An Exploration of Television’s Representation of Black Female Bodies

by

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed current representations of black female bodies on television. This study aimed to examine if there were differences between the representation of black female bodies on black-oriented television than on mainstream-oriented television. Using social learning theory and social comparison theory, this study explored the impact that these cultural representations may have on viewers. The sample for this study included 122 characters across 34 television shows and used a qualitative coding scheme to explore the representation of these women. Through this study, I found that while mainstream-oriented television depicted a larger range of black female body sizes, the representation of black women regardless of their body size was overwhelmingly negative. Black-oriented television depicted black women more positively in general but representations were limited due to the sparse availability of black-oriented content. Directions for the future, including alternative methods of representation are explored to widen the representations of black women.
INTRODUCTION


From the airing of the first television promotional ads, the series had garnered critical attention. Critiques of the show focused on two major points: the youth of its creator, the then 24-year old Oberlin College graduate Lena Dunham, and the cast of the show. With Girls’ creator being straight out of a racially diverse and famously liberal college, along with the show’s setting in racially diverse Brooklyn, it was surprising when all four major lead roles went to white women. This caused widespread backlash in the television blog sphere with popular sites including Jezebel, Racialicious, and Huffington Post all publishing articles about Girls’ “diversity issue.” Feminist blogs in particular struggled in critiquing Girls. After all, Lena Dunham (who also stars in Girls) is a symbol of young, female success and she has achieved such success without conforming to traditional conceptions of female beauty. However, while Lena Dunham uses her work to present alternative scripts for femininity, she also continues to reproduce an on-screen reality in which black characters are virtually non-existent.

Even with Girls premier notwithstanding, 2012 was a pivotal year for diversity on television. Just ten days before Girls debuted, Shonda Rhimes’ (of Grey’s Anatomy and Private Practice fame) newest show Scandal premiered.
Scandal had the dubious honor of being the first network show since 1974 to star a black female lead, and though the series began with a shaky start, by the midpoint of its sophomore season, the series had captured a sizeable audience. When the ABC Family network series Bunheads premiered in June, just two months after Scandal and Girls, Shonda Rhimes publicly criticized Bunheads for its lack of diversity. With this new fodder, blogs once again hurried to debate the “diversity responsibility” of television programs. Carina MacKenzie claimed that though Girls may not have a ‘diversity responsibility’ due to its target audience, “there’s an argument to be made that if a showrunner/network/studio is producing a show about six teenagers, they have a responsibility to include characters that aren’t white” (2012).

In response to the deluge of criticism, Lena Dunham defended the casting of her show in an interview with NPR’s Fresh Air by stating:

Something I wanted to avoid was tokenism in casting. If I had one of the four girls, if, for example, she was African-American, I feel like—not that the experience of an African-American girl and a white girl are drastically different, but there has to be specificity to that experience [that] I wasn’t able to speak to. I really wrote the show from a gut-level place, and each character was a piece of me or based on someone close to me. And only later did I realize that it was four white girls… I did write something that was super-specific to my experience and I always want to avoid rendering an experience I can’t speak to accurately.
Some appreciated Dunham’s statement, or considered it unnecessary since she seemed to draw an intense amount of ire when other shows with completely white casts have not suffered since intense scrutiny (Huffington Post, 2012). Others criticized the idea that writers must be limited by their own race of those they chose to represent. After all according to Cassie Murdoch of Jezebel, “there are plenty of other major characters—like men, for instance—which [Lena Dunham] clearly hasn’t lived as, and yet she still managed to include them in the show.” However, with all the criticism that was levied on both sides of the “diversity issues” debates, few endeavored to look at the representation black women do have currently in the media.

**Black women and their representation**

Blogs such as Racialicious, Jezebel, and At the Bar show a conflicted view on the representation of black women. Just as it is impossible to generalize the feelings and experiences of black women, it is impossible to pretend there is a monolithic view of black representation. However, in all of these blogs, there seems to be a general disappointment in how black women are represented, particularly on mainstream television. Bloggers note particularly pervasive tropes that depict black women as being overweight, one-dimensional, and undesirable. In one piece originally published on Frugivore in 2012, the writer Kirsten Savali bemoans the lack of black, overweight, female leads while another article on Jezebel remarks that when black, overweight women do appear, they are shunted into the “fat, black, and sassy” roles (Moss, 2012). However, it is not enough to acknowledge the problematic representation of black women, we must examine the effects these images may have on black women.
A link between media consumption and body image disturbance has been documented for white women consuming mainstream media (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Irving, 1990), however, there has been little research conducted on the effect televised images have on black women (Gordon, 2008). Researchers have postulated black media may be in some way protective against body image disturbance (Thompson-Brenner, Boisseau, St. Paul, 2011). Despite this theory, there has not been an extensive study on how black women are represented on television. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the representations of black women, and body size is the prism through which representation will be examined.

It has been a year since Girls premiered, and discussion about “diversity responsibilities” has fallen out of the public sphere once again. Girls is a critical success despite its fairly low ratings. Nevertheless, this debate has not been completely forgotten, nor should it be. It is essential that we examine the representations we do have of black women before we begin stating that we need more of them in the media. If we do not examine these representations, we run the risk of perpetuating harmful and negative representations without ever realizing the harm they may be causing to black women.
**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Television has been an integral part of American life almost since its introduction into mainstream American culture in the 1950’s. Current estimates show that about 97% of households own at least one television, and the average American household owns not just one television, but three (Nielsen, 2011). Though between 2011 and 2012 television ownership decreased by 2%, internet television viewing options such as Hulu©, Netflix©, and other video sharing websites have made watching television possible even in the absence of a television set (Nielsen, 2011). This shift in viewing practices has served to further embed television programming into daily lives.

During the 2010-2011 season, viewers spent an average of 34 hours per week watching television (Nielsen 2011). When black viewers were isolated as a group however, the figure jumped to 46 hours per week, twelve hours above the composite time. Though no figures were provided by Nielsen with white viewers being isolated, it is clear that while most of the American population is spending a great deal of time watching television, black viewers are spending even more time watching television than the general population (Nielsen, 2011). With this amount of time being dedicated to television viewing, it is clear why the effects of television as a medium have been a topic of interest in social psychology for the past several decades. Though much of this research has been conducted on the general (mostly white) population, the data which suggests black viewers are consuming more media than their white counterparts implies that there is an even more pressing need for research to be conducted in this particular subset of the population.
1. Television as a Medium of Influence

There are multiple theories that explore how television as a medium influences its audience. In this portion of the literature review, I will explore three different theories relating television viewing and social psychology: social learning theory, cultivation theory, and social comparison theory. I will then explore how these three theories relate to the body of research exploring the connection between media consumption and body image disturbance. Throughout this study, body image disturbance is a term which includes feelings of body dissatisfaction as well as cognitions of body-image distortion and body-size overestimation (Rosen, 1990).

1.1 Social Learning Theory: Television and Observational Learning

Bandura’s social learning theory examines the interactions between personal, environmental, and behavioral determinants. Together, these three types of determinants govern psychosocial functioning (Bandura, 2001). Social learning theory rests in part on the idea that humans are suited to learn observationally from the experiences of others (Bandura, 1977). This ability to learn through the actions and behaviors of models is what allows individuals to save time in learning essential skills (Bandura, 1977). Observers can acquire behaviors and cognitive skills through observation and such learning takes “varied forms, including…judgmental standards, cognitive competencies, and generative rules for creating behavior” (Bandura, 1986, p.49).

However, simply observing behavior does not lead an individual to imitate the behavior. Thus, Bandura (1977; 2001) introduced the importance of attentional, retention, production, and motivational factors. These factors help determine which
observed behaviors will be imitated. First, the individual must determine which behaviors are salient, prevalent, and have value. Then individuals must then retain the behaviors, which occurs through repeated exposure. This then allows for modeled behaviors to become retrievable before individuals enact and execute these modeled behavioral patterns. Individuals then determine if these modeled behavioral patterns elicit the intended responses from others. Finally, if these modeled behaviors are incentivized, then motivational processes will lead individuals to imitate the modeled behavior.

Bandura also acknowledged that through modeling and social learning, media influence could be diffused in multiple ways. Bandura posited that it was possible for influential individuals to become adopters; these individuals are affected by the media and then pass on these ideas to their followers. Thus, Bandura (2002) hypothesized that:

In some instances the media both teach new forms of behavior and create motivators for action by altering people’s value preferences, efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and perception of opportunity structures. In other instances, the media teach, but other adopters provide the incentive motivation to perform what has been learned observationally. In still other instances, the effect of the media may be entirely socially mediated. (p.286)

Through this explanation, one can observe how studying media influence can be complicated by diffusions of influence. When using the social learning theory to hypothesize about television effects and body image disturbance, researchers examine how the behavior of television characters codify messages which promote certain body
ideals and in turn, inspire individuals to attempt to attain these body ideals.

**1.3 Cultivation Theory: Television and its Cumulative Effect**

Pioneered by George Gerbner, cultivation theory hypothesizes that over time, watching large amounts of television will lead to a conception of the real world that mirrors the world seen on television (Shanahan and Morgan 1999). Thus, cultivation theory attempts to show that television ‘cultivates’ a particular worldview in its viewers. Cultivation theory focuses on television as a form of mass media in which there are “consistent images, portrayals, and values that cut across most types of programs and are virtually inescapable” for viewers (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 49). This theory does not claim that individual programs or genres do not have short-term effects, nor does it claim that mediating factors do not play a role in cultivation. However, cultivation theory does argue that television as a medium is a system of messages, and proponents of cultivation theory concern themselves with “the consequences…[of] television in general over long periods of time” (Shanahan and Morgan 1999, p.5).

Cultivation theory is based on five premises, each of which distinguishes it from other theories of media influence. The first premise states that institutions of mass communication are owned by “social, cultural, and primarily economic elites” (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p.16). This premise does not imply that such elites are malicious or evil, or even that they represent individual people. Rather “elites” are defined as dominant institutions and those individuals who operate within these institutional rule structures (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Due to the way television is systematically structured to favor the perspectives of its creators, these elites codify
elite-serving messages in the television they produce (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Though accepting these two premises may seem difficult, the third premise is that “the tendency for media messages to conform to elite needs and desires can be revealed through empirical study” (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, p.17). Such empirical study is the foundation of cultivation analysis.

According to the fourth premise, regardless of the individual reasons audience members watch television, in watching they participate in a social process in which these elite-serving messages are internalized. This process allows cultivation theory to act as a form of social control (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Premise five is the central belief of cultivation theory; that audience members who enter this social process more often will have beliefs that are more congruent with those desired by social elites (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Cultivation analysis is the last part of a three-pronged research effort Gerbner and his fellow researchers used to examine media effects. The other two prongs of this research are institutional process analysis and message system analysis. Institutional process analysis explores how media is produced, while message system analysis examines what sort of messages media propagates (Gerbner et al., 2002). As the last prong of the research process, cultivation analysis functions by looking at “cultivation differentials” or the difference between the beliefs of light television viewers and heavy television viewers (Gerbner et al., 2002). Gerbner and his fellow researchers found that for heavy viewers, differences in perspectives and behaviors that would typically be found between individuals due to social, cultural, and economic factors were suppressed, a phenomenon Gerbner termed “mainstreaming”
Mainstreaming is considered by proponents of the cultivation theory as being the “empirical verification” of cultivation theory since it represents a homogenization of views from a heterogeneous sample (Gerbner et al., 2002, p.51).

Supporters of cultivation premise their theory on the idea that television viewers are largely undiscriminating and that television messages have commonalities throughout the medium (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999; Gerbner et al. 2002). Those who challenge cultivation theory instead highlight the proliferation of cable networks and niche outlets which allow audiences to be even more discriminating viewers than ever before (Potter, 1993). In addition, critics condemn the lack of causative evidence in cultivation studies and challenge that the correlation that can be illustrated in cultivation theory may be the result of third variables or have an opposite causative direction (Griffin, 2012). For instance, a major example used in cultivation theory is that heavy viewers of television are more likely to overestimate the amount of crime that occurs in the real world and be more fearful, but perhaps being more fearful of crime causes individuals to stay at home more often and watch more television (Griffin, 2012). In relating cultivation theory to body image disturbance research, researchers attempt to show that thin-ideal (or the equation of thinness with goodness) is a message which can be cultivated in heavy viewers.

1.4 Social Comparison Theory: Televised Images and the Audience

Social comparison theory is based on the idea that when individuals reflect on attributes or skills such as beauty, wealth, or intelligence; individuals compare their level of the attribute or skill to the amount possessed by others (Jasso, 2006). This
drive to compare oneself to others can serve multiple functions. In his seminal work on social comparison theory, Festinger (1954) hypothesized that social comparison was driven by the need for humans to evaluate themselves accurately in absence of an objective measure. However, further research has shown that individuals engage in social comparison even when objective measures are present (Jasso, 2006). These findings then complicate the motivations for social comparison. Researchers have found that there are three types of social comparison that can occur, upward comparisons, lateral comparisons, and downward comparisons (Jasso, 2006).

Festinger (1954) included the caveat that individuals are motivated to compare themselves to like others or else the basis of comparison would not be relevant. However, even when an individual considers someone to be similar enough to be a relevant basis of evaluation, motivational goals may influence the selection of individuals for comparison (Corcoran, Crusius, and Mussweiler, 2011). Lateral comparisons are comparisons that occur between individuals who are fairly matched in individual qualities and it is lateral social comparison that facilitate the accurate self-evaluation Festinger (1954) described. However, individuals can also choose to compare themselves to like individuals who possess slightly less of the desired attribute or skill than the comparing individual, a process called downward comparison. This downward comparison can serve to create and maintain a positive self-image (Wills, 1991). Conversely, individuals can choose to compare themselves to those who possess slightly more of the desired attribute or skill, a process termed upward comparison. These upward comparisons can motivate individuals to self-improve in relation to the desired attribute or skill (Taylor & Lobel, 1989), however, it
can also cause negative mood (Gibbons & Gerard, 1989). Social comparison has been important in television studies because of the potential for viewers to use on-screen images as a basis for comparison.

2. Television’s Role in Body Image Disturbance

There have been many studies on the impact of television on women’s body image disturbance (Botta, 1999; Harrison, 2000; Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). The fact that the prevalence of eating disorders in industrial countries has increased over the past several decades while remaining fairly low in developing nations has led scholars to examine the sociocultural factors that may underlie these disparities (Becker et al., 2002). One such sociocultural factor is the media and studies have shown that television does not represent women in a realistic manner. For one, thin women are vastly overrepresented in television, which was shown by Fouts and Burggraf’s (1999) study in which 33% of the female characters analyzed were underweight and only 7% were above-average weight. These figures differ significantly from the two-thirds of the United States population that is considered overweight or obese (CDC, 2010). Additionally, this study found that the thinner the female character was, the more positive verbal reinforcements she received from males which also supported Lauzen and Dozier’s (2002) study in which women on television were more likely to receive comments on their appearance than men. With such narrow depictions of women being so widely disseminated on television, researchers have attempted to make sense of what audiences in general and women in particular may be learning from such depictions.

Yet, exploring the role television plays in body image disturbance is not
simple especially since most of this research has been conducted in the United States. This complicates research since television has been an integral part of American culture for many years now. Showing that television specifically plays a role in body image disturbance can be somewhat difficult unless researchers can observe a population both before and after the introduction of televised media. One such study conducted in Fiji showed that after the introduction of television to a region of Fiji, women reported more body dissatisfaction and self-induced vomiting as a means of weight control than they had before the introduction of television (Becker et al., 2002). However, these results must be contextualized by recognizing that Fijian adolescents may have been particularly vulnerable to developing disordered eating habits with the advent of western beauty norms because such norms were associated with glamorous American lifestyles. Also, it is possible that these Fijian adolescents were perhaps less media literate than adolescents in the United States, which may have also increased their vulnerability.

Despite such difficulties, there is evidence to suggest that there is indeed a connection between television viewing and body image disturbances (Harrison, 1997). The extent and mechanisms by which the two are linked are still unclear. Scholars attempt to explore which factors contribute to this link, whether it is the amount of television watched, the content of the programming, the interactions between the viewer and the programs, or some combination of these factors.

2.1 Television and Body Image Disturbance: Quantity or Content?

Multiple studies have shown that media consumption can positively predict women’s eating disorder symptomatology, specifically, bulimic behaviors (Harrison,
In a study by Want, Vickers, and Amos (2009) researchers found that the body shapes of female characters do not need to be integral to the show. Rather thin and attractive body types can be incidental and still have a significant negative effect on women’s ratings of their satisfaction with their overall appearance when tested immediately after exposure. Therefore there is some support that the amount of television watched by women regardless of its content can contribute to negative effects for body image and eating behaviors.

Other research has shown that the content of television is an important factor in the correlation between body image disturbance and television viewing. Several studies have refuted the connection between the number of hours spent watching television and increased incidences of body image disturbances and have instead shown that certain programs were more likely to predict such connections (Botta, 1999; Schooler & Trinh, 2011; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). One such study found that soap operas or serials, movies, and other genres that showed women in stereotyped roles were associated with body dissatisfaction in their sample (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). This finding is supported by a study in which women who viewed sexist (objectifying) television ads displayed more body image disturbances than women who did not view an ad or who viewed a non-sexist advertisement (Lavine, Sweeney, & Wagner, 1999). Even Harrison’s (2000) study, which showed that the amount of television watched could be predictive of eating disorder symptomatology, also showed that content remained important. In this study, it was found that there were certain programs that were associated with certain eating disorder cognitions. For instance, an interest in programs that highlighted body-
improvement was a positive predictor for anorexic symptamatology as well as for a drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction. The study also found that exposure to television featuring fat characters positively predicted bulimic symptamatology.

Researchers using cultivation theory or quantity-based measures are often criticized for neglecting to account for the effect of viewer choice. In order to determine whether or not the choices viewers make in deciding what to watch, Schooler and Trinh (2011) looked at the viewing preferences of adolescents and used these preferences to create eight distinct viewing profiles. Though each viewing profile corresponded with a different number of hours spent watching television and the content of the television watched, only one subset showed any correlation with body image disturbance. This group, called Comprehensive Watchers, viewed 28 hours of television a week and they were the only group who split viewing time equally across genres, indicating that they were fairly nonselective viewers. For girls, being a Comprehensive Watcher was associated with lower body satisfaction at the end of the study. This suggests that perhaps content is not as important as the amount of television watched in this sample, particularly if one is an indiscriminate viewer.

2.2 Interaction between viewer and television: Social Comparison Theory and Body Image Disturbance

Researchers have conducted studies on the effects that certain viewer relationships have on body image disturbances. Many studies attempt to measure to what extent to which females sampled internalized the thin-ideal which is present in television programming (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Thompson & Stice, 2001). The “thin-ideal” is the idea that certain individuals may
see the rewards that women on television reap from being thin and conventionally attractive and associate the two so that thinness connotes desirability, personal self worth, and success (Garner, Olmsted, & Garfinkel, 1983). This thin-ideal internalization can be extended to social learning theory. Studies postulate that women observe the benefits individuals reap from being thin and then internalize these body ideals. Women may also learn methods to achieve thinness through the behavior of the observed characters (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999). Bessenoff (2006) found in her study that exposure to thin-ideal media was correlated with a general increase in body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the greater extent to which girls reported endorsing a thin ideal, the stronger their drive for thinness and the more they engaged in bulimic action. Another study showed that early adolescent girls who viewed commercials depicting the thin-ideal reported relatively greater body dissatisfaction than girls who had not watched such commercials (Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2003).

Social comparison has also been heavily implicated in the relationship between television and body image disturbance. With the understanding that upward comparisons would produce negative feelings, it seems reasonable that individuals would be encouraged to not compare themselves to the actors on television since these comparisons are more likely to be upward comparisons. However, due to the ubiquity of media, social comparisons with media images may be difficult to avoid, particularly since these comparisons can be spontaneous and unintentional (Jasso, 2006). Though Botta (1999) found that considering television images to be authentic was important in explaining the effects of social comparison, other researchers complicate this notion.
Milkie (1999) explains that individuals who may not find media images realistic may still believe that others do; consequently they can be indirectly led to engage in social comparison with televised images.

Social comparison was also implicated in Greenwood’s (2009) study in which the level that girls wished to resemble their favorite female television character in behavior and appearance was measured and termed Wishful Identification. This ‘Wishful Identification’ was found to be associated with greater body surveillance (comparing body to others, worrying about appearance) and body shame (being ashamed of weight) among young women. Additionally, this study found that greater romantic attachment to a favorite male television character was associated with increased body surveillance. Thus, having a certain level of engagement with televised images was a risk factor for body image disturbance in this study.

3. Body Image Disturbance in Black Women

It might be assumed that body image disturbance and its negative outcomes would be more prevalent in black women than in their white counterparts. For one, black women are far more likely than white women to be overweight with about 80% of black non-Hispanic women being overweight or obese compared to about 60% of white non-Hispanic women (AMA, 2010). Of course these measures are not flawless, collapsing obese and overweight statistics does not give a precise idea of how many women are dangerously overweight and many of the current measures for weight-related health have been tested and developed using white women. However, there is evidence to suggest that black women actually prefer and endorse a larger
ideal body size than do white women, which may also contribute to these statistics (Perez & Joiner, 2003).

Whiteness has historically been an implicit (and at times explicit) physical quality for beauty and black women seem to be even more sensitive to this association between whiteness and beauty than white women are (Poran, 2002). This standard of beauty, which is also marked by a certain shapeliness, may lead researchers to hypothesize that because black women neither possess whiteness nor the body type deemed attractive by mainstream media, that they would be even more susceptible to media effects on body image. This claim is not supported by evidence however, which has shown that black women have higher self-esteem than their white counterparts (Perez & Joiner, 2003). Black women are not more likely than their white counterparts to experience body image disturbance or eating disorders/disordered eating (Stice, 1994). This difference has led researcher to examine black culture as a protective factor in how black women feel about their bodies.

3.1 Conceptualizations of Beauty

Some researchers have pointed to black media as being in some way protective against body image disturbance (Schooler et al, 2004, Milkie, 1999). This idea is bolstered by several studies, which have found that black women endorse a larger ideal body size than white women (Perez & Joiner, 2003), and have different conceptions of beauty than white women. In Parker, Nichter, Nichter, & Vuckovic’s (1995) study of black adolescent girls, the researchers found that external physical attributes were rarely the only attributes that mattered in defining beauty, and that the
girls in the study were much more likely to equate beauty not with a particular size, but with overall attractiveness. This attractiveness is not about “a girl’s body size or shape, height, weight, skin color, hairstyle, etc., [but rather] if you can clothe and groom yourself and have the personality to carry off your personal style, you are ‘looking good’” (Parker et al., 1995, p. 108). Similarly, Rubin et al. (2003) found in their study that both black and Latina women endorsed a “multifaceted beauty ideal that promotes personal style, self-care, and spirituality” (p. 55). This “holistic” concept of beauty espoused by black women is hypothesized to protect black women from the white beauty ideals they are unable to attain.

Nevertheless, there are flaws within this alternative beauty hypothesis. Other studies have found little difference between the conceptualizations of beauty of white and black participants. Poran (2002) found in her study that the majority of participants defined beauty as consisting of both personality traits and physical characteristics and that these responses did not differ by race. According to Rubin et al. (2003):

Women of color participating in this study felt they were, in fact, subject to evaluation with reference to the same aesthetic ideals as white women, though these images were considered even more unattainable and oppressive to them. However, the body ethic espoused by study participants, one that promotes self-acceptance and nurturance, rejects the dominant cultural ethos that encourages women to reshape their bodies to emulate the cultural ideal. (p.70)
Thus, it is possible that the idea that black women have an alternative conception of beauty may be overstated.

3.2 Role of Ethnic Identity

Another hypothesis which can relate to the ‘alternative beauty’ hypothesis is that it is not being black which protects black women from body image disturbances, but rather how black women feel about being black. Central to this hypothesis is the concept of ethnic identity, which refers to how one socially and emotionally values membership in one’s own ethnic group (Petersons, Rojhani, Steinhaus, & Larkin, 2000). This concept includes ethnic pride, contentment with ethnic identity, and feelings of belongingness or attachment to one’s ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). In multiple studies, having a strong ethnic identity has been demonstrated to be a protective factor against body image disturbance (Henrickson, Crowther, & Harrington, 2010; Oney, Cole, & Sellers, 2011; Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011). Some studies have also found a relationship between the ethnic identity of white women and body image disturbance, but in the opposite direction so that strong ethnic identity becomes a risk factor for body image disturbance (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011). Researchers predict that the strength of ethnic identity is correlated to the acceptance of multifaceted beauty ideals, which was previously discussed as an alternative conception of beauty.

However, ethnic identity is not an uncomplicated protective feature of body image disturbance. For one, some studies have suggested that this strength in ethnic identity, and acceptance of larger ideal body sizes contributes to developing problems with obesity and binge eating disorders for black women (Lovejoy, 2001). Gordon
(2008) found that having a stronger racial identity increased the importance of being attractive for black girls, rather than decreasing the importance. Gordon suggested that this means that while black girls are not subject to the pressures of conforming to a white beauty and body ideal, they are still subject to the pressures of a black beauty and body ideal.

3.3 Social Comparisons

Many of the media effect studies conducted with black women found that black women did not have the same results of negative affect seen in white women, after watching shows featuring thin white (Frisby, 2004; Milkie, 1999). Researchers suggest that black women were not vulnerable to comparing their bodies with white bodies on television precisely because these white and thin bodies were so dissimilar from their own. This dissimilarity therefore prevented social comparison from occurring (Frisby, 2004). In order to test whether or not black women are susceptible to negative media effects through the social comparison mechanism, studies in which black women viewed other black women’s bodies on television had to be conducted. In such studies, black women still seem less likely to engage in social comparison than white women, however, black women who are already struggling with body image disturbance are more likely to engage in social comparison with idealized black bodies (Frisby, 2004).

When examining the effects of black-oriented media versus mainstream-oriented media on body-image disturbance, researchers found interesting differences which could suggest that perhaps it is not only that black women have mechanisms that prevent them from experiencing body image disturbance, but also that the media
oriented toward them is protective. Compared to mainstream-oriented media, black-oriented media is hypothesized to represent a larger range of body types, which may then temper harmful media effects (Thompson-Brenner et al., 2011). These findings were supported in a study examining Latina women and their satisfaction with their bodies after watching Latina-oriented, mainstream-oriented, and black-oriented television (Schooler, 2008). At the beginning of the study, mainstream-oriented television or telenovelas did not have an effect on women’s body satisfaction. Girls who frequently viewed black-oriented television, however, had a greater level of body satisfaction. Over time, while telenovelas were not found to be significantly related to body image, mainstream-oriented television was associated with a decrease in body satisfaction (Schooler, 2008). The consumption of black media can also be seen to relate to having a strong ethnic identity when considering its effect on black women. Having a strong ethnic identity may make black women more likely to consume black media, which further entangles these two components. However, Schooler’s (2008) study does suggest there may be something about black-oriented television in particular that is protective against body image disturbance.

The findings of this section would suggest that black women as a whole are protected in a multitude of ways from body image disturbances. However, it is more accurate to say that black women who have strong ethnic identities are the most protected against body image disturbance. With the conflicted theories of how black-oriented television may be a protective factor (Thompson-Brenner et al. 2011; Milkie, 1999; Schooler, 2008), this study will focus on the representation of black women across black-oriented and mainstream-oriented television. Though researchers have
looked at black-oriented television and mainstream-oriented television, the research tends to focus on white women on mainstream-oriented television and (occasionally) black women on black-oriented television. This, of course, ignores the fact that black women are found on mainstream-oriented television programs and this project aims to examine a larger picture of how black female bodies are represented on television.

4. Historic Representations of Black Females

There is a field of study focused on representations of black women, however, this field is limited in several ways. Most of this work has been done either on cinematic representations, or are about representations in hip-hop culture. Neither of these schemes was developed specifically for television programming. Additionally, while the representations explored through both schemes are definitively sized in a certain way, size has not been the focus of study when it comes to representations of black women. I aim to explore how these schemes of representations do uphold certain body ideals and can be explored to show how the representation of black female bodies is central to the representation of black women.

4.1 Foundational Controlling Images

In her work Black Feminist Thought (1990), Hill Collins outlines what she considers to be the four foundational controlling images of black femininity. “Controlling images” are defined as:

Representations of subordinated groups…[which] guide behavior toward and from those persons, constrain what is seen and believed about them, and when internalized, profoundly influence the self-perceptions of the marginalized. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p.22)
In exploring the ideologies behind the “Mammy,” the “Matriarch,” the “Welfare Mother,” and the “Jezebel,” Hill Collins attempted to show how each of these controlling images served a purpose to help legitimize the economic, social, and physical domination of black women.

Hill Collins begins with the “Mammy” figure, the docile smiling servant who is loved and accepted by her white family. The “Mammy” is ever loyal and lovable, precisely because she poses no threat to dominant white male culture and, in fact, her relatively favorable representation makes her a “normative yardstick” against which all other black women are rated (Collins, 1990, p.71). Essential to the “Mammy” figure is not only her asexuality, but also her drab physical appearance, often being presented as being an “overweight, dark-skinned woman with very African features…not considered attractive by white male desires” (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Hill Collins acknowledges that while the “Mammy” may wield substantial authority within the confines of her white “family,” she remains subject to white patriarchy (p.71).

However, while the “Mammy” shows what black women should be inside the homes of their white families, it did not present a narrative for black women in their own homes. Hill Collins asserts that this then led to the creation of the second controlling image, the “Matriarch.” The black “Matriarch” was considered a failure when compared to “Mammy” precisely because she lacked the asexuality and passivity of her beloved counterpart. The “Matriarch” was instead emasculating and “unfeminine”–traits which served as both the cause and function of their “Matriarch” status. By running off past and potential love interests with her unattractive character
traits, “Matriarchs” were perpetually single mothers (Hill Collins, 1990). Despite their differences, the “Mammy” and the “Matriarch” are inextricably linked because, in reality, a woman who worked as a “Mammy” and thus supported her family with her earnings would then be a “Matriarch” in her own black home as she neglects her children and undermines her husband to serve her white “family.”

The “Welfare Mother” as a controlling image originated in the conception of black women as “breeders,” women who were able to give birth as easily as animals. During slavery, the purportedly animalistic reproductive capabilities of black women were considered an economic asset since enslaved black women gave birth to slaves. However, when slavery ended, black women’s supposedly high levels of fertility took on new political meaning. Suddenly poor black women’s (re)productivity became dangerous since her passivity led to a failure to transmit values and work ethic to her numerous children (Hill Collins, 1990).

This idea of the constantly reproductive black woman was in part borne out of the last foundational archetype, the “Jezebel.” This notion of black femininity saw black women depicted as being extremely sexually aggressive and this sexual immodesty was then used to support the idea that black women were “unrapeable.” Though this is the last controlling image Hill Collins (1990) explores, she explains that it is perhaps the most basic because “efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (p.77).

4.2 Modern Incarnations

Building on the work of Hill Collins, Dionne Stephens and Layli Phillips (2003) built upon these foundational archetypes to attempt to locate these controlling
images in modern hip hop culture. The authors do not suggest that the four foundational archetypes are no longer visible, but rather that “the ghosts of the four lingering images have influenced the creation and maintenance of today’s three-dimensional sexual scripts.” In their analysis, they found seven controlling images that can broadly be grouped in terms of those who operate on the basis of their sexuality, those who are seen as independent, and those defined by their relationship to God and/or their spirituality.

First Stephens and Phillips examine archetypes who use their sexuality as a form of trade. This category includes the “Divas,” who trade sex for social standing; “Gold Diggers,” who trade sex for monetary goods; and “Freaks,” who do not trade sex for anything, which is the basis of their denigration. Each of these figures are classed and raced with “Divas” as appealing to middle class values due to their “immodest” but not skimpy clothing, their high maintenance lifestyles and traditionally (as in more Eurocentric) prettiness. Conversely, “Gold Diggers” link their sexuality to their economic dependence, which relates them more to the “Welfare Mother” archetype than strictly the “Jezebel” image and this relationship distances them from the Eurocentric ideals of beauty. The “Freak” image is far less complicated however, her lack of sexual inhibitions and risky sexual behaviors make her analogous to the hyper-sexualized “Jezebel” image.

The second designation of images is related in through independence—these include both the “Dyke” and the “Gangster Bitch.” These images are both conceptualized as being aggressive and emotionally strong, however, these two images differ when it comes to their relationship with men. Whereas the “Dyke” is
seen to challenge the patriarchy in her apparent lack of need for a man to participate in her success, the “Gangster Bitch” gains her power through her relationship with her male lover. These two figures are therefore seen as being “strong,” but both are still denigrated since “Dykes” are maligned and ridiculed for not conforming to heterosexual ideals and “Gangster Bitches” must submit to violence and be sexually available in order to reap the benefits of protection afforded through her relationship.

Both the “Sister Savior” and the “Earth Mother” archetypes ground their identity in their relationship to a higher power or plane. However, while the “Earth Mother’s” sexuality is based in a spiritual and communal framework, the “Sister Savior” is grounded in the African American church, which is seen as a repression of sexuality. Therefore, while the sexual naiveté and denial of the “Sister Savior” keeps her out of the sexual context that so many of the other archetypes are grounded in, it is the “Earth Mother’s” demeanor, the fact that she “cuts through the games, sexism, and potentially hurtful outcomes” (p.23) that takes the “Earth Mother” out of the sexual context.

Though there are few other models for conceptualizing the new archetypes that dominate the media, the one presented by Stephen’s and Phillips (2003) is not without flaws. This work exists quite firmly in the context of hip hop culture and can be somewhat difficult to generalize to scripted television. Therefore, it is difficult to say whether or not this is a useful scheme to interpret modern representations of black women on television today.

4.3 The Myth of the “Strong Black Woman”

Many of the explored archetypes fall under the designation of black female
archetype Hill Collins refers to as “bitches” (2005). This category not only includes the “Matriarch” and the “Jezebel,” but also many of the sexual scripts outlined by Stephens and Phillips (2003) such as “Ghetto Bitches,” “Gold Diggers,” and “Dykes.” Though these all represent a negative evaluation of black femininity, Hill Collins suggests that there may be a difference between “bitches” or negatively evaluated representations of black femininity and “Black Bitches” who are seen as being “super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated” (Hill Collins, 2005, p.124). This idea of “Black Bitches” is related to the final archetype discussed, the “Strong Black Woman.” In some ways, the myth of the “Strong Black Woman” is embraced by black women, despite its strength as a controlling image (Hill Collins, 2005). In Jean Wyatt’s “The Genealogy of the Strong Black Woman” (2008), Wyatt relates the origin story of this stereotype originally conceptualized by Morgan (1999) who claimed that this archetype was rooted in slavery when a black female slave was expected to show strength throughout her abuses. Thus this “strength” functioned as a way to normalize the treatment of black women by stating that their constitutions could bear it. Despite these origins, Wyatt challenges that black women adopted it because, “the Strong Black woman is above all strong,” (p.43). However, this controlling image is not truly beneficial for Black women because it does not allow for weakness or failure of the black woman, which is an impossible task.

Throughout the survey of literature presented for this section, only one academic paper touched on the problems black women have with television representations that have been expressed in alternative discourses such as blogs. Rubin et al. (2003) reported “study participants present two dominant polarized
images of African American women in mainstream American iconography: the high fashion model, emulating white beauty ideals, and the loud, sassy, “ghetto” girl.”

Black women have expressed on blog sites such as Racialicious and Jezebel (both considered feminist blogs) a dissatisfaction with both the lack of representation of black women and the limited portrayals of black women as being overweight, perpetually single, and secondary to the storylines of white characters. Though the research in this field has been very limited, there is some evidence to suggest that these limited portrayals of black femininity have very real effects for black women in how they are perceived by themselves and others (Givens & Monahan, 2005). Thus, black women may be influenced by these controlling images, many of which are particularly sized.

5. Current Study

Representations of black women are important because ultimately, “represented identities profess to express something true or essential about those represented” (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005, p. 579). These representations have the power to influence not only how black women think of themselves and other black women in their lives (Givens & Monahan, 2005), but also how the population at large views black women (Merskin, 2010). In her work about representations of Native American women, Merskin (2010) adapts the theory of double-consciousness in order to account for the convoluted identities of Native American women and I believe her framework can be extended to black women as well. In locating their identities as black and female, black women must contend with this “sense of always looking at [themselves] through the eyes of others” (Du Bois, 1903, p.3). In the instance of black
women, the eyes they must look through are not only those of the dominant racial group (whites), but black men as well.

This branch of work about representations of black women has encouraged me to attempt to locate the importance of body shape in the current representations of black women on television. Though much work has been done on the effect of representations of (white) women on (white) women, little work has been conducted with black women. While many studies postulate that black culture buffers women from body image disturbance, little work has been done on how black television actually represents black women. This work aims to fill a gap in order to shed light on the racial differences in representations and media effects. Through this work, I will examine the representations of black female bodies across both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television. I hope to discover how representation may differ across program orientations and examine how representation of black female bodies may be protective against body-image disturbances in black women.
METHOD

This research is an archival study, which focuses on a recent sample of television shows featuring black female characters. The aim of this study is to explore how the bodies of black women are represented in both mainstream- and black-oriented media in order to widen the sphere of literature about black female bodies on television.

1. Participants

Because this study focuses on a snapshot of representations of black female bodies, I chose to limit my sample to television shows that aired during the 2011-2012 season and the 2012 summer season. The summer 2012 season was included in order to capture networks that mostly release new programming in the summer such as HBO, USA, and TNT. To ensure that my sample was as current as possible, if a show aired during this time period but was not renewed for the 2012-2013 or 2013 summer seasons, it was eliminated from my sample. To further limit my sample, I chose not to consider shows that were unscripted or reality television shows, animated shows, or shows primarily aimed at children. While it would have been interesting to study unscripted/reality television shows, these shows typically take place under very unrealistic and forced situations, making them seem unlikely to happen in real life. Animated shows and shows primarily aimed at children were eliminated on the basis that these shows were unlikely to be targeting the teenage and adult viewership I wished to study. Under these limits, I then began to compile my sample.
At the beginning of my study I aimed to focus on the major cable networks. Under this guideline, I took information from the five basic cable networks, ABC, NBC, CBS, The CW and Fox. Using the network’s website, I recorded each program on air during the 2011-2012 season and using the show’s cast pages I counted the number of black women represented on each show. When the ethnic or racial background of the actor was unclear, I then used actor’s personal web pages to determine ethnicity and racial background if possible.


In total, 34 shows were chosen for this sample, five of which were black-oriented (or had mainly black casts) and 29 of which were mainstream-oriented (or
had mainly white casts). Because the aim of my study was not related to the incidence of appearance (how many times a given black female character appears in any given episode) but rather to examine how black women are depicted, I chose not to use a random sampling method for this study. In deciding which episodes of a show to view, I felt it was important to sample episodes across the lifetime of the show. Therefore, I decided to view the first three episodes of every show (or the first three episodes in which the black female character was featured as a regular cast member) in order to assess early characterizations. I then selected two episodes from the mid-season of the show and two episodes from the 2011-2012 season. In order to select the two episodes from each season for mainstream-oriented programs, I targeted episodes based on the presence of storylines that prominently featured the black female character. In order to accomplish this I used the episode recaps on the show’s websites in order to determine which episodes would be best for coding. In the event that two episodes had equal prominence, the show with the highest viewership was used. In the black-oriented shows, since black women would be prominently featured regardless, I watched the three first episodes of the premier season, and the remaining episodes watched were the two episodes with the highest viewership for that season. Thus, on a show featuring only one central black female character, a maximum of seven episodes could be coded.

Over the course of my study I had to refine my methods in choosing episodes. Because my sample units were characters, if a show featured two black female characters who met the criteria for my study then both were coded independently. This meant that the maximum number of episodes I could watch for a show if the two
black female characters had no overlap in the episodes in which they were most prominent was fourteen episodes. Additionally, any black female character with more than three spoken lines in an episode was also coded.

2. Procedure

I began my research by watching episodes of shows that fit the criteria of my study. As I watched, I began to take notes on recurring themes and factors of interest. After watching several episodes of shows such as Glee (2009), Army Wives (2007), and The Game (2006) I began to develop a list of codes focusing on the physical features and characterizations of black women. Once a coding sheet was developed, I began my data collection process.

All episodes viewed for this study were viewed in a medium that allowed for pausing and replay. Shows therefore were watched either on DVD, or through Netflix or HBO Go. This allowed me to stop and rewind in order to not miss any details necessary to code the episode. Watching through these services also allowed me to avoid advertisements while watching. The majority of the episodes were watched alone either on a television set or on a computer. In the rare cases that the episode was watched with another individual, I remained the sole coder of the episode in an effort to preserve consistency. Before watching the episode, I read the synopsis of the episode in order to familiarize myself with the plotline. This also allowed me to code on the first viewing of the episode and only re-watch the episode if there were lingering questions about the episode or characterization of the target characters.

2.1 Materials
The primary material for this study was my coding sheet. Codes fell into three major categories: character’s appearance, her socioeconomic status, and her interpersonal relationships. Appearance codes included hair type, skin tone, attractiveness and body size. These codes were included after reviewing the literature on black women and self-esteem and representation. Hair texture and skin tone have been noted as important ways to connote racial identity with kinky or unprocessed (not straight) hairstyles and darker skin tones are seen as antithetical to Eurocentric ideals of beauty (Wilder, 2010). Attractiveness was a subjective measure, characters were rated on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being extremely unattractive, 3 being neither attractive nor unattractive and 5 being extremely attractive. Socioeconomic status codes included assets, occupation, and economic class. Interpersonal relationship codes included a description of the character’s familial relationships as well as friendships and romantic/sexual relationships. A full list of the codes generated in this study can be found in Appendix B.

2.3.1 Body Shape Scale

Body shape was one of the chief areas of interest for the purposes of this study. For assessment, a reliable and widely used scale called the Stunkard et al. 1986 Figure Contour Scale was used. This scale uses nine figures ranging from 1 (very thin) to 9 (very overweight). A copy of this scale is included in Appendix C.

2.3.2 Skin Tone Scale

In order to code skin tone, a measure used by Harvey, LaBeach, Pridgen, and Gocial (2005) was used. This scale ranges from 1 to 16 with 1 being an extremely light skinned complexion and 16 being extremely dark skinned. Pictures of
individuals with corresponding skin tones were used in order to help assessment. A copy of this scale is included in Appendix B.

3. Analysis

Throughout this study I used Glaser and Strauss’s Grounded Theory (1967), which focuses on “discovering theory from data” (p.1). Therefore, after I had collected my data, I organized my codes into themes, which then could be used to glean information about the representation of black female bodies. This was done in order to assure that I was developing my theories from my data rather than allowing my theories to limit what I observed in my data.

While coding my data I began to notice recurring themes in my data. Though body size remained the main topic of interest while interpreting my data, other themes of interest emerged. These themes included appearance, friendship, relationships, isolation and exclusion, socioeconomic status, health and diet, and the reappearance of the controlling images explored in chapter one. These themes emerged because they were particularly salient across the sample. Each theme related back to body size and served as a point of characterization for the women in my sample. I therefore used these themes to outline my discussion section.

Most of these broad themes were further subdivided into categories. Though appearance, socioeconomic status, and health and diet were not subcategorized, every other theme was. Friendship was subcategorized as friendships that were protective, friendships that were equal but lacked intimacy, and friendships that were both equal and intimate. Women were categorized as having romantic relationships that were
either happy and stable, unhappy or unstable, problematic, casual, or as being divorced. Theme four of isolation and exclusion was subcategorized as women who were isolated due to unfamiliarity, authority, and proximity. Lastly, the theme of controlling images retained the subcategories discussed in chapter one so that the images discussed included the four foundational images, the sexual scripts outlined by Philips and Stephen (2003), and the image of the strong black woman.

In analyzing my data, I attempted to make connections between the observations and both social learning and social comparison theories, which were outlined in my literature review. Due to the nature of cultivation theory, it would not have been useful to use this theory as a method to interpret my observations.

Social learning theory postulates that individuals will imitate observed behavior if the model being observed receives positive consequences for their actions (Bandura, 1977; 1986; 2001). Shows portraying black women as being thin and participating in diet behaviors and if these characters are perceived to be rewarded for and satisfied with their small body size, then viewers may expect similar rewards and satisfaction in losing weight (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). I will therefore explore the rewards and consequences that women with idealized-bodies receive on mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television shows and examine whether or not these outcomes may hypothetically motivate body image disturbance.

Social learning theory contends that individuals are motivated to compare themselves with like others in order to accurately assess themselves (Festinger, 1954; Jasso, 2006). Therefore, in examining the body sizes of characters on black-oriented and mainstream-oriented television programs and hypothesize whether these images
might induce upward, downward, or lateral comparisons. I will then consider what the effect of these comparisons on body image disturbance. Through my analysis of the representation of black female bodies I hope to further research on the impact that televised images of black women on both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television may have on black women in the United States.
RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Despite being a relatively small group, black women on television are not a monolithic group. My final sample represents a range of experiences and individuals, though certain overarching themes emerged. I will explore several trends and themes observed in this sample and relate them to how differently sized women are characterized differently across mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television. These themes include appearance, friendships, romantic relationships, isolation/exclusion, lifestyle, and personal factors.

My sample included 121 characters, 69.4% of whom appeared on mainstream-oriented television programs. Of this initial sample, 50.4% of the characters observed and analyzed had a significant role in the program in which they appeared (appearing in multiple episodes or having a strong effect on storylines).

Previous research suggests that black-oriented television may serve as a protective factor against body image disturbance in black women by showing women with a larger range of body sizes (Thompson-Brenner et al., 2011). I decided to test this hypothesis first. For the purposes of this study, the 9-point scale Body Figure Contour Scale (Stunkard et al., 1983) used to categorize body size for characters was collapsed into three new groups. Characters receiving a score of less than four were categorized as being below-average body sized, characters between above four and below seven were categorized as being of average body sized, and characters scoring above a seven were categorized as being above-average body sized. Below is a chart for the distribution of body sizes in television overall as well as isolated for
mainstream- and black-oriented television programs.

Fig. 3.1 Body Size Across Program Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television Orientation</th>
<th>Body Size</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Below-Average</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Above-Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream-Orientation</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-Orientation</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results do not support the hypothesis offered by Thompson-Brenner et al. (2011). In this data, both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television offer skewed distributions of body sizes across the spectrum, however, black-oriented television is more skewed than mainstream-oriented television. In fact black-oriented television represents a larger percentage of black women who are in the smallest body size-category than mainstream-oriented television.

In order to see whether or not this trend would be different if I only examined characters who had a significant presence on the program, I re-analyzed my data, this time only including characters with a significant presence. Below is the chart of distribution of body sizes of prominent characters for overall, mainstream-oriented, and black-oriented television:
Limiting my data to only the prominent characters in my sample shifted the statistics considerably with black-oriented media and mainstream-oriented media now having almost identical representations of women in the smallest body size group. Black-oriented media also featured a much higher percentage of significant characters of average body size, however, representation continued to be extremely limited for above-average sized women. While black-oriented television depicted far more average-sized characters than mainstream-oriented television (42.1% vs. 24.4%), black-oriented television also depicted far fewer above-average sized bodies than mainstream-oriented television (5.3% vs. 24.4%).

For this sample, I rejected the hypothesis that black-oriented television features a more broadly distributed range of body sizes than mainstream-oriented television. Therefore, other factors had to be explored to examine how black media may or may not be seen as protective against body image disturbance. This section will therefore explore how women in these different body size groups are characterized across a multitude of categories in order to examine how differences in
characterization across body size and television orientation may contribute to
differences in the representation of black females and their bodies.

1. Attractiveness

Appearance is a major factor in determining how black women of different
body sizes are perceived and represented. In general, there is a tendency for women
on television to be attractive and thin (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999). I found no reason to
suggest that this would not be the case with black women on television. However,
previous research has suggested that both black men and black women perceive larger
or “thick” female figures as more attractive than extremely slender female figures
(Perez & Joiner, 2003). Therefore, I hypothesized that attractiveness and body size
would be more closely related on mainstream-oriented television than on black-
oriented television. Below is a chart summarizing the findings relating body size and
attractiveness. For the purpose of this study, attractiveness was rated on a scale of 1 to
5 with 1 meaning extremely unattractive, 3 meaning neither attractive nor
unattractive, and 5 meaning extremely attractive. All scores were whole numbers.
Unsurprisingly, attractiveness is highly negatively correlated with body size in this sample with attractiveness decreasing as body size increased. Also of note is that on black-oriented television, the percentage of attractive individuals was higher than on mainstream-oriented television. In fact, of the thirty-seven prominent characters observed on black-oriented television, none of them scored below 3 on the attractiveness scale. This data shows that black women on black-oriented television were more likely to be represented as being attractive than black women on mainstream-oriented television. This propensity for black-oriented television to
portray more attractive black women may be a result of black-oriented media striving to produce more positive (and therefore more attractive) images of black femininity. This may also be why black-oriented television overrepresented both below-average and average-sized women, but underrepresented above-average sized women.

Consistent with Perez and Joiner’s (2003) research, a higher percentage of women with an above-average body size were depicted as being attractive on black-oriented television (33.3%) than on mainstream-oriented television (5.9%). Due to the limit of this sample however, little more can be said definitively about this trend. It is very possible that this trend only appeared due to the extremely small number of above-average sized women found on black-oriented television.

These findings support Fouts and Burggraf’s (1999) research, demonstrating a clear skew towards women on television being attractive, with this attractiveness being correlated with body size. However, this data also shows that the relationship between attractiveness and body size is weaker on black-oriented television. These figures seem illustrate that the larger idealized body for black audiences (Perez & Joiner, 2003) is reflected in media produced for them, with women who are both below-average and average sized being depicted as attractive.

Appearance is very clearly related to how audience members are meant to perceive a character and her body size. As I collected my data, however, other trends became salient with themes surrounding interpersonal relationships, lifestyles, and controlling images emerging. At first, many of these themes did not seem to be related to issues of body size and body image disturbance. However, in qualitatively analyzing these themes, I found connections to how women were characterized.
through both these themes and their body sizes. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will confront these themes and their intersections with body size and representation.

2. Friendships

When limiting my sample to characters with a significant presence, almost 80% of them had at least one major friendship. Friendship was therefore a prevalent theme in this study. For these significant characters, body size did not seem to factor into whether or not a character had a friendship. This is illustrated by the chart below with each percentage reflecting the presence of a friendship for individuals in a given body size category:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>April, Val, and Keisha</th>
<th>Tara and Sookie</th>
<th>Georgia and Riley</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Figure 3.4 Percentage of Significant Characters with Major Friendship by Body Group
In examining this chart, one can see that having a friendship is almost identical across body size categories for mainstream television. There is a noticeable difference on black-oriented television across body size categories, and these differences will be addressed later in this chapter.

Despite seeing few differences in the frequency of friendships, in qualitatively analyzing the friendships depicted across mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television, certain differences emerged. Friendships tended to fall into one of several different categories: protective friendships, friendships in which both parties exerted equal attention and energy but lacked intimacy, and equal and intimate friendships. Friendships were a point of characterization for women in this sample, and simultaneously, certain friendship types were more often seen in certain program-orientations and/or were associated with particular body sizes.

**2.1 Protective Friendships**

Protective friendships involved one character (in this case, the black female character) in some way protecting the other character(s) with whom she shares a friendship. When a power dynamic existed within this category of friendship, the friendships were categorized as “Mamabear” friendships. “Mamabear” friendships were a specific type of protective friendships in which the character assumed an authoritative but caring role over her friend. Protective friendships were exclusively...
featured on mainstream-oriented television, with 9 of the 29 (31%) observed friendships on mainstream-oriented television meeting the criteria of this category. Of these protective friendships, 4 out of 9 were non-“Mamabear” protective friendships, and 5 were “Mamabear” protective friendships.

Examples of protective (not “Mamambear”) friendships include Lanie Parish (Castle, 2009); Veronica Fisher (Shameless, 2011); Tara Thornton (True Blood, 2008); and Bonnie Bennett (The Vampire Diaries, 2009). Tara Thornton and Sookie Stackhouse (True Blood, 2008), and Bonnie Bennett and Elena Gilbert (The Vampire Diaries, 2009) are both examples of childhood best friends. Veronica Fisher and Fiona Gallagher are neighbors who soon bond to the point of becoming close friends in part due to their dire financial situations (Shameless, 2011). Lanie Parish and Kate Beckett (Castle, 2009) began their friendship through working at the same New York City police precinct and have been close ever since. In each friendship observed, these women consider the other to be her “best friend,” and in each friendship, the white character is also the series’s protagonist.

Due to the intensity of these friendships, these women were portrayed as being devoted to one another. However, because the white best friend is the main protagonist in each of these shows, the viewer is shown many more instances of the black female characters expressing loyalty and devotion to their white best friends without similar levels of reciprocity. For instance, in the pilot episode of True Blood (2008), Tara manipulates a local bar owner named Sam into hiring her as a bartender. She accomplishes this by reminding Sam (who both employs and pines after Sookie) that together, they can both “keep an eye” on Sookie. Tara later exclaims in the same
episode that “over her dead body” would she allow Sookie to put herself in danger (“First Taste,” True Blood, 2008). In season four, Tara fulfills this promise when she shields Sookie from a shotgun blast. This act not only leads to Tara getting shot in the head, but also to Sookie allowing Tara to be turned into a vampire. Thus, Tara literally gives up her mortal life in order to save her best friend.

Bonnie, a teenaged witch on the CW’s fantasy drama The Vampire Diaries (2009), is another character who makes incredible sacrifices in order to protect her best friend. Despite witnessing her grandmother dying after reaching the limits of her magical powers, Bonnie continues to push her magic past its limits in an effort to help her best friend Elena face a variety of magical obstacles. Though her actions begin to have negative physical ramifications, Bonnie refuses to pass up any opportunity to help Elena and other characters on the show manipulate this vulnerability. It is true that both Tara and Bonnie are extreme examples of protective friendships. However, Veronica (Shameless, 2011) and Lanie (Castle, 2009) are often neglected in storylines in order to focus more attention on their white best friends. To some extent, all of these women’s lives are defined by the white woman by their side, and each is willing to go to extreme lengths to keep her safe.

“Mamabear” friendships had similar frequency of non-“Mamabear” protective friendships. Georgia Cummings (The Client List, 2012), Astrid Farnsworth (Fringe, 2008), Caroline Julian (Bones, 2005), Miranda Bailey (Grey’s Anatomy, 2005) and Shirley Bennett (Community, 2009) all exhibited this type of friendship with fellow characters. Power dynamics were central to this type of friendship. Sometimes the power dynamic was predicated only on age, such as with Caroline (Bones, 2005) and
Shirley (*Community*, 2009). However, in several cases, these women held formal positions of power over their friends, and this dynamic facilitated this type of friendship. In *The Client List* (2012), Georgia runs a massage parlor/brothel in which she refers to all of her employees as “her girls” and takes genuine interest in their lives and safety. Miranda Bailey on *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005) is the resident to the main characters’ surgical interns, and though this power differential eventually dissipates as the interns move up the power ladder at Seattle Grace, Miranda still continues to micromanage and guide them, at times surreptitiously and at other times blatantly.

As maternal figures, these women tend not to be sexualized or even very youthful or pretty, with Astrid (*Fringe*, 2008) being the only exception. These women often have fulfilling lives outside of their “Mamabear” relationships, but simultaneously, in the context of the show they are most important in these maternal roles. This is perhaps because the characters they mother are the real focus of the programs.

A notable exception to the typical “Mamabear” friendship is Astrid’s friendship with Walter from *Fringe* (2008). Because of Walter’s age and brilliance as a fringe science researcher, Astrid is the ‘weaker’ party in their power dynamic. Despite this, Astrid is very protective over Walter, who is rather eccentric and difficult to manage. Over time their relationship begins to resemble a close father-daughter relationship. Because Astrid does not function as a maternal figure for Walter, she is allowed to be both slim and pretty, in direct contrast to the other “Mamabears” in this sample.
These protective friendships represent an inequality between the characters involved. In both types of protective relationships, the black female character is able to repeatedly show the importance of the friendship, however, the white characters have little to prove in the context of these friendships.

2.2.1 Protective Relationships and Body Size

Because these relationships were only observed on mainstream-oriented television, all conclusions about body size must be interpreted through this knowledge. I found that there was a clear difference in body size between the two types of protective friendships. Of the “Mamabears,” Astrid (Fringe, 2008) is the only character who is not above-average body size. By contrast, women who had non-“Mamabear” protective friendships were all below-average or average body sized. This difference is not surprising since larger body size is often considered a maternal characteristic and maternal feelings are intrinsic to “Mamabear” friendships. The larger body size of these characters continues to perpetuate the common imagery of the large black nurturing figure. However, an important factor for “Mamabears” is that they are typically not the “best friends” with the characters they participate in these relationships with. Because of this, their identities are able to gain importance from other factors in their lives such as being wives (Shirley), mothers (Shirley and Miranda), and authority figures (Georgia and Bailey). To be sure, these other factors are still fairly reductive, but these women are able to explore identities outside of one constructed in a friendship with the white female protagonist.

The same cannot be said for other protective friendships. Despite tending to be younger, more attractive, and of smaller body size than “Mamabears,” these
women pay high prices for their protective friendships. Though not seen as being as overbearing as “Mamabears” can be, these protective relationships have the most catastrophic consequences including bodily harm and death. In the case of Bonnie (The Vampire Diaries, 2009) and Tara (True Blood, 2008) and to a much lesser extent Lanie (Castle, 2009) and Veronica (Shameless, 2011), their lives come second to those of their white best friends and it is difficult for them to have an identity separate from the one constructed in their friendships.

Ultimately, it seems that black women in protective relationships may be portrayed negatively in this friendship type regardless of their body size. Of course these portrayals differ based on body size, but both have negative outcomes. While the “Mamabears” are portrayed as being undesirable, which may reinforce the notion that women of color of a certain size are only fit for motherhood (whether biologically or symbolically), the slimmer women in this category have far more tragic outcomes.

2.2 Equality Without Intimacy

In other instances, there is equality in the friendship (neither character taking or giving more energy or resources to the friendship than the other), but there is also a distinctive lack of intimacy. The characters involved in this type of friendship were more than mere acquaintances and often truly like and enjoy each other’s company, however, on-screen no deep connection was shown. Similar to protective friendships, equality without intimacy friendships were only observed on mainstream-oriented television, with 9 of the 29 (31%) friendships observed from mainstream-oriented television comprising this category.
This lack of intimacy can be attributed to several different factors. In some cases, being an authority figure precluded intimacy. This appeared to be a factor in the friendship depicted in *Suits* (2011) between a founding partner Jessica Pearson and her protégé Harvey Spector. Though the two have known each other for years, their friendship seems confined to the office or other places that are considered to be an extension of the workplace. This may be a strategic move on Jessica’s part to avoid emotional intimacy interfering with their work, especially since Harvey is prone to overstepping boundaries and Jessica frequently has to assert her authority over him.

In other cases, there was little explanation given for the lack of intimacy in the friendships involving these characters. Many of these characters such as Donna (*Parks and Recreation*, 2009), Kendra (*The Client List*, 2012), and Carmen (*Franklin & Bash*, 2011) mostly appeared in workplace situations, so it is possible that the friendships in which they were involved, were merely those of convenience. This may then explain why so little intimacy was present.

2.2.2 Body Size and Equality Without Intimacy

A character’s body size did not seem to affect her likelihood to have a friendship that lacked intimacy. Perhaps this is because many of these were workplace friendships and workplaces were a space in which body-size diversity could easily exist. However, program-orientation did seem to be a factor since these friendships were found exclusively on mainstream-oriented television. These friendships are not an ideal state of friendship and it is interesting that once again a
category of undesirable friendships is confined to representation on mainstream-oriented television.

2.3 Equality and Intimacy

Friendships in which both parties were equally invested in one another and no one character became the center of the relationship were categorized as being equal and intimate friendships. This was the only friendship type observed on both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television, which means that every friendship observed on black-oriented television fit into this category. This type of friendship was the most common, with 11 out of 29 (38%) of friendships observed on mainstream-oriented television and 100% of the black-oriented television friendships comprising this category.

This category of friendships consisted of more “best friends” including Judi Mann and her white best friend Fran (Happily Divorced, 2011) as well as pairs of black female best friends like Val and Keisha from VH1’s Single Ladies (2011). This category also represented familial relationships that functioned as friendships, such as mother and daughter Lydia and Enid Adams on Southland (2009) and Tasha and Stacy from Let’s Stay Together (2008).

2.3.1 Body Size and Equality and Intimacy

Program-orientation seemed to be a more significant predictor of whether or not a black woman had an equal and intimate friendship than body size was. Also, because these friendships were equal and intimate, they were portrayed not only as being fulfilling, but also seemed less problematized than the “protective friendships” discussed previously. That these friendships were more common on black-oriented
television implies once again that black-oriented television may be attempting to disseminate more positive images of black womanhood through allowing them to experience these fulfilling friendships.

2.4 Friendship and Body Size

It did not appear that body size significantly impacted the likelihood or quantity of friendships. It does however; appear that black-oriented television depicted a greater percentage of mutually beneficial and satisfying friendships than did mainstream-oriented television. Whereas almost two-thirds of the friendships involving black women depicted on mainstream-oriented television lacked intimacy or equality, black-oriented television did not show any such problematized relationships. Therefore, while black women on mainstream-oriented television were more often depicted as having unfulfilling friendships no matter her body size; women on black-oriented programs were more often depicted as participating in satisfying and fulfilling friendships regardless of body size. However, it is also important to note that black-oriented shows in general tended to be more relationship focused, and this may have affected these results.
3. Romantic Relationships

67.2% of the prominent characters in this sample mentioned were depicted as having engaged in at least one romantic relationship. For these characters with significant presence, body size did not appear to be a factor in the percentage of individuals depicted in romantic relationships:

Figure 3.5 Percentage of Individuals Depicted in Romantic Relationships by Body Size and Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Below-Average</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Above-Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream-Oriented</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-Oriented</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While engaging in romantic relationships does not appear to be related to body size, in looking at these relationships qualitatively, trends emerge that were not be represented by statistics. The romantic relationships observed in this sample could be categorized as being happy and stable, unhappy and unstable, problematic, or casual.

There was also a handful of characters in this sample who had been divorced.
Relationships discussed also spanned the lifetime of a series; so one character could have more than one relationship depicted over the course of the program.

3.1 Happy and Stable Relationships

Happy and stable relationships were those in which both partners were fairly happy and able to surmount most obstacles in their relationship. These relationships were fairly equally represented among significant characters in both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television.

Happy and stable relationships accounted for only 5 of the 34 (15%) observed relationships on mainstream television. Of these five, three involved below-average sized women and two involved above-average sized women. Below-average sized women in happy and stable relationships included Veronica (Shameless, 2011), Kendra (The Client List, 2012), and LaDonna (Treme, 2010). Each couple was depicted as having obstacles within their relationships; Veronica and her boyfriend Kevin struggle financially, Kendra’s fiancé is unaware of her sex work at the massage parlor, and LaDonna and her husband have difficulties both with her habitually unemployed ex-husband and her emotional state after LaDonna is attacked at her place of work. Yet, despite these issues, these women have happy relationships.

Miranda (Grey’s Anatomy, 2003) and Shirley (Community, 2009) are both above-average sized characters who were depicted as having happy and stable relationships on mainstream-oriented television. Both Bailey and Shirley are currently involved with men who they had dated previously. In fact, neither Bailey nor Shirley have had their romantic lives highlighted to the extent of their other co-stars. Though these women have happy and stable relationships, they are rarely shown with their
significant others. This is in direct contrast to the other relationships on their respective shows.

A problem in analyzing happy and stable relationships on mainstream-oriented television was that though these relationships were depicted on mainstream-oriented television, they were typically not given much screen-time. This lack of screen-time was perhaps in part because happy, stable couples are not as interesting as dramatic couples. Another factor may have been that because these relationships were depicted on shows that still focused primarily on white protagonists, less screen-time was given to the black (peripheral) characters and their relationships.

On black-oriented television 7 out of 24 (29%) of the relationships depicted were happy and stable relationships. Of these seven relationships six of them involved characters of average or below-average size. In contrast to mainstream-oriented television, all seven of these relationships were between husbands and wives.

Because of the fact that black-oriented television focused on black characters, the screen-time devoted to each couple was far greater than on mainstream-oriented television, where the main relationship of interest tends to be white. Though none of the characters engaged in steamy sex scenes, all but one of them showed scenes of sexual and romantic attraction between partners. One of the first episodes of Let’s Stay Together focuses on the sexual satisfaction of the primary couple Charles and Stacy as they endeavor to please one another in the bedroom. These happy and stable couples seem to be more integral to the plot of the shows they are on, perhaps in part because black-oriented shows tended to focus on relationships and families.

3.1.1 Body Size and Happy, Stable Relationships
Body size did not seem to be a factor in whether or not characters experienced happy, stable relationships. In fact, it’s possible that the slight trend in Figure 3.5 that showed a higher percentage of above-average sized women in relationships may be significant since body size can be associated with age and having had children. On mainstream-oriented television, happy and stable couples seemed to be featured less prominently than happy and stable couples on black-oriented television, but this was most likely due to differences in program-orientation. Since black-oriented television programs tend to focus on interpersonal relationships.

3.2 Unhappy/Unstable Relationships

Relationships in which one or both partners are unhappy were categorized as being unhappy or unstable relationships. On mainstream-oriented television, 9 out of the 34 (20.6%) observed relationships were unhappy or unstable. On black-oriented television, 2 out of 24 (8.3%) of the observed relationships were unhappy or unstable. All of the women in unhappy or unstable relationships were below-average sized in both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television.

On mainstream-oriented television, women in these relationships tended to be depicted as victims of their significant others. On Bones (2005), Fran, a tireless advocate for homeless youth discovers that her husband is abusing his power and bartering food for sex with young, homeless girls. When Fran discovers he has been using her to exploit the youth she has devoted her life to helping, Fran shoots and kills him. Another tragic example occurs on Southland (2009), when a troubled teenaged girl shoots her much older lover after discovering that he has been cheating on her with another teenaged girl. Both of these examples are not only interesting
because of the level of aggression characterized by the women involved, but also because they represented the most extreme consequences of unhappy relationships.

On black-oriented shows, the only two unhappy relationships were given very little screen and story-time. In both cases, these unhappy relationships were plot contrivances to drive the action for other relationships on the show. For example, when Malcolm on *Single Ladies* (2011) wanted to make his on-and-off again lover Keisha jealous, he began dating another woman. Malcolm’s relationship with this other woman was clearly unhappy, but it also helped lead to the reconciliation between Malcolm and Keisha. This unhappy relationship was not attempting to tell a tragic story, but rather was a plot device.

### 3.2.1 Unhappy Relationships and Body Size

Though it is interesting that none of these unhappy or unstable relationships involved women who were above-average size, since so few women of above-average size are represented in this sample, it is possible that body size does not factor into the likelihood of a black female character experiencing an unhappy or unstable relationship. It is true however, that unhappy or unstable relationships were disproportionately represented on mainstream-oriented television, which, once again suggests that black-oriented television in general depicts more fulfilling relationships for black women than mainstream-oriented television.

### 3.3 Problematic Relationships

Relationships in which either a partner or the audience realizes there are flaws in the relationship that are extremely difficult to overcome were categorized as being problematic relationships. These relationships were sometimes only seen as being
flawed after they ended which is in part, why they are not categorized as unhappy or unstable relationships.

On mainstream-oriented television 10 of the 34 relationships (29%) depicted were problematic relationships. Of these, three involved above-average sized women: Andrea (The Big C, 2010), Janila (Southland, 2009), and Mercedes (Glee, 2009). These three relationships had several similarities, one of the most prominent being that all three of these characters were teenagers who were inexperienced in romantic relationships. Janila (Southland, 2009) is introduced in the pilot episode as the girlfriend of a young gangbanger from her neighborhood. When she is exposed firsthand to his dangerous lifestyle, she breaks up with him and becomes an informant for the Los Angeles Police Department before finally entering the Witness Protection Program. Her decision to engage in a romantic relationship at fourteen with a gangbanger is definitely problematized in the context of the show, but Janila is able to move past her mistakes after she breaks up with her boyfriend.

Though the popular teen musical-dramedy sensation Glee has been known for having its characters switch romantic partners on almost a weekly basis, Mercedes made it to the third season without having ever embarked on a serious relationship on-screen. Though Mercedes had been interested in one of her flamboyantly gay friends, briefly dated bad-boy Noah Puckerman who had previously bullied her, and embarked upon a secret romance with a fellow glee club member, Sam; she was not given an extensive on-screen romance until season three. Despite being fairly attractive, Mercedes was under no illusions about her appeal to the opposite sex during her sophomore year, remarking, “not a lot of guys are knocking down my door
for dates” (Glee, 2009, Acafellas). In season three, when Mercedes becomes the last central glee club member to enter a serious, long-term relationship onscreen; she is also one of the few who dates outside the glee club. Her boyfriend, Shane, is a black linebacker who was previously only seen making fun of the glee club in a few sporadic episodes.

Despite his past actions, Shane tries to support Mercedes as she prepares to finally step out of the shadows of her fellow glee club members for her senior year. He encourages her to become more assertive in getting what she wants. However, although Mercedes is portrayed as enjoying her boyfriend’s company, and although his encouragement inspires her to stand up for herself, he is considered a negative influence by her friends in glee club. This leads to Mercedes becoming alienated from many of her former friends. Eventually, Mercedes cheats on Shane with the blond haired, blue-eyed Sam with whom she had a brief off-screen fling over the previous summer. Both of these relationships eventually fail; with Shane because of Mercedes’ infidelity, and with Sam when Mercedes moves to Los Angeles after graduating high school.

Andrea was in the most problematic relationship of the three characters profiled. In The Big C, Andrea is not portrayed as being very romantically or sexually experienced. When she meets Myk, a young Ukrainian sales associate, Andrea believes she is caught in a whirlwind romance. Myk compliments her appearance, noting that with all the jewelry she wears she resembles a “big black Christmas tree” (“A Little Death,” The Big C, 2010). Within three episodes of meeting, Andrea loses her virginity to Myk in the back of his company van. The two continue to move
quickly in their relationship with Myk proposing to Andrea, even though she is still in high school. While planning their marriage however, Andrea discovers that not only is Myk stealing company goods from his job, but that he is also only marrying her in order to get his United States citizenship. Though Andrea ultimately turns Myk in for his illegal activities, the trauma of this situation sends Andrea into an identity crisis, which she attempts to solve by going to Africa for the summer to reconnect with her parents who are doing missionary work.

Below-average and average sized women were not immune to problematic relationships on mainstream-oriented television, though they tended to not be as negatively portrayed as the ones just explored. One relationship that came close, was the relationship between Olivia Pope and President Fitzgerald Grant on Scandal (2012). Not only is Olivia engaging in an on-again off-again affair with the married president of the United States, but she is also not his only affair. President Grant also cheated on his wife by having a one-night stand with a White House aide. Olivia and Fitzgerald’s relationship, though portrayed as being full of chemistry and passion, is also incredibly toxic. President Grant is the only person who can manipulate Olivia effectively and make her mistrust her famed instincts. Her affair with him also causes a rift between Olivia and one of her close friends (who is also President Grant’s Chief of Staff), Cyrus Beam. After discovering the two in a compromising position, Cyrus states callously, though not incorrectly, that Grant has Olivia “in the palm of his hand” and that she has become trashy a result of their affair (“Hell Hath No Fury,” Scandal, 2012).
Problematic relationships also existed on black-oriented television, though not in the abundance that they were portrayed on mainstream-oriented television. Of the 24 relationships observed, only 2 (8.3%) were problematic on black-oriented television. To a certain extent BET’s *The Game* (2006) is built around an extremely problematic relationship between Melanie Barnett and Derwin Davis. To support Derwin’s dream of playing professional football, Melanie gives up Johns Hopkins Medical School and defies her parents’ wishes by moving out to San Diego with him. The couple however, is plagued with issues from infidelity to infertility and though they are depicted as truly loving one another, their relationship never seems to be stable. However, the relationship between Melanie and Derwin, though very much tumultuous, does not seem to reach the heights of drama seen on some of the mainstream shows in this sample.

3.3.1 Problematic Relationships and Body Size

It is clear that it is not necessary for black women to be of a certain size in order to be involved in problematic relationships, particularly on mainstream-oriented television. However, the problems that women of above-average size face in these relationships do seem to be characterized differently based on their body size. Part of what leads Janila, Mercedes, and Andrea into these problematic relationships in the first place is that they are inexperienced romantically; both because of their age, but also because of their size. For Mercedes and Andrea in particular, their size and the feeling that their size makes them unattractive (as well as the reinforcement from their lack of dating prospects) led both of them to become entangled in troubled relationships.
3.4 The Casual and Prolific Daters

The casual or prolific dating category captured women who were not in long-term or steady relationships but who still dated or engaged in casual sex. Women in these types of relationships were depicted on both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television; however, of the seventeen women in this category, only two were above-average size and they both appeared on mainstream-oriented television.

On mainstream-oriented television, 9 of the 34 (26%) observed relationships were casual dating relationships. Of these nine women only two were above-average body sized. Donna from Parks and Recreation is one such example of a casual and prolific dater who is above-average body size. Donna does not get tied down to any one man; rather she has “several in rotation” (“Operation Ann,” Parks and Recreation, 2009) and repeats the motto “use him, abuse him, lose him” when talking about men (“Harvest Festival”, Parks and Recreation, 2009). Donna is directly contrasted with Ann Perkins, a character whose ethnicity is never directly addressed but is portrayed by the self-identified black, white, and Jewish actress Rashida Jones (Weller, 2005). Despite Donna’s larger physique and less beautiful face, she is portrayed as being far more successful with men than Ann and gives Ann dating advice on multiple occasions. However, while Ann’s many unsuccessful relationships become somewhat of a running joke on Parks and Recreation, none of Donna’s many paramours make any on-screen appearances. Therefore, while Donna is allowed to be successful in her relationships and benefit from her sexual attractiveness off-camera, there is an edge of humor to the fact that she in all of her big, blackness is seen as
being irresistible to men and yet beautiful and ethnically ambiguous Ann is perpetually unlucky with love.

On black-oriented television, all the casual daters were average or below-average sized and their dating was typically presented as being both frustrating and yet, also exciting. These women are capable of acquiring steady romantic partners, however, they have not decided to settle down yet. On VH1’s *Single Ladies* (2011), casual dating is one of the main topics of the show. In this show, all of the main characters are depicted as dating casually and their romantic interests are constantly shown on-screen. Though in *Single Ladies* (2011) the main protagonists range from being quite thin (below-average size) to very curvy and voluptuous (average body size), they are all depicted as being attractive to men and beautiful to the viewers.

3.4.2 Casual Dating and Body Size

Once again, the small sample size of above-average size women makes it difficult to generalize about these women in the casual dating sphere. In general, casual daters tended to be average or below-average size, which is perhaps because women of this size are perceived as being able to casually date because their size connotes sexual desirability. Most of these casual daters were presented as being sexually desirable and as was previously explored, this sexual desirability (or attractiveness) is related to body size. However, unlike in other categories, there does not appear to be a large effect of program orientation on the depiction of black women who were casual daters. This is because in most cases, these casual daters were depicted as having an idealized body type and being conventionally attractive which seem to be prerequisites for casual dating regardless of program-orientation.
3.5 Divorced

There were four divorced women in this sample: Miranda (Grey’s Anatomy, 2003), Georgia (The Client List, 2012), Shirley (Community, 2009), and Abby Bennett-Wilson (The Vampire Diaries, 2009). Of these four women, only Abby Bennett-Wilson is not above-average body sized. Though this group of women is extremely small, there seemed to be a trend between body size and failed relationships.

Infidelity factored in to the divorces of both Georgia (The Client List, 2012) and Shirley (Community, 2009). Georgia remarks in an early episode that her husband “ran off with one of [her] girls” though she also admits that she is “fine without him” (“Pilot,” The Client List, 2012). Similarly, Shirley Bennett’s husband Andre left her for a stripper, though she seems far less at peace with his departure than Georgia. In an outburst in one of her classes at Greendale Community College, Shirley admits that she is finally getting her business degree “because [she] wasted fifteen years of her life on a man who left her with nothing but stretch marks and a foggy memory of two bland orgasms and now it’s time to get what’s hers!” (“Introduction to Film,” Community, 2009). This quote suggests that Shirley and Andre had problems even before his infidelity. Interestingly enough, Shirley and her ex-husband ultimately reconcile due in part to Shirley’s unplanned pregnancy but there is little discussion of this unsatisfying part of their physical relationship.

Abby Bennett-Wilson (The Vampire Diaries, 2009) was the only divorcee who was not of above-average body size and she was also the only woman who abandoned her husband. Rather than for reasons of infidelity, Abby leaves her family
because she wants a new life and pays the price of slowly losing her magic the longer she is away from her daughter.

3.5.1 Divorce and Body Size

Women who were above-average body sized made up a larger portion of women who were divorced. In several of these cases these women were left by their husbands for women in professions that connote certain standards of sexual desirability (sex workers and strippers). The implication is that these women stopped being attractive to their husbands and this is what led to their divorces. Though body size is not explicitly mentioned as a factor, it seems plausible that these women are being subtly punished for their unappealing body types through divorce or abandonment.

3.6 Relationships and Body Size

Though women of certain body sizes were not more or less likely to have a relationship, there did appear to be some sort of connection between body size and relationships. It seems that on mainstream-oriented television, the outcomes of relationships differed based on the body size of the women involved. It did appear that the relationships of black women on black-oriented television were portrayed more positively regardless of her body size than the relationships of black women on mainstream-oriented television regardless of her body size.
4. Isolation, Exclusion, and Outsiders

Isolation and exclusion were recurring themes in this sample with 23 cases observed on mainstream-oriented television, meaning that 56% of the significant characters on mainstream-oriented television were excluded or isolated. In some cases this isolation or exclusion was very much a part of the narrative of the series, but in other cases it was never addressed on-screen. Though methods of exclusion and isolation differed across my sample, it remained a prevalent theme. It is also important to note that characters who are excluded or isolated were only observed on mainstream-oriented television (which often coincided with them being the only black character on the program) and yet this exclusion is almost never attributed to race. Instead issues of unfamiliarity, authority, familial ties and power dynamics were used to exclude and isolate black female characters.

4.1 Unfamiliarity

Women in this category were excluded ostensibly because they were new to the previously established group central to the show’s focus. This category included
three characters, Amy Sykes (Major Crimes, 2012), Victoria Gates (Castle, 2009),

and Camille Saroyan (Bones, 2005) all of whom are below-average size. All three of

these characters entered close-knit units who shared previous history. In both Bones

and Castle, these women assumed positions of power, which further exacerbates

negative and exclusionary feelings towards these characters.

At the beginning of season two of Bones (2005), Dr. Camille Saroyan is

brought in to head the Jeffersonian even though the protagonist Dr. Brennan believes

herself to be the more obvious choice. Camille’s ability to underlie her admittedly

intimidating and authoritative demeanor with excellent people skills frustrates Dr.

Brennan since Brennan struggles in social situations. As a result, Brennan and

Camille become entangled in a struggle for power. When Camille shows she is

willing to lose the entire forensic department at the Jeffersonian rather than to

publicly allow Brennan to undermine her, Camille’s exclusion seems solidified.

However, Camille eventually learns that though she is technically in charge, because

she is new to the department and because Dr. Brennan is beloved at the Jeffersonian,
she must compromise in order to be successful in her new job.

On Castle (2009), after the death of the beloved Captain Esposito, Victoria

Gates assumes his captaincy. Not only is Captain Gates unfamiliar, but she is also

very intimidating and vocally opposes the way the precinct was handled under

Captain Esposito’s tenure. Captain Gates is not concerned with being disliked since

she moved up through the ranks in Internal Affairs and makes it very clear that she is

willing to be ruthless in order to serve her own agenda. Her demeanor earns her the

respect of her superiors, but the distrust of those under her command. Kate Beckett,
the protagonist of *Castle* (2007), is especially wary of Captain Gates and frequently attempts to circumvent her authority.

### 4.1.1 Unfamiliarity and Body Size

All three of these characters in this category of exclusion were below-average sized. Camille and Captain Gates are excluded not solely because they are unfamiliar, but because they are unfamiliar threats. Captain Gates represents a threat to Kate’s career and Captain Gates also feels somewhat threatened by Kate, remarking that Kate beat her out by six weeks to become the youngest woman made detective in the NYPD. Camille and Brennan are similarly threats to one another. Camille is a threat both to Brennan’s career and her personal life due to Cam’s warmth towards coworkers and past romantic history with Booth (Brennan’s handsome FBI attaché); while Brennan is a threat to Camille’s career as well due to the loyalty others show her. Perhaps thinner women are seen in these roles because they represent a more relevant threat in the domains of career and romance, especially if they are meant to threaten beautiful, white, and thin protagonists. Both Camille and Victoria are also in positions of authority, which means that once their unfamiliarity dissipates, they will continue to be excluded based on the next categorization, “Women on Top.”

### 4.2 Women on Top

Women excluded due to the authority they hold over others in the central group were categorized as “Women on Top.” There were five characters who fit into this categorization: Jessica Pearson (*Suits*, 2011), Olivia Pope (*Scandal*, 2012), Gloria Akalitus (*Nurse Jackie*, 2009), Miranda Bailey (*Grey’s Anatomy*, 2003), and Mrs.
Frederick (Warehouse 13, 2009). All five of these characters appeared on mainstream-oriented television shows.

Unlike the “Unfamiliars,” the characters in this category were almost equally split between being above-average sized and below-average or average sized, and the differences in their characterizations are obvious. The primary way in which these women were excluded was by the authority they held over the main characters of the show. However, the particular way these women are excluded greatly differs with the size of the character.

Both Jessica Pearson (Suits, 2011) and Olivia Pope (Scandal, 2012) are powerful in their respective fields. Jessica Pearson is a founding partner of a successful New York City law firm and Olivia Pope left her job as the Director of Communications for the White House to start her own crisis management firm in Washington D.C. These women are also both very attractive and their beauty is explicitly mentioned on the show. When Jessica must go see a very important client, Harvey, her coworker remarks on her provocative attire. She is also often seen in skirt suits rather than pant suits, highlighting her femininity and beauty. Similarly, Olivia Pope is constantly dressed in beautiful and expensive looking clothing. Olivia’s personal life is also integral to the drama of the show, not only is she engaging in an extra-marital affair with President Grant, but she also attracts other men in the White House. When she arrives at one of the Presidential balls in a formfitting backless dress, the vice-president’s secretary half-jokes that he must find a way to “sexually harass her” without causing trouble and later asks her out on a date (“Sweet Baby,” Scandal, 2012).
Thus, while these women’s power is rarely questioned, they are also presented as being undeniably feminine and desirable. Though both Olivia and Jessica keep their personal lives private within the context of the program, the viewers are aware that they are more than capable of pursuing romantic relationships and it is hinted that their isolation is in part self-imposed. Their beauty and relative youth mean that both Olivia and Jessica have most likely worked hard for people to see them as more than just pretty faces and therefore must work in order to keep their “Woman on Top” personas in tact despite their attractiveness.

Olivia Pope and Jessica Pearson’s ability to be taken seriously despite their beauty and youth are directly contrasted to the other women in this category, all of whom are above-average sized. Neither Miranda (Grey’s Anatomy, 2003), Mrs. Frederick (Warehouse 13, 2009), nor Gloria Akalitus (Nurse Jackie, 2009) are particularly attractive or youthful looking. Their jobs are also considerably less prestigious despite also being in positions of authority. Mrs. Frederick heads a paranormal government agency, Gloria is the head nurse at a city hospital, and Miranda begins Grey’s Anatomy as a resident at a Seattle hospital. Though Mrs. Frederick perhaps in the most intentional about her appearance of the three women, her signature tweed suits and pearls appear to the viewer as being frumpy while Gloria and Bailey’s style of dress can be most aptly described as unpolished. Moreover, their isolation and exclusion seems less self-imposed and more a mere function of their jobs with none of these women having an overwhelming amount of direct contact with those they supervise. Therefore, while in some ways Olivia and Jessica seem to isolate themselves from others; Miranda, Mrs. Frederick, and Gloria
seem excluded and the extent to which this is their own choice is not addressed in the episodes sampled.

4.2.1 “Woman on Top” and Body Size

Body size seems to affect how women in authority are characterized. All of these women must give something up in their pursuit for authority and power. Jessica and Olivia are able to be attractive and in positions of authority, but they must work in order to ensure they are taken seriously. Conversely, Gloria, Bailey, and Mrs. Frederick can be fairly secure in their authority, but they are also not seen as being particularly sexy or even womanly.

4.3 Not in the Family

Several of the shows in this sample were primarily focused on the lives of one particular family. Most screen-time is dedicated to family members, and in these shows, other characters were excluded because they are not a part of the family. Examples of this include Veronica (*Shameless*, 2011) and Jasmine (*Parenthood*, 2010). None of these women were above-average sized and their body size did not seem to factor in their exclusion, but in an indirect way, their race did.

In shows where the focus is on the family (which on mainstream-oriented television almost always implies a white family), any nonfamily character can be expected to face a certain amount of exclusion. But because the family is white, the blackness of these characters can unintentionally emphasize lack of familial ties as well as exclusion. This category is especially frustrating in the case of *Parenthood* (2010), a show that focuses on the Braverman family. One of the Braverman children, Deke has a child with a woman named Jasmine. This makes her in some way part of
the family, and yet she and her child are often missing from Braverman events and seen little in comparison to other Braverman family members. Thus, though she is in some way a part of the family, her lack of biological connection still facilitates her exclusion from the Braverman family and therefore from being a main focus of the show.

Though there were family-centered programs on black-oriented television including *The Soul Man* (2012) and *Are We There Yet?* (2010) this category of exclusion still did not appear. It is possible that because the family-centered shows on mainstream-oriented television were more dramatic than the family-centered black-oriented programs. This difference in genre may have allowed for more nonfamily characters to have substantial roles in comedies than in dramas.

4.3.1 *Not in the Family and Body Size*

Being “Not in the Family” is probably the most racialized mode of exclusion explored in this piece. Though exclusion is not technically based on race, the exclusion based on biological these cases often makes it de facto exclusion based on race. Therefore, body size does not directly factor into this mode of exclusion. Program-orientation did emerge as a factor, particularly since even family-centered black-oriented shows did not engage in this type of exclusion. This is yet another category in which a theme emerged on mainstream-oriented television but did not appear on black-oriented television.

4.4 *Separate But (Un)Equal*

The last category is primarily comprised of shows that centered in the workplace. In this genre, characters are excluded on the basis of their job function not
corresponding to the job function of others on the show. Examples of this include Rachel Zane (*Suits*, 2011) who is a paralegal while all the other main characters are lawyers; Ann Perkins (*Parks and Recreation*) who is one of the only main characters who does not work in City Hall; and Joan Burton (*Army Wives*, 2007) who is army personnel rather than the spouse of army personnel. Of the twelve women in this category, ten were below-average size and the others were average size. All of these women appeared on mainstream-oriented television.

4.4.2 Separate But (Un)Equal and Body Size

A trend emerged in which most of the women who were “Separate but (Un)Equal” are also below-average and average size. Many of these women were excluded based on their professions, but remain important in the context of the show because they serve some other purpose in the plot. For instance, Lanie (*Castle*, 2009) will always be important no matter where she works because she serves as Beckett’s confidante and without her the audience would never know how Beckett is feeling. Rachel Zane (*Suits*, 2011) is an ever-important romantic interest and Bonnie (*The Vampire Diaries*, 2009) is essential since she is the only dependable witch in Mystic Falls. Thus these women must prove themselves valuable to the plot of the programs they are on to justify the writers making an effort to keep them on the show despite inconvenience. Often the simplest way to ensure these women are central to the plot is to cast them as love-interests for one the (typically white) male protagonists, or best friends and both of these roles connote a certain idealized body type.

4.5 Conclusion of Body Size and Exclusion
In the case of exclusion and isolation, body size did not determine whether or not the characters are excluded, but rather impacted their subsequent role on the show. For instance, “Women on Top” were excluded no matter whether or not they are below-average and average size or above-average sized. However, “Women on Top” who were below-average and average sized are portrayed far more glamorously on mainstream-oriented television than “Women on Top” who were above-average body size.

5. Socioeconomic Status and Eating Habits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Donna</th>
<th>Ava</th>
<th>Andrea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5.1 Socioeconomic Status

Representations of socioeconomic status differed greatly between mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television as illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When limiting my sample only to prominent characters, similarly skewed results emerged:

**Fig. 3.5 Socioeconomic Status of Significant Characters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Class</th>
<th>Mainstream-oriented</th>
<th>Black-Oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both of these data sets, it became apparent that black-oriented television showed a larger percentage of women who were high in socioeconomic status than mainstream-oriented television showed. The table below shows the breakdown of socioeconomic class by body group and program-orientation:
### Fig. 3.6 Socioeconomic Status of Significant Characters by Body Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 1</td>
<td>High: 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 2</td>
<td>High: 27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 38.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 3</td>
<td>High: 28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream-oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 1</td>
<td>High: 28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 32.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 39.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 2</td>
<td>High: 14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 35.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 3</td>
<td>High: 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-Oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 1</td>
<td>High: 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 2</td>
<td>High: 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Group 3</td>
<td>High: 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle: 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low: 0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a noticeable overrepresentation of women on black-oriented media who were of high economic status irrespective of their body size, but on mainstream television being of a larger body size meant a tendency to be of lower socioeconomic class.

### 5.2 Health/Food

Very few women in this sample were seen dieting, exercising, or even commenting on their own size. However, examining the depictions of women who did have food or diet related plot points is essential because these depictions were so problematic.
In total, three women in this sample participated in dieting behaviors: Ava (Up All Night, 2011) who unsuccessfully attempted a cleanse; Donna Meagle (Parks and Recreation, 2009) who participated in a cleanse for one episode; and Andrea (The Big C, 2010). Both Donna and Andrea are above-average sized and Ava is average sized. Of the episodes watched, only Andrea is seen repeatedly dieting. Andrea also held the most extreme ideas about her size. After telling jokes at her teacher’s expense, Andrea’s teacher retaliates by telling her quite plainly that Andrea “can either be fat and jolly or a skinny bitch” (“Pilot,” The Big C, 2010) drawing attention to Andrea’s large body size. This same teacher then tries to persuade her to try a new health program where she pays Andrea $1 for every pound she loses. It turns out Andrea is similarly hard on herself. In the pilot episode she says in all seriousness “I’d rather be skinny and die young than be fat forever” as she smokes cigarettes as a method of weight control (“Pilot,” The Big C, 2010). Andrea is also candid about her disordered eating habits, which include fasting, and binge eating, neither of which helps her lose any weight.

Though Mercedes (Glee, 2009) did not attempt to lose weight in the sampled episodes, like Andrea her relationship with food is questioned by the show in which she is featured. In season two, a teacher institutes a ban on tater-tots in the cafeteria just as Mercedes is beginning to feel poorly about not being romantically attached. Mercedes becomes enraged and starts a protest to reinstate them. Mercedes reacts to them as if they were a drug, her face lighting up when she is able to order tater-tots at an off-campus eatery after school. Mercedes gets a harsh reality check concerning both her health and her love life from her best friend Kurt who informs her that she is
“substituting food for love…and more importantly, you’re substituting me for a boyfriend” (“The Substitute,” *Glee*, 2009). This harsh truth seems to bring Mercedes out of her tater-tots obsession and relationship slump.

Seeing these storylines for Andrea and Mercedes is extremely troubling particularly because of their age. Though the behaviors of these characters are not portrayed positively, the message meant to be taken from either character are mixed. These women are portrayed as being, in part, defined by their size. Their size is seen as the reason they are not desirable to the opposite sex, and their food consumption is up for public discussion as long it is couched in terms of concern. Both Andrea and Mercedes are characterized as having bodies that they should be ashamed of, and both characters project this shame to the audience.

6. **Controlling Images**

The last section will explore trends of portraying black female characters in certain ways that highlight previous controlling images discussed in the literature review.
Representations of all four controlling images outlined by Hill Collins occurred in this sample. Women who brought together large body sizes and nurturing, motherly behaviors were most analogous to “Mammies.” Though these women were not direct equivalents of the happy and servile “Mammy,” they did share certain qualities, such as being overweight, and drab in appearance. The controlling image most clearly seen in this sample was a combination of the “Mammy” and the “Matriarch.” The fact that women in this sample could be represented as both “Mammies” and “Matriarchs” is a function of these two controlling images being counterparts. Shirley (Community, 2009) and Miranda (Grey’s Anatomy, 2005) both functioned as “Mammy”/ “Matriarchs.” Miranda has a son who she barely spends time with since she is constantly toiling at Seattle Grace. Similarly, Shirley laments more than once that attending community college has taken time away from her family. When Shirley is remarrying her husband Andre, he remarks on the time she has spent away from the household, implying that things were better when he was the
breadwinner for the family and that when they remarry she should go back to being a
homemaker (“Urban Matrimony and Sandwich Arts,” Community, 2009). Thus,
Shirley in particular is the perfect example of a woman who is a “Mammy” to the
main (and mostly white) cast and yet, perceived by her own family as being a
neglectful “Matriarch.”

The “Welfare Mother” as a controlling image did not factor into the
classification of many of the significant characters of this sample though there
were several shows in which these types were shown as very minor characters, such
as in the Los Angeles police procedural drama Southland. The prevalence of these
minor “Welfare Mother” like characters on Southland is undoubtedly because
Southland is set in poverty-stricken areas of southern Los Angeles. However, there
were two significant characters who shared key characteristic with the “Welfare
Mother,” such as Ruby Jean and Lettie Mae, both from True Blood (2008). Though
both of these women only have one child each, Ruby Jean’s mental illness and Lettie
Mae’s alcoholism make them unfit and passive mothers at their best, and emotionally
and physically abusive mothers at their worst.

The “Jezebel” was also observed in this sample. Both Kendra (The Client List, 2011) and Veronica (Shameless, 2011) are sex workers who profit economically off
of their sexuality. One of Veronica’s first scenes on Shameless (2011) is a flash of her
participating in bondage/domination/sadism/masochism play with her white
boyfriend. This scene instantly brings sexuality into Veronica’s characterization. Yet,
neither Kendra nor Veronica were constructed as being out-of-control with their
sexuality and therefore are not direct translations of the “Jezebel” controlling image.
Additionally, there were sexually aggressive women who bore similarities to the “Jezebel” in this sample. Both of these women were depicted on black-oriented television: Rhonda and Charmaine (*Let’s Stay Together*, 2008). Both of these women were depicted as being unscrupulous man-eaters as they hit on central character Tasha’s husband. However, because Rhonda is young, attractive, and thin she is presented as far more of a threat to Tasha’s marriage than Charmaine is. Charmaine is an older woman who is above-average body-size and her overtures are seen as being comical and even a little grotesque, whereas Rhonda is seen as a far more dangerous before Tasha defuses the situation by talking with her in person about not “stealing” another woman’s man (“On to the Next One,” *Let’s Stay Together*, 2008).

6.1.1 Foundational Images and Body Size

When observed in this sample, the four foundational images did in fact continue to be associated with the body sizes Hill Collins ascribed to them. “Mammies” and “Matriarchs” continued to be larger physically while “Jezebels” linked back to their sexuality through large breasts and hips, though “Jezebels” were divided between large, humorous depictions and slimmer, more threatening images. The “Jezebels” were the only controlling image that was found both on mainstream and black-oriented television.

6.2 Modern Incarnations

Overall, there was little evidence in my data that the archetypes outlined by Stephens and Phillips (2003) were translated from hip-hop culture to television representation. “Dykes,” “Divas,” “Gangster Bitches,” and “Earth Mothers” were completely absent in this sample. With the other controlling images such as “Gold
Diggers,” “Sister Saviors,” and “Freaks,” occur only very rarely. Ultimately, these controlling images could not be used to interpret the data from this sample.

6.3 The Angry Black Woman

The “Angry Black Woman” was a controlling image observed several times in this sample. The “Angry Black Woman” brings together both verbal aggression and physical aggression. This category consisted of women who used angry verbal aggression and/or physical aggression, although in most cases subjects used both. Examples of the “Angry Black Woman” include Cameo (Glee, 2009); Tara Thornton (True Blood, 2008), and Shirley (Community, 2009).

Most of these women are not ever seen on-screen reacting violently, though there are a few exceptions. In a guest spot of less than two minutes, a student named Cameo featured in Glee punches a substitute teacher. Tara is also shown being almost constantly verbally aggressive and becomes physically aggressive after an incident with a few racist men as she is leaving a bar (True Blood, 2008). Her physical aggression and anger are integrally related to the fact that her own mother Lettie Mae is incredibly angry and physically abusive. “Angry Black Women” do not always have to become physically violent in order to be categorized as such, however, many make comments that imply the ability, willingness, or intention to commit violent acts which may or may not be ever acted upon.

6.3.1 The Angry Black Woman and Body Size

Of the eight “Angry Black Women” observed on mainstream television in this sample, two were above-average size and the remaining six were average or below-average size. In the case of each of the two above-average size characters, their anger
is seen as a point of humor in the show. In *The Big C*, when Andrea threatens to “beat down” the much smaller Adam so that he will come down to dinner, or when Cameo punches Gwyneth Paltrow’s character directly in the face the effect is meant to be humorous. However, when average or below-average women become violent, it is typically done in order to evoke drama. For instance, when Lettie Mae attacks Tara with a broken bottle on *True Blood*, her show of violence is meant to create sympathy for Tara and revulsion for Lettie Mae. When Tara later becomes physically violent with her would-be attackers, the scene is used to show how emotionally vulnerable Tara remains after the death of her lover.

This difference in characterization may stem from the fact that, for above-average size women, the very size of their bodies can be considered a humorous prop. In the pilot of *The Big C*, Cathy Jamison tells Andrea that since she is overweight, Andrea can either be “fat and jolly, or skinny and mean,” but not both (“Pilot”). These reasoning seems to be reified by this sample with the above-average sized “Angry Black Women” being used as comic relief.

6.2.2 The Sassy Black Woman

When verbal aggression is used humorously or without real threat of physical aggression, these women were categorized as “Sassy Black Women.” Women in this category include Donna Meagle (*Parks and Recreation*, 2009), Bailey (*Grey’s Anatomy*, 2003), Mercedes Jones (*Glee*, 2009) and Andrea (*The Big C*, 2010). On mainstream-oriented programming the concept of the “Sassy Black Woman” appeared to be based in a particular body size.
It is important to point out that on mainstream television, “Angry Black Women” and “Sassy Black Women” sometimes were conflated in one character. This small categorization, which consisted of women who typically only resorted to verbal aggression but when pushed resorted to threat or actual physical retaliation, included Veronica (Shameless, 2011), Shirley (Community, 2009), Andrea (The Big C, 2010), and Mercedes (Glee, 2009). For instance, after being rejected by her friend Kurt, who is gay; Mercedes smashes his car windows in retaliation (Glee, 2009). This, however, is the only instance of violent retaliation witnessed from Mercedes in the observed episodes.

On black-oriented television, there were women who presented “sassy” characteristics, however, unlike the sassy women seen on mainstream-oriented television, these women were not defined by their “sassiness.” These women included Chardonnay (The Game, 2006), Tasha (The Game, 2006), and Keisha (Single Ladies, 2010). That these women are able to portray “sassy” characteristics and yet still have a character beyond one-liners perhaps is another example of black-oriented media attempting to show black women as being more than one-dimensional characters.

6.3.1 The Sassy Black Woman and Size

The “Sassy Black Woman” is entrenched in her body size on mainstream television. Similarly to the “Angry Black Woman,” the “Sassy Black Woman’s” body size functions to ensure that she can be both verbally caustic and at the same time humorous and entertaining. Her body ensures that the audience is not encouraged to see her as being sexual or threatening to hegemonic conceptions of beauty, and so her “Sassiness” and willingness to tell the truth is also unthreatening. She is able to gain
acceptance from both the cast and the audience, however, she is also often one-dimensional and seen as a periphery character.

In observing the “Sassy Black Woman,” one can see how her body size functions to keep her as a periphery character. With the “Sassy Black Woman” being just one more way of representing above-average body sized individuals negatively, it’s possible that viewing this archetype would motivate viewers to avoid an above-average body size.

### 6.4 The Strong Black Woman

Surprisingly, the “Strong Black Woman” image did not come up frequently in this sample, though when she did, she was only observed on mainstream-oriented television. This is perhaps because of the very nature of television shows; the multi-season structure lends itself less to such a portrayal than movies perhaps would. This controlling image is also the one most perpetuated by the black community since it is considered a positive stereotype, so it is possible that it derives strength not in being represented on-screen but rather from life. There was a conscious effort in categorizing these women that “strong” not be equated with powerful, but with the ability to endure hardships. These women included Jessica Pearson (*Suits*, 2011), Joss Carter (*Person of Interest*, 2011), Fran Duncan (*Bones*, 2005), Rachel Brooks (*Justified*, 2010), Lydia Adams (*Southland*, 2009), Melanie (*Southland*, 2009), and Joan Burton (*Army Wives*, 2007).

Many of these women have gone through some sort of personal hardship or tragedy as with Rachel from *Justified* (2010) whose sister was killed by her drug-addict husband in a car accident, or Joan Burton (*Army Wives*, 2007) who suffered
from posttraumatic stress disorder after being deployed to Iraq. These women have struggles, and yet they remain stoic under pressure others would crumble under.

6.4.1 The Strong Black Woman and Body Size

The “Strong Black Woman” is only represented as being below-average body sized in this sample. The reasons for this are unclear. It is possible that because this representation is meant to be one of the most complimentary to black women and because it represents the idealized black woman, her size may be a function of her mythic status. Her slim figure may be just another part of her being able to “do it all” and though she is not sexualized through her body, her body remains a site of her characterization.

7. Discussion

7.1 Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory is based on the principle that individuals may learn through observation. Central to this theory is the concept of motivation, or that the observed behavior must be associated with positive consequences in order to be modeled. This motivation is essential in interpreting the results of this study. In this study, we have examined the depiction of black female bodies and aimed to discover what conclusions the viewers may draw. However, in general, this study found that though depiction of black women differed according to body size and program orientation, on mainstream television in particular, these differences in depiction may not have been strong enough to motivate appearance-enhancing behaviors or body image disturbance.
There is evidence that shows that above-average sized black women were depicted in very specific ways on mainstream television. As seen in their protective friendships and “Mammy”/“Matriarch” characterization, many above-average sized women were desexualized in the context of their show. When exploring romantic relationships, viewers observe the teenaged characters Mercedes (Glee, 2009) and Andrea (The Big C, 2010), both of whom were not considered to be viable love interests for the majority of their character arcs. In several of the divorcees sampled, size is indirectly implicated as a factor in failed relationships. Above-average sized women who were excluded in this sample seemed to suffer less from self-imposed isolation, and more from distance from the other characters. Being above-average body size is also correlated with being of lower socioeconomic status and participating in dieting behaviors.

When examined in aggregate, this depiction of above-average sized women as being non-sexual, unattractive, lonely, and poor, does not seem very favorable. In fact, it is not. In examining these representations, viewers may internalize troubling messages. Viewers are encouraged to connect being above-average body sized to having difficulty in interpersonal relationships, and to associate it with having an overall lower quality of life. Therefore, it does seem that mainstream television would motivate its watchers to be above-average sized. Though the characterization of above-average sized women on black-oriented television is less negative than on mainstream-oriented television, this is because above-average sized women were extremely underrepresented. Thus, we cannot say that above-average sized women are actually represented more positively, but rather that they are almost invisible on
black-oriented television. This invisibility may be just as problematic as outright negative representation because it serves as a way to invisibilize a huge population of black females.

What complicates my results, however, is that on mainstream television, being below-average or average body sized did not then produce to positive consequences. On mainstream television, black women who fit an idealized body type were often presented as being more attractive than larger sized women, however, they still found themselves in sacrificial friendships, problematized romantic relationships, and isolated from other characters in the program. The greatest positive outcome for these women as a group, is that many of them were closer to the center of the plot than above-average sized women. These women were the best friends, the lovers, they can be sexualized, and therefore they are important to the show. However, they are often not represented as being three-dimensional characters and though they are more central to the plot than other black women, they are rarely represented in truly central or starring roles.

On black-oriented television, below-average and average sized women were overrepresented. In general, black women were portrayed more positively on black-oriented media. These black women had fulfilling friendships, often were well-off financially, and were almost always physically attractive. However, because black-oriented television so drastically underrepresents above-average sized women, it is possible that the positive representations of these black below-average or average sized women may also be acting as a motivator to fit in a particular body ideal. Though the body-ideal found on black-oriented media does seem to be larger than on
mainstream-oriented television, this body-ideal is still not above-average sized. Rather it is shapely and best captured by the “average” body size category. On black-oriented television it is possible that there is even more of a motivation to conform to an idealized body type than there is on mainstream-oriented television because on black-oriented television black women as a group receive positive outcomes.

7.2 Social Comparison Theory

In the literature review, we explored how dissimilarity between idealized white bodies and the bodies of black female viewers seemed to prevent black women from engaging in social comparison with these images. However, in my study, since all the women observed were black, there were possibilities for social comparison, which may affect black female viewers.

Of particular interest to social comparison theory were the findings in attractiveness and health/diet. As discussed previously, the connection between attractiveness and body size on mainstream-oriented television is not surprising since white-idealized (attractive) bodies tend to be thin. Therefore, it is possible for these “white” conceptions of beauty to be transposed upon black female bodies. In effect, this creates a black idealized body on mainstream television that is similar to the white idealized body. Conversely, black-oriented media seem to reproduce the idealized body espoused by black men and women, thus the black-idealized body on black-oriented television is larger than the black-idealized body on mainstream-oriented television.

These differences in idealized bodies across programming orientation are important in conceptualizing how social comparison may occur for black female
viewers. If a black female viewer continues to favor a larger idealized body size and considers herself to have this idealized body type, she will relate to the images on black-oriented and mainstream-oriented television differently. When viewing the thin-idealized bodies on mainstream-oriented television, she may engage in downward comparisons with these images, realizing that she possesses a more attractive body size in her community than the character does. In this case, viewing the thin-idealized bodies on mainstream-oriented television may boost the viewer’s self-esteem.

However, if a viewer does not strongly endorse the larger idealized body found on black-oriented television, then she may engage in upward comparisons with mainstream-oriented images, considering the thin-idealized bodies on mainstream-oriented television to be more attractive and more desirable in American society. Thus, for this viewer seeing the thin-idealized bodies on mainstream-oriented television may lead to a decrease in self-esteem.

Since black-oriented television in general portrays a larger ideal body size, it is likely that many viewers will engage in lateral comparisons between these images and their own bodies. However, if a viewer feels her body size is either too thin or too large to fit into the idealized body type promoted by black-oriented television, she may engage in upward comparisons. These comparisons may then encourage black female viewers to attempt to change their body size. Black-oriented television may in fact be even more prone to encouraging comparisons since these shows are thought to represent black interests more than mainstream-oriented television and therefore may be seen as more realistic.
7.2.2 Social Comparison and Health and Diet

In the eating habits section, we observed four women on mainstream television attempt to become healthier or change their body shape. None was successful. Mercedes (Glee, 2009) and Andrea (The Big C, 2010) were the most prominent examples characters who have problematic relationships with food. Both of these characters have long-term struggles with their size, and in viewing their storylines, it is possible that viewers may be motivated to compare themselves to these characters. This is not a particular problem if the viewer is much smaller than these characters, but if she is closer in body size to Mercedes or Andrea, these lateral or possibly upward comparisons could be harmful. Viewers may be encouraged to believe that if Andrea and Mercedes are unhappy and (in the context of the show) rightfully ashamed of their body shape, then viewers who are similar or larger in size should also be unhappy and ashamed of their size. If viewers then observe these characters engaging in harmful food-related behaviors, they may begin to believe such harmful behaviors are appropriate for themselves.
CONCLUSION

Television’s role in promoting idealized bodies and contributing to body image disturbance is still not fully understood. Cultivation theory postulates a connection between the amount of television watched and body image disturbance. There is limited evidence suggesting that media consumption can positively predict eating-disorder symptomatology (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). The social learning theory explores how the promotion of a thin-ideal in television may then lead to viewers connecting the positive outcomes of thinness seen on-screen, to a drive to become thin to enjoy these positive outcomes as well (Garner et al., 1983). Social comparison theory examines the relationship between the viewer and the images they consume on-screen, postulating that if viewers compare themselves with these televised images who are often thin and beautiful, then they may begin to feel badly about themselves and thus engage in appearance-enhancing behaviors (Gibbons & Gerard, 1989).

Conversely, because black women in general have higher self-esteem than white women and report endorsing a larger body-ideal (Perez & Joiner, 2003), the link between black women, body image disturbance, and television is even less understood. Some hypothesize that black women themselves have developed protective factors against the influence of television on body image by developing alternative conceptions of beauty and by not engaging in social comparison with dissimilar (white) idealized bodies. Others explore the possibility that black culture in itself is protective against body image disturbances with a larger range of body sizes being represented on black-oriented television. Exploring the television representation of black female bodies can therefore help us understand differences in
how black women view themselves in relation to mainstream media as well as their
own communities. However, there is no way to simplify the complexity of the
representations that were found in this sample.

In general, below-average sized women were overrepresented in this sample
and above-average size women were underrepresented. This is consistent with
previous research, which showed that women on television are more likely to be thin
than the general population (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999). However, above-average size
women were even more underrepresented on black-oriented television than on
mainstream-oriented television, which complicates the hypothesis that black-oriented
television shows a wider range of body sizes. It is true however, that black-oriented
television had a larger percentage of average sized bodies than mainstream-oriented
television and this finding is consistent with evidence showing a larger idealized body
size in the black community.

The finding that attractiveness and body size had a stronger negative
correlation on mainstream-oriented media than on black-oriented media helps
support the hypothesis that black-oriented television may define idealized bodies as
being somewhat larger than idealized bodies in mainstream media. However, this did
not translate to black-oriented media showing a larger range of body types and in fact,
above-average body sized individuals were extremely underrepresented in both
samples, but particularly on black-oriented media.

Additionally, being attractive and/or having an idealized body is not
necessarily synonymous with other measures of success or fulfillment such as having
fulfilling interpersonal relationships. The friendships witnessed in this sample ranged
from being protective, being equal but lacking intimacy, to being both equal and intimate. Though body size did not seem to factor in as to whether or not a character had a friendship, it did seem to relate to how their relationships were depicted. While on black-oriented television, only equal and intimate friendships existed, on mainstream-oriented television, black women found themselves almost equally split between the three friendship categories. In protective friendships black women found themselves either sacrificing their own wants and needs for their friends, or mothering them and these friendships did seem to correlate with body size.

In romantic relationships, black women once again did not seem to be excluded from having romantic relationships based on their body sizes, however, the types of relationships and how these relationships were depicted were affected by both their body size and the program orientation. In general, relationships on black-oriented television were represented more positively than those on mainstream-oriented television, perhaps in part because black-oriented shows tend to be more relationship oriented. Despite this, happy and stable relationships, unhappy and unstable relationships, problematic relationships, and casual dating relationships were found in both mainstream-oriented and black-oriented television.

Black women were also excluded and isolated in this sample. Whether this exclusion is based on unfamiliarity, being in a position of authority, not belonging to a certain family, or other factors did seem to be correlated with body size. Women who were attractive and had idealized body sizes were more likely to be excluded based on being threatening, by their own volition, or were purposely drawn in by the
program despite their exclusion to be love-interests, best friends, or serve other important functions.

Class seemed to be directly related to body size, with those who presented idealized body shapes being more heavily represented in a high socioeconomic status groups than those who did not possess an idealized body size. While attempting to change one’s own weight was rarely seen in this sample, when it did occur, the character’s efforts did not succeed and exposed the greater vulnerabilities of the character such as loneliness or poor self-esteem.

When it came to many of the controlling images explored at the beginning of this piece, it appears that many of them have continued to be replicated in this sample. Though not every representation of black female bodies could interpreted through the lens of a controlling image, many of them could be. Particularly, the “Jezebel,” the “Mammy,” the “Sassy Black Woman,” the “Angry Black Woman,” and the “Strong Black Woman” were central to the representation of many women in this sample. Though some of these representations were very specifically sized, such as the “Mammy” and the “Strong Black Woman,” others differed in function based on their size. For both the “Jezebel” and the “Angry Black Woman,” above-average sized women in these roles were seen as humorous and laughable while below-average or average sized women were depicted as being more serious threats.

In examining these representations, it seems that there are some false assumptions about the presence and representation of black female bodies across mainstream- and black-oriented television. Mainstream-oriented television appears to be promoting an idealized black body (which is similar in shape to the idealized white
body), however, this idealized black body does not represent many positive outcomes for black women and therefore, social learning may not occur for black women consuming these images because there is little motivation to attain this body ideal. On black-oriented television there is also an idealized body size as well, and this idealized body type is supported by positive outcomes which may then inspire black women to achieve this larger, but still idealized body type.

These differences in idealized bodies depicted in mainstream- and black-oriented television also have implications for the social comparison theory. Black women who mainly consume mainstream-oriented television may then begin to engage in more upward comparisons with the idealized black bodies, which are further from the reality of body size for most black women. This may then eventually lead to body image disturbances. Conversely, the idealized body type on black-oriented television is somewhat closer to the actual body sizes of black women and therefore more lateral comparisons would be expected from women who mainly consume black-oriented television. This may be another way in which strong ethnic identity may be protective against body image disturbances since black women with a stronger ethnic identity may be more likely to consume black-oriented television.

There were many limitations in this research. One of the biggest limitations was the fact that the only shows sampled were ones that had at least one major black female role. Though this allowed me to get a sizeable amount of information from characters who are at least meant to be prominent and three-dimensional, it also meant that shows with the least amount of consistent representation of black female bodies were excluded. Though this might not appear to be a problem initially, in
watching the shows selected for this sample, it became clear that sometimes, the characters who have the least amount of screen-time can show even more clear representations of black female bodies. It is possible that shows without a major black female character are still representing black female bodies and that because they do not have to build long-term characters from these representations, these representations may skew differently than the ones seen in this sample. Therefore, by limiting this sample in the way I did, it is possible I eliminated the most egregious and flawed representations of black female bodies from my sample.

Another limitation was the fact that in the past decade, there has been a sharp decline in the number of black-oriented television shows which extremely limited the conclusions I could draw from black-oriented programming. With the demise of UPN in 2006, the prolific cable network which mainly focused on black-oriented programming, it was difficult to ascertain whether or not certain assumptions found in the literature about black-oriented programming were false, or if they had at one point been true, but are now false.

Due to these limitations and the nature of the literature, there are many opportunities for further research. Further research could extend this sample to include shows without central black, female characters and explore the possibility at looking at changes in representation of black female bodies over time. Further research in the field of body image disturbance could attempt to examine why, if black-oriented television still supports an idealized body, are black women still considered to be less susceptible to body image disturbance.
In short, it seems that black women on television are defined by their proximity to the action of the program on which they appear. To be young, beautiful and possess an idealized body on mainstream television is to be closer to the center of the plot, it is to be a “best friend” or a glamorous authority figure, or a love interest of a main character. To be above-average body size means being farther away from the center of the show, to be put on the periphery with perhaps a rich off-screen life, but little to add in the way of plot. Both of these categories of women suffer from controlling images and neither is in an enviable position.

This lack of adequate representation for black female bodies may be changing with alternative avenues of media gaining traction which allows for more black women to attempt representing themselves in the media. In 2011, The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl premiered on YouTube and quickly became a hit. Issa Rae, who both created the series and stars in it as the protagonist J stated on an interview with CNN, “I just felt like, I didn’t really see myself represented on-screen, on television or in film. And, you know, I love these shows like Parks and Recreation and 30 Rock just because they have this awkward sense of humor…these shows represent my sense of humor. And so I thought it would be funny to, sort of have a series based around this African-American girl who goes through everyday awkward situations.” (CNN, 2012) Through the success of The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl, Issa Rae has not only teamed up to produce another web series with another black actress Andrea Lewis but has also signed a deal with Shonda Rhimes to produce and pitch a cable series.
Though it appears that representation of black female bodies has come a long way since Patricia Hill Collins wrote about her four foundational controlling images, this study shows that the problem with representation is not only the lack of representation, but also the very content of these representations. It is not desirable that there be more representations of black female bodies if these representations continue to rearticulate these controlling images onto the bodies of black women. Rather, alternative representations must be produced in order to balance these flawed representations. With newcomers like Issa Rae and Shonda Rhimes, it does seem that black women may be able to move past these controlling images however it seems clear that in order to do so, black women must begin representing ourselves.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A: Television References


Appendix B: Codes

Appearance Codes
Hair Type
Attractiveness-Scale 1 to 5
Skin Tone
Body Size
Clothes
Interpersonal Codes
Family
Friends
Romantic/Sex Life
Socioeconomic Codes
Job
Assets
Economic Status
Lifestyle
Health/Exercise
Food
Hobbies
Strengths
Weakness
Other
Age
Sex Appeal
Villain/Antagonist
Speech Patterns
Appendix C

Stunkard et al. 1983 Figure Contour Rating Scale

Female
Appendix D

Harvey Skin Tone Scale (2005)