

Portrayals of Black Women in TV Shows That Aired in 1997 Versus 2017: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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Abstract

While television became a popular medium in the 1950s, representation of black women on television didn't begin to take hold until the beginning of the 1980s. This paper analyzes whether five television shows aired in 2017 portray black women characters in more positive ways than five television shows aired in 1997. This is accomplished through a content analysis of black female characters from five shows in each year. For each show, five episodes were coded, for a total of 50 episodes. A black woman character was chosen from each of the 10 shows, and these characters were analyzed by two different coders regarding appearance (skin tone and hair style), presence of positive portrayals (independence, education, career success, strength), and presence of negative portrayals (as identified by Versluys & Codde, 2014). Although some black women characters have embraced their identity in recent TV shows, and some have been portrayed as having positive traits, the results of this study indicate that the portrayals of black women on TV still rely on stereotypes and misrepresentations.

I. Introduction

Malcolm X once said: "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman" (Rodriguez, 2016). Society has not always accepted black women, treating them differently compared to other groups, whether it was because of their physical appearance or the stereotypes that were attached to them.

As time has passed, black women have begun to embrace their true identity, rather than hide it in the shadows. Embracing one's appearance has become the expectation. For instance, the natural hair movement has replaced perms, and all shades of black skin are now accepted as beautiful (Patton, 2006). This change for black women may look like a small step forward, but it has, in fact, impacted the future of this group.

As black women have transitioned into the acceptance of their identity, so has society. TV shows have diversified content due to the growing popularity and acceptance of black female culture. Black women are given roles that do not diminish who they are, but in fact, break down and challenge stereotypes. These

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shows have also begun to address social issues such as colorism, an issue that is deeply rooted in the black community, as well as discrimination and inequality.

In order to analyze this progression, this research compares the portrayal of black women in TV shows that were airing in 1997 versus ones that aired in 2017. The shows in these two timeframes will give insight into how the roles of black women have changed throughout time. This research will focus on TV shows that have a black woman in at least one prominent role and that address controversial issues. It will also describe how some TV shows embrace the identity of black women, as well as the adversities that come with being one in this society. It will also discuss how these shows' conscious decisions to embrace the identity of black women will perhaps impact future generations. Lastly, this paper will not only demonstrate in what ways shows use their platform to embracing black women's identity, but also why some of these shows fell short.

II. Literature Review

There has been a shift in the portrayals of black women on TV shows over the generations (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). Even though some of the older, unflattering stereotypes are still evident in some TV shows today, the roles that black women are transitioning into have reflected positive advances. Studies in the recent past have examined the history of black women on television and the typical portrayals that have been attached to them (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Collins, 2005; Versluys & Codde, 2014; Goldman & Waymer, 2015). In addition to the history of some of the portrayals, research has addressed the effects that result from them (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Collins, 2005).

Television became popular in the 1950s, but it was not until the 1960s that television made it a point to show diversity on the screen, which resulted from the pressure from the NAACP and the progressive wave from the Civil Rights Movement (Versluys & Codde, 2014). However, the production of TV shows in the 1960s was still predominantly white-dominated, which limited the way in which black people were portrayed on television (Versluys & Codde 2014).

Representation of black women on television began to increase at the beginning of the 1980s (Smith-Shomade, 2002). The roles that black women acquired were often in supporting roles to white or black male leads (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). As several sitcoms featuring black people began to appear in the 1990s, it became evident that the roles of black women were shown in both flattering and unflattering images (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). Although the rise of successful black television shows during this time period indicated a huge step towards greater racial equality in the media, there were two recurring issues about black advancement in television. The first issue was the imbalance of black representation in comedies and dramas. Black women appeared in only a few dramas and were mostly limited to sitcoms and music videos. The second issue with television shows from the 80's and 90's was the lack of positive black women characters (Versluys & Codde, 2014). By the time the 2000s rolled around, black women were presented with more opportunities to be part of the main cast of sitcoms (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). As a result of the increase of black women in the main roles of sitcoms, they began to gain more freedom in television than ever before (Smith-Shomade, 2002).

Television has been criticized for its representations of blacks, especially in regard to the portrayals of black women (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Black women characters are often limited to certain roles that are often discouraging (Ford, 1997). The uniqueness of the black woman is that she stands in the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America regarding women and regarding the negro (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). A black woman is considered a double minority because she withstands the challenges of being a woman and being black in America (Smith-Shomade, 2002). Television shows have been known to be insensitive to realistic portrayals of black women, which resulted in television playing an important part in the dissemination of these stereotypes. (Staples & Jones, 1985; Goldman & Waymer, 2015).

Throughout U.S. television history, three main stereotypes of black women that continuously appear are the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Collins, 2005; Versluys & Codde, 2014). These stereotypes became the foundation of how black women are portrayed in television. Throughout the course of history, however, other distortions of the image of black women have occurred, one of which was developed by black women themselves (Versluys & Codde, 2014).

“The Mammy” stereotype can be traced back to before the Civil War (Versluys & Codde, 2014). She is often seen as the contented domestic worker, meaning she is expected to be submissive to the white family or employer. Her physical appearance is seen as unattractive, and she usually is obese and dark-skinned (Collins, 2005). The mammy’s main goal is to take care of her family and to be of service to her employers (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). The “Black Lady” role is the modernized Mammy and is used as a template for middle-class womanhood (Collins, 2005). This more modern role still has limiting characteristics. Unlike the mammy, she is allowed to use aggression, but only if used to gain economic success or for the benefit of others. She is known to have more attractive physical traits and is seen as more professional than a content domestic worker (Goldman & Waymer, 2015; Collins, 2005).

The Jezebel stereotype was invented to rationalize the concept of slavery by shifting the perspective of the sexual exploitation of black women by white slave-owners (Versluys & Codde, 2014). This stereotype put the focus on black women seducing white men and took away the focus of white men abusing black women (Versluys & Codde, 2014). This role in television portrays black women as being hypersexual, promiscuous, and sometimes labeled as gold diggers (Goldman & Waymer, 2015).

The “Sapphire” is one of the most prominent negative black women stereotypes. She is seen as aggressive, sassy, and hostile. The sapphire’s sassiness and rudeness contradict the feminine nature expected of women (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). Her skin is usually a darker skin tone, and she is known for mocking black men for what she considers to be their inadequacies (Collins, 2005). An example of this stereotype would be the character Pam, of the hit 90’s TV show *Martin*. Versluys believes that this role was created to emphasize the superiority of the “white Victorian woman” by showing the contrast between the “uncivilized” loud black women, and the respectable morally behaved white women (Versluys & Codde, 2014).

Black women created their own portrayal of themselves, known as the strong black woman, with hopes to degrade the three previously discussed stereotypes that were created by whites (Versluys & Codde, 2014). This strong black woman portrayal on television is known to have self-sacrificial strength while providing unlimited support to friends and family. She does not depend on men financially and, therefore, can take care of herself, and her personality is focused on her positive traits (Versluys & Codde, 2014; Goldman & Waymer, 2015).

TV shows perpetuate ideas about race and ethnicity that place black women at a clear disadvantage (Little-Field, 2008). It is also possible that the way that television portrays black women seeps into other areas of their lives, such as how they are treated on a daily basis or how they view themselves (Versluys & Codde, 2014).

Throughout history, black women have conformed to the white standard of beauty and used this to evaluate their own attractiveness (Smith-Shomade, 2002; Patton, 2006). Lighter skin tones were looked at as more beautiful than darker skin tones and perms were created to straighten black women’s hair to reflect white women’s hair (Patton, 2006). These white beauty standards for black women were evident in TV shows, such as when darker-skinned women play roles that reflected the Mammy and Sapphire stereotype (Goldman & Waymer, 2015). These recycled stereotypes caused a division among light skin black women and dark skin black women because these portrayals had a greater impact with darker skin black women (Versluys & Codde 2014).

Scholars have recognized that television has the power to change unjust and negative representations of black women (Staples & Jones, 1985; Versluys & Codde, 2014; Goldman & Waymer, 2015). Recognizing these recycled stereotypes, which has shifted portrayals of black women, is important. This study analyzes the evolution in the representation of black women on television shows to add to the literature in this field. It does so by examining how portrayals of black women in TV shows from 1997 compare to similar portrayals in TV shows in 2017. In addition to identifying similarities and differences between the two time periods, this study will also address how some of the shows may have fallen short in embracing black women.

III. Methods

This research analyzed five television shows that aired in 1997 (*Moesha*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Living Single*, *Martin*, *Family Matters*), and five television shows that aired in 2017 (*Being Mary Jane*, *Scandal*, *Grownish*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Insecure*). One black actress who held a lead role or supporting role

was chosen for each of the 10 shows. Two coders watched five episodes from each TV show (for a total of 50 episodes) and noted the portrayal of the black women in each episode.

The black women characters chosen for the study represented a variety of backgrounds. The title character of *Moesha* was a teenager struggling with coming of age. Vivian Banks, from the hit show *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, was the upper-class mother of three children, a wife, and aunt. Pam, from the series *Martin*, was the best friend of the title character's romantic partner. Khadijah James from *Living Single* was one of six single friends featured on the show. Harriette Winslow from *Family Matters* was a middle-class mother and wife.

The black women characters chosen from 2017's episodes had a variety of life experiences as well. Olivia Pope from *Scandal* held various high-level jobs in Washington D.C. On *Insecure*, Issa Dee was a 29-year-old trying to figure out what she wanted out of life. Annalise was a lawyer and professor on *How to Get Away with Murder*. Zoey Johnson from *Grownish* had just started college. The title character from *Being Mary Jane* was a newscaster.

Two coders (the author of this study and a college student trained by the author) viewed each episode in the sample using the categories of analysis. In addition to noting skin color (light, brown, or dark), and role (lead or supporting), the code sheet was used to record both positive aspects (such as portrayals of the black actress as independent, educated, or a successful career woman), and negative ones (such as an angry, over-sexual, loud, or housewife/ submissive character).

The coders also recorded the presence or absence of characteristics that reflected the "The Mammy," "The Sapphire" and "The Jezebel," three major stereotypes that black women were given over the years (Collins, 2005). These stereotypes were the foundation of the negative portrayals for black women in TV shows. By coding the characteristics of these black female roles to see if the negative stereotypes were as apparent as they were in the past, it was possible to determine if these shows have reflected and embraced the identities of black women as they have evolved in society.

In total, 10 actresses were coded and 11 categories of coding, for a total of 110 coding instances. The overall intercoder reliability was 93.6 percent – the coders agreed in 103 out of the 110 instances. In eight categories of coding, the percentage of agreement was 100 percent; in one category, it was 90 percent; and in another category, it was 80 percent. Only in one category (whether the black actress was independent), the percentage of agreement was low (60 percent). The reasons for the disagreement between the two coders in this particular category are explained in the Findings section.

IV. Findings

Appearance was examined by the coders because of the importance it has when it comes to black women identities. Therefore, the two coders examined the shade of the black women's skin tone (light, medium/brown, dark) and the black women's hair (weaved, straight or natural). This way, the coders were able to note if there was a shift, through time, in the acceptance of black women's original beauty versus the beauty expectations of white society. Two of the black women were coded as having light skin, two were coded as having medium/brown skin, and six were coded as having dark skin. However, it should be noted that Vivian Banks, from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, had been played by a dark-skinned woman in the first three seasons of the show. For this study of 1997, the lighter-skinned actor who played Vivian Banks in the last three seasons was the one coded. Regarding hair style, only two characters wore hair in its natural state (Issa Dee from *Insecure*, and Zoey Johnson from *Grownish*), both in shows that aired in 2017. The rest of the characters either wore their hair straight or wore weave.

The negative portrayals all had characteristics of the three popular stereotypes that are seen throughout the history of black women representations in film and television (Collins, 2005). Characters considered as "over sexual," reflecting the Jezebel stereotype, demonstrated characteristics such as promiscuity. Out of the 10 black women characters, only two were portrayed as over sexual. Both of these characters (Olivia Pope and Mary Jane) were from 2017 shows.

Two characteristics were coded in relation to the Sapphire negative stereotype. "Aggressive" portrayals were coded if the majority of the character's role in interactions with other characters came off as aggressive, defensive, or mean. Four characters (Pam, Annalise, Olivia Pope, and Mary Jane) were

portrayed as such. Three out of the four characters were from 2017 shows. “Loud” or outspoken portrayals were identified in seven out of 10 characters by one coder; five out of 10 characters by the other coder. In both cases, the majority of the characters who were portrayed as loud were from 1997.

The mammy stereotype – portrayals of black women as submissive and focused solely on taking care of their family or boss – was reflected if a character was a stay-at-home mom or was portrayed in a manner that reflected family over career. Both Vivian Banks from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* and Harriette Winslow from *Family Matters* fit into this category. Despite Vivian Banks being a professor, and Harriette having a career in management, in most cases audiences saw these women at home.

Coders also examined whether these black women had positive portrayals as educated, successful, and independent. In terms of education, all but two characters had a college degree (Moesha was still a high schooler; Pam’s education is unknown). For success, the characters had to have a well-paying or high-level job. One coder found that four out of the 10 women were successful, with the majority being characters from the 2017 shows. The other coder found that five out of the 10 characters were successful (three characters from 2017 and two characters from 1997).

The coders disagreed on the number of characters that were independent, which for this study was defined as the character supporting herself financially. While one coder found that six out of the 10 characters were independent, the other coder found that all 10 were independent. Coder 1 considered that four women were not independent because, while they do not seem to be financially unstable, they do not make their own money. For example, Zoey Johnson (the only character from a 2017 TV show who was not considered independent by coder 1) was a freshman in college. Moesha was a high schooler. Vivian Banks and Harriette Winslow had money, but their husbands were the ones who worked outside their homes in salaried jobs.

V. Conclusion

After analyzing the black women portrayals in these TV shows, it is apparent that although black women in society have begun to accept and embrace their identities, some TV portrayals may still be perceived as negative (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). There were some instances in the 10 TV shows analyzed, especially in the ones that aired in 2017, that indicate that there is, indeed, a slight shift away from negative portrayals; however, there are other instances that suggest either no shift or a negative shift.

Black women are seen, sometimes, playing roles that are successful or independent. The shows that aired in 2017, in particular, portrayed these women as more independent and as having their own successful careers rather than just being a housewife. For example Olivia Pope, Annalisa Ketting, and Mary Jane Paul each are successful in their fields. Nearly all the characters were portrayed as educated as well. When it comes to appearance, a slight positive shift can be seen among these more recent characters, given that some are embracing their natural hair, rather than wearing straight hair to follow dominant societal norms.

There was one slight negative shift, nonetheless, and it was the two characters from 2017-aired shows that were being shown as “over sexualized.” It is unknown if the writers of the show were choosing to embrace the idea of women being openly sexual as a positive characteristic, in that women decide what to do with their bodies without inhibitions, or if, this is simply the Jezebel stereotype still being used to portray black women as sex objects. It was also surprising to see such a diverse group of black women playing all these characters, which is a positive thing. In fact, the skin color of these actresses ranged from very light to very dark, with numerous variations within the spectrum.

Overall, this qualitative content analysis offers support for the notion that black women roles in TV are not as unflattering as they used to be in the past, but the portrayals of black women’s personalities can still reflect those older stereotypes . The TV industry does have a good amount of catching up to do with the portrayals of black women, even in recent times. As of right now, only about 5 percent of TV show screenwriters are black (Sun, 2017), while the black population in the United States is about 13 percent. Therefore, as the number of black screenwriters might increase in the near future, the positive portrayals of black women and black men may also rise. If this is so, the future black generations could finally begin to see an accurate representation of their identities on the TV screen.

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