

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Colorism in Black Sitcoms

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines colorism in twenty Black American sitcoms ranging from the 1960s until the 2010s. Although previous researchers have looked at how colorism has presented itself in various forms of mainstream and Black media, not many have looked at the Black sitcom genre as a whole. Through the use of qualitative content analysis, this research suggests that Black American sitcoms tend to spread colorist messages in how characters are portrayed in the areas of romance, aggressiveness, criminality, and class status. Under the cultivation analysis theory, this research argues that because of these Black sitcoms have been used as a tool to spread colorist messages which plays a part in real world discrimination typically felt by darker skinned Black people. This study could be used by both audiences and content makers to acknowledge and fight against the biases present within previous and future forms of media.

Introduction

In 2020, Disney+ announced that they would be releasing a reboot of the 2001 Disney sitcom *The Proud Family* titled *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder*. While many fans were elated by the news, a few began discussing the flaws in the original series. In fact, a petition on Change.org was created to cancel the reboot, specifically citing colorism, or privilege/discrimination in relation to the lightness of one's skin tone (Hall, 2019), as the reason why. In the petition, the creator Ella Mai states "The Proud Family has always had issues with colorism. The series in its depiction of visible Black girls/women perpetuates the idea that those with lighter skin are intelligent and 'human' while those with darker skin are seen as incompetent and less than" (2021). Despite the fact that the petition has roughly 18,000 signatures, the series began airing February of 2022.

The controversy surrounding the series serves as an example of a much larger issue within the Black community surrounding the presence of colorism in Black media, here defined as media made with a predominantly Black cast.

This study intends to investigate the colorism present within a specific form of Black media, Black sitcoms, by examining if the skin tone of a Black character impacts the way they are depicted. This study is focusing on Black sitcoms because when Black people first began to receive representation in the 20th century, it was primarily through the sitcom genre. While Black people have been represented in a wide variety of genres since then, the majority of Black representation on TV is still in the sitcom genre (Dixon, 2019). Meaning that the genre has played a significant part in how Black people are depicted in the media and this depiction has gone on to impact the way they are viewed in the real world (Gerbner, 1998).

Literature Review

Although the term “colorism” wasn’t documented until 1982 by African-American writer Alice Walker, it has been a phenomenon in the Black community since at least the 17th century. During slavery in the United States, mixed race Black people were idealized due to their closer proximity to Whiteness. This notion was further solidified with The Mulatto hypothesis, a theory that states lighter-skinned Black people are morally, physiological, and intellectually superior to darker-skinned Black people due to their closer proximity to Whiteness (Hall, 2019). The effects of this belief can still be felt today as darker skinned Black people are less likely to be hired for jobs (Harrison, 2006), more likely to receive harsher legal punishments for the same crime (Jones, 2000; Eberhardt et al., 2006), and are generally seen as less attractive than their lighter-skinned counterparts (Hunter, 2007).

According to George Gerbner, founder of cultivation analysis theory, a significant tool used to spread these beliefs is the media. Cultivation analysis is a theoretical perspective based on the belief that television has the power to shape how audiences view the world. Through his work, Gerbner found that repetitive lessons learned from television are likely to become the basis of beliefs (Gerbner, 1998). Meaning, that the way lighter and darker skinned Black people have been depicted in the media, will play a part in how those groups are viewed in real life.

A History of Black Representation

To understand colorism within Black sitcoms, it is essential to understand the history of Black representation as a whole. Up until the second half of the 20th century, the overwhelming majority of people presented in the media were White. The few times that African-Americans were casted in Hollywood for significant roles, it would predominantly be lighter-skinned actors as their ability to “pass” as White people helped them be seen as more versatile and relatable. Conversely, darker skinned Black actors’ inability to “pass” meant they were relegated to portraying negative stereotypes (Farrow & Smith, 2019; Freyberg, 2004). Some studios even darkened Black actors' skin to better help them sell the stereotype, such as the case with Paul Robeson in his role for *The Song of Freedom* (showcased in **Figure 1**), a movie designed to make Black people appear ‘uncivilized’ and ‘comical’ (Farrow & Smith, 2019).



Figure 1. *The Song of Freedom* Movie Poster with a Darkened Paul Robeson (Song of Freedom Inc., 1936)

It wasn’t until the 1970s when things began to change as there began to be more series that depicted Black characters in non-stereotypical roles such as *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Jeffersons* (Sebro & Chen, n.d.). While the increase of series showcasing positive Black representation should be praised, it’s important to examine how they may have contributed to other forms of discrimination, in this case colorism.

Although there is very limited research looking at colorism within the media, the research that does exist typically falls within three categories. The first category deals with colorism in non-fictional media, shown through Travis Dixon and Keith Maddox's study of the association between people's perception of crime and skin tone in news reports. They found that Black people with more Afrocentric features (darker skin, coarser hair, bigger features, etc.) were more likely to be associated with negative traits, specifically aggression and criminality. They propose that this negative portrayal of darker-skinned Black people could play a part in the discrimination felt by darker-skinned Black people in the legal system as they are seen as more of a threat (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Jones, 2000; Eberhardt et al., 2006). This study is significant because it suggests that there is a relationship between the skin tone of a Black person and the way they are depicted in the media and that this relationship could have real world implications.

The second category tends to focus on older and/or less culturally relevant forms of media, primarily used to look at the history of colorist messaging in the media. For example, Monet Downrich's examination into colorism in the Black magazines *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence*. She found that in 2 out of 3 of the magazines, colorism would primarily impact the perceived beauty of women as 80% of the couples shown in the magazines examined had a lighter-skinned woman and darker-skinned men. She argues that this sends the message that lighter-skinned women are more desirable than their darker-skinned counterparts and/or Black men should aspire to be with someone with a lighter skin tone (2020). This study demonstrates that even media specifically curated for Black audiences has the capacity to spread colorist messages. When compared to Dixon and Maddox study, it also indicates that colorism may present itself differently between men and women. In Black women, skin tone seems to have the most impact on attractiveness and desirability while in Black men it seems to most impact associations with criminality and aggressiveness. That's not to say that skin tone can't impact the perceived desirability of men and vice versa, just that that is how colorism most impacts the genders.

The last category deals with more modern and/or culturally relevant forms of media, primarily through looking at specific movies or TV series. An example of this would be Catherine Steele's study on colorism present in the previously mentioned sitcom *The Proud Family*. She found that lighter-skinned female characters on the series were more likely to be portrayed as upper class, proper, and intelligent. In contrast, the darker-skinned female characters were portrayed as lower class, scary, and unattractive. When examining the men of the series, she notes a particular episode that pitted the families of the mother of the main character, Trudy, against the father of the main character, Oscar. She notes that Trudy's family was portrayed to have more Eurocentric features, be richer, and more educated. Conversely, Oscar's family possessed more Afrocentric features, were poorer, and less educated (2016). Steele's research builds upon Downrich in that it not only finds that skin tone impacts the perceived desirability of Black women in the media, but also whether they will be portrayed to have positive/negative traits. Despite the fact that Steele's perceptions of the series is limited due to her only watching one out of the series' three seasons, her findings were consistent with the problems listed on the previously mentioned petition to cancel the reboot series (Mai, 2021).

Although there have been studies that have looked into colorism in the media, very little studies to date have examined the role the Black sitcom genre has played in spreading colorist messaging. As discussed earlier in the Literature Review, Black sitcoms have the power to shape audiences' attitudes towards certain groups, so the way said groups are portrayed in these shows matter. Because of the gap in current literature and the potential impact of colorism in Black sitcoms, this study's purpose is to examine how colorism presents itself in Black sitcoms.

Methods

To answer the research question, the selected shows were analyzed using qualitative content analysis guided by the cultivation analysis theory. Qualitative content analysis looks for trends in the ways particular groups are depicted in the media and how this can have a negative impact on society. It is guided by the cultivation analysis theory because the theory works to identify the most recurrent and overarching patterns of television content and focuses on the consequences of exposure to such patterns (Gerbner, 1998). Combined, the two work for the purposes of the study

because they can be used to examine trends in the ways darker/lighter-skinned Black people are represented in Black sitcoms and the possible consequences of said trends.

Selecting The Series and Episodes

The first component of this research study was selecting the shows to analyze. In order for the shows to be up for consideration they had to be a Black sitcom, follow the lives of characters based in the United States, and be a show I had access to. I decided to only analyze Black sitcoms versus multiracial sitcoms because Black sitcoms provide a chance to see the widest range of Black characters rather than only looking at a handful (Sebro & Chen, n.d.). And I choose to only focus on shows based in the United States because colorism has been shown to present itself differently depending on region and culture and it would be infeasible to examine the colorism present in Black sitcoms worldwide (Rahman, 2020).

The selected shows were chosen off of a NPR article titled *A Timeline of Sitcoms Featuring Families of Color* (Chow, 2014). I chose to use this list because it was a reputable source that showcased a list of series from a wide timespan. The information on the series (the years the series aired and the number of seasons) was provided by TV Guide, an “American digital media company that provides television program listings information” (TV Guide, n.d.), and are showcased on **Table 1**.

From there one show from each season, excluding the last season of *Black-ish* as it was airing at the time of the study, was selected using a random number generator. While I recognize that this may leave me with a skewed and/or misinformed perception of the show/characters, for feasibility, I did only one episode per season in order to include as many series as possible in this study. I randomly selected the show in order to decrease bias as my background as a darker-skinned Black person may influence my interpretation (Suresh, 2011). Additionally, I wanted to see how characters are portrayed in an average episode and randomization gave me the best chance at that. I choose to do one from each season as a way to see as many characters as possible and if characters changed throughout time.

Watching The Shows

Before watching the shows, I read the synopsis of the entire series and of the specific episodes watched provided on the platform I used to watch said episode. That way, I came into the shows with a baseline understanding of what was happening.

While watching the shows, I only analyzed the actions of Black and/or Mixed race characters. I used an observation log that allowed me to track the skin tone of the characters according to the Fitzpatrick scale chart, a scale created by American dermatologist Thomas B. Fitzpatrick that is commonly used to classify skin color showcased in **Figure 2**, and gender (Fitzpatrick & Patel, 2021). I tracked gender because, as discussed in the Literature Review, colorism has been shown to present itself differently between genders. While watching the shows, I took notes on the actions of the characters, indicators of how they are perceived (typically shown through comments made by other characters), and any other notable actions in the show. After watching the shows, I used the actions written down throughout the series to analyze the characters of the show.

Table 1. Black Sitcoms by Title, Years Aired, and Number of Seasons According to TV Guide

Title of the Show	Years Aired	Number of Seasons
Julia	1968-1971	3
Sanford and Son	1972-1977	6
That's My Mama	1974-1975	2
The Jeffersons	1975-1985	11
Grady	1975-1976	2
What's Happening!!!	1976-1979	3
227	1985- 1990	5
A Different World	1987- 1993	6
Family Matters	1989-1998	9
Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	1990-1996	6
Roc	1991-1994	3
Moesha	1996-2001	6
Sister, Sister	1994-1999	6
Smart Guy	1997-1999	3
One on One	2001-2005	5
My Wife and Kids	2001-2005	5
The Bernie Mac Show	2001-2006	5
All of Us	2003-2007	4
Everybody Hates Chris	2005-2009	4
Black-ish	2014-2022	8

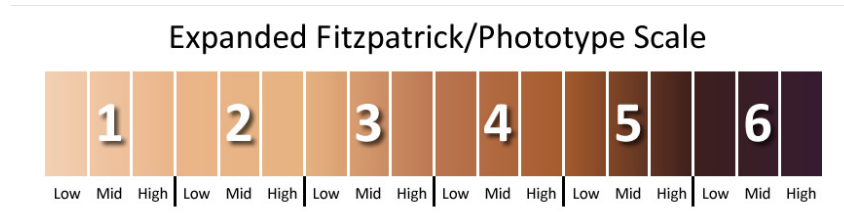


Figure 2. Fitzpatrick Skin Chart (Pistache Training, 2017)

In order to account for the social and historical context surrounding the shows, after watching/analyzing all of the series, I grouped them into 20-year periods (1960s-1970s, 1980s-1990s, and 2000-2010s) based on when the shows aired. I did this because when watching these shows it's important to keep in mind that shows written today and twenty years ago aren't going to portray the same issues the same way so it would be unfair to hold them to the same standards (RobbGrieco, 2014). Whenever there were situations where a show may have aired through two periods, they will be grouped in the period where the majority of the series ran. Within these periods, I compared the series to each other to see if there are any overarching patterns on how Black people are portrayed as it relates to skin tone, then compared the time periods against each other to see how those patterns evolved throughout time.

Findings and Analysis

Over the span of 2 months, a total of 99 episodes and 299-character portrayals were analyzed. It is necessary to point out that during the last season of the series *One on One*, the cast went from being predominantly Black to multiracial. Because of this, the episode in the final season of the series was excluded from study as it no longer fit the criteria of acceptable shows.

When looking at the shows, there isn't a clear-cut distinction between the portrayal of lighter-skinned characters and darker-skinned ones; characters of all shades were represented as kind/mean, intelligent/dumb, mature/immature, etc. But when one looks at the depth at which characters are portrayed in these traits, specifically within the themes of romance, class status, aggressiveness, and criminality there is a concerning pattern of portrayal that could be used to spread colorist notions.

Romance

In all of the time periods, the romantic pairings were most likely to be made of a female partner who was the same skin tone or lighter one than the male partner. This is consistent with Downrich's study into popular Black magazines and serves to show that that pattern exists well into modern day media (2020). Just like in the previous study, this could be used to spread the message that attractiveness is tied to skin tone, specifically lighter skin tone for women and darker ones for men. However, it could arguably be more impactful as Black sitcoms have been a more popular form of media that has persisted for a longer period of time than Black magazines.

Class Status

When looking at how colorism presents itself when it comes to class differences, each time period showcased it a bit differently. For the shows in the 1960s-1970s, there seems to be no clear-cut difference between class and skin tones. Darker-skinned characters such as Helen from *The Jeffersons* (shown in **Figure 3**) were shown to be just as successful, if not more successful, than lighter-skinned ones such as George from the same show (shown in **Figure 3**). This is positive as it sends the message that skin tone and class status shouldn't be interconnected.

There didn't start to be a notable difference in class and skin tone until the 1980s-1990s. While darker-skinned characters weren't necessarily boxed into the poor category, they typically were not shown to be as rich as lighter-skinned characters. This can be seen through the characters of Dr. Foster (shown in **Figure 4**) and Whitley (shown in **Figure 5**) from the show *A Different World*. While the audience is meant to see Dr. Foster as a successful college professor, it's heavily implied that Whitley is extremely upper class and comes from some sort of generational wealth. This becomes exceptionally significant as the show takes place just barely a generation after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Cornell Law School, n.d.). Additionally, the majority of the characters who were written to be lower/working class were darker skinned. This is expressed most clearly as the only show in this time period with a lead character explicitly written as poor/cheap was also the only show with a darker-skinned man as the lead, *Roc* (shown in **Figure 6**).

And this pattern somewhat shifted in the 2000s-2010s period with more darker-skinned people being portrayed as richer. The problem is that they tend to be rich due to stereotypical reasons. For example, Jack Matthews (shown in **Figure 7**) from *One on One* and Bernie Mac (shown in **Figure 8**) from *The Bernie Mac Show* are portrayed to be some of the richest characters from the time period but one is a basketball player and the other a comedian. When you compare this to lighter-skinned characters who are portrayed to be similarly wealthy, such as Petyon (shown in **Figure 9**) from *All of Us* who is a businessman, it begins to send a message that the only way darker skinned people can be successful is through stereotypical means. This somewhat aligns with the historical standard to cast darker-skinned people in stereotypical roles (Freydberg, 2004), but it's important to point out that having a "stereotypical" job isn't inherently negative. It becomes a problem when it is the only way darker-skinned people can be successful whereas lighter-skinned people can be successful for a mirage of reasons.



Figure 3. Helen (right) and George (left) from *The Jeffersons* (Duclon et al., 1975-1985)



Figure 4. Dr. Foster from *A Different World* (Carsey et al., 1987 - 1993)



Figure 5. Whitley from *A Different World* (Carsey et al., 1987 - 1993)



Figure 6. Roc (left) from *Roc* (Fisch & Kaplan, 1991 - 1994)



Figure 7. Jack Matthews from *One on One* (Janollari et al., 2001 - 2006)



Figure 8. Bernie Mac from *The Bernie Mac Show* (Willmore et al., 2001 - 2006)



Figure 9. Peyton from *All of Us* (Smith et al., 2003 - 2007)

Aggressiveness

While there were rarely any acts of overt violence in any of the shows, the few characters that would be portrayed as aggressive and/or violent were darker skinned. While lighter-skinned people could be portrayed as confrontational, it was extremely rare for them to be presented as an actual threat to the characters. An example of this would be Fred (shown in **Figure 10**) from *Sanford and Son* who is portrayed to be extremely rude and prejudiced, but he is never considered a serious threat by any of the other characters. Darker-skinned characters on the other hand were more likely to be portrayed as people to genuinely be afraid of. For example, the character of Darryl (shown in **Figure 11**) from *What's Happening!!* is an abuser and a bully that the other characters spend most of the episode fearing.

And this trend stays consistent with the other time periods as well. Lighter-skinned characters such as Alisha (shown in **Figure 12**) from *Moesha* are presented as mild nuisances compared to Diane (shown in **Figure 13**) from *Black-ish* who is not only the darkest character on the show, but the only character that the others are scared of, even though she is younger than almost all of them.

Overall, this compliments Dixon and Maddox's (2005) study in that darker-skinned people are more associated with aggressiveness but conflicts in that the problem arises relatively equally between the genders. Just like in their study, this depiction could be used to send the message that darker skinned people are inherently more aggressive and/or prone to violence.



Figure 10. Fred from *Sanford and Son* (Lear & Yorkin, 1972 - 1977)



Figure 11. Darryl (middle) from *What's Happening!!* (Orenstein et al., 1976 - 1979)



Figure 12. Alicia from *Moesha* (Farquhar et al., 1996 - 2001)



Figure 13. Diane from *Black-ish* (Anderson et al., 2014 - 2022)

Criminality

While characters of all skin tones could be portrayed as criminals, lighter-skinned people were more likely to be shown in a sympathetic manner. This contrast can most be seen through Floyd (shown in **Figure 14**) from *That's My Mama!!* and Patience (shown in **Figure 15**) from *Moesha*. Both of them are robbers. But the audience is made to sympathize with Floyd as they learn that the only reason he began stealing was because he struggled to find work after returning from the Vietnam War. Patience on the other hand is presented as a one-dimensional bad guy that the other characters are visibly intimidated by.

This is again consistent with Maddox and Dixon's (2020) study, with darker-skinned Black people being more associated with criminality but differed in a peculiar way. It's not that lighter-skinned people couldn't be portrayed as criminals, but there was almost always some justification given to those characters that made the audience want to sympathize. Darker-skinned characters weren't given that same luxury, often being portrayed as unambiguously bad. This could be used to send the message that darker-skinned people are inherently less deserving of sympathy and could lead to them being seen as irredeemably bad.



Figure 14. Floyd from *That's My Mama!* (Davis et al., 1974 - 1975)



Figure 15. Patience from *Moesha* (Farquhar et al., 1996 - 2001)

Conclusion

Overall, this study proposes that Black sitcoms have significantly contributed to the spreading of colorist messages in the Black community. It's not that Black people with a certain skin tone have to be portrayed in a certain manner; it's when examining the categories of romance, criminality, aggressiveness, and class status a concerning pattern appears. These trends send the message that darker-skinned people are poorer, more aggressive, less deserving of sympathy, and that the attractiveness of Black people is tied to skin tone. According to the cultivation analysis theory, these

negative portrayals of darker-skinned people in the media could play a role in the negative attitudes towards them in real life and contribute to the various forms of discrimination mentioned in the Literature Review.

It must be noted this study did face a few limitations. As previously mentioned, due to time constraints only one episode per season was examined, meaning that this analysis isn't based on a full picture. That's why I believe that this study is best understood as a baseline understanding of a problem to be further expanded on through future research. Doing a deeper analysis into how the Black sitcom genre or other forms of media contributes to the spreading of colorist message could be effective in fully understanding how the media is used to spread colorist notions about the Black community. Although the Black sitcom genre should be praised for being some of the first pieces of media that was used to bring good and complex representation to the Black community, it's important that the genre be looked at through a critical lens. Hopefully in doing so, both the people behind the scenes and viewers can be made aware of and fight against this bias.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mother, sister, and Dr. Soo Park for supporting me through the research process and encouraging me to publish.

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