

Understanding the Effects of Mass Media's Portrayals of Black Women and Adolescents on Self-Image

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role mass media plays in the way in which Black women and adolescents see themselves. The articles used give incite into not only how Black women are directly affected by mass media, but how the affects can be indirect as well; in the sense that the stereotypes perpetuated shape how others see and treat Black women, and therefore shape how they see themselves. This paper examines research that suggests that ethnic media and ethnic identity may in fact play a larger role in determining self-image than mainstream media does for Black women. It also explores the ways in which the Black community rejects stereotypes of beauty and *blackness* presented by mainstream media by heightening the sense of group membership and providing their own standards of what it means to be beautiful and Black in America through Black-oriented programming.

Much research has been done on the role media plays in people's self-image. A majority of that research has focused on White women and White adolescent girls. When the research has included Black women and Black adolescents, the source of media has largely been mainstream, rather than Black-oriented. As a Black female, I was interested in how media has shaped my self image as well as other Black women's. What I found was that media- Black-oriented media specifically- tends to have a positive effect for Black women with strong ethnic identity, while Black women with weak ethnic identity were more at risk of the aversive affects of mainstream media.

As it turns out, while media does effect how we view ourselves, ethnic identity plays a major role in how much we let media effect self-image. Ethnic identity is "a group-based identity formed and developed through a variety of socialization processes, including both personal experiences... and mediated experiences" (Allen, 1993, 2001; Berry & Mitchell-Kernan, 1982; Gecas, 1992, as cited in Fujioka, 2005, p. 451). For this reason, while certain images may be influential in self-image, just as many may be rejected because they do not resonate with those images that are prevalent in Black culture, specifically amongst members of one's social circle. Yuanyuan Zhang, Travis L. Dixon, and Kate Conrad's research actually suggests that media is not directly responsible for affects on Black women's self-image. They argued that women with stronger ethnic identity were less affected by media images than those with weaker ethnic identity (2009, p. 263). Black people's "significant" experiences, such as those with family and friends, are more effective than the more "generalized" experiences, like those presented by mainstream media (Gecas, 1992, as cited in Fujioka, 2005, p. 451). The Black community is likely to question whether or not an image truly reflects them or merely a stereotype of their

community when the image is coming from mainstream media (Zhang, Dixon, Conrad, 2009, p. 264). Instead, the Black community looks to ethnic media for images that “foster and embrace Black ethnic socialization” (Allen, 2001, as cited in Fujioka, 2005, p. 452) and more typically look to other Black women as role models, and would therefore be more likely to reject a mainstream media ideal as a valid comparison (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, Caruthers, 2004, p. 40).

For instance, where Michelle Obama has been criticized for not being what is seen as physically ideal by many in mainstream America, she is praised in the Black community as having “uniquely black beauty” (Quinlan, Bates, Webb, 2012, p. 123). Black beauty is typically defined as “light skin, straightened hair, and small facial features” (Brooks & Herbert, 2006, as cited in Quinlan et al., 2012, p. 122). Michelle Obama does not fit some these stereotypically beautiful traits, but is still considered beautiful in her own right amongst the Black community.

One explanation for this inclusion of Michelle Obama as an example of Black beauty, could be that Black women and adolescents do not measure beauty on a physical level alone. According to Lisa Duke's research in 2000, Black adolescent females questioned about beauty described it as largely based on attitude and character in addition to appearance (p. 378). Michelle Obama is generally seen as a positive role model in the Black community (Quinlan et al. 2012, p. 123). Despite her not outwardly fitting the stereotypes of Black beauty, she is acknowledged as having uniquely Black beauty due to the integrity of her character.

Another explanation for this behavior is that this negative portrayal of Black identity caused the Black community to express group loyalty by asserting a stronger group membership (Ellemers, Spears, Doosje, 2002, p. 178). The ideal standards of Black beauty were suspended to

include Michelle Obama in response to mainstream media dismissing her beauty due to the fact that she doesn't fit their ideals.

Another way in which the Black community copes with mainstream media's threat to their ethnic identity is through programs that foster Black success, such as affirmative action (Fujioka, 2005, p. 453). Programs such as affirmative action contribute to group success and therefore increase the in-group status (Fujioka, 2005, p. 453).

Unfortunately, for Black women that loosely identify with their ethnic identity, the consequences of media's portrayal of them (both mainstream and Black media), can be dire. Black women who do not relate to Black ethnic identity tend to distance themselves from the Black community in response to aversive portrayals (Ellemers, et al., 2002, as cited in Fujioka, 2005, 453). These same women, usually in adolescence, are more at risk of developing body image disturbances that may lead to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (Schooler et al., 2004, p. 39). During adolescence, Black girls are both developing a racial identity and learning what society's ideal of beauty is (Duke, 2002, p. 219). During this stage in their lives, many of them would rather be seen as a teen girl rather than a Black teen girl (Duke, 2002, p. 219). The messages they are receiving are often conflicting, as Black women tend to have a different body type than the White ideal, which is usually unachievable by many Black women. Even when viewing Black-oriented programming, such as rap music videos, these women tend to be more affected by media ideals (Ward, Hansbrough, Walker, as cited in Schooler et al., 2004, p. 45).

According to the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954, as cited in Duke 2000, p. 379), people like to compare themselves to others that are similar to them. So it would make

sense that Black women look to Black-oriented media to draw comparisons of ideal beauty, rather than mainstream media. Rap music videos, typically made by Blacks and featuring Black women, tend to portray the thin ideal (Zhang et al., 2009, p. 263). For a Black woman with a strong ethnic identity, these images may not disturb her self-image, as Black culture does not emphasize thinness and appreciates larger body sizes (Streigel-Moore et al., as cited in Zhang et al., 2009, p. 265). However, a Black woman with low ethnic identity who tends to embrace mainstream culture is more susceptible to glamorizing thin ideals (Zhang et al., 2009, p. 272) seen in Black-oriented media as well. In Zhang's experiment, exposing women with high ethnic identity to thin images, actually decreased body dissatisfaction; while as expected, women with low ethnic identity were more dissatisfied with their bodies (2009, p. 272). A possible explanation for high ethnic identity relating females feeling better about their bodies in response to the rap videos was that, having been a long stigmatized community, Blacks tend to see each other as allies rather than competition (Schooler et al., 2004, p. 44). Having any sort of media visibility is more important than the images necessarily being representative of the majority of the community.

But for many, self-image goes beyond physical appearances. According to Duke's research on Black adolescents that read mainstream magazines, such as *Seventeen*, these magazines lack not only physical presence of Black women, but they fail to resonate with the experiences, perspectives, and needs of their large Black audiences (2002, p. 219)- giving the Black community all the more reason to dismiss mainstream ideals. Many of the girls in this study believed that rather than being part a niche audience, more authentic Black images needed

to be included in mainstream media. They felt underrepresented and invisible to the outside world.

While there is a small number of Black images regularly shown on television, the majority of these fictional characters aid in the perpetuation of Black stereotypes (Coleman, 1998, as cited in Quinlan et al., 2012, p. 120). Such stereotypes not only shape how others choose to deal with Black women, but indirectly, how Black women view themselves (Hudson, 1998, as cited in Quinlan et al., 2012, p. 120). These stereotypes can have detrimental consequences. Studies have suggested that the over-sexualized *Jezebel* Black female stereotype in media has contributed to Black females becoming the emerging leading face of the AIDS epidemic (Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, Jackson, 2010, p. 273). This stereotype has transcended boundaries, crossing over into Black-oriented media. The Modern Jezebel- a highly sexualized, materialistic, controlling, demanding woman- is especially present in rap music videos (Stephens and Phillips, 2003, as cited in Townsend et al., 2010, p. 274). Because of her strong prevalence in Black programming, those with both strong and weak ethnic identity may be exposed to such images, and be affected by them. Many impoverished adolescent girls watch the rap music videos and see a message in which women relate to “their culture of poverty, yet have the economic means to procure middle-class goods” (Stephens and Phillips, 2003, as cited in Townsend et al., 2010, p. 274). They can relate to these Jezebels in the sense that they are from the same cultural background. They are part of a struggling minority group fighting to acquire what the predominantly White middle class has while preserving those values held ideal in the Black community. They aspire to be like these over-sexualized images in the same way White adolescent girls aspire to be like the models in *Seventeen Magazine*. These aspirations put them

at greater sexual risk, in-turn making them more likely to acquire sexually transmitted diseases such as the AIDS virus.

For Black women and adolescents, mainstream media is not a looking glass, but rather is a one way mirror into White America (Duke, 2000, p. 383). This allows them to repel many of the ideals that cause many White adolescent girls grief as they enter womanhood. Black women do not see a reflection of their culture and values when consuming mainstream media, and are therefore largely unaffected by it. Strong ethnic identity allows for Black women to differentiate between what is ideal for their culture, and what is supreme for the dominant culture, so that White standards of beauty become irrelevant to their lives and ideas of beauty. It also allows them to feel comforted by, rather jealous of, the Black images presented in mainstream and Black-oriented media alike. However, ethnic identity does not grant Black women immunity to the effects of Black media portrayals completely. They are still faced with the task of mitigating these representations effectiveness to shape how others outside of the Black community feel about Black people in America and not letting them encroach on ideals already put in place in Black culture.

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