

A Literature Review of Black Women's Portrayal in Media and Its Effects on Their  
Treatment in Society

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### **Abstract**

Black women are often discriminated against by members of society based on the relationship between their race and their gender. They are often left out of women's rights movements because of their Blackness and out of Black rights movements because of their womanhood. Thus, what consistent advancements can be made while they are wedged in a gap that most members of society are not aware exists? This crossroads at which Black women are mistreated is known as intersectionality and is at this intersection where their struggles for advancement are not based solely on their race or gender but a combination of both. These unique experiences that Black women face because of their intersectionality can often be attributed to stereotypical representations in media that cast Black women as either, ill-tempered, increasingly sexual, or incredibly caregiving. Such stereotypes are rooted in negative views created about Black women during the slavery era as justification for mistreatment. The main stereotypes in which Black women are often casted as are the Sapphire, the Jezebel, and the Mammy. Though these stereotypes have evolved over time, with these as well as numerous other variations being present in modern media, they all contribute to the same issue of Black women of all ages facing discrimination in educational and professional workspaces, as well as everyday life. This literature review discusses the concept of intersectionality as well as the historical and media origins of the main stereotypes. Furthermore, it discusses how depiction in media may impact mistreatment of Black women in society. The purpose of this literature review is to discuss how the treatment Black women face in society may be influenced by media portrayal. The study serves to compile bodies of literature that not only inform members of society about the concept of intersectionality and Black women's caricatures of Blackness, but also speak to how they relate to each other and Influence discrimination.

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## A Literature Review of Black Women's Portrayal in Media and Its Effects on Their Treatment in Society

I am Black and I am a woman; however, my identity is not mutually exclusive to the experiences of either of these two groups. Thus, I am Black and I am a woman but I am a Black woman. I grew up understanding that my race and gender participated in a co-dependent relationship with one another. In high school, I was not always treated with the same respect as my Black male counterparts who commanded authority because of their male identification nor was I granted the same treatment as my White female peers whose White privilege seemed to often supersede most gender discrimination. Unfortunately, it seems that my own experiences, as well as those of my mother, my sister, and most every other Black woman in this nation do not seem to be criteria enough for validation. Members of society that do not fall into our category force us to choose between our race and our womanhood. For people who do not live a life that requires acknowledgement of the distinct relationship between the two identities, why does it matter? Such blinded oppression has been systemically rooted in the United States for centuries and for quite some time has existed unnamed. In 1989, however, Kimberlé Crenshaw published literature that analyzed the stark difference in treatment Black women face in contrast to their Black male and White female counterparts. She labeled the distinguishable identity crossroads “intersectionality.”

### **Background**

Crenshaw writes, “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). In her literature, she discusses a case against General Motors in which Black women, who were not being employed, claimed the company participated in

discriminatory practices. They appealed to the court on the basis that only White women and Black men were being hired. Though for this reason the company was not technically discriminating against potential employees because of their race or gender, Black women were falling through the cracks of laws that did not account for their intersectionality. Expectedly, the court ultimately ruled that the case held no standing; the plaintiffs' claim of sex discrimination was unfounded as women were being hired by the company and the race discrimination accusation found to be unsupported because the company was also hiring Black employees. Though losing the case was undesired, the primary issue to be acknowledged is the disregard for the precarious predicament Black women's intersecting identities place them in.

Though the company did hire women, they were only hiring White women and, upon being forced to hire Black employees following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, they were only hiring Black men. Thus, the Black women filing suit had no discriminatory proof according to the law; General Motors was fulfilling all requirements in terms of hiring disadvantaged groups. The law did not account for the effects of intersectionality. Such invisible oppression is difficult to combat because the majority of people informed enough to fight it are those who experience it. It is those whose hardships are typically also invisible or, even worse so, simply ignored. The life experiences of each Black woman are not universally the same, but they are similar and furthermore the recognition of such hardships is typically considered insignificant. However, there is an interesting dichotomy that comes in the intentional disregard to understand the true experiences of Black women in society and how regularly Black women are portrayed in the media. It is as if people have chosen to create what they are as opposed to doing the research to truly find out.

For centuries, Black women have been branded with three distinctive stereotypes: Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire (Harris-Perry, 2011). The Jezebel idea is rooted in the assumed hypersexualizing of African-American women. Black women are often portrayed as sexual beings who are lascivious by nature and willing to give themselves away to whoever is willing to take. Many Black women agree that they are either stereotyped as being too sexual or not sexual at all (Harris-Perry, 2011). Sapphire is the hot-tempered and often bitter bulldozer of a black woman who lacks the soft, quiet nature that many people equate with femininity (Harris-Perry, 2011). This stereotype casts Black women as angry and volatile and can be depicted by characters such as Bernadine Harris in *Waiting to Exhale*. Lastly, Mammy reiterates the idea that women are resilient and thus are forced into the role of the sacrificing and nurturing caregivers (Harris-Perry, 2011). The Mammy is the opposite of both of her counterparts in being gentle and typically non-sexual in nature. This stereotype was named after Mammy herself, a Black female character in *Gone with the Wind* tasked with caring for everyone. These stereotypes have permeated both historical and contemporary culture, and are a driving force for the discrimination Black women face daily.

There is a lack of knowledge regarding the creation of such stereotypes and their infiltration into modern media. The stereotypes of Black women find their origin in negative views forced onto Black enslaved women during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and have maintained their place as consistent influences in how Black women are portrayed in media past and present. The unawareness of this impact has fed a deep-rooted ignorance of how these stereotypes affect the oppressive manner in which Black women are treated in society. Simply put, Black women are treated the way they are because the vast majority of people



are unaware that the media they consume, the things they watch, see, and are fed to stereotype Black women as influence how they are viewed and subsequently interacted with.

The social cognitive theory accounts for the influence of mass media on a person's thoughts and beliefs about identity-based groups. Bandura (2009) explains that "human nature is a vast potentiality that can be fashioned by direct and observational experience into a variety of forms within biological limits" (p. 266). Simply put, the behavior people display towards each other, and, in many cases, towards racial groups can find a root cause in what they have seen, heard, or otherwise experienced; in regards to media, this can be what is seen, heard, or watched through various mediums such as television shows, movies, and music videos. The consistent inclusion of stereotypical Black female characters in media offers a narrow-minded view of who Black women are and how they behave and with White people not often having the opportunity to co-mingle with a variety of personality types of Black women especially, the development of their beliefs depends heavily on media portrayal (Entman, 2010).

The angry, Black woman who is portrayed on TV that threatens others is often mistaken for the Black woman mistreated in the grocery store who stood up for herself. The sexually lascivious Black woman often portrayed in hip-hop music videos often seen as interchangeable with the single Black mother walking around a neighborhood. These stereotypes are not simply caricatures that live inside a box but are, unknowingly to many, the Black women that they think they see every day. Black women are not, by nature, angry or bitter, nor are they inherently sexually provocative or nurturing caregivers, but it is difficult to understand this when the majority of portrayals about Black women assert differently. People discriminate against Black women often unknowingly due to perceived

connotations garnered from various forms of media. Thus, this literature review aims to inform the reader and to provide a source of discussion for how the media portrays Black women and how those portrayals influence society's perceptions of and behavior towards the group.

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss how the treatment Black women face in society may be influenced by media portrayal. The study serves to compile bodies of literature that not only inform members of society about the concept of intersectionality and Black women's caricatures of Blackness, but also speak to how they relate to each other and influence discrimination. Our treatment in society is consistently influenced by our portrayal in various forms of media such as movies, television shows, and music videos (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008; Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2010). This is due in part to the intersectional nature of the race and gender identities. While there is varying literature on the meaning of intersectionality and media's generalizations of Black women, there is not much literature that synthesizes the topics together; there is a lack of research that explains not just how Black women are stereotyped but why they are stereotyped in the way they are and how it influences discrimination.

This is done by providing a brief discussion of the research methods, to be followed by a review of the literature and studies surrounding the topic of intersectionality, Black women's depiction in media, and the portrayal's influence on the oppression of Black women in society. How does intersectionality differentiate a Black woman's experience from that of Black men and White women? In what ways are Black women stereotypically portrayed in media? In what ways are Black women discriminated against by members of

society and how does media portrayal influence this? These are questions this literature review addresses. This research aims to inform readers that the experiences of Black women are not able to be separated from and confined to just the experiences of Black citizens and of female citizens; our experience is uniquely defined by the intersection of the two.

Furthermore, to discuss how Black women's stereotypes transcend into media and what influence such depictions may have on how they are discriminated against in real life.

### **Method**

For this study, various scholarly databases were, including JStor and Academic Search Premier, were utilized. The searches included key terms such as "Black," "African-American," "Women," "Blackness," "Stereotypes," "Jezebel," "Sapphire," and "Mammy." While the searches did result in some literature regarding the topic, the results were not as robust as was hoped or expected. Several foundational articles were discovered with these search terms and found the majority of other articles from the references of these initial articles. The articles were read and separated based on their primary themes into specified categories for synthesizing purposes.

### **Conclusion**

In drawing attention to the history of Black women's stereotypes and their relationship with the media and discrimination, this literature review begins with a discussion of the parameters in which this search took place. The review then considers the concept of intersectionality, as well as the historical context of the most prevalent stereotypes of Black women and how they relate to modern-day caricatures. Furthermore, the review discusses how these stereotypes are portrayed in media and to what extent it impacts how Black women are mistreated in society.

## **Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methods used to research the topic of this literature review. The design of the search is discussed followed by the purpose of the search and what procedures were used.

### **Design**

This literature review incorporated the use of scholarly databases to research articles pertaining to the subject topic. Upon finding qualified resources, the articles were read with special attention paid to any references that could also be reviewed independently for relevance to the subject matter. Though several articles were multi-faceted in discussing any combination of the topics of intersectionality, the history of Black women's stereotypes, and the portrayal of Black women in media, upon annotation they were separated into these categories, "Portrayal in Media," "Caricatures/Stereotypes," "Societal Sentiment," and "Intersectionality." The majority of articles fell within the first three categories. Based on these guidelines, this review synthesizes articles according to each category's sole significance and their relationship to each other.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss how the treatment Black women face in society may be influenced by media portrayal. The study serves to compile bodies of literature that not only inform members of society about the concept of intersectionality and Black women's caricatures of Blackness, but also speak to how they relate to each other and influence discrimination.

### **Procedures**

The process of completing this review included first referencing the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw in defining intersectionality and discussing its relevance. The next step included finding articles that explained the history of the stereotypes of Black women as well as how they are portrayed by and have evolved in the media. Furthermore, this review discusses how these topics both influence and cause discrimination against Black women in society.

### **Defining Intersectionality**

The preliminary literature search centered on information previously known about the topic, specifically an article by Kimberlé Crenshaw titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (Crenshaw, 1989.) With this article serving as the basis for the definition of “intersectionality,” attention was given to finding literature discussing the stereotypes of Black women, the portrayal of Black women in media, and the treatment of Black women in society.

### **Search Procedures**

The databases linked to the UNC libraries website were primary resources with an initial search using Academic Search Premier. Terms searched were “Black or African-American or African American,” “women,” and “stereotypes,” and this search yielded multiple articles discussing stereotypes of Black women in media. While several articles found related specifically to the connection between the portrayal of Black women in media and how the group is treated in society, for the purpose of this research, these search terms were too broad. The articles began to discuss the relationship between the depiction of Black women in media and how it affects the behavior of Black women and, even more broadly,

the portrayal of all Black people, both men and women, in media. The focus of the study is not the Black race as a whole nor how Black women treat themselves based on their self-perception. Thus, the initial focus was finding literature that discusses the history and meaning of the main stereotypes of Black women. From previous knowledge that the main caricatures include the “Mammy,” the “Jezebel,” and the “Sapphire,” the first two terms from the aforementioned search were kept but “stereotypes” was replaced with “Mammy or Jezebel or Sapphire.” From 4 pages of this search in the database, only 3 articles pertaining directly to the subject were found. At this point, this database was no longer yielding more results for the topic and the search shifted to the JSTOR database.

For the initial search in this database, the same keywords from the previous database were used: “Black or African-American or African American,” “women,” and “stereotypes.” This yielded few pertinent results after looking through several pages of articles, and the search shifted to articles discussing the relationship between stereotypes of Black women and treatment by others in society. The first two search categories from previous searches in regards to race and gender were kept the same but “perception” and “society,” were added which yielded multiple articles that pertained to Black American’s self-perception, health issues among Black Americans, and educational success of the group. “Society” was removed and the search yielded similar results. “Perception” was changed to “treatment,” in hope that the change in vocabulary would result in more related articles but that was not the case. Semi-related articles were found that discussed the treatment of Black Americans in general but with no specific focus on women. One last attempt was made with this database by adding “stereotype” to the aforementioned search terms but after looking through several pages of the articles, still found only a few that pertained to the subject. At this point, the

decision was made to begin looking at the bibliographies of articles already found for any further research on the topic. This is where the majority of the articles used for this study were found.

## Literature Review

This chapter explores how the concept of intersectionality separates the experiences of Black women from those of their Black male and White female counterparts. It then discusses how modern-day stereotypes have evolved from three main prevalent stereotypes rooted in views of Black women created during the antebellum era. Attention is also given to how these stereotypes are portrayed in various types of media and how these generalizations influence the treatment of both adolescent and adult Black women. This literature review aims to reference the concept of intersectionality in drawing attention to the extent that the stereotypes of Black women have held a place in society, and how their consistent prevalence in various forms of media influences how Black women are discriminated against in everyday life.

### Intersectionality

“We should first worry about raising up Black men and then Black women can follow and be raised too,” a Black male friend explained to me in discussing what approach the Black community should take in the fight for racial equality. It is to be emphasized that this discussion was in regards to racial equality specifically, not to include the sex discrimination Black women also face. Such disregard for the unique discrimination Black women face based on both race and gender is not simply a modern characteristic of society. In 1976, five Black women filed suit against General Motors in a case that came to be known as *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*. Their complaint alleged that the company had discriminated against Black women, but the case was rejected on grounds that Black women specifically did not qualify as a special class of which could pursue protection against discrimination because the case was not alleging discrimination against Black people nor



women as a whole (Crenshaw, 1989). The rationale was that women had been hired and, even though only White women were hired, there could not be sex discrimination present. The plaintiffs were then told that if they were alleging race discrimination and, for the purposes of expedition, they should collaborate with an outstanding case against the company surrounding race discrimination, but this would defeat the purpose (Crenshaw, 1989). Such a consolidation would include Black men, but that defeated the purpose; the claim was made to draw attention and receive justice for the combination of both race and sex discrimination, a combination that Kimberlé Crenshaw coined “intersectionality.”

*DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* was simply one case of many to follow in which Black women’s experiences were consolidated into oblivion. Cases that fought sex discrimination were to include all women and any victory would likely result in advancement for White women because of their privilege in race. Similarly, any attempt to combat racial discrimination would be a victory for Black men who, though disadvantaged racially, still held a gender status that benefitted from a patriarchal system. Kimberlé Crenshaw states that “the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women’s and Black men’s experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.143). Such assertion applies visibly in regards to Black women’s attempt to fight sex discrimination. In *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter, Inc.*, Tommie Moore, a Black woman, alleged both race and sex discrimination within the company but was denied the right to be a class representative in the sex discrimination complaint because she was said to not be claiming discrimination as just a woman but as a Black woman specifically. Thus, it was doubted whether she could represent the desires or beliefs of White women that also worked at the company. (Crenshaw, 1989, 144).

One might question would not the same ring true if a White woman from the company were chosen to represent in the case? Would it not follow that a White woman may not be able to represent the needs of the Black women employees just as vice versa? Though this would seem to be the case, this is not how the logic often followed. For generations, Black women have been expected to sacrifice their racial injustice for the advancement of their womanhood. Since their creation, feminist movements have worked diligently to advance the rights of White women under the guise of advancing the rights of “all women.”

During the nineteenth century, in what historians consider to be the first wave of feminism, advancements towards women’s suffrage and political representation were underway, but due to the racist nature of the time, Black women were not typically the women being discussed. Though Black women did experience similar yet worse treatment attributed, in part, to their gender, they were still Black and their intersectionality equated to exclusion from any progress by the movement (Flexner, 1975). During this era, Sojourner Truth challenged such exclusionary ideology regarding Black women’s intersectionality at a time in which the relationship between these two identities had yet to be named. When rising to speak, her White female counterparts pled with her to not do so; they feared that her race would not allow her to focus solely on women’s rights and would inevitably turn to race and the necessary emancipation of slavery that had yet to come (Crenshaw, 1989). She delivered her now renowned speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” which focused on the mistreatment of women but also her experiences of an even greater discrimination that came at the crossroads of her Blackness and her womanhood.

She stated and questioned, “Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?” (McQueen, 2015, p. 97). Not

only are Black women often not permitted to speak on behalf of women for fear of lack of inclusivity of the desired rights of all women, but the needs of the group are often misrepresented by White female counterparts who are often at the forefront of discussions regarding sex discrimination. Crenshaw explains that the exclusion of Black women is, “...reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women*,” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 154).

However, as exclusionary as the fight for gender equality may be, it is not to be overlooked that the fight for racial justice is equally as ignorant of the individual experiences of Black women.

In 1984, *Vuyanich v. Republic National Bank of Dallas*, a Black woman sued the company for discrimination after being fired due to a “personality clash” with workers in the department, though it was evident that it was due to her interracial marriage with a White man. Her termination followed a conversation with her supervisor regarding how the world “was not ready for mixed marriages” (*Vuyanich v. Republic National Bank of Dallas*, 1979). Because this discrimination was based on a racial factor she attempted to file suit, but she was denied the ability to do so because Black men’s and women’s experiences conflict in such a manner that Black women would not truly be able to represent the extent to which Black men are discriminated against. Black women are often caught between a rock and a hard place in attempting to represent themselves and fully express the unique crossroads their identities create without excluding the problems of both Black people and women as whole groups. In relating the struggle of Black women’s advancement to that of sequestered individuals trying to escape, Kimberlé Crenshaw states,

If Black women cannot conclusively say that “but for” their race or “but for” their gender they would be treated differently, they are not invited to climb through the

hatch but told to wait in the unprotected margin until they can be absorbed into the broader, protected categories of race and sex (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152).

It is this inability to be molded into the trope of discrimination that caused the creation of boxes into which Black women are forced to fit. There are strict categories that define what Black women are and how they are to behave and it is such intersectionality that sparked the creation of the stereotypes of Black women often portrayed in media.

### **Historical Origin of the Stereotypes of Black Women**

#### **The Sapphire**

During slavery, the epitome of femininity was associated with White women and Black women were characterized as one of several opposites. They were laboring workers wielding the physical strength to labor in the fields with their male counterparts or nagging women who aggressively ran off their loved ones (West, 2012). This perceived reality masked the truth that Black women faced continuous grief and pain through the sales of their children, husbands, and other loved ones throughout slavery that often rightly manifested itself as anger. Furthermore, with the overwhelming absence of male figures in Black families, Black women were forced to take on the role of head of household and provide for their families. The continuous decline of the social status of Black Americans was blamed on those who had the least amount of support and resources to fight back against the real social and economic policies that were crippling the Black community. It was blamed on Black women (West, 2012).

The Sapphire character in the 1920s radio series *Amos n' Andy*, depicted as a Black wife attempting to assimilate into Black culture, personified a stereotype that had already permeated and negatively influenced members of society. Her character and subsequently the

stereotype depicted a woman who, according to Kretsedemas (2010), “browbeat her male romantic partners and was usually obsessed with status climbing” (p. 151). As a dominant within the Black romantic relationship, such relationships within the Black community were depicted to be laughable inversions of White male-female romantic relationships which were the accepted norm. The portrayal of Sapphire and the antithesis of this norm supported already existing ideas that the Black community was incapable of exhibiting White behavior, the superior behavior (Kretsedemas, 2010). The Sapphire stereotype can often overlap with the idea of the Black woman as a matriarch, described by Tyree (2011) to be “an emasculating, controlling, and contemptuous woman who berates her male loved one” (p. 398). Both stereotypes depict a woman capable of belittling a man and of whom, when crossed, one should be cautious.

### **The Jezebel**

The root of sexual exploitation of Black women lies in beliefs regarding Black women as property, a belief that originated with the beginning of the North Atlantic slave trade in 1619. Upon initial arrival in Jamestown and subsequent arrivals that followed, Black women were stripped of their clothes, dehumanized to the extent of being worth only the perceived value of their body parts and ability to reproduce (West, 2012). As property, their White counterparts were allowed to treat Black women as they saw fit, which often included White men committing sexual violence against the group. In order to validate such sexual terrorism, White citizens created the Jezebel stereotype which branded Black women as sexually promiscuous beings that desired sexual behavior and were unable to display morality (Sewell, 2013). The logic ensued that Black women could not technically be raped or sexually victimized because they always desired sex. Regardless of what their words were,

whatever acts of sexuality were committed towards them were, even at just an innate level, considered to be wanted (West, 2012). Despite its antiquated origin, this stereotype of Black women has yet to face any deviation of influence within American society. Though sitcoms of the 1980s and 1990s such as *The Cosby Show*, *Living Single*, and *A Different World* attempted to rebrand Black women in a manner that negated the oversexualized persona, most advancement on this front was negated by the rise of hip hop and rap music videos which reintroduced the Jezebel stereotype by exploiting Black women (Lundy, 2017).

### **The Mammy**

The Mammy stereotype, like most other stereotypes of Blackness, stems from the antebellum era. With the Black women divided into field hands and house slaves, those working in the house came to become a representation of subservient Blackness. Their ability to serve Whites was rooted in their lack of sexuality and devotion to care (Sewell, 2013). While the Jezebel caricature stemmed from the needs of slave masters to breed their own property following the abolition of the slave trade, the Mammy character was created to be the antithesis of sexual immorality among Black female slaves. In regards to the duties of the Mammy in the plantation house, Parkhurst (1938) explains, “These were mainly connected with the care of the children of the family, thus relieving the mistress of all the drudgery work connected with childcare” (p. 310). She was portrayed often as a bigger Black woman, typically with broad shoulders and a large chest to exhibit her motherly nature and to contrast with the Eurocentric standards of beauty. This was an attempt to demonstrate her total devotion to her masters and inability to threaten a slave master’s sexual devotion to the lady of the household (Sewell, 2013). It was often speculated that this stereotype was encouraged to placate White women’s fears of interracial sexual exploitations by White men.

## **Stereotypical Portrayals in Media**

The stereotypes of Black women are of the most long-lasting yet seemingly misunderstood within society. A few of the most prevalent and basic in society are that of the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire (Harris-Perry, 2011). These three are directly rooted in White societal views of Black enslaved women and have evolved over time to include a myriad of stereotypes such as the freak or hoe; the Matriarch; the angry, Black woman, and a variety of others. All of the stereotypes, whether one of the original 3 or a later developed variation, hold dominant roles in the media.

### **Sapphire**

Since *Amos n' Andy*, the idea of Black women being overbearing has rooted itself in society through reality TV. Characters such as Omarosa on *The Apprentice*, a who was cast to be self-serving and willing to climb over anyone to make it to the top, reinforce the Sapphire stereotype (Childs, 2005). The type of behavior Omarosa took part in for personal gain is often seen as noteworthy determination among White males and females or Black men, but is seen to be domineering or exhibiting despicable behavior among Black women. Even current reality shows such as *Love & Hip Hop*, a show that caters to Black culture, often portrays Black women as angry and volatile beings who are willing to tussle with anyone at any time. The influence of sitcoms is also not to be ignored. Kretsedemas (2010) completed a qualitative study investigating the depiction of the "Angry Black Woman" narrative on Prime-Time television and it yielded results that were none too surprising. The study was based on the popular 2000s television show *Ugly Betty*. He focused on the portrayal of Black women mainly through the sentiment regarding one of the main characters, Wilhelmina, a lighter-skinned African-American woman (Kretsedemas, 2010).

Her character was a qualified employee for a well-known magazine publication company and was expected to take on the role of editor-in-chief, but was overlooked and the position awarded to the inexperienced son of the company's owner. The show often depicted Wilhelmina as an evil character attempting to have the son fired with a major plotline being the main character, Betty, often foiling Wilhelmina's plots to take over. Participants in the study reiterated their disregard for the character, describing Wilhelmina as the, "evil villain," and stating, "Her priorities are herself," (Kretsedemas, 2010, p. 161). Despite how her portrayal made them feel, many of the same participants did acknowledge that in real life they would likely have been angry as well had they been treated as she had. One white female interviewee stated, "I mean she's not portrayed as a victim but realistically, I mean if you think about the story, she kind of is" (Kretsedemas, 2010, p. 162). A white male concurred claiming that he felt somewhat sympathetic toward Wilhelmina's character (Kretsedemas, 2010). Such commentary recognizes that the behavior of Black women in media is often understandable and relatable but due to the way they are cast, it can be difficult to look past the selfish or volatile behaviors displayed. Subsequently, it can be difficult not to stereotype Black women as unreasonable in expressing any anger they may have.

### **Jezebel**

Though rap and hip-hop is seen to be an avenue for which mistreated Black Americans can share their truth, it often turns into amplification of the Jezebel stereotype. The modern hip-hop and rap genre often includes videos depicting scantily-dressed women serving as accessories to expensive cars or being fondled by the male rappers sponsoring the videos. Even when there is a lack of visual presence of Black women, lyrics in songs often



demean women and categorize them according to their perceived sexuality by calling them “hoes” and “bitches,” emphasizing their body parts and the ability to please men with their bodies.

Popular 1990s and 2000s rappers the Ying Yang Twins rose to fame profiting off of music that mainly dehumanized women, most often Black women. Songs such as “Say I Yi Yi” include lyrics stating, “She shakin' ass and gettin' paid, because she makin' her cheese. She ain't scared to get on the floor to show her ass and titties,” and, “I know them hoers in the club, they ain't twerkin' for free. If she dancin' like she should, she'll make her money. I like them freaky ass hoers, twitchin' asses for me” (Ying Yang Twins, 2002). Lyrics such as these with accompanying video that features sparsely clad women being groped by men with most of their camera time focusing strictly on the movement of their body parts were not uncommon occurrences of the late 1990s nor 2000s era and have since become a staple of the hip-hop and rap community. Even currently popular songs, such as newfound rapper Da Baby’s lyrics in his song “Carpet Burn” include lyrics such as, “Got up with carpet burns (yeah), I just can't help it, Pussy good, it had me stalkin' her (woo), Lock me up, officer (I), Can't get her off me, it's hard for me to get off of her (uh huh)” (Da Baby, 2019). This is yet another example of the disregard for Black women in attempts to offer methods of restoration for the Black community. Unfortunately, music videos are not the only form of media in which Black women are defined by their sexual behaviors.

Reality television has become a dangerous medium depicting Black women as conniving individuals who thrive on their ability to sexually manipulate others. These are Black women who actually own businesses and are thriving economically. Lundy (2018) discusses Black women’s accomplishments being “subdued by sexual subjectification and

the demonstration of demeaning hypersexual, thot-like behavior, reminiscent of the traditional jezebel and mulatto stereotypes” (p. 63). The sexual categorization of Black women has evolved the Jezebel stereotype to include different names and variations such as “freak,” “hoe,” and “thot” (standing for That Hoe Over There) which all align with the Jezebel ideal (Lundy, 2018). The sexual behavior of Black women has become such an integral part of the representation of Black women in modern-day media that multiple sexual scripts, including but not limited to the personification of the “Diva,” “Gold Digger,” “Dyke,” and many more have become subcategorizations of the Jezebel character, all scripts which find their definition in either the presence or lack of sexual behavior in Black women (Stephens & Few, 2007). However, despite the advancement of contemporary media and its expansion to increasingly include negative sub-stereotypes of Black women, those relating to sexual impropriety and promiscuity stem from the initial Jezebel stereotype.

### **Mammy**

Some of the most popular Mammy characters of the 1900s, and even still to be recognized today, were played by Hattie McDaniel. Her most notable role took place in the 1939 classic *Gone with the Wind* in which she coined the name for this specific stereotype by playing the character of Mammy. She played similar characters in the movie *Show Boat* and the radio show *Beulah*, both roles requiring the depiction of a stocky, Black, caregiving mother figure who dedicated herself to the advancement of her White masters (Sewell, 2013). Though McDaniel paved the way for the advancement of not just Black women but the Black community in film by being the first African-American to win an Academy Award in 1940, from the perspective of the Black community her roles were often quite controversial.

The opportunity to represent Black people in television was a great leap from the use of Black face, but she was still considered to be using her talents to further negative interpretations of the role Black women should play in society. She consistently validated the idea that this character was a true representation of Black women were and how they behaved in reality (Sewell, 2013). McDaniel's responded to such controversy, stating, "Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid. If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week being one!" (Bogle, 2003). The generalization of the actions and behaviors of Black women made it difficult for Black female actresses such as Hattie McDaniel to gain employment playing other roles. Slavery had sparked the creation of not just of this caricature of Blackness for women but also of all of the aforementioned and any advancement in regards to their race, gender, or both combined would now have to be preceded by a break in the narrative. The Mammy is still seen in modern movies with the character Aibileen in *The Help*, who was a Black nanny in a film in which every Black woman played the character of a nanny for a White family. However, it is difficult to transform the views of those who have not only been taught but shown for centuries that Black women are either too angry, too sexual, or the White person's caregiver. What have been the effects of the permeation into society of such stereotypes?

### **Societal Sentiment**

The stereotypes of Black women portrayed in the media have been discussed to have a negative impact on the manner in which society treats Black women. The stereotypes previously discussed, the Sapphire, Jezebel, and Mammy, as well as any sub-stereotypes and modern-day versions of these initial ideas have permeated society through the increasing popularity of media outlets such as music videos and television. The generalization in the

media has affected how Black women are viewed and interacted with in the school system for adolescent Black girls, in post-secondary academic settings and the workplace for adult Black women, and in general everyday life for Black women of all ages.

### **Black Female Adolescence**

Adultification is a process by which the concept of childhood is manipulated to, despite similar or same ages, to cast some adolescents in an older light based on their race, gender, or perhaps a combination of both (Epstein, Blake, González, 2017). The categorization of childhood as a period of continuous development and learning marked by a lack of maturity, is what typically exonerates the negative behavior of many youth. The majority of society contends that adolescents either do not know better or are not able to exhibit better behavior. Among Black adolescents and especially among Black girls this willingness to overlook behavior is often not offered due to stereotyping that casts this group as more adult-like and thus requiring a greater accountability for behavior (Epstein et al., 2017). As the concept of childhood evolved into a period of innocence that requires protection, White children began receiving such protections reflecting this change. Unsurprisingly, the treatment of Black children remained virtually unchanged (Ocen, 2015). The lack of growth is likely due to historical behavior of assigning greater consequences to the child-like behavior of Black youth as opposed to their White counterparts (Ocen, 2015). Within the school system, negative responses to the behavior of Black adolescent girls is common, and can often be attributed to notions derived from stereotypes presented in the media. Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darenbourg (2010) conducted research that acknowledged, in regards to stereotypes discussed in this literature review, that “teachers may subconsciously use stereotypical images of Black females...to interpret Black girls’ behaviors

and respond more harshly to Black girls who display behaviors that do not align with traditional standards of femininity in which girls are expected to be docile, diffident, and selfless” (p. 93). This influence is often seen in classrooms where Black girls are treated with greater disdain and disregard for portraying behavior associated with childhood innocence than their White counterparts.

Beginning as early as age 5, Black girls are more likely to be viewed as intentionally behaving as “grown,” or older than their actual age. They are also seen to be more knowledgeable about adult topics, such as sex, which can likely be attributed in part to the circulation of the Jezebel stereotype (Epstein et al., 2017). Researchers conducted a study that adapted a scale that assessed childhood innocence. The study found that in comparison to their White peers, Black adolescent girls are more likely to be perceived as requiring less nurturing, less protection, and less support because they are more independent (Epstein et al., 2017). An example of such adultification occurred in 2012 during an arrest of a 15-year-old Black girl by New York police officers. She was using a Metrocard only valid for youth under 19 and, despite confirmation of her age from both of her parents when contacted, the police officers still perceived her to be 4 years older or greater than her true age. The adolescent was not released until her mother brought her birth certificate to the police station (Paraschandola, 2012). Stereotypes of Black women as sassy, overbearing, and sexually provocative have infiltrated the public consciousness of society, influencing the manner in which Black adolescent girls are treated in their everyday life. Unfortunately, such discrimination is not specific to a category that can be aged out of.

### **Black Female Adulthood**

Morris (2016) states, “Caricatures of Black femininity are often deposited into distinct chambers of our public consciousness, narrowly defining Black female identity and movement according to the stereotypes... As such, in the public’s collective consciousness, latent ideas about Black females as hypersexual, conniving, loud, and sassy predominate” (p. 27). Such stereotypical influences greatly affect the view of Black women in the workplace. In the professional space, the view of Black women as the caregiving Mammy often places them in support-type positions. They often serve as sounding boards for the needs of their White male and female and Black male coworkers due to their perceived comforting nature (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008).

The Jezebel stereotype often causes a lack of credibility for Black women in the workplace because the sexualized components of the caricature cast doubt on the qualifications of professional Black women. Furthermore, it causes questioning of any professional mobility Black women may have. Did she receive the promotion because of her qualifications or because of sexual behavior with a boss or supervisor? (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). The Sapphire’s impact is not much better as it outcasts Black women as rude professionals who are difficult to work with and who are unwilling to compromise. Through the scope of this caricature, in the eyes of other professionals, Black women are seen as too aggressive or too outspoken making them incapable of teamwork and requiring isolation from fellow employees (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Unfortunately, bias such as displayed is not reserved for the workplace.

In a survey study created to analyze the impact of racial stereotypes of women on the relationship between sexuality and motherhood, researchers found that members of society believe Black women to be more likely to participate in sexual activity, more likely to have

been pregnant at some time in the past, and, if pregnant, are less likely to have the father involved in the raising of the child (Rosenthal & Label, 2016). These are all beliefs that have roots in the Jezebel stereotype personifying Black women as having increased sexual tendencies in comparison to their White counterparts. Another study found that in regards to the view of Black women as angry or bitter, Black women are seen to be less influential when expressing anger in group settings. Salerno, Peter-Hagene, & Jay (2017) discuss, “Our results provide the first experimental evidence that expressing anger detracts from Black, but not White, individuals’ influence during group decision making—even when both are making identical arguments and are contributing identical expressions of unambiguous anger” (p. 72). The stereotypes of Black women that are portrayed in media influence the treatment of Black women in most spaces because throughout history and modern-day, Black women are portrayed along the distinctive stereotypical lines that have been discussed.

### **Conclusion**

The stereotypes of Black women are rooted in racist views that derive from the belittlement and mistreatment of Black enslaved women during the antebellum era. The treatment that this group received both in the past and present comes at a unique crossroads of their Blackness and their womanhood which are experiences that are not typically felt by their Black male or White female counterparts. This intersectionality of identities solidifies the prevalence that stereotypes of Black women hold in society and though they have evolved and expanded in nature, they are still strict categories into which Black women are placed that have dominated media portrayal and impacts treatment by members of society. Literature has discussed how the behavior of Black adolescent girls is more likely to be subject to adultification and, consequently, how these adolescents are more likely to be

punished and treated negatively both in the education system and in their everyday life. For Black adult women, these stereotypes influence how their co-workers see them in professional and social spaces causing isolation, low expectations, and difficulties advancing in the workplace. All of these issues stem from negative connotations associated with Black women, connotations that are believed to be true based on the stereotypical ways in which Black women are portrayed in the media.

To speak plainly and concisely, Black women are consistently portrayed in the media to be sexual, naturally caregiving, or bitter, among other things. Since these types of Black women are what many people are exposed to in most things they watch and listen to, there is an association made between what Black women are portrayed to be and who they really are; it can be difficult to believe each Black woman to be a unique, phenomenal individual capable of positive characteristics of any other race or gender if everything shown to members of society says otherwise. It is this lack of differentiation between what is portrayed and what is reality that causes Black women to be discriminated against based on perceived understanding that all Black women are the stereotypes members of society are shown. The issue is that though literature may acknowledge them to be stereotypes, to many people they are not; to members of society, these generalizations are treated as reality.



## Results

In this section the results of this literature review are relayed in the form of a table. The table includes categories based on the most significant topics that persist from the research. The categories are Historical Origin, Media Origin, Characteristics, Contemporary Examples in Media, and Other Variations. Historical origin contains information about the circumstances that caused the stereotypes to be created while media origin discusses specifically how they got their start in media. The Characteristics are what adjectives best describe the stereotypes. The Contemporary Examples in Media relay what modern-day examples there are in media. Other Variations are other names for generalizations that the base stereotypes have evolved into. The category discussing what discrimination they influence is omitted because they all impact the extent to which adolescent females are adultified, how Black women are viewed in the workplace, and how Black women of all ages are treated in real life.

Table 1

*Origins and Characteristics of the Stereotypes of Black Women*

	<b>Mammy</b>	<b>Jezebel</b>	<b>Sapphire</b>
<b>Historical Origin</b>	This stems from desire to create antithesis of Jezebel stereotype. It is most often characterized by house slaves and caregivers.	Black enslaved women were often victims of sexual violence committed by White masters. To justify this, White citizens created this stereotype to claiming that Black women were sexual beings that wanted what was happening to them	Black women were bearing grief of having family sold into slavery and being mistreated. This justly sometimes manifested in anger which was the basis for this stereotype.
<b>Media Origin</b>	Mammy in <i>Gone with the Wind</i> , played by Hattie McDaniel	No official media origin	Sapphire in <i>Amos n' Andy</i>
<b>Characteristics</b>	Kind, caregiving, motherly, non-sexual in nature	Sexually provocative, possessing loose or no morals, nicely shaped	Bitter, "bulldozer", threatening, aggressive
<b>Contemporary examples in Media</b>	Abeline from <i>The Help</i> , played by Viola Davis	Joseline from <i>Love and Hip-Hop</i>	Omarosa from <i>The Apprentice</i> , Wilhelmina from <i>Ugly Betty</i>
<b>Other variations</b>	The Matriarch	Hoe, Freak, Thot, Gold Digger, Dyke	The Angry, Black Woman

## **Discussion**

This section discusses the relationship between this literature review and prior research on the topic, findings that were unanticipated as well as limitations on this review and implications for future practice and discussion of the topic.

### **Relationship to Prior Research**

In comparison to prior research, this literature review serves as a compilation of other bodies of work pertaining to specific parts of the topic that were defined in discussing mainly intersectionality, the stereotypes of Black women, or the discrimination of Black women in society. Some did reference how the most notable stereotypes of Black women relate to the treatment of Black women in professional spaces or did briefly acknowledge the influence of the stereotypes in an overarching study regarding the perception of Black women in society; in regards to intersectionality, most of the research focused mainly on explaining the history of it and its relevance. This literature review serves as a cross between all of the aforementioned, incorporating discussion of the significance of intersectionality in understanding the treatment of Black women in society, the history of the initial stereotypes of Black women as well as how they have evolved, and how their personification in the media influences how Black women are treated in society. Furthermore, this literature review also served as an antithesis in part to related literature in discussing how stereotypes affect behavior toward Black women as opposed to various research that discusses how the stereotypes affect the behavior of Black women.

### **Unanticipated Findings**

The search for this topic yielded several articles discussing a myriad of evolutions of old and creation of new stereotypes of Black women that surpassed the scope of the original

Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. The Jezebel stereotype, originating from the sexual violence toward Black enslaved women during the antebellum era, is the basis for more than 8 varying personifications of Black women in the media (Stephens & Few, 2007). This is not to include modern-day stereotypes inspired by the Mammy, such as the Matriarch, and the Sapphire who has evolved in the Angry, Black woman. The finding of such literature was unanticipated as the complex nature in which Black women are stereotyped is surprising; the discrimination of Black women is often similar but there are a variety of generalizing scopes in which they are viewed.

The articles found firstly on discrimination against Black women specifically within the workplace and how the stereotypes influence how Black women are treated in professional spaces were not expected studies. As the struggles of Black women in society are often minimized and not typically an area of focus for people outside of the community, it was unforeseen to find such in-depth qualitative studies.

### **Limitations**

Limitations on this literature review stem mainly from the lack of literature pertaining specifically to the experiences of Black women in society. While the search did reveal some, it waned in comparison to literature regarding the experiences of all women of color as well as Black people of all genders. Despite trying various search engines and terms, it was difficult to find much literature that did not focus on the history of the stereotypes or how they relate to media. Though this was helpful research and necessary for this review, literature relating to the experiences of Black women in society and how the stereotypes influence discrimination was equally as essential. The difficulty of finding literature regarding specifically Black women simply speaks to the need for future discussion of the

concept of intersectionality and ensuring the representation of Black women in literature and not simply all Black people or all women or women of color.

### **Implications**

This literature review acknowledges the existence of negative stereotyping in the media in relation to the discrimination of Black women by members of society. As the base stereotypes found their origin hundreds of years ago, it is understandable that the inaccuracy of media depictions of Black women has yet to be recognized by the majority of people in the country, but such recognition is necessary. A great deal of discrimination displayed towards Black women is due to preconceived notions about the group that derive from media. If more people are cognizant of the origin of these stereotypes and the many different forms they have evolved into in modern media, they may begin to become cognizant of how their wrongful treatment of Black women has no factual basis or cause. In regards to research, this review acknowledges the lack thereof discussing the mistreatment of Black women based on generalization. The experiences of Black women are unique and that should be represented in the availability of literature to discuss it.

This review also intends to educate members of society on what implicit and explicit biases they may hold against Black women that are rooted in the consumption of these stereotypes. It is likely that some discrimination towards the group is not caused by intentional disregard for the wellbeing of Black women but in the ignorance of how what is seen and heard in media influences behavior in real life. Media depictions of Black men and women often face criticism for presenting characters with one-dimensional personas who lack the complexity of real people. Critics assert that by doing such, Black individuals appear more homogenous (Entman, 2010). Though White members of society may be aware that

peopling sharing an identity still have distinctive, unique traits, the depiction of Black characters in media as the antithesis of this idea makes it difficult for White individuals to understand that not all Black people conform to stereotypes. Discrimination against many groups is often due to a lack of awareness regarding the true nature and beautiful complexity of individual members of the group. That is often increasingly true for the Black race and especially for Black women specifically. It is hoped that discrimination rooted in ignorance, which accounts for a portion of discrimination in society, may decrease in prevalence if more members of society are made aware of how media affects a person's beliefs about racial groups.

### **Conclusion**

The origination of the caricatures of Blackness for Black women stems from the victimization and forced labor of this group during slavery and the years following. The rise of the media, such as radio and cinema, throughout the early 20th century left little avenue for Black women to rise to fame without personifying the stereotypes that amplified their mistreatment. With the expansion of media into music videos and television, these same stereotypes (the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire) continued to grow and evolve into a plethora of generalizations of Black women that have permeated society and influence the manner in which Black women are treated in everyday life. Though treatment based on stereotype-driven beliefs is common for many groups throughout society, it is unique for Black women in that such stereotypes are found at the crossroads of their Blackness and their womanhood which is not of easy comparison to those just identifying with their race or their gender. They are not just Black and they are not just women, they are Black women.

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