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Policing of Black Women’s Bodies in Online Commentary of *Flavor of Love*

Ebony Artis

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to use thematic analysis on comments posted about Black women on YouTube videos for season two of *Flavor of Love*, which can be connected to stereotypes that were created before reality television got started. Black women are stereotyped in the media in many ways. Reality television helps to broadcast these stereotypes (the Mammy (very motherly), the Jezebel (very sexually positive), and the Sapphire (very rude and “ghetto”) to multitudes of people in their audience. *Flavor of Love* is one of the most watched reality love TV shows marketed towards the African American community (Caruso, 2015). In the comment sections, “real” people are being policed by online commenters. I applied thematic analysis to organize the *Flavor of Love* commentary into clusters: name calling [n=614], ugly [n=429], “real women” and comparison to other women [n=246], pretty [n=185], and sexualizing bodies [n=179]). These clusters help us understand the commentary in relation to Black women, their bodies, ideas of beauty, how they are evaluated in relation to other women, and the correlation between stereotypes and reality television show characters. The findings line up with the three previously stated stereotypes that effect Black women.

Key Terms:

- Online Commentary
- Thematic Analysis
- *Flavor of Love*
- Stereotypes
- Black Women
- YouTube
- Realty Television

Ebony Artis is a 2017 graduate of Xavier from Mobile, Alabama who majored in Communication Studies. Her research interests include topics linked to intersectionality, sexuality, and misogynoir. Artis’ work in XULAneXUS is the result of her senior capstone project in Communication Studies. She also worked with Dr. Tia Smith in Mass Communication on the project “Gender, Race, and Romance in Reality TV.” Artis is currently an intern with the Dollar General Bowl in Mobile, and later plans to attend graduate school.
Introduction

Women worry about many things when it comes to the policing of their bodies because “being a lady” often comes with a list of unwritten cultural rules which women are to follow. Black women’s sexuality has been policed for centuries in particular because of the intersectional connection between being a woman and being African American. A few examples come from stereotypes created for Black women during slavery, such as the Mammy figure, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire (Cox, 2005). This project explores how race influences the way people comment on and police Black women’s bodies by considering YouTube commentary posted in reaction to season two of Flavor of Love, a reality show on VH1. Analyzing commentary in the comment section of YouTube is a method of studying the way we interact and communicate our identities. I will look at how this online platform offers the ability to mask one’s identity while giving personal commentary. Online commentary, and specifically a form of trolling, often has been discredited as lacking credibility because anyone can add to the discourse under platforms such as YouTube. Verification is not required to comment, and the comments are governed only by other YouTubers. Although this is true, the validity or realness of a comment is not as important as the fact that the comment is now on the web to impact others.

The following research questions guide the project: How does race impact the way Black women’s bodies are policed (also known as body politics), which is the practice of society regulating and trying to correct the human body, within online commentary? How do historical stereotypes of Black women relate to the policing of Black women’s bodies? To address these questions, the project focuses on YouTube commentary from Flavor of Love. Since YouTube is a platform that allows individuals to post previews, and then allows public commentary on the uploaded episode, it is the best platform to collect the online commentary data. I apply thematic analysis, which is a popular research tactic used in qualitative analysis, to place the comments into themes. I connect race and gender throughout this study using intersectionality, which allow researchers to identify the importance of minority identities.

This research illustrates the influence of misogynoir, which is misogyny directed specifically at Black women, and online commentary (Elizabeth, 2017). Similar research has been done on race, reality shows, online comments, and the show Flavor of Love, but these have not been combined in a single study. Researchers such as Lisa Nakamura (2014), who investigates race and identity in online spaces, and Jean Burgess (2009), who studies YouTube culture and online commentary, have inspired this study’s focus on online commentary and race. My research also focuses on online commentary of a television show with a high Black demographic. Previous researchers have looked at racist online comments in relation to news sites (Hughey, 2013), race and the way Black people are shown on the urban website WorldStarHipHop (Cramer, 2016), and the ways we are taught race through the usage of social media (Nakagawa, 2014). The internet is an important part of our culture, and what we say online should be viewed as a form of communication that matters. Commentary on Black female characters in reality television shows is a way to see the transformation and consistency of stereotypes from previous technologies.

Literature Review

Policing of Black Women’s Bodies

The policing and constraint of Black women’s bodies is not a new topic, but the internet has added a new context in which to
consider it. Policing of Black women is shown in the stereotypes that have been created and depicted in television and film. The three common stereotypes for Black women perpetuated in media images are the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel (Cox, 2005). The Mammy stereotype comes from the idea that Black women are servants and are seen as not sexual to the point that they are written off as asexual (Cox, 2005). The Sapphire stereotype is said to be the “typical angry black woman.” You can identify this character by her snapping her fingers and rolling her neck “with attitude” (Cox, 2005). This stereotype breeds the idea that Black women are “aggressive, ill tempered, illogical, overbearing, hostile, and ignorant without provocation” (Ashley, 2014). The Jezebel figure is known to be sexually appealing and enjoys advances on her because she uses her sex appeal to get what she wants. The Jezebel stereotype hyper-sexualizes Black women, which frequently occurs in Flavor of Love.

As researcher Jane Splawn (1997) observes, Black women’s bodies historically have been viewed and written in the same context. Black women are property and owned. Slavery set up a system in which Black women’s bodies were literally owned, beaten, and raped (Williams, 2016). The Jezebel stereotype plays off the idea that Black women’s bodies are on display and available for commentary. If individuals think that Black women are born to be promiscuous and known to be sexual objects, it is easier to add additional shame to their bodies and the way they choose to present their sexuality. Shayne Lee (2010) is one of few writers who explore Black women, their sexuality, and how they relate to pop culture, describing the eroticization of Black women and how their sexuality is automatically viewed negatively. Researchers are aware of the images that come about when the media police Black women while also disseminating the negative images that perpetuate policing. For example, Lauren Cramer (2016) looked at race and the way Black people are shown on the urban website WorldStarHipHop (WSHH), which is known for fights, “Black” humor, and Black women doing sexual dances like twerking and pole dancing. Crammer’s argument is that WSHH can include nonblack bodies in a way to deflect the idea that this reflects urban Black culture.

Reality Television

Described as a television show that is generally unscripted and unrehearsed, reality television has been a hit since Survivor, which was one of the most popular reality television shows aired originally on CBS in 1999 (Dubrofsky, 2008). Survivor, which is based on a Swedish show Expedition Robinson that premiered in May of 2000, is a reality show that placed a group of people on an island to compete for money (Cooper, 2016). Reality television is one of the most popular forms of television programming (Cooper, 2016). Reality television shows were popular around the 2000s with shows such as COPS and The Real World, but shows did not start to see larger numbers of viewers until competition formats of reality shows formed (Cooper, 2016). Though it claims to be a real representation of the lives presented, it is not necessarily real. In fact, people who participate in reality shows are not even called actors to increase the idea of it being real (Wayne, 2015).

Flavor of Love follows Flavor Flav, an artist from the hip hop group Public Enemy, on his “hunt” to find his dream girl, putting the girls through several challenges to weed out the “gold diggers, fame chasers, fakes, and chicken heads,” as VH1 describes it. Flavor of Love was the foundation of Black reality television and has heavily influenced other Black reality television shows such as Love and Hip Hop Atlanta, I Love NewYork, and more. Flavor of Love cast
predominantly African American women and an African American star.

Intersectionality

Intersectional theory, or intersectionality as it is more popularly known, is linked to feminist thought (Carasthathis, 2014). Eguchi defines intersectionality as the inspection of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and all of these works together to create an identity (Eguchi, 2014). Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality to create dialogue around the intersection of identities, an area she found lacking in contemporary research. This is especially important when looking at oppression and privilege, such as considering LGBTQIA, disability, or Black female identities. Intersectionality looks at the overlap of identities and helps to give marginalized people a way to speak of their own personal experiences.

Since you cannot separate a person’s experience of race from her experience of gender, intersectionality is important to describe the way that Black women have had, and continue to have, their bodies policed. The impact of race for Black women often has been ignored in scholarship (Alexandre, 2011). Before intersectionality was introduced, Black women were forced to combine other feminist theories in order to adequately describe Black women’s struggle (Davies, 1994). This worked for the most part, but nothing got close to explaining Black women’s experience like intersectionality. For Davies, being Black and a woman cannot be separated when explaining and understanding an experience. Black women’s bodies are always available for public consumption (Brooks, 2004). Though all women’s bodies may be policed, there are clear differences in the language used when it comes to talking about Black women and the way their bodies are policed.

Intersectionality also discusses how some identities are flexible while others are fixed. Multiple identities are an important part of a person, and the separation of these identities denies a person of their full identity. An example of this is Johnson’s article “Just Because I Dance Like a Ho I’m Not a Ho,” which describes experiences of Black college cheerleaders at historically Black colleges. The research suggests that HBCU cheerleaders have a different cheering style than PWI cheerleaders, and this is rooted in the intersection of race, class, gender, and ideological perspective (Johnson, 2015). Other researchers like Julia R. Johnson (2013) use intersectionality to talk about transgender people and cisprivilege and the way CeCe McDonald, a Black transfeminine woman, was criminalized in Minneapolis. This study uses intersectionality to understand the overlap of race, gender, and sexuality.

Online Commentary

Blogs, social media networks, and even wiki pages allow users to communicate and comment in open forums. Any commentary that is posted online in a public forum for others to see is defined as “online commentary.” Some online commentary is basic communication between two people, while some can be classified as trolling. Simply stated, trolling is antagonistic commentary done online for strictly the amusement of the person commenting (Hardaker, 2012). Discussion boards are the beginning of “trolling,” which occur when people on the internet anger others online with rude or offensive commentary for the fun of it (Phillips, 2016). The anonymity of being online enables people to say things they usually would not say out of fear of being judged negatively. This anonymity allows users to freely voice their opinions on Black women and their bodies. Therefore, the understanding of trolling is important when it comes to this research. Understanding the way that people think and act when they are able to speak how they want, and to whomever they want, allows a different layer of understanding that we would otherwise not
An example of research surrounding the issue of the internet and race is from researcher Matthew W. Hughey, who looked at racist online comments in relation to news sites (2013). Hughey found that news sites were aware of the trolling and had to incorporate bots on their website to find profanity and “racial epithets” (2013).

YouTube commentary has been looked at in several instances. One study focuses on the analysis of YouTube comments to look at how people feel about cigars (Nasim, 2013). Though this doesn’t align with the topic of my paper, it does welcome the idea of the importance of the comment section. Another study by Rohlfing (2016) focuses specifically on online hatred in YouTube comments section. Data comes from a video that depicts a white woman who is on a train and while riding says something racist to another passenger. The video influences the way that people comment on race in online forums because it invoked different emotions for different people (Rohlfing, 2016). Similar to previous research, Green (2015) focused on online bullying and YouTube videos, specifically the way that being LGBT and bullied through YouTube videos effect self-disclosing in other settings. Online commentary under YouTube videos is the data portion of the study, specifically the depiction and decoding (to extract one’s own meaning from a product) of Black women and their bodies on Flavor of Love.

Methodology

Thematic analysis is a form of qualitative research that organizes commonalities found in collected textual data (Cassell & Symon, 2004). The repetition of key words/phrases is a crucial component in thematic analysis (Miller, 2016). These commonalities are called themes, and they help to organize the collected data. For this study, thematic analysis provides a way to collect and organize a multitude of comments and will help answer the previously stated research question.

My data for this research is collected from all of the comments (over 1700 overall) posted under 12 full episodes of season two of Flavor of Love (2006). Flavor of Love is characterized as a reality love television show. Thanks to YouTubers who upload these episodes in their entirety, I viewed not only the episode, but also the commentary located below each episode. The commentary is the focus of my research. All comments, conversations, and likes under every video have been attached to one of the following themes: name calling (614), ugly (429), “real women” and comparison to other women (246), pretty (185), sexualizing bodies (179). Themes were created from the overall topics of the comments. There are four ways for a comment to be scored: the comment section directly under the YouTube videos where watchers can leave a comment; the “liking” of these YouTube comments; a reply which agrees with an original comment (which I label a “conversation”), and a “like” of a comment in a conversation. Some comments fit two themes and in that situation, they were scored for both. Sometimes the conversations did not agree with the original post or fit into another category and in that case, they were scored in separate themes. Overall, 1,531 comments were scored, which means that out of the 1,700 comments, some did not pertain to this research. For example, some people would ask for the user to re-upload other seasons or someone might make a comment about the house they are living in. In addition to these comments, likes and responses added to the overall numbers that are depicted in Figure 1.

The comments were then grouped into themes using thematic analysis. Themes were selected based on the main categories emerging from the commentary. Name calling examples include references such as: bitch, annoying, fake, hoe, ghetto, thot, etc. The ugly theme featured
key words such as hideous or disgusting, and included the expression of jealousy of Black women because commenters did not view Black women on the same level as other women. “Real women” and comparison to other women used more of a formula then key words. This was inspired by the idea of a mythical norm of being a woman. For example, “real women” are passive, “real women” cover up when they go out, and even, “who would want a woman like that. Shes so messy and cant clean up after herself” [sic]. The pretty theme described physical appearance. Examples of this include, “she’s extremely beautiful,” “She has a nice way of dressing,” “Her eyebrows are so neat,” etc. I made a clear distinction between the pretty theme and the sexualizing bodies theme, which also had a formula. The latter either started with “I want to do [insert sexual act] to her” or “I would want her to [insert act] to her.”

Thus, data was categorized based on assignment to themes. For example, if a comment read “Bootz is a typical thot. I can always spot those,” it would be placed in name calling. For the ugly theme, an example was: “Krazy fine as hell. Black women jealous because they look like monkeys and roaches.”

The most difficult theme to understand might be the “real women” and comparison to other women. Examples included: “she has no manner” [sic], “Who would want a woman like her?”, and “She needs to dress like [insert another person on the show],” and “Like Dat has absolutely no manners!! She needs to act like a lady”. Examples of comments in the pretty theme included, “Deelishis is very beautiful.” The theme focuses specifically on outward beauty on a surface level. Finally, the sexualizing bodies included examples such as “Deelish got the sexiest ass I’ve ever seen I just want to [insert sexual act].

Results

As Figure 1 depicts, there were more name calling comments (n=614) than any other category. Specifically, examples of the name calling included “annoying,” “fake,” and “bitch.” The second highest occurring theme was ugly (n=429). This category included the actual word “ugly” but also included phrases that creatively described how ugly commenters thought the women on the show were. The next most popular theme was “real women” and comparisons to other Women (n=246). This category had some overlap because it focused on elevating one woman over another based on looks, talents, childhood, social class or personality. The next was the pretty theme (n=185). Similar to ugly, this theme included the word “pretty” but also included other synonyms of pretty. The last theme was sexualizing bodies (n=179). This theme included commentary that suggested women were nothing more than bodies to be viewed or judged and explicit commentary about how the women had bodies that were sexually pleasing.

Analysis

For the name calling theme, I noticed comments used the same words that are used to describe the Jezebel stereotype and the Sapphire stereotype. These comments called Black women “bitch” (which is a word used to describe somebody rude and references the Sapphire) or “hoe” (which is a word that is linked to being sexually promiscuous such as a Jezebel). Sapphires are loud and “annoying” or always angry and a “bitch.” After YouTuber “ILoveMedia22” says that Black women look like monkeys, the YouTuber talks about how Krazy, the Latina woman on the show, is “fine as hell” but “Black women always insecure around nonBlack women.” [sic] This connection brings YouTube users to think that Black women are
jealous of other ethnicities because Black women are inherently not attractive.

The “real women” and comparison to other women theme perpetuates the idea that women are always against each other and need to “one-up” another woman. The pretty theme measures a woman’s worth by her outward appearance. This theme is related to the idea of women having to be pretty for men. This is androcentrism, which is placing masculine points of view at the center of things like culture.

As far as sexualizing Black women’s bodies, the commentary pulls from the Jezebel stereotype. Comments were made only about how sexually attractive the women on the show were or what the commentators wanted to do to them sexually. The Jezebel stereotype illustrates Black women as solely sexual beings that use their body to get what they want in life; the attention directly on Black women’s bodies therefore enhances the commentary on Black women’s bodies (Cox, 2005).

Researcher Franklin Gilliam (1999) points out the way stereotypes are formed. He calls this a “narrative” that is being played out. Without both aspects of being Black and being a woman, it would not be possible to create the stereotypes of Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, or “welfare queen.” Gilliam’s formula for stereotypes also explains intersectionality. It is a way to look at the overlap of identities that an individual can face while being part of a minority group within systems of race, gender, health, class, etc. Without intersectionality, it is hard to understand why Black women have different experiences than other women. Crenshaw (1991) understood how crucial it is to acknowledge all aspects of a person’s identity. These stereotypes must look at every facet of a person’s identity (Gilliam, 1999). Furthermore, these stereotypes require that you be both black and a woman. Therefore, intersectionality is important in discussing them. My research uses online commentary to look at the way people police Black women’s bodies, behaviors, and attitudes. While this approach is not new, it has not been applied to a Black show directed to Black people with the online commentary coming from YouTube. There is a difference between “her hair is a mess,” which could be directed at any race, and “her hair is so nappy.” This is a look at the way intersectionality can alter the misogyny that Black women face.

Policing of Black women’s bodies or body politics, also examined by Wallenius-Korkalo and Volkonen (2014) on Finnish reality TV shows, is the practice of society regulating and trying to correct the human body. It is important to note the corrections because the commentary did not stop with regulating but also tried to correct the way that women dressed or wore their hair.

Conclusion

To conclude, the data collected from the comment section of Flavor of Love on Black women focused on ideas of beauty, pretty or ugly, how sexually appealing they are, how often they are called out by their names, and how much of a woman they are in relation to other women. These themes can correlate with stereotypes that were created and then pushed and shown on television. The three stereotypes I decided to look at, the Mammy, Sapphire and Jezebel, are recreated even today, and this is shown through the YouTube comment section. Policing of Black women’s bodies is a way for people to regulate and correct Black women, and this is shown through my data collection and thematic analysis.

A limitation of this research is that I coded the comments on my own. With other researchers involved in the coding, the themes would have been more stabilized and consistent.
Another limitation is that the research was constructed in a semester, which created time limitations. Additionally, the data is specific to a show that is no longer on air and was aimed at a very specific audience. It would be interesting to see how things would change if the show was directed at white middle age women instead of young teens and Blacks in their early twenties. YouTube also created a limitation as a platform for data collection because comments can be deleted or reported if they are too offensive or the uploader chooses to remove it. In the future, a platform without this option, such as the VH1 website, might allow for an analysis of a different audience that would not be regulated as much. In future research projects, I would want to collect more commentary from different channels that uploaded *Flavor of Love*. There is importance in studying the ways that social media enhances the ways we communicate (Nakagawa, 2014).

Further interests include analyzing whether more men or women engaged in policing, but since YouTube does not allow you to see the gender of commentators, I would have to move platforms. As previously stated, I would like to see the difference in themes when it comes to another show with different demographics. In the future, I would also like to explore other stereotypes in television shows. I would like to analyze the comment section as a television show is being aired as well, perhaps by using Twitter which is often used to comment on television shows as they air.
Figure 1. Themes of online commentary.
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