

Transforming the Narrative: How Can Increased Critical Media
Literacy Empower Young Black Female Students in Schools?

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to analyze the media's portrayal of Black women, understand how it is interpreted by young Black girls and their peers and explore how it affects all Black girls' educational experiences. This study seeks to answer the inquiry question, "How can increased critical media literacy empower black girls and women to alter negative narratives, advocate for themselves in the classroom, and promote academic achievement?" The goal of this research is to learn how Black girls can dismantle the racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes presented by the media by interrogating the false stories being told and counteracting them with authentic ones.

Media has increasingly played an outstanding role in creating and fostering certain ideas and narratives of particular groups of people, especially with its growing prominence and accessibility in this digital age. It has gained the power to influence public opinion and often allows people to pre-judge different types of people based off images and words plastered on television and computer screens. This can be seen with how greatly skewed the perception of Black girls and women has become over time because of the mostly negative narratives told by the powerful (often White) people in control of mainstream media. For centuries, Black girls and women have been labeled everything from 'angry' to 'violent' to 'promiscuous' to 'ratchet.' These labels have not only affected how young Black girls question their identities and perceive their worth, but they create uncomfortable spaces in schools as well. Often black girls are forced to interact with peers and teachers who's only exposures to who a Black woman is is from media outlets. Receiving understanding and clarification on the identity and personality of a person from secondary sources like media can be quite harmful and lead to mistreatment, for young Black girls are often adultified and criminalized in the classroom.

While my educational experience has not been affected to that extremity, I, like most Black women, have encountered situations where I had to realize how I was often perceived was from information told by other, not personal interactions. A particular incident that inspired this research was when I was sitting in one of my education classes and found myself surrounded by the deafening White laughter of my peers, who also happen to be future teachers and educators. It was quite unsettling and suffocating because what exactly they were laughing at – a viral World Star Hip-Hip video of the infamous Sharkiesha violently pummeling another young Black girl in 2013. A video that somehow was introduced eagerly through a presentation by two White male classmates and sparked an unplanned discussion on race, gender, and the media's effect on how we view one another. For me, the entire situation was bothersome but not surprising. I had already experienced it at least a dozen times in a dozen different classes through my entire academic career. I already had a clear understanding that when I walked into a classroom, I wouldn't be in the majority and always pre-judged based off information learned on the internet and not from real-life interactions, even though my life couldn't be any more different from Sharkiesha's and any more similar to my White peers.

What truly affected me from that day was the realization that each 'situation' I have experienced has silenced me more and more while internally my rage as only festered and grown. And as an undergraduate student studying both communications and education, I haven't found a way to combine both disciplines to combat unfortunate situations like the one previously mentioned, but as a future educator, it is important that I find a way to reclaim my power. It is also equally - actually even more - important that I don't allow my future students, who are black and brown, to lose theirs. So even though I appreciate the necessary conversations happening between current and future educators on how there is an importance to be critically media literate

and more self-aware about pre-biases before entering the classroom and teaching, I want to instead find a way to empower and support my students in changing the false media's narrative that is often created about them, their families, and their communities. I want to create an awareness of the false truths that exist in media through incorporating critical media literacy into their education and I hope that this will inspire them to actively engage in the use of media to create their own content, especially with the increasing access and advancement to digital technology.

Literature Review

Black Girls' Responses to Media's Misinterpretations

The distorted historical images of Black femininity has contemporarily manifested into the media viewed and consumed by many people in society, including Black adolescent girls. These false and misconstrued portrayals that represent Black girlhood can often have positive or negative implications on how real young Black girls construct their own identities and view themselves. In a study called "This Is Not Reality ... It's Only TV", Hall and Smith (2012) looked to gain insight on how eleven Black high school girls interpret and challenge media's portrayal of their race, class, and gender within music videos, highlighting the importance of one's cognitive development during adolescence and the influence of their sociocultural environment.

Focusing on three particular students from a group interview session, the analysis revealed that all of their responses spoke to their cognitive achievement yet undergirded their sociocultural background (Hall & Smith, 2012), which clearly shows how the constant grouping of Black women done by the media suffocates them of their individuality. These Black young women all possessed an awareness of how Black females were depicted in the media and seemed

to adamantly want to dissociate as much as possible with the negative labels it created and focus on their individual personalities.

In a particular interview with one of the participants, Angela, the researchers asked her how she thought her teachers (majority being White) perceived and interacted with her based off seeing mediated content like music videos that often objectify and sexualize Black women. Her immediate response was a request for White teachers to stop stereotyping or pigeonholing her based on what they saw and learned on their screens. This perception that Angela had (real or perceived) of how White teachers “down” her supports research studies that explore the negative experiences of students of color within the school environment. And as noted in the article, “Angela’s request to be looked upon as a whole being speaks to the way in which controlling images affect teacher perceptions of Black girls. Furthermore, it reveals the intrinsic relationship between schools and society—that is, schools as symbolic and concrete sites that represent how Black girls are classified and treated within the broader society.” (Hall & Smith, 2012).

As educational research literature also points out, teachers’ expectations of African-American students are strongly influenced by Eurocentric ideological frameworks (As cited in Hall & Smith, 2015). From this standpoint, White educators’ myopically judge minority students based on learning styles and behaviors and relate to them accordingly. It is important for teachers to be aware of these biases that they possess, whether consciously and unconsciously, and make changes before they enter the classroom because it can be truly problematic. Teachers cannot rely on particular stereotypes regarding a student’s race, gender, or class to influence how they feel or evaluate the child for it threatens students’ academic achievement, and even worst their psychological well-being.

Similarly, Muhammad and McArthur (2015) also looked to gain insight and explore the perspectives of eight Black adolescent girls, between the ages of twelve and seventeen, when it relates to these current media representations in a study called “Styled by Their Perceptions.” Three distinct themes, (a) Judged by my Hair, (b) Angry, Loud, and Violent, and (c) Sexualized and Objectified emerged from when the participants in this research expressed how they viewed representation (McArthur & Muhammad, 2015), which are all contemporary manifestations of historical representations. And while this ‘Womanist investigation’ was meant to educate people on how these certain perceptions of Black women and girls impact how they are treated and develop identity like the previous study, this one went one step further to gain understanding on how negative portrayals could be replaced by positive images created by Black girls and women to generate more positive media consumption for humanity.

From our hair to our personalities to our bodies, we have been often dehumanized and demonized for appeal as entertainment for others for centuries. In opposition to this and other ways they felt society and media viewed them, the young Black girls, who were participating in a summer writing institute at the time, took advantage of pen and paper to rewrite how they were portrayed. To resist false portrayals use one’s literary voice to reclaim the narrative like this is a gift many Black women and girls possess, and it needs to be nurtured.

To nurture this gift, it is important for teachers to take a critical literacy approach (including critical media literacy) and ask students to examine and interrogate media images and depictions of diverse groups in society. Media texts such as images, sound, video, television, film, magazine, radio, music, and the Internet should be invited into classroom spaces for students to analyze, question, and interpret. Critical media literacy encourages youth to decode the meanings and messages behind media representations that hopefully lead to rich discussions

and writing on the portrayals that do not serve humanity well and inspire social change, which is what the girls in this particular study did. Especially when considering goals of multiculturalism and how classroom spaces should help youth build a better humanity for all, this is a great first step in providing comfortable classroom where students can advocate for themselves (McArthur & Muhammad, 2015).

Implementing Critical Media Literacy

As previously stated, engaging in critical media literacy can have great effects on a multicultural classroom, which happens to be the layouts in my schools around the United States today. In these classrooms are young Black girls who need to be empowered and critical media literacy can do that for them “because it is not simply an exercise in reading and writing; it is a mode through which Black girls learn how to push back and (re)write who they are.” (McArthur, 2016). Recognizing that students have this protentional to be transformative and helpful in constructing a model for being fully human in the world and working to make conditions for others more humane, Dennis (2016) provides how classroom teachers can design and develop curriculum with layered opportunities for Black girls to develop critical literacy practices in digital spaces.

Understanding that digital tools are being incorporated more and more in K-12 classrooms to support accessible curricula, collaboration, exploration of identity and positionality, inquiry, and social action, Dennis (2016), developed specific curriculum comprised of several different units that leveraged digital literacy practices to help students process content and demonstrate their learning in various ways. These units were implemented into the classroom of a fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Jones, who constructed lesson plans to teach the content. From the development and implementation of this curricula that focused on social issues

stemming from current events a space was created for Black girls to draw on critical literacy practices with digital tools to reshape how they demonstrated their thinking about social justice, power, and activism. From this, Dennis (2016) was able to learn several things: (1) the explorations of social issues allowed for certain discussions surrounding issues that directly affected the lives of Black girls and promoted advocacy among the students, (2) using and understanding the use of digital tools enabled opportunities for agency and self-confidence for Black girls, and (3) Black girls were able (re)imagine what it exactly meant to be a learner by exploring social issues and engage in these ideas across modalities and digital platforms. In the end, Black girls were able to apply their growing knowledge of digital literacy practices to address inequities (often their own). Opportunities like this are necessary and provide the best outcome for Black girls to be able to self-advocate in and out of the classroom and continue to achieve academically, which is one of the goals needed to be accomplished

Digital media can also be used by students outside of the classroom to create social change and re-imagine themselves as active and engage citizens within their communities, which can be seen in the case study of Charmaraman (2013), where she “explored how adolescents were empowered through afterschool media production activities and, in the process, re-imagined themselves as active and engaged citizens within their community.” While volunteering at a local school in Oakland she became engaged in the community and partnered with Youthscares, a local resource for developing media production classes for youths. Three specific themes that emerged from her analyzation of the experience: (1) sociocultural capital through group ownership; (2) safe space for creative expression; and (3) developing a sense of community with diverse voices. Once again, a safe space is provided for to self-advocate and be uncensored.

In her observations Charmaraman (2013) found that “the youth videos developed were collaborative storytelling devices, which allowed these youth to actively protest an issue that they felt needed to be opened up for community dialogue. In the case of community-based youth media organizations, empowerment and the development of voice resides in the ability to go beyond being passive consumers of media culture to active designers and producers of an alternative youth media, that in turn, can increase a community’s power for social change.” If provided the resources and support, students can create media that tells a different story from the ones that are often portrayed in the mainstream media and that can be quite powerful.

Conclusion

After reviewing the several academic sources, I believe they all provided strong validation for my concerns related to the experience of young black girls in schools with great explanation on how the media has tarnished the image of the black woman. It is clear media’s strong impact on how we see and understand different people and things and the research confirmed that not only does it affect how black girls view themselves, but also how teachers and peers view them as well. In Hall and Smith’s research (2012), the participant, Angela, spoke on her experiences with White teachers but didn’t elaborate. Besides this insertion, accuracy in understanding how much media alters the direct relationships between Black girls and other people in school isn’t provided. A great flaw is that we don’t get to hear the side of the teachers and peers who share the academic space with young Black girls. The dynamics of those relationships would be something that needs to be done with more research in the future because social interactions play an important part in the entire education experience. Even though there was a primary focus on the black female students in in Ms. Jones’s classroom, I know that the

classmates' energy and reaction to the lessons taught must have had some impact on their Black female peers from the various short conversations inserted within the Dennis' analysis.

Besides receiving a better understanding of how Black girls are affected and react to the false images media portrays, clarity on what actions need to be taken and how they can possibly be achieved was given. Teachers, who must to be unbiased and welcoming to all students from all backgrounds, need to have a strong understanding of critical media literacy and understand the necessity of teaching it to students. Once critical media literacy is implemented in the curriculum, students will develop an awareness of social issues in the world and be able to closely analyze various forms of media. Increasing the critical media literacy of young Black girls empowers them to advocate for themselves with was mention in both the works of both and McArthur (2016) and Dennis (2016), who specifically emphasized the necessity in providing digital media skills and tools can give them the opportunity to act on the social issues that they learn. It is important for black girls to have an outlet that allows them to take control and change the narrative whether through writing like in McArthur and Muhammad's study or creating digital media projects like in the studies of Dennis and Charmaraman. The importance of critical media literacy was established within this review, but in the future, with more expansive research, we can begin to understand how to assist and empower all school-aged Black girls in accessing the different talents and skills they have, whether it's music or writing or athletics, so they are able to have the loudest voices and change the narratives about them.

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