

CAP 4800

Senior Capstone- Communications  
Dismantling the Stereotypes of Black  
Male Imagery in Television

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of media in the United States, black representation has missed the mark of being displayed as accurate. Multiple pieces of media such as *A Birth of a Nation* ushered in an archetype of that representation. Not to mention, the writers, producers and even actors in the film were white in a time where black people were excluded from these positions. This film and many others of the time established how black people would go on to be represented in the minds of Americans, but more importantly through the mediums like movies, television, books etc. Due to social, economic and political realities of racism against black people and people of color, the exclusion process was allowed to continue until movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, Black Arts Movement, and Black Sitcoms and Movies of the 90s broke the barriers set in place to keep these structures intact. These movements reidentified the black experience and its perception. This rise of technology and social media in the late 2000s-2010s, gave way to the access of information and transparency through technology. Considering other factors such as diversity in population, ignited conversations about what other voices look like in the media, not only on screen but in the writers room and behind the camera. Social media movements such as #MeToo and #OscarSoWhite continued the conversations of the lack of representation in the various spaces in Hollywood. The discussion of diversity and inclusion of staff writers in television has become an increasingly frequent conversation. “The goal is to create a system of fair and inclusive representation of all races, genders, religions for the major television networks. If you don’t have a writer, you don’t have a show”, said Alex Noglaes, president and CEO of the National Hispanic Media Coalition, one of the groups that make up the Multienthic Media Coalition.

Programs mean absolutely zero unless they become feeder programs in the writing pool (Lisotta). Since the early 2000s, there have been small incremental improvements in this system, however some believe that with the rise of a diverse American audience, these small incremental improvements are not enough to account for that change in audience. “Much work remains to be done before diverse writers are adequately incorporated into the television industry, and we are losing ground in this effort...Findings like these highlight a glaring disconnect between the increasing diversity of audiences and business-as-usual practices in the Hollywood industry” (Targeted News Service).

In the 2013-14 television season in America, the Writers Guild of America West accounted that the overall TV staff employment of Women and Minorities was 42.7 percent. These numbers declined from the 2011-12 television season. However, in the talks of diversity and inclusion, black male writers and the representation that black male writers have on television programs had little to no mention. In looking at this phenomenon of black male writers in the American television space, it has been found that “African Americans are locked out of the media production process to such an extent that their own self-representational aesthetic is only just starting to reemerge from its last repression after the groundbreaking work of black artists during the 1920s and 1930s” (Page). This has resulted in little to no black male writers, producers or showrunners in the executive position to lend representation for black male characters in television programs. Ultimately, the black male aesthetic has been controlled and curated by executives that present an inaccurate depiction of what being a black male looks like through television programs and this creates false perception, misconceptions, and stereotypes. Human “aesthetics, which concerns the qualities, patterns, feelings, and emotions that make

meaning possible for us, provides the key to understanding how humans can experience anything as meaningful in their lives.”(Johnson) Representational art is artwork that has an identity, so the art is created to represent or reflect and stand on its own. These are both intricate parts in the presentation of television programs and audience interpretation of those programs.

Kenya Barris contributes to the landscape through the television series *Black-ish*. Kenya Barris is a black producer/writer and serves the role of creator, producer and one of the writers of *Black-ish*. *Black-ish* is a series based on an all black family as they cover certain racial based topics, but also displays a perspective of a functioning family centered around and narrated by Andre Johnson played by Anthony Anderson. This paper will examine the perception and effects that black male imagery has had on Americans through television over the course of the medium and will include a textual analysis of an episode of *Black-ish* to identify and examine how the show shapes the perception of black male characters in today’s landscape to dispel the established stereotypes of black males in television. The examination will be assisted with the perspective of Kenya Barris; the creator, a writer, and producer and Anthony Anderson; actor and executive producer as they insert the needed voice for the black male experience to be expressed throughout this medium. This capstone project will explore dismantling the stereotypes of black male imagery and representation in television through the show *Black-ish*.

#### ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brooks, Dwight E., and Lisa P. Hebert. *Gender, Race, And Media Representation*. Gender And Communication In Mediated Contexts, 2006, pp. 297-317, Accessed 19 Mar 2020.

Audiences place their care on images and symbols through narratives like radio, television, music, film, and other media for the purpose of constructing their social identities. What it means to be male, female, black, white, rural or urban are shaped by commodified texts produced by the media. Media is ultimately responsible for being the sole representation of our social realities. Much of the critical race studies is a combination of legal, feminist, multicultural, social, political, economic, and philosophical perspectives. MacDonald (2004) examines *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and Spike Lee's film *Clockers*. It is examined that these texts present new ways of thinking about masculinity and rejecting the negative stereotypes of masculinity. Through these multiple texts it shows that masculinity is a complex idea that coexists with other complex ideas such as race and class and these complexities are being portrayed in media culture. Through the many depictions of black male portrayals in television shows, it shows how the media constructs monolithic views of race and gender. However, the television shows themselves show the layered representation that challenges the stagnate constructions.

Punyanunt-Carter, Narissra M. "The Perceived Realism of African American Portrayals on Television." *Howard Journal of Communications* 19.3 (2008): 241–257. Web.

The research conducted in this study was a mass questionnaire administered in testing format to 412 students enrolled in a basic communications course. The questions asked to the participants focused on the viewers perception of perceived realism concerning specific themes of African Americans on television. The results showed that a factor analysis was conducted for

positively worded items and negatively worded items. The Cronbach's alpha shows .91 for positively worded items and .89 for negatively worded items. The results for the descriptive analysis for the themes (i.e. occupational roles, personality characteristics, low achievers, and positive stereotypes) showed that people do not vary in their perceptions of perceived realism of African Americans and that viewers have different realism perceptions of African Americans portrayal on television. Results also show that there are no significant differences between race and gender on viewers' perception of perceived realism which is consistent with Ford's (1997) study that demonstrates there is no difference between Black and White viewers' perception of television portrayals.

Ellithorpe, Morgan, and Amy Bleakley. "Wanting to See People Like Me? Racial and Gender Diversity in Popular Adolescent Television." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 45.7 (2016): 1426–1437. Web.

This current study is analyzing narrative television shows that are popular amongst various subgroups of adolescents for their patterns of racial and gender representation. Even though there's an increased popularity with new forms of viewing television style content, television is a dominant media source. There has been conflicting previous research that states for black characters in media, television has a fairly proportionate representation compared to the population of the United States and reports on Hollywood diversity finds underrepresentation for ethnic minorities and women. There is a possibility that along with watching mainstream television, Black adolescence, watch Black-oriented media content due to lack of representation

in mainstream media. The results show that not only are black adolescents going to watch shows at a 2.5 times higher rate, these adolescents may select media content relevant to their identity groups.

Ford, Thomas. "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals of African-Americans on Person Perception." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60.3 (1997): 266–275. Web.

Research on television portrayals of African-American on people's perception have been shown to influence whites' perception of these groups. Greenberg (1972) study has shown that for over half of white children sampled that television is the principal source of information about African Americans. So, this means that these children were likely to believe that the portrayal of African Americans was "true to life". Ford conducted a study to explicitly see how stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in television affect the way white people think about and respond to individual African Americans. The study took 40 students (28 females and 12 males) who were enrolled in an introductory communications course and subjects were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (type of comedy skit: neutral, stereotypes; race of alleged offender: white, African Americans). The result showed that stereotypical television portrayals of African-Americans in a humorous context increase the likelihood that whites will perceive an African-Americans target person in a stereotypical manner. The study also raises the possibility that some yet unexplored mechanisms inherent in humorous stereotypical portrayals contribute to devaluing social judgement.

Hunt, Dr. Darnell, Ramón, Dr. Ana-Christina, and Michael Tran “*UCLA’S HOLLYWOOD DIVERSITY REPORT REVEALS A FEW BRIGHT SPOTS FOR WOMEN AND MINORITIES.*”

States News Service 21 Feb. 2019: n. pp. 14, 39-40, 62-64. Print.

From the Hollywood Diversity Report 2019, there are only 2.2 out of 10 lead actors in television that are people of color. For the 2016-17 television season, the percentage of leads by race on broadcast scripted television was 78.5% white and 21.5% minority. The percentage of white is down from 81.3% and the percentage of minorities is up from 18.7% in the 2015-16 television season. Leads by race on cable scripted shows showed 78.7% of white and 21.3% minorities during the 2016-17 television season. The percentage of white is down from 79.8% and the percentage of minorities is up from 20.2% in the 2015-16 television season. Overall, the number of credited writers for broadcast scripted shows in 2016-17 was 17.9%, 2% up from 15.5% during the 2015-16 season. Overall, credited writers for cable scripted shows was 14.4%, up from 11.1% the previous season. Hollywood has always been a lucrative and insular industry in which White men have dominated the position of power. This has resulted in the common erasure of women and people of color. Diverse groups are still woefully underrepresented among directors, writers, and lead actors.

Lisotta, Christopher. “Opening Up the Writers Room; Each of the Big 4 Networks Follows a Different Path to Diversify Its Writing Staff.(Special Report: Diversity in TV)(Column).”

*TelevisionWeek* 23.42 (2004): n. pag. Print.

For the Big 4 networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox) to broaden their employee pool and diversify their writing staff, TelevisionWeek assisted in this increase of opportunities for people of color with the television writers' room. Fox had a 3-year program in which they selected writers to become a part of their six-week screenwriting course, writer's bootcamp. 500 applicants applied, 15 of whom were selected. 2 got writers jobs on Fox shows, out of the remaining 13, 5 got staff writer jobs and 2 others got placed as writer assistants. CBS held a writer's mentor program with 300 applicants. 7 minority writers got accepted into the program, 1 got a position for a CBS show and 3 others were staffed on Fox shows. ABC has the longest fellowship program spanning 15 years. They get thousands of applicants to fill 7-8 writer slots. Of the seven applicants that got accepted, 6 were staffed writers at ABC. Even though these are all programs that yielded certain results, it didn't specify what type of shows will be written or whether or not, these minorities were given the opportunity to write a show and not just be an additional writer for a show.

Luisi, Monique & Jones, Robert & Luisi, Tim. (2019). Randall Pearson: Framing Black Identity, Masculinity, Adoption and Mental Health in Television. *Howard Journal of Communications*.

1-15. 10.1080/10646175.2019.1608481.

In this qualitative research study, the authors use the character Randall Pearson from *This is Us* to look at the framing of black identity, masculinity, adoption, and mental health. Black America men in the media tend to be viewed as narrow and representatives of hegemonic masculinity. The defining characteristics of this type of masculinity include physical

control/emotional distance, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, a sense of adventure/frontiersman ship, along with heterosexuality and homophobia. Mediums uses framing to construct portrayals of characters that influences and informs the audience. These frames usually depict and reinforce the messages around the phenomena of groups of people and according to research, at the production level process, television producers understand the influence they have on the audience.

Nielsen Insights "*For Us By Us? The Mainstream Appeal Of Black Content*". Nielsen.com, 2017, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2017/for-us-by-us-the-mainstream-appeal-of-black-content/>. Accessed 30 Mar 2020.

From music to movies, fashion and art, Black Americans have long played an important role in shaping popular culture in the U.S., and that influence remains strong. In fact, 73% of non-Hispanic whites and 67% of Hispanics believe that African-Americans influence mainstream culture. Andrew McCaskill, senior vice president, Communications and Multicultural Marketing, at Nielsen stated “Storylines with a strong black character or identity are crossing cultural boundaries to grab diverse audiences and start conversations. That insight is important for culture and content creators, as well as manufacturers and retailers looking to create engaging, high-impact advertising campaigns.” During the 2016-17 television season, there were a number of stand-out shows with black leads that have non-black viewership, including *Black-ish*. ABC’s hit sitcom “Black-ish” follows a father and husband (Anthony Anderson) who’s trying to create a sense of black cultural identity for his affluent family of four

and has 79% non-black viewership. Tracee Ellis Ross, who plays his wife, won the best actress in a comedy series Golden Globe for her role. These results are similar among these different television shows and shows that there is a need and importance for blacks shows headed by black male leads and writers.

Page, Helán. “‘Black Male’ Imagery and Media Containment of African American Men.”

*American anthropologist* 99.1 (1997): 99–111. Web.

Page (1997) states The success of African American women and men in the specific domain of science and technology has been stymied since the era of agricultural mechanization by massive technological, social, and political changes in the urban, regional, and international economic terrain. Page argues that African Americans and other minorities have been essentially pushed to the bottom of the age of the “informational city” which increases lack of access to high-level technical skills that prohibit any possibility of economic or status success in the information age. This has formed the disparaging familiar public image of a black underclass. This means that the image of black men are representative of African Americans in local and national media. Page concludes that whether the public or national imagination resides in the white imagination, the mainstream media agents learn to disregard the identity imperatives of marginal others and resort to universal claims. African Americans are locked out of the media to such an extent that it is now starting to reemerge from the last repression of the 1920’s and 30’s. This current reality of the fact that African Americans are excluded from academic and technical fields cannot be reversed unless the youth are encouraged to excel and are exposed to the arts, science and technical fields at an early age into adulthood.

Partnership, Topos et al. *Social Science Literature Review: Media Representations And Impact On The Lives Of Black Men And Boys*. The Opportunity Agenda, 2011, pp. 22-34, Accessed 22 Mar 2020.

This report talks in length about the media portrayals of black males and what these effects are specifically. Consumers of mainstream media receive overwhelmingly more “information” about individual African-American males than about the broader forces that shape their experience. Researchers also have confirmed that the media creates rather than reflects negative understanding, finding, for example, that the higher the consumption of media, the lower the self-esteem among African Americans. (Tan & Tan, 1979) Black males are highly visible in other types of roles that can be considered positive. In the world as depicted by the media, blacks frequently excel in sports, and more generally, are associated with physicality and physical achievement, as well as, the aggressiveness that usually goes along with this type of success. Just as important as the patterns of distortion and exaggeration discussed so far is the fact that many important dimensions of black males’ stories are largely untold in the media, in particular how the lives of black men and boys are affected by larger contexts. Blacks are underrepresented in media being portrayed in roles with less emphasis on intellectuality. Distorted media presentations concern the lack of black input, in various forms, into the production of content. This dearth of representation includes, for instance, limited African-American TV station ownership, and an under-representation of African-American producers, journalists, and experts invited to contribute content. A Knight Foundation report

shows that women and people of color continue to be underrepresented in the positions of journalist and editor. Even as other organizations have succeeded in bringing diversity to the workplace, the news media has lagged. In a 2002 census, over 90 percent of journalists were white. (Lehrman, 2005)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The portrayal of African American men in television doesn't start and end in the writer's room or just simply in production. The historical legacy and process of the lack of black males being represented properly is complex in nature. If the goal is for there to be fair representation of black writers in order to portray African American men in an accurate light, the reasons for exclusion currently speaks to the social, political, and economic position of African American men, women, and communities. Page (1997) speaks on the fact that African American women and men in the specific domain of science and technology has been stymied since the era of agricultural mechanization by massive technological, social, and political changes in the urban, regional, and international economic terrain. This has resulted in black people being pushed to the bottom of this new information age that has created a black underclass. With that the standard imagery of black families and black men were easily painted to be viewed negatively in local and national media. Even if the public or national imagination resides with the white imagination, the mainstream media agents learn to disregard the identity imperatives of marginalized others and resort to creating universal claims of these others (i.e. stereotypes).

Brooks and Hebert (2006) have identified that viewers of television place their care on images and symbols through narratives like radio, television, film, music, and other media for the purpose of constructing people's social realities. Black American men in the media tend to be viewed as narrow and representatives of hegemonic masculinity. Luisi, Luisi, Jones (2019) However, there have been many texts that challenge the representation of black male masculinity and show that masculinity is a complex idea that coexist with other complex ideas such as race and class and these complexities are being portrayed through media culture. It shows how media culture has constructed monolithic views of race and gender, but by the nature of depicting masculinity on screen, breaks those constructions, Brooks and Hebert (2006). Consumers of mainstream media receive overwhelmingly more "information" about individual African American males than about the broader forces that shape their experience. Researchers have confirmed that the media creates rather than reflects negative understanding. Blacks are underrepresented in media to a point that they are being portrayed in roles with less emphasis on intellectuality. Distorted media presentations are results of lack of black input, in various forms, into the production of content. This dearth of representation includes, for instance, limited African-American TV station ownership, and an under-representation of African-American producers, journalists, and experts invited to contribute content.

In the Hollywood Diversity Report 2019, 2.2 out of 10 lead actors on television are people of color. Leads by race on broadcast scripted television was 78.5% white and 21.5% minority during the 2016-17 television season. Leads by race on cable scripted shows showed 78.7% of white and 21.3% minorities during the 2016-17 television season. The number of credited writers for broadcast scripted shows in 2016-17 was 17.9%, 2% up from 15.5% during

the 2015-16 season and the credited writers for cable scripted shows was 14.4%, up from 11.1% the previous season. Overall, the scope of Hollywood has proved a lucrative and insular industry in which white men have dominated the positions of power. Even though there are incremental steps being made towards diversifying these positions, these numbers result in an erasure of women and people of color, which result in underrepresentation among directors, writers and lead actors. (States News Service, 2019) There have been attempts in trying to increase the number of opportunities for people of color in the television writer's room with the big 4 networks (CBS, ABC, NBC, and Fox). These writing programs have yielded results that have placed an average of 3-5 writers on television shows for these networks, but these programs didn't specify what kinds of shows would be written and whether or not these minority writers have been given the opportunity to write a show or just be included in the writing staff for another show, Lisotta (2006).

Research was conducted focused on viewers' perception of perceived realism concerning specific themes of African Americans on television with 412 students enrolled in a basic communication course. The results revealed that people do not vary in their perceptions of perceived realism of African Americans and that viewers have different realism perceptions of African Americans portrayal on television. Results also show that there are no significant differences between race and gender on viewers' perception of perceived realism which is consistent with Ford's (1997) study that demonstrates there is no difference between Black and White viewers' perception of television portrayals, Punyanunt-Carter (2008). Ford (1997) conducted a study to explicitly see how stereotypical portrayals of African Americans on television affect the way white people think about and respond to individual African Americans.

The study took 40 students (28 females and 12 males) who were enrolled in an introductory communications course. The result showed that stereotypical television portrayals of African-Americans in a humorous context increase the likelihood that whites will perceive an African-American target person in a stereotypical manner. The study also raises the possibility that some yet unexplored mechanisms inherent in humorous stereotypical portrayals contribute to devaluing social judgement. Prior to conducting this study, Ford found that Greenberg's (1972) study has shown that for over half of white children sampled that television is the principal source of information about African Americans. So, this means that these children were likely to believe that the portrayal of African Americans was "true to life".

Ellithorpe and Bleakley (2016) conducted a study analyzing narrative television shows that are popular amongst various subgroups of adolescents for their patterns of racial and gender representation. They discovered that previous research states for black characters in media, television has a fairly proportionate representation compared to the population of the United States and reports on Hollywood diversity finds underrepresentation for ethnic minorities and women. There is a possibility that along with watching mainstream television, Black adolescence, watch Black-oriented media content due to lack of representation in mainstream media. This supports the reason why data shows black adolescence watch television programs at a 2.5 times higher rate than other adolescence. Mediums uses framing to construct portrayals of characters that influences and informs the audience. These frames usually depict and reinforce the messages around the phenomena of groups of people and according to research, at the production level process, television producers understand the influence they have on the audience, Luisi, Luisi, Jones (2019).

Analyzing this from the top trickling down all the way to the casual television viewer, the structure of Hollywood studio networks that create television programs, that are viewed by all races watch, has a demographic that is disproportionate in all positions of power. This structure allows the narrative for black men to be presented and viewed inaccurately. Even in the attempt to include black writers in programs geared specifically for them, there is no explicit plans to give these writers the platform to tell their unique stories and more so include them into the system that has historically excluded, willingly created negative stereotypes, and failed to take in depth looks at the larger story of why these false realities have been created about black men and African Americans. There are examples that are sparsely scattered over the history of American television, but these articles of media that represent an alternative to the “normalized” narrative, just display the stagnate or very small incremental steps toward creating a diversified medium. In knowing that television is still the dominant medium that people use, it is safe to say that with this disproportionate representation, the audience will continue to receive false narratives of black men in television, even if there are one or two shows that give concerted efforts in telling stories that give a full scope of the black American male story. The best alternative for the different racial audiences will be to search for black-oriented media that is geared and focused in representing the black American experience more accurately than the traditional Hollywood system.

## ANALYSIS

Before the era of silent movies, talkies and then eventually television shows, the narrative was being set in motion of how black people, men specifically, were viewed and portrayed in the

cultural landscape of America of the time. By the time of the Reconstruction Era, Americans were faced with how to engage with the now freed blacks. “Many white writers argued that without slavery, which supposedly suppressed their animalistic tendencies, blacks were reverting to criminal savagery.” (Pilgrim 2012) Writers like Thomas Nelson Page, Charles Carroll, and Thomas Dixon ushered in the era of the “black brute” through their literary works which not only established a narrative that would later transfer into film, but become integrated into social life for whites and blacks alike.

Page’s novel *Red Rock* (1898) became one of the first novels to help popularize the image of the cheerful and devoted Mammies and Sambos, which he previously wrote about, to the literary black brute. Charles Carroll’s *The Negro A Beast* (1900) “claimed that blacks were more akin to apes than to human beings and theorized that blacks had been the “tempters of Eve.” Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spot* (1902) “claimed that emancipation had transformed blacks from “a chattel to be bought and sold into a beast to be feared and guarded.” The black brute narrative was as simple as uncontrollable black men roaming around during the night to seek out and rape, kill and defile white women. He would later be caught and lynched. “At the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the virulent, anti-black propaganda that found its way into scientific journals, local newspapers, and best-selling novels focused on the stereotype of the black rapist. The claim that black brutes were, in epidemic numbers, raping white women became the public rationalization for the lynching of blacks. Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansmen* (1905) became the novel of the groundbreaking adaptation film of the time *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

This film took this black brute narrative to a nationwide level that would set the precedent of how the Hollywood system of television and film would create and dictate black male character depiction. As television programs would progress to depict the black male character from background character to the main lead, “African-Americans and members of other minorities appeared on prime-time television with increasing frequency throughout the 1970s and 1980s... Unfortunately, however, these advances are largely limited to appearances in situation comedies with predominately African-American casts.” (Ford 1997) The role that humor has plays a dichotomy of results. The role of humor geared towards African Americans could show viewers the perception of black characters, but the comedy still encouraged and displayed obvious portrayals of stereotypes about African Americans in general. “ The use of humorous context in the present study raises the possibility that the findings involved more than simple stereotype priming: Humor may play an important role in mediating the effect of stereotypical portrayals of social groups on perceptions of individual members of those groups. One possible hypothesis is that the disparagement of social groups through humor increases our tolerance or acceptance of discrimination against out-groups. As a result, people are more likely to engage in discriminatory social judgement upon exposure to disparaging humor.” (Ford 1997) Even though there was the appearance of diversity it was constructed into a non-self-controlled narrative that further painted a narrative of African Americans that would encourage stereotyping, discrimination and discriminatory actions because it is deemed acceptable through these humor based, predominantly African American cast.

Conversely, the 2016-2017 television season is the first time in history where there are a significant number of television shows with predominantly black cast or main storyline centered

around a black character that have unique subject matter, have won awards for performances, and have cross-cultural viewership. Television shows such as *Empire*, *This is Us*, *Black-ish*, *Secrets and Lies*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, *Scandal*, *Insecure*, *Atlanta*, and *Queen Sugar* have been classified as ushering in a “Sliver Age for African American Television”. For the first time in television history, there are a number of successful shows running concurrently at the same time that display a dynamic range of African American characters and stories being told. *Black-ish*, a show on ABC network, is centered around Andre Johnson, played by Anthony Anderson, and his black family as they provide insight into what it means to be a black family in today’s contemporary America. Along with displaying the imagery of a majority black cast and a functional black family, the show is intentionally socially aware. The show covers a range of topics including race, gender, socio-economics, generational ideals, but most importantly these topics are displayed and discussed through the lens of black actors and black writers and producers. Since this show has a lead black male actor and black writers and producers, the topics are funneled through the mind of Andre Johnson as he tries to make sense of these topics for himself and his family. The uniqueness of this show is that it is the first of its kind to journey into the mind of a black man as he works through these topics in ways that do not reinforce any negative black stereotypes, or display the black brute narrative, and simultaneously gives insight to these broader topics while breaking the stereotypes and negative narratives.

The season 2 episode 12 “Hope”, tackles the relevant social topic of policing and police brutality as it relates to the relationship between police and the black community. The family is gathered around the television watching the news on the verdict of a possible indictment involving an unarmed black man and the excessive force used by police officers and whether or

not this case will go to trial. Simultaneously, the family is trying to order dinner, as they start to discuss the case and the way that wrongful policing has turned out historically for black people when it comes to the justice system. Rainbow does not want Jack and Diane, the youngest children, to be a part of the conversation because she is trying to protect their innocence. They continue to clash on their different views on the topic and the grand jury has decided to not move forward in an indictment against the police officer. In the conversation of how they should react when they are interacting with the police, Andre and Rainbow come to a head when Andre wants to expose them to the truth and Rainbow does not because she wants Jack and Diane to continue to have hope in the world:

Andre: Don't you get it Bow, the system is rigged against us

Rainbow: Maybe it is Dre, but I don't wanna feel like my kids are living in a world that is so flawed that they can't have any hope.

Andre:...Oh, so you wanna talk about hope, Bow. Obama ran on hope; remember when He got elected and we felt like maybe, just maybe we got outta that bad place and made it to a good place, that that the whole country was really ready to turn The corner...You remember that amazing feeling we had during the inauguration, I was sitting right next to you and we were so proud and we saw him get out of that limo and walk alongside of it and wave to that crowd. Tell me you weren't terrified when you saw that. Tell me you weren't worried someone was gonna snatch that hope away from us like they always do. That is the real world Bow, and our children need to know that that's the world that they live in.

This scene is a defining moment in the show because the family was arguing about the justice system and black people. The writing shows the very nuanced relationship that black people are faced with in regards to the reality of dealing with the world. Anderson's character,

Andre, did a very important thing in this scene. He was not only able to articulate his thoughts and concerns on how he feels about hope, but during this dialogue he was able to display this in a concerning, compassionate, and emotional way that not only dispels the black brute narrative, but any stereotype that could have been displayed in this scene to convey the message of the episode. In the scene, Andre was able to show an array of emotion, one being vulnerability, that comes from a real and accurate place when discussing policing and police brutality. The emotion was not uncontrolled, unwarranted, or out of place. It was handled with care, consideration and understanding. For this type of imagery to be displayed through a black male, during a primetime television show, is a very important achievement for the black writers and producers, in controlling and showing an accurate depiction of a black male in this particular situation.

During season 3 episode 12 “Lemons”, everyone in the Johnson house including Andre are coping with the newly elected president Donald J. Trump and possible implications that will have on the country. Andre expresses that the election happened a couple of months ago, but everybody around him was acting as if the election happened yesterday. The Trump presidency had taken its effect on Andre’s advertising company as well, to the point that the team could not focus long enough to come up with a presentation to pitch to a company later on in the day. The team is going back and forth when Josh makes a comment stating that there is still time for the electoral college votes to be overturned, so there is still a chance. Andre is laughing quietly to himself rubbing his hands together.

Josh: Hold on, hold on, what’s so funny Dre?

Leslie: Yeah, you have had nothing to say about any of this all day, Why do you not care about what's happening to our country?

Andre:...What did you say to me?...Umm, You don't think I care about this country? I love this country even though at times it doesn't love me back. For my whole life, my parents, my grandparents, me, for most black people; this system has never worked for us. But we still play ball! Tried to do our best to live by the rules even though we knew they would never work out in our favor. Had to live in neighborhoods that you wouldn't drive through, send our kids to schools with books so beat up you couldn't read em, work jobs that you wouldn't even consider in your nightmares. Black people wake up everyday believing that our lives are gonna change even though everything around us says it's not. Truth be told, you ask most black people and they'd tell you that no matter who won this election they didn't expect the hood to get better. But they still voted because that's what you're supposed to do. You think I'm not sad that Hillary didn't win, that I'm not terrified of what Trump's about to do. I'm used to things not going my way. I'm sorry that you're not and it's blowing your mind. So, excuse me if I get a little offended because I didn't see all of this outrage when everything was happening to all of my people since we were stuffed on boats in chains. I love this country, as much if not more than you do and don't you ever forget that.

In this scene, even though Andre is displaying frustration and anger, it is not in a stereotypical manner; displaying aggression and violence. Instead, it is one that is rational, clear, and acted out in a civil manner. This scene is important because it displays great imagery on how Andre deals with anger and frustration as a black man. Instead of leaning into the negative stereotypes and tropes of the black brute, he displays his emotion in a civilized manner. This imagery is important to the cross-cultural audience that tunes in to watch this show. The audience gets to see the image of a black man displaying typical negative emotion in a controlled and sensible manner. This scene is important because it can begin to reshape the deep-rooted perception in which black men are viewed, especially when they display emotions like Andre did in this scene.

During season 1 episode 5 "Crime and Punishment", Andre is faced with beating Jack for hiding in a department store while shopping with Rainbow. When Andre gets the news that



This episode speaks on the debate on whether it is still a useful practice for black people to discipline their children. Despite Andre's personal experience growing up and what his peers view on the topic of spanking their children, Andre was able to find a way most suitable to his parenting comfort which doesn't result in beating his children. This scene displays a very unique response to the conversation of discipline in the black community and the image it can create for black men on this type of platform. Disciplining in the black community has a long and painful lineage that starts with slavery and has been passed down generationally through a vicious cycle. Doctors' William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs discuss in their book, *Black Rage*, "Beating in child-rearing actually has its psychological roots in slavery and even yet black parents will feel that, just as they have suffered beatings as children, so it is right that their children be so treated. This kind of physical subjugation of the weak forges early in the mind of the child a link with the past and, as he learns the details of history, with slavery per se." (Love, 2009)

For black people, more specifically black men, to display disciplining their children through spanking is to continue on a history of pain that is rooted in the history of slavery and without much acknowledgement. The black brute narrative was birthed from the era of slavery in the reconstruction era and the imagery of black men spanking their children are correlations because studies show that hitting children is more prevalent and detrimental to the black community. Black parents have been taught that physical discipline is their way to try and protect their children. "A 2015 Pew Research survey found that black parents are more than twice as likely as white and Latino parents to use corporal punishment on a regular basis...Black parents have legitimate fears about the safety of their children, and the overwhelming majority believe physical discipline is necessary to keep black children out of the streets, out of prison or

out of police officers' sight.” (Patton 2017) Black parents are confusing protecting their children with damaging them. Like Andre said, “I’m about to whip my son because I love him and don’t want anything bad to happen to him.” In that moment, his insight challenged his conditioning of discipline he received and the type of discipline he chose to impart on his own children. This episode not only starts a conversation of disciplining in the traditional black communities, but it inserts imagery that shows how Andre works through his rationale of what decision he should make instead of just spanking Jack because that is the assumption of what should be done, even when he didn’t want to spank him.

*Black-ish* proves to be a show with a majority black cast, black writers and producers with the intention of being a social aware show, but with displaying the imagery of the black family and the black male in a depiction that lends a piece of the black narrative during this “Silver Age of African American television”. *Black-ish* works to defy the traditional standards of displaying black characters in a hegemonic way. Even though there were black male lead television shows that displayed a black family structure (I.e. *The Cosby Show*, *The Jefferson*, *Sanford and Son*), they were true predecessors to shows like *Black-ish*. These shows laid a comedic template, but *Black-ish* elevates the platform by displaying a more dynamic range of characterization for black characters and not being a funny show but forcing the audience to neither think or have the necessary dialogue or both. This “silver age” that is presently being witnessed could be the entry within the landscape could open even further for African American television and the scope of black male character depiction. This age could further break the perceptions of how black men are viewed in “real life” in television and could lead to a dismantling of traditional standards of Hollywood that continue to perpetuate stereotypes of

black men. With viewers and audiences investing their time and energy into stories that are dynamic, unique and true to the depiction of black people, television could evolve to a platform that is more reflective of the American audience it caters to by allowing the proper writers and actors to tell their stories.

## CONCLUSION

“The goal is to create a system of fair and inclusive representation of all races, genders, religions for the major television networks. If you don’t have a writer, then you don’t have a show.” (Lisotta) Hollywood television has improved in representation and inclusion of all, but the improvements are so small, that television has always seemed to be behind in being inclusive. For African Americans, the representation has been inaccurate for a majority of years because of the lack of access that has been given to African Americans, people of color, and minorities to produce, write, and direct television shows that tell stories reflective of them. Due to the social, political, economic influence of racism in the country for decades since the invention of television, blacks in television were underrepresented and portrayed inaccurate because of being excluded from writers rooms. “African Americans are locked out of the media to such an extent that it is now starting to reemerge from the last repression of the 1920’s and 30’s.” (Page 1997) This created imagery that was deemed stereotypical and racist, but still was displayed in television programming. This imagery’s origin stemmed from before the formation of television during the early years of film where literary works were being turned into film adaptations. Writers like Thomas Nelson Page, Charles Carroll, and Thomas Dixon ushered in the era of the “black brute” through their literary works which not only established a narrative

that would later transfer into film, but become integrated into social life for whites and blacks alike. “Many white writers argued that without slavery, which supposedly suppressed their animalistic tendencies, blacks were reverting to criminal savagery.” (Pilgrim 2012) The “black brute” narrative or “happy-go-lucky” imagery were the popular characters that were portrayed on screen. This imagery would continue on as television evolved into the modern television studio system.

Ford conducted a study to explicitly see how stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in television affect the way white people think about and respond to individual African Americans. The results concluded that stereotypical television portrayals of African-Americans in a humorous context increase the likelihood that whites will perceive an African-American target person in a stereotypical manner. The study also raises the possibility that some yet unexplored mechanisms inherent in humorous stereotypical portrayals contribute to devaluing social judgement. “African-Americans and members of other minorities appeared on prime-time television with increasing frequency throughout the 1970s and 1980s... Unfortunately, however, these advances are largely limited to appearances in situation comedies with predominately African-American casts.” (Ford 1997) Based on Ford’s findings, this humorous context that cast blacks in this stereotypical manner of storytelling negatively affected the imagery of black characters, especially black male lead characters. Audiences associated the context of humor as being a reality for the African American individual. Major networks have tried to create systems to include diverse writers in their writers rooms. The big 4 networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox) to broaden their employee pool and diversify their writing staff, TelevisionWeek assisted in this increase of opportunities for people of color with the television

writers' room. However, the result concluded that these programs make very small incremental steps at ensuring that writers' rooms remain diverse and inclusive. Even with the expansion of where television programs could be viewed, television still dominates the majority of audience viewership. This means that viewers will still tune in to these big network television programs and these shows will still be underrepresented in writing and character portrayal. This influences what black adolescence viewers would watch in order to find themselves accurately represented in TV and media. "There is a possibility that along with watching mainstream television, Black adolescence, watch Black-oriented media content due to lack of representation in mainstream media. The results show that not only are black adolescents going to watch shows at a 2.5 times higher rate, these adolescents may select media content relevant to their identity groups." (Ellithorpe, Bleakley 2016)

However, due to the increase in platforms where television programs could be viewed, it allowed more shows to be written and more stories to be told. In particular, for African American majority casted shows, have experienced a resurgence. During the 2016-17 television season, there were several stand out shows, majority black cast, that garnered success and substantial viewership from non-black viewership. This is being hailed as the "silver age for black television" as these majority black casted shows are running at once and experiencing success across all demographics. One of those shows was *Black-ish*. "ABC's hit sitcom "Black-ish" follows a father and husband (Anthony Anderson) who's trying to create a sense of black cultural identity for his affluent family of four and has 79% non-black viewership." (Nielsen Insights) *Black-ish*, created, produced and written by Kenya Barris, a black man, does a great job at being very socially conscious on topics that are not only relevant to black communities, but

communities of all races at large in America. Andre Johnson, the black male lead character, shows imagery that contests traditional Hollywood imagery of the black male on television. Andre's character shows insightful commentary and thoughtfulness as he goes through common and unique situations that show a wide range of character expressions that dispel the "black brute" or "happy-go-lucky" narratives.. Not only does Black-ish dismantle the stereotypes of black male imagery and representation, but it also opens the possibility for more unique black stories to be told on the many platforms available to do so.

## SUGGESTIONS

For future research, an analysis of two shows with black male leads from two separate decades. Conduct a comparison and contrast of shows success, subject matter, and portrayal of the lead roles in comparison to the times of the shows' release. Conduct an experiment of audiences of different races watching a popular episode of each show and share their thoughts on similarities and differences between both shows.

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