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Tyler Perry and The Weight of Misrepresentation

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TYLER PERRY AND THE WEIGHT OF MISREPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Criticism of black film production often includes discussions of narrow typecasting and stereotypical role portrayal. Previous research shows that consumers of black films attest that such films are an accurate depiction of black culture. However, consequences of negative stereotypes presented in mainstream media are rarely discussed. The purpose of this study is to define and examine the stereotypes of African American women in film. By way of semiotic film content analysis this research will look at the relationship and function between specific historical stereotypes and the behaviors of female characters in Tyler Perry's most popular films. This research examines role portrayals in relation to character traits that are historically classified as the "Mammy," "Sapphire" and "Jezebel" stereotype classifications.

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has the power to shape a consumer's construction of social reality. Because of the power of popular media including music, movies and television, it is important that leaders in the industry be cautious of what images they offer their consumers. "Culture branders" such as film directors have a greater responsibility because the material they release helps to shape the way society thinks. For the purpose of this research, a "culture brander" will refer to one who has a strong presence and impact on popular culture. This research examines the extension of African American stereotypes pertaining to black women, including the "Mammy," "Jezebel" and "Sapphire," in a sample of Tyler Perry films. This analysis argues that Tyler Perry's films create

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cultural capital that has the ability to construct a belief system about typical African American behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Stereotyping and Binary Thinking

      Individuals perceptions of others are built on how their environments have shaped their mindsets. Regardless of being negative or positive, racial, sexual and gender stereotypes exist. In an essay written to describe representational practices known as *'Stereotyping,'* Richard Dyer argues that it is important for one to distinguish the difference between *typing* and *stereotyping*. We, as humans, understand our world by assigning objects, people and events to wider categories, which seem to fit our culture (Dyer, 1977). *Typing,* according to Dyer, is how we decode our world; we understand "the particular" according to the terms of its "type." For example, we would decode an object with four legs and a cushion as a "chair." There will be a general category in one's mind that the object would fit, whether or not one has come into contact with that particular design of a chair before. Without *typing,* it would be difficult to make sense of the world (Dyer, 1977). According to Dyer, a *type* is "any simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded, and change, or development is kept to a minimum" (Dyer, 1977). Stuart Hall agrees that stereotypes grasp hold of those few vivid, simple, memorable and widely recognized characteristics about an individual, reduce the entire person down to those few traits, exaggerate them to simplify them, and then fix them without a chance for change or development. Therefore, stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and sets the "difference" firmly in place (Hall, 1997).

      The *Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* further explains that stereotyping is often the "process that involves the attributing of negative traits to people who look different than us" (Barker, 2004). Stereotyping is employed to divide what is socially acceptable from what is socially unacceptable. This notion causes the exclusion and dismissal of individuals who do not meet society's

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criteria for specific categorizations' standards. According to Hall (1997), stereotyping is a part of maintaining the symbolic and social order of our lives. This practice divides insiders from outsiders and the normal from the unusual, separating "us" in order to exile "them" (Hall, 1997).

Today, stereotypes and influential stereotypical images can be seen in different aspects of society, ranging from government and political roles, to familiar social interactions, such as reports of racial profiling and racial discrimination in employment. More specifically, gender roles initiate their own exclusive techniques, creating a questionable reality for individuals in society today.

Hazel Carby suggests that stereotyping is employed "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations" (Hill-Collins, 2000). In agreement with Carby, Patricia Hill Collins states that these stereotypical images of black women are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and all other forms of social injustice seem natural and further, an inevitable series of events in a black woman's life (Hill-Collins, 2000).

Binary thinking occurs when two opposing concepts function together by one being submissive to the other. Each term in the binary only gains meaning in relation to its counterpart. Examples of binary relationships would include male/female, white/black, and culture/nature (Haplin, 1989). Binary thinking is a notion that crosscuts all forms of societal oppression. People, objects and ideas are all categorized in terms of their difference from one another when binary thinking is employed (Keller, 1985). Binary thinking is a cognitive process that allows one to think in two ways simultaneously. This shapes one's understanding of human difference as defined in oppositional terms, meaning that one part is not simply different from its counterpart, but that they are related only through their definition as opposites. In a binary relationship, one element might be objectified as the "other," viewed as a pawn that can be manipulated and controlled, thus making objectification central to the process of oppositional difference (Hill-Collins, 2000). Oppositional binaries are unstable because they seldom represent different, but equal, relationships. Only through

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subordination (one half of the binary to the other), can tension in the relationship be temporarily relieved.

Examples of the aforementioned binary relationships under subordination would result in situations similar to whites ruling blacks, men holding power over women, reason being superior to emotion in acquiring truth, and facts more valued than opinion when evaluating knowledge (Hill-Collins, 2000). According to Hill-Collins, African American women occupy the inferior half of the binary relationship. Analyzing specific controlling images projected in the media in relation to black women will reveal the specific niche of the black woman's objectification. The stereotypical images of black women are each dynamic in their own right and ever-changing. These evolving stereotypes each provide a new starting point for examining popular images that fuel new forms of control (Hill-Collins, 2000).

Elite groups have the power to define societal values. Thus, in executing this power, they have the ability to manipulate ideas about black womanhood. Hill-Collins claims that the African American woman's status has been deemed the "outsider's," and it is from this point that other groups in society define their "normality." She claims strangers and other outsiders threaten the "moral and social" order of society. However, while the "others" will never really fit into society, they are quite essential to its survival. "Others" who stand at the margins of society, not fitting within social constructs, clarify its boundaries. By not belonging, black women serve as a reminder to emphasize the significance of belonging (Hill-Collins, 2000).

Black feminist scholar Barbara Christian suggests that in the United States, "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society's 'other' " (1985). Contemporary images of the black woman in America as "other" provide ideological justification and extend race, gender and class oppression (Hill-Collins, 2000). Cheryl Gilkes goes on to say "Black women's assertiveness and their use of racism to launch multiple assaults against the entire fabric of inequality have been a consistent, multifaceted threat to the status quo. As punishment, black women have been assaulted with a variety of negative images" (Hill-Collins 2000).

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Subliminal messages can be observed in many popular films today. What is not clear and evident to consumers of cultural motion pictures, are the underlying stereotypical messages presented within contemporary character roles, and in particular, those pertaining to black women, including the three dominant stereotypes: the "Mammy," "Jezebel" and the "Sapphire" (Fontaine, 2011).

The "Mammy" stereotype originated as a domestic house servant, faithful and obedient. The "Mammy" ran her slave master's home very sternly. According to Cheryl Thurber, "she held the keys, an important symbol of status and answered only to the plantation mistress and master" (102). Because of her dominant power, the "Mammy" was respectfully feared and crossed by neither black nor white members of the household (Hill-Collins, 2011). The "Mammy" is typically depicted as an overweight woman with broad shoulders, large arms and a wide stance (Hooks, 1981). The black "Mammy" takes on the image of what bell hooks refers to as "masculinized sub-human creatures" (Hill-Collins, 2011). Through exaggerated opposites of mainstream society, the "Mammy" is in a type that could be easily marked "other." According to bell hooks, the original masculinization of the Mammy was used to enhance the idea that white women were passive and ladylike (Hooks, 1981).

The "Jezebel" stereotype originated from the sexual exploitation and victimization of African American women by their white slave owners (Thomas Witherspoon & Speight). Her sexuality, in turn, exploits men's weaknesses (West, 1995). The "Jezebel" is usually depicted in film and culture as someone who uses sex to draw men in for money and other destructive reasons. Usually found to have lighter skin, she was attractive to slave masters, in comparison to the female slaves with darker skin. The "Jezebel" thrives on attention, primarily from men that don't belong to her (Fontaine, 2011). According to Patricia Hill-Collins, the modern execution of the "Jezebel" stereotype through contemporary media is a sexualized, angry black woman who has sex with men for pleasure, drugs, revenge or money (Hill-Collins, 2004). The modern image of the "Jezebel" justifies the abuse she receives from African American men (Fontaine, 2011).

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The "Sapphire" stereotype originated as a feisty female character on the "Amos 'n' Andy" show, first on radio in the 1940s, and then on television in the early 1950s (Deane, 2012 The "Sapphire" is usually depicted as a black female who is sharp tongued, violent and offensive. She can be found rolling her neck and shaking her head with her hand on her hip. According to Fontaine, the "Sapphire" is sassy. She mocks black men for a number of reasons, including, but not limited to their unemployment and pursuit of white women (Fontaine, 2011).

CONSEQUENCES OF BLACK REPRESENTATION IN FILMS

There are many consequences that black females are subject to, due to their representation in popular contemporary film. In the domain of media roles, the way *blackness* is framed in society has a lot to do with the portrayal of African American stereotypes in feature films. The media plays a significant role in shaping what we believe to be our social realities (Brooks, 2006). Scholars who have examined portrayals of African Americans in the media have found faults in their reflections concerning legitimacy, oversimplification and accuracy. According to Dates and Barlow, African American stereotypes in the media are far from the natural, harmless products of an idealized popular culture, but are rather one-dimensional and distorted, socially-constructed images that reflect African American culture (Dates & Barlow, 1990).

American media outlets are frequently criticized for broadcasting ideologies of racism that are dominant in American culture. These negative ideologies include racial exploitation, which incorporates beliefs that justify inferior and or unequal treatment of specific groups. Distorted images of African American behavior in the media, particularly in feature films, reassures its consumers that African Americans are still "in their place," and further, that blacks who escape their "place" are not to be seen as a threat to society because "they transcend race by majority values and ambitions" (Djata, 1987). Ideologies of black inferiority often are projected onto entire groups of people through the use of demeaning stereotypes that reinforce and legitimate that idea.

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The problem with stereotypes such as the "Mammy," Jezebel" and "Sapphire" is that they embody more negative and narrow depictions of blacks (black culture) than occur in reality for blacks or for whites (Branthwaite and Peirce, 1990).

Narissa M. Punyanunt-Carter explains that audience members interpret media portrayals of African Americans to be indefinitely true in the article, "The Perceived Realism of African American Portrayals on Television." Further, she goes on to claim that negative portrayals of African Americans in the media most often lead to nothing but the continued stereotyping of the African American population at large (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008).

Stereotyping is one of the many ways that the media can communicate prejudice (Duckitt, 1992). Portrayals of African Americans through such stereotypical images can reveal subtle attitudes and assumptions about the minority at large (Bristor, 1995). According to Cooper, "One may surmise that the significant presence of blacks in American popular comic forms, starting from minstrel shows and continuing with their representation in comedic films, television situation comedies, and as stand-up performers, have significantly affected Whites' perceptions of Blacks" (Cooper, 2007). African Americans hold a significant place in comedic entertainment; consequently consumers have the potential to acquire a perception of black culture that might not have otherwise existed.

INFLUENCE OF MEDIA IMAGES ON AFRICAN American Self-Esteem

Mainstream media, in its many forms, have proven to affect the self-perception of its consumers (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1995). Images are more influential when the viewer can identify with the race of the talent on the screen, meaning that black audience members will identify heavily with black actors/actresses, models and athletes (Botta, 2000). Stereotypes of black women portrayed in the media both reflect and distort the ways that African American women view themselves (individually and collectively) and the ways they are viewed by others (Hudson, 1998).

Author Monique Ward conducted a study on the effect the media has on black youth consumers. The study concluded that of all

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racial groups, blacks (youth and adults) have been shown to consume the most media (Ward, 2004). In agreement with Ward's findings on African American consumers, Author Patricia Hill-Collins states:

> …Popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas. African American youth, in particular, can no longer depend on a deeply textured web of families, churches, fraternal organizations, school clubs, sports teams, and other community organizations to help them negotiate the challenges of social inequality. Mass media fills this void, especially movies, television, and music that market black popular culture aimed at African American consumers (Hill-Collins, 2004).

In response, Ward (2004) contends that frequent and over-exposure to images of blacks with stereotypical characteristics lead viewers of all races to believe that those attributes characterize blacks in the real world. Because African Americans view these images most frequently, it is believed that these consumers are led to assume that blacks are inferior and that being black is a bad thing, thus leading to low self-esteem and overall lower racial self-esteem (Ward, 2004). The correlation between levels of media exposure and low self-esteem is a direct result of the perceived realism of blacks in the media. Taking in a steady visual diet of these stereotypical images results in the construction of a disproportionate reality when it comes to the grouping, or "typing," of African American women. African Americans are pre-conditioned to and by the white, racist point of view, thus subjecting them to the role of the victim of these misrepresentations. Film critic bell hooks states that such representations in the media "determine how blackness and people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed images" (hooks, 1992). African American women, in particular, must deal with stereotypical images of black women in mainstream media that influence their everyday roles in society.

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Films possess the ability to re-image and refocus what American culture knows to be "real," particularly pertaining to black culture. To possess this ability is to possess the power to change things (hooks, 1996). The problem with media portrayals is not whether they are "true" or "false," but rather that they inhibit the production of other meanings or ideas (Bristor, 1995). Feature films involve much more than mere entertainment. Conscious of what is being learned or not, films provide cultural discourse to discuss constructions of race, class, power and sex. In contrast to the negative effects black comedic films may have on its viewers, when it comes to comedic entertainment, Daryl Dance (1998) writes:

> If there is one thing that has brought African American women whole through the horrors of the middle passage, slavery, Jim Crow, Aunt Jemima, the welfare system, integration…it is our humor. If there is any one thing that has helped us to survive broken promises, lies, betrayals, contempt, humiliations, and dehumanization that have been our lot in this nation and often our families, it is our humor.

Tyler Perry has become one of the biggest names in entertainment as a leading figure in black film, theatre, production and direction. As a black celebrity and culture brander, Perry represents much more than himself. The projects that he chooses to release ultimately affect consumers' perceptions of the black community as a whole. Humor is the outlet Tyler Perry uses to heal from the abuse and strife woven throughout his upbringing. It was through this outlet that his empire was born and thus, the outlet he uses to tell stories of the African American family. His stories rely on a blend of faith and comedy to appeal to a largely female, and largely Christian audience. He claims that the basis of his artistic drive is his passion to tell women's stories (Ulaby, 2010). Despite his popularity, critics have little positivity to offer pertaining to Tyler Perry's work.

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METHODS

Significance of Study

This study seeks to examine female lead characters in Tyler Perry's films, as extensions of historically stereotypical depictions of African American women. This study is important because the characters featured in Tyler Perry's array of films are popular figures in contemporary media particularly pertaining to black culture. Because these figures are so popular across cultural demographics, they are likely to be seen as a representation of black cultural behaviors for those with limited contact with African Americans. These representations are important because of their influence on consumer's social construction of what is real. This research will contribute to the existing body of work concerning African American stereotypes, and hopefully will encourage other scholars to critically explore Perry's work.

This study employs the qualitative methodology of *semiotic film content analysis*. The researcher also deemed qualitative methodology to be appropriate for this study to count the number of times the array of stereotypical behaviors and appearances were present throughout Tyler Perry's work. This study also employs semiotics through content analysis, interpreting behaviors, appearances and dialogue of Perry's female characters as a sign. The content analysis is derived from five of Tyler Perry's self-directed films, including: *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005*), Madea's Family Reunion* (2006), *Meet the Browns* (2009), *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (2009), and *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009*).* These films were chosen because each story revolves around a black woman. These specific films were also chosen because Tyler Perry's most recognizable character, Madea, appears in all five of these films.

Content analysis is a method used by social scientists to investigate the content of the mass media or other documented sources of information. Content analysis is used to explore various media, such as film, to discover how specific issues are presented. This research includes content analysis as a strategic exercise, counting the number of times a specific quality, or behavior that fit the pre-determined characteristics of a "Mammy," "Sapphire" or "Jezebel" were seen on screen.

Semiotics Analysis, or "The Study of Signs," also played an important role in assessing African American female characters throughout

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the samples. Semiotics can be employed as the analysis of all cultural texts (Chandler, 2005). Within the constructs of semiotics, most behaviors can be seen as signifying something. Each sign has meaning within a culture. In this study, all female characters' behavior, appearance and dialogue were assessed as a sign. Each quality and behavior will be coded by the aforementioned definitions of the "Mammy," "Sapphire" and "Jezebel," according to pre-established codes, based upon the researcher's understanding of these stereotypes (Figure 1).

"Mammy" Characteristics	"Jezebel" Characteristics	"Sapphire" Characteristics
Cooking	Fair Skin	Angry
Cleaning	In Bed	Swearing
Feeding Others	Consuming Alcohol	Violent
Gray Wig	Unmarried	Sassy
Nurturing	Smoking	Insulting Towards Men
Caring	Engaging in Sexual Intercourse	Guarded
Giving Advice	Dancing	Dismissive
"Honey"	Short Dress	Keeps People Distant
Glasses	Tight Clothing	Lonely
Big Breasts	Sexually Enticing	Sharp Tongued
House Dress	Manipulative	Loud
Disciplining Children	Seeks Attention	Mocking Black Men
Teaching Manners	Attractive	Rolling Eyes
Masculine	Angry	Hand On Hip
Authoritative	Engages with Men For Money	Rolling Neck
Dimwitted	Engages with Men For Drugs	Rude
Threatening	Engages with Men For Pleasure	Sarcastic
Domineering	Accepts Abusive Behavior	Internal Conflict
Protective	Lingerie/ Night Clothes	Destructive
Faithful	Slender Body Shape	
Referred to as "Ugly"		
Criminalized		
Violent		

Figure 1: Typical Characteristics of the "Mammy," "Jezebel" and "Sapphire."

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   The female characters in the films listed above were analyzed, based on the stereotypical characteristics of the "Mammy," "Sapphire" and "Jezebel." The films were viewed chronologically, based on the order of their theatrical release, to determine whether the behaviors were consistent in the films over time. All films were initially watched twice in their entirety, while taking screening notes. Scenes that depicted prominent stereotypical behaviors were screened a third and fourth time to examine the characters' dialogue, behavior and appearance more closely. When five or more coded behaviors were found within a particular role portrayal, that character was deemed as an indefinite extension of the specific stereotype "Mammy," "Sapphire" or "Jezebel."

FINDINGS

Results

   Overall, a total of 1,389 behaviors were assessed. Of those coded behaviors, 585 fell into the category of the "Mammy," 498 behaviors were categorized as "Sapphire" qualities and 306 behaviors were characterized as "Jezebel" (Figure 2).

"Mammy" Characteristics

   Mabel Simmons, also known as "Madea," which is short for "Mother Dear", represents the historical "Mammy" stereotype in her costumes, as well as in her actions.

   In the five films analyzed for this study, Madea was assessed as being violent, domineering and threatening 97 times. Madea does not deal with threats against herself or her family in a calm manner. For instance, in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman,* when Madea's granddaughter is threatened by her cheating husband, Madea quickly pulls a gun from her purse and says ecstatically while waiving the weapon, "Please hit her, please hit her, I want to see you do it!" (Perry, 2005). No matter what state she may be in, it's evident that Mabel Simmons is always ready for a fight. When a child works up enough nerve to dare to talk back or disrespect her, she is quick to chastise the child while threatening to beat him to unconsciousness, as in *Madea's Family Reunion*.
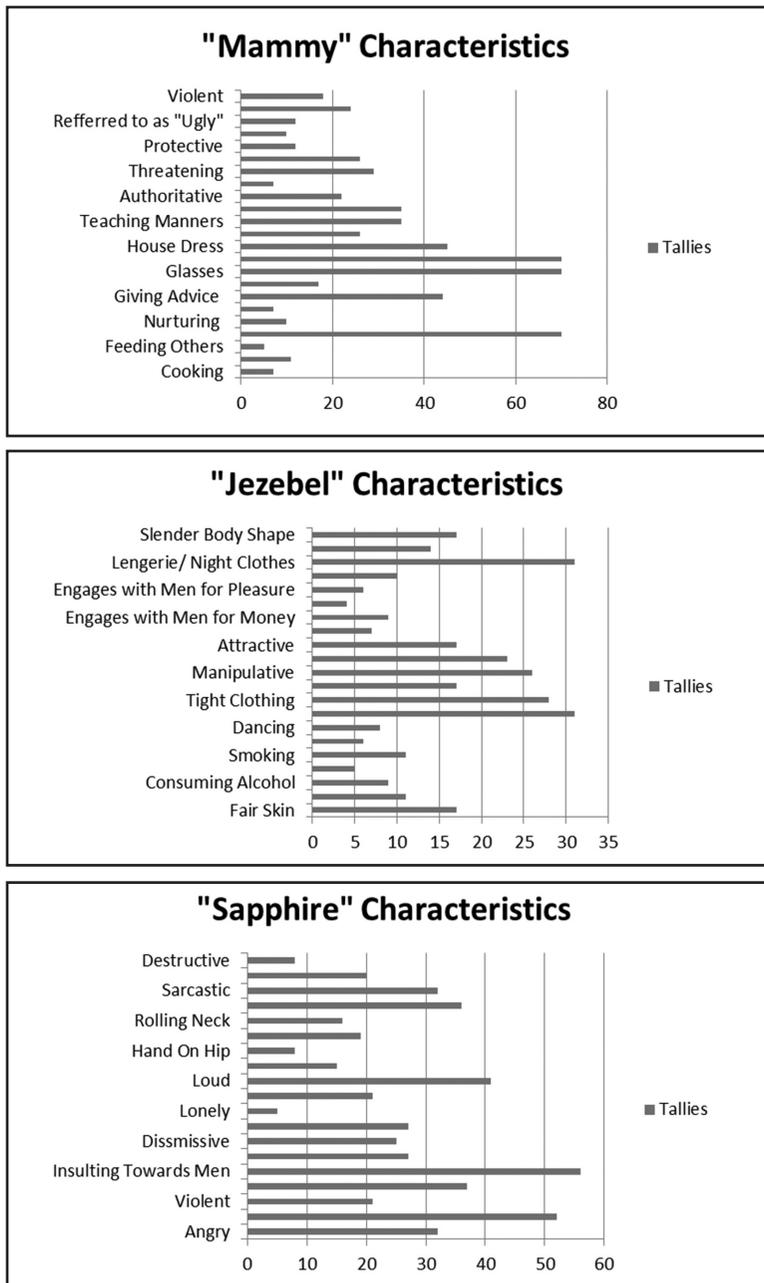
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Figure 2: Numbers of "Mammy," "Jezebel" and "Sapphire" Characteristics in Sample of Tyler Perry Films.

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Masculine "Mammy"—Madea possesses many masculine characteristics, consistent with bell hooks' definition of "masculinized sub-human creatures;" this description is justified by the fact that Madea is played by Tyler Perry in drag. Over the course of this study, Madea was visually assessed as a masculine figure 25 times. Some examples of her masculinization include: in *I Can Do Bad All By Myself,* Madea is referred to as "Yes, man," repeatedly by a child, who has attempted to break into her house. Madea often insists on carrying a gun in her purse, making her appear as a criminalized figure. Madea is on trial in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman, Madea's Family Reunion,* and *Madea Goes to Jail*. In *Diary of a Mad Black Woman,* Madea is put on house arrest, after breaking, entering and destroying property. In *Meet the Browns,* Madea engages in a high-speed police car chase. When she finally surrenders, she fights the officers as they try to arrest her. The officers who arrest Madea are later shown in court with neck braces, canes and black eyes.

In *Madea Goes to Jail*, Mabel Simmons is further depicted as a criminalized masculine figure. After an altercation in a parking lot, a character refers to her as a "Jemiman Hun." This line of dialogue refers to the classic "Mammy" figure on the "Aunt Jemima" pancake syrup. Later the character appears in a prison uniform, her hair styled in what is known in the black community as "prison braids," a popular style for black men with long hair in urban areas. Madea is at no point intimidated by the prison system. She does what she wants to do and demands respect from even the toughest prisoners.

Nurturing "Mammy"—Despite her masculine characteristics, Madea also possesses many of the nurturing character traits of the historical "Mammy." Madea was noted for nurturing behaviors 162 times, which include feeding others, giving advice, teaching manners and the use of the word "Honey." For example, she is found feeding a junkie, three children who broke into her house, attempting to steal valued possessions in *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, and the entire family multiple times in *Madea's Family Reunion.* In order to avoid jail time, Madea agrees to be a foster mother in *Madea's Family Reunion,* to a troubled teenage girl who

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happens to be in court while Madea was on trial. Despite a great deal of tension in their relationship, by the end of the film the teen-age girl is grateful for the positive reinforcement and confidence she gains while staying in Madea's house.

Dimwitted "Mammy"—The dimwitted "Mammy" refers to the character's unintelligent behavior. Madea's use of slang can be assessed as "dimwitted" throughout Perry's films, along with certain kinds of thoughts that seem inappropriate for a woman her age. For example, in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman,* Madea is seen on the floor panting for breath and exhausted from break-ing and entering into her granddaughter's home. As she begs her granddaughter to bring her some oxygen, she proceeds to light a cigarette and begins to smoke. Madea is unable to assist her foster child who asks for help with her math homework. Em-barrassed, Madea calls a member of the family, claiming, "Oh honey, I don't know nothing about that Algero!" Madea was noted as having "dimwitted' characteristics 7 times throughout this study.

"Sapphire" Characteristics

The "Sapphire" stereotype is characterized by being sassy, insulting and violent. "Sapphire" characteristics were noted 498 times throughout this study, with most of the "Sapphire's" anger being directed towards men.

Tyler Perry's first film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, tells the story of an African American woman, Helen, whose eighteen-year marriage ends abruptly, with her wealthy husband throwing her out of their house. Helen is assisted by a kindly U-Haul truck driver, who she addresses in the following way: "Stop the truck! All you men are just alike. You just think about yourself, you don't think about anybody else but yourselves…go to hell!" This behavior continues in a later scene where Helen comes in contact with the truck driver again, and throws an ice-cold drink in his face. Orlando, the truck driver, states "Now every man is going to have to pay for what [her husband] did." She replies, "I'm not bitter, I'm mad as hell" (Perry, 2005).

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Madea also exemplifies many "Sapphire" characteristics throughout this sample. For example, in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman,* Madea encourages Helen to destroy the expensive clothes that her husband bought for his mistress. While tearing the clothes apart in the closet, Madea exclaims, "This is for every black woman who ever had a problem with a black man!" In *Madea's Family Reunion,* Madea teaches her granddaughters how to play "grit ball," a technique consisting of throwing hot grits on a man and beating him with a heavy steel skillet. Madea also exemplified the "Sapphire" quality of mocking black men; several times she refers to her brother Joe as worthless, claiming that she looks forward to claiming his "check" when he dies.

The film, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself,* is centered on a "Sapphire" and how her behavior affects her relationships. The character April portrays many "Sapphire" characteristics—she is angry, loud, sassy and dismissive. She sleeps with men solely for pleasure and money to pay the bills, dismissing the idea of loving someone or letting another fully love her.

"Jezebel" Characteristics

The modern "Jezebel" is exhibited in the sample a total of 306 times. Tyler Perry's first use of the "Jezebel" stereotype is showcased in the character of Brenda, in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. Brenda is a married man's mistress. The film indicates that she had been seeing the lawyer for much of his eighteen-year marriage, because they have two sons together. Brenda is thin, has fair skin and could easily pass for white. Brenda is an example of the "Jezebel" because she is sleeping with Charles with the sole purpose of acquiring access to his money. The love triangle between Charles, his mistress and his wife also refers to cultural prejudices that prefer fair skinned "Jezebels" to darker-skinned women.

In *Madea's Family Reunion*, 20 women appear in provocative clothing, dancing to loud music and engaging in public displays of affection. This image furthers the stereotype of the "black family" as loose and wild. In *Madea Goes to Jail*, two of the main characters chose prostitution as their profession. The film focuses

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on the internal conflict of the individuals who have sold their bodies as a result of being hurt in the past. Overall, 76 sexually provocative behaviors were noted.

DISCUSSION

The Tyler Perry films assessed in this research present multiple examples of the "Mammy," "Jezebel" and "Sapphire" stereotypes. It was observed that the stereotypical "mad black woman," also known as the "Sapphire," is found to a degree in most characters, whether they were deemed "Mammy," "Sapphire" or "Jezebel." The anger in the depiction becomes even more common as the films were released, proving not only that the stereotypes were consistent over time, but also that they became more exaggerated. In many cases anger is the driving source that propels the plots forward.

Black women's threatening body language (rolling necks and eyes while speaking extremely loudly) are very common throughout this study's sample, noted 169 times. Images like this might lead one to expect this type of behavior from a black female peer, during a confrontation or a disagreement.

The "Mammy" stereotype appears most frequently in this sample. This was expected, considering the demand created by consumers to see Perry in his most popular role. Black male comedians have maximized the box office potential of the "Mammy" character. The popularity of Eddie Murphy's portrayal of "Norbit,"(2007) and Martin Lawrence's portrayal of "Big Momma,"(2000) are choice examples. According to Heartly, what many viewers fail to realize is that Tyler Perry constructed the Madea character in the mirror of black masculinity by using deviant, strong and aggressive behaviors. Critics believe that Madea's exaggerated performance of the "Mammy" is complicated by the fact that the character is played by a black man, Perry, in drag. The complication is implied with the gender displacement of Madea's position, as a mother, speaking from a woman's perspective and behaving as a woman while a man is clearly performing the actions. Because the audience realizes that Madea is not a genuine portrayal of a woman, they laugh at many extreme behaviors, without punishing her for her actions. Madea is not an accurate

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portrayal of a black woman; consequently, she is easily placed in the category of "other." Categorizing her as a sub-human creature allows the audience to laugh at her absurdity. Madea's behavior is seen neither as inappropriate female, nor male behavior. She is the essence of what a stereotype is: an idea constructed to look away from the truth.

In every film in this sample, Madea was in trouble with the police, in some films appearing in court multiple times. In light of carrying guns, engaging in arguments and physical struggles with police, there is no way that Madea could have remained in realistic society without repercussions. In a similar study, Alfred Heartley included a discussion about Madea's role in *Madea Goes to Jail*. He states that prison is a place where black men need to exhibit a strong presence of masculinity to other inmates, because passive individuals in the prison system are marked as weak, and are subject to abuse. Because violence dictates the social order in the prison system, violent behavior on behalf of inmates essentially ensures their safety from crimes in prison such as rape (Heartley, 2011). This idea provides a rationale to Madea's behavior in *Madea Goes to Jail*. When Madea is seen acting in such ways, negative stereotypes of a black woman are not what enter into the mind of the viewer, but rather the negative, criminalized, connotations of the African American man.

While this study focused on the consequences of representations of African American women in black films, Madea is dominant as the stereotypical black male. Audiences may enjoy watching Madea behave so radically, rebelling against the law and various police authorities because few African Americans would think to threaten their safety so carelessly. The wish-fulfillment the audience experiences is akin to the pleasures provided by the Blaxploitation films released between 1969-1974. These films were also targeted toward the black audience (Guerrero, 1993).

The "Jezebel" stereotype had the least coded behaviors. This is possibly due to the new implication of the modern Jezebel who is sexy, but angry, pushing her more towards the "Sapphire" category.

To avoid the consequences of black misrepresentation in film there needs to be greater sensitivity to role portrayals of Af-

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rican Americans in the media. Tyler Perry claims that he writes a "simple story on purpose" (NPR, 2010). Spike Lee, a fellow black filmmaker, used words such as "coonery" and "buffoonery" to describe aspects of Perry's work. While on one hand Perry talks about the passion he has to tell women's stories, we must ask to what purpose and to what end?

Tyler Perry is using the popular success of his comedic films to produce more serious material. His limited involvement with *Precious* (a film adaptation from Sapphire's novel *Push*) and his greater involvement with *For Colored Girls* (a film adaptation of Ntozanke Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide/ When The Rainbow Is Enuff*) is an indicator that Perry is truly attempting to go beyond the self-termed "simple stories," to the work of more complex artists.

Little research has been conducted on differing perspectives of role portrayal in black film between African American and Caucasian audiences. Because assumptions and attitudes are seldom consciously nor intentionally articulated, identifying them and questioning them is an important step in future research to assess the awareness of stereotypes, perceived realism of the depiction of black culture, and whether or not consumers of Tyler Perry films identify with stereotypical characters.

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