Dear White Writers,
An Analysis of Contemporary TV Sitcoms Starring Black-ish People

Kierra Smith

A Capstone Project

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Communication
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Masters of Arts in
Public Communication

American University
Washington, D.C.

Supervisor: Prof. Caty Chattoo

April 27, 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

The landscape of media has changed. Allowing viewers to consume content both traditionally through television and streaming platforms including Netflix, Amazon and Hulu. As the landscape continues to evolve, so does audience entertainment pallets, craving the depiction of diverse and relatable stories. For so long, black characters were mere tropes illustrating walking stereotypes to a mass audience. Black viewers crave authentic representation not only on the screens but behind the scenes as well. The purpose of this study is to explore the importance and influence of racial diversity in contemporary U.S. entertainment television. Stuart Hall's Representation Theory and Critical Race Theory served as a theoretical lens for this study.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"Let me introduce myself. My name is J and I'm awkward… and black," served as the introduction to Issa Rae's award-winning web series, The Misadventures of AWKWARD Black Girl. The character "J" chronicled the life of a young black woman who wasn't a fierce, self-proclaimed badass. J was clumsy and had no idea how to maneuver in social settings or even how to pursue a casual conversation with her crush. For lack of better words, she was awkward – is that uncommon to see on your television screen?

Issa Rae's web series was the inspiration to her breakout HBO sitcom, Insecure, which followed the same formula – a normal, awkward black girl trying to figure out her life. "We don't get to just have a show about regular black people being basic," said Rae in an interview with NPR's Morning Edition (Deggans, 2016). When discussing her web series in a 2016 Vulture article, Rae stated:

> The black characters on TV are the sidekicks, or they're insignificant. You could put all the black sidekicks on one show, and it would be the most boring, one-dimensional show ever. Even look at the black women on 'Community' and 'Parks and Recreation' - they are the archetype of the large black women on television. Snide and sassy (Scholl, 2011).

For so long, black people on television were mere tropes of people who lived within that skin – both realistic and not, for example, The Cosby Show. The Cosby Show marked the beginning of the revolution of black television in the 1980s – showcasing black characters in a positive light (AJ+, 2017). However, the audience viewed the family as unrealistic and hyper-perfect. The 90s was deemed "the golden age" of black sitcoms (AJ+, 2017). Following the blueprint of The Cosby Show, the emergence of black situational comedies featured shows including Girlfriends,

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, A Different World, Living Single and many more (AJ+, 2017).

These particular shows visualized characters venturing away from the hyper-perfect "Cosby Syndrome." Many of the shows that viewers grew to love quickly went away (AJ+, 2017). The golden age of black sitcoms disappeared – leaving viewers questioning if their stories are meant to tell?

But there's no doubt that people love television and the characters that exist within the screen. However, the landscape of entertainment and tv now consists of streaming services like Netflix, Hulu and Amazon. According to a recent Nielsen report, television continues to be the most used source of electronic media (Katsingris, "The Nielson"). However, researchers can't deny the fact that there is a generation gap of traditional TV watching today; Millennials are watching less TV compared to their parents (Katsingris, "The Nielson"). Young people are utilizing streaming services more than indulging in traditional television watching (Katsingris, "The Nielson").

Not only has the landscape changed, so has the audience entertainment pallets. The audience has become more diverse and demanding of new television. Although there are still shows with black characters, viewers are now considering who is in charge of telling their stories. There are more black showrunners and writers than before, but it's still not enough. Issa Rae explained in an article with The Guardian, the importance of diversity not just on the screen, but in the background as well. Rae said, "Diversity is still a huge issue. We need more people of color in positions of power to greenlight content. If you want to see content of color, then it has to be in the hands of people of color," (Adewunmi, 2014). In the words of Issa Rae herself, "how hard is it to portray a three-dimensional woman of color on television or in film?" (Wortham, 2015), "I'm surrounded by them. They're my friends. I talk to them every day. How come

Hollywood won't acknowledge us? Are we a joke to them?" Representation is important and gives people of color something to identify with. Gauntlett's Identity theory explains that the media gives its viewers the resources to construct their identity (Gauntlett, 2003). Gauntlett states that media provides consumers a diverse range of stars and models of influence to look at for advice and guidance for certain situations (Gauntlett, 2003). Gauntlett addresses the role the audience members play within media. He defines the viewer's relationship with the media as "users" and "active participants." The audience is involved and no longer consume media passively (Gauntlett, 2003).

This capstone will explore the impacts of black sitcoms of TODAY and if the stories and characters align to or reject stereotypes of black people. The capstone will dive deep into the ongoing tropes and analyze current television shows featuring black characters. The capstone will also explore the relationship and the impact of particular shows and its viewers. This particular study will focus on two key research questions:

1. **Has a diverse representation of African Americans in television shows disrupted the cultivation of negative stereotypes?**
2. **How has those portrayals of African Americans influenced its viewers?**

There is little research on the disruption of negative stereotypes of African American characters of recent television shows. Most research that is out reflects television shows of the past including The Cosby Show and Good Times. This research will help establish the impact of diverse representation in media. By studying the tropes of African American characters, this capstone will help to inform our understanding of the importance of diversity in the media, the impact of stereotypes, the connection between characters and fans of the selected television shows and the power media has on consumers. This research will inform the works of members in entertainment including, actors, writers, producers, directors and showrunners for new work.

This study can possibly help change the process of developing a character with the audience in mind and bring stories to life without showcasing ethnic groups as tropes. This study can also inform members of academia on the impact of new shows and what they represent.

First, I will begin with a review of relevant literature and research in the field of television and stereotypes, race and the history of the fox network. Following this, I will discuss the methods of this study followed by the results. Finally, I will discuss conclusions that can be drawn from the results.

Literature Review

Rise and Fall of Black Television

"Middle-class white audiences began to replace standard network viewing with cable subscriptions and videocassette recorders," explained Kristal Brent Zook as she described a shift in focus in viewer demographics for television networks in the 80s ("Color by Fox," 1999, pg. 3). In her novel *Color by Fox: Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television,* she explains that as white families changed their viewing habits, African Americans and Latinos continued watching the free networks – ABC, NBC and CBS, leading to executives focusing their advertisement on "urban" audiences (Zook, 1999, pg. 3). Because minority viewers relied on the "free" channels, networks began to develop programming that will appeal to "urban" viewers (Zook, 1999, pg. 3). Rupert Murdoch took inspiration of the three networks and decided to introduce a network that will "capture large numbers of young, urban viewers," better-known-as Fox (Zook, 1999, pg. 3). Zook stated that, "Fox network was unique, then, in that it inadvertently fostered a space for black authorship in television," (Zook, 1999, pg. 4). However, Rupert Murdoch's desire to sever business ties with investors is one of the reasons Fox quickly cut all of its black programming (Zook, 1999, pg. 101). Zook quoted Keenen Ivory Wayans in her novel stating, "Fox changed the course of black television unintentionally. They didn't go out to make

black shows. They went out to make alternative programming. Zook compared Fox's relationship with its black audience to an unfaithful lover, "Fox continues to need black viewers – but on its own terms," (Zook, 1999, pg. 105). Zook explained that these black sitcoms allowed black people to inhale "deeper," (Zook, 1999, pg. 105). She states that these iconic shows, "helped us to know that our fears, desires and memories are often collective, not individual," (Zook, 1999, pg. 105).

Race in the New Media Landscape

Audience members are becoming more diverse and desire to connect with characters who look like them. According to a 2016 Nielsen report," Young, Connected and Black," African American viewers desire for new television content served as, "one driver of the dramatic increase in diverse television programming," ("Young, Connected," 2016). Because African Americans influence society, a large percentage of new television programs featuring black characters as leads are bringing viewership that is non-black ("Young, Connected," 2016). According to the Nielsen report, "Black-ish," "Secrets and Lies," "How to Get Away with Murder," "Pitch," "Rosewood," "Insecure" and "Atlanta" all average more than 50% non-black viewership ("Young, Connected," 2016). The report details, "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," ("Young, Connected," 2016).

Although there are more black leads on television series, what impacts a show the most is the team behind the scenes. Darnell Hunt conducted an interesting study in 2017 called "Race in The Writers' Room How Hollywood Whitewashes the Stories That Shape America." The study

explains that black people only make up 4.8% of people of color in the writers' room and that 5.1% of showrunners in Hollywood are black (Hunt, 2017). Hunt details that, "More than 90% of all shows examined were led by White showrunners, with 97% of shows with White creators being led by White showrunners. 80% were led by men. Only 5.1% of shows were led by Black showrunners. Black writers are rare in writers' rooms led by White showrunners—69.1% of these rooms had no Black writers, while 17.4% only had a single Black writer," which can lead to tokenism (Hunt, 2017). Hunt also discovered that, "The only platforms that had programs with five or more Black writers in their writers' room were: ABC (17%, 4 shows), Comedy Central (25%, 2 shows), FX (9%, 1 show), HBO (8%, 1 show), FOX (5%, 1 show) and Netflix (3%, 1 show)," (Hunt, 2017).

More Than A Caricature

Mack Scott describes the opening of the classic sitcom "Beulah" as a black 'mammy' stereotype personified describing the main character: "Her heavy round face dominated the screen. Her black skin accentuated the whites of her large protruding eyes. Her big dark lips and short flat nose were hallmarks of her African ancestry," in his article "From Blackface to Beulah: Subtle Subversion in Early Black Sitcoms" (Scott, 2014, p. 743). Every episode began this way. However, Scott states that when the main character begins to speak, she was not the stereotypical "slow-witted" caricature (Scott, 2014, p. 743). Scott credited "Beulah" for exposing Americans "to a more humane interpretation of black life," (Scott, 2014, p. 743). Scott explains that viewers of "Beulah" saw something more than the caricature and perceived the character as "redeeming" and human. Beulah humanized the actual women who work in the kitchens of affluent households. Beulah wasn't a "mule" but a likable, clever woman who was seen as the "most honest," and "clever" of the family (Scott, 2014, p. 762). Most times, Beulah outwitted the

members of the Henderson family and was perceived as the "matriarch" of the family and not "the help" (Scott, 2014, p. 762). Many of the viewers, no matter the ethnicity, identified more with Beulah because of her, "values and experiences" (Scott, 2014, p. 762).

During that time, "the only work for black actresses in television was portraying highly stereotyped characters and that women who played these roles were fully aware of the significance of their positions," (Scott, 2014, p. 749). The politics of television were controlled by the views of white people. Before television, blackface shows utilized caricatures to entertain white viewers. Through the format of blackface and minstrel shows, 'blackness' was used as entertainment and comedy, which birthed the "coon, Uncle Tom, tragic mulatto, mammy and brutal black buck caricatures," (Scott, 2014, p. 754). These characters served as, "wholly representatives of the black race (Scott, 2014, p. 756). The politics of television proved that advertisers and their agencies feared a white economic backlash should they finance African American talent in other roles than minstrel-based comedy roles," (Scott, 2014, p. 760). White supremacy advocates pushed networks to continue to "depict" black characters as stereotypes because of their unwillingness to, "abandon an enduring racial tradition," (Scott, 2014, p. 759).

Nicole Jackson examines the impact of Tyler Perry and his influence through his works in her article, "Perry versus Cosby, a Different Perspective Examining the Influence of Black Media on Black Group Consciousness." Perry has become infamous for his popular caricature Madea. Madea is a loud, take no nonsense, weed-smoking, gun-toting grandmother. In his most popular sitcom, "House of Payne" follows the Payne family, who some may say emulate stereotypical images of black people. Jackson states that "at a time when portrayals of blacks on television are few, Perry's characters offer a much needed, albeit limited, glimpse into and validation of the black experience," (Jackson, 2013, pg. 69). She explains that both shows "went

to great lengths to offer viewers a more dynamic, positive image" of black families, however, "The Cosby Show" lacked blackness and "House of Payne" utilized its blackness in a more segmented experience through its characters (Jackson, 2013, pg. 75). Many viewers enjoyed "House of Payne" and the somewhat stereotypical characters because the sitcom showcased a working-class family who dealt with relatable "life struggles" including "drugs, sibling rivalries, peer pressure, education and sex," (Jackson, 2013, pg. 76). What made viewers invested in the characters of "House of Payne" was that they were not afraid to be black. Jackson also takes a deeper dive into the criticism of "House of Payne" and Tyler Perry's second sitcom, "Meet the Browns," in another article, "A Preliminary Analysis of Tyler Perry's 'House of Payne' and 'Meet the Browns': Effect on the Black Identity, African Americans' Frequency of Exposure, Perception of Accuracy and Affective Evaluation," with another author George Musambira. They found that many critics believe that Perry's sitcoms did nothing but "mirror stereotypical images that blacks have fought so long to cast from the media's eye," (Musambira & Jackson, 2018, pg. 214). The authors state that "black television media positively influenced perceptions of black autonomy, positive stereotypical beliefs about the black group and closeness to other blacks," (Musambira & Jackson, 2018, pg. 214). Both of these sources show how black people created empowerment and representation through programming that, on the face of it, appeared to be stuck in stereotypical images.

Storylines and Stereotypes

In David L. Moody's book, *The Complexity and Progression of Black Representation in Film and Television*, Moody states "stereotypes can be considered a belief that all people with similar characteristics are the same – stereotypes are used to present oversimplified perceptions (or images) of individuals. Stereotypes are also used to categorize a group of people," (Moody,

2016, pg. 90). He explains that although it has been evident in the past, sitcoms of today utilize storylines to "foster" negative stereotypes of black people (Moody, 2016, pg. 90). Examples he mentioned were buffoonery (characters portrayed in "Martin" and "Good Times"), coonery (characters portrayed in "Meet the Browns") and thuggery (characters portrayed in "Empire") (Moody, 2016, pg. 90). Moody explores this idea that through storylines of blacks on TV are more prone to "exhibit the bourgeois values, habits and attitudes that are so familiar in White characterization," (Moody, 2016, pg. 90). Moody illustrates this "Cosby" complex of current black sitcoms – stating that it could be detrimental for black people to "tolerate portrayals of themselves that are not complimentary," because even today, black people are still "struggling for social empowerment, still seeking to integrate the entrenched and obstinate white power structure," (Moody, 2016, pg. 93). The fairly-new ABC sitcom, "Black-ish" – portraying an upper-middle-class black family whose patriarch struggles to maintain a cultural identity while raising his children in a white neighborhood represents a "conciliatory – non-assimilation approach to Black family life," (Moody, 2016, pg. 94). Within the plot of this show, you have Andre Johnson – the patriarch of the family who believes that "success has led to the loss of [his] cultural identity and individuality, Rainbow Johnson – the wife who is a successful anesthesiologist who doesn't always agree with her husband but wants their children to have better, the children: Zoey – the privileged and witty fifteen-year-old, Andre Jr – the son who is struggling to grasp the "complexities of growing up in an assimilated and privileged environment, and Jack and Diane – the extremely gifted six-year-old twins (Moody, 2016, pg. 95).

Shavonne Shorter examines the controlling images in the popular sitcom following a group of friends entitled "Girlfriends," in her book, *The Complex Girlfriend: Toni Childs as a*

Hybrid Controlling Imagine on Girlfriends. Shorter defines controlling images as "stereotypical tropes that depict black women in a number of degrading ways," (Shorter, 2019, pg. 34). She explains that the world perceives black women in many tropes rooted from slavery including;

> "The Mule (hard-working field hand who was profitable), Jezebel (sex-obsessed seductress), Breeder (woman who has many children than can be sold for profit), Welfare Mother (one who lives off the government and is a bad mother to her children), the Freak (a wild and crazy, sexually limitless woman), the Black Lady (the educated, successful and respectable woman) and the Super Strong Black Woman (a strong, independent woman), (Shorter, 2019, pg. 34).

The show focuses on four main characters: Joan represents the black lady, Lynn represents the jezebel, Maya represents the super-strong black woman and then there is Toni – who doesn't necessarily fit into one image, yet, is a hybrid of many (Shorter, 2019, pg. 34). Shorter analyzed all of the episodes the character was featured in and found reoccurring patterns of the character Toni being a hybrid of the black lady, the gold digger and the "antitheses of the super-strong black woman," (Shorter, 2019, pg. 34). Although her character wasn't the most liked on the series, she showcased that black women/characters "have personalities that are nuanced, complicated and multifaceted (Shorter, 2019, pg. 43). Through this character, Toni explored the idea that "black women are more than one dimensional," (Shorter, 2019, pg. 43). Toni doesn't disrupt the stereotype of black people – specifically black women, it more so reinforces the stereotypes that have been passed down from generations. However, these articles show that the variety of shows featuring black characters produce both positive and negative effects in the black community.

Black Men in Media

Black men have also suffered from the misrepresentation of characters in both news and television media. Tia Tyree explains in her article, "Representations of (new) Black masculinity: A news-making case study. She describes the historical representation of black men detailing the tropes that appeared including;

> "the Toms (good Negroes, loyal to their White masters), Coons (the no-account
> Negroes, lazy, subhuman), Tragic Mulatto (mixed-race person, a divided racial
> inheritance), Mammy (prototype house servant, nurturing, loyal to the masters),
> and the Buck (strong, raging, hypersexual male)," (Tyree, Byerly, Hamilton,
> 2012, pg. 469).

She even explains how most stereotypes have evolved and still exist in traditional media today, showcasing black men as "criminal, pimp, drug dealer, irresponsible father, and loser," (Tyree, Byerly, Hamilton, 2012, pg. 469). To disrupt those stereotypes, she recommends content creators to fill in the gaps of black male representation, establishing the "new black man." She explains that images of black men should represent the "Black males in academic literature, namely those of 'married, middle-class, educated, spiritual Black men, who are goal-driven, employed, competent and non-criminal," (Tyree, Byerly, Hamilton, 2012, pg. 470). Nathian Rodriguez also explored the stereotypes of black men in her article, "Hip-Hop's Authentic Masculinity: A Quare Reading of Fox's Empire." She addressed this idea that black men are perceived as homophobic, especially in an urban setting. In her article, she analyzes the series Empire where she explains that all of the male characters must present their selves as societies version of masculine. Rodriguez states the first episode displays the negative outlook of homophobia amongst the

black community that stems from an "ideology that emerged in the 1960s that equated black strength and authentic black identity with a militantly adversarial stance toward American society," (Rodriguez, 2017).

Searching for an Identity

For years, the classic sitcom, "The Cosby Show" has been ridiculed for its false realism of Black American families (Hopkins, 2012, p. 954). Patricia Hopkins compared and contrasted "The Cosby Show" and "Good Times" in her article, "Deconstructing Good Times and The Cosby Show: In Search of My "Authentic" Black Experience." Hopkins explored the critiques of "The Cosby Show" briefly in her article stating that "The Cosby Show" created a false impression that most African Americans had achieved "the dream" and had entered mainstream middle-class America," (Hopkins, 2012, p. 958). The show emphasized the idea that a black family no longer has to deal with "racism and discrimination" due to their socioeconomic class (Hopkins, 2012, p. 958). Many would argue that the Cosby family did not represent the situation of "real" black families who live in communities that "continue[s] to suffer from poverty, high unemployment, increased teen pregnancy, gang violence, and the rise of AIDS and crack cocaine addiction (Hopkins, 2012, p. 958).

Hopkins explains that growing up, her environment reflected the setting of the "Good Times" – raised in the housing projects similar to the Evans family (Hopkins, 2012, p. 954). Although her upbringing was similar to the one depicted in "Good Times," she states that she identified with "The Cosby Show" more " because it depicted a black family where both parents always worked, the family was grounded in faith and implemented the power of education within their children – everything that her family represented although they were poor (Hopkins, 2012, p. 954). She also explains that although she grew up poor, her parents made sure she was

exposed to "culture through arts," similar to the Cosby family (Hopkins, 2012, p. 957). Hopkins continues by stating that although she grew up poor in a housing project like the children from "Good Times," that should not be the only show she can find herself within (Hopkins, 2012, p. 960).

According to Scott, "The Cosby Show" worked to subdue negative stereotypes and messaging were "muted by the show's charismatic lead actors," and many of the viewers "forgot" that the Huxtables were black because they did not depict themselves as the standard negatives that lived within the brains of the typical white viewers that tuned in every night (Scott, 2014, p. 763). For many black people who were working to overcome the negative glares, "Good Times" was a hard pill to swallow. It symbolized everything middle-class blacks did not want whites to see. However, "The Cosby Show" confirmed to viewers that black people were educated and hardworking rather than poor, uneducated, aggressive and loud (Scott, 2014, p. 769).

Herman Gray even explains in his book *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* that after television shows like "Amos 'n' Andy," "The Beulah Show" and "Good Times," black sitcoms had a desire to not paint "stereotypical images of African Americans," and wanted black people to be more appealing to white viewers (Gray, 1995, pg. 76). Gray explores the idea of depicting black characters in higher social classes to disrupt stereotypes – stating that "black upward social mobility and middle-class affluence replaced black urban poverty as both setting and theme." Gray and Hopkins have similar sentiments regarding "The Cosby Show." Gray mentions in his book that Bill Cosby's sitcom was used as a "corrective" tool of previous black representation by showcasing families in higher-class (Gray, 1995, pg. 80). However, Gray addresses the complexities of "The Cosby Show" and the issues the sitcom failed to address

within the black community outside of the middle-class structure like economic disparity (Gray, 1995, p. 81). Gray states that "The Cosby Show" on many occasions, "seemed unable, or unwilling, to negotiate its universal appeals to family, the middle class, mobility, and individualism on the one hand and the particularities of black social, cultural, political, and economic realities on the other," (Gray, 1995, pg. 81-2)

Stuart Hall's Representation Theory

Stuart Halls Representation Theory has been established as a pillar for media studies – focusing on how media re-present reality. The theory questions who has the ability to make meaning. Essentially, Hall argues that producers make the meaning in an attempt to maintain dominance and keep people in their place. According to The Media Insider, "media representations aren't reflections of things that already have meaning, they are the meaning makers of things that happen in reality," (The Media Insider, 2019). He goes on to explain that these stereotypes that we are exposed to every day are developed because of the "limited representations the hegemonic elites show," its viewers (The Media Insider, 2019). In layman's terms, we become familiar and internalize the images that we see of ethnic groups, especially people of color, women and people amongst the LGBTQ+ community. Once these images are portrayed over again for some time, they can restrict society's perceptions of different groups (The Media Insider, 2019). The Media Insider explains that these images "become naturalized and we stop questioning it," (The Media Insider, 2019).

In Stuart Hall's book, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, he explains that culture and language play a huge part in developing representation and meaning. Hall states that language gives us the ability to "make sense of things," while "culture is about feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas," which leads to the

development of meaning which Hall describes as "what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong'" (Hall, 1997, pg. 1-3). Meaning is always produced. Hall explains that language consists of many elements, including "sounds, words, notes [music], gestures, expressions [and] clothes," (Hall, 1997, pg. 5). He explains that representations serve as the connecting piece between meaning, language and culture. Hall defines representation as "using language to say something meaningful about, or to re-present, the world meaningfully, to other people," (Hall, 1997, pg. 15).

Critical Race Theory

According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic, Critical Race Theory began as a movement in law to address racial issues. As the theory and movement has grown, it has mostly been used to address racism in education. The theory and the ones who subscribe to the theory believe that "racism is ordinary… [and] that it is difficult to cure or address," (Delgado, Stefanic, 2001, pg. 37-42). Many would also state that Critical Theory is used to push the interest of "white elites" and that it is a "social construct," (Delgado, Stefanic, 2001, pg. 37-42). The authors explain that:

> Society constructs the social world through a series of tacit agreements mediated by images, pictures, tales, blog postings, and other scripts. Much of what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel but is not perceived to be so at the time. Attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction (pg. 48).

In an article, Marxist Materialism and Critical Race Theory: A Comparative Analysis of Media and Cultural Influence on the Formation of Stereotypes and Proliferation of Police Brutality against Black Men, authors Devair and Rhonda Jefferies relate Critical Race Theory to Media

and Hip Hip. Because CRC studies focus on race and oppression, the authors argue that the genre of Hip Hop is a tool to interfere with the "white elites" agenda (Jefferies, 2017). The authors explain that "Rap/hip-hop, a Black male dominated genre of music, both desists and assists in aiding this hierarchy of rank and possessions, methodically masked as the status quo," and that many artists like Kanye West and J. Cole utilize their lyrics to expose the reality of what they see (Jefferies, 2017). You can argue the same for television shows like Insecure and Dear White People.

Methods

Case Study Analysis

This original research consists of a descriptive case study analysis of select entertainment television shows to explore stereotypical representation of black television characters in current sitcoms from multiple platforms of entertainment. An analysis of current television shows from a variety of platforms was conducted to address the first research question**, has a diverse representation of African Americans in television shows disrupted the cultivation of negative stereotypes?** From secondary research within my literature review, I will determine the stereotypes and themes that may appear in these shows and analyze if the characters are working to portray the tropes depicted in the past or dispelling them. During this study I will be analyzing situational comedies from ABC (a television network), HBO (a cable network) and Netflix (a streaming platform).

A total of three episodes from the premiere season of Black-ish, Insecure and Dear White People will be analyzed for this project. I will utilize the first three episodes to develop a deep description of each including; the major characters, setting of the show and who the showrunner is demographically. I will also be examining the content of the show and interviews with the

creators. For the interviews with showrunners, I would hope to discover how they created the characters and why they made the show.

From Hall's theory, I utilize his *intentional approach* to analyze the meaning within the shows. Halls intentional approach states "it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends they should mean," (Hall, 1997, pg. 25). I then compare and contrast the characters of the particular show with the existing tropes that exist within the literature I reviewed. This approach addresses my first research question: **Has a diverse representation of African Americans in television shows disrupted the cultivation of negative stereotypes?**

Interviews:

I also conducted five in-depth interviews with students studying media, film and theatre and also fans of the show. These interviews help to address my second research question: **How have those portrayals of African Americans influenced or impacted their viewers?** Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes, with a total of seven interview questions. The questions were:

1. What is your favorite show of all time?

2. What character has impacted you the most?

3. What is your favorite moment from the character? How do you remember them?

4. How important is it for you to see black characters on television? What does a black character represent for you?

5. Describe your ideal character: What does the character look like, personality, physical features, background etc.

6. If you are able to write your own show, what would that world look like? Explain the family dynamic (if any) and how would your star character present their selves to the world? What would they represent?

7. Can you reflect on how the portrayals of black characters might be different than in other heyday moments (90s moments of black TV), if they are, and why that might be so?

Results

Case Study | Black-ish

Black-ish revolves around a black upper-middle-class family as they juggle many issues and the father's conviction to form a foundation of cultural identity for his family. The ABC sit-com premiered on September 24, 2014, to a total of 11 million viewers (Kissell, 2014). The show aired during the peak of police brutality against black bodies. The killing of Michael Brown and riots plagued the street a month before Black-ish premiered. The New York Times claimed the show to be "a modern family with issues," and praised the creator, Kenya Barris for creating a show that takes a "much more nuanced and complicated dive into racial identity than initially advertised," (Wortham, 2014).

Kenya Barris wanted to create a show "about a black family – not about a family that happens to be black," (Moraes, 2014). Showrunners Kenya Barris and Larry Wilmore created a show that depicts class and culture – Barris emphasized that the show "has much less to do with race than culture," (Moraes, 2014). The statement is contradictory. To be "black" isn't just cultural aspects, but who you are and physical characteristics such as skin color that a "black" person cannot hide nor deny. It's applied that every social issue addressed on the show is what all black people experience, when most times that is not true – we are not monolithic. Barris

wanted to create a show about a black family that addresses the aspects of culture and not make it a "race" issue so mainstream white viewers would be comfortable watching. It is impossible to talk about "black" culture without addressing race at the core.

Setting: The series has two significant places that we see within the show. We first meet the protagonist's character inside of his home, waking up and preparing for the day. We see the family eating meals together and having conversations over the dinner table. This setting is essential for this series because it negates the negative stereotype that black people come from broken families and single-parent households. It shows that there is a presence of a black male in the home – not just one, but three generations of black men in one house. The other primary setting is the office where Dre works— displaying a working, educated black father who is not the stereotypical "lazy" black man.

Meet the Characters:

Andre Johnson is the patriarch of the family and the example of a black man "making it out the hood," serving as the protagonist throughout this series. We are introduced to him through a voice-over: "Okay, so, I'm just your standard, regular ol', massively well endowed, Black dude." Establishing that he's a "normal" guy that's either "well-supported financially," or has a large penis. Dre is successful and hardworking. An educated black man promoted to Senior Vice President of "urban" advertising. He comes off as vain and materialistic as we see him adoring his large wall full of sneakers and praising his two-story house. He is alert – knowing that perspectives of black men being the "big scary black guy" have changed, yet he admits he sometimes misses it because "it did kinda have its advantages."

Rainbow Johnson is the matriarch of the family and it is emphasized that she is fair skin. Andre makes it a point to describe her as his, "jaundice complexioned, mixed-race," wife who happens to be a doctor. She doesn't necessarily see the world through a "black" lens like her husband.

Pops Johnson is Dre's father, who lives in the family guest house. He comes off as callous and unaffectionate towards his son as Dre state, "Even though we were close, my Pops had a weird way of showing he loved me... And by weird,' I meant he didn't do it at all." Pops even shows his disgust toward an affectious exchange between Dre and his son Jr.

The Children: Zoey Johnson is the witty, iPhone obsessed teenage girl**, Andre Johnson Jr** is the eldest of the bunch , who loves school, completing projects and crushing on his female classmates, **Zack and Diane** are twins and the youngest of the Johnson family – they are extremely smart and very independent.

<div align="center">

Season One Episode One
Title: Pilot

</div>

Theme(s) From the First Episode:

Race in The Workplace: The pilot episode displays the corporate world through Andre's eyes – working within an organization where black people aren't represented in higher levels. At his job, we see Andre walking in addressing the black security guard, speaking to the black receptionist, dapping up the black janitor and mailman. It was intentional to show black people in those stereotypical "mule" servant roles to express the unique situation of being one of the black people who "made it" in a dominant white world. He explains that when black representation in the workplace is so few, "[being] black made you feel like you were part of a little family. So, when one of us made it, it was kind of like we all did." We also see one of Andre's co-workers ask him, "How do you think a black guy would say good morning?" Addressing the idea that black people aren't normal. An Us v. Them mentality was highlighted

with a depiction of a line of segregation during a meeting. Minorities (us) one side of the table and white employee on the other (them) - showing the division of upper and lower management. Andre doesn't hide his desire to be welcomed on the "them" side as he becomes the Senior Vice President of the Urban Division.

Physically Features Equate to Blackness: In the pilot episode, many times, we see the parental unit equate their blackness or lack thereof to their physical features. From the introduction voice over, he points out how fair Rainbow skin is. Andre even goes far to tell her that because she's mixed race and light-skin, she is not "even really Black." Her response is, "if I'm not really black can someone tell that to my hair and my ass." Andre even takes pride in being the "well-endowed black guy." As mentioned before, he is implying that he is either "well-supported financially," or has a large penis, according to Webster dictionary. This only reinforces the urban myth of black men and hypersexualize them, alluding toward the Mandingo/Buck stereotype

Chicken and Soda: We see a reinforcement of the "black people love chicken" stereotype through Pops Johnson, the grandfather. A stereotype that all black people drink grape soda is emphasized once the family's oldest son teammate assumes the carbon drink was in their fridge.

<div align="center">

Season One Episode Two
Title: The Talk

</div>

Theme(s) From the Second Episode:

Black Men are Homophobic: During this episode, the characters Rainbow and Pops reassure Andre that stretching is not "gay." Insinuating that Andre is slightly homophobic. It was contradicting to hear statements like "stretching does not make you gay, Dre," or stretching may look "a little gay, but it works" when we also see Andre wrapping his bath towel to cover his breast, squealing at the feeling of cold body spray and telling his son he's a "little too bloated to go shirtless right now."

Theme(s) From the Third Episode:

Black Boys Can Be Nerds: This episode highlights the "traditional" gestures within black culture that men do to acknowledge the presence of each other. One thing that served as an undertone for this episode is a different yet positive depiction of what a black boy can be. It shows that a black boy can be a "nerd" who isn't interested in basketball, hip hop or fashion. It shows that it's okay for a blackboy to be awkward.

Case Study | Insecure

Insecure is HBO's new series following the lives of two black women as they struggle to navigate the terrains of their personal and professional world. The series is seen through the viewpoint of two modern day black women in South LA. The show depicts the journey of the two best friends on their journey towards #BlackGirlMagic. Rae states in a 2018 interview with GQ that she was inspired by past sitcoms with "predominantly black casts," and she desired to have her own version (Baron, 2018). Issa states in an interview with Katie Couric that she created Insecure "because there were a bunch of stereotypes. For me, it was just about putting something into the world that I could relate to," (Ernsberger, 2018). Rae stated in in an interview with The Guardian;

> "I just wanted to see my friends and I reflected on television, in the same way that white people are allowed, and which nobody questions... "Somewhere along the way, being white became seen as 'relatable', and you started to see people of colour only reflected as stereotypes or specific archetypes. So much of the media now presents blackness as being cool, or able to dance, or fierce and flawless, or just out of control; I'm not any of those things," (Mulkerrins, 2017)

Setting: The setting of South LA, specifically the neighborhood of Compton, is depicted in b-roll visuals as a bright sunny place completed with churches, small businesses, palm trees and community members taking a stroll down the street. This minority community is depicted as a home and haven for the people that reside there. The visuals of South LA are entirely different from the visuals of gang violence and crime projected onto viewers.

Meet the Characters:

Issa Dee is one of the major characters of the series and is the personification for the awkward, outgoing and funny girl who was raised in the suburbs. We are first introduced to her in her classroom as she works as a youth liaison for the nonprofit, We Got Y'all, that helps inner-city youth in Los Angeles. She is a dark complexion and educated woman with short dyed natural hair. Her vibrancy is seen through her smile and colorful clothing. At the start of the series, Issa just turned 29 years-old and is trying to figure out her life, professionally and personally. She is a good friend, although sometimes her friends may describe her as honest, passive-aggressive, irresponsible, selfish, careless and run away from her issues.

Molly Carter is Issa's best friend and the second major character of the series. Molly is the well put together, smart, ambitious and sociable lawyer who's loved by both white and black people (from Issa's perspective). She grew up in the inner-city and can be known as vain and bougie. Molly is never seen with a hair strand out of place. She has a very type-A personality and strives to have every part of her life just as perfect as her career. She is the strong, independent black woman who deals with a void in her life – she desperately wants to be married. Her desire has landed her in many promiscuous situations to find the perfect man. Because of her desire to be with a person – she comes off as naïve, jealous, demanding and a desperate woman who has

trouble picking up on social cues. She tends to self-sabotage and also doubts herself a lot. She's an excellent friend to Issa and tells her when she's wrong

Lawrence is Issa's longtime boyfriend of five years. When we first meet Lawrence, he is depressed, lazy and a man who has lost all ambition. He is a Georgetown graduate and has no clue where life has taken him.

Tiffany is a part of the friend group and is the representation of the "Black Lady" stereotype. She is smart, educated and SUPER classy. Most of her friends call her bougie, but she doesn't see it that way. She is annoying and very pretentious and has no time for her friend's petty drama.

Kelli is also a part of Issa and Molly's friend group and the life of the party. She is the loud, take-no-nonsense, hypersexual ball of joy who always speaks her mind. She is an accountant who got most of her life together – her only vice is her sexual appetite. Kelly is the hybrid representation of the "Super Strong Black Woman," and "Jezebel," or "Freak."

<div align="center">

Season One Episode One
Title: Insecure as F*ck

</div>

In this episode we meet Issa Dee one of major characters of the series. She is working on her birthday as a youth liaison at Thomas Jefferson Middle School presenting about her employer to a group of students. She is faced with questions from the class foreshadowing the insecurities not only her character, but black women face in their professional and private lives.

<div align="center">

Why you talk like a white girl?
What's up with your hair?
Is this what you always wanted to do?
Are you single?
Why ain't you married?

</div>

Theme(s) From the First Episode:

"Token" Black Girl: In this episode, we see Issa dealing with the perception of black women in the workplace. Often working in an organization as the "only one" you can unintentionally become the voice of all black people. We see Issa walking in the break room when her coworker asks, "Issa, what's on fleek?" and she tells her coworker she doesn't know. Her thoughts make it evident that she does, "I know what that shit means." However, this moment reinforces the mindset that all black people are the same and expected to relate and be knowledgeable of everyone's experiences.

Vulnerable Black Women: In this episode we get to see black women being open and vulnerable. Often, black women are depicted as strong and independent, with no room to disclose issues, private thoughts and uncertainty. We see Issa being vulnerable, asking herself, **"**how different would my life be if I actually went after what I wanted?" she assumes her life would be like her best friend Molly – perfect and loved by everyone. We also see Issa disclosing to Molly her feelings about the state of her relationship. She isn't happy and feels like time is passing her by. She is another year older; she's feeling stagnant at her job and the last thing she wants to deal with is an unfulfilling relationship. She even tells Lawrence, "I don't want to just sit on the couch with you for the rest of my life and wait for something to happen." In this episode, we also see Molly being vulnerable with Issa as she deals with the self-doubt of dating. Molly tells Issa, "It's like it doesn't matter what I do Issa. If I'm into them, then I'm too smothering. If I take my time or try to give them space, "oh I didn't think you were into me." Fine. Sex right away. Lose interest. Wait to have sex. Lose interest."

Black Children & The White Savior: This episode explores the white savior complex as Issa's coworker describes the children at Thomas Jefferson Middle School. The coworkers tell others,

"these poor, poor children need our guidance more than anything. They were so intent on not acknowledging the burden that face them every day."

<center>**Season One Episode Two**
Title: Messy as F*ck</center>

Theme(s) From the Second Episode:

Hyper Sexualization of Black Men: Molly is on a date with a guy as they talk about their worst dating experiences. The man she is with tells her, "listen, I've never had so many women eyeing my shoe size and asking me, "so are the rumors true?"

Black Children Success Route: This episode reinforces the stereotype that the only way to get through to black children is through sports and rap music. It also highlights the white savior complex as well. Many of her coworkers are pitching ideas about programs for the children to participate in. Many mention activities with basketball. Issa assures them, "it's crippling for inner-city kids to rely solely on sports to achieve success." They also suggest taking the students to an "African American museum or, like, a Latino museum and just see how much more grateful other generations were." They even suggest attending hip hop Shakespeare and advising the kids should attend a drum circle because it "really helps with aggression.

<center>**Season One Episode Three**
Title: Racist as F*ck</center>

Theme(s) From the Third Episode:

The "Perfect" Black Worker: Issa discovers that her coworkers have been having private conversations about her since her presentation did not go well. When asked about these conversations, they told her they weren't sure how she would react – implying the stereotype of the "angry black woman." This show displays how the standards for black people are different. Issa tells her boyfriend what happened, explaining, "I made one mistake during my presentation

and they lost all faith in me. You know, now I'm the black girl who fucked up. And white people at my job f*ck up all the time!" Her boyfriend tells her that now she has to "work extra hard to prove them wrong." Even Molly tries to convince the new loud and black intern to "switch it up a little bit," when working with white people.

Case Study | Dear White People

In an interview with The Ringer, Justin Simien explains why the characters of Dear White People are important. Simien states, "I think my primary job as an artist is to get people to see themselves in my characters, and that is political to me because a lot of times, black people are not really seen as human beings… the first goal that I have is to create these people that feel like human beings to where anybody can sort of see themselves in their lives," (Collins, 2017). Justin Simien even details in an interview with The Collider blog his reasoning on creating "authentic" Black Characters. He states, "I try not to get into identity politics, which is funny because I have a show called Dear White People, or representation and portraying the race a certain way. That's an old school style of portraying, and that's not my thing. My thing is to try to tell the truth, as honestly as possible," (Radish, 2019). He even explains his viewpoint as a male writer writing from the women's perspective. Simien states, "it would be really irresponsible to tell stories coming from female points of views without women in the writers' room, but also behind the camera," (Radish, 2019)

Setting: We meet the primary cast on the campus of Winchester University, a fictional Ivy League college where diverse students are forced to take photos for admission pamphlets. The university has a known culture for covert racism, and overt racist antics like a blackface party which is swept under the rug. This setting is essential because it sets the tones for the character's environment and serves as an underlying cause for their behaviors.

Meet the Characters:

Samantha White is a Junior at Winchester University with a major in Media studies. She is the bi-racial major character who seems to be frustrated with the culture of her ivy league campus. She is an activist for the Black Student Union on campus and some would perceive her as the angry, race-baiting radio host (according to the white students). Samantha is headstrong, stubborn, goal-driven and a little distracted by her unconventional boyfriend. Samantha is known for being outspoken and overcompensating for being half-white. She can be compared to the Tragic Mullato stereotype.

Troy Fairbanks is the student body president, political science student and son of the dean of students known for his nickname "Trobama." He was raised by his father and was groomed to be the "perfect" black person, so he was deemed presentable for the higher class. He is a brilliant, goal-driven and a charming young man who is also lost and is living under his fathers' image.

Lionel Higgins is a Journalism student and reporter for The Independent, Winchester University student newspaper. Not much is known about the background of this major character, but he is awkwardly shy, fearful and dealing with his anxiety of being black and gay.

Colandrea 'Coco' Conners is an Economic student at Winchester and Troy's secret fling. She is insecure and come from a troubled childhood. Coco struggles with her identity as a dark-skin black woman from the hood. She is the example of "code-switching," hiding her background to fit in with her group of white friends.

Joelle Brooks is the "sidekick" to Samantha and the "Strong Independent Black Woman" trope of the series. She is ambitious, loyal, outspoken and very intelligent. There is not much known of the character, her background and even her major of study.

Reggie Green is a student activist at Winchester University raised by a former Black Panther. He is stubborn, passionate and knowledgeable. Because of his passion, he tends to make the other white students feel uncomfortable. He symbolizes the historical "Buck" trope. There is not much else known about the character.

<p align="center">**Season One Episode One**</p>

Theme(s) From the First Episode:

Diversity of the Black Experience: During the first episode, we are introduced to the six major characters on campus. An important scene displays a black caucus meeting of all of the black student organizations on Winchester University campus. We see black students from a range of backgrounds, dispelling major historical tropes of black people. It shows black men and women dressed and speaking differently from each other – enunciating their words and occasionally using slang. This group of black people are diverse in many ways including skin tone, socioeconomic status, culture and even hair type.

Being Black Enough: We witness Samantha, one of the leaders, struggle with this idea of being black "enough." She deals with this internal conflict within herself because she is a student activist for the black community and her father is white. The black community on campus also finds out that Samantha is dating a white man. Everyone begins to look at her differently. The group starts to question her intentions of being the lead activist on behalf of the black community because they believe her dating a white man contradicts her stance for black people.

<p align="center">**Season One Episode Two**</p>

Theme(s) From the Second Episode:

Homophobia: During this episode, the character Lionel is a shy, gay black man who has dealt with homophobia from his community. He has a desire to get a haircut but has struggled to find the right place. He did not feel comfortable in the white barbershop because of the uncomfortable

stares and he also did not feel comfortable in the black barbershop because of the offensive

comments. One black barber stating, "y'all know I don't cut fags." The narrator explains that he

isn't afraid of black people, just the ones that remind him of the boys from high school that

teased him for being gay.

<div align="center">

Season One Episode Three

</div>

Theme(s) From the Third Episode:

The "Perfect" Black: This episode centers around Troy Fairbanks during election day of

student body president. The narrator mentions, "It's the role Troy was groomed to

play." Implying since he was young, he was molded to be the perfect black man. Smart,

charming, sensible and very articulate. No room for error or mistakes. Troy is expected to

showcase his abilities to blend in with the elite and engage in conversations with diverse groups

of people, including the African American, Latinx students, STEM majors, typical "frat" boys,

athletes and feminists. An Asian student even stated, "Damn. This brother can do anything,"

while watching Troy make dumplings. The character shows layers of himself. It shows that he is

human and has flaws. He secretly smokes weed and has numerous affairs with his female peers.

Case Study | Interviews

*The interviewees who have participated are either fans of the three shows studies (Black-ish, Insecure and Dear White People) or students who study media, film and theatre. These interviews are meant to answer the RQ; **how has those portrayals of African Americans influence of impact its viewers?***

The participants stated that their favorite shows ranged from Good Times, Insecure, All

Rise, Fresh Prince of Bel-air, My Wife and Kids, A Different World and even The Office. Many

noted that they have watched Black-ish and Dear white people but do not classify them as a

"favorite." The group explains that characters including Claire Huxtable, Will Smith from The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Bernie Mac from the Bernie Mac Show and Kim from A Different World. Although the respondents could not recall any exact moments from their favorite characters that stood out, they remembered their characteristics as being "strong with an edge," relatable, real, loyal, hilarious, adaptable, outspoken, intelligent, being emotional and being able to deal with issues and address controversial images. One participant, in particular, remembers his favorite character (Bernie Mac) as being stern and giving.

Every single participant said it was crucial to see black characters on tv. One participant stated that black figures represent a limitless future and a "spectrum of emotions and traits that black boys can be," The interviewee explains that these sitcoms show that "black men can be sensitive, strong and vulnerable." The group agreed that black characters represented success, intelligence and reality. One member even said that "not all black characters are store clerks or crackheads." Black characters, for some participants, represent a blueprint of what they want their life to be. One participant even stated that the characters represent, "Me! What I could be, what I couldn't be and basically my future goals personified on screen."

The participants were asked to describe their ideal character. The main adjectives that the interviewees used to describe their perfect character are positive, strong, intelligent and vulnerable. They would prefer to see their ideal characters being able to fit in "both worlds." Their perfect character will be the representation of the "come up" story – having the ability to make something out of their selves. A person who came from rough beginnings and is working towards success. They don't want the character to be "perfect" but someone from the upper-middle class with human traits dealing with mental health, family issues and finances. They

would prefer their character to be active and live a healthy lifestyle. Some careers they would like to see their characters in are counselors, entrepreneurs, bankers and aspiring creatives.

The interviewees stated they would like their show to take place in an urban setting with a "two-parent household doing great things. The family would have access to resources like a reliable car. Multiple generations of a family would live under one roof in a diverse community who are close to their neighbors." Some would even like a show following a group of college kids in an urban city. One person stated that their show would take place, "post-college with intellectual storylines. The show would have some family moments, but not a lot of boy drama. Their character would represent balance and how to fix or maneuver the negative things that happen." One person stated that they would write a show highlighting unconventional roles in the black community, such as sex workers and the power of sex and owning your own body.

Some participants were split on if the portrayals of black characters are different now from the 90s. One person who said yes firmly stated that "most black people are portrayed to be cricked characters or people always doing something wrong – can they be a normal black person capable of dealing with their issues. They are either always messing up or the savior." Another person who said no mentioned, "The Cosby Show wouldn't make these new shows look out of the ordinary. However, they have shifted away from the strong family structure and began to address things more openly, especially the LGBTQ community and push for mental health." The participants that were in the middle stated that shows began to address "issues more real to us," and that "Black tv was already groundbreaking anyway and you don't realize until you watch it later in life. You can either relate to it or hope to it."

Discussion

The purpose of the case study was to explore the dynamics of black representation in entertainment media and analyze if shows created by African American showrunners disrupted stereotypical media tropes of black characters. In the matter of showrunners, Kenya Barris's reasoning behind the creation of Black-ish was to display a black family that addresses aspects of "black culture" but not make it about race, which is deemed contradicting. However, Issa Rae and Justin Simien created their shows, Insecure and Dear White People to display characters that they can relate to. They both recognized that for some time, people of color were portrayed continuously as stereotypes and wanted to utilize their platforms to portray black characters as human beings.

What's remarkable about this descriptive analysis is that each television show analyzed represents three different sources of media; a television network, cable network and streaming platform. ABC's show Black-ish represents the television network and from the analysis, the television network show glorifies stereotypical tropes within its primary characters compared to the other two television shows. From the beginning we are introduced to Andre as a hard-working male with a big penis. Even his wife, Rainbow Johnson, justifies her blackness with her curly hair and big butt. Both characters equate their physical features to being black. Andre's comments on being well endowed allude to the Mandingo/Buck stereotype – the hypersexual black male character. Both Andre and Rainbow perpetuate this idea that what makes a black person is the size of their physical feature. This can be damaging to members of the black community because Black-ish core audience is white and that can set a tone for how its audience thinks of African Americans in their community. It can also influence their young black viewers to believe they need those things to be "black."

From the analysis, the older characters, especially the men of the family are the ones displaying the stereotypes on the show. Pops Johnson is Andre's father and one of the characters who exhibit the traditional media tropes of black people. The first episode explores Pops' infatuation with fried chicken – a historical stereotype that hovers over the black community. The show also pushes the stereotype of all black people drink grape soda. Displaying these stereotypes to a mass audience would do nothing but reassure the historical tropes in the minds of viewers who believe them to be true. Unfortunately, it's only the older characters who seem to glorify those stereotypes, while the children contradict them. One child depicted, Andre Johnson Jr., continues to go against the grain in terms of stereotypes of young black men. In the third episode analyzed, Andre Johnson Jr isn't a boy who wants to play basketball or to talk in slang. He is a nerd! What's great about this depiction of the younger generation is that it displays so much more of what a black boy can be. He likes to play video games and is obsessed with wizards. This young character loves school, science and also goes above and beyond to make excellent grades. Essentially, Andre Johnson Jr is a well-mannered, well-spoken and educated young boy – he has no desire to play basketball and listen to rap music. Unfortunately, this one contradicting character isn't enough. Although the show does more to glorify stereotypes than disrupt them, it does, however, address themes within the show, including being black in the corporate world and homophobia within the black community.

HBO's show Insecure and Netflix show Dear White People represent the cable network and streaming platform. In Insecure, Issa Dee is one of the primary characters who does not constitute a historical stereotype mentioned in the literature review. Issa's character is a contradiction to many of the African American female stereotypes referenced in the literature review. Similar to Andre Johnson Jr character in Black-ish, Issa represents what black women

can be. Often, black women in television are either the sidekick or the strong black woman who fixes other people's problems – does Olivia Pope sound familiar? The character Issa is a socially awkward black girl who makes mistakes and is vulnerable. The second primary character, Molly Carter displays aspects of the independent black woman, but that's not all of who she is

The secondary characters (Molly and Tiffany) of Insecure also align with aspects of the stereotypes referenced in the literature review as well. We don't see much of them, but they represent different versions of black women in a positive light. The Kelli character aligns with the "freak" or "Jezebel" stereotype. In the past, the Jezebel was a prostitute or a woman that couldn't be trusted around men. Kelli is an accountant who is very secure in her sexuality and aggressive when pursuing men – she knows what she wants and isn't afraid to be free in her sexuality. Issa's boyfriend in the series isn't a criminal like many other black men are depicted. Lawrence is a college graduate and is dealing with mental health.

What's excellent about Insecure is the beauty in the imagery of the setting where the show takes place. Issa Rae and the showrunners made sure to depict the neighborhood of Compton as that – a community where people live, work, have fellowship and spend money. Compton, in the past, has been depicted as a war zone due to the long-rooted feuds of gang members.

Similar to Insecure, Netflix's show Dear White people showrunner stated that the show was created to depict authentic black characters. These characters have struggles, they aren't perfect, and they are trying to figure life out like any other human being. It just so happens that Dear White People chronicles the life of black students on an ivy league campus. Instead of glorifying stereotypes that are disparaging to the black community, we see the characters in both Insecure and Dear White People, addressing real-life situations. The showrunners are exposing

themes and stereotypes that would not appear in an entertainment program written by people, not of color. The characters from these programs are displaying how nuanced the black experience can be. It shows that we are not all monolithic and have to subscribe to one set of cultural aspects to be perceived as black.

To answer the research question: **Has a diverse representation of African Americans in television shows disrupted the cultivation of negative stereotypes?** It depends on the source of media, the showrunner and diversity within the writer's rooms. Black-ish resides on a legacy network and glorifies many of the stereotypes that haunt the black community. It seems when black creators get an opportunity to develop content for cable networks like HBO and streaming platforms like Netflix, they have more creative space to tell the stories they want without having an obligation to satisfy white viewers and make them feel comfortable. Black showrunners on non-traditional networks can tackle tropes and include cultural experiences that wouldn't appear in a sit-com that was written by a white person.

Representation matters! Black characters impact their viewers and influence what they want their black characters to be and represent. As previously stated in the literature review, the audience is becoming more diverse and prefers to connect with characters who look like them. Their pallets are different, and it's evident from the interviews conducted. The purpose of the interviews was to address my second research question: **How have those portrayals of African Americans influenced or impacted their viewers?** Participants have always seen black TV as groundbreaking. Black characters from the past and present have changed what black viewers expect from the shows and characters. It's apparent from the respondents that it is vital to see black characters on television. These participants view black characters as a symbol of success and intelligence. Representation has influenced the audience to be more accepting of their selves

and to be vulnerable at times where society tells them not to be. Black characters of both past and present have helped African American audience members determined what they expect from future roles. The "perfect black" character is no longer acceptable to them. They want to see characters that resemble who they are – a flawed person with a "come up" story who deals with real-life issues, including mental health and finances. They want to see characters in a world where two-parent households exist on television. They want to see ordinary people – the same that they see in their everyday lives.

From the case study, what was not expected was a television show on a legacy network with a black showrunner and an impactful title that created so much backlash like Black-ish to glorify stereotypes the way they did. The results from analyzing Dear White People were surprising as well. From a biased opinion, I expected the show to portray more stereotypes of black people giving the setting of where the show took place.

Critical Race Theory and Stuart Hall's Representation Theory served as the theoretical lens of the research and they both stand.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that remain present for this study. First is the researcher's bias because the project is qualitative in nature and the majority of results relied on descriptive analysis based solely on the researcher. Another limitation is the sample of television shows analyzed. The first three episodes of the first season of each series were analyzed to determine the answer to the first research question. Due to convenience, participants were students of media studies and may not have represented the audience of the programs analyzed. Interview participants may have displayed response bias during the interview process as well.

Conclusion

"Let me introduce myself. My name is J and I'm awkward… and black," served as the introduction to Issa Rae's award-winning web series, The Misadventures of AWKWARD Black Girl. Issa has shifted Hollywood and reframed the meaning of black representation. The purpose of the research was to explore the importance and influence of racial diversity in contemporary U.S. entertainment television. The golden age of sitcoms has set the tone and so have its viewers. As the landscape of entertainment television continues to change, so will its audience pallets – demanding more diverse stories and characters. Black creatives and showrunners have the power to create and illustrate their own stories and experiences in a way so that they don't glorify stereotypes. The power of the creative lies within the story and can build or destroy a community. The descriptive analysis shows that a legacy network still utilizes stereotypes to illustrate stories written by people of color. For other media sources, including cable networks and streaming platforms, writes have more creative space to address tropes that would not be addressed if a person of another race was writing the story. Modern platforms give creatives the ability to discuss painful topics utilizing a comedic lens without depicting African Americans through harmful tropes.

References

Adewunmi, B. (2014, April 16). Web comedy star Issa Rae: 'I think TV will become the internet's poor cousin'. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/apr/16/issa-rae-web-comedy-star-tv-poor-cousin

AJ+. (2017, September 10). *What Happened To The Golden Age Of Black Sitcoms? | AJ+* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEiXGrqoFMs&t=5s

Baron, Z. (2018, May 22). The Uncompromising Comedy of Issa Rae. Retrieved from https://www.gq.com/story/issa-rae-insecure-profile

Collins, K. A. (2017, April 21). "I Was Taken Aback by the Volume of Vitriol". Retrieved from https://www.theringer.com/2017/4/21/16041564/justin-simien-interview-dear-white-people-netflix-4b35fbaf71c0

Deggans, E. (2016, October 7). Issa Rae Turns Basic Into Revolutionary With 'Insecure'. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/2016/10/07/496984892/issa-rae-is-first-black-woman-to-create-star-in-premium-cable-show

Delgado, R, Stefancic, J. (2001). Critical race theory: An introduction. Retrieved from https://ebookcentral.proquest.com

Ernsberger, P. (2018, September 13). Issa Rae Opens Up About Turning Awkward Moments Into A Hit Show In This Exclusive Clip. Retrieved from https://www.bustle.com/p/issa-raes-inspiration-for-insecure-was-a-lot-more-literal-than-fans-may-have-realized-exclusive-video-11889279

Gauntlett, D. (2003). Media, gender and identity: An introduction. Routledge.

Gray, H. (1995). The Politics of Representation in Network Television. In Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness" (pp. 70–92). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Hall, S. (1997). Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices / edited by Stuart Hall. London ;: Sage.

Hopkins, P. D. (2012). Deconstructing Good Times and The Cosby Show. Journal of Black Studies, 43(8), 953–975. doi: 10.1177/0021934712463395

Hunt, D. (2017, October). Writer's Room. Retrieved from https://hollywood.colorofchange.org/writers-room-report/

Jackson, N. E. (2013). Chapter 6: Perry versus Cosby, a Different Perspective Examining the

Influence of Black Media on Black Group Consciousness. In Interpreting Tyler Perry Perspectives on Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality (1st ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Jeffries, D., & Jeffries, R. (2017). Marxist Materialism and Critical Race Theory: A Comparative Analysis of Media and Cultural Influence on the Formation of Stereotypes and Proliferation of Police Brutality against Black Men. Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men 5(2), 1-22. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/660538.

Katsingris , P. (n.d.). THE NIELSEN TOTAL AUDIENCE REPORT. Retrieved November 1, 2019, from https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.mediapost.com/uploads/NielsenTotalAudienceReportQ 12019.pdf#.

Kissell, R. (2014, September 25). ABC's 'Black-ish' Strong-ish in Premiere; CBS Reality Vets Win Night in Demos. Retrieved from https://variety.com/2014/data/news/abcs-black-ish-impressive-ish-in-premiere-cbs-reality-vets-win-night-in-demos-1201313297/

Moody, D. L. (2016). American Culture and the Black Situation Comedy. In The Complexity and Progression of Black Representation in Film and Television (pp. 87–100). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Moraes, L. de. (2014, July 16). TCA: ABC's 'Black-ish' About Culture More Than Race, Exec Producers Say. Retrieved from https://deadline.com/2014/07/tca-abcs-black-ish-about-culture-more-than-race-exec-producers-say-804409/

Mulkerrins, J. (2017, August 5). Issa Rae: 'So much of the media presents blackness as fierce and flawless. I'm not'. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/aug/05/issa-rae-media-presents-blackness-fierce-flawless-insecure

Musambira, G. W., & Jackson, N. E. (2018). A Preliminary Analysis of Tyler Perry's 'House of Payne' and 'Meet the Browns': Effect on the Black Identity, African Americans' Frequency of Exposure, Perception of Accuracy and Affective Evaluation. Journal of Creative Communications, 13(2), 212–231. doi: 10.1177/0973258618803465

Radish, C. (2019, September 24). 'Dear White People' Creator Justin Simien on the Impact of Trump's America on Future Seasons. Retrieved from https://collider.com/dear-white-people-justin-simien-interview/

Rodriguez, N. (2018). Hip-Hop's Authentic Masculinity: A Quare Reading of Fox's Empire. Television & New Media, 19(3), 225–240. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417704704

Scholl, D. (2011, December 14). Issa Rae on The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl and Creating the Black Liz Lemon. Retrieved from https://www.vulture.com/2011/12/issa-rae-on-the-mis-adventures-of-awkward-black-girl-and-creating-the-black-liz-lemon.html

Scott, M. (2014). From Blackface to Beulah: Subtle Subversion in Early Black Sitcoms. Journal of Contemporary History, 49(4), 743–769.
< https://doi-org.proxyau.wrlc.org/10.1177/0022009414538473>

Shorter, S. (2019). The Complex Girlfriend: Toni Childs as a Hybrid Controlling Imagine on Girlfriends. In Representations of Black Womanhood on Television (pp. 33–46). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

The Media Insider. (2019, November 8). *Stuart Hall's Representation Theory Explained! Media Studies Revision* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJr0gO_-w_Q&t=127s

Tyree, T., Byerly, C., & Hamilton, K. (2012). Representations of (new) Black masculinity: A news-making case study. Journalism, 13(4), 467–482. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911421695

Young, Connected and Black. (2016, October 17). Retrieved from https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2016/young-connected-and-black/

Wortham, J. (2014, October 23). A Modern Family With Issues. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/arts/television/heady-stakes-for-black-ish-on-abc.html?auth=linked-google

Wortham, J. (2015, August 4). The Misadventures of Issa Rae. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/magazine/the-misadventures-of-issa-rae.html

Zook, K. (1999). Color by Fox : the Fox network and the revolution in Black television / Kristal Brent Zook. New York: Oxford University Press.