Black Women: Conforming, or Redefining?

Many Americans, both male and female, feel the need to follow established beauty standards in order to achieve “perfection”. In America, there are standards of beauty that many women try to live up to yet the majority of our beauty standards in the media seem to cater to European American women. How do these standards affect women of color, specifically Black women? The lack of diversified representation of Black women in the media can suggest that Black women are more susceptible to conforming to European American ideals.

Authors, who have decided to write about Black women in today’s society or even history, whether it is about beauty, finding a place in a modern culture, defying and or reinforcing stereotypes, or even appearances in the media, tend to be psychologists and anthropologists. There are doctors of different social sciences who seek to understand more about Black women, and from a social and psychological standpoint, some research has been conducted. All authors that have contributed to this area of study similarly came to the conclusion that Black women as a whole in relation to the media have not been studied abundantly. “There has been far less research examining the specific images of Black women in the media” (Gordon 246). The fact that most authors are aware that acknowledging Black beauty is rare can demonstrate how Black women in society feel about themselves, and being so impressionable. Most authors are pursuing this topic because they felt not enough has been written about it and in doing so, they have taken matters into their own hands and educate people
who may not have realized. As a Black female growing up in a society where media is very influential, I am personally invested in the topic of Black beauty. I care to know how Black women, myself included, are included in the media, and how that affects if and how we perceive ourselves as beautiful.

People who are portrayed in the media have the ability to affect those watching and how they view themselves. Authors such as Maya K. Gordon, Susan L. Bryant, Deana L. Jefferson, and Jayne E. Stake establish that Black females are impressionable due to the media, but Bryant, the author of *The Beauty Ideal: The Effects of European Standards of Beauty on Black Women* specifically brings up a different point. Bryant provides the idea that colorism is indeed a contributing factor to a Black female’s identification and vulnerability due to media by stating, “…black girls with darker skin may be more vulnerable than their lighter skin peers to negative messages from the media about their physical appearance and attractiveness, which can lead to long-term risky behaviors” (Bryant 83).

Although this is a strong position, authors Gordon, Jefferson, and Stake would disagree. Maya K. Gordon, author of *Media Contributions to African American Girls’ Focus on Beauty and Appearance: Exploring the Consequences of Sexual Objectification*, would say that Black females are vulnerable to the media because of the identification with Black females that are being sexually objectified. “The more objectifying female artists present images that emphasize women’s appearance, sexuality, and desirability to men, and these findings suggest that girls who identify more strongly with these artists may be internalizing their messages about women” (Gordon 253). This article is suggesting that a Black woman would be more vulnerable to internalize the messages of over-sexualization because a Black woman embraces that in the media, which would lead to how a Black woman identifies herself.
In addition to these points, shifting from the vulnerability of Black women toward the media, another position is a Black women’s vulnerability toward the media in comparison with European American women. Deana L. Jefferson and Jayne E. Stake, authors of *Appearance Self-Attitudes of African American and European Women: Media Comparison and Internalization of Beauty Ideals* wrote that it is harder for a Black woman to identify with European American standards of beauty, so a black woman is more satisfied with her body than a European American woman is. “…EA women are more vulnerable to body image concerns than are AA women, having not only discontent with their body size, but with specific appearance features as well” (Jefferson and Stake 407). This suggests that Black women don’t think they’re less beautiful, they just think that because they don’t see themselves in the media, they can’t relate to the European American beauty standards, so they ignore them, whereas a European American woman will internalize the beauty standards and become more dissatisfied. This could mean that if there was more representation of Black women in the media, Black women would have more to compare themselves to, which allows self-doubt, but if there are people to relate to, that could also mean they can see themselves in a more positive light, knowing others are the same.

In the media today, Black people are defined as beautiful, but only when it pertains to certain characteristics. Eric J. Bailey, author of *Black America, Body Beautiful* would suggest that the body image of Black women attribute to more than just physical appearance. Bailey also talks of the differences in what the media shows, which is limited, versus the true representation of what African American body types are like. The preferred African American body for women has natural curves, which is a positive trait. Being a Black woman and not having a physically preferred body can alter the perception of beauty, because there is a double standard of not being “Black” enough. “This double standard involves the concept of a body that looks ‘too African
American,’ or ‘too European American,’ and causes some people to feel uncomfortable about their own ethnic physical identity (natural curves, hips, rear end), or to think that another person is losing his or her ethnic physical identity (curves, hips, rear end)” (Bailey 24). The double standard is something a Black woman may struggle with. Because she may lack these physical assets, her definition of beauty and the way she sees herself can be altered, and subsequently feel inferior to those who may have them. She may also feel inferior, not because Black women have it and she does doesn’t, but perhaps because European American women have them as well.

In the media lately, there has been much speculation over Kylie Jenner and her new lips. Kylie Jenner, a White female has been using lip fillers to give her lips a plumper look. The “Kylie Jenner Challenge” was then created to mock or pay homage to Kylie, for starting the revolution of larger lips. Black people as a whole are known for having fuller lips, but for a White female to alter her appearance to achieve this, may result in Black women finding it harder to appreciate this trend. Because of the double standard that Bailey mentioned, feeling less Black and in turn, less beautiful can affect many Black women who may find it harder to identify with themselves because of beauty ideals due to the media.

*Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being* is a representative text of the topic of Black beauty. The article seems to be about the hair of Black women, but it is really about the sense of inferiority to the ideals of White beauty. When Thompson speaks about this topic, her tone comes across as defensive, as if this topic is personal to her. The usage of the words like “it isn’t enough” or “condemnation” when speaking about how Black hair is different to manage than hair of other races provides the inclination that she is affected about this topic. This can be representative to other texts and the conversation as a whole because in all articles, there can be some sensitivity to the topic, especially since most of the authors writing about this topic are
Black. The conversation of Black beauty is sensitive to people because the feeling of inferiority can be traced back to slavery, where Thompson says, “once the slave trade began, the African’s connection to their hair was forever altered, and complicated by life in North America.” This quote suggests that there is still sensitivity behind this topic, because it can be related back to a degrading time in history. Hair is one factor in today’s society that is considered a determinant of beauty. By Thompson’s statement, it could be interpreted as the beauty that Black women once held and were once appreciated for, changed and was forever changed, because of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to North America. Thompson is insinuating that the transition from Africa to North America made the beauty of Black people, but especially Black women very minimal, because since then, Black people were juxtaposed to White standards and since then, Black women have been trying to reclaim their beauty by attempting to assimilate to European American ideals, for example, straightening their natural curls.

The different writers that have contributed to the topic of Black beauty understand that beauty is a subjective topic, but authors are beginning to write about it. If beauty is so objective, what makes Black beauty any more relevant? More awareness for Black women’s place in society means there was a less awareness before. The ongoing conversation is shedding light on a Black woman’s beauty, and realizing there can be difficulty trying to find a place in the guidelines that have been created for what’s accepted in today’s society. Black women may have a harder time fitting in, as Bailey would agree, because of the double standard that Black people may have to encounter (Bailey 24). Not being as curvaceous as the media may make Black women seem can affect a Black women’s perception of her, because she would be the least preferred and seem less “Black”.
Why does the perception of Black body image influence beauty? Why does the relationship between body and beauty validate one another? In doing so, being sexually objectified rises. The conversations being arisen seem as if Black women aren’t beautiful so they must resort to becoming overly sexual, but it is really about people not believing in Black women and that this is their reclamation of beauty. If Black women internalize the messages that are promoted by the overtly sexual icons in the media, there will be less of a problem accepting that being sexual is a problem (Gordon 253). It may also seem that because of music artists who objectify themselves and when younger girls internalize the messages, it makes it seem like Black women have to over-compensate for not being portrayed accurately.

The problem of not having diversified representation in the media can make it harder for a Black woman to accept herself because there are many European American women that Black women cannot relate to. “Previous research suggests that they are not affected by media portrayals of white women” (Gordon 252). After reading the different sources, the different points that arise demonstrate that it is hard for a Black woman to be looked at as a beautiful part of today’s American culture. There are different factors that make it difficult for the average Black woman to identify with figures in the media, so to be viewed as beautiful to other people and to them, there appears to be a difficult task. Being overly sexualized doesn’t guarantee that all Black women identify with objectified figures in the media. Women aren’t dominant in the media, and Black women in the media appear much less. When reflecting on the media’s portrayal of Black women, body image is very important. The representation of body image seems to only revolve around the hyper-sexualization of Black females, when Black women actually appear. Why is body image taken for granted as wholesome representation? Why isn’t there more effort in contributing more to offer than a sexual image?
There is a missing component in the academic conversation that seemed interesting. Academics may agree that there are minimal resources about intelligence and Black women, which does not seem to be considered. Why aren’t there representations of Black women exhibiting both a strong mind and body? Black women in society have to redefine both beauty and intelligence to create a more wholesome image of Black women. There are figures in the media that can represent Black women as intellects in the media, but not enough for adequate representation. Actress Kerry Washington, who plays Olivia Pope on the television show *Scandal*, is a Black woman who is very intelligent and helps those around her using her intellect. She can be a positive portrayal of the lesser-recognized intelligent Black woman, especially since she is one of the few characters who play the role of a sophisticated and educated Black woman. Another example of an intelligent Black woman who signifies a positive image is Tessa Thompson. In roles like Samantha White from the movie *Dear White People* and civil rights activist Diane Nash in *Selma*, Thompson has opened the window for women of color to be seen as beautiful and smart, but there is still not much representation of women like her in the media.

Another person redefining Black beauty in the media is Lupita Nyong’o. Lupita is a Black actress who won the “Best Supporting Actress” Oscar for the movie *12 Years a Slave*. She is changing and redefining beauty standards in European American media. Because she has a darker skin tone than many mainstream actresses, Lupita is recognized for her beauty that is different and unusual for traditional standards. It could appear that it is racist to say she is beautiful because of her skin color, but acknowledging that she is paving the way for other women of color to be confident in them is positive. Susan L. Bryant may not entirely agree with this statement because she said darker skin girls may resort to risky behaviors because of their vulnerability to the media, but because Lupita is representative of many Black females, as
mentioned earlier, it will be easier for Black girls to identify with her and allow girls to be more confident.

The topic of Black beauty should be acknowledged and widely spoken about because Black women can be represented as any woman of color, or any woman. To be fair and just to all, it is not appropriate to think about a certain group of people based on a sub-set of actions. The portrayal and the influence Black women in the media have on Black women in the public can change to a more positive look. The question is how? If there were more fitting standards to people who can potentially be affected, there would be less negative perceptions of people. The conversation should be about how to widen the spectrum of just sexually objectified females, or importance of body image to dignified women.

The primary point at hand is the effort in redefining both beauty and body image alongside intelligence, and moving away from the hypersexual aspect. The more representation of Black women in a positive light, rather than the hyper-sexualized light, could promote more confidence in the Black community. There could be more to talk about and Black women could have more studies done, because it is understood that they are not as researched and studied. It is impossible to completely redefine the image of Black women in the media, but to alter it in some ways using more representation of different, positive, portrayals can lead to more identification and stagnation from European American beauty ideals. How does society and mainstream media move forward from creating a hypersexual image to a representative, and more suiting image? Black women aren’t susceptible to conforming to European American beauty ideals; they are using it as a guideline to reclaim their beauty and create more complete image of what Black women ought to be represented as.
Works Cited


Deana L. Jefferson and Jayne E. Stake Appearance Self-Attitudes of African American and European Women: Media Comparison and Internalization of Beauty Ideals (EBSCO) 21 Apr. 2015
