“Blacks Be Like”
An Analysis of Negative Stereotypes Perpetuated in Fox’s Empire

by

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed various stereotypes perpetuated in current television programs with an emphasis on season one of Fox’s new hit show *Empire*. The analysis was based off Gerbner and colleagues’ cultivation theory and the influence television has on viewers’ perceptions of reality. Bandura’s social learning and social cognitive theories are also used to explain how people could learn through their observations of television. Observations in this study chiefly focused on negative stereotypical depictions of Blacks on *Empire*. Using qualitative observations, this study questioned: what negative stereotypes about Blacks are being perpetuated in *Empire* and what potential affect could these images have on hypothetical viewers? The results indicate that viewers of Empire are learning that five main negative stereotypes (Blacks are homophobic, Black women are aggressive, Blacks support corporal punishment in child rearing, Blacks are against interracial dating, and Black males are violent criminals) are true about Black Americans. This study suggests the need for more implementation of education on Black history, life, and culture in order to raise awareness on the disparities between the real world and fictional television as well as promote higher levels of interracial harmony.
INTRODUCTION

“...With the coming of television, every person who has one available finds a huge increase in the kind of dramatic and fictional information about the world to which they are exposed.”

- John Condry (Condry, J., 1989 p.121)

The television has become a virtual family member to individuals in many households. According to Nielsen Media group, there are televisions in an estimated 116.3 million homes with nearly 293 million persons ages 2 and older living in these homes. As a result, the vast majority of people living in America have access to this 1920s invention. Many have endeavored to study the effects of television and other forms of media. One of the many astounding conclusions is that extensive exposure to television images can impact viewers’ perceptions of reality: heavy viewers begin to blend the real world with the world of television (Gerbner et. al., 1980; Gerbner et.al., 1986). As Gerbner and colleagues have suggested, images portrayed on television display a warped depiction of social reality. Gerbner and colleagues argue that heavy viewers internalize television’s distorted images and come to believe that these depictions are true of society.
Fox’s new hit prime-time television show *Empire* aired January 7, 2015 and has broken historical television records. According to Nielsen Media Group, 9.8 million viewers watched the series premiere. Viewership consistently increased up until the season finale, which earned a total of 16.7 million viewers—a best new season result by any television show on any broadcast network in the last ten years. Based on these ratings, one can conclude that many Americans have tuned in to this show. With its co-lead roles of Luscious—the thuggish drug dealer turned hip-hop mogul and CEO of Empire Entertainment Record Label, and his ex-wife, Cookie—the fresh out of prison, aggressive Black woman on a mission to redeem what she believes to be her rights to the company, this show perpetuates a myriad of adverse stereotypes about Blacks in America. Stereotypes about Blacks being notoriously homophobic, greedy, and violent are consistently reinforced from the pilot episode up until the season finale.

Negative images of Blacks have permeated entertainment media dating as far back as the minstrel shows of the early 1800s, far before the invention television. Minstrel shows perpetuated Black stereotypes of that time by promoting the dim-witted, happy-go-lucky slave narratives. Today, images of the “angry black women,” violent, and criminal Black people are what many viewers are exposed to when they watch television and films. In many cases, if a Black character in a television show or film is not the “black friend/sidekick” (*Felicity’s “Elena”, Clueless’s “Dion”,*)
Seventh Heaven’s “John”, One Tree Hill’s “Skills”, etc.) then they usually play the role of the bad guy or criminal (Mary in “Precious”, Alonzo in “Training Day”, Jules Winnfield in “Pulp Fiction”, Simon Phoenix in “Demolition Man”). Granted, there are exceptions to this rule. However, because there are so few depictions of Blacks in television and film, these negative portrayals are often what viewers perceive to be Black realities. Because of the negative stereotypes about Blacks that are constantly circulated through the media, the images of Blacks as aggressive or violent may be perceived as more entertaining and realistic than the few images that portray Blacks more positively. An examination of the types of films featuring lead and/or multiple Black actors that have earned critical acclaim help demonstrate this point. For instance, films like “Gone With The Wind,” “Training Day,” “Precious,” “Hustle and Flow,” and “Monster’s Ball” (all of which earned some form of an Academy Award) are examples of how negative stereotypic depictions of Blacks are endorsed by society. These films depict Blacks as the stereotypical “mammies” or maids who are motherly but aggressive (“Gone With The Wind”), the “Jezebels” who use their bodies to get what they want (“Monster’s Ball”), the rude and hostile parents who abuse their children (“Precious”), or violent criminals who are willing to do whatever it takes to get rich (“Training Day” and “Hustle and Flow”). These recurring negative images
of Blacks in the media have the potential to affect viewers of all ages (Dates, 1990).

Unfortunately, those who are arguably most significantly harmed by these portrayals are Black children. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 72% of all Black youth in America are at-risk, most of them growing up in single parent homes, Black youth are likely to have limited supervision of their television viewing and few conversations about the messages in the content they are exposed to.

The overt homophobia, perpetuation of the “angry black woman” stereotype, normalization of child abuse, and the glorification of the thug narrative in the show Empire all convey the message to Black and non-Black viewers that this is the reality for Blacks in America. Viewers of Empire who have had few interactions with Blacks in real life may be cultivated to believe or perhaps confirm their existing belief that Blacks do in fact embody the negative stereotypes they have been consistently fed by television, film, and other media.

This thesis will mainly analyze the representation of Blacks on major television networks, but will also explore representations in other media like news and film. This thesis aims to explain how depictions of Black in a fictional television like Empire may perpetuate negative stereotypes about Blacks. Furthermore, this thesis will explore the continuation of negative stereotypes about Blacks and the implications this has for Blacks and the
rest of the American society. My research extends from studies on the effects of television viewing on an individual’s perception of reality (Gerbner & Gross 1980; Gerbner et. al, 1980; Gerbner et. al, 1986) as well as theories of social learning and its impact on people’s values, beliefs, and behavior (Bandura 1971; Bandura 2002). I will apply the theories presented in the aforementioned literature to my exploration of the stereotypical images displayed on *Empire*, aiming to demonstrate that the negative portrayals of Blacks in the media could have detrimental effects on hypothetical Black and non-Black viewers. This thesis aims to answer the question: what stereotypes about Blacks are being enforced in the show *Empire* and how could these images affect viewers’ perceptions of Blacks in America? Through this work, I intend to develop a platform for future research on the influence of television on individual and group perceptions of Blacks.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous literature has suggested that although the quantity of Black images on television has increased in the recent years, the quality of these images have not (Greenberg et. al., 2002; Mastro & Troop, 2004; Weigel et. al., 1995). Critical issues with the negative portrayals of Blacks in television are not only the negative influences these representations may have on people's perceptions of Black, but also the negative impact these images may have on Blacks' conceptions of self. Some scholars have stated, “the psychological effects of a phenomenon like television is notoriously difficult to establish on an experimental basis” (Esslin, M., 2002 p.78). Despite this, communication researchers have conducted longitudinal studies that have demonstrated television viewing can have psychological effects. For instance, studies have shown that those who watch a lot of television are more likely to believe the images on their screens to be true of their everyday reality (Gerber et. al 1980b) Others have theorized that individuals can learn values, ideals, and behaviors by observing television programs (Bandura 2002). In this literature review, I will describe some of the issues concerning previous and current portrayals of Blacks in television and film and will demonstrate how television has both meaningful and harmful impacts on its viewers’ beliefs about the realities of society.
Cultivation Theory

In the mid-1960s, Gerbner & Gross of the University of Pennsylvania launched a research project entitled “Cultural Indicators” in efforts to examine media effects. They specifically aimed to discover whether watching television has an effect on viewers’ ideas and perceptions of everyday life, and if so, how. Their work on the Cultural Indicators research project resulted in the formation of the cultivation theory. The cultivation theory posits that heavy viewers of television are more susceptible to believing that media messages presented to them are real and valid. Heavy viewers are those who report watching at least four hours of television per day.

The methodology for Gerber and Gross’s (1980) research consists of three components. For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss the second and third components of this research approach: message system analysis and cultivation analysis. During message system analysis – which is the first step in the process – researchers make detailed observations about the characters or actions in a television drama. The coding process followed television content and tracked the different images of each show over a
long span of time. In “The State of Cultivation”, Morgan and Shanahan
describe the objective of message system analysis:

The goal of this analysis was track the most stable, pervasive, and
recurrent images in network television content, in terms of portrayal
of violence, gender roles, race and ethnicity, and occupations, and
many other aspects of life over long periods of time. Coded data is then used to form questions to be posed during cultivation
analysis.

During cultivation analysis, a subject may be asked about the amount
of true violence in daily life in order to determine what influences the
messages in the media may have had on them. For each question asked,
there is an answer that is more accurate of television called the “television
answer” (which were obtained from message system analysis) and one that
is more accurate of the different “real world,” or the “true” answer, which
usually goes in the opposite direction (Gerbner et.al, 1980, 1986). Gerber
and Gross found that in the cultivation analysis, participants’ answers to
questions were related to how much television they watched, as well as
their other media habits. Those who watched more television were more
likely to give “television answers” to posed questions (Gerbner & Gross,
1980).
Key Components of Cultivation Analysis

Mainstreaming

A key term in cultivation analysis is mainstreaming, which is known as the “blurring, blending, and bending process by which heavy television viewers from disparate groups develop a common outlook on the world through constant exposure to the same images and labels on television.” (Gerbner et. al, 1980a)

According to Gerbner and colleagues, heavy viewers of television dramas tend to blend the world presented in television with the real world they live in. Gerbner and his colleagues in the Cultural Indicators Research group call this effect “blending,” which they have described as the process of the facts of the of television slipping into the belief and value systems of those who are heavy consumers of it.

Resonance

Another important term in cultivation analysis is resonance, which can be understood as the condition that occurs when the world the viewer lives in is in some way similar to the world depicted on television. Gerbner defines resonance as the combination of television and everyday reality, providing viewers with a “double-dose” that resonates with the individual, making the cultivation effect even more powerful. If what viewers see on
television is somehow congruent to their everyday realities, they may be more likely to believe that the images depicted on television are reflective of their social reality. (Gerbner, 1998)

The concepts of mainstreaming and resonance have possible implications for Black Americans, who according to a 2013 Nielsen study, watch the most television of all ethnic groups. Because many Blacks racially identify with the characters of *Empire*, they may also be more likely to experience resonance. As a result, Black Americans may be less capable of distinguishing between what is true about society and what is merely entertainment. In conclusion, negative portrayals of Blacks in the media may have the potential to affect how Blacks view their own realities.
Learning Through Modeling

Renowned psychologist, Albert Bandura developed a social learning theory, which states that people learn through social contexts (Bandura 1971). The theoretical framework of social learning heavily draws on the idea of learning by observing behavior and the consequences come with them, or in other words, modeling.

Social learning theory suggests that individuals imitate people who are known as social models. These models can be an individual’s friend, parent, or even someone they consistently watch on television. Bandura also proposes that an observer is more likely to adopt a modeled behavior if the model is similar to them and holds admired status (Bandura, 1971).

Bandura (1971) describes three types of modeling stimuli. The most relevant modeling stimulus, which is the most relevant to this thesis, is termed “symbolic.” A symbolic modeling stimulus is experienced when modeling occurs by way of media, like television, movies, Internet, radio, etcetera.

While furthering this research, Bandura developed another theory he called social cognitive theory (Bandura 2002). Bandura (2002) states “virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from indirect experience could be achieved vicariously by observing people’s actions and its consequences for them” (Bandura 2002, p. 270-271). The social
cognitive theory posits that people could acquire behaviors, values, and ideals from observing television through the process of modeling (Bandura 2002).

Based on cultivation theory and social cognitive learning theory, one could expect that individuals who are heavily exposed to television narratives of criminal activity transforming the financial, social, and political lives of criminals may be led to believe that criminal activity is the way to success in these domains. Furthermore, social cognitive theory could be applied to explain the process of how individuals develop negative stereotypes about groups of people by watching television where these stereotypes are enforced.
An Overview: Portrayals of Blacks in the Media

Lack of Representation

Racial and ethnic minorities have been historically underrepresented in the media. American television and film currently lack diversity in actors and writers.

In 1997, when minority groups represented 25.4 percent of the U.S population, a study discovered that ethnic minorities only made up 15.7% of prime time television actors. The paucity of active Black characters still persists a decade and a half after this study was conducted. For instance, a content analysis at the Annenberg School for Communications and Journalism evaluated the speaking characters of 500 films and their findings demonstrate the profound scarcity of minority characters and directors in film. Across 100 top-grossing films of 2012, a mere 10.8 percent of the speaking characters were Black, 5 percent were Asian, 4.2 percent were Hispanic, and 3.6 percent were from mixed or other ethnicities. Conversely, 76.3 percent - over three-quarters - of all the speaking characters were White. In terms of directors, across a sample of 500 films, only 33 of them were Black and only two were female. This study also mentioned that despite the Civil Rights movement and different programs aimed at increasing diversity in Hollywood on and off screen, this
underrepresentation of people of color did not change over this study’s five-year period of investigation.

These findings suggest that American films are displaying a monochromatic America. This display contribute to the myth that all Americans are Caucasian and has implications for how American society is perceived by both Americans and non-Americans. The lack of Black writers in film may contribute to the paucity of Black stories being told. Because there are so few Black stories in television and film, each creation, production, or performance by a Black American in these media is perceived as an opportunity for a story about a Black social reality to be told. Unfortunately, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the telling of Black stories by Black writers does not always result in positive portrayals of Blacks.
Quality of Representation

Blacks were portrayed in entertainment media far before the emergence of television and other media, even when Blacks themselves did not carry out the portrayals. This section will provide a brief description of what those portrayals looked like before television, and then fast-forward to current portrayals of Blacks in the media, with an emphasis on television depictions specifically.

The Minstrel Show

Minstrel shows hit stages in the 19th century and were among the earliest portrayals of Black life. These shows were very popular before the abolishment of slavery. The minstrel show was the typical form of American entertainment of its time, consisting of dancing, music, comic skits, and other acts. These shows depicted Blacks as lazy, buffoonish, and dim-witted. The objective of these shows was to convey the message that slaves were happy and willing to serve their masters. For decades, these shows provided White America with the lens through which they should see Black America. The minstrel sketches and songs typically featured characters including but not limited to the slave, the mammy, the provocative mulatto wench, and the black soldier. The mammy is the archetype for a Black woman who works as a nanny, in most cases for a
white family. Mulatto refers to someone who is born to one White parent and one Black parent.

White people in blackface performed in the traditional minstrel shows. Blackface is a form of makeup (burnt cork or greasepaint) used by theatre performers intended to represent a Black person. Frederick Douglass referred to the blackface performers as "...the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens." Douglass thought blackface performers were a way to make money off of demeaning Blacks.

Eventually, Whites were not the only blackface performers; Blacks joined in on the art form, especially after the Civil War. It would be fair to assume that Blacks would want to put an end to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about their people. However, not only did they perform in these shows, but they also constituted a large proportion of the shows’ audiences. Black minstrel performers were seen as the most authentic performers of the material, being that they were actually Black people. The negative portrayals of Blacks in minstrel shows began to lose popularity during the Civil Rights Movement. By the 20th century, there were very few minstrel shows, with people of the rural South comprising the majority of the attending audience.
The decline of these shows did not signify an end to the stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in media. Hattie McDaniel was the first Black person to win an Oscar, for her supporting role as the loyal maid or “mammy” in the 1940 film, “Gone With the Wind.” Sidney Poitier, who was the first Black person to win an Oscar for best actor in a leading role, originally refused his role as Porgy, the cripple beggar in “Porgy and Bess” because he thought the material was “not complimentary to Black people.” However, he ultimately took the role, recognizing that refusal could negatively impact his future professional opportunities.

This conflict is one faced by many Black actors of past and current times. Black actors like Gabrielle Union, leading character of BET’s Being Mary Jane, have publicly expressed their frustration with the stereotypical roles Blacks are cast for. In an interview with Angie Martinez on the popular New York based radio station, Power 105.1, Gabrielle expressed her frustration with the paucity of diverse roles for Black women in Hollywood, stating, "They want us shucking and jiving and cooning, that’s where they’re most comfortable having a black woman.” Gabrielle is referring to the film and television industries, which she believes promote these stereotypical images of Blacks by continually assigning the same roles to Black actors and actresses.
Unfortunately, negative portrayals of Blacks did not end with the minstrel shows during the Civil rights movement. These depictions still permeate television today. The following section will highlight some of the current negative imagery of Blacks in television programs.
Present Day Depictions of Blacks in the Media

In the last decade, new forms of media have continued the tradition of publicly displaying stereotypical archetypes of Blacks. Reality and fictional television shows as well as news coverage featuring Blacks have consistently shown Blacks in an unfavorable manner.

Reality Television

Current shows like VH1’s Love & Hip Hop and Bravo’s Real Housewives of Atlanta are classic examples of this. Love & Hip Hop, which is centered on women who are mostly in relationships with men in the music industry, depicts Black men as liars, cheaters, and womanizers. Bravo’s Real Housewives of Atlanta, chronicles the lives of several upper-middle class Black women living in Atlanta, Georgia. Through the endless catfights, both shows have depicted Black women as aggressive, hot-tempered, and rude—all typical characteristics of the stereotypical “angry black woman,” which I will expand on in a later section.
Fictional Television

With the emergence of more Black fictional television casts, reporters at CNN have questioned whether this is, “The Year of the African American Viewer.” Television shows like ABC’s Scandal, How To Get Away With Murder, Black-ish, and Fox’s Empire, with Blacks as leads have helped increase the number of Black actors on television. However, with the exception of Black-ish, the aforementioned shows are not free from negative and stereotypical content, which depict Blacks in a privative manner.
**Scandal**

ABC’s *Scandal* follows the life of yet another single Black woman. Olivia Pope is a political “fixer” who has an affair with the President of the United States, solemnly drinks wine and eats popcorn in her spare time, and can solve all problems that are not her own. Olivia Pope is the highly assertive, stereotypical Black woman who is incapable of getting or keeping a man of her own. Olivia, the opinionated and outspoken mistress to the president, demonstrates the stereotypical single Black woman.

**How To Get Away With Murder**

This show airs on ABC and follows another highly successful Black woman—Anna Keating. Mrs. Keating is a lawyer and law professor who unlike Olivia Pope, is married. However, she is unhappy with her White husband and having an affair with a Black man. Like Olivia, Mrs. Keating is completely capable of fixing other people’s problems, but is utterly incapable of fixing her own relationship issues. The extremely aggressive Mrs. Keating is rarely ever shown as being happy. Granted, because her profession as a lawyer, she must be often be stern and straightforward. However, even in scenes unrelated to her profession, where is she shown with loved ones, Mrs. Keating is shown as angry or dissatisfied. These depictions perpetuate the stereotype of “the angry Black woman”
**Black-ish**

This ABC show illustrates the struggle of an upper-middle-class Black man raising his Black children in a predominantly White neighborhood while trying to ensure that they maintain their ‘blackness’. Instead of subtly hinting at and leaving the audience to make their own judgments about them, stereotypes are addressed in this show. This is demonstrated in the pilot episode when a White child assumes that an Black family would have grape soda in the fridge and the Black father takes offense to this assumption. This show is one of the few, if not the only television show with Black main characters, that does not perpetuate negative stereotypes about Blacks.

Of the four current shows on major broadcasting networks (including Empire) with leading Black actors, only one of them consistently shows Blacks in a positive light. Although it may be true that “Blacks are just happy to have a job in Hollywood,” as CNN’s Don Lemon has suggested, it is still unfortunate that the roles they are consistently hired to portray are those that somehow demean the Black community. According to Black respondents to Mintel’s exclusive survey, 82% of Blacks find it important that Blacks are portrayed positively in the media. This a stark contrast to the 15% of the sample who believe Black men are currently
portrayed in a positive light and the 26% who believe that Black women are
(Mintel Group LTD). It is important that Blacks are portrayed positively in
television and other media because these images do have an affect on
people’s perceptions of Black people and culture. Researchers have long
studied the effects of television viewing and how the distorted images have
implications for how individuals view and judge people in society.

News Coverage

Black men are often shown as perpetrators of crime on the news.
Several investigations have been dedicated to the examination of race and
crime representations displayed on television news programs. A major
conclusion that has been drawn from these investigations is that racial and
ethnic minorities are often associated with criminality on local news
programs (Dixon & Linz, 2000a; Dixon & Linz, 2000b; Entman, 1992; Romer
et. al., 1998). Entman (1992, 1994) reported that African Americans were
more likely than Caucasians to be featured in news stories about crime and
were more likely than White to be portrayed as dangerous and associated
with violent and drug-related activities.

These findings have implications for viewers’ perceptions of crime
and criminals.. In the year 2000, Dixon and Linz found that Blacks
represented 37% of the perpetrators featured in crime news stories aired on
Los Angeles news stations, but only made up 21% of those actually
arrested for crime. These findings indicate that viewers of local news may be given the impression that there are more Blacks committing crimes than there are in actuality. Furthermore, it has been concluded that this type of news casting is capable of activating stereotypes about Blacks, which can be used in subsequent judgments (Dixon, 2006a, 2006b; Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, 2000). Those consistently exposed to depictions of Black criminals may perceive Blacks as harmful threats in real life encounters. They may also come to associate blackness with criminality.

Mary Beth Oliver demonstrated the activation of stereotypes about Blacks was used in subsequent judgments in her study entitled, “Caucasian Viewers’ Memory of Black and White Criminal Suspects in the News.” Oliver exposed subjects to a news story about a murder that showed a wanted poster of either a White or Black suspect. Right after viewing and for a second time 3 months later, subjects identified a series of photos, indicating how much they believed each person in the photo to be the same suspect from the newscast. When asked to identify the race of the suspects in the story, participants tended to pick the Black suspect, even after having seen a news story identifying a White person as the culprit. These findings suggest that an individual’s held stereotypes are activated when making judgments on things they may be uncertain about.

Conclusion
Many depictions of Blacks in the media have been consistently negative. From historical minstrel plays to present day television programs, Blacks have been consistently displayed in a negative light. Stereotypes about Blacks have been at the heart of many entertainment formats aiming to display Black culture and life. Stereotypes have also been formed and reinforced by other media platforms such as local news coverage. These media images depict Blacks as aggressors, thugs, and violent perpetrators of crime. The problems are thus twofold—Firstly, Blacks, who are the highest consumers of television are being fed stereotypical images, internalizing, and learning how to behave through them. Secondly, non-Black viewers are led to develop stereotypes towards Blacks that may affect their later perceptions and judgments of them. The negative stereotypes perpetuated in Empire may have the power to promote negative beliefs and judgments about Blacks. T
METHODS

This research is a content analysis, which focuses on fictional television shows on major television networks featuring Blacks in America. The aim of this study is to explore how various stereotypes Blacks are currently depicted in fictional television. The analysis will primarily focus on Fox’s hit show *Empire*, but will also include reference to other shows on major broadcasting networks.

1. Participants

The analyses in this study will specifically focus on the first season of *Empire*. This show was chosen due to its high level of popularity and public interest demonstrated by its outstanding viewership records. Based on its high levels of viewership, it was concluded that *Empire* would be the more effective in impacting viewers’ perceptions of Black reality than would *Black-ish*, the other current show with an all Black cast with has much fewer viewers.

2. Procedure

I began my research by first becoming familiar with the literature on television viewing, cultivation, and social learning theories. I then watched all 12 episodes of the first season, scanning it for attitudes (based on commentary) and behaviors that had been previously pegged as
stereotypical of Blacks and the contexts in which these stereotypical attitudes and behaviors took place. As I watched, I took notes on recurring negative stereotypes as well as interesting contextual and situational factors. All 12 episodes were viewed on Hulu.com, a medium that allowed pausing and replaying. To ensure consistency, I remained the sole investigator for all episodes.

3. Analysis

After the data collection was complete, I conducted a qualitative analysis of my observations. My analysis was based mostly on Glaser and Strauss’ Grounded Theory (1967). This theory emphasizes “discovering theory from data” (p.1). Hence, I initially viewed my data while simultaneously developing potential codes based on my observations. Finally, I used the codes to form a list of five themes. This list served as an outline for collecting information on the perpetuation of stereotypes about Blacks in Empire. The five themes included homophobia in the Black community, Black female aggressive behavior, Black criminality, child-rearing practices in the Black community, and views of interracial dating in the Black community.

Much of my research was based on Gerbner and colleagues’ cultivation theory (Gerbner et. al., 1980) and Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002). Gerber and colleagues’ cultivation theory
posits that heavy viewers of television tend to believe that the world they are exposed to on television reflects the real world they live in. According to Bandura’s theory of social cognitive theory, individuals can learn values, behaviors, and ideals by observing television programs (Bandura, 2002). I chose to apply these theories to my observations I effort to hypothesize how viewers could potentially be influenced by negative stereotypes perpetuated in fictional television. I observed and analyzed each stereotype and the contexts in which it was perpetuated. I conducted additional research to examine how those in academia and public discourse these had previously studied and discussed these stereotypes. Through the analysis of the perpetuation of these stereotypes in Empire, I was able to explore what this television show and other media communicates to society about Black families, culture, and life.
SHOW BACKGROUND

Cookie and Luscious
Empire (2015)

© Fox

Network History

Fox network was launched October 9, 1986 as an adversary to the three well-established major U.S. television networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC. Fox gradually became the most successful fourth television network. In 2005, Fox was named most watched television network in the United States. Between the years of 2004 to 2012, Fox was the highest-rated broadcast network in the 18-49 demographic. During the 2007 to 2008 television season, Fox gained the position of the United States’ most watched network in overall viewership.

During the 2013 to 2014 season, Fox suffered a fierce 22% decline in ratings and after a continuing decline, Fox eventually fell to fourth place.
among major networks in overall national viewership for the first time in 13 years.

In the summer of 2014 at the semi-annual Television Critics Association press tour, Fox Networks Group chairman and chief executive said, “We need some new hits… that will be our focus.” Fox needed more viewers and its new hit show Empire, which aired January 7, 2015, helped to propel the network’s ratings and bring Fox back into competition with the other major networks with its all Black leading cast, creator, and director.

**Fox’s Black Viewership**

According to Nielsen Media Research Group, in 2010, Fox primetime television’s audience was 92% White and 1% Black. In comparison to other major networks like MSNBC and CNN who’s Black audience makes up 24% and 16% of their audiences respectively, Fox Black viewership was not strong. With the new series *Empire*, Fox has brought more Black viewers to their network. According to Nielsen, 62% of *Empire*’s adult 18-to-49 viewers are Black American - an amount that no other prime time television show has ever reached. Other current shows with Black lead actors like ABC’s *Scandal, How To Get Away With Murder*, and *Black-ish* cannot compare with *Empire*’s vast Black audience, with Black Americans making up only 37%, 32%, and 24% of these shows’ audience.
respectively. Considering that Blacks tend to prefer programs featuring Black performers (Bogart, L. 1956) it is understandable that Blacks are watching these shows. Interestingly, most Black television viewers are tuning in to Fox to watch Empire, a show following the lives of a successful Black family.

A broadcasting network with mostly white viewers and employees may know very little about the Black family. This is why Fox needed Lee Daniels, the African American film producer and director responsible for critically acclaimed movies like “The Butler,” “Monster’s Ball,” and “Precious”. Lee Daniels co-created, directs, and has co-written the hit series Empire. As a Black American man, one could assume that Mr. Daniels is familiar with the black family dynamic. The fact that someone so involved in the creation and production of Empire is a Black man may lead some to believe that these stories are more accurate, than say, if it were a White man who wrote and directed the series. In fact, Lee Daniels has admitted in numerous interviews that some of the stories told in Empire have come directly from his personal experience as well as the experiences of his friends and family members. In an interview on GLAAD All Access, Daniels said, “I am here to challenge people on their views about gays, about blacks, about racism in America.” He also mentioned “the goal for the show is to break down the walls of hatred towards (his) community – not just the black community but the gay community”
Empire Show Description

Empire is a fictional television show centered on the family of Luscious Lyons, a drug dealer turned hip-hop mogul, founder, and CEO of an entertainment enterprise, Empire Entertainment. When Luscious is diagnosed with ALS, he must choose one of his sons to be his successor as CEO of the company. This leads the boys to experience tension amongst one another.

Luscious’s oldest son, Andre Lyons, is the ivy-league educated CFO of the company, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and acts as the brains of the corporation; finding funding for the company’s financial endeavors, and consulting his father in the making of all economic decisions. Andre, though extremely brilliant, is not as musically inclined as his brothers, which is a quality Luscious believes is important in a CEO at an entertainment company.

The middle son, Jamal Lyons, is a singer, songwriter, and musician. Though Luscious provides for Jamal financially, he does not support Jamal personally or professionally, because he does not support Jamal’s “decision” to be gay.
The youngest son, Hakeem Lyons, is the rapper of the trio and apparent favorite son of Luscious. Luscious’s consistent encouragement and financial investment in Hakeem’s music career suggests that Hakeem has the best chance of being chosen to take over the company.

The fight to be the next CEO becomes even more complex when the boys’ mother, Cookie, is released early from prison. Cookie is determined to get back the company she claims to have helped launch with the money she earned during a drug deal gone bad, which ultimately sent her to prison for 17 years. When Cookie returns home from prison she is on a mission to take back what she believes is hers. The show highlights the drama among his three sons and ex-wife during their competition to take over as the new CEO of the company.
Empire Controversy

Those Against the Empire

Members of the black community have criticized Lee Daniels for being a “sell out” whom portrays the negative aspects of black culture. His tendency to portray negative parts of Black life are reflected in the fictional characters of the extremely violent and abusive mother in the movie “Precious,” the lower class woman waiting for husband to be executed in “Monster,” and the glorified servant story told in his film “The Butler”. Dr. Boyce Watkins, an African American author, economist, political analyst, and social commentator who has been featured on many major networks including CNN, MSNBC, and Huffington Post, has been outspoken about the negative trends in Lee Daniels’ work. Dr. Watkins had a lot to say about Empire on his YouTube video entitled “The show Empire is coonery and here’s why I just can’t watch”:

Rupert Murdoch is a racist conservative. This is why you should be concerned about any Black show that is being presented by Fox... This is the portrayal of Black families on Fox. If (the cast) was White, they wouldn’t have this storyline. It would be totally different. People would say, “Well this is not realistic.” Apparently this is what Black people are. We’re former drug dealers... Whenever Black people act like niggas, it’s always a hit. Whenever we act like coons, it’s always a hit... When you put out a show like Empire, its gonna be a hit because they love to see us portray... coons and rappers and thugs and killers and gangstas and morons and idiots... (Empire) is a minstrel show designed to promote a certain kind of propaganda. That is what is so powerful about this. (YouTube, 2015)
Dr. Watkins is obviously not a fan of the show and believes that Black television is only successful in the American society when Blacks are displayed negatively. Dr. Watkins’ YouTube video received 3,074 “thumbs up” and 455 “thumbs down.” This demonstrates that he is not alone in these sentiments. Dr. Watkins continued to express his thoughts about *Empire* on a panel discussion on CNN’s Don Lemon show where he discussed the limited roles for Black Americans in Hollywood:

I think a lot of Black actors and actresses are tired of being put in the entertainment ghetto. The entertainment ghetto is basically the place where you have roles that are specifically designed for Black people... I can tell you this: if that family were a normal family and didn’t have so many dysfunctions, those characters would have been White. I mean let’s be clear, this is Rupert Murdoch... This is “Imma slap yo’ bitch ass because I’m from the hood.” If you’re Black and you want to play roles that involve being a thug, a hood rat, a gangsta, a killer, or a criminal, there are plenty of roles for you in Hollywood.

Dr. Watkins highlights the paucity of diverse roles for Black Americans in Hollywood. He claims that roles that perpetuate negative stereotypes about Blacks are the main roles that Blacks can earn in the film and television industry. He posits that if the cast of *Empire* were White, the plot and storyline would be different.
Those For the Empire

In the same CNN panel discussion that Dr. Boyce Watkins participated in were two other panelists, Entertainment Tonight host, Nichelle Turner and Chris Witherspoon, editor for TheGrio.com both had positive things to say about the show. Nichelle Turner said:

This is a very diverse family on television. Yes, you have Luscious who came from the hood and you have Cookie, who also came from the hood. But they have an ivy-league educated, yes he has been diagnosed bipolar, they have a son who is gay and who is coming out but is the most talented one in that family and they have a son who is a rapper. I think that is a very diverse family. If you’re calling it coonery, then you might be calling the Turner family coons because I have a lot of these folks in my family.

Nichelle supports the diversity of the family being depicted in Empire and believes it also reflects the lives of some people in her own family.

Christopher Witherspoon believes that this show may “open doors for other (Black) actors and empires to come along…” Witherspoon believes that Empire “is a cultural phenomenon.”

Some social commentators have supported this show because of its depiction of a diverse family and some have criticized it for its perpetuation of negative stereotypes about Blacks. This thesis aims to describe the different stereotypes perpetuated in Empire, and how these depictions could potentially affect hypothetical viewers.
Stereotypes and Stereotype Threat

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to understand the concept of stereotypes and stereotype threat. What do these concepts mean? How do they influence society? How do stereotypes influence an individual’s conceptions of self and perceptions of others? Because this paper focuses on Black Americans, I will specifically attend to stereotypes about Blacks, how those stereotypes may affect them and their influence on people’s – both Black and non-Black – perceptions of Blacks. I will begin with broad definitions of these terms, then turn to the stereotypes being enforced in Empire and the influence these stereotypes may have on viewers.

Stereotype

According to the Blackwell dictionary of sociology, “a stereotype is a rigid, oversimplified, often exaggerated belief that is applied both to an entire social category of people and to each individual within it.” A generalization, not to be confused with a stereotype, Blackwell dictionary describes, is any broad “descriptive statement that is applied to an entire group as a whole.” The key difference is that generalizations are only applied to groups of individuals, whereas stereotypes may be applied to
both individuals and entire groups. An example of a generalization would be that all men are cheaters who are afraid of commitment. An example of a stereotype is that men cannot care for children. It is important to note that not all stereotypes are negative in nature. For instance, the stereotype that all Asians are geniuses is not necessarily demeaning to Asian people or culture.

**Stereotype Threat**

Stereotype threat, first introduced by Steele and Aronson, can be understood as a situation where individuals feel at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about a social group to which they belong. Stereotype threat is said to take place when an individual is made aware of negative stereotypes about their group and becomes anxious about confirming those stereotypes based on their behavior, appearance, mannerisms, and etcetera. As a result of the experienced anxiety, individuals ultimately confirm those stereotypes.

In their well-known article published in 1995, Steele and Aronson reported findings that when Black students were presented with a verbal test - from the Graduate Record Exam - introduced to them as a measure of their verbal abilities where there was an emphasis on their racial background, they performed significantly worse on the test than a group of equally proficient White students who took the same test. When their race
was not emphasized, Blacks performed significantly better than those in the other condition and equally with Whites on these tasks. According to Steele and Aronson (1995), because Blacks in this study were primed with their race, reminding them about the stereotype of Blacks’ intellectual inability – they were more self-conscious about their ability to perform and those feelings translated into poor performance.

Since then, many other studies have tested other groups’ susceptibility to stereotype threat. For example, Nguyen and Ryan (2008) found that females underperformed on a math or a science test in predicaments when gender identity was made salient, hence reminding women of the stereotype about their assumed inferiority to men in these areas. Those who are primed by the negative stereotypes about their group are at risk of confirming those beliefs in their performance or behavior (1995).

Although any group of individual or group has the potential to be negatively stereotyped, research has shown that Black Americans suffer more from negative stereotypes than White Americans do (Stephan et. Al 2002). There are various stereotypes about Blacks that have been reinforced in the show Empire. The ensuing discussion will include brief descriptions of these various stereotypes, how they have played out in the show, and their implications. Note that background information provided about the emergence of these stereotypes is not intended to validate or contradict
them. Rather, the aim is to explore how these stereotypes have been connected to the Black community and what the potential consequences of believing in these stereotypes may be.
Stereotypes Perpetuated in America and *Empire*

Young Jamal, Empire (2015)

**Blacks as Notoriously Homophobic**

A common stereotype is that blacks are notoriously homophobic towards gay men. Homophobia can be understood as any discrimination or negative prejudice against homosexuals in. The Black community has been consistently pegged as especially homophobic.

Multiple texts have been implied that in the Black community, homosexuality is perceived as the obverse of being Black. Few others have claimed that this contrast has stemmed from the Black community’s deep history and connections to the Christian church in the United States. Lewis’s (2003) comparative study of Black and White opinions about homosexuals supports this claim. This study found that Black Americans were 14% more likely than Whites to see Lesbian, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) as deserving “God’s punishment,” in the form of AIDS. This study implies that issues with homophobia may relate to religious beliefs.
Researchers have asserted that homophobia may be contributing to the building of barriers that prevent proper treatment of AIDS within the Black community. An article in the Huffington Post entitled, "AIDS still thought of as a gay disease in Black America" expressed:

But the truth is this: while nearly 600,000 African Americans are living with HIV, and as many 30,000 newly infected each year, there is still within the black community one in five living with HIV and unaware of their infection; and, they are disproportionately heterosexuals. As long as we continue to think of HIV/AIDS as a gay disease, we'll not protect ourselves from this epidemic.

The severity of the AIDS epidemic in the Black community, specifically among those who are heterosexual, suggests that there may be some people who are pretending to be straight and choosing to lead secret homosexual lives in effort to conform to religious or societal norms. That more Blacks in Lewis’s (2002) study thought members of the LGBTQ community deserved “God’s punishment,” implies more about their religious background than their racial backgrounds. Although some social commentators have mentioned the role of the “Black church”, race is often overemphasized in public discussions of issues of homophobia in the Black community. Simply implying that Blacks are more homophobic than other groups without accounting for the influence of the church may lead people to believe that this issue is related to racial or cultural influences.

Others have argued that homophobia appears to be more pervasive in the Black community than in other ethnic or racial communities because
Blacks have a higher tendency to speak freely on these issues. In her essay, “Homophobia in Black Communities,” American author and social activist, bell hooks, speaks of this open expression of homophobia among Blacks:

Black communities may be perceived as more homophobic than other communities because there is a tendency for individuals in black communities to verbally express in an outspoken way anti-gay sentiments... Yet a distinction must be made between black people overtly expressing prejudice toward homosexuals and homophobic white people who never make homophobic comments but who have the power to actively exploit and oppress gay people in areas of housing, employment, etc.

Hooks argues that because Blacks are more vocal about their feelings regarding homosexuality, they may come off as more homophobic than the Whites who she suggests are in positions of power and have contributed to decisions concerning gay rights that have been just as homophobic as the outward comments made by Blacks. The overt expression of prejudice that hooks’ speaks about in this quote can be found in the very first episode of Empire.

While the Lyons family and their friends are spending time together after dinner, the middle child, Jamal, is upstairs dressing up in his mother’s female clothing and accessories. When Luscious notices Jamal coming down the stairs wearing his mother’s scarf tied around his head and her read heels on his feet, Luscious stops what he is doing and glares at his then 5-year-old son with a look of rage. Luscious leaps from his seat, swoops little Jamal up, cursing at him as he carries him outside and throws him into the trash bin. Cookie runs out after them and retrieves her
screaming toddler from the trashcan and in a stern voice, tells Luscious, “I wish you would,” daring him to mistreat her son in that way again. The sadness and anger in Cookie’s eyes demonstrated her sympathy for son as she recognized that he was gay. In a flashback in the pilot episode, when young Jamal goes to visit her in prison, Cookie tells him, “You are different. People are going to treat you differently because of. But I got you.” This scene illustrates Cookie’s early recognition of Jamal’s sexuality.

In episode 6, “Out, Damned Spot,” it is made clear that Luscious’ mistreatment of Jamal continues while Cookie is in prison. In this episode, it is uncovered that Luscious had previously forced Jamal to marry a woman in efforts to make Jamal become a “normal” heterosexual. The marriage does not last long and Luscious continues to look down upon his son for his “decision” to be gay. Luscious believes that his son chose to be homosexual.

Although Luscious does not agree with Jamal’s lifestyle, he still provides for him financially by putting him up in a loft, which cost him $12,000 per month. Contrarily, Luscious does not support Jamal’s dream to launch a successful music career even though he owns one of the best record labels in the nation. In fact, Luscious outwardly denies Jamal’s artistic abilities, potentially because accepting those abilities would mean accepting Jamal for who he is.
It is only after Jamal’s duet performance with his brother Hakeem generates a huge public interest that Luscious is obliged to acknowledge Jamal’s musical capacity. Even then, Luscious refuses to appreciate Jamal’s talent. Instead of praising Jamal for what the audience and everyone else perceived to be a stellar performance, he attributes the positive feedback to Hakeem’s performance abilities.

It is not until the season finale, when Luscious experiences a serious case of writer’s block that he acknowledges that the only person who can help him inspire his creative mind is the person he calls a “sensitive punk”: Jamal. Even when Jamal agrees to help him, Luscious still takes a shot at his sexuality saying, “at least you walk like a man.” This theme of equating male homosexuality to the lack of manhood is consistently touched upon throughout the series.

Even Cookie, who attempts to protect Jamal from his father’s homophobia, seems to struggle with the concept of him of being both masculine and homosexual. Although Cookie apparently loves Jamal and defends him against his father’s blatant disrespect, she also offers her own share of brusque commentary in reference to Jamal’s homosexuality throughout the series. For instance, when Cookie visits her son Jamal for the first time after her release from prison, her very first remarks to him are: “for a queen you sure keep a messy house.” Even though Jamal is clearly not a drag queen, Cookie—who refers to him as a “sissy” on several
occasions—seems to associate male homosexuality with femininity.

Although Cookie does not directly deny or abase Jamal because he is gay, Cookie still seems to face difficulties fully accepting her son’s sexuality. This is demonstrated when she is first introduced to Jamal’s boyfriend. When Jamal introduces them, Cookie says, “Ooh baby, you didn’t tell me you were dating a little Mexican. Look at her, she’s adorable.” Cookie even later refers to Jamal’s boyfriend as “Dora,” referring to the Hispanic female cartoon character. It is never explained why Cookie decides to use the pronoun she, as opposed to he in reference to Jamal’s male partner.

Nonetheless, based on her unclear stance on her son’s homosexuality, one could gather that this kind of response may have something to do with her incomplete acceptance of Jamal’s sexual orientation. Cookie’s use of the pronoun she to describe his boyfriend could be a sort of coping mechanism, helping her deal with her son’s lifestyle. Perhaps, by calling her son’s male partner a she, Cookie is better able to accept their homosexual relationship.

By the second to last episode, Jamal is the only son willing to help him redeem his company after it goes under attack by Luscious’s biggest industry rival. In the season finale, Jamal expresses that all he wants is for his father to accept and love him. This became clear when Jamal dangled his father’s rival over a building at what looked like thirtieth floor. In this scene, Jamal threatened to drop the entertainment company executive if he
did not sign over the rights to the artists he “stole” from Empire. One could argue that this action represents Jamal’s desire to prove his manhood to his father. When Luscious found his son doing what he would consider “taking charge” or “being a man,” he proudly turned back around, retreated inside and allowed his son to risk his life and freedom in efforts to save the company. While homosexuality was seen as weak and feminine, almost killing another human being was seen as strong and masculine. It was that “act of manhood” that made Luscious decide that Jamal was man enough to run Empire Enterprises.

In Episode 12, When Luscious announces at a press conference that Jamal will be taking over the company as Empire’s next CEO, a rap artist signed to the label named Black Rambo comes to voice his strong opinions on the matter:

**Black Rambo:** I’m not performing nothing if you’re running Empire

**Luscious:** You should leave now

**Black Rambo:** I’ll go and so should every emcee on your roster. Gone put a fairy on your billboard… Last time I checked hip-hop was born from the struggle of real men. Did you forget all that? Ain’t no place in this game for them bitches.

Black Rambo leaves the building and no public comments were made in response to what he said. After deliberation between Luscious, Andre, and the company publicists they come to the conclusion that Black Rambo will not be welcomed back to the record label and no public statements will be made in regards to Black Rambo’s outburst. Andre voices that he is
opposed to the idea of speaking out against Black Rambo’s homophobic comments, “it’ll weaken the stock price and cost shareholders millions.” He also expresses that because the company is launching a huge investment plan, it is not a good time “to take such bold stance in a matter that alienates so many of their customers (i.e. people of color)” No one in the room speaks out against this comment, leading viewers to believe that none of them were in disagreement with his statement.

Interesting, the customers Andre speaks of in this scene look a lot like the majority of the Empire’s viewers—Black. This show, as Lee Daniels explained, was intended “to challenge people about their views about gays.” However, because it is decided that Luscious would not speak out against Black Rambo’s homophobic comments, viewers are sent the message that such behavior should not be addressed because it makes the Black community uncomfortable.

Viewers are also sent the message that female homosexuality is to be accepted and not looked down upon. In episode 5, Hakeem’s girlfriend, Tiana, is caught cheating with another girl. Cookie tells her to go with it because it is sexy and the public would like that. Luscious advises Hakeem that he “should not be upset that (his) girl has a girlfriend.” Rather, he should be happy that he could potentially have two women in his life simultaneously. There is no consequence for Tiana for cheating on her
boyfriend with a girl. Furthermore, her being interested in girls is seen as attractive. According to Bandura (1971), this message could be detrimental to young girls who may be seeking to earn the attention of males and are learning what to do in these situations by observing Tiana.

Viewers of *Empire* may be impacted by the crude behavior and commentary expressed towards gays expressed in the aforementioned scenes. *Empire*'s co-creator and producer, Lee Daniels' attempt to affect change surrounding homophobia in the Black community may actually lead to the reinforcement of homophobic ideals as Black viewers observe that there is no actual punishment for those who engage in violent and aggressive homophobic behavior. Non-Black viewers, who have limited interactions with Blacks, may believe that Blacks are viciously homophobic toward homosexual males and thus may refrain from interacting with Blacks after watching *Empire.*
Another known stereotype about Blacks is that they firmly believe in implementing corporal punish to discipline their children. This stereotype is reinforced in multiple scenes in *Empire*. In the pilot episode, Cookie beats her son Hakeem with a broom after he disrespects her by calling her a bitch. While striking him, she screams, “You gon’ respect me!” 

When Hakeem meets up with his father that night, Luscious smiles and says to his son, “I see you met your mother.” The implications of this scene are twofold: Firstly, it reinforces the stereotype of the aggressive black woman because Luscious implies that upon meeting Cookie, Hakeem could have expected that kind of hostile behavior from her. Secondly, it implies an acceptance of Cookie’s parental choice to discipline Hakeem with a beating. There is no follow-up conversation about the beating between Luscious and Cookie nor is there one had amongst Cookie and Hakeem. This scene along with the lack of discussion about the beating
implies that it is standard for Black parents to discipline their children this way.

Another parental beat down occurs in the season finale of the show. At the company’s huge pre-IPO concert, Hakeem’s anger about his father forcing his older-girlfriend to disappear is reflected in a freestyle directed at Luscious:

Yo, they call me Keem, what’s popping fellas?
Way I spit it; I even make my daddy jealous.
Y’all think he got the power? Woo! Shame the devil.
That poor fool can’t even keep his family together.
They say that he the king. Well, I’m the prince
And I’m run the Empire and leave with your bitch (looking at Luscious)
I’m gone. (Drops microphone)

Luscious follows Hakeem out and punches him in the face, knocking him straight to the ground. Luscious then fixes his tie while blood drips from Hakeem’s lips. Following the altercation, everyone in the scene went separate ways with no mention or conversation about what had happened.

It seemed as though no one had an issue with the spanking, sending the message to viewers that this was a normal occurrence. It was never explained why no one had an issue with Luscious’ behavior.
A proposed explanation for why some Blacks spank their children is that Blacks need to teach their children lessons that will prevent them from making poor decisions, which could ultimately land them in dangerous situations, like prison or death. An example of this sentiment is found in a tweet posted on September 13, 2014 from a famous Black comedian D. L. Hughley tweeted: “A fathers belt hurts a lot less (than) a cops bullet!” This tweet got 148 RETWEETS and 86 Twitter users favorited the tweet. This notion of beating your kids to save them was seconded by the star of Showtime’s Ray Donovan, Wendell Pierce in a discussion on HBO’s Real Time with Bill Maher. When Bill Maher asked panelists whether kid spanking, and kid beating was a “black thing,” Pierce first clarified the distinction between discipline and abuse then responded: “It’s not a black thing, white people beat their kids too, I’ve seen ‘em at the Wal-Mart.” The conversation between the panelists continued, “I don’t think they do it as much,” Maher replied, “because of the reasons you said before... it’s an economic thing. Rich white people are the last ones to even touch their kids.” Joan Walsh from Salon.com added “That’s entitlement, that’s white entitlement, and the tragic thing is that black parents have resorted to violence in order to keep their kids in line because they can’t be entitled, because being entitled would be being dead, in some cases.” “Get beat by your parents so you don’t get beat by the cops,” Maher added. This discussion highlights the need for Black children to be “kept in line” in
order to prevent them from being harmed by law enforcement later on in life.

The panelists went on to discuss that kid spanking may be a Southern thing, pointing out that the South is where the extreme Christians reside, implying a relationship between the Christian church and ideals that support the implementation of corporal punishment to discipline one’s child. One example of this relationship between the church and child rearing practices can be found in the Bible scripture, Proverbs 13:24: “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.”

The biblical imperative is also demonstrated in Pastor Michael Pearl and his wife’s controversial book *To Train Up A Child*, which tells parents that using objects including a quarter-inch tube to beat their children will “break their will”. When a child allegedly died by these practices, critics emerged, implying that Pearl encouraged these behaviors and so he is ultimately to blame. In an article response to the uproar posted on his website, Pastor Pearl states, “I laugh at my caustic critics, for our properly-spanked and trained children grow to maturity in great peace and love.” It is important to note that Pastor Pearl and his wife are White Christians, supporting the idea that the influence of the church on ideals about child rearing may be stronger than racial or cultural influences.
Granted, some scholars have posited that kid spanking in the Black community may be a reverse pathology of disciplining practices slave times. Black psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs wrote in their 1968 examination of psychological black life, *Black Rage*:

Beating in child rearing actually has its psychological roots in slavery and even yet black parents will feel that, just as they have suffered beatings as children, so it is right that their children be so treated.

This explanation is partially supported by the terminology often used in the Black community to describe the spanking of a child: “whooping,” which is phonetically similar to the whippings carried out during slavery. So based on the history of this child rearing practice throughout Black history in America, it can be concluded that there may be some people in the Black community who “whoop” their children. However, to say that all Blacks abuse their children is a vast overstatement. Nonetheless, if one is only exposed to the depictions of Black parents in the media, one may be led to believe that kid spanking is a “black thing” or a Black problem.

Though it may seem that corporal punishment is a “Black thing,” and only Blacks support the spanking of one’s children, a nationally representative study found that 74% of Black women and 64% of White women ages 18-65 agreed that sometimes, a child needs “a good hard
spanking”. So while some may be cultivated to believe that mostly Blacks spank their children and support it at a significantly higher rate than non-Blacks, data rejects this notion.

The way that corporal punishment is implemented in Empire without explanations for why may perpetuate the stereotype that kid spanking is a “black thing,” guided by ideals of the Black race. These behaviors may be perceived as in line with the ideals of a specific race, as opposed to the common notions of those who belong to a specific religious belief system that may influence parents’ attitudes toward corporal punishment.

Psychologist Albert Bandura’s social learning theory (1971), which states that people learn behaviors by observing others’ behaviors and the consequences that come with them implies that for parents who watch Empire, the beating of one’s child may be perceived as socially acceptable after viewing scenes where Cookie and Luscious are hitting their child and are not looked down upon by bystanders or punished in any other way for carrying out these behaviors.

Finally, the perpetuation of corporal punishment supports and further reinforces other stereotypes that describe Black people as violent and aggressive and may lead people to see Blacks as threatening. All of these stereotypes combined, as they have been in Empire, may lead some people to perceive Blacks as harmful or threatening, which could result in
negative consequences for Blacks in situations where judgments must be made may also lead to lower levels of interracial harmony.
The Angry Black Woman

A typical stereotype is that of the “angry black woman.” This stereotype characterizes the Black woman as aggressive, hostile, and violent.

Beginning in the 1900s, the image of this stereotypical Black woman was depicted constantly in dance, movies, and film. An academic paper by J. Celeste Walley-Jean in the publication Black Women, Gender + Families provides some background on an initial portrayal of this stereotype in the media:

First, the sapphire image originated with the character Sapphire on the 1940s and 1950s Amos ‘n’ Andy radio and television shows (West 2008). This character was depicted as hostile and nagging, and her primary goal was to castigate her (Black) American husband (West 1995, 461), casting (Black) American women as overly aggressive and masculinized (West 2008). P.70
An academic article published on the University of South Carolina’s Undergraduate Research Journal, Caravel, offers a clear definition of this stereotype:

The Sapphire is “dominating, pushy, and bitchy” (Valentino, 2007). She is similar to the matriarch in that she is also aggressive, especially towards men. In her quest for control, she aims to bring down Black men; her abusive tones and sassy attitude make her the embodiment of the “Angry Black Woman” (Fontaine, 2011, p. 4).

These depictions cultivated into a stereotype that characterized black women as overly opinionated, aggressive, loud, and rude in nature and disposition. During slave times, and arguably still today, such stereotypes of Black women may have aided in the justification of grave mistreatment and sexual exploitation of Black women. Though there is no empirical evidence that show Black women as being more angry or aggressive than women of any other race, the stereotype is still widely referenced.

We can see this stereotype consistently played out in Cookie’s character. Descriptions of the instances where An entirely separate research paper could be dedicated to an exploration of the many instances when Cookie portrays the image of the “angry black woman” For the sake of this paper, I will present just a few examples of Cookie as the stereotypical “angry black woman.”

In episode two, Cookie shows up at Luscious’s house for the first time, hops out of the taxi and orders Luscious to “pay that Pakistani man.” Upon entering Luscious’ mansion, Cookie looks around at the expensive
art on the walls. When Luscious tells her she is looking at a Klimt painting she responds, “Yeah, well, you can keep it. Its ugly.” She proceeds toward the kitchen and tells Luscious she’s hungry, implying that he get her something to eat. While eating at the table, she asks Luscious to put Jamal on the roster of a big show intended to launch Hakeem’s rap career. Luscious refuses and after a heated debate that does not end in Cookie’s victory, she leaves the house. However, the fight does not end here. Cookie shows up at Luscious’s company office and interrupts a meeting with a rap artist concerning a shooting allegedly inspired by his music. Cookie walks in and says: “Don’t drop him because of the shooting. Drop him because his music sucks.” When the rapper asks who she is she responds, “Someone who would have never gave birth to your ugly ass.” After the rapper leaps from his seat, she yells out, “I’ve faced bigger in prison with more talent, bitch!” Luscious escorts her out of the conference room and says to her, “You need to start acting like a professional instead of a hood rat.” It is then that she then focuses the conversation back to Jamal, insisting that Luscious launch he and Hakeem simultaneously. When Luscious refuses to comply and walks away, Cookie removes her stiletto heel and hurls it at him. Displaying a Black woman as barging in on a professional meeting then provoking a heated debate that turns into a physical confrontation in a professional environment perpetuates the “angry black woman” stereotype.
Cookie continues to portray this stereotype up until the season finale. In episode 12, Cookie initiates a vicious fight with her ex-husband’s previous fiancée, Anika, a Black woman who Cookie despises. When Cookie shows up at a meeting just expects to be having with her sons, Hakeem and Andre she is surprised to find that Anika is also present. Cookie pours herself a drink then and approaches Anika with a look of disgust on her face saying, “Tell me why I shouldn’t throw this drink in your bitch ass face.” Anika responds, “Cause you’d never get up off the floor bitch.” Immediately after Anika’s comment, Cookie throws her drink in Anika’s face and punches her. Anika falls to the floor and Cookie nonchalantly turns and walks away from Anika. Anika then grips the stool to bring herself up, sneaks up behind Cookie, grabs her by the hair and they begin tussle. They are separated until Cookie grabs Anika, throws her onto the pool table and begins to choke her until one of her sons pulls her off. These two Black women participating in a physical fight (initiated by one of them making a rude comment) promotes the stereotype that Black women are hostile, violent, and aggressive.

Frequent depictions of the “angry black woman” in Empire and elsewhere may contribute to a wider acceptance of or an influx in actions of mistreatment or abuse towards black women by those heavily exposed to such content. Janet E. Helms (1979) previously maintained that, due to the
fact that mental health professionals have accepted stereotypic images of Black American women, their needs are neglected, and they can be treated in very debasing and cursory ways. It may be difficult for those who accept the imagery of the “angry Black woman” to see Black women as gentle or kind.

Another potential consequence of enforcing this stereotype is that it may make the successful formation and/or maintenance of intimate relationships a more difficult process for Black women. Those who see Black women constantly depicted as aggressive, argumentative, or rude may be less likely or feel less inclined to engage in relationships with Black women. At the same time, Black women who are heavily exposed to this stereotype may even suffer from a psychological phenomenon called the self-fulfilling prophecy. This phenomenon states that a belief or expectation, regardless of how true it is, affects the outcome of a situation or the way a person or group behaves. In the case of this stereotype, because Black women have been labeled angry or aggressive, they may foster aggressive behavior when treated is such. So when it comes to relationships, if people treat Black women like they are rude or aggressive, Black women may in turn act in those ways, thus making it harder for them to form healthy relationships.

In fact, a huge public question has been, “why are there so many single Black women?” According to a Yale University study conducted in
2009, 42% of Black women had never been married compared to the mere 23% of white women in the same predicament. These numbers led to a public frenzy where articles entitled “Why Are There So Many Single Black Females?” and “Marriage Eludes High Achieving Black Women,” were circling the web. These stories conveyed that Black women who wanted to married should lose all hope. These stories also claims that Black men were intimidated by strong Black women and for this reason preferred to date out of their race. One could only imagine the anxiety of a young single Black woman who hopes to marry, but is given the impression by various media outlets, that the man she wants to be with would rather be with a woman who is not Black. This brings me to the often mentioned stereotype that Blacks, especially Black women, despise the idea of interracial relationships, blaming White women who date Black men for their failure to find a male companion.
Interracial Dating – Blacks are Skeptical of White Women

Past research has found that White-Black interracial couples are generally viewed more negatively than other racial combinations (Davis 1991; Feagin, 2000; Ferber, 1998, Frankenberg, 1993; Rosenblatt et.al.,1995). Interracial couples comprised of Black men and White women are the most common Black-White relationship. Other studies have found that the Black woman is the most in opposition to Black men-White women interracial relationships (McNamara et.al., 1999; Rosenblatt et.al., 1995; Spickard 1989). Based on these conclusions it can be presumed that some Black women are not in complete agreement with interracial dating. The question you should be asking yourself is, “Why are some Black women opposed to these kinds of relationships?” Not much research has intended to answer this question.
One of the few scholars who attempted to answer this question points out that research that has endeavored to explore interracial relationships have often focused on the experience of the white woman (Jones 1990; Lazarre 1996; Reddy 1994). In her publication entitled, “The Angry Black Woman,” Erica Chito Childs points out that when the Black woman is mentioned in qualitative studies on interracial couples, they are often portrayed as angry and against interracial dating:

Qualitative studies of interracial couples also often emphasize the image of the “angry Black woman” (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 1999; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995), based primarily on the narratives of Black men–white women couples. For example, in Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell’s study, Christine, a white woman involved with a Black man, described her resentment at the way Black women she encounters routinely treat her: “The other thing that’s happened recently for me that I think he (her Black partner) thinks is funny, but I’ve gotten kind of angry about Black women and how rejecting they are of us and how hostile many of them are” (Rosenblatt et. al, 1995, 153). (Childs 2005, 546)

Childs posits that the perceived anger and hostility coming from Black women is often considered to be a reflection of personal characteristics, attributes, or issues. Childs also suggests because Black women have not been able to tell their sides of the story, we are simply left with the image of the angry black woman (Childs, 2005, 548). Dickson (1993) and Collins (2004) have suggested that from the Black woman’s perspective, interracial relationships between White women and Black men, along with mass incarceration, homicides, and drug abuse are viewed as the reason behind
the scarcity of eligible Black men. Childs describes that for Blacks, specifically Black women the disapproval of interracial dating is about more than just the Black woman herself:

Relationships between Black men and white women, even if based on love, respect, and commitment, are viewed as detrimental to Black women, the Black family structure, and the survival of Black communities. The underlying reality that the Black college women described is a shortage of available Black men and a lack of “substantive opportunities” to date interracially because of the white standards of beauty that deem them unsuitable mates to white men (Collins 2004). (Childs 2005, 558)

As Childs has suggested, it may be that some Black women see interracial dating between Black men and White women as harmful to her potential to find a good mate. Because there are so few eligible Black male companions due to some of the factors Collins (2004), it is suggested that Black women see interracial dating as a lack of preservation of Black life and culture. Additionally, some Black women may feel they don’t have a chance with a White man because of the beauty standards, which place them at the bottom of the pool of interest. To say that Black women hate White women or interracial dating would be a farfetched and incomplete statement. Nonetheless, this stereotype is salient and recurrent in several scenes in Empire.

Because the oldest son Andre is married to a White woman, the topic, or in this case, issue of interracial dating is raised in multiple scenes in Empire. In Cookie’s first one-on-one encounter with Andre, she is
perplexed by his decision to begin a relationship with a White woman.

Their brief discussion on the topic begins as follows:

**Cookie:** Why’d you marry that White girl?
**Andre:** We met at school. She’s brilliant.
**Cookie:** Pretty White girls always are, even when they ain’t

When Cookie asks Andre why he married his wife, the tone of disappointment in her voice demonstrates her negative feelings towards their interracial union. Contrarily, Cookie never asks her son Hakeem his reasoning for being with his Black girlfriend. When Cookie makes her comment about White women, her suspicious tone of voice conveys that she does not trust White women. Andre shifts the conversation and tries to convince Cookie that she should manage Jamal. In efforts to spark Cookie’s interest, he tells her that Luscious does not want Jamal to be successful in his music because that could lead to Jamal’s success at the company.

Cookie’s suspicions of Andre’s wife come out in her response when says, “is that what that White girl is telling you?” This commentary suggests that Cookie perceives White women as manipulative and untrustworthy and perpetuates the stereotype that Black women see White women as evil and conniving. Andre’s wife, Rhonda is consistently depicted as a conniving woman who devises sneaky plans to earn her husband the CEO position. In one scene, she even encourages Andre to hurt one of his brothers in a plan to pit his siblings against each other: “What if Jamal made a run for the company and your two brothers went to war? They just
may kill each other. And you are the last man standing.” In the next scene, Andre goes to convince his mother to manage Jamal. In episode five, Rhonda spots Hakeem’s girlfriend kissing another girl, videotapes it, and uploads it to the Internet to cause a rift in their relationship. The objective behind this is to cause Hakeem to lose his focus on his music. Furthermore, Rhonda encourages Andre to go through with a plan to tell a group of said hoodlum that Jamal is at a recording studio in an urban area wearing expensive shoes and jewelry. The plan is to have it appear that Hakeem sent his thug friends to beat him up and ruin his session. The conspiracies continue throughout the series and Rhonda is consistently playing a part in it.

Cookie was not the only one vehemently opposed to Andre and Rhonda’s union. In a scene where Andre is talking to his father about potentially becoming the company’s next CEO, his father immediately shoots him down saying that after he married “that White woman,” he would never be head of the company. Luscious’ a comment and skeptical tone of voice convey that like Cookie, he does not trust White women. However, it is unclear why Luscious is opposed to the CEO having a White wife. Potential explanations may include the fact that according to Luscious, Empire Entertainment is a family company and as a company that is deeply rooted in hip-hop, the family should reflect hip-hop and those who consume it – which are Black.
Andre’s parents’ negative reactions to his relationship with his wife convey the message that there is something bad Andre’s decision to marry a White woman. Throughout the show, Rhonda is depicted as bringing the family down. This may cause Black viewers to believe that White women can be detrimental to the Black family.

*Empire*’s Depictions of negative interactions between Blacks and White may have an effect on the formation of intimate relationships between Blacks and Whites. These portrayals could also impact general interracial harmony. Heavy non-Black viewers of *Empire* may come to believe that they should not endeavor to build relationships - especially intimate relationships - with Blacks. If it appears that a Black family is not accepting of non-Blacks then under the theory of negative reciprocity, where negative feelings or actions are returned with the same negativity, non-Blacks may in turn, be just as unaccepting of Blacks.
Menace to Society: The Criminal Black Man

Characters like Andre, the successful Black man who legitimately earned his success is somewhat of an anomaly in television and film. Andre’s father, Luscious, and the guys he sent to Jamal’s studio session display characteristics, which are much more in line with the typical role of Black men in television and other media. Often depicted as perpetrators of crime and violence, the Black man as the gangster or thug narrative is much more common in the media.

In the very first episode, Luscious kills his right hand man, Bunky, who helped raise his children while Cookie was away in prison. Bunky wanted $25,000 to settle a debt and threatened to oust Luscious for his past criminal behaviors if Luscious refuses to give him the money. Luscious tells Bunky he wants to meet to talk. When they meet, Luscious mentions how they have been friends since they were fourteen-years old. Luscious goes on to say, “I never let anything come between me and friendship
except a bullet.” Then Luscious shoots Bunky in the face and turns around to walk away. This scene bolsters the stereotype that Black men are violent criminals. Even as a billionaire, Luscious is still involved in criminal behavior.

Whenever Luscious describes his criminal background, he describes it as a means for survival. In the pilot episode he tells his team in a conference meeting that he sold drugs at the age of nine in order to feed himself. In a scene in episode two, Luscious interviews with a news anchor about accusations of Empire Entertainment perpetuating violence. The two come to a discussion of Luscious’s previous criminal lifestyle. His explanation for his behavior is that “that’s how (he) grew up. Where you either sold drugs or watched your children go hungry.” Luscious’s commentary implies that he did what he had to do in order to feed his children. His explanation can serve as a potential excuse for lower class individuals who commit crime. It is in how Luscious tells his life story, where viewers are exposed to a normalization – and based on Luscious’s success, a glorification – of the thug narrative.

Luscious launched his music career on illegal drug money, a large amount of which sent his wife to prison for seventeen years. Ironically, prison life is hardly ever displayed or discussed. The lack of discussion about the potential consequences of his past criminal behavior may make the consequences seem less important to the viewer. Viewers are only
exposed to the vast benefits of being rich. Luscious does not discuss work ethic, getting a job or earning an honest living. Instead, Luscious promotes the ideal of doing what you have to do to get where you need to be, by any means necessary. Saying that he engaged in criminal activity to “feed himself” implies that those who are in difficult situations should be excused for their criminal behavior. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 67% of all Black children are growing up in single parent homes where there may be little cash flow. Those of them who are heavy viewers of Empire may come to believe that it is okay to sell drugs or engage in other criminal activity in order to improve their financial conditions in the same way that Luscious has.

The problem with depicting Blacks as gangstas and thugs in the media is not only that young Black men, but also police officers, jury members, and other everyday citizens may be watching and assimilating these images. Bussell and Crandall (2002) stated that the prominent media images of Black Americans as criminals shown on television were perceived as realistic to viewers of such content. The core of this issue is that these images could cost a Black man’s life at some point. Those who are rarely exposed to Blacks and hold little knowledge about Black life or culture are sometimes forced to make decisions, that can be life altering at times, based on stereotypes perpetuated in the media.
In a study on the effects of race on responses to weapon holders, Greenwald, Oakes, and Hoffman (2002) found that subjects in a video police simulation were more likely to “shoot” black men (holding objects that may or may not be guns) than white men under the same circumstances. Why is that a Black man is perceived as more likely to be holding a weapon? The constant depictions in the media of Blacks as criminals may be an explanation. Television viewers have not only been cultivated to see the world as a more violent place as Gerbner and Gross (1976) demonstrated, but the media may also be teaching viewers that perpetrators are Black.

Consistent exposure to stereotypes that depict Blacks as violent criminals may cause viewers to develop stereotypes about Blacks that could be later recalled and retrieved to make judgments. Some of these judgments may be harmless, but as has been shown in the Greenwald, Oaked, and Hoffman (2002) study, these judgments could be detrimental and even fatal.
CONCLUSION

From minstrel shows, to news coverage, to reality and fictional television shows, the United States has a long history of perpetuating negative stereotypes about Blacks in entertainment media. Considering the various stereotypes depicting Blacks as aggressive, argumentative, hostile, and homophobic, the extremely popular show *Empire* has certainly contributed to the continuation of this process. These stereotypes may have cultivated or contributed to preexisting unconscious biases that can affect the way individuals perceive, rate, and interact with Blacks. In order to maintain interracial as well as within-race harmony, stereotypes about Blacks in the media should be sufficiently decreased. These stereotypes threaten the health and progress of the American society. As a “melting pot,” of races and cultures it is important that all the different kinds of people in America can get along well with one another. It is hard to get along with people of whom you perceive as aggressive, homophobic, ignorant, or violent.

With as many viewers as *Empire* has, the show should be promoting more positive images of the underrepresented group it aims to portray. With such a platform as Fox Channel, creators and directors of *Empire* should aim to use this rare opportunity to tell a “Black story” that depicts
Blacks in a more positive light than they have consistently been shown in the past. Granted, one must not be ignorant to the fact that one television show is incapable of representing an entire culture. However, individuals should be aware that previous and current negative portrayals of Blacks affect the way people think about Blacks; Research has shown that depictions of Blacks on television have an effect on viewers of all ages and races (Dates, 1990). The consequences of these depictions are the acceptance and reinforcement of these stereotypes, desensitization to violence in the Black community, and overall damage of the Black community.

If creators and directors feel that these kinds of tales are necessary to make profit and are unwilling to end these negative portrayals, then they should get more creative about how to tell these stories or even use their platforms to educate viewers on these stereotypes. Simply presenting stereotypical images to viewers without any explanation of the origins, validity, or impact on the Black community leads society to believe that these negative stereotypes accurately reflect Black realities.

Some may argue that non-Blacks are also often negatively portrayed in media. They may question how it is that negative portrayals of Blacks may have worse effects on viewers than negative portrayals of Whites. A potential answer to this legitimate question is that relative to the amount of White representations, there are very few current representations of Blacks
on television. Therefore, it may be easier for these few depictions to be perceived as true of the entire Black community. Because there are so many White actors in various different roles in television and film, it may be difficult for many to say, “All White people are…” Considering there are only four current fictional television shows with leading Black actors, and only two with nearly all Black casts, viewers have limited material to refer to when making judgments about Black people. Three out of four of these shows include content that reinforce negative stereotypes about Blacks (Scandal, How To Get Away With Murder, and Empire).

Unfortunately, these three shows earn the most viewers and consequently have the strongest impact on viewers’ perceptions of Blacks. Perpetuating these negative stereotypes do not only affect perceptions about Blacks, but can also be detrimental to Blacks’ perception of self.

The many Black children who may be viewing this type of content are learning about themselves, their people, and their culture through these images. A U.S. Census Bureau report on at-risk schoolchildren found that only 35% of White children report having at least one of the study’s predetermined at-risk factors. In stark contrast, 72% of Black children in

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1 At-Risk Factors:

1. Has a disability  
2. Retained in grade at least once  
3. Speaks English less than ‘very well’  
4. Does not live with both parents  
5. Either parent emigrated in the past 5 years  
6. Family income below $10,000  
7. Neither parent/guardian employed in their lives
this sample reported having at least one of the at-risk factors. In 2013, 63% of all Black American children were being raised in single-parent (mostly single-mom) households. Given that single parents may work long hours, it is likely that many of these children do not have adults around to monitor their television viewing or teach them about what it is they are watching. Theoretically speaking, at-risk Black youth are partially raised by television thus it is important that they are exposed to more positive images of people who look like them in the media. Children who are at-risk may be more likely to engage in negative behaviors and activities, which is why more television programs about Black life and culture should aim to portray Blacks more positively.

The continuing decline of curriculum focusing on Black studies in America is another reason why media intended to reflect Black life and culture should be more positive and educational. According to a 2011 report of the state of civil rights education implementation in America, few states are required to teach students about prominent events, groups, or leaders in Black history. For example, Only 6 states require students to learn about Jim Crow, 4 states require students to know about the Selma-Washington March, 3 states must teach about Thurgood Marshall, and 6 states are required to educate on Medgar Evans. It is important to note that just because these states are required to include curriculum on these people and events in Black history, does not necessarily mean that the curriculum
at each school is adequate, nor does it mean that schools in other states
have not implemented curriculum on these topics. However, based on the
minimal requirements declared mandatory by many states in the U.S., it is
clear that various parts of Blacks history in America are not perceived as
important enough to cover in American schools. As a result, television,
film, radio, news, and other interactive media are possibly playing a larger
role in the education of Black life and culture. Because Black history is so
scarcely taught in schools, the influence of these negative stereotypes is
even more detrimental to the Black community.

Even if a stereotype does hold some truth, there are devastating
consequences that come with fully believing in and relying on them
nonetheless. Significant research has shown that exposure to negative
portrayals of Blacks in the media have a significant influence on people’s
evaluations of Blacks in general (Ford, 1997; Mastro & Tropp, 2004; Power
et. al., 1996). These issues (with the exception of the angry black woman)
are not specific to the black community. However, because these
stereotypes are more often portrayed by and in relation to Blacks,
individuals may be given the impression that Blacks are the only
perpetrators of homophobia, kid spanking, crime, and etcetera. Due to the
lack of representation of Blacks in television, the few stories the media tells
about Blacks are all that society has to refer to when thinking about,
judging, or interacting with Blacks.
This is especially detrimental considering that many non-Blacks have extremely limited interactions with Blacks. In their measure of segregation based on friend networks of youth grades 7-12, Echenique and Fryer (2006) found that the average student has .7 friends of a different race. If youth are not interacting with members of other races, television may be the place where they learn about those other races. When the negative images portrayed on television are a source of education about Blacks, viewers, especially those of other races, may learn to avoid or dislike Blacks. Illustrating this is Dong and Murrillo’s (2007) examination of the impact of television viewing and interpersonal contact on young adults’ stereotypes toward Hispanic Americans. Dong and Murrillo’s questionnaire revealed that:

White Americans tend to develop negative stereotypes towards Hispanic Americans when they depend on television to learn about them. This finding indicates that people are influenced by television images. The more negative images are shown on television, the more likely the viewers pick up the images and develop their stereotypes (Dong & Murrillo, 2007).

This finding implies that those who observe Blacks negatively depicted on television and rarely interact with them in real life may develop stereotypes about Blacks. With such limited interracial interactions highlighted by Echenique and Fryer (that each student has an average of .7 friends of the other race,) the television may play the role of educator for many individuals who have had little experience with other races. This would not be an issue if the images on television, especially those of
Blacks, were not so polluted with stories that perpetuate negative stereotypes. Those who have accepted these images as true of Blacks may continue to acknowledge these images and ignore the infrequent images that portray Blacks in a more positive light.

Other than the 1984-1992 *Cosby Show*, which was centered around the lives of a Black male obstetrician and Black female lawyer, there were not and have not since been any shows (with the exception of *Black-ish*) that have depicted a successful Black family in a positive light. Ironically, *Black-ish*, which challenges Black stereotypes, has had very few Black viewers (24% of all viewers). More than twice as many Blacks that watch *Black-ish* watch *Empire* (61%). Blacks may perceive *Black-ish* as less realistic than *Empire* due to its novel portrayal of a law-abiding successful Black family. Contrarily, *Empire* fits with the negative stereotypes that have been consistently depicted and internalized by Black viewers.

According to the Penguin dictionary of psychology, confirmation bias is a psychological phenomenon, which refers to the tendency of people to seek or interpret information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs or hypotheses. This tendency has been seen in cognitive tasks and social situations, where information that is inconsistent or disconfirms one’s beliefs is misinterpreted or ignored. Constant negative images of Blacks in the media may be validating what viewers already believe about
Blacks, which could potentially explain why the show *Empire* had so many more Black viewers than *Black-ish*. Contrary to *Black-ish* where there is no angry black woman or thug narrative, *Empire* touches on a number of existing negative stereotype about Blacks. For as long as there has been media and entertainment, Blacks have been sent the message that they are aggressive, violent, and criminal. Those who have internalized these beliefs may only seek entertainment that are consistent with the negative stereotypes they have been exposed to.

Why is it that Blacks seem to prefer to watch content that demonizes and degrades them? Gerbner and colleagues’ cultivation theory suggest that Black Americans are more likely to believe the messages about race presented to them in the media due to their large consumption of television. In light of this finding, a potential answer to the question of why Blacks continue to view these images that are hurtful to them is that television and other media have cultivated Blacks to believe that their reality consists of overt aggression and criminal activity. As a result, when Blacks are exposed to television programs like the *Cosby Show* and *Black-ish*, they perceive these stories as unrealistic. This perception has the potential to lead Blacks to believe that they do not deserve, nor are they supposed to lead legal, successful lives. Instead, according to the television shows they watch (i.e. *Empire*), they should sell drugs to get out of the hood and build their own empire. Current television shows that are more widely accepted
by Blacks tend to adversely depict Black culture. The Black community’s reception of consistently instilled negative stereotypes may have influenced their perceptions of themselves and their reality.

In addition to affecting Blacks’ perceptions of self, these negative depictions may also have an influence on how others view Blacks, specifically in terms of criminal activity and violence. The 2011 publication, “Social Science Literature Review: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys” wrote about the consequences of negative images of Blacks in the media, stating:

The most serious possible consequence of negative attitudes concerns the ultimate questions of life and death. Besides the fact that black men are more likely to be sentenced to death than white men for the same crime, several suggestive experimental studies have shown that subjects in a video police simulation are more likely to “shoot” black men (holding objects that may or may not be guns) than white men under the same circumstances (e.g., see Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003).

This research finding has recently shown true in devastating real life situations where Black men were perceived as threats and shot to death, when in many cases, these men were actually harmless at the time.

After the announcement of the non-indictment of NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo, who choked an unarmed black man by the name of Eric Garner, the NAACP Legal Fund posted a series of Twitter posts naming 77 unarmed people of color who were killed in police custody between 1999 and 2014. The 77 cases were those that the majority of the public was aware of and there is a definite possibility that more remain undocumented.
These cases not only speak to necessary reforms in the policing practices of American officers, but they also highlight issues regarding society’s perceptions of Blacks. In many of these cases, officers described their victims as threatening due to their size or because they appeared to be holding a weapon.

Granted, there should be some reformations in the protocol for how officers deal with civilians of all races. However, Greenwald and colleagues’ study has highlighted that these behaviors are not much different from those of nonofficial, everyday civilians. In light of these research findings, one should be weary to place all of the blame on the police system itself. Rather, one should question what it is about the perception of Blacks in America that make people react to them defensively in these situations. The power of the media should not be overlooked in the process of attempting to answer this question. Depicting Blacks as lewd, aggressive, and criminal have some influence on how Blacks are perceived.

Future research should aim to identify methods that will assist in lessening the impact of negative stereotypes portrayed in the media— for instance, focus groups aiming to debrief viewers on such content If youth outreach programs such as Boys and Girls Clubs or YMCAs are aware that kids at their locations are viewing these kinds of television shows, they should develop forums for discussing content and teaching about the history behind what they are viewing. Similar programs can be conducted
for adults, who are also at risk of perceiving these stereotypes as reality. A potential incentive to attend such meetings could be the guest appearance of one of the cast members of the show, where this member could discuss the validity or invalidity of the stereotypical content.

In conclusion, as Morgan & Signorielli (1990) have argued, television has become the nation’s learning environment. Images on television have the capacity to seep into viewers’ beliefs about the real world they live in (Gerbner & Gross 1980). The inability of heavy viewers to distinguish between the world of television and the real world implies that when viewers are exposed to negative content, they may come to believe that such content accurately reflects society.

The negative images of Blacks depicted in television and other media have an effect on observers of all races and ages (Dates 1990). This effect must not be overlooked in the creation and broadcasting of images of Blacks. Because there are currently so few images of Black on television, viewers may perceive the few portrayals of Blacks as representative of the entire community. Exposures to the negative stereotypes perpetuated in the show Empire (i.e., black women are aggressive and rude in nature, Blacks are homophobic, criminals, and against interracial dating) have implications for how Blacks are perceived in America. Adverse
depictions of Blacks may lead to the fostering of negative stereotypes about Blacks. As a result of individuals’ beliefs in these negative stereotypes, Blacks have suffered in various ways including poor reception by out-groups (Hughes and Baldwin 2002), medical neglect (Helms 1979), and conceivably, even death (Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, etc.) Americans should no longer underestimate the power of the many destructive images depicted on television.
Author’s Final Note:

For clarity, in the urban community, the term “be like,” refers to tendencies. The title “Blacks Be Like” can be translated or understood as “Blacks Have The Tendency To.”

Although I am extremely passionate about issues that affect the Black community because I am a Black woman, it should be known that all of the analyses and points made in this thesis were made based off of factual evidence and not biased judgments or emotions. This work is intended to spark thought, not tension or controversy.

Thank you for reading,

Dawanna Butler
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Empire. Chicago: Fox.

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