THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS ON TELEVISION: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF A DIFFERENT WORLD AND GROWN-ISH

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INTRODUCTION

• 1987-1993
  • Spin-off of *The Cosby Show*: black female daughter (Denise Huxtable) attends Hillman College (HBCU)

• College experience of the female African American lead character

• 2018-present
  • Spin-off of *Black-ish*: black female daughter (Zoey Johnson) attends California University (PWI)

Source: Fan Art TV
Source: Wikipedia Commons
Source: HBCU Buzz
Source: TV Over Mind

Historically Black College or University
Predominantly White Institution
WHY IT MATTERS

The representation of the female AA college student

The representation of the college experience

Who's watching? What are they learning?

PWI non-minority students who have limited first-hand experience with AAs prior to/during college

High school students who have limited knowledge of what to expect in college
LITERATURE REVIEW

- The Social Construction of the African American Family on Television
- Sitcoms and African American Portrayal on Television
- Television as a Vicarious Experience
- Perceived Realism
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY ON TELEVISION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *THE COSBY SHOW* AND *BLACK-ISH*

Textual analysis on *The Cosby Show* and *Black-ish*

How AA family is constructed on television, evolved over time

Similarities in family demographics (well-rounded, educated, suburban)

Differences in willingness to address certain topics such as racial issues and stereotypes

Source: NPR

Stamps (2008)
SITCOMS AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PORTRAYAL ON TELEVISION

Situational Comedy

- Comical, yet expected to be moral
- “The producers seem to have forgotten that you can’t raise a moral issue and play with it—people expect you to solve it. …it exploits social issues without making sense of them”

Berman (1987)
SITCOMS...CONTINUED
African American Portrayal on Television

Minstrelsy Era
(1950 to 1953)
Amos ‘N’ Andy, Beulah

Nonrecognition Era
(1954 to 1967)
Car 54, Where Are You?, Hogan’s Heroes

Assimilation Era
(1968 to 1971)
The Bill Cosby Show*, Julia

Source: Slate Magazine
Source: YouTube
Source: IMDb

(Means Coleman, 2005)
SITCOMS...CONTINUED

African American Portrayal on Television

Lear Era
(1972 to 1983)
Sanford and Son, Good Times, The Jeffersons

Black Family Diversity (Cosby Years)
(1984 to 1989)
The Cosby Show, A Different World, 227

Neo-Minstrelsy Era
(1990 to 1998)
Martin, The Wayans Bros.

Source: Fame Focus
Source: TV Series Finale
Source: CliqueClack

(Means Coleman, 2005)
SITCOMS...CONTINUED

African American Portrayal on Television

Source: Sim International

Source: One News Now

Source: Amazon


Source: ShareTV

Source: DirecTV
TELEVISION AS A VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE

• Vicarious experience: Knowledge gained through means other than direct experience
• Television is a “window on the world” for providing children, families, and communities information otherwise not available to them (Graves 1999)
• Televised role portrayals can lead to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Graves 1999)
• Viewers are likely to believe TV as true to form, serves as knowledge gap for viewers without first-hand experience with another race (Ford 1997)
PERCEIVED REALISM

Five factors that contribute to narrative persuasion, which can then influence individual behavior and societal action (Cho et al. 2012)

- Factuality (Made up or not)
- Typicality (Similar to real life)
- Narrative Consistency (Without contradictions)
- Plausibility (Possible)
- Perceptual Quality (Convincing audio and visuals)

Narrative Persuasion
How was the lead female AA character portrayed?

What is the predominant theme of each episode?

How realistic were the portrayals of the events in each episode?

Did the episode resolve the conflict?

What is the tone of the episode?
• Content analysis of first season of *A Different World* (22 episodes) and *Grown-ish* (13 episodes)
• Unit of analysis: Each episode = one unit
• Coding for:
  – a set of character traits
  – overall theme
  – perceived realism
  – conflict resolution
  – tone
• Analyzed using SPSS Chi Squared Fisher’s Exact Test
METHOD
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

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<th>A Different World</th>
<th>Grown-ish</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
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<td></td>
<td># of total</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
<td>Y/N %</td>
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<tr>
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<td>17</td>
<td>12 (5)</td>
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<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13 (3)</td>
<td>81% (19%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16 (2)</td>
<td>89% (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11 (1)</td>
<td>92% (8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivated</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9 (8)</td>
<td>53% (47%)</td>
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<td>Open-minded</td>
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<td>15 (3)</td>
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<td>Organized</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7 (6)</td>
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<td>Responsible</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12 (6)</td>
<td>67% (33%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12 (5)</td>
<td>70% (30%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sympathetic</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16 (2)</td>
<td>89% (11%)</td>
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</table>
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Predominant Theme of Episodes

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>A Different World</th>
<th>Grown-ish</th>
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<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drugs/Alcohol</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Money</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romantic Relationships</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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</table>
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Quality Perception, Plausible, Consistent Narrative

- Quality Perception:
  - Grown-ish: 100%
  - A Different World: 100%

- Plausible:
  - Grown-ish: 92%
  - A Different World: 95%

- Consistent Narrative:
  - Grown-ish: 100%
  - A Different World: 100%

Typical, Factual

- Typical:
  - Grown-ish: 38%
  - A Different World: 73%

- Factual:
  - Grown-ish: 61%
  - A Different World: 82%
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Tone

- Positive: 100% - A Different World: 70%, Grownish: 0%
- Neutral: 30% - A Different World: 0%, Grownish: 0%
- Negative: 0% - A Different World: 0%, Grownish: 0%

Conflict Resolution

- Yes: 14% - A Different World: 86%, Grownish: 39%
Grown-ish overall more culturally aware and established than A Different World

More provocative and suggestive content in Grown-ish

Grown-ish displays as more imaginative and fictional

A Different World feels more in tune with the real world, with real problems
“…you can’t raise a moral issue and play with it.” (Berman 1987)

What is the tone in the discussion of these topics?

The portrayal of drugs/alcohol, race relations, academics, romantic relationships

Are the resolutions to the conflicts sound and reasonable?

Perceived Realism

Narrative Persuasion

Individual behavior and societal action
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Small sample size of only 35 total episodes analyzed

- Insufficient size to show statistical significance
- Expand sample size to encompass several seasons

Content analysis emphasizes quantitative rather than qualitative data

- Multiple methods suitable for television analysis
- Textual analysis for more in-depth qualitative results

Research not exhaustive in data available in the shows

- Some characteristics and themes unaccounted for or not emphasized
- Implementing an approach that captures full data
SELECTED REFERENCES


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Winthrop University
QUESTIONS?

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HYPOTHESIS

*Grown-ish* will portray more diverse character traits and episode themes

Less perceived realism, resolution of conflict, and serious tone

*A Different World* has more perceived realism, more conflict resolution, and more serious tone

Less diverse character traits and episode themes
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## CODING WORKSHEET

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CODING WORKSHEET ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

What is the predominant theme of the episode?

• a) Friendship b) Academics c) Drugs/Alcohol d) Money e) Romantic Relationships f) Race e) Other

Did the episode help resolve the conflict?

• Yes or No

What is the tone of the episode?

• a) Positive b) Neutral c) Negative