Is That a Real Woman? Reality TV Viewing and Black Viewers' Beliefs About Femininity

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Portrayals of women on reality TV frequently showcase a traditional feminine ideal that prioritizes sexual appeal, domesticity, and heteronormativity. Because Black viewers consume TV at high levels, and because Black women are prominently featured, this content could help shape their assumptions about femininity, especially if it is perceived as authentic. We therefore tested whether regular exposure to mainstream and Black-oriented reality programs is associated with beliefs about femininity among Black viewers and whether these beliefs are also linked with perceptions of the content's realism. Participants were 478 African American adults ($M = 26.10$) who indicated their exposure to 38 mainstream and 12 Black-oriented reality programs and their perceptions of realism. Assessments of gender beliefs included 4 subscales from the Femininity Ideology Scale and the Heterosexual Script Scale. As expected, greater exposure to mainstream reality programs predicted stronger expectations that women should be deferent and should conform to stereotypic appearance norms. Greater exposure to Black-oriented programs predicted greater acceptance of women as emotional and of the Heterosexual Script. When perceived realism was included, it emerged as a strong, direct predictor of all 5 belief variables; there were no interactions of exposure and realism. Implications for relationships are discussed.

Public Policy Relevance Statements
Surveying a national sample of African American adults, we found that frequent consumption of popular mainstream and Black-oriented reality TV programs is each associated with holding more stereotypical views about women. Perceiving these reality TV programs to be realistic is an even stronger predictor of holding these beliefs.

Keywords: reality TV, gender beliefs, Black media users, perceived realism, media effects

Reality TV has become a significant part of the current TV landscape, offering regular insight into how individuals date, work, and socialize. Although TV exposure, in general, is argued to help cultivate our perspectives about the real world (Gerbner, 1998), portrayals on reality programs may be especially influential because the characters are perceived as "real people," not actors (Brown, 2005). One domain of beliefs that could be sculpted are beliefs about gender roles, about expectations of ideal womanhood and manhood. Across several studies, findings indicate that frequent exposure to reality programming is associated with greater endorsement of traditional gender and sexual roles (Ferris et al., 2007; Seabrook et al., 2017; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). For example, frequently viewing reality dating programs has been shown to predict stronger endorsement of notions that men are sex driven and women are sexual objects (Ferris et al., 2007). Among

undergraduate women, frequent viewing of romance-based reality programs predicts holding *more* egalitarian gender beliefs and perceiving reality TV to be realistic predicts holding *less* egalitarian gender beliefs (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016).

In this investigation of reality TV's contributions to beliefs about femininity, we sought to build on this work in three ways. First, because most studies have been conducted on predominantly White samples of undergraduates, there is little understanding concerning contributions of reality programming to other demographic groups. African Americans are among the heaviest media consumers (Nielsen Company, 2018) but are understudied in terms of media effects. We therefore targeted this population. Second, within the genre of reality TV, some programs are targeted to mainstream audiences (e.g., *Survivor*), and some are targeted to Black audiences (e.g., *Love and Hip-Hop*). Because media targeting different audiences could exert differential effects, we assessed and tested contributions of each type. Finally, it is argued that media effects vary based on viewers' cognitions and perceptions of the content (Bandura, 2001). One influential cognition is perceptions of realism, with the expectation that content perceived to be realistic exerts more influence than content viewed as less realistic. We explored these assumptions here, testing whether regular exposure to mainstream and Black-oriented reality programs is each

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associated with beliefs about femininity among Black viewers, and whether these beliefs are also shaped by perceptions of the content's realism.

Gender Portrayals in Mainstream Reality Programming

Although there is no universal definition, reality TV is typically conceptualized as featuring real people, rather than professional actors, playing themselves, in unscripted situations, for the primary purpose of entertainment (Nabi et al., 2003). The reality genre is seen to include six to eight subtypes (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2018), including competition (*The Amazing Race*), dating/romance (*The Bachelor*), talent contests (*The Voice*), docusoaps (*Real Housewives*), makeover/self-improvement (*Queer Eye*), and court/crime/law programs (*Cops*). This genre has increased substantially in prominence over the past decades. By the end of the 2000s, reality programs were noted to account for 40% of TV's prime-time schedule (Barnhart, 2010); in 2017, reality programs made up almost half of the 400 most popular TV programs (Dehnart, 2018).

One commonality across diverse types of reality programs is that the individuals appearing offer examples of our culture's norms and expectations of ideal womanhood. According to prominent measures (Levant et al., 2007; Mahalik et al., 2005), cultural norms for femininity (hereafter labeled traditional femininity) center on dependency/deference, investment in appearance, beauty and thinness, purity, sexual fidelity, modesty, domesticity, nurturance, niceness, and emotionality. To what extent do images on modern reality TV conform to these expectations? Although there have been few quantitative analyses of the portrayal of femininity *across* reality programming, one can formulate a general picture of this genre's portrayal of women by compiling findings across critical cultural analyses of select programs. Three themes emerge from these analyses.

First, evidence of traditional femininity is seen in the emphasis on women's physical appearance. This emphasis has been noted across subgenres of reality programming. On reality dating programs, beauty is featured as a critical aspect of femininity, and women's looks are typically presented as their only source of value (Grumbein & Goodman, 2013). A content analysis of popular docusoaps (e.g., *The Real World*) found that women exhibited a higher level of body exposure than men, with female cast members exposing their bodies more than 50% of the time (Flynn et al., 2015). This centralization of female appearance is especially salient on makeover programs, such as *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*, in which young women receive extensive plastic surgery makeovers. Scholars argue that external beauty is privileged on these programs, with discourses that tie women's appearance to their self-worth and happiness (Goldman & Waymer, 2015; Grumbein & Goodman, 2013). These programs encourage scrutiny of women's bodies, highlight that appearance is focal, and convey that only a certain type of stylized feminine appearance is acceptable (Grumbein & Goodman, 2013; Marwick, 2010).

A second theme aligning with traditional femininity is portrayals of women as overly emotional, catty, and verbally combative. Arguments and name-calling are a staple on reality programming and are often central components of the drama (Lauzen et al., 2006). In one analysis of the prevalence of relational aggression on reality and scripted programming, Coyne et al. (2010) found a higher prevalence of female aggressors compared to the number of women on TV. Glascock and Preston-Schreck (2018) reported 19 verbally aggressive acts per hour in their analysis of a composite week of reality programming, with a higher percentage of women than men engaging in threats, yelling, and character attacks. Indeed, Downing (2018) noted that women on romance-based reality programs are encouraged to engage in behaviors that exaggerate and dramatize their relational aggression and highlight competition. The display of highly emotional women is also prevalent (Dubrofsky, 2009). On some programs, such as *The Bachelor*, women's emotionality is expected and highlighted as a given; however, *excessive* emotionality and emotional meltdowns are used to mark women as unfit for love and to justify their elimination (Dubrofsky, 2009).

A third theme is that reality programs feature traditional courtship scripts. According to the dominant heterosexual script in our culture (Kim et al., 2007), women are expected to be attractive sexual objects, passive, responsible, and sexually modest; men are expected to be sexually assertive, dominant, and promiscuous, with less attention to emotion and commitment. These patterns are seen in reality programs. In their analysis of 64 hr of reality dating programs, Ferris and colleagues (2007) found 5.9 references per hour to the notion that women are sexual objects and 3.6 references per hour to men as sex driven. Indeed, reality dating programs such as *The Bachelor* and *Joe Millionaire*, in which dozens of women compete for the affections of one man, are described as promoting heteronormative fairy tale scripts (Cox, 2012; Downing, 2018) in which the "heterosexual princess gives up everything to find her knight-in-shining-armor and be whisked off to a happily-ever-after marriage" (Grumbein & Goodman, 2013, p. 103). In these programs, a compliant femininity is rewarded, one characterized by passivity (i.e., waiting for the man's advance), sexual purity, and submissiveness (Cloud, 2010; Grumbein & Goodman, 2013). Thus, portrayals of femininity on reality TV are highly consistent with stereotypical portrayals in other media formats (Brown, 2005) and prioritize female sexual appeal, domesticity, submissiveness, the importance of appearance, and heteronormativity.

Portrayals of Black Women on Reality Programming

Because these studies referred mainly to portrayals of White women on reality TV, it cannot be assumed that these descriptors apply to all women or to Black women. Indeed, the presence of Black women on reality TV has been increasing. By 2014, there were more than 10 reality programs that centered on the actions of Black women, including programs such as *Basketball Wives* and *Love and Hip-Hop*, which spawned multiple spinoffs (West, 2018). However, there is concern that the dominant representations of Black women often feature racially stereotypical, highly sexualized portrayals (Coleman et al., 2016).

Evidence from a diverse set of textual, qualitative, and quantitative analyses support this concern. In her textual analysis of 10 mainstream reality programs, Tyree (2011) analyzed each Black character for stereotypical appearance, gestures, movements, actions, and dialogue. Overall, 58% of African American characters analyzed (18 of 31) fit into at least one stereotype, with an even higher rate on programs with predominantly White casts (66%). The Black women analyzed were primarily categorized as the Angry Black Woman or as a "loose" woman. Smith (2013) coded traits of 16 cast members across 30 episodes of *College Hill*, which follows participants at a

Black university. In general, Black women were portrayed more negatively than Black men. More specifically, there were fewer instances of Black women showing emotional strength, kindness, happiness, and optimism in comparison to Black men, and more instances of Black women showing emotional weakness, arrogance, loudness, anger, and pessimism. Supporting this pattern, in their content analysis of verbal aggression on reality programming, Glascock and Preston-Schreck (2018) found that African Americans were overrepresented as aggressors and that Black women were more verbally aggressive than Black men. Edwards (2016) conducted a discourse analysis of *Love and Hip-Hop New York*, which presents the romantic relationships and careers of individuals navigating the hip-hop industry. Overall, she found that women of color were frequently depicted as angry, deviant, immoral, violent, and hypersexualized. For example, the camera would often pan a woman's buttocks and breasts before any action took place in the scene, and women were often shown arguing and fighting over men. Indeed, many scholars argue that reality programs feature a negative portrayal of Black women that centers on long-standing stereotypes of them as angry, drama-filled, hypersexual, and aggressive (Edwards, 2016; Goldman & Waymer, 2015; Ward, 2015; West, 2018).

However, there is also evidence that portrayals of Black women are not solely negative and that this content varies according to the racial composition of the programming. Goldman and Waymer (2015) analyzed the behaviors, actions, personality traits, and appearance of Black female cast members in six reality docusoaps from 2011, three that were predominantly Black (e.g., *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*) and three that were predominantly non-Black (e.g., *The Real World*) and also analyzed 15 docusoaps from 2014 that each featured at least two Black women. Confirming the earlier work, they found that a portrayal of Black women as angry, mean, and aggressive was featured across a majority of the docusoaps analyzed from 2011. However, they also found significant differences based on the race of the casts. Common images that emerged on the predominantly Black programs (14 Black women coded) were "Professional Black Woman" (13 of 14), "Good Black Mother" (10 of 14), and "High-Class Black Woman" (14 of 14). Indeed, the majority (92%) of the Black women in the predominantly Black programs were presented as professional, ambitious women with successful careers, especially in their program biographies. Conversely, on the non-Black programs, five of the six Black women studied in 2011 were presented as a "Sexualized Black Woman," and the image of the high-class Black woman was *not* featured in the non-Black programs. Thus, more three-dimensional depictions of Black women were featured within the programs with a predominantly Black cast, and the majority of stereotypical images of Black women were found on the programs in which Black women were in the minority.

Contributions of Reality TV Viewing to Viewers' Gender Beliefs

How might regular exposure to this content shape Black viewers' conceptions of women and femininity? Support for potential effects on viewers' gender ideologies can be drawn from theoretical and empirical analyses of media. According to cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998), TV offers a consistent yet distorted view of social roles and social reality, and the more frequently viewers are exposed to this content, the more likely they will come to cultivate or adopt social attitudes that correspond with the content

presented. One of the psychological mechanisms believed to undergird this macrolevel effect is chronic accessibility, whereby regular exposure to TV content repeatedly activates related schemas, calling them to mind for subsequent decision-making (Shrum, 1996). Therefore, if reality programs consistently present women as emotional or as sexual objects, frequent exposure to these stereotypes is believed to repeatedly activate stereotypical gender schemas; with each activation, these stereotypical assumptions about women become more salient, acceptable, and normative.

Also supporting work in this field is social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), which argues that individuals' beliefs are shaped by their engagement with media content, and that these beliefs inform their subsequent behavior. However, exposure, alone, does not guarantee that the values viewed will be adopted. Instead, this adoption depends on features of the content and cognitions of the viewer, including level of identification with the media model, salience of the model's actions, perceived value of the model's behaviors, and rewards or punishments received. Given that reality TV is a constructed reality, we have chosen to focus on the potential influence of one specific cognition: perceived realism, conceptualized as the extent to which the events and people depicted are perceived as plausible, accurate, and similar to the real world (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). Scholars theorize (for review, see Pouliot & Cowen, 2007) that the extent to which viewers perceive TV content as realistic, regardless of how much they watch, will affect their openness to the messages presented. Across numerous studies of undergraduates, findings indicate that attributing more realism to either scripted or reality TV content is associated with higher levels of the TV-inspired behaviors or beliefs assessed (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016; Ferris et al., 2007; Fogel & Kovalenko, 2013). For example, Lippman et al. (2014) found that attributing greater realism to TV content was associated with greater acceptance of romantic beliefs, in general, and of specific romantic beliefs (e.g., love finds a way), even after controlling for level of romantic media exposure. Thus, drawing on these two theories, we expected that greater amounts of exposure to reality programs and attributing greater realism to the content would each be associated with stronger support of the genre's dominant stereotypes about women.

At this point, however, evidence offers little indication that TV use contributes to Black viewers' gender beliefs. In one of the few quantitative studies to examine reality programming directly, Coleman et al. (2020) surveyed 115 Black women aged 18 to 25 years, assessing their consumption of 13 Black-oriented reality programs (e.g., *Real Housewives of Atlanta*), their perceived realism of reality TV, and their endorsement of three stereotypes about Black women (hypersexual Jezebel, angry Sapphire, strong black woman [SBW]). Neither exposure nor realism predicted Black women's gender stereotypes. Equally minimal results have emerged in analyses of other TV genres. Surveying 176 Black adolescent girls, Gordon (2008) found that greater viewing of Black sitcoms and Black music videos each correlated with greater endorsement of the importance of appearance for women, but these effects were *not* significant in regressions with other media variables included. Surveying Black adolescents (70% girls), Ward and colleagues (2005) found that more frequent consumption of music videos and sports programming was each associated with stronger support of traditional gender roles; exposure to primetime

TV comedies and dramas did *not* play a role. In perhaps the strongest results, greater media use (a composite variable that included music videos, reality TV, movies, and women's magazines) predicted Black women's greater acceptance of traditional gender and sexual roles, as measured by three scales (Ward et al., 2020).

Despite these mixed results, there is indication that taking a more nuanced approach that includes assessing perceived realism or mainstream versus Black-oriented programming produces richer outcomes. Anyiwo and colleagues (2018) examined the impact of exposure to 29 popular TV programs (17 targeted to mainstream audiences and 12 targeted to a Black audience) on Black adolescents' acceptance of mainstream gender roles (MGR) and support of the SBW ideal. Exposure to mainstream programs predicted weaker endorsement of MGR for boys. Exposure to Black-oriented programs did not predict MGR but was associated with stronger endorsement of the SBW ideal for both sexes. Surveying Black undergraduates, Jerald and colleagues (2017) tested contributions of TV hours and TV realism to MGR, perceptions of women as sexual objects, and three stereotypes about Black women. Although there was no contribution of overall TV hours, greater perceived realism predicted stronger support of MGR, the Jezebel stereotype, and the SBW ideal. Thus, among Black viewers, there appear to be stronger contributions of perceived realism and Black-oriented programming than of overall exposure. We therefore included these components here.

The Current Study

It has been argued that reality TV does not show the true diversity of women's lives (Grumbein & Goodman, 2013), but instead showcases a version of femininity that prioritizes appearance, sexual appeal, emotionality, passivity, and domesticity. Depictions of Black women are believed to be equally constrained, centering on stereotypes of them as verbally combative and hypersexual. Although the "reality" in these programs is actually a constructed reality, produced by the TV editors rather than the participants (Goldman & Waymer, 2015), it can still play a role in shaping viewers' beliefs about how women should be. In this study, we therefore examined whether exposure to reality programming contributes to the gender ideologies of Black women and men. Previous research provides little information regarding the impact of reality TV viewing on beliefs about women, and few of the existing studies have tested Black participants. This omission is surprising, given that Black adults are heavy TV viewers, spending 6:36 on live or time-shifted TV per day, compared to 4:46 for the total U.S. population (Nielsen Company, 2018).

Drawing on past empirical and theoretical literature (i.e., Bandura, 2001; Gerbner, 1998), we therefore posed two hypotheses and one research question. First, because mainstream reality TV frequently portrays women and Black women in accordance with norms for traditional femininity that center on appearance, emotionality, and heteronormativity, we predicted that greater exposure to mainstream reality TV would be linked to stronger endorsement of traditional femininity ideologies (Hypothesis 1). Second, given that portrayals of women on reality programs with predominantly Black casts (hereafter referred to as Black-oriented reality TV) reflect both limiting stereotypes *and* more three-dimensional portrayals of femininity, we posed the following exploratory research question (Research Question 1): Does frequent exposure to Black-oriented reality programs predict Black viewers' beliefs about femininity? Finally, because perceived realism is often a stronger predictor than exposure alone (e.g., Jerald et al., 2017), we hypothesized that perceiving reality TV to be more realistic would be linked with greater endorsement of stereotypical beliefs about women, above and beyond exposure levels (Hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants

Surveys were completed by 484 Black adults aged 18 to 55 years ($M = 26.10$), including 246 who identified as men (50.8%), 237 who identified as women (49%), and one who identified as "other." The majority of the sample (95.8%) was aged 18 to 30 years. Participants came from across the United States, with 200 coming from the South (41%), 95 from the West (20%), 93 from the Northeast (19%), and 96 from the Midwest (20%). Because gender beliefs have been shown to vary by socioeconomic status and social position (Ellemers, 2018), we also obtained information about income, education, and relationship status to determine potential covariates. Response options for household income ranged from 1 (*less than $20,000/year*) to 6 (*more than $100,001/year*). The most common responses ($M = 2.71$) were $20,001 to $40,000/year (34.7%; scored as 2) and $40,001 to $60,000/year (26.4%; scored as 3). Participants indicated their highest level of education using a scale that ranged from 1 = less than high school to 7 = doctorate. The mean fell at $M = 3.88$, with most reporting having completed a 4-year degree (39.2%) or having attained some college (32.0%). Participants provided information about their marital status by selecting one of eight response options (e.g., single, divorced). The most common responses were single (197 participants; 40.7%), in a relationship and cohabiting (93 participants; 19.2%), in a relationship and not cohabiting (89 participants; 18.4%), and married (87 participants; 18.0%). From these data, we created a dichotomous variable labeled *Partnered*; those who were in a relationship, engaged, or married were coded as 1 = Partnered ($N = 283$; 58.5%); those who were single, divorced, separated, or widowed were coded as 0 ($N = 201$; 41.5%).

Procedure

The survey was distributed via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). We indicated that we were seeking Black adults aged 18 to 40 years and screened out non-Black adults in prescreening. Participants completed the survey online at their own convenience and were paid 10 cents for every minute, resulting in three dollars compensation upon completion of the 30-min survey.

Measures

Media Use

To assess reality TV viewing we provided participants with a list of 50 reality programs that had been compiled based on Internet searches conducted early in 2016. Twelve programs featured predominantly Black casts (e.g., *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta, Black Ink Crew*) and were secured using reports on Black consumers (Nielsen Company, 2013) and Internet search terms such as "top Black reality shows." The remaining programs

were mainstream reality programs (e.g., *The Bachelor, Survivor*) and were secured using search terms such as "top reality shows." All 50 programs are listed as Table 1. Participants indicated how frequently they viewed each program using the following response options scored 1 to 4: *never/not at all*, *a little/a few episodes*, *some episodes*, and *a lot/almost all episodes*. Preliminary analyses indicated that six programs had never been viewed by 80% or more of the sample and were therefore removed. We then computed two mean scores from the remaining data. One score reflected mean consumption of the 34 mainstream reality TV programs

(α = .93), with higher scores indicating heavier exposure to the programs listed. The second score reflected mean consumption of the 10 Black-oriented reality TV programs (α = .92), with higher scores indicating more exposure.

To assess the degree of realism that participants attribute to reality TV, we used a modified version of Rubin's (1983) TV Reality Index. This scale was modified from the original in two ways. First, the prompt and items were changed to assess perceptions of "reality TV" instead of "TV." Second, because Rubin's (1983) Index yielded only three coherent

Table 1
50 Reality TV Programs Provided

Television program	Channel/network	Airing dates
Keeping Up With the Kardashians	E!	2007-
Dancing With the Stars	ABC	2005-
America's Got Talent	NBC	2006-
The Bachelorette	ABC	2003-
Impractical Jokers	truTV, Comedy Central	2011-
Survivor	CBS	2000-
*Preachers of LA	Oxygen	2013–2014
*Chef Roble & Co	~~Bravo~~	~~2011–2013~~
Naked and Afraid	Discovery Channel	2013-
Alaskan Bush People	~~Discovery Channel~~	~~2014-~~
Teen Mom 2	MTV	2011-
*Tamar & Vince	WE-TV	2012–2017
America's Next Top Model	The CW, VH1	2003-
RuPaul's Drag Race	Logo TV, VH1	2009-
The Bachelor	ABC	2002-
Real Housewives of New York City	Bravo	2008-
*Mary Mary	~~We-TV~~	~~2012–2017~~
Hotel Hell	Fox	2012–2016
Rich Kids of Beverly Hills	E!	2014–2016
Real Housewives of Beverly Hills	Bravo	2010-
Dating Naked	VH1	2014-
Sister Wives	TLC	2010-
American Pickers	History Channel	2010-
Botched	E!	2014-
*Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta	VH1	2012-
Pawn Stars	History Channel	2009-
So You Think You Can Dance?	Fox	2005-
Property Brothers	W Network, HGTV	2011-
Undercover Boss	CBS	2010-
Chopped	Food Network	2009-
The First 48	A&E	2004-
*Real Housewives of Atlanta	Bravo	2008-
*Black Ink Crew	VH1	2013-
Little Women: NY	~~Lifetime~~	~~2015–2016~~
My 600-lb Life	TLC	2012-
Mob Wives	VH1	2011-
Kourtney and Kim Take Miami	E!	2009–2013
House Hunters	HGTV	1999-
Beyond Scared Straight	A&E	2011-
The Voice	NBC	2011-
Hardcore Pawn	truTV, TBS	2009–2015
*Braxton Family Values	We TV	2011–2019
Family Therapy with Dr. Jenn	~~VH1~~	~~2016~~
*Tia and Tamera	Esquire Network, E!	2011–2013
Candidly Nicole	~~VH1~~	~~2014-2015~~
*Basketball Wives	VH1	2010-
*Love and Hip-Hop: Hollywood	VH1	2014-
Dance Moms	Lifetime	2011–2019
*T.I. & Tiny: The Family Hustle	VH1	2011–2017
Catfish	MTV	2012-

Note. Asterisked programs are those with predominantly Black casts. Programs that are crossed out were removed from the final analysis because 80% or more of the sample never watched them.

items and a relatively low alpha (.71), we added three additional items drawn from the Perceived Realism Measure (Rivadeneyra & Lebo, 2008) to improve the strength of the scale. This revised six-item version has been used successfully in several past studies (Kuo & Ward, 2016; Lippman et al., 2014), and a version that focused on reality TV was used successfully ($\alpha = .84$) by Ward and Carlson (2013). The three items added include: "Reality TV content reflects everyday life," "People on reality TV shows are just like people I know," and "People on reality TV handle their problems just like people I know." Participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale to indicate agreement with each item. Mean scores were produced ($\alpha = .91$), with higher scores indicating stronger belief that reality TV portrays the world realistically.

Finally, to assess and control for participants' overall levels of TV viewing, we included three items that asked them to indicate how many hours they watch TV on an average weekday, Saturday, and Sunday. Responses were provided using options that ranged from 0 to 10+ hr. Weekly viewing hours were computed by multiplying the weekday hours by five and adding this product to the Saturday and Sunday hours ($M = 37.4$, $SD = 15.46$).

Beliefs About Femininity

Assessment of participants' beliefs about femininity was conducted via four subscales from the Femininity Ideology Scale (FIS; Levant et al., 2007): Stereotypic Images and Activities, Dependency/Deference, Caretaking, and Emotionality. The 11-item Stereotypic Images and Activities subscale ($\alpha = .93$) reflects norms about feminine appearance and general activities. Sample items include "A woman should wear attractive clothing, shoes, lingerie and bathing suits, even if not comfortable" and "A woman should not be expected to do mechanical things." The 10-item Dependency/Deference subscale ($\alpha = .95$) captures the notion that women should take a dependent and deferent role in relation to their husbands. Sample items include "A woman should not be competitive" and "Women should act helpless to attract a man." The seven-item Caretaking subscale ($\alpha = .87$) reflects the ideal that motherhood is central to women's nature and fulfillment. Sample items include "A woman's natural role should be caregiver of the family" and "Women should be gentle." The eight-item Emotionality subscale ($\alpha = .91$) addresses assumptions that women are emotional and therefore are not good leaders. Sample items include "It is expected that women will be viewed as overly emotional" and "It is expected that women will not think logically." Response options for all four subscales ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*); Mean scores were computed such that higher scores indicated stronger support. Levels of internal consistency obtained with our sample are comparable to those achieved in the development of the

scale among 407 undergraduates, 81% White. In addition, Davis et al. (2018) reported an internal consistency of .91 for the shortened version of the FIS, tested among 292 Black women.

Finally, to assess support of traditional sexual roles, we included the Heterosexual Script Scale (Seabrook et al., 2016). This scale measures support for gender-specific courtship strategies, orientations toward commitment, and sexual norms. Sample items include "A woman should be willing to make personal sacrifices in order to satisfy her partner" and "There is nothing wrong with men being primarily interested in a woman's body." Mean scores were computed across the 22 items ($\alpha = .95$), such that higher scores indicate greater support for heteronormative courtship norms. This scale has been used successfully with Black samples, with scholars reporting an alpha of .91 among adult Black women (Ward et al., 2020).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the main variables are provided in Table 2. Media use was moderate for this group. Sample means of 1.61 and 1.68 for Mainstream and Black-Oriented Reality TV, respectively, indicate that participants watched "none" to "a few episodes," on average, of the 44 core reality programs. Results of a paired samples t test indicate that Black-oriented reality programs were watched more frequently than mainstream reality programs, $t(482) = 2.730$, $p = .007$. The most watched programs were *Catfish* ($M = 1.99$), *Love and Hip-Hop Atlanta* ($M = 1.90$), *America's Got Talent* ($M = 1.84$), and *Pawn Stars* ($M = 1.82$). However, participants did not perceive reality TV to be a close depiction of real life ($M = 2.77$ on a 7-point scale). Beliefs in traditional femininity were somewhat weak, as participants mostly reported disagreeing with statements in the FIS. Intercorrelations indicate that all media variables correlated significantly with each other, all media variables correlated significantly and positively with gender beliefs, and all gender beliefs correlated with each other.

To examine demographic correlates of participants' gender beliefs, we ran a series of zero-order correlations between the five gender belief variables and the following demographic variables: gender (man = 1; woman = 0), age, level of education/schooling, income, relationship status/being partnered, and weekly TV hours. Results are provided in Table 3. Men expressed stronger agreement than did women with traditional stereotypes of women as deferent and feminine in appearance and activities and of the heterosexual script. Greater education was associated with weaker endorsement of four of the five gender beliefs. Being in a

Table 2
Descriptives and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	M	SD	Range	Deference	Caretaker	Emotional	HSS	MainRTV	BlackRTV	Realism
Stereotypic images	2.37	1.14	1–6	.84***	.67***	.69***	.69***	.19***	.15***	.36***
Deference	2.00	1.06	1–6	1	.50***	.52***	.51***	.23***	.13**	.37***
Caretaker	3.18	1.16	1–6		1	.64***	.70***	.12*	.12**	.26***
Emotional	2.86	1.25	1–6			1	.67***	.13**	.16**	.26***
HSS	3.20	1.06	1–6				1	.18***	.23***	.28***
MainRTV	1.61	0.509	1–4					1	.68***	.46***
BlackRTV	1.68	0.763	1–4						1	.39***
TV realism	2.77	1.40	1–7							1

Note.   HSS = Heterosexual script; MainRTV = Mainstream reality television; BlackRTV = Black-oriented reality television.
* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.   *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Demographic Correlates of Gender Belief Variables

Variable	Gender (Male)	Age	Schooling	Income	Partnered	Weekly TV hours
Stereotypic images	.27***	−.03	−.11*	−.07	−.10*	.10*
Deference	.24***	−.09	−.08	−.03	−.07	.07
Caretaker	.08	−.01	−.12*	−.07	−.05	−.02
Emotional	.08	.01	−.09*	−.06	−.04	.12**
Heterosexual script	.19***	.08	−.10*	−.08	−.05	.06

Note. Partnered = in a relationship (committed, cohabitating, married, or engaged).
* $p < .05.$ ** $p < .01.$ *** $p < .001.$

relationship/partnered was associated with weaker support of stereotypic appearance and activities for women. Greater weekly TV viewing was associated with greater support of women as emotional and of stereotypic appearance and activities for women. Gender beliefs did not differ by age or income. Accordingly, tests of the main hypotheses included controls for gender, schooling, being partnered, and weekly TV viewing hours.

Testing the Main Hypotheses

Drawing on the cultivation model, our first hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) predicted that heavier exposure to Mainstream Reality TV would be associated with stronger support of traditional norms for femininity that center on deference, emotionality, caretaking, heteronormativity, and appearance. As an exploratory research question (Research Question 1), we also examined whether exposure to Black-Oriented Reality TV would be associated with various aspects of traditional femininity. To test these questions, we conducted a series of simultaneous regressions, in which the five gender beliefs served as the outcomes and the four covariates (male, partnered, schooling, weekly TV hours) and two media variables (Black-Oriented Reality TV and Mainstream Reality TV) were entered simultaneously as predictors. Although Black-Oriented and Mainstream Reality TV were correlated ($r = .68$), we kept them in the same regression because the correlation was not higher than .8 (Mason & Perreault, 1991). Results are presented in Table 4.

Providing partial support of Hypothesis 1, we did see several positive and significant associations between exposure to mainstream reality programming and traditional beliefs about femininity. Here, greater consumption of mainstream reality programs predicted greater endorsement of norms of deference for women and of stereotypic images and activities for women. In addition, supporting

Research Question 1, there were also associations for Black-oriented reality TV. More specifically, greater exposure to Black reality programs was associated with greater acceptance of the heterosexual script and of women as emotional. Each regression equation tested was statistically significant, with the predictors contributing 4.8% to 14.6% of the variance.

Drawing on social cognitive theory, the second hypothesis predicted that attributing greater realism to reality programs would be associated with support of traditional femininity norms, above and beyond exposure levels. We tested this notion in a series of multiple regression analyses. Again, the five gender beliefs served as the outcomes. The four demographic covariates, the two reality TV exposure variables, and perceived realism of reality TV were entered simultaneously as predictors. Results are provided in Table 5.

Offering strong confirmation of Hypothesis 2, perceived realism emerged as a significant and direct contributor in each regression equation. Here, the more realistic that participants perceived reality TV to be, the more strongly they endorsed traditional notions that women are deferent, caretakers, and emotional, and should conform to stereotypic images and heteronormative scripts. However, the pattern of results looked somewhat different for each belief outcome. Concerning norms for emotionality and stereotypic images, realism was the only significant media contributor. Concerning expectations that women conform to the heterosexual script, both watching Black-oriented reality TV and attributing more realism to reality TV predicted stronger support. Concerning norms that women are deferent, both watching mainstream reality TV and attributing greater realism to reality TV predicted stronger support. Finally, concerning norms that women are caretakers, watching more hours of TV predicted less support, but perceiving

Table 4

Regression Analyses Testing Contribution of Exposure Variables to Viewers' Beliefs About Femininity

Variable	Stereotypic images	Deference	Caretaking	Emotional	Heterosexual script
Male	.30***	.26***	.08	.10*	.22***
Partnered	−.08	−.06	−.05	−.04	−.04
Schooling	−.08	−.07	−.11*	−.07	−.08
Weekly TV hours	.05	.01	−.08	.07	−.02
Mainstream reality TV	.17**	.28***	.10	.03	.08
Black-oriented reality TV	.07	−.02	.09	.13*	.22***
R2	.146	.136	.048	.051	.115
Equation F	13.314***	12.252***	3.910**	4.186***	10.084***

Note. Standardized coefficients (Beta) reported.
* $p < .05.$ ** $p < .01.$ *** $p < .001.$

Table 5
Regressions Analyses Testing Contributions of Perceived Realism to Beliefs About Femininity

Variable	Stereotypic images	Deference	Caretaking	Emotional	Heterosexual script
Male	.29***	.25***	.08	.10*	.22***
Partnered	−.10*	−.08	−.06	−.06	−.06
Schooling	−.05	−.04	−.09	−.05	−.06
Weekly TV hours	.01	−.04	−.12*	.04	−.05
Black-oriented reality TV	.03	−.06	.06	.11	.19**
Mainstream RTV	.06	.17**	.02	−.05	.00
Reality TV realism	.35***	.35***	.26***	.25***	.25***
R2	.237	.229	.100	.098	.164
Equation F	20.708***	19.812***	7.400***	7.237***	12.995***

Note. RTV = reality television. Standardized coefficients (Beta) reported.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

reality TV to be realistic predicted more support. Each equation was significant, with the predictors explaining 9.8% to 23.7% of the variance.

A first post hoc analysis tested a potential moderating role of perceived realism, following the approach and findings of some past work (e.g., Ward & Carlson, 2013). We used the same set of predictors as in the previous analysis but added two interaction terms: one reflecting exposure to Mainstream Reality TV X Perceived Realism, and a second reflecting exposure to Black-Oriented Reality TV X Perceived Realism. None of the interaction terms was statistically significant, and adding these terms did not increase the variance explained in any of the five equations. Therefore, contributions of perceived realism appear to work uniformly, regardless of participants' level of exposure.

A second post hoc analysis tested for a possible moderating role of gender, which was a significant correlate of three of the five gender beliefs. The same set of predictors used to test H2 was used, with the addition of two interaction terms: Gender × Mainstream Reality TV and Gender × Black-Oriented Reality TV. One significant interaction emerged of the 10 tested: concerning beliefs about stereotypic images and activities, gender interacted with the viewing of mainstream reality TV, $B = .13$, $p = .022$, $R^2 = .251$, $F(9, 465) = 17.322$. A separate regression was then run for each gender to determine the meaning of this significant interaction. Among men, only perceived realism ($B = .47$) predicted greater acceptance of stereotypic activities for women; among women, both viewing mainstream reality programs ($B = .21$) and attributing greater realism to reality TV content ($B = .30$) each predicted greater acceptance of stereotypic feminine activities.

Discussion

Although research indicates that frequently viewing or attributing high realism to reality TV is associated with endorsing stereotypical gender ideals (e.g., Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016; Ferris et al., 2007), these studies have seldom sampled African Americans, who are the heaviest media consumers. Do the significant associations seen in the literature extend to Black adults? Drawing on social cognitive and cultivation theories, we tested this question, examining whether Black adults' consumption of mainstream and Black-oriented reality programming is associated with their beliefs about femininity. Overall, all forms of reality TV use were predictive, with perceived realism dominating, and with contributions varying by gender belief.

For the first hypothesis and first research question, we predicted that heavier exposure to mainstream and Black-oriented reality TV would be associated with stronger endorsement of traditional beliefs about women. These expectations were partially supported. When the reality program variables were examined individually in zero-order correlations, all of the correlations with participants' gender beliefs were significant and positive. However, in regression analyses that controlled for other forms of TV use and demographics, more constrained contributions emerged. Greater exposure to mainstream reality programs predicted stronger expectations that women should be deferent and should conform to stereotypic appearance and activity norms. More specifically, items on the Stereotype Images and Activities subscale highlight expectations that women uphold traditional feminine appearance norms (i.e., petite body, large breasts, attractive clothing) and demure behavior (i.e., soft voices, not showing anger, not enjoying "tomboy" activities). These expectations, especially the appearance norms, mirror common portrayals of women on mainstream reality programs, portrayals that we noted center on passivity, domesticity, and beauty (Grumbein & Goodman, 2013). Analyses of program content (e.g., Tyree, 2011) suggest that this female demureness is less prominent on programs with predominantly Black casts. At the same time, we found that greater exposure to Black-oriented reality TV predicted greater acceptance of women as emotional and of the Heterosexual Script. These findings match the types of women noted to dominate Black-oriented reality TV, women described as verbally aggressive, emotional, and hypersexual (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2018; Ward, 2015; West, 2018). Together, these findings highlight for scholars the utility of including subgenres of reality programming, as different types might feature different portrayals and cultivate different assumptions of femininity.

For the second hypothesis, we anticipated that perceived realism would contribute directly to Black adults' beliefs about femininity. This hypothesis was supported, with perceived realism of reality TV emerging as a strong, direct predictor of all five gender belief variables. This pattern mirrored other studies that had examined both exposure and perceived realism and found the effects of perceived realism to be stronger than those of exposure (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016; Ferris et al., 2007; Lippman et al., 2014; Martins & Jensen, 2014; Seabrook et al., 2017). This pattern also supports the premises of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and suggests that the power of cognitions may be stronger than the

power of exposure. However, although perceived realism was a strong predictor, exposure levels still contributed in some equations, indicating that realism, alone, does not tell the full story. We believe that it is important to include both exposure and cognitions, and perhaps to consider and include other cognitions in the future, such as identification or viewing motivations.

One interesting question is why significant results emerged here, but not for Coleman et al. (2020). As noted earlier, this research team found no associations between consumption of 13 Black-oriented reality programs and perceived realism of reality TV, and Black women's endorsement of three stereotypes about Black women: Jezebel, Sapphire, and SBW. One key difference was their focus on stereotypes about Black women and our focus on general stereotypes of femininity. Perhaps Black viewers apply a more critical or sensitive eye concerning stereotype of their own group and are more rejecting of media attempts to cast their specific group in a negative light.

Implications and Limitations

Why does it matter that media exposure could be contributing to holding narrow beliefs about women and femininity? Findings from decades of psychological research demonstrate that internalizing stereotypical conceptions of women exacts negative consequences for women and men. Among women, for example, internalizing traditional gender ideologies, which center on passivity and a sexual appearance, is linked to diminished sexual agency. This association has been seen among samples of White women (Curtin et al., 2011; Seabrook et al., 2016; Shearer et al., 2005) and Black women (Ward et al., 2020), with traditional gender beliefs predicting lower levels of sexual assertiveness, sexual risk knowledge, and condom use self-efficacy, and higher levels of sexual inhibition and sexual shame. Second, among girls and women, endorsing traditional gender ideologies has associated with diminished belief in one's academic competence. Because girls' sexualized attractiveness is perceived to be incompatible with other traits, including intelligence (Starr & Ferguson, 2012; Stone et al., 2015), girls who conform to sexualized appearance ideals may come to see themselves as less competent. Third, among men, accepting stereotypical assumptions about women's roles, especially a sexualized view of women, is linked to greater acceptance of violence against women (Seabrook et al., 2019; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016). This connection is believed to originate from the dehumanization that comes with sexual objectification.

Although this study makes important contributions concerning the ways in which reality TV viewing is linked to the gender beliefs of Black adults, there are several limitations that future research should address. First, because these are correlational data, causality cannot be determined. It can be assumed that preexisting beliefs contribute to media choices just as media use contributes to beliefs about femininity. Experimental studies are needed to help demonstrate causality. Second, our measure of reality TV viewing reflected only a segment of current programming. Some commonly viewed programs were likely excluded. Moreover, because we focused only on reality programming, we cannot conclude that this genre is *more* impactful than other genres, such as scripted dramas or music videos. Future work is needed that tests multiple TV genres and media simultaneously. Finally, our gender belief scales addressed only five dimensions of traditional femininity;

other dimensions identified by Mahalik et al. (2005), such as niceness or sexual fidelity, should be examined in future research.

Conclusion

Our results indicate that Black adults are not exempt from potential connections between their TV viewing and their beliefs about femininity. Frequent exposure to mainstream reality programs is linked to expectations that women should be deferent and should look and act in certain traditional ways. Exposure to Black-oriented reality programs is associated with assumptions of female emotionality and of traditional courtship scripts that prioritize female objectification and male dominance. Finally, attributing high degrees of realism to this content is associated with greater acceptance of multiple aspects of traditional femininity. Indeed, the contributions of perceived realism may be particularly impactful. If viewers perceive the content to be authentic and representative, they may be more inclined to accept it in a noncritical way, for it is presented as the characters' own choices (Downing, 2018; Goldman & Waymer, 2015). It is therefore critical that parents and educators engage in critical media literacy and that these interventions include a focus on reality TV. Although some reality programs portray women in *nonstereotypical* ways, a good portion of media content continues to perpetuate stereotypical images of femininity, which may have consequences for both women and men.

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