Netflix, Quarantine, and Chill: An Analysis of Black Female Representation on 2020 Netflix Original Streaming Movies

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Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic created a national shutdown of businesses and industries in North America, leading to a record number of people staying home and refraining from outside activities. With people unable to leave their homes, the entertainment industry and, in particular, the film industry went through a cinematic halt (Collier, 2021). Theatres and cinemas, alike, shut down and stopped releasing new movies, movie premiers were postponed, film castings and screenings were pushed back indefinitely, and theatrical companies lost millions of dollars in revenue. The absence of these businesses led to increased use of the next dominant global media output: streaming platforms.

Cinemas shutting down gave way to the rise of streaming. Streaming services gained millions in subscribers and consumers during the early months of the pandemic as the platforms made films and television shows easily accessible and affordable to larger audiences in the comfort of their homes (Collier, 2021). The release of original works by these platforms such as *The Mandalorian* by Disney + and *Extraction* by Netflix also contributed to the surge of consumer attraction (Forbes, 2021). The most popular services in 2020 were Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, Disney +, Apple TV, HBO Max, Peacock, etc. While all platforms significantly increased in consumers during 2020, Netflix dominated the competition with an overall subscriber count of approximately 200 million (Forbes, 2020). The "streaming giant" gained an estimate of 26 million in paid subscribers during the first half of the year and had continuously

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grown since then, thereby securing the spot of the leading streaming platform of 2020 (Forbes, 2020).

The year 2020 also emerged as a climax for Black activism, particularly through the Black Lives Matter movement. Following the unjust deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of white police officers, Black America took to the streets and protested against police brutality and systematic racism. In addition advocates also called for better representation of African Americans across media and popular culture. Many long running shows like *Cops* were cancelled in 2020 because of its depictions of policing and presentations of African Americans as criminals. Other series were critiqued for their persistent problematic use of stereotypes about Black Americans.

With streaming platforms now predominantly offering digital media output, this research paper examines the extent to which diverse representation of Black people exists on the most popular worldwide streaming platform. It considers how, at the same time that Black people were protesting about the treatment they received, the most popular streaming service portrayed them.

 Hollywood has always had an issue in celebrating diversity within their films and shows if not specified within a writer's script. "Whitewashing" of ethnic characters are regular occurrences (Williams, 2020). In cinemas and theatres, space and time slots play as factors in the limited amount of diversified content that gets shown to audiences; however, on streaming platforms, there are no such factors. Streaming allows for unlimited content and inventory for all audiences, so there are fewer restraints, other than industry will, to have diverse representation across its content. On Netflix, movies, and shows - original releases included - that feature Black leads are placed under the *Black Stories Collection*. This collection also includes

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subcategories such as "Black Lives Matter," "Black History is American History," "Sitcoms," and "Strong Black Leads," but the ratio of Netflix original content to their transferred content is much lower, and the ratio of strong Black female leads to Black male leads is also lower. This fails to reflect the fact that women are the dominant users of streaming platform services (McKinsey, 2020).

This issue is important because streaming content will be the next dominant way of consuming media. Black audiences have already proven to be economically viable, as seen in the success of *Black Panther*, an all-black cast superhero film that grossed $700 million in the domestic box office and had an African-American viewership of 37 percent on opening weekend (Statista, 2021). Since time and space are not significant factors for streaming platforms and Black audiences are an economically viable market, investing in original content that features more Black female leads would be a positive strategy that could drive future success for streaming platforms.

Literature Review

Black Women on the Big and Small Screen: An Overview

Throughout cinematic history, women rarely led on screen due to the fact that the film industry was and still is a male-dominated field. In 2019, women as speaking characters only averaged up to 34 percent, and out of the top 100 grossing films of that same year, women as leads or co-leads made up 43 percent (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2020). Even fewer numbers were averaged by women who belonged to underrepresented or ethnic groups as they averaged 17 out of the 43 movies that featured women as its lead (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2020). Despite the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative being one of the leading trackers for gender and race diversity, there are still too few studies that are constantly tracking what gender

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and race looks like on streaming services. This lack of gender diversity in Hollywood has been the same since the dawn of filmmaking.

From the 1920s through the 1950s, which was the Golden Age for Cinema, filmmaking shifted from independent filmmakers to studio systems (King, 2002). Rather than having a diversified group of independent filmmakers, the industry shrank to 5 main studios - MGM, Paramount, Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO Pictures - which were operated by a group of men. These men hired more and more men, which led to white men dominating the industry, and therefore made it harder for women to find their place in Hollywood (Williams, 2020). So, men, and particularly white men, continued to get cast as leads, while roles for white women were less prominent and unequally compensated for the same work. Opportunities for Black women in the industry were even fewer and compensated at less equal rates than white women (Sun, 2018).

Today, the five main studios are Disney, Sony Motion Pictures, Warner Bros, Universal, and Paramount; however, throughout the last decade there have been more players involved in industry acquisitions due to the rise of streaming services. Walt Disney also now has their own streaming platform, Disney+. In addition to Disney, the remaining Big Five studios have all successfully released 2020 films in the other leading streaming platforms like Amazon Prime, for instance. Therefore, the old arguments on what types of films would be successful at the box office are now challenged by the wider release availability that streaming platforms offer major studios, compared to limited screens at the cinema.

Black Women's Roles on Screen

In the earlier days of cinema, for underrepresented women, particularly Black women, achieving success in Hollywood was difficult but not impossible. Casting Black women to play lead characters, especially during the Golden Era was a rare occurrence. There were a few

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exceptions such as Lena Horne and Hattie McDaniel who were pioneers for Black women in film; however, both struggled with being typecast for their roles (Barbas, 2006) and were not allowed much flexibility in playing diverse characters. Very little change has been made in terms of the diversity of actresses in films. Black women are still underrepresented in the film industry because they are stereotyped into portraying specific types of characters and are not often allowed to appear in roles outside of the widely held narratives society holds about Black women (Mapp, 1982).

The first Black person and woman to win an Oscar was Hattie McDaniel in 1939 for her supporting role as Mammy in *Gone With The Wind*. She played a maid. After a span of 50 years, the next Black woman to receive an Academy award was Whoopi Goldberg in 1990 for her supporting role in *Ghost*, in which she played a psychic. The first Black woman in a lead position to win was Halle Berry in 2001 for her role in *Monster's Ball* in which she played a struggling single mother. In 2006, Jennifer Hudson won the Best Supporting Actress award for her portrayal of Effie White, the "sassy" member of a singing group. She was followed by Mo'Nique in 2009, who won her supporting actress nomination for her role as an abusive mother in the film, *Precious*. As an outspoken maid in the film, *The Help*, Octavia Spencer won Best Supporting Actress in 2011. Lupita Nyong'O won her Oscar back in 2013, for her character, Patsey, in *12 Years A Slave*. She was a slave. In 2016, Viola Davis won the award for Best Supporting Actress as the wife of a waste collector. Lastly, Regina King in 2018 won the Best Supporting Actress Award for her role as a single mother in *If Beale Street Could Talk*. For the top acting award for Black women, Hollywood has only celebrated them whenever their roles depicted commonly held stereotypes.

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Film scholars have well defined how Hollywood stereotypes Black women in films (bell hooks, 2003; Collins, 1991; Mapp, 1982; Mills, 2018; Sewell, 2013). The depictions of Black women in film can be characterized in the following themes: Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. Mammies are the roles that traditionally cast mature Black women as domestic help that work in white households (West, 2012). Mammies should never be confused with a nanny which are typically good-paying positions for white women whereas mammies are low-paying positions for Black women (Mapp, 1982). For example, Hattie McDaniel in *Gone With The Wind* (1940) and Octavia Spencer in *The Help* (2011); both women played the role of maids for a white family and thus can be referred to as mammies.

Jezebel is a term for a hypersexualized Black woman. Jezebels are stereotyped as attractive Black women who have an insatiable amount of sexual appetite, and who use men to get what she wants (Fontaine, 2011). An example of this was Dorothy Dandridge in the film, *Carmen Jone*s (1954.

 A Sapphire is another term for an 'angry Black woman,' as well as a more modern adaptation of a Mammy. She has sassy behaviour, bossy, and is - many times - inclined to be mean-spirited. Sapphires were created as an embodiment of African-American women's attitudes, and become verbally abusive towards 'incompetent' African-American males, and to anyone who disrespects them (Fontaine, 2011). That being said, Sapphires' attitudes are generally accepted by White people surrounding her (Fontaine, 2011). Tiffany Haddish in *Like A Boss* (2020) is an example, as she plays the "sassy" best friend; a derivative of the traditional Sapphire.

For young Black girls, there is the archetype of the "pickaninny" (Daniels & Daniels, 2019). These are often portrayals of young Black girls and Black children in general who come

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from challenging family backgrounds, are portrayed as dirty or undesirable and often considered resistant or immune to pain. Pickaninnies are also commonly depicted as adultified at an early age, and their characters often assume adult responsibilities (Daniels & Daniels, 2019). This can be seen in roles like *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) featuring Oscar-nominated actress Quvenzhane Wallis, who played "Hushpuppy," a 6-year-old girl, who, along with her terminally ill father struggles to rebuild her home after a storm passes. There are also the hypersexual depictions of young Black girls as seen in *Precious* (2009) with lead, Gabourey Sidibe, portraying Precious, a 16-year-old girl who gets abused sexually and physically by her father and mother, respectively.

These depictions don't only affect women. They also extend to Black men. The main stereotypes for Black men are Mandigos, Uncle Toms, Coons, and Sambos. Collectively they are all stereotypes that evolved from slave tropes of Black people and have translated into the Hollywood era and into our current cultural presentations of Black people (Taylor, E., Guy-Walls, P., Wilkerson, P. et al., 2019). These Black racial stereotypes continue to be prevalent in films and television shows today - especially for Black women who are already disproportionately underrepresented in the industry - because the predominant population of casting directors in Hollywood are white (McKinsey, 2020).

Thus, a significant percentage of the media content released by film studios and streaming platforms are filmed in accordance with the white gaze and enshrine whiteness as the default American racial identity (Williams, 2020). White gaze is understood as the way in which white audiences want to imagine their relation or proximity to blackness as well as the level of comfort White people want to feel when being introduced to blackness (Williams, 2020). This negatively affects Black women as these films create and generalize a false portrayal of the

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majority of the Black female population. This also detrimentally affects Black actresses as it leads to more women receiving less diversified and desirable roles and more women struggling with becoming type cast by the industry (Boylorn, 2008).

The Myth of Economic Viability of Black-led content

The notion that Blacklead content and Black cinema have not always been lucrative is a myth perpetuated in Hollywood. The reality debunks the myth of Black people not being economically viable. There are several overlooked eras in which Black cinema thrived economically. Despite the controversy that these films brought (Lawrence, 2007), Blaxploitation-era films in the '60s and '70s, introduced critically-acclaimed films such as *Shaft* (1971) and *Dolemite* (1975) and received immense success and profit. Other major Blaxploitation films include *Cleopatra Jones* (1974), *Truck Turner* (1974), *Blacula* (1972), and *Black Caesar* (1973). Despite Blaxploitation films creating a false narrative of Black people in the '70s (e.g cool gangstas), the era grossed immense revenue (Fehrle, 2015).

During the era of the late '80s to early '90s came the rise of urban cinema that focused primarily on authentically reconstructing Black reality on film. However, these stories were depicted through the Black male gaze, in which the portrayal of Black women was confined to that told by Black men (Jackson, 2014). Spike Lee and John Singleton are two of the Black male directors that came from that era. Fortunately, Black women in the late '90s, were able to escape some of that gaze with the birth of Black romantic comedies. Black female directors, such as Gina Prince-Bythewood, were instrumental to the era of Black romance (e.g her portrayal of the Black woman in her movie, *Love & Basketball* (2000), which was critically acclaimed and well-received by the Black community).

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Black women were also depicted in diverse roles across the small screen. This era spanned several decades beginning with classic television series such as *The Jefferson*s (1975-1985) and *Sandford and Son* (1972-1977). After these successful films and shows, the turning point for Black television began with *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) (Perez, D., 2020). Following the national success of *The Cosby Show*, sitcoms that featured Black leads were more heavily invested in, which gave rise to the numerous Black sitcoms that followed in the '90s (Perez, D., 2020). Sitcoms such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *A Different World* (1987-1993), *Family Matters* (1989-1997), *Martin* (1992-1997), *In Living Color* (1990-1994), and *Moesha* (1996-2001) gained instant success and continued to receive great ratings throughout their airing. By the early 2000s, however, there was about a 10-year-period without any major small screen and film content made by and for people of color (Forbes, 2020). The comeback of these shows came with Tyler Perry in the 2000s, who introduced well-known and loved films and shows such as the *Madea* franchise (2000-2019), *House of Payne* (2007-present), and *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) (Forbes, 2020), all of which secured him an immense amount of profit. Perry was able to turn a $20 million project into $100 million profit (Forbes, 2020), making him one of the highest-paid men in the film industry. Oprah Winfrey was also a significant player in distributing Blacklead content across the small screens with OWN network produced series such as *Greenleaf* (2016-2020).

Throughout this post-Golden era in Hollywood, there have been strong eras for Black-produced and Black-led films. In the 2010s, there was an onslaught of new Black directors in Hollywood, including directors such as Ava Duvernay, Ryan Coogler, and Jordan Peele who have all proved themselves acclaimed directors through the success of their works. These include *Selma* (2014), *13th* (2016), and *When They See Us* (2019) by Ava Duvernay, Ryan Coogler's

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Black Panther (2018), *Creed* (2015), and *Fruitvale Station* (2013), and Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) and *Get Out* (2017). Regina King and Issa Rae are from the latest batch of Black women actors-turned directors in Hollywood, producing successful Black-led content such as *One Night In Miami* (2020) and *Insecure* (2016-present), respectively.

Despite the rise of Black directors in Hollywood and the knowledge that Black work aimed at Black communities are economically viable, the industry still hasn't made worthwhile investments in Black projects on screen and off the screen (McKinsey, 2020). The media and entertainment industry revenues average $150 billion each year; however, 2020 findings show that if the industry invests in and funds Black-led projects to the same degree as other projects, the industry could accumulate an additional $10 billion in annual revenue (Mckinsey, 2020). Black off-screen roles have not improved over the last one and a half decades. The only noticeable change is an increase in Black roles behind the camera, which occurs when there is at least one Black senior executive on the team leading a project (McKinsey, 2020). There is no reason other than gate-keeping by Hollywood to not fully allow for more Black-led and Black-created content on streaming services. There has been some progress when comparing Black presence from the Golden era to modern Hollywood; however, in this new age of social awareness and with the shift of consuming media from cinemas to streaming services, there is much more that can be done.

Given these scholarly arguments above. This research paper poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How frequent were Black leads on Netflix original films and series in 2020?

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RQ2: How frequent were Black women leads on Netflix original films and series in 2020?

RQ3: How did Netflix original movies portray Black women on screen in 2020?

RQ4: How did Netflix original series portray Black women on screen in 2020?

Methodology

Sample

This study examined the representation of Black women in film during a year where COVID-19 forced cinemas and theatres to close down and allowed for streaming services to take its place as the next big source of media output. For this study, the sample chosen to analyze was the list of 2020 Netflix U.S. Original Films and Series. This was chosen after research findings pointed to Netflix as the top streaming platform during the 2020 pandemic.

Procedure

All data selected for coding met four requirements: the media originates from the U.S.; it qualifies as a Netflix Original film or series; it was released during the year 2020, and lastly, the film/series has people as its main cast (movies or films that centered only around the lives of inanimate objects come-to-life or animals were disqualified from the list). To access the full list of films and shows for Netflix 2020, the researcher used the following sites: IMDB, ReelsGood, and Netflix. On ReelsGood, there is a built-in feature that allows for the user to select a streaming platform, the type of media from that platform the user is interested in (e.g movies and

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TV shows), as well as the option of sorting the media by year. All media content ever released on Netflix, was deposited on the ReelsGood site and was separated by years. ReelsGood and Netflix were used together to identify potential qualifiers (ReelsGood) and confirm whether they met the base requirements of the study (Netflix). ReelsGood identifies all projects on Netflix, including global work and non-original content, so not everything on the site met the requirements. Netflix was used to confirm which works were U.S.-based and original content. Netflix was also used to watch the trailer/preview of each project, as a way of understanding the role of the characters within the main cast and that of the protagonist. IMDB was used to verify the role of cast on each of the works sampled, and to see if there were any Black male or Black female characters in a project's main cast.

In all, 112 Netflix Original movies and 102 Netflix Original series were coded.

Coding

The researcher then coded the films by the racial background of the cast and the portrayal of that character in the Netflix original work. From the list of 112 original movies on Netflix, 36 were coded under the category of the Black female main character, meaning that there was a Black female within the film's main cast or there was a Black woman who had a speaking role in the film. Under the 36 films which featured Black women, the types of roles of these Black women, along with the character tropes of these women were coded in separate graphs.

Among the list of 102 original series on Netflix, 41 were coded under the category of the Black female main character. The types of roles these Black women played, along with the character tropes, were also coded in separate graphs.

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The four types of roles coded were star, co-star, main/major character, and minor character. These 4 categories were used to help understand the distribution of character presence throughout the 36 films, and to analyze any new findings. The star category was used to identify films that had Black women as the only lead or protagonist. Films under the co-star category depicted Black women sharing the main lead role with another actor/actress. Those under main characters had Black women as part of the main cast list, but not as lead characters. Finally, the minor character category portrayed films that had Black women in smaller or recurring roles, but not in the main cast list. The distribution of the films were coded following that rubric.

The character tropes or stereotypes used to understand the distribution of roles among Black women in the Netflix original films and shows were Jezebel, Troubled Youth which derives from "Pickaninny," "Angry Black Woman" aka "Sapphire," "Single Mother," "Supportive Best Friend" - which is a derivative of a "Mammy," and "Love Interest," which is a character used to portray the desirability of Black Women as shown in films. These tropes were used as they were all a subcategory or derivative of the four main Black female stereotypes in films (Sonja, 2005): Mammies, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Pickaninny.

Result

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced a national cinematic shutdown in the U.S. Due to this, the number of people going out to cinemas and theatres took a sharp decline which caused millions of dollars in loss for the film industry. This allowed for streaming mediums to be the next dominant wave for media consumerism. This study sampled and coded Netflix original content, the top streaming platform in 2020, to determine its representations of Black women to quarantined audiences without the restraints of time slots and limited film occupancy that traditional cinemas previously argued.

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Given this background, and in light of a decade long's push for more representation in Hollywood, this study asked in the first research question:

RQ1: How frequent were Black leads on Netflix original films and series in 2020?
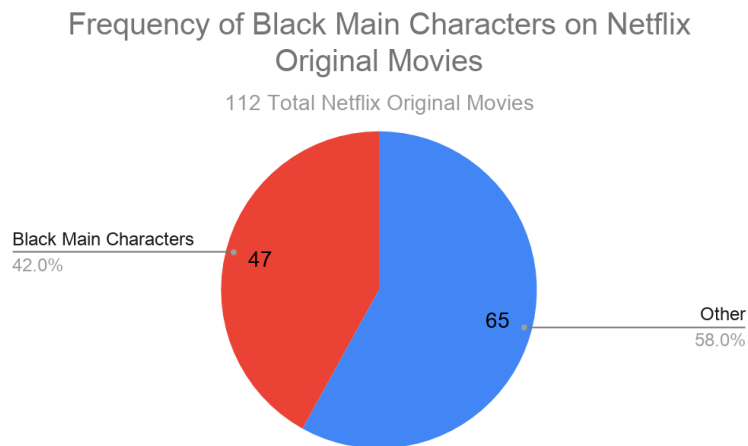
Frequency of Black Main Characters on Netflix Original Movies

112 Total Netflix Original Movies

Black Main Characters
42.0%
47

65
Other
58.0%

Figure 1.1 Frequency of Black Main Characters on Netflix Original Movies in 2020.

The study coded a total of 112 Netflix Original Movies and 102 Netflix Original Series. In Figure 1.1, among the 112 films, Black characters that served in the main cast or had a speaking role were recorded in 47 movies and estimated at 42 percent of the 2020 Netflix Original Movie sample data. The 42 percent of data is inclusive to both Black male and female characters, however, it does not mean that these were films with majority Black casts. Films that included Black actors as part of the main cast also included white cast members and those from other racial groups. The remaining 58 percent of movies in Figure 1.1 represent films with no Black main characters or Black speaking roles.

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Frequency of Black Main Characters on Netflix Original Series

102 Total Netflix Original Series

Black Main Characters
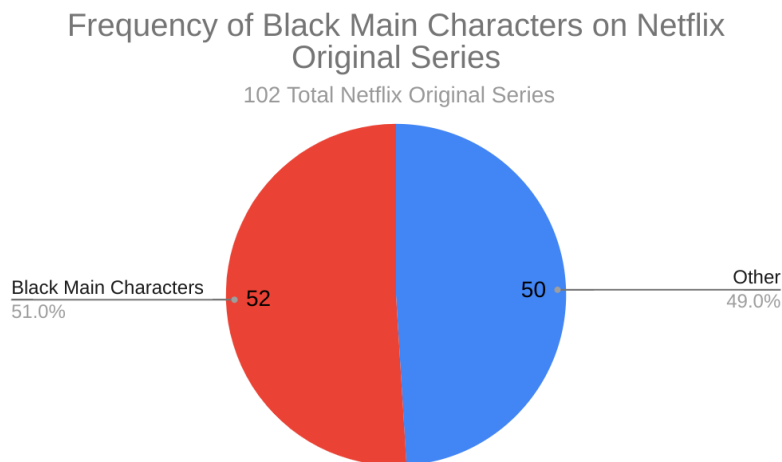51.0%

52

50

Other
49.0%

Figure 1.2 Frequency of Black Main Characters on Netflix Original Series in 2020.

In Figure 1.2, the frequency of Black main characters in 2020 Netflix Original series was coded to answer research question 1. Among a total of 102 series, 52 of them or 51 percent of the total shows on Netflix in 2020 included Black main characters. The 52 percent includes both Black male and female characters; however, it does not exclude the possibility that white and other racially-identified main characters also appeared and were co-leads in these series.. The remaining 49 percent of data in Figure 1.2 represents shows with no Black main characters or Black speaking roles.

The study specifically aimed to examine Black women's representation on screen, given their status of being the least cast group and the group receiving the least starring roles in Hollywood. The study asked in research question 2:

RQ2: How frequent were Black women leads on Netflix original films and series in 2020?

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Frequency of Black Female Main Characters on Netflix Original Movies

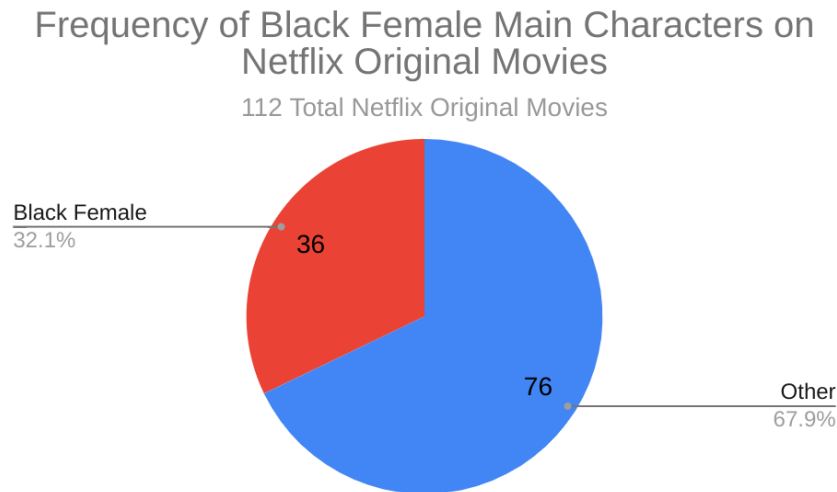### 112 Total Netflix Original Movies

Figure 2.1. Frequency of Black Female Main Characters on Netflix Original Movies

In Figure 2.1, the frequency of Black female main characters cast in 2020 Netflix Original movies was coded. Among the 112 films, Black female characters that served in the main cast or had a speaking role were identified in 36 movies and estimated 32.1 percent of the 2020 Netflix Original movie sample data. The 32.1 percent of data is not exclusive to only Black female characters and includes the possibility of white and other racially-identified main characters within that subset of the data. The remaining 67.9 percent of movies in Figure 2.1 represent films with no Black female main characters or Black female speaking roles.
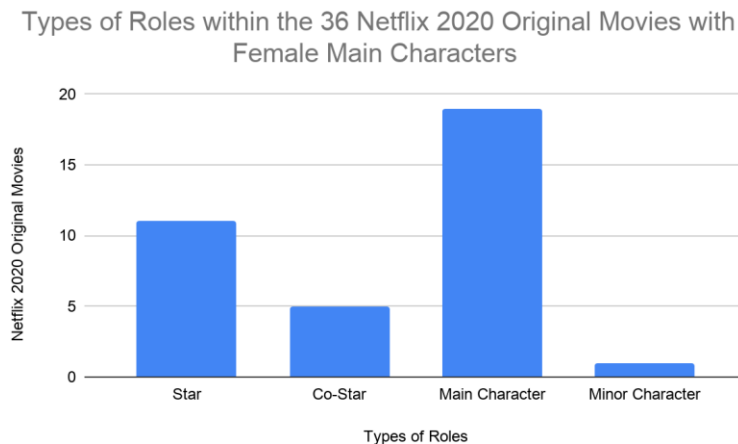
16

Figure 2.2. Types of Casting Roles for Black women in 2020 Netflix Original Movies.

The data in Figure 2.2 further analyzed the findings in Figure 2.1 that explored the frequency of Black female main characters within 2020 Netflix Original films. Among the 36 movies that included Black female characters within their casting, 11 had Black women as the protagonist or star of the film, 5 had Black women as one of the co-stars of the film, 19 had Black women as a part of the major character list, and 1 had a Black woman as a minor character.

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Frequency of Black Female Main Characters on Netflix Original Series

102 Total Netflix Original Series
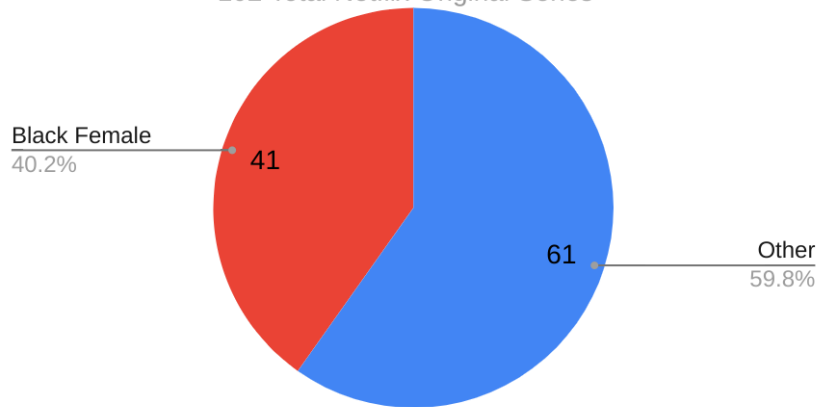
Black Female
40.2%

41

61

Other
59.8%

Figure 2.3. Frequency of Black female main characters in 2020 Netflix Original Series.

In Figure 2.3, the frequency of Black female main characters in 2020 Netflix Original series was coded. Among the 102 films, Black female characters that served in the main cast or had a speaking role were recorded in 41 movies and estimated 40.2 percent of the 2020 Netflix Original series sample data. The 40.2 percent of data is not exclusive to only Black female characters and includes the possibility of white and other racial main characters within that data subset. The remaining 59.8 percent of 2020 original Netflix series in Figure 2.3 represent films with no Black female main characters or Black female speaking roles.

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Types of Roles within the 41 Netflix 2020 Original Series with
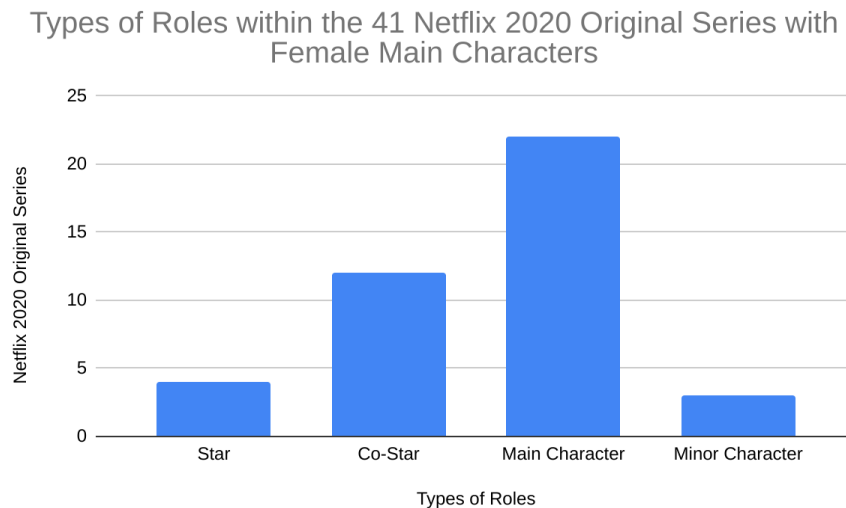Female Main Characters

Figure 2.4 Types of Casting Roles for Black women in 2020 Netflix Original Series.

The data in Figure 2.4 further analyzed the previous findings in Figure 2.3 that explored the frequency of Black female main characters cast in 2020 Netflix Original series. Among the 41 shows that included Black female characters within their casting, 4 had Black women as the protagonist or star of the series, 12 had Black women as one of the co-stars, 22 had Black women as a part of the major character list, and 3 had a Black woman as a minor character.

This study also examined how Black women were portrayed in addition to how frequently they were included in Netflix original content. Research questions 3 and 4 aimed to further analyze portrayals of Black women during the pandemic on the top streaming service.

RQ3: How did Netflix original films portray Black women in films in 2020?

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Roles for Black Women in Netflix Original Movies

35 Total Netflix Original Movies

Jezebel
3.4%

Troubled Youth
3.4%

Angry Black Woman
13.8%

Best friend
6.9%

Single Mom
10.3%
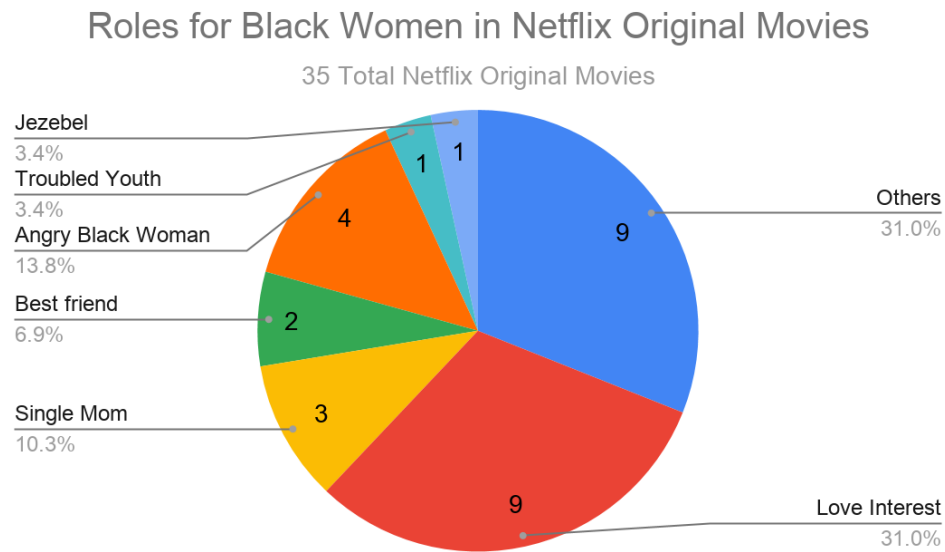
Others
31.0%

Love Interest
31.0%

Figure 3.1. Black Women's Roles in 2020 Netflix Original Movies

Out of the 36 total U.S. Netflix Original movies that featured Black women as main characters or characters in speaking roles, approximately 69 percent of the films exhibited at least one or more common Black female stereotypes. In *Kissing Booth 2* (2020), Chloe Winthrop's (Maisie Richardson-Sellers) character embodies the Jezebel stereotype. Sellers plays the attractive college friend of the male lead and possible love rival of the female protagonist. This accounts for 3.4 percent of the sample. The "Troubled Youth" aka "Pickaninny" stereotype averaged 3.4 percent. For example, the film *Project Power* (2020) featured Robin (Dominique Fishback), a drug-dealing teenager from a struggling single-parent household. Averaging at 13.8 percent is the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype, also known as a Sapphire. Included in this category was actress Kerry Washington's depiction of Mrs. Greene in the musical film *The Prom* (2020), a stubborn single mother, who passionately opposes the notion of a LGBTQ+ prom in her daughter's high school, and from Viola Davis's portrayal of MaRainey, a sassy southern

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Black female musician, from *MaRainey's Black Bottom* (2020). It is also shown in Margeline's (Jenifer Lewis) sassy character in the musical film, *Dolly Parton Christmas on the Square* (2020), as well as Coco Jones's character, Rita, in *Vampires vs The Bronx* (2020) .

The overly-supportive "Best Friend" narrative, accounted for 6.9 percent of the data. Single mothers comprised 10.3 percent of the data with films such as *Coffee & Kareem* (2020) featuring Taraji P. Henson as Vanessa Manning, Kerry Washington's character, Mrs. Greene, in *The Prom* (2020), and Kelly Jenrette as Delanda in *All Day and a Night* (2020).

Approximately 31.0 percent of these films featured a Black main character invested in a love relationship, with 6 of these films being interracial couples. This percentage shows the desirability of Black women in film. These movies included *Lovebirds* (2020), *Coffee & Kareem* (2020), *Operation Christmas Drop* (2020), *A Babysitter's Guide to Monster Hunting* (2020), *Fearless* (2020), *Work It* (2020), *The Main Event* (2020), *Uncorked* (2020), *Fatal Affair* (2020).

The remaining 31.0 percent of the data is was coded in the "other" category which comprises of Black female roles with story lines that weren't fully developed enough to be placed into one specific stock character (e.g Keesha in *The Magic School Bus: Kids In Space* (2020).

Research question 4 examined portrayals for Black women in 2020 Netflix Original series.

RQ4: How did Netflix original series portray Black women on screen in 2020?

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Roles for Black Women in Netflix Original Series

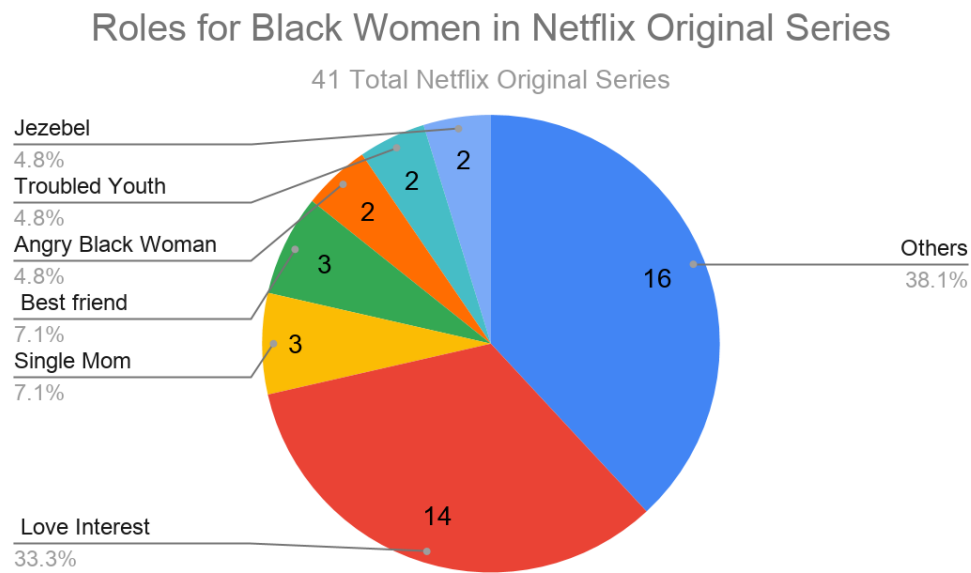41 Total Netflix Original Series

Figure 4.1. Black Women's Roles in 2020 Netflix Original Series.

Out of the 41 total U.S. Netflix Original series that featured Black female main characters, 61.9 percent of these movies consisted of Black women embodying common stereotypes. Approximately 4.8 percent of data was the Jezebel stereotype as depicted in *Bridgerton* (2020-present) through Marina Thompson (Ruby Barker), a Featherington cousin who tries to use her beauty as a way of securing a husband before the news of her pregnancy is exposed. Camille Washington, played by Laura Harrier from *Hollywood* (2020) also plays a jezebel, as she portrays a beautiful up and coming actress.

Averaging 4.8 percent, the "Troubled Youth" or Pickaninny narrative was portrayed in *Tiny Pretty Things* (2020-present) with Neveah Stroyer (Kylie Jefferson), a ballet dancer from Inglewood who escapes her troubled life to attend a dance school in New York, and *Grand Army* (2020-present) where Dominique "Dom" Pierre (Odley Jean), a Haitian-American student, struggles with supporting her family and with maintaining her academics.

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The Sapphire or "Angry Black Woman" depiction also accounts for 4.8 percent of the data and includes shows such as *Hoops* (2020-present), an animated sitcom with Cleo King voicing Opal Lowry, the sassy principal of Lenwood High, and *Self-Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J Walker* (2020) with Carmen Ejogo playing Addie, a mean-spirited mulatto who serves as the show's antagonist.

The supportive "Best Friend" role makes up 7.1 percent of the sample and includes characters like Jolene played by Moses Ingram in *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), Pru Granger voiced by Sydney Parks in *Spirit Riding Free: Riding Academy (*2020-present), and Helen Decatur played by Heather Headley in *Sweet Magnolias* (2020-present).

The "Single Mom" narrative also comprises 7.1 percent of sampled shows and included *Too Hot To Handle* (2020-present) featuring Rhonda Paul; *Trial 4* (2020) which interviewed single mother, Mary Jackie Ellis; and in *Grand Army* (2020) Ms. Pierre, Dom's Haitian mother, played by Magaly Colimon.

Approximately 35.7 percent of these shows had a Black woman as a main character invested in a love relationship, with 9 of these films featuring interracial couples. This percentage depicts the desirability of Black women in film. These movies included *Outer Banks* (2020-present), *The Eddy* (2020-present), *#BlackAF* (2020-present), *Hollywood* (2020), *Love Is Blind* (2020-present), *Gentefied* (2020-present), *Self-Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J Walker* (2020), *Bridgerton* (2020-present), *Grand Army* (2020-present), *Julie & The Phantoms* (2020-present), *Game On: A Comedy Crossover Event* (2020), *Tiny Pretty Things* (2020-present), *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), and *Too Hot To Handle* (2020-present).

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The remaining 38.1 percent of the sample were coded in the "other" category because the Black woman's character remained under-developed in the series to be assigned a specific traditional stereotypical category.

Discussion

Prominence Leads to Future Opportunities

Based on the results of this study, Netflix can claim to have at least 40 to 50 percent of its original content reflecting Black diversity and 30 to 40 percent that presents Black female diversity in original films and shows across their streaming service. However, when analyzing the breakdown of Black female characters (star, co-star, main/major character, minor character), this study found that fewer Black women are cast for leading or protagonist roles. Black women were cast within the main cast roles rather than roles that allowed them to drive the main film narrative. A few Black women that were filmed in the star roles of these pieces of Netflix Original content included Viola Davis from *MaRainey's Black Bottom* (2020), Michelle Obama in *Becoming* (2020), Nia Long in *Fatal Affairs* (2020), and Octavia Spencer in *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J Walker* (2020). Each of these women have the main lead roles in their respective films, which speak well for Black female representation in film. However, these women are already household names to the larger U.S. viewing audience and are already well-established in their careers.

Lead roles have an economic impact, meaning that if one was to successfully star in a streamed service role, it can catapult them to a big-screen role. This was the case for *Bridgerton* break-out star Rege-Jean Page, whose role in the series offered him the ability to appear as the host of *Saturday Night Live* the next year. Page is also set to star alongside actors, Chris Evans and Ryan Gosling in a new Netflix Original Film, *The Gray Man* directed by the Russo Brothers

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(Deadline, 2021). This kind of career opportunity can only happen if one was to lead or star in a successful film or show. There were other Black women cast as part of the main cast in Bridgeton, but not as a co-star like Page. Although visible, their less prominent roles lead to fewer follow up opportunities like Page received.

Stereotypes Persisted

From Jezebel to Sapphire, and Mammy to Pickaninny; Netflix's 2020 Original films and series depicted Black women in each of these four persistent stereotypes. The total percentage of stereotype tropes that appeared in 2020 Netflix Original films was 69 percent whereas, in 2020 Netflix Original series, it was 61.9 percent. The main depictions found in these pieces of original content included, modern "Jezebels," "Troubled Youth," "Single Mom," "Supportive Best Friend," "Angry Black Woman," and "Love Interest." Despite Netflix being a streaming platform with virtually no casting or storytelling limitations, Black female character tropes represented more than half of both the original films and series on Netflix.

This can be interpreted to mean that even when there is unlimited space on streaming services and mediums to tell untraditional stories about Black women, the choice is made to still cast Black women into primarily stereotyped or underdeveloped roles.

Films versus Series

When looking at Netflix Original Series and Films side-by-side, research shows that there is about a 7 percent difference between the stereotyping of Black Women on Netflix, with films leading by 69 percent. This means that Netflix Original Series provide Black women with a little more freedom for prominence and more time for better character development. This makes

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sense, since series continue on for multiple-episodes and seasons, whereas in films, character development and plot are condensed into a timeframe averaging one hour and thirty minutes.

For example, in the animated movie, *Spirit Riding Free: Ride Along Adventure* (2020), the character Pru Granger is portrayed as a main cast member, playing the supportive Black best friend of the protagonist. However, her role switches when *Spirit Riding Free* becomes an animated series, *Spirit Riding Free: Riding Academy* (2020-present). Pru becomes a co-star lead as the series focuses on the three friends as they navigate their lives at a boarding school far away from home. Pru's screen time increases, and audiences are exposed to more complex sides of the character; thus allowing for more character development and prominence.

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Conclusion

Last year, 2020, marked a cinematic halt across the U.S due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to traditional cinemas and theatres shutting down, streaming mediums such as Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime, and Hulu became the most dominant form of consuming media content (Forbes, 2020). Streaming services offered viewers what cinemas and theatres cannot: a large and diversified assortment of films and series, all easily accessible to audiences at a low subscription cost.

Unlike traditional film houses, streaming platforms are able to produce and release a larger number of films at quicker intervals for their wide consumer base. This brings into question streaming services' role in the representation of underrepresented groups, particularly Black women, in film and media content. The argument for a lack of time slots and limited film occupancy that traditional cinemas could make, cannot be made by streaming platforms; thus the lack of representation of Black women in the film industry can only be due to the lack of investment in Black stories (McKinsey, 2020).

There are multiple ways for the "streaming giants" to take initiative in Black projects. Casting more African-Americans for on-screen and off-screen roles in the industry, as well as investing more in the types of story arcs that Black women depict in film, will make a huge difference in the portrayals of Black people in Hollywood and in the type of stories told through film. Currently, Black women are still telling the narratives of the modern-day slave stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire and Pickaninny. For that change on screen to occur, there needs to be a change behind the scenes and in executive board rooms in the entertainment industry.

Changes in films cannot occur if not by the will of the industry. There needs to be a deep analysis and reconstruction of the producers, directors and other executives of the film industry,

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in favor of allowing more Black executives into decision-making positions in Hollywood. Currently, Black directors, producers, and writers make up less than 6 percent in the industry (Mckinsey, 2020). In comparison, 87 percent of TV directors and 92 percent of film directors in Hollywood are white (McKinsey, 2020). By increasing the number of Black executives and the amount of Black-led content in film, the industry can expect an additional annual growth of $10 billion (McKinsey, 2021). More Black content-creators in the industry leads to more Black-led films and shows, which leads to increased content sales since Black communities are an economically viable market.

The Black market is a profitable market; it is lucrative. The Golden era of Black cinema; including Blaxploitation, Urban cinema, and Black sitcoms; and the revenue they grossed are all key examples proving how profitable it would be for Hollywood to invest in people of color, and in particular, women of color. Therefore, the film and media industry should elevate Black executives to important roles in the major studios and invest in Black-pitched projects. Hollywood would need to cast more diverse Black women in films and deviate from the usual choice actresses. The social and technological climate has progressed too far for Hollywood to be falling behind. Streaming platforms are to be the next dominant form of media consumption and are also the key in lessening the racial gap in film and on the small screen. There is certainly much more the biggest streaming services can do to allow Black women to narrate their own stories to wider audiences.

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