Broadcasting Blackness: A Content Analysis of Movies Aired by Black Entertainment

Television (BET) Before and After Viacom's Ownership

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ABSTRACT

Black Entertainment Television is a cable television station whose mission is to provide "an authentic, unapologetic viewpoint of the black experience" by offering "socially active and culturally influential content" that "reflects our audiences' lives" (Viacom.com). In 2000 former owner of BET, Robert Johnson, sold his black owned company to media conglomerate, Viacom. This means that white owned Viacom has control over the black image and idea "blackness" that BET conveys to its viewers. This study is a content analysis of how blackness is portrayed in the five most frequently played movies aired by BET from January 1, 1999 to January 1, 2000, and BET's five most frequently aired films between January 1, 2011 and January 1, 2012. The purpose of this research is to identify how themes of blackness displayed on BET have changed with respect to the change in ownership.

Media is a heavily consumed product in American culture. It is through this constant bombardment of media images that we are exposed to the dominant ideologies of society. In an ideal world one could turn on the television and observe positive, empowering images of people of color on every channel. However, images of minority groups are minimal, tokenized and overwhelmed by white faces. Beretta Smith-Shomade argues that the consistent presence of minority groups found on ethnic specific programs "fulfill a crucial need for visioning and supplementing feelings of self-worth and self-actualization" (Smith-Shomade2008:xvii). In other words, it is important for marginalized groups to not only see themselves in the media, but also be exposed to positive, enduring cultural images.

It is important to learn more about how blacks are portrayed in the media, especially programming that is marketed to African Americans because it affects the black perception of self. The historically racist portrayal of African Americans has contributed to further oppression of blacks. Black television and films can either empower and unify or break and oppress African Americans. Thus it is important to explore differences in the production of the black image in order to provide the most beneficial media experience to African Americans and other marginalized groups. Also, positive black programming has the potential combat stereotypical images and lead to better race relations and understanding. This study will look to answer the question: How does the racial identity of the ownership of BET affect the channels portrayal of blackness in it's airing of films? The research study analyzed the films aired on BET to better understand how the ownership can influence the ways that African Americans are portrayed on the network. The study revealed that there is a relationship between the race of the owner and the ways that blackness is displayed in the films and, in turn, on the stations; however, the profit-

motive of the media as an agent of socialization is a vital interest in the production and consumption of black images.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of African Americans in American Films

Since its development, television and film have served as agents of socialization, showing people the norms, expectations, and ideals of society. Beginning with D.W. Griffith and his film, *The Birth of a Nation*, American cinema and its white producers have historically have defined what it means to be black in America. The degrading images cause racist ideologies to be perpetuated, continuing oppression of African Americans.

Bogle (2001) argues that in his film, Griffith presented three varieties of black characters based on stereotypes and American racial ideology: the "faithful souls," "brutal black bucks," and the "tragic mulatto." The "faithful souls" group is made up of what are known as Uncle Toms and mammy figures. Uncle Tom was first presented in Edward S. Porter's motion picture, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* as a slave character played by a white man in blackface (2001). As Toms "chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind" (Bogle 2001:13). The Tom is grateful for his subhuman position in society and serves the system that oppresses him while looking down on other slaves. Another faithful soul is the mammy figure. Mammy is used in movies to present the black individual as an object of amusement and buffoon. The mammies of American film are often portrayed as independent, fat, and cantankerous black women (2001). This image of black femininity is either the militant, bossy woman organizing a "movement to keep [her] good-for-nothing husband at home" or as a more "sweet, jolly, and good-tempered" servant (Bogle 2001:9). The recurring presence of

Uncle Toms and mammy figures in films are used to justify and propagate the current oppression of people of color and other historically marginalized groups.

Bogle (2001) notes that the second variety of blacks Griffith employs are the "brutal black bucks" who are subhuman, sexually repressed, feral beings that are out to raise havoc through revolutionary or militant physical violence aimed at faithful souls and whites (13). Brutal bucks are big and bad, "oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" (Bogle 2001:14). This character illustrates the underlying fear of whites that has historically lead to lynching, mutilation of genitalia, and the emasculation of black men by whites. Attraction to white females by bucks is portrayed by white writers as being attributed to either the idea that women are power symbols or an animalistic attraction innate to the nature of black men (2001).

Parallel to the brutal buck is the mulatto (Bogle 2001). The tragic mulatto is the light skinned product of the slave master's sexual exploitation of the female slave. Often explored is the mulatto's plight in her attempt to pass as white (2001). Unlike the brutes and bucks, the mulatto is made "likeable—even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt) –and the audience believes that the girl's life could have been productive and happy had she not been a 'victim of divided racial inheritance'" (Bogle 2001:9).

With the introduction of Griffith's black stereotypes, black cinematic themes emerged (Bogle 2001). These themes allow for future writers, producers, and directors to seamlessly deploy Griffith's black characters into current environments and contemporary cinema (2001). Although these degrading images of blackness are no longer displayed as literal slaves, it is possible that underneath any new presentation of the black image there is the presence of a familiar tom, mammy, brute, buck, and mulatto.

Black Produced Films and Contemporary Renditions of Images

Almost 75 years after *The Birth of a Nation*, 1990's experienced an influx of African American men writing, directing, and producing films in Hollywood- movies made for black people by black people. These African American produced films, labeled "black films," integrate gangster rap ideologies and hip-hop culture into the movies, creating a space where the black, macho criminal is promoted and glorified (Benschoff 2009:ch.4). The macho criminal is often found embodying capitalist ethic, violently sexist tendencies, and homophobia that, together, create an image of hyper-masculinity; a characteristic that is the envy of the men in the character's neighborhood and the male audience (2009). Thus it is a culmination of urban moviegoers and white suburban teen males that propel hood films and black movies to fame. Box-office success of these films does not come without critique as middle-class black audience members are often appalled by the films' homogeneous display of black life (2009).

According to Benschoff (2009) the latter half of the 1990's mark the surfacing of movies marketed toward African American women. Similar to the classic Hollywood woman's film, the black chick flicks are centered on woman's suffering in her search for love, stressing the idea that the most important thing for a black woman to do is find a good black man to marry (2009). Gender roles within black woman's films continue to be bound to Hollywood's traditional white patriarchal structure. The dating pool of female African American characters is largely limited to black men as society, and in turn black film, still "remains wary of depicting successful interracial relationships" (Benschoff 2009:ch.4). Also absent from these movies are the presence of gay and lesbian roles, with the exception of the stereotype of the effeminate gay male 'snap queen'" (Benschoff 2009:ch.4).

Collins (2005) argues that with the development of black films in the 1990s, and the evolution of the genre since then, new renditions of traditional black stereotypes have evolved. Collins states that contemporary black stereotypes are understood according to the gender and class of the characters. Lower and working class male images include the athlete, the criminal or gangsta, and the player. The athlete views playing sports as the only legitimate way to attain social mobility and get out of the 'hood (2005). Criminal or gangsta stereotypes are presented as being inherently violent, hyper heterosexual, and materialistic men who get their money through illegal means. The last of the lower and working class images is the player who shamelessly uses women to fulfill their desires through promiscuity and manipulation.

According to Collins (2005) stereotypical images of the middle and upper class black men in contemporary film are the black buddy or sidekick, and the sissy or gay snap queen. Collins defines the black buddy or sidekick as being friendly and deferential, loyal to dominant society and the individuals who uphold it, and devoid of sexual prowess or aggression. The black buddy or sidekick does not bring up racial issues; his sense of self stems from the presence of his white friend and often helps whites solve their personal problems. Sissy or snap queen images are desexualized, emasculated, feminine, and often labeled as homosexual.

Images that are supposed to represent working-class black women are either "bitches" or "bad black mothers" (Collins 2005). Bitches are controlling, loud, rude, pushy, confrontational, and actively aggressive. The bitch image's sexuality is largely under the control of men. On the other hand, the bad black mother is pictured as neglecting her children, either in-utero or anytime after, living in poverty, and relying on the State for support. Bad black mothers raise children that become future criminals and unwed mothers.

Collins also explores middle-class images in black produced film such as, the "black lady" and the "educated black bitch." The black lady and the educated black bitch need to separate themselves from and avoid the actions, appearances, and lifestyle of the working-class bitches and bad black mothers in order to claim her status as middle-class (2005). For instance, unlike the bitch, the black lady's sexuality is not used to gain power, nor is it outwardly present; her sexuality is confined to a domestic space and a monogamous, heterosexual relationship (2005). In addition, the bitch puts her job first and is aggressive or subordinate only when it is appropriate. As for the educated black bitch, she has money, power, a good job, and maintains control of her body and sexuality (2005). The educated black bitch must navigate through society in a way that she retains a sense of blackness as well as power within a male and white dominated structure. In all of Collins' images the lower and working class stereotypes are understood by audiences as being the more authentic representations of blackness.

Guerrero (1993) argues that when African Americans do not control the images of African Americans, these illustrations aim to serve the agendas of those in control, to reinforce and justify blacks' subordinate position in society. From this perspective black films of the 1990s may seem to be a solution to end black stereotyping in cinema. However, Benschoff (2009) argues even though black filmmakers are addressing blackness and black issues in their independent works, mainstream ideas of blackness continue to be constructed by whites and marketed to African Americans. It is important to note that "the African American films that find wide audiences are the films Hollywood itself allows to be produced and distributed" (Benschoff 2009:ch.4). Likewise, black producers face a de facto budget ceiling that causes African American film makers to choose between creative expression through their art medium, taking a political stand, or making money (Collins 2005). Black filmmakers are expected to produce a

film that illustrates what "real" blackness is and in turn face occupational and creative limitations as well as further generalization of African American experiences (Gillespie 2007). As a result, these Hollywood "black films" rarely challenged the ideologies of "white patriarchal capitalism" held by the dominant culture (Benschoff 2009:ch.4). Black producers are limited by the structure of white dominated corporations to how far their portrayals can stray from the dominant culture's desires and ideals. One should be weary to identify one perspective on culture as authentic and aware of the capitalist nature of American film production.

Attitudes and Audience

Black films are produced to convey certain messages about "blackness" and black identity. Although black films may be marketed toward an African American audience, non-blacks have access to black movies and construct their own understandings of what it means to be black in the United States. Fisher's study (2009) explores how "meaning is determined by a multicultural audience in response to a particularly controversial representation of 'blackness' in America".

Fisher uses reader-response theory and a qualitative research design to examine student interpretations of three "black urban youth films" from the 1990's: *Boyz n the Hood, Juice,* and *Menace II Society*. From the data collected within her focus groups of 14 college students from diverse backgrounds, Fisher notes that the text, personal characteristics and experiences of the reader, and the immediate social context all play an important role in shaping of participants' meaning-making response (2009).

Fisher (2009) discusses the depiction of violence and its connection to the film being labeled as realistic. The authenticity of the film rests in the director's ability to construct a reason for violence within the story line and make violence seem natural. The researcher notes that

when directors are able to justify the violence by contextualizing it within the oppressive society, the story is viewed as plausible and authentic, and moral themes can be drawn out (2009). However, if the violent behavior is seemingly random, personal, or unattached to society, then the movie is viewed as not fitting or satisfying the expectations of the genre (2009). "Generally, the responses to all three films indicate that the participants' critical orientation was based on the directors' view of the hood, except when that view was not clearly articulated and failed to meet the participants' expectations for the genre" (Fisher 2009:80). The idea to omit certain films from the genre suggests that people have existing preconceptions about blackness and set norms for black-targeted films.

Additionally, Fisher (2009) states, "many of the students discussed the films in terms of their own life experiences, ethnic or racial group identification, gender, and socioeconomic class membership…particularly when addressing 'realism'" (Fisher 2009:81). The ability of a person to identify with an image depends on how they view their identity in relation to the identity of the target audience, whether they distinguish themselves from the group or view themselves as a member of the target audience (2009). The meaning and authenticity of an image is dependent on the identity of the interpreter and their contact with the "other" in society. Fisher's data "strongly suggests that the interaction of culturally diverse others had a significant effect on the direction in which participants focused their attention" (Fisher 2009:83). In other words, cross cultural discussions concerning the meaning of "blackness" and black imagery allows one to take on different views and understandings of hood films. Aside from what the director's message is, the viewer's interpretation of the film's meaning relies on the individual's identity, experiences, ideologies, and preconceptions. However, understanding can change as various subcultural groups discuss the images they see.

THEORY

Media images can be analyzed and understood using a sociological lens. In his work, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Stuart Hall (1973:46) theorizes that "in the analysis of culture, the inter-connection between societal structures and processes and formal or symbolic structures is absolutely pivotal." In his theory Hall argues that mass media, such as television, is a commodity that is produced and consumed within the construct of the capitalist society. Hall's encoding and decoding model offers valuable insight into the conceptualization of media and a theoretical framework in which one can understand the production of blackness in films.

Hall theorizes that media images are produced through an active cycle of exchange between encoders, decoders, and society. This cycle begins as television producers draw from society's dominant ideology and "encode" their works with a "preferred" meaning (1973). Producers create images and messages for audience consumption, e.g. "signs" that carry symbolic meaning and therefore when a product is bought, it is not simply the object that is purchased and circulated, but also the meaning assigned to that product. As the audience watches television, they go through the process of decoding the images. The decoders refer to their "maps of meaning" that are based on that culture's ideologies, history, and their social reality to understand the coded images in different ways than the encoders intended (1973).

According to Hall (1973:57), the preferred meaning that is encoded is not always congruent with the meaning decoded by the consumer. Audience members can decode an image in three different ways: dominant or hegemonic code, negotiated code, or oppositional code. The dominant code is where the viewer operates within the social and cultural hegemony and understands the meaning parallel to the encoded, preferred meaning (1973). Negotiated code

"acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground-rules, it operates with 'exceptions' to the rule" (Hall 1973:58). Finally, oppositional code is where one understands the literal and connotative inflection given to an image, but is determined to decode the message in a way that is contrary to the dominant way (1973). Croteau and Hoynes (2003) argue that how one decodes an image can be dependent on their socioeconomic class, age, gender, and race. After one decodes an image, they give feedback to the producers through their purchases affecting how images are to be coded in future images. The cycle is continued.

Hall's analysis of media as a commodity within a capitalist, white society offers perspective as to who defines blackness, illustrates media's connection to the larger social system, and the potential of BET's portrayal of blackness to reflect, enforce, or challenge race ideology. This research seeks to find out in what ways the race of the encoder and owner influences the image of blackness that is portrayed on BET and uses Hall's model as theoretical framework through which one may explain these differences.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a content analysis of how blackness is portrayed in the film aired on BET. In this study "blackness" is understood as the collection of "productions, histories, images, representations, and meanings that are associated with black presence in the United States" (Gray 1995:12) Both manifest and latent coding styles will be used to analyze "easy to identify, visible, surface content in a text" as well as "underlying, implicit meaning buried in the content of a text" (Neuman 2012:243). Using both of these styles increases the reliability and validity of the research, thus strengthening the study.

Sample

The sample of films was made up of the five most frequently aired movies on BET the year before it was sold to Viacom (January 1, 1999-January 1, 2000), and BET's five most frequently aired films between January 1, 2011 and January 1, 2012. These dates allowed the owners of BET the maximum amount of time to have developed and presented their desired image of blackness. Each weekly publication of *TV Guide Magazine* that fell within the given dates were examined which allowed the researcher to record which films were shown as well as the frequency at which movie was replayed within that time frame. In the instance where two or more movies were shown an equal amount of times, the researcher drew randomly the movie would be included into the sample. In 1999, BET aired 24 different movies a total of 82 times, where in 2011, BET aired 116 different films a total of 433 times.

Coding

Each movie was coded using the same code sheet that addressed who directed, produced and wrote the film, race of the director, producer, and writer, race of the cast, setting of the film, date that the movie was released, film rating, date and number of times the film was aired on BET. In addition, latent codes such as the main characters' relationships with each other, display of sex and sexuality, socioeconomic status, view of formal education, understanding of violence, and the presence of historical and current stereotypical images were included in the code sheet. In order to gain consistency in coding the sample, the descriptions of the characteristics assigned to each historical and contemporary stereotype was used to operationalize each figure.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is the sample size. Using the five most frequently played films in each time frame is similar to five case studies. It is not large enough of a sample to analyze patterns in how blackness is constructed in depth. However, the sample size of the study allow more time to be allotted to the coding of each movie, gaining a richness and quality of the content analyzed. Although some of the content may be unconsciously overlooked, the researcher has the advantage of being able to stop, rewind, pause, and review the films. This ability allows for more thorough coding of the material.

Although the study has limitations, content analysis is the most efficient method of research for this study without examining individuals' perceptions of blackness in 1999 and 2011. An interview would contain rich data and insight into diverse perspectives of blackness; however, it does not allow for a comparison between black owned and white owned BET programming.

FINDINGS

The findings suggest that the race of ownership of BET influences the types of films and images shown. Table 1 shows the race of the people who are creating the black images within the films and the racial makeup of the cast members of the selected films that aired on BET in 1999 and 2011.

Table 1 indicates that between 1999 and 2011 there are more black writers, producers, directors, and all black casts in 2011 when the station is white owned. In 1999, when BET was black owned, the opposite is found – more films were written, produced, and directed by whites. None of the five movies in 1999 were written or produced by a person of color. Black characters were shown less in 1999; three of the five films (60%) contained a mostly white cast and

contained less than five black characters per film. All of the five films aired in 1999 included at least one white role in their casts; thus, none of the films pictured an all black cast.

Table 1: Comparison of Race of Writers, Producers, Directors, and Cast by year, 1999 and 2011			
	Black Owned-1999	**White Owned-2011**	**Total**
Writer(s) Race			
Black	0	7 (100%)	7 (100%)
White	6 (85.71%)	1 (14.29%)	7 (100%)
Unknown	1 (33.33%)	2 (66.67%)	3 (100%)
Producer(s)			
Black	0	10 (100%)	10 (100%)
White	6 (66.67%)	3 (33.33%)	9 (100%)
Unknown	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)
Director(s)			
Black	2 (28.57%)	5 (71.43%)	7 (100%)
White	3 (100%)	0	3 (100%)
Unknown	0	0	0 (100%)
Cast Race			
All Black	0	3 (100%)	3 (100%)
Mostly Black	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	4 (100%)
Mostly White	3 (100%)	0	3 (100%)
All White	0	0	0 (100%)

By 2011 BET was White owned but the films were more frequently written, produced, and directed by African Americans. All of the five movies had a black director. Three of the five films (60%) had all black casts, while the remaining two films were coded as having "mostly black" casts that contained less than five white characters.

Table 2 shows the five most frequently shown films on BET in 1999. BET aired a movie as a part of their prime time programming 82 times. The top five most frequently aired films made up 36 of the total 82 instances (43.91%) where movies were played on the cable network.

Of the five films, four were set in urban settings that included New York, New York and Los Angeles, California. The one movie that was not set in an urban location, *I Spy Returns*, was

the most frequently aired film in 1999 and took place in Vienna, Austria. Three of the five films

displayed lower class living while two of the five films presented their characters in the middle

class.

Table 2: Five Most Frequently Played Films on BET in 1999		
	Number of times played	**%**
I Spy Returns	11	30.56%
Rebound: The Legend of Earl "The Goat" Manigault	8	22.22%
Full Eclipse	7	19.44%
Daybreak	5	13.89%
Strapped	5	13.89%
Total	N= 36	100%

When the occupations presented in the films were analyzed it was found that three of the

five movies (60%) featured a main character with a job in Law Enforcement. Two films (40%)

displayed their characters as both gun or drug dealers and domestic laborers. The remainder of

occupations that were presented in 1999 included a college French professor, social activist,

bicycle courier, and fast food cashier-images. In general, all the characters in the films adhered to

traditional gender roles. Four out of five films (80%) contained story lines that were told from a

male character's perspective. *Daybreak* was the only movie that was presented from a female's

point of view, but this character was a white woman; thus none of the movies contained a plot

that was addressed from black women's perspective. All of the films aired in 1999 displayed

only heterosexual relationships. Three out of the five films (60%) contained interracial sexual

relationships- two instances of a black man in a relationship with a white woman and one

occurrence of a white man with a black woman.

In 2011 BET included the airing of a film in its programming 433 times. The five most

frequently played films that made up the coded sample accounted for 61 of the 433 times

14.08%) a movie was aired in that year. Table 3 lists the titles and frequencies of BET's five

most aired films in 2011.

These five films were set in three different areas. Where the most frequently played film

in 2011, *Preacher's Kid*, took place in the small town of Augusta, Georgia, the second and third

most aired movies, *Not Easily Broken* and *The Perfect Holiday*, were set in the suburbs of Los

Angeles and New Jersey. The settings of the films *Baby Boy* and *Barbershop* were urban areas,

with the former set in South Central Los Angeles and the latter the South Side of Chicago.

Table 3: Five Most Frequently Played Films on BET in 2011		
	Number of times played	**%**
Preacher's Kid	16	26.23%
Not Easily Broken	13	21.31%
The Perfect Holiday	12	19.67%
Baby Boy	10	13.89%
Barbershop	10	13.89%
Total	61	100%

Two of the five films (40%) portray middle class families. The socioeconomic settings of

the remaining three films are equally distributed among the following classes: lower (20%),

working (20%), and upper (20%). Characters that occupied these settings were found to have

various occupations. Two of the five films (40%) displayed characters that were professional

singers or rappers. Both drug dealers or criminals and small business owners were also found in

two out of five movies. The rest of the occupations that were presented in 2011 included a

Bishop, real estate agent, contractor, part-time mall employee, low wage position at a telephone

company, and barber. In two of the five films (40%) women had a higher income than their male

significant other.

All of the five most played films by BET in 2011 exhibited a traditional family structure, but two films also displayed a matriarchy. All intimate relationships in the films were heterosexual and two of the five movies (40%) presented interracial sexual relationships or encounters. In the two most frequently aired films, *Preacher's Kid* and *Not Easily Broken*, religion and reconnecting with God was found to be the cure for broken or damaged relationships. Three out of five films (60%) contained instances of men physically abusing their female love interest.

Table 4 compares the number of the characters in 1999 and 2011 that were coded as being various stereotypical black figures. These figures include both traditional and contemporary stereotypes. In addition, Table 4 displays what socioeconomic class and context these images were placed in.

Table 4: Compariosn of frequency of Stereotypical Black Characters by year, 1999 and 2011									
	Socioeconomic class								
	1999				2011				TOTAL
Traditional Figures	*L*	*W*	*M*	*U*	*L*	*W*	*M*	*U*	
Buck	1		1						2
Mammy	2								2
Uncle Tom			1				1		2
Tragic Mulatto									0
Contemporary Figures									
Criminal/Gansta	2		1		3	2		1	9
Black Lady			3				1		4
Bitch						3			3
Athlete	1						1		2
Bad Black Mother	1					1			2
Player					1		1		2
Black Buddy/Sidekick			1						1
Educated Black Bitch							1		1
Sissy/Gay Snap Queen									0
Total	7	0	7	0	4	6	5	1	30

All ten films contained at least one stereotypical image. The five most frequently aired films in 1999 portrayed a total of fourteen stereotypical figures. In addition, the images coded in the 1999 films were restricted to the lower or middle class with seven (50%) lower class images and seven (50%) middle class images. On the other hand, the five most frequently aired films in 2011 displayed sixteen stereotypical figures, portraying at least one stereotypical figure in each of the four socioeconomic classes. Some stereotypical images such as Tragic Mulatto and the Sissy or Gay Snap Queen were not represented in either sample.

In both the films aired in 1999 and the films aired in 2011 the most frequently pictured stereotypical image was the Criminal or Gangsta. This specific figure accounted for three of the fourteen (21.4%) total stereotypical figures found in the movies played in 1999 and six of the sixteen (37.5%) total stereotyped images in the 2011 films. Characters coded as Criminals or Gangstas were male characters that were most often found to be lower class, inherently violent, hyper heterosexual, hyper masculine, and materialistic. The Criminal or Gangsta figure attempted to gain power, respect, and social mobility by dealing drugs, selling guns on the street, robbing people, killing, or pursuing a gangsta rap career.

The second most recurring images in 1999 and 2011 were stereotypes of black women. Three of the total fourteen stereotypical black images presented in the 1999 films were coded as being the Black Lady figure. Found strictly in the middle class, the Black Lady images were found to put their jobs or personal goals above everything else in their lives. In addition, these women were portrayed as being tough, independent, smart, desexualized, and were aggressive or subordinate only when appropriate.

The movies aired in 2011 displayed sixteen stereotypical characters, in comparison to the 14 stereotypical characters found in 1999. In accounting for three of these sixteen images, the

bitch figure was the second most presented figure in the 2011 films. The bitch characters were working class women who were controlling, aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy. Even though these women were often confrontational and actively aggressive, the men controlled these bitches' sexuality.

DISCUSSION

Hall's model was used to navigate through the research and findings to help understand the concepts of how BET uses films to encode meanings of blackness to the channel's audience and who really defines blackness. The encoding and decoding model was conceptualized on two levels. First, the films themselves are encoded by the filmmakers with preferred meanings of blackness with the intention of being decoded by those who go to see or purchase the film. The owners of BET decode the films as they search for images of blackness in these movies to inject into their programming. How these black images are understood and decoded depends on the gender, class, and race of the owner, and of course part of this is at the hands of the staff. More important is how these images reflect the portrayal of blackness that is desired by BET. BET then uses these images to encode their network with their desired signs of blackness.

Another way to conceptualize Hall's model is from a more broad perspective. White owned media conglomerates dominate the cable arena. In order for BET to survive and excel in this structure, BET must appeal to, and to an extent reflect, the ideology of the conglomerates. The white, capitalistic values and race ideology are encoded in BET as it conforms to this structure to remain appealing and non-threatening to the power structure. In turn, BET codes its images of blackness in ways that reflect the ideologies of the dominant culture. These stereotypical images of blackness are then consumed and perpetuated in society. Providing positive and diverse images of blackness may have deterred conglomerates like Viacom from

buying the network, losing Robert Johnson money. Thus, as a true product of the capitalist structure, BET chooses money over fruitful representation of blackness. In addition, Johnson's subsequent success tokenizes him and makes the creation and operation model of BET to be understood as something that African Americans should ingest and mimic to be successful. In this broad sense, those who are in power in the capitalist structure are the ones in charge of creating the image of blackness.

Hall notes that the transmission of dominant meaning requires a material substratum to reach its desired audience. This idea illustrates the purpose of BET as the channel is marketed in the cable television arena as a tactful way to socialize African Americans to a specific image of what it means to be black in the United States. Thus, one may conclude that the films that are aired on BET are strategically shown and used as vessels to transmit the owners' preferred meaning. Using this logic, one can argue that as BET's target audience may change, reaching out to tap into white suburban, male consumers, the portrayal of blackness may become more and more stereotypical.

Blackness may have a different meaning on other channels or networks according to who is producing their images and their target audience. However, the fact that BET markets itself as a network for African Americans forces viewers of all backgrounds to assume that these images are what is really black. White BET viewers may take this boxed presentation of perceived authenticity and use it to label African Americans around them as truly black or not. Where it may seem that this may open up opportunity to some blacks that do not find their image presented on BET, a sort of passing or whitening, it strips African Americans of a piece of their identity, does not allow or respect self-identification, and gives whites more power in categorizing people of color and assigning them status.

Previous literature such as Benschoff (2009) argued that "black films" are weary of producing images of successful interracial relationships or homosexuality. The research ran congruent with Benschoff's claims as only 40 percent of the films produced by African American filmmakers in 2011 displayed interracial relationships. In addition, self-identified bi-racial characters, the product of implied interracial relationships, were non-existent in all of the films. In addition, black homosexuality was also erased by BET, leaving a group of African Americans unrepresented and creating a one-dimensional presentation of black sexual identity.

The study found that when BET was black owned in 1999 the channel aired films that were written, directed, and produced by whites, and yet it contained less stereotypical black images. These results may be due to the fact that among the most frequently aired films in 1999, three of the five films had casts that were mostly white-thus these films displayed a lower number of black main characters that could be coded as stereotypical. It is also possible that there were fewer black produced films in 1999 for the owner to choose from, leaving mostly white produced films to be aired. However, this does not seem very likely as the 1990's marked increased creation and consumption of commercial and independent "black films." One could also entertain the idea that the original founder and owner of BET, Johnson, may have purposefully gave air time to the films of white producers as a way of making his network more appealing to prospective white investors and accepted by the white ran cable networking system.

On the other hand, when white owned in 2011, BET aired films that were largely written, directed, and produced by black filmmakers, and pictured more stereotypical images than the 1999 films. The increased number of stereotypical images in the black produced films aired in 2011 may be a reflection of the limitations black filmmakers face discussed by Gillespie (2007) and Benschoff (2009). The authors argue that the African American films that reach a

wide audience are the films that Hollywood allows to be produced and distributed. Capitalist and white dominated Hollywood puts black filmmakers in a position where if black producers want to make money, they have to produce movies that black audiences will pay to see, but do not threaten the white power structure. As a result, "black films" rarely challenged the ideologies of "white patriarchal capitalism" that is held by the dominant culture (Benschoff 2009).

Another possible explanation for the increased number of stereotypical images in black produced films involves Fisher's study. Fisher (2009) argued that white viewers of "black films" use preconceived understandings and expectations of blackness to judge the level of realism in the film. White viewers who may have little or no interaction with people of color equate the stereotypes found in hood and black films with authenticity. In order to reach a larger, whiter audience, BET may include films that include more stereotypical images of blackness. What is perceived as authentic sells.

A limitation of this study is that the films are not produced by BET and therefore the channel does not directly construct the images presented in the films. However, BET has access to many movies and chooses which films fall into their desired definition of blackness. BET still is responsible for the images they choose to air and all of their programming reflects their race ideology and representation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, who is producing images of blackness is important. The context and power associated with blackness changes when a black man is the one defining versus a white man. Likewise, who is profiting off of the commoditization of culture must also be taken into account. It is important as researchers and consumers of media to recognize the capitalist system that media is produced in. Producers of images in media have certain limitations placed on them by

those in power that can stifle the number and type of images exposed to the audience. In addition, the capitalist system causes many to choose between revenue and producing empowering images. Marginalized populations should not have their culture exploited by the media for white gain. In the lucrative and controversial business of commoditizing culture black people are both consumers and the product to be consumed. It is the selling of black bodies for the benefit of a white system that is comparable to slavery.

In order to gain more insight into this issue, future studies should compare the portrayal of blackness on BET with respect to ownership by analyzing the structure of BET's programming. In order for more multi-dimensional images of blackness to be present on networks such as BET, there needs to be more variety of "black film" or black programming, such as the inclusion of independent productions. The power structure of media production must be altered to allow more opportunity for African American producers and consumers.

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