mabry, 2017). The episode focused on unfolding Colandrea Coco Conner’s story. The episode starts when she arrived on campus and she and Sam met. Throughout the episode the viewer sees Coco’s and Sam’s interests change and start developing as they define their identities throughout their first semester. Coco wants to join a sorority and undergoes changes to fit the part. A fight with Sam stirs up memories of their friendship; and the differences that drove them apart (IMDb, n.d.b). This episode was selected because it aligns with the purpose of this study.

Empire

Empire is currently in its fifth season airing weekly on FOX. The show according to Croop (n.d.) is for an audience 16 and up. The show revolves around the Lyon family who run their own media company (FOX, n.d.). Lucious Lyon played by Terrence Howard is the CEO of Empire Entertainment. Cookie Lyon played by Taraji P. Henson plays the role of the ex wife of Lucious Lyon. Cookie did 17 years in prison for using 400,000 dollars in drug money to help start up Empire Entertainment. After spending 17 years in jail, Cookie is looking to pick up things at Empire and manage artists and make a name for herself again. When Cookie returns after her time in prison she is also rebuilding her relationships with her three sons Andre Lyon, Jamal Lyon, and Hakeem Lyon. Andre Lyon is the oldest son who graduated from Penn but battles with mental

health issues . He is the only son who is not musically inclined but instead helps run the business side of Empire Entertainment. Jamal is the middle child who is known for singing, being a true musician, and he is an open gay male in the music industry. Hakeem Lyon is the youngest, a hot-headed son known for partying, women, and rapping. The episode selected for this study was Season 1 Episode 2, titled “The Outspoken King” (44 minutes), which aired January 14, 2015. The episode selected for this study examines the roles of the two assistants for Luscious and Cookie, which aligns with the purpose of this study.

The Carmichael Show

The show is aired on NBC and has a total of three seasons. The show is influenced by comedian Jerrod Carmichael. The show follows Jerrod and his family. Jerrod’s girlfriend, Maxine, played by Amber Stevens West, is a therapist in-training (NBC, n.d.). His religious mother, Cynthia, played by Loretta Devine, is an outspoken, religious mother of two who is married to Joe Carmichael, played by David Alan Grier. Joe is an outspoken and contrarian father (NBC, n.d.). Bobby Carmichael, played by Lil Rel Howery, is Jerrod’s ever-hustling brother (NBC, n.d.). Bobby’s ex-wife, Nekeisha, is played by Tiffany Haddish.

The episode selected for this study was Season 1 Episode 1, titled “Pilot” (21 minutes; Carmichael & Cohen, 2015). Jerrod and Maxine move in together, but Jerrod is reluctant to tell his parents. Maxine feels they both need to be open and honest; Jerrod and his brother Bobby know that this is a recipe for disaster (IMDb, n.d.a). As the episode unfolds the couple arrive at Jerrods parents’ house and secrets start to be

revealed. The episode was selected for this study to examine how colorism is portrayed in 21st century television shows.

Reliability

In order to establish reliability, to produce accurate, precise, stable, and consistent results, a code book was created for this study to examine specific behaviors among individual characters. A code book was used ensure all indicators were coded the exact same way for each episode. Each indicator was operationalized and based on previous literature cited. The initial viewing of each episode was done without coding; then coding was conducted after this initial viewing. The researcher watched each predetermined episode until the specific episode was completely coded.

Coding Process

A specific coding scheme was developed to analyze the characters' interactions and behaviors in each show. In order to answer the research questions, an indicator sheet and code book were used. The code book was used to code scenes in each episode efficiently. The code book consisted of five different sections: lead or supporting character, gender, character name, age, and ethnicity. In order to precisely answer each research question, the code book included the name of the series, a brief description of the episode, gender of each character, title of the episode, length of the episode, source, target age, and a list of characters. Included in the code book were the main indicators used and underneath each indicator were boxes where each interaction could be recorded. The indicator sheet used for the study consisted of a place where the researcher filled in the episode title, the category (beauty, self esteem, or portrayals), the indicator, and a brief description of the episode. A box was provided at the bottom of the sheet

which is where each interaction that fit the description was coded. See Appendix A for the coding sheet used and Appendix B for the indicator sheet.

All the indicators used in the code book were based on terms operationalized in the previous section. An indicator has been defined by Babbie (2016) as an observation that is chosen to be examined and a reflection of a variable that is to be studied. The researcher specifically looked for indicators that were used when women were discussing women of color and beauty as well as how each individual perceived these things. When deciding which indicators would be used it was imperative to make sure there were a balanced number of positive and negative attributes within each category to ensure reliability.

In each section of the code book, main categories were listed (beauty, self esteem, and portrayal). Under each category, 16 indicators were listed for each category. For the category of beauty, the indicators used were classy, snob, prissy, rich, delicate, long hair, natural hair, masculine, overweight, and fit. For the self esteem category, the indicators used were praised, approved, disapproved, confident, excluded, worthless, assertive, and rejected. For portrayals, the indicators used were the mammy, Jezebel, baby mama, the welfare queen, the matriarch, the angry black woman, Sapphire, the wannabe, educated, the magical negro, the independent Black women, and the Black athlete.

For this study the researcher recorded interactions among five different episodes looking for specific indicators in each episode. The interaction was only documented if it included any of the indicators listed on the coding sheet. When watching each episode, the researcher coded when each indicator was shown, a brief description, the time the indicator occurred, and the end time. The start time and end time of the interaction were

recorded to allow for easy referencing when doing the analysis. Babbie (2016) defined coding as a “process of transforming raw data into a standardized form” (p. 328). Each time an interaction was coded it was noted whether the indicator was received or directed to or directed by a lighter or darker complexion character in the show. It was vital when coding to note the skin tone of the character to answer the research questions.

Each show was watched numerous times until the episode was coded in entirety. For each show the same code sheet was used for each individual episode. Then the data were analyzed, which provided further information to determine the answers to the research questions. The same coding scheme was used for all five shows to provide consistent, precise data.

Analysis Process

After coding each episode, the researcher analyzed the data collected from each show. Through the analysis, the research questions were answered through each dataset. The researcher gathered information from various episodes and television shows to develop a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, describe, organize, and report themes that are found within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When deciding upon each theme, how frequently a theme occurred within each show was taken into consideration. Thematic analysis was beneficial in order to decipher and find certain themes that emerged from watching each show. In the next chapter, the findings based on the themes that emerged from the shows are presented.

CHAPTER 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

As part of this analysis, each show selected was reviewed using the methodology described in Chapter 3. After analyzing the shows in depth, themes emerged that coincided with each research question posed. Each show revealed that colorism still exists in 21st century television shows. The direct impact colorism has on young women of color affects their self-esteem and their idea of beauty. In this chapter, the findings are discussed based on the analysis conducted for each episode. The findings of this study are broken down in relation to the research questions. Based on the analysis conducted after watching and coding a total of five different shows, themes emerged that answer each research question. The four research questions were:

1. Do young women of color in the 21st century have a better concept of their own beauty than in previous centuries in the United States?
2. Do issues of colorism still exist on television in the 21st century?
3. How are issues of colorism displayed in contemporary television shows?
4. Do issues of colorism impact the self-esteem, self-perception, and perception of others among women of color in the 21st century?

Black-ish

The show *Black-ish* met the criteria for the research study by focusing on issues of colorism among the Johnson family and displaying two of the main characters through the specific caricature of the angry Black woman.

Black-ish Season 5 Episode 10, entitled “Black Like Us” (Saji & Richardson-Whitfield, 2019), aired on January 15, 2019. The main characters in the episode selected are Diane and Jack, the youngest kids of the Johnson family; Junior, the eldest son, who is taking a gap year; the parents, Bow and Andre; and grandmother Ruby Johnson, Dre Johnson’s mother, who lives with Andres family. The episode focuses on Diane and Jack’s school picture, which causes heated discussion on colorism. Dre and Bow are angry that Diane appears to very dark-skinned in the school photo. The parents feel that the photograph was not lighted correctly to accommodate African American children and they make the decision to talk to the principal about being “sensitive toward all complexions” (ABC, 2018). Junior brings to the families attention that there is a colorism issue in the family that is never spoken about. Throughout the episode heated arguments develop around the issue of colorism.

In this episode, “Black Like Us,” research question 1 is addressed. Darker skin young women of color are still battling with the beauty standards implemented within the 21st century. In the episode Bow tries telling Diane that all Black skin is beautiful, but she replies “Okay. So why do people bleach their skin?” (14:36) Dre questions Diane after she makes the skin bleaching comment and Diane tells her dad “it’s like a \$10-billion dollar business” (14:40). When Diane goes to a cosmetic store, she picks up red lipstick and is about to put it on when a darker complexion women sales associate stops her and says “Oh, trust me. Women like us shouldn’t wear red lipstick” (15:01). Diane has a flashback of how she has dealt with the struggle of being darker complexioned in the past. She is at a bakery stand and a light skin women approaches her and says “Oh, look at you. You are gorgeous for a dark skin girl” (15:07). The examples given in the

episode of *Black-ish* coincide with research question 1, suggesting that darker skin young women are still battling with their own beauty, which aligns with the old perception of beauty in previous centuries.

This episode, “Black Like Us,” also addresses research question 2, providing evidence that colorism still exist on television in the 21st century. Dre explains at the beginning of the episode how dividing slaves by color during slavery days has caused a “deep-seated tension and resentment that continues to this day. The resentment is so great that it makes us hyper-sensitive to issues of complexion” (3:52). Dre goes on highlighting that there are still issues of colorism that exist in society today. Dre gives an overview, stating that

Black people come in many shades, from Mariah Carey to Wesley Snipes. Because we look different we get discriminated against differently. Like in the case of O.J. A magazine made his skin look darker to make him seem more villainous. And sadly it’s not just done to us like with the ‘Are You Darker Than a Brown Paper Bag Test.’ Sometimes we even discriminate against each other. It’s called ‘colorism.’ (2:44)

During the episode, Jack gives Bow and Dre the school photo of their class. Their parents look at the photo and Bow asks where’s Diane? Bow and Dre get upset and Dre yells “They O.J.’d my baby!” (1:55).

Another example that provides support to the notion that colorism still exists on 21st century television shows is when Dre is arguing with Bow, Junior, and Ruby. He tries to explain to Bow and Junior that darker complexion people suffer daily in everyday life. Dre says “This is about looking at damn near every movie, magazine and television

show and only seeing a lighter version of yourself” (13:39). Dre expresses to Bow and Junior “the only time I see a dark skinned person on TV is when the news says the police have murdered another one of us” (13:52). The examples stated add support to research question 2 that colorism is still prevalent on 21st century television shows.

Research question 3 is supported throughout the episode, “Black Like Us,” on how issues of colorism are displayed through portrayals. In several scenes Ruby is seen yelling, screaming, and making rude remarks towards other family members, portraying the angry black woman caricature. Ruby is seen going back in fourth with Bow arguing, saying “

You know what? You can act like you’re hurt if you want to, Rainbow, but if you get to complain about a few jokes, I get to complain about how light skin is the Black standard of beauty. Who do women with deeper skin tones have to look up to huh? (9:00)

The family is in the kitchen continuing to argue when Junior brings up Lupita Nyong’o and Ruby asks Junior to name another darker complexion women and all he can think of is Lupita’s last name Nyong’o. Ruby yells at Bow and starts pointing her finger saying “Let me help you out-- Tika Sumpter...Viola Davis...And that beautiful bald-headed lady from Black Panther... But Lupita’s on all magazines because they only choose one dark skin women to celebrate every 10 years”(9:28). Ruby feels no type of sympathy towards Bow or Junior; she directly targets comments at Bow yelling “You think you’re the only ones fighting two battles? Dark skin people have been picked on by white people and light skin people ever since they bought us here” (12:41). The examples provide support

to research question 3, suggesting that colorism still exists through negative portrayals such as the angry Black woman, which is associated with darker complexion women.

The impact of self-esteem asked about in research question 4 is addressed in the episode, “Black Like Us.” Throughout the entire episode, while her family argues, Diane is very passive, asking them just to drop it. Towards the end of the episode she finally opens up about how being a darker complexion women impacts her and her self-esteem. Diane has finally had enough by the end of the episode and she confronts Dre who has been arguing for darker complexion people. Diane says to her father “since when did you become dark skin?” (14:02) She tells her dad and other family members that none of them are as dark as she is: “no one in this family is as dark as me. That’s the problem” (14:08). She brings to her family’s attention that if it’s such a good thing that she’s dark why is everyone afraid to talk about it? She tells them that they are blaming her picture on the “the camera lighting” or “complexion” (14:22). She stands up to her whole family, saying all of this arguing is really “about me being darker” (14:25). Bow looks shocked because she had no clue Diane struggled with being in her own skin. She says “Diane, I had no idea that this hurt you so much” (14:46). Diane says “How could it not?” (14:48)

Examples are then given from Diane’s everyday life of her struggles. One example is the bandaid being placed on her and another student’s knees, which is skin tone for the lighter complexion girl but stands out on her knee (14:50). The issue of colorism not only affects Diane throughout the episode but Ruby as well. Toward the end of the show the viewers see how being a darker complexion women directly affects Ruby. Ruby breaks down after Bow calls her a monster, saying “I’ve been called that all my life, and I’m not about to sit here and let you do it” (16:27). Ruby later comes back

and has all of the family sit down while she shows them an album of photos of her when she was little. She explains to them that she used to feel different, too. “You see, I was the darkest one in my family because my people were Creoles from Baton Rouge. They were all light enough to pass the Brown Paper Bag Test” (17:38). Ruby goes deeper in explaining her childhood to the family, saying

They were evil to my father. And they were even more evil to me. I wasn’t allowed in the front yard with my cousins. I had to play by myself in the back so my dark skin and my nappy hair wouldn’t embarrass my light skin family. (18:02)

She reminisces on a nursery rhyme they sang around her “If you’re light, you’re alright, If you’re brown, stick around. If you’re black, get back” (18:19). Ruby turns to Bow and confesses “I was mad at them, not you. And today I realized I have been hurting you the same way they hurt me. I’m so... so sorry, Rainbow” (16:32). This episode of *Black-ish* adds support to research question 4 that issues of colorism do impact darker women of colors self esteem through 21st century television shows.

Grown-ish

The show *Grown-ish* met the criteria for the research study by focusing on issues of colorism, the effects colorism has on the self-esteem of women of color, and how women of color are portrayed. In Season 1 Episode 1, “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp” (Barris & Cunningham, 2018), which aired March 7, 2018, two of the main characters, Jazz and Sky, are on the track team at the university. They are twins who run track and are not afraid to express what they think and feel. Another character in the episode is Zoey Johnson, who is known for her fashion and for being well-known on campus. Ana, who is a Cuban and also a Republican, is part of the friend group. Neomi is a Jewish girl

who is part of the friend group and who is also bisexual. The main male characters are Luca, who is into fashion and who identifies as a trend setter; Aaron, a young activist who is vocal about what he believes in; and Vivek, a Gujarati Indian, who is the campus drug dealer.

The show follows Jazz and Sky and their concerns about being ignored by men on campus, especially African American men because of their skin tone. Controversial discussions occur with the friends at the local college bar. In the episode selected research question 1 is addressed when the lighter skin characters are associated with positive beauty attributes and darker characters with negative beauty attributes.

In this episode, Aaron discusses his preferences for women and Luca points out that all of the girls Aaron likes look the same. Aaron becomes defensive and refers to his social media for proof. The women in each picture are lighter skin women with long straight hair and light eyes. He refers to them in the caption as “Queens.” Luca tells Aaron that he excludes certain Black females in his definition of queens and Luca says “you love queens .. when they’re Egyptian not Nubian” (3:36). The group of friends sits at a table at the local college bar and Luca brings to Aaron’s attention that he only likes lighter complexion females. Aaron goes out of his way to find a dark complexion women at the bar and introduces her to his friends to prove Luca wrong. He emphasizes rudely that she is from Cameroon and tells his friend he wants to take a picture with the dark-skinned girl and hashtag it “motherland.” The young lady is insulted and realizes she is being used by Aaron just because she is a darker complexion. She has dark skin and has a short masculine haircut. This episode of *Grown-ish* adheres to research question 1,

suggesting that the old idea of beauty is still present in the contemporary television. The characters reflect the old negative ideas of regarding African American women's beauty.

Research question 2 was addressed in the episode, adding support to the idea that issues of colorism still exists on 21st century television shows. In the first few minutes of the show it is clear that colorism exists based on the divide and discrimination among the women on the college campus. The female lead character in the show, Zoey, narrates the opening scene, discussing how far the current generation has come when it comes to dating and openness. Zoey walks down the hallway of her college dorm and states

There is no question that our generation is more open than any other generation that came before it. And when it comes to dating, it's like we have an open-door policy. That's right – in our world anyone can get it. (00:15)

Zoey implies that the current generation has made strides in being open to dating people from different ethnicities and people who do not necessarily have the same skin tone as they do. Zoey concludes, "We've mixed things up so much that in 40 years, we're gonna have this planet looking like a bunch of Jesse Williams. But it's not that easy for everybody." She makes reference to a popular male actor who is half White and half Black. Zoey understands that there have been changes made by this generation that have increased interracial dating and that it has become more acceptable. However, her last statement is "it's not that easy for everybody." She acknowledges that there are still certain groups that are being discriminated against. The audience finds out that darker complexion Black women still have a problem.

In the episode, many of the scenes take place at the local bar by campus where the friend group often goes. Zoey narrates a scene at the bar by "Online dating sites like

OkCupid and Tinder have proven statistically that some groups are selected more than others” after she speaks a picture of a White women and the words “amongst the highest rated” appear. Following the White woman, a picture of a Asian women pops up as highest rated across the board. Zoey says that other groups “they do don’t do as great ??”(0:49) She continues “no group gets less love than Black women”(0:52). Jazz, Sky, and other dark complexion females stand along the wall alone. To support her last statement, Zoey provides a statistic from OkCupid that “82% of non - black men show some bias against black women.” Then, Doug, a Black supporting actor in the show, walks past the group of darker complexion women against the wall with a White girl on his arm. A hierarchy is established in the episode where White women are most sought after, then Asian women, then light complexion exotic women, then, last, the darker complexion women. Research question 2 was addressed, adding support through examples that colorism is still a dominant issue visible on 21st century television shows.

This *Grown-ish* episode also adheres to the third research question posed, supporting the idea that colorism displayed in contemporary television shows is through portrayals. Colorism is still evident through negative characterization for darker complexion women; for example, as “angry black women” and as “sapphire,” and positive characterization is evident for the light complexion women such as the good executive, the girlfriend, and the sorority girl. The depiction of each character was vital when determining to see how issues of colorism are displayed through portrayals on television shows. Jazz and Sky, the two sisters on the show, consistently tried expressing their concerns about being discriminated against. Jazz and Sky are portrayed as aggressive, overbearing, ill tempered, and angry. They are depicted as the angry black

women throughout the show. Jazz is very aggressive when she sees Doug walking past with a White girl. As he passes, Jazz angrily says “ain’t that bitch” (1:02). Jazz was angrily expressing how she felt because of her skin tone she was constantly overlooked and she felt shunned by the Black male, Doug. Jazz is also viewed cussing, yelling at friends, and aggressively ill tempered. She yells at the group angrily “everyone is always checking for the girl who looks black, but no one wants the girl who actually is” (7:41). The statement made by Jazz describes how everyone wants the White or lighter complexion woman but no one wants the darker woman who is actually Black. Research question 3 was addressed, providing examples to support the question that colorism is displayed through positive and negative portrayals based on the hue of one’s skin tone.

Research question 4 was addressed in the episode of *Grown-ish* examined. The self-esteem of the darker skin women was directly impacted based on the examples provided. In the episode Jazz tries to get her point across that color biases do exist on their campus. She says to her group of friends that all her and her sister are trying to say “is sometimes when we look around campus, it feels like we are really at the bottom of the list” (4:17). In another scene, Sky sits at the table at the campus bar feeling rejected by society because she says “pop culture sends the message that black girls are not it” (6:55). While they are discussing the discrimination that is happening on campus, a Black male approaches the table where the friend group is sitting. Jazz perks up and smiles at him he smiles back and ask “how’s your night going?” The young Black guy glances at the friend group, but dismisses Jazz and directs his energy toward Ana, who is lighter skinned (7:13). This is another example providing support for research question 4 that

issues of colorism impact the self-esteem among darker women of color in the 21st century.

Dear White People

The show *Dear White People* was selected because of the content in the show that focused on issues of colorism, beauty, and the self-esteem of women of color. The main characters from the episode selected were Colandrea “Coco” Conners, a dark-skinned college student who is eager to find a group that accepts her, and Samantha White, a multiracial college activist who runs a campus radio show, *Dear White People*. The episode selected for analysis was Season 1 Episode 4 titled “Chapter IV,” which reflects the idea that young women of color, specifically darker complexion women, are associated with negative beauty attributes. The episode takes place on a predominantly White Ivy League college campus, Winchester University, and focuses on the character Colandrea “Coco” Conners. Sam and Coco’s friendship unfolds as they reflect back on how their friendship and interests have evolved.

This episode, “Chapter IV,” addresses research question 1 in the episode: The positive idea of beauty is associated with the lighter complexion women. Attributes such as prissy, fit, classy, and snobby are used in the narrative in the show about sorority girls who were predominantly lighter skinned. Sam and Coco are invited to attend a sorority interest meeting by the president of the sorority Karen, who makes rude remarks about Coco’s hair not being like other girls’ hair (13:57). All of the girls in the sorority are encouraged to have similar long hair, features, and demeanors. With research question 1 being addressed based on the examples in the show, young women of color in the 21st

century are influenced by the old idea of beauty in previous centuries in the United States.

The episode specifically addresses research question 2 in scenes where colorism is highlighted. In the episode, young women of color are divided based on their skin tone, appearance, social status, and beauty. The group of sorority girls who approach Sam and Coco embody the characteristics of what is considered beautiful. The head of the sorority Karen displays qualities of snobbishness. She makes rude remarks about Coco's hair, saying she obviously bought your hair (13:57). All of the girls in the sorority have similar long hair and features. Coco is discriminated against when it comes to joining the sorority; she overhears the sorority girls insulting her behind closed doors and saying they wish they would have gotten Sam, who is the light skin, long hair, confident woman (21:30). During one of the scenes Coco has a flashback of when she is in elementary school. All the students in the class are sitting on the mat and the teacher tells them "first we are going to have playtime and then snack time and then nap time" (1:15). The teacher releases the kids for playtime. Coco and the other young Black girls run to the toy box. Coco grabs a White doll and light skin Black girls surround her and take the doll from her saying "No, you take the ugly one" (1:30). The doll the young girls are referring to is a dark doll with an afro. Issues of colorism are present in the episode analyzed, supporting research question 2 that issues of colorism are still prevalent on television in the 21st century.

Issues of colorism are displayed through portrayals with the main characters in the show which adhere to research question 3. The angry black woman stereotype is applied to Coco's character, the darker skinned woman, in the episode. During the episode Coco

is seen yelling and cussing because Sam's radio show *Dear White People*, which airs across campus, took the recorded clip of Coco at a Black face party, altered her voice, and looped the clip of Coco saying "these people don't give a fuck about no Harriet motherfucking Tubman" (4:04). In another scene Coco yells and curses angrily at the sorority girls for talking about her behind her back (21:58). The main character Sam, who is lighter skinned, is displayed as a young, mixed woman who is educated and able to hold intellectual conversations. Sam references Assata Shakur and relates back to Coco: "I told you about Assata Shakur and what would she say about you overdrawing your bank for a weave?" (19:43) The dominant caricature in the show was the darker complexion women, portrayed in the negative angry black women role. The episode provides support for the fact that issues of colorism are still dominant in contemporary television shows through stereotypical portrayals.

Research question 4 is directly answered, showing how the self-esteem of a darker complexion woman is directly impacted because of colorism in the episode examined. In one scene Coco overhears the sorority girls calling her a liar. Coco storms in angrily, yelling

Sisterhood. huh? Tracey, you got an 850 on your SATs. If you weren't a legacy you'd be a flight attendant on Spirit Airlines. Elizabeth, your underarms are not your strong suit, and Mike dumped you 'cause you smell like slave socks. And Karen, you're a fucking slut. (21:53)

Coco, being the darker skinned woman, was often excluded, disapproved, and rejected throughout the episode. A drunk White boy approaches Coco at the Black face party and touches her face asking, "how did you get the color so even ... oh!" The young White

boy laughs and walks away because he realizes she is Black (0:56). During Coco's first semester at the school she goes to a party with her White friends where men are supposed to pick women by the end of the night; all of her friends have been picked and Coco is seen sitting on the side, lonely because she was not selected (11:38). Another scene that supports the theme is when Coco is arguing with Sam and she confesses aggressively, "dear white people you made me hate myself as a kid" (20:35). Coco states that she feels she is always excluded or stigmatized because of her skin complexion: "they always assume that I'm poor or uneducated or ratchet" (20:23). They assume these things because of Coco's skin tone. Throughout the episode it is evident that Coco's self-esteem is directly affected based on her skin tone.

Empire

Season 1 Episode 2 of *Empire*, entitled "The Outspoken King" (Daniels, 2017), aired January 14, 2015 and was selected based on the content that supported the research study. The scenes throughout the episode associate darker complexion women with negative beauty attributes and with negative portrayals. The color caste system and hierarchy based on colorism are evident among the main characters.

One of the main characters in the episode is Lucious Lyon, who is the CEO of the record label Empire Entertainment. He is the father of three sons, Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem Lyon. Cookie Lyon, his ex-wife, is a dark-skinned, strong, loud, confident woman who served 17 years in prison for using \$400,000 worth of drug money to create Empire Entertainment. While in prison, Lucious divorced Cookie and when she returns, she finds out that Lucious has met someone new, Anika Calhoun. Anika is a light skin, prissy, educated woman who holds a lot of control and power. Andre Lyon is the eldest

son of the Lucious and Cookie Lyon who suffers from bipolar disorder. Andre is married to Rhonda, whom he met during college at an Ivy League institution. Rhonda Lyon is a White, smart, ruthless character who controls what Andre does. The middle son, Jamal Lyon, is musically inclined and also is gay. The wild youngest son, Hakeem, is a rapper who is signed to Empire Entertainment. In the episode selected for analysis, the two assistants, Becky and Porsha, are the dominant characters featured. Becky is an overweight, darker skin assistant to Lucious Lyon who is ready to do whatever is needed of her. Porsha is Cookie Lyon's assistant. She has darker complexion and is loud and outspoken.

The episode, "The Outspoken King," focuses on Lucious defending his company. Problems arise with one of the artists that the company manages, which causes Lucious to have to make significant decisions. Anika is seen in an authoritative role in the company, heavily influencing Lucious's decisions. Cookie is adjusting after her return from prison and hoping to manage Jamal and have him perform with Hakeem at the club Lucious recently purchased.

In this episode, research question 1 is addressed, associating darker skin women with negative beauty indicators and lighter skinned women with positive beauty attributes. The two lead women are Cookie Lyon and Anika Calhoun. Anika is the lighter complexion woman who is depicted as classy, wealthy, and authoritative. Cookie, who is darker complexioned, is portrayed as masculine. She is seen fighting with women and men throughout the episode. Cookie fights with a male rapper who is signed to Empire (14:27). The rapper is all over the news for being involved in a shooting. Cookie bursts into a meeting and insists that he be fired. An argument between the rapper and Cookie

develops, which leads to the two attempting to fight. Cookie is not only seen attempting to fight the artist signed to the label but she is seen trying to fight Anika as well (32:25).

The negative beauty indicators that define the darker complexion women are visible while examining the two assistants in the show. The two assistants in the show are Becky, who assists Luscious Lyon, and Porsha, who assists Cookie Lyon. They are both darker complexion women who are portrayed negatively. Becky is overweight and is seen struggling to keep up while walking down the hallway and holding a conversation with Luscious (8:24). Becky appears as the mammy character, heavy and trying to please. Porsha is the loud-mouthed dark skin women who has a masculine natural hair style, fulfilling the angry Black woman stereotype.

The episode also addressed research question 2, providing evidence that colorism exist in the episode. The show displays how there is a divide among women of color based on their skin complexion because of the hierarchy that exists based on skin color. Andre, the oldest son, is married to a White woman named Rhonda, who is the mastermind behind her husband's success. She controls her husband and tells him how to deal with his family. Throughout the episode she is seen giving her husband orders and demanding that he go to the doctor and be on his medication. At the end of the episode, the family is at an event at the new club Luscious purchased to see both of the youngest boys perform, and Rhonda sternly badgers Andre to take his medication. Rhonda is positioned at the top of hierarchy due to her influence on controlling others and her authoritative role. Below Rhonda on the hierarchy is Anika, the lightest of Black female characters on the show. Anika's role is also a very assertive character. Anika is seen sitting at the head of the table during meetings and managing top artists in the company.

Anika also heavily influences Lucious's decisions within the company. The episode suggests that lighter women of color and White women hold more power and influence than the darker women. There is a divide among the lighter skin women and dark skin women in the episode.

“The Outspoken King” addressed research question 3, which suggest that colorism is displayed through negative caricatures; specifically the mammy and angry Black woman in the episode examined. The episode portrays darker and light complexion women of color differently. The show sticks to the same stereotypical idea that darker skinned women are associated with negative portrayals and lighter skinned women are portrayed in a positive light. The stereotypical mammy caricature is visible in this Empire episode when it comes to the darker complexion women who are the assistants to Lucious and Cookie. Lucious, who is lighter skinned, walks past a dark-skinned women in maid attire while she's dusting and tells her “ I told you not to be down here while I'm working” (2:17). Porsha, who is Cookie's assistant, is treated as the mammy when Cookie, who is darker skinned, yells at her “thought I told you to wait in the car” (11:23). Cookie is constantly seen yelling at and mistreating Porsha. When Cookie throws a shoe at Lucious, Cookie yells at Porsha saying “Porsha get my damn shoe” (18:02). When Becky is caught using Lucious's bathroom, Lucious tells Becky “How many times do I have to tell you about using my bathroom?” (12:34) Becky is treated as a mammy figure that is not allowed to use the same bathroom of the person for whom she works. It is clear that there is a discrimination based on skin tone happening in the episode.

As the episode starts we see Cookie Lyon barging into Lucious's and Anika's house, where she had not been invited, saying “I came to check out my house” (3:50).

Cookie is portrayed as a bitter, angry individual in many scenes. Cookie yells at Anika, aggressively saying “excuse me, sweetie, this a family matter involving two of my sons...” (5:01). Luscious physically tries dragging Cookie out of his house while she yells out to Luscious “get your hands off of me! I’m not that tired Heifer” (5:07). During these two scenes one can see how angry Cookie is through the words and actions she uses towards others. Cookie is seen portraying the angry black woman. Porsha, who is Cookie’s assistant, is darker skinned and is constantly perceived as the loud black woman in the Sapphire role. Porsha pushes her way rudely through a crowd of people outside of the Empire headquarters, yelling “ Move! Get out of our way!” (13:27). Research question 3 is addressed, suggesting issues of colorism are displayed on contemporary television shows through portrayals: darker complexion women in negative roles and lighter skin women in more authoritative educated roles.

The episode adds support to research question 4, providing examples that suggest that negative words are directed towards dark-skin women, which directly impacts their self-esteem. During many scenes, the assistants Porsha and Becky are yelled at and devalued. Cookie refers to Porsha as “a dumbass” and says, “She is slow”(42:06). Cookie is also referred to as “a bitch” in front of Luscious (14:18). Becky is on a phone call with Luscious, trying to tell him important information, but Luscious continues to cut Becky off and silence her. Luscious yells at Becky “get Vernon dammit” (8:51). Following that scene Cookie is seen begging Luscious to allow Jamel to perform alongside Hakeem. Luscious says no and tells Cookie “stop barging in my office, you are not wanted here” (15:14). In the episode examples were provided to support research question 4, adding

supporting evidence that using negative language towards darker women of color directly affects their self-esteem.

The Carmichael Show

The Carmichael Show was selected for the study based on content in the show that discussed issues of colorism, the Black standards of beauty, and the portrayals of darker women of color. The show follows the Carmichael family, focusing on Jerrod Carmichael, the son of Cynthia and Joe Carmichael, who is dating Maxine, a therapist in training and very authoritative and confident. Cynthia Carmichael is the loud, opinionated Christian mother of Jerrod and Bobby. Joe Carmichael, the father, is set in his ways. Bobby Carmichael, brother of Jerrod, is always seen hustling and with his ex-wife Nekeisha. Nekeisha is loud and ghetto and uses bad English.

The Carmichael Show, Season 1 Episode 1 titled, "Pilot," aired August 26, 2015. This episode was selected for the study because it focuses on Jerrod trying to find a way to tell his parents that he and Maxine have moved in together. The episode adheres to research question 1, providing support that positive beauty attributes are associated with the lighter complexion girlfriend, Maxine, while negative beauty attributes are associated with the dark skin ex-wife, Nekeisha. It was clear while examining the episode that there was favoritism towards the lighter skin female. Maxine, the girlfriend of Jerrod Carmichael, is a lighter skinned woman whose beauty is harped on and made visible throughout the entire episode. Maxine has long hair and is prissy and delicate. She enunciates all of her words clearly and carries herself in a prim manner. Maxine displays characteristics that have traditionally been viewed as positive and fit the description of a

lighter skinned woman's beauty. Based on the example, the contemporary television show adheres to the old idea of beauty.

Issues of colorism were prevalent in the episode, which aligns with research question 2. The show suggests that Maxine, the lighter skin girlfriend, was worthy enough to be accepted into the family. Nekeisha, on the other hand, was always seen loudly bickering with her ex-husband, Bobby Carmichael. Through the research and episode it was evident that colorism is still a dominant issue in 21st century television shows.

Research question 3 suggests that issues of colorism are displayed in contemporary television shows through positive and negative portrayals. The episode portrays lighter skinned women in a positive light and darker skinned women in a negative light. Maxine, the light skinned girlfriend, is depicted as the educated woman who is a therapist in training. She is able to hold intelligent conversations with the family and intellectual conversations with her boyfriend. At the beginning of the show Maxine is seen on the couch reading a book. During the episode she discusses politics and the right to vote. Nekeisha, the darker complexion ex-wife, is portrayed as the angry Black woman/Sapphire. She is seen yelling and cussing at Bobby. When Bobby shows his mom, dad, and Nekeisha a magic trick where he cuts a penny in half, Nekeisha yells at Bobby "uh-uh we can't afford that to be cutting up money" (15:07). At the beginning of the episode Nekisha walks in, loudly slamming the door, yelling at Bobby "the next time there is a sock on the door and a sign that says sexual intercourse in progress, do not enter" (4:08).

Cynthia, the mother, is also viewed through the lens of the angry Black woman and the Sapphire. Cynthia and the family are in the living room when Nekeisha explains to the family she has been sleeping with someone else. Cynthia gets angry, yelling at Nekeisha, “who the hell is Lamont” (20:10). The Sapphire caricature was a dominant role for darker women of color throughout the episode. If one compares how Maxine is being portrayed as the intellectual therapist and girlfriend to Jerrod, then examine Nekeisha who uses slang and profanity and is given the role of the ex-wife, one can see that there is a drastic difference in how the two women are depicted in the episode. Nekeisha is portrayed as the negative loud, ghetto, ex-wife; the lighter skinned women, Maxine, is displayed in a more positive light.

Examples in the show support research question 4, suggesting that the impact of colorism has an effect on the self-esteem of darker women. In *The Carmichael Show*, the negative language and actions are directed at the darker complexion women, affecting their self-of esteem. Nekeisha, who is Bobby’s ex-wife is degraded by hypersexualizing her and talking about how she is sleeping with another man. Bobby’s parents disapprove of Nekeisha for getting a divorce, while lighter skinned Maxine is praised by her boyfriend and the family. Maxine displays more assertiveness and confidence in the show. Based on the examples provided in the show, research question 4 asserts that the impact of colorism does have an effect on darker women of colors self esteem.

Summary

Throughout the analysis that was conducted to respond to the research questions stated in Chapter 3, an initial observation could be made that the representations of women of color on television may not have changed significantly in the 21st century. The

analysis of this data demonstrates that colorism still exists and is revealed through the portrayal of women of color on television. Based on research findings, darker women of color are still stigmatized by the negative characteristics. Through language used on 21st century television shows, the self-esteem of darker women may be directly impacted by watching the negative, stigmatizing caricatures that define darker women of color. The negative impacts on the self-esteem of the viewers may also be affected by the language used on the shows examined.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

Introduction

The following is a discussion of the project and findings resulting from an analysis of representation of contemporary beauty among women of color. The purpose of the study was to examine how the representation of young women of color in 21st century television shows, with a focus on how colorism, affects the viewer's idea of beauty and self-esteem. A review of the literature discussed in chapter 3 indicated that dark-skinned African American women have to face the additional oppression of having their skin tone devalued, not just by White people, but within the Black community as well. In order to accomplish this analysis, a review of literature regarding this topic was evaluated from the early representations of women of color to the most recent television representations of the 21st century.

A content analysis of five television programs was conducted. The shows included *Black-ish*, *Dear White People*, *Empire*, *Grown-ish*, and *The Carmichael Show*. Three main categories were examined with indicators within each main category. The main categories were beauty, self-esteem, and portrayals. Indicators that were analyzed for the beauty category included: classy, snobby, prissy, rich, delicate, long hair, natural hair, masculine, overweight, and fit.

The category of self-esteem included the following indicators: praised, approved, disapproved, excluded, assertive, confident, rejected, and worthless. For the category, portrayals, the indicators were: Mammy, Jezebel, baby mama, welfare queen, matriarch,

angry Black woman, Sapphire, wannabe, magical Negro, independent Black women, and Black athlete. The analysis was conducted in order to answer four research questions. The following is a summary of the analysis and findings in regards to each research question.

Discussion

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked: Do young women of color in the 21st century have a better concept of their own beauty than in previous centuries in the United States?

Throughout the five episodes when beauty is discussed or used to describe characters there was a distinct difference in the adjectives used with darker complexion women and those used with lighter skin women of color. When darker complexion women were examined, negative attributes were applied to them in terms of beauty, while positive attributes were given to lighter skinned females throughout the show. Therefore beauty was regarded as it was in previous centuries in the five episodes aired in the 21st century.

In the five shows examined, attributes such as snobby, prissy, rich, and long haired were used to describe the lighter complexion women. The terms found in the shows to describe the light skin women align with how beauty was defined for lighter complexion women in the 1600s through the 1900s (Tindall et al., 2011, p. 41). Further, it was noted that the light-skinned females were considered kinder, gentler, and more delicate in the contemporary shows. This is consistent with the findings of Kerr (2005, p. 273).

If a woman was dark skinned she had what were considered negative traits such as masculinity, being overweight, and having natural hair. Based on these findings, the research suggests that the old ideas of what beauty is among African American women are still produced in the five contemporary television shows analyzed. In order to be deemed as beautiful, women had to be lighter complexion. If young women of color are seeing this, they may develop a negative idea of what beauty is and devalue their own darker complexion.

Research Questions 2 and 3

Research question 2 asked: Do issues of colorism still exist on television in the 21st century? Followed by research question 3: How are issues of colorism displayed in contemporary television shows?

Issues of colorism are still displayed in 21st century television shows through positive and negative caricatures. After analyzing the different television series it was revealed that negative stereotypes are still applied to the characters that dark-skinned women play. The research indicates that lighter skinned women play the role of the educated women and darker skinned women play the roles of the angry black woman and the Sapphire. By displaying negative and positive attributes based on skin tone, the idea may be conveyed to dark complexion young women of color that they cannot get ahead in society today. Young women of color in the 21st century are aware of the social constructs that exist within in the African American community when it comes to the discrimination and divide between lighter skinned women and darker complexion women. It appears that contemporary television shows are reinforcing those stereotypes. The color caste system was visible in each show analyzed. The hierarchy correlates back

to the literature discussed in the Literature Review section around the era of slavery placing White skin at the top of the hierarchy, followed by light skin, and then dehumanizing blacker skin (Norwood, 2015, p. 592).

The five shows revealed that colorism still exists in 21st century television through stereotypical portrayals. All five shows were examined to see if the same stigma from the previous eras were visible on modern day television shows. Sadly, darker complexion women of color were used in 21st century shows to portray roles such as the angry Black woman and the Sapphire. The analysis suggests that darker skinned women of color are discriminated against and routinely given negative roles to portray. The lighter skinned females are given the roles of the educated women and often viewed in authoritative roles.

The portrayal of the angry Black woman role displayed the colorist bias against the dark complexion Black women in the shows. The shows stick to the same stereotypical idea that darker skinned women are associated with negative portrayals and lighter skinned women are portrayed in a positive light. It is clear that there is an authoritative hierarchy that exists based on skin color and a negative stereotype is projected that dark complexion African American women are angry Black women.

Research Question 4

This question asked: Do issues of colorism impact the self-esteem, self-perception, and perception of others among women of color in the 21st century?

This research adds support to the idea that the images produced in contemporary television shows directly impact the darker women of color based on the five shows analyzed. The themes that emerged support the idea that negative terms such as devalued,

disapproved, worthless, and rejected are used in reference to darker complexion women in the shows examined. Positive words such as approved, confident, assertive, and praise worthy were words associated with lighter complexion women of color.

Issues of colorism were directly impacting darker women of color in the television shows examined. If a darker women of color internalizes the language used in the shows, she would associate herself with these negative terms, which might affect her self-esteem. The television shows supported the idea that in order to be confident, approved, and praised, you must be lighter skinned.

Words and actions used displayed how worthless the darker complexion women of color were; lighter skinned characters reinforced the idea and failed to show any sort of concern or compassion towards the darker skinned women. This sets up a damaging dynamic between the two groups of women of color and may affect their perceptions of one another.

Through those examples it became apparent that colorism still exist in 21st century television shows through the portrayals of women of color. The consistency among all five shows indicates that darker skinned African American women are still portrayed in negative roles such as the angry Black woman and the Sapphire.

It is important to note, however, that despite the continued negative stereotypical representation issues of colorism directly impacting darker young women of color, self-esteem and self-perception, women of color are constantly making strides to break the stereotypical way of thinking when it comes to the issues and effects of colorism. A deeper look at women of color in the 21st century reflects a profound change in the social status of women of color from the 1600s to the first two decades of the 21st century. Not

much needs to be said regarding the status of women of color in the 21st century that cannot be observed by taking a look at the representation of women of color in the U.S. House of Representatives. On January 3, 2019, six women of color were sworn into Congress. This clearly indicates that, regardless of the continued negative representation of women of color on television, women of color are making changes within society to diminish the negative stereotypes. This is further demonstrated by women of color in the television industry. One example is Shonda Rhimes, who over the past decade has written, produced, and directed some of the most successful television shows.

Another example that brings awareness to colorism is the 2011 documentary *Dark Girls* (Duke & Berry, 2012), which provides insight to the everyday reality and struggle darker complexion women experience. The documentary gives the viewer insight into darker women's personal stories of discrimination and embedded negative beliefs, along with healing and self love. Further evidence that negative television representation is not necessarily having a major impact on girls of color is demonstrated by 14-year-old Marsai Martin, who stars on the show *Black-ish* as Diane. In her new film, *Little*, which is set to open in theaters on April 12, 2019, she will make history by starring her own film and becoming the youngest Black executive producer in history. While these few examples suggest a shift in the positioning of women of color and the impact of colorism on television this thesis did not attempt a study of these possible changes. Issues of colorism are becoming more visible within the Black community and examples that are provided such as the documentary and producers are breaking barriers and attempting to correct the situation.

Limitations

This study was limited to a review of five contemporary television shows that aired in the 21st century. This met the criteria of reviewing programs shown between 2000-2019. With the limited production of Black television series that present issues about race, skin complexion, and beauty, the study was limited. This limited sample size may not give an accurate representation of the entirety of television shows in the 21st century. This, therefore, reduces the generalizability of the findings.

Future Research

The current study can serve as a pilot study to a larger study that could be done utilizing a more extensive content analysis. Additionally, the study can be broken into three different studies specifically focusing on beauty, self-esteem, and portrayals. Breaking further studies into three separate analyses would allow the researcher to focus specifically on one topic and obtain more precise data. Secondly, it is important to note that scripted shows are not a real depiction of the everyday life of African American women. Conducting the same study but altering the method to do in-depth interviews would obtain a better understanding of the lived experiences of women of color.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Coding Sheet

Coder: _____

Code Sheet ID: _____

Name of Series: _____

Title of Episode: _____

Length: _____

Source (circle one):

1. Netflix

2. Hulu

Target Age:¹ _____

List of
Characters: _____

¹ Determined by Common Sense Media.

Appendix B. Indicator Sheet

Coder Sheet ID: _____

Episode Title: _____

Category: _____

Indicator: _____

Brief description of episode:

List indicator (e.g., A. Classy)

BEAUTY - “A combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight.”

- A.** Classy - “Having or reflecting high standards of personal behavior”
- B.** Snob - “A person with an exaggerated respect for high social position or wealth who seeks to associate with social superiors and looks down on those regarded as socially inferior”
- C.** Prissy - “Excessively proper; affectedly correct; prim”
- D.** Rich - “Having abundant possessions and especially material wealth”
- E.** Delicate - “Highly sensitive”
- F.** Long Hair - “is usually shoulder blade length or longer”
- G.** Natural Hair – “Hair whose texture hasn’t been altered by chemical straighteners, including relaxers and texturizers”
- H.** Masculine - “having qualities appropriate to or usually associated with a man”
- I.** Overweight - “above a weight considered normal or desirable”
- J.** Fit - “in good health, especially because of regular physical exercise”

SELF-ESTEEM - “a situation which means the individual’s being approved by others, being praised and being accepted as valuable due to what he does. Self-esteem is also explained as acceptance not only the positive actions but also being disapproved or not being appreciated, that is, it is the situation whether the individual finds himself valuable or not.”

- K.** Praise - “to glorify (a god or saint) especially by the attribution of perfections”
- L.** Approve - “to have or express a favorable opinion of”
- M.** Disapprove - “to pass unfavorable judgment on”

- N. Exclude - “deny (someone) access to a place, group, or privilege”
- O. Assertive - “having or showing a confident and forceful personality”
- P. Confident - “feeling or showing confidence in oneself or one's abilities or qualities”
- Q. Rejected - “fail to show due affection or concern for (someone)”
- R. Worthless – “Having no real value or use”

PORTRAYALS (CARICATURES) - “picture, description, etc., ludicrously exaggerating the peculiarities or defects of persons or things”

- S. Mammy - “a loyal, desexualized caregiver (with a penchant for ‘sassy’ comedic exchanges)”
- T. Jezebel – “an overtly-sexualized, assertive woman”
- U. Baby Mama - “a woman who becomes pregnant to keep a relationship with the father of her child, take his money, or keeps the child as a ‘part of him’”
- V. Welfare Queen - “a lazy woman of color, with numerous children she cannot support, who is cheating taxpayers by abusing the system to collect government assistance”
- W. Matriarch - “portrays the Black mother as the overbearing head of her household who ‘violates’ the appropriate gender behaviors set by the White patriarchal America”
- X. Angry Black Woman - “aggressive, ill tempered, illogical, overbearing, hostile, and ignorant without provocation”
- Y. Sapphire - “portrays black women as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing”

- Z.** Educated - “a woman who is very educated, but not just towards academics but towards learning and experiencing things from her own life.”
- AA.** Wannabe - “A person who tries to be like someone else or to fit in with a particular group of people”
- BB.** Magical Negro – “the noble, good-hearted black man or woman” “whose good sense pulls the White”
- CC.** Independent Black Woman - “an ability to handle anything on one’s own”

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