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The Invisible Professional: Visual Culture of Successful Black Women

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Thesis of Sophonie Gaspard

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

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THE INVISIBLE PROFESSIONAL:
VISUAL CULTURE OF SUCCESSFUL BLACK WOMEN

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Sophonie Gaspard
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences
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ABSTRACT

Black women in the United States have been arguably the most underrepresented, stereotyped, and hypersexualized groups in society; their contributions in the workplace often reduced in significance. Similarly, the perceived values of the white majority have historically dictated the images of minorities in the media. In their research on visual culture, Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy & Knight (2007) suggest that those with social, political, and economic power define how groups without power are represented and stereotyped, illuminating the privileges of having visible positive portrayals. As contemporary American society shifts towards greater inclusion and participation from black women, the media is encouraged to bring messages depicting diverse professionals to the forefront. Over the last 100 years, magazine covers in particular have grown to become one of the few platforms that explicitly feature images of society's successful people, with certain magazines circulating to millions each year and influencing the decisions of a generation; a time-capsule of American culture. This current inquiry examines the potentially stereotypical trends created over the past seven years when popular magazine outlets engage their visual power in depicting black women. Most significantly, this study quantifies the visual culture portrayed by black women featured on the covers of ten highly circulated culture-shaping magazines through a content analysis: a visual methodology informed by qualitative coding of what it means to be stereotyped, limited, and underrepresented. The result of this research, while filling the gap of feminist visual rhetoric studies on black women in a media-obsessed and celebrity centered society, is the call for revision of these limited roles in future media productions.

Keywords: Content analysis, visual rhetoric, professional black women, visual culture, success, identity, media agenda, contemporary American society, magazine covers.

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INTRODUCTION

What do we see when we consider success in our society? Do the images relate to our personal life experiences, because otherwise, where do said images come from? Amid today's technology explosion and smartphone-dependent world, the amount of time we spend scrolling through pictures and watching videos may well have an influence on our perceptions of reality. Hence, if we turn to the visual media produced in the past five years, including movies, magazine covers and even television shows, celebrity culture is being promoted more than ever before. The aforementioned timeframe includes a monumental period in media history, amidst political scrutiny after 2016 when celebrity businessman President Donald Trump was elected and accused news outlets of publishing "fake news"; and 2017 when the "Me Too" movement spread virally on social media following the widespread exposure of high-profile sexual-abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein and other celebrities. The highest-ranked professionals become the celebrities seen on the covers of magazines, therefore their images are circulated heavily through mainstream media outlets. Ultimately, this media exposure has effects that impact the way we vote for president, the Hollywood moguls we decide to demonize, and the models we desire to emulate.

If we take a look at these professionals that we see in the media: from athletes to entrepreneurs, from movie stars to politicians, their images become a representation of success in the eyes of society. The Kardashian family, known most prominently for their roles as socialites in reality television are often considered American royalty because of their influence over contemporary American entertainment, fashion, and business. The family, including spouse and billionaire rapper Kanye West depict the way entertainers are ranked and illustrated by the media as society's most successful individuals. Keeping this in mind, the story told by the compilation

of media images reflects the current contemporary American society may view as a successful individual. If the same story and images are repeated, then the message becomes more definite, that the media's representation of celebrities often becomes a real-life rubric for success.

However, despite past research examining and validating their rates of success across professions, certain demographics continue to dominate the images in the media, while excluding others. This diversity, or lack thereof, may propose an issue for corresponding groups in society. To be specific, the contributions of black women has been recognized across professions, yet visual display of their success remains limited or skewed in the media.

The image of a professional black woman has been largely invisible to the public, a marginalization that cannot go unnoticed in today's media-rich culture. Activist and founder of the "Me Too" Movement Tarana Burke initially voiced her purpose to empower women in 2006, similar to other social justice reform movements that center on previously marginalized groups breaking their silence. In 2013, both the Black Lives Matter movement and the Black Girl Magic movement were popularized in resilience for embracing the value of black bodies in contemporary American culture. McCombs and Shaw (1972) describe the agenda-setting theory, stating that people will include or exclude from their thoughts what the media includes or excludes in content. In other words, what we think is based on what we see—or in this case, what we don't see. Their theory appears to manifest through this marginalization, as audiences in society shape their opinions and beliefs about certain demographics based on the media's content. Ultimately, the media's visual culture of professional black women can prove to be problematic for consumers who are constantly seeing the media's trends as representative of all black women in society. With the media's limited definition of what a successful or professional black woman looks like, the trends of this visual culture are worthy of exploration for their

potential effects on media hyper-consumers. The social justice movements that highlight the problematic patterns in the media give light to research on the way black women may desire, and even deserve a shift in the media's representation of their lives. This current study examines the trends in the media's images of successful black women through a content analysis method, quantifying the visual culture portrayed by black women featured on the covers of ten highly circulated culture-shaping magazines. The result of this research, while filling the gap of feminist visual rhetoric studies on black women in a media-obsessed society, is the call for a revision of these limited roles in future media productions.

Successful people receive media coverage because of their profession or their influence over an aspect of mainstream culture. Contrarily, regardless of professional achievement, female minorities seen on covers of popular magazines are rarely seen as leaders, professionals, or high-achieving individuals. Instead, the media perpetuates stereotypical roles that black women play in society, essentially limiting the range of successes available to them. Black women in contemporary American society are exposed to icons in the entertainment industry and to images that are considered palatable by white heterosexual male norms. Explicitly, media outlets will often represent an ethnicity, race, or gender as caricatured characters such as the angry or strong black woman, mammy, or welfare queen. These labels have been analyzed in previous (visual) rhetoric research (Woodard, 2005; Kretsedemas, 2010; Tyree, 2011), but very little has been said on how these trends may impact the future, with technology bringing visual culture to the public's scrolling eyes and inside every smart home, and amidst the uprising of black body social justice movements. Black women are among the most neglected by the media yet ironically among the greatest targeted consumers. With this in mind, the trends in visual culture can represent the information that an entire generation of media consumers will engage with daily,

triggering the call for reform on how black bodies are represented as noted by the Black Lives Matter and Black Girl Magic movements. The limited representations of black women in the media has many implications for the future of these invisible professionals.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Powerful Media: On Today's Agenda...

The media that society consumes today may not directly tell the public *what* to think, but collectively, it plays a big role in what the public thinks *about*. The images and messages that tend to frequent the mind and become acceptable within society are often based on those which consumers interact with the most. This may be in digital or print outlets targeted at various audiences, from subscription magazines to online advertisements. There are previous studies that illuminate how media images can affect corresponding demographics in society (Covert & Dixon 2008), exposing the cause and effect relationship between the images that the media will produce and the underlying messages the public will tolerate. One recurring message, for example in magazine advertisements, communicates that women are sexual objects, habitually displaying women nude or partially nude, unlike their male counterparts are who are seldom pictured unclothed (Wood, 1994). This message, while tolerated in decades of media images, is also perceived as conflicting with the very audience of these ads; women. While mainstream media outlets aim to attract and maintain audience attention, research on media agenda-setting describes how outlets may not focus on the attitudes of the public. Instead the cognition of the public is claimed to be structured *by* the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Previous research on national issues of racial justice have illuminated instances of the power of visibility and privilege for white Americans (Dyer, 2000 ; Dalton, 2008 ; Sue, 2006; Wildman & Davis, 1997; McIntosh, 1988). Such research raises awareness to the instances when minorities are included in

the majority celebrity culture of the media. One celebrity whose images have been the subject of many media studies on visible black women is Beyoncé. She is noted in recent studies as a woman who embraces her body while using it as a commodity and to express empowerment (LaVoulle & Ellison, 2017). If the media holds such power, then the trends found in the media's representation of society are worthy of examination, especially in contemporary American culture where marginalized groups have been historically stereotyped and underrepresented.

The internet and modern smart devices allow the public to, now more than ever before, live in a media-rich society, so the images and messages that are promoted and circulated the most become part of our culture and our lives. For example, advertisers use brand and product placement tactics to structure what society accepts as standard American visual culture. Repeated images in the media create a visual culture that may shape the thoughts and sometimes even the identity of consumers. Similarly, many ideologies and prejudices that we accept as reality are created by the visual culture of marginalized groups by the media. For instance, the Kerner Commission Report of 1968 concluded that media representation helped fuel national racial unrest and linked problematic stereotypes to employment within its related industries (Gray 2016). Herman Gray's research states that there is a continuous influence of the discursive alignment of representation and demography as a measure of racial and gender inequality. This means that visual culture has the continuous influence of representation; when this is combined with a generation that stays connected their screens, the power of the media becomes a significant part of what we accept as reality. These invisible forces have left behind a timeline of media that define what it meant and what it continues to mean to be seen as successful in America. The consequences of certain media messages have been met most recently with the opposing social justice movements that were popularized concurrent to this study, a historical

phenomenon that previous studies like Gray's suggested would reoccur. Racial unrest in the country is represented as limited portrayal of marginalized groups in the media. This time, promoting television commercials, programming, and a social media campaign, black women began to use the "Black Girl Magic" mantra to empower and celebrate their diverse walks of life. The Black Lives Matter movement led to many media outlets protecting themselves from the modern "cancel culture" by aligning with the organization, or by displaying solidarity with those who have faced social injustice. Whether neutral, supporting, or against, the influence of representation manifests itself into the world now more than ever before.

The media is known for its pervasive power, known under the agenda-setting concept as ubiquity, a characteristic which refers to its inevitable presence. The *Spiral of Silence Effect* by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) also describes the media as having two other characteristics, cumulation and consonance, conditions identified respectively, as the monopoly of the media and the absence of counter-messages (Shaw, 1979). These three factors can prove to be problematic when the media uses this power to promote negative stereotypes. For this current study, the media is examined through a content analysis of these images and messages in order to delineate how black women are represented by the media in modern American society. The undeniable involvement of the media's ubiquity, cumulation and consonance in technology-saturated lives of most Americans may impact other factors of racial prejudice and inequality.

Black Women in America: Media Portrayals vs. Her Reality

Researchers have long proposed critical arguments on how the media's repeated display of stereotyped characters create negative perceptions by others (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014). These characters come in all shapes, sizes, demographics, and platforms, thereby creating an opportunity for further research within each of these areas. If the media is

displaying stereotypes, then the question arises, is society mirroring the same trends? A previous study on the identity and image of women in hip-hop (Perry, 2003) discusses how corporate interests have potentially damaging social impacts. In many instances, the facts show that the media may, in fact, perpetuate trends of objectifying and subjugating black women, and in the case of the “double-minority,” there is a gap in the research of this phenomenon. A historical touchstone for black women objectification lies in the example of the “Hottentot Venus”, Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who in 1810, was reduced to her sexual parts and her distinctive physique, caged and displayed in major cities of Europe until her untimely death (Willis , 2010). Baartman’s notoriety for her body, her partially nude attire, and her race became a one of the limited images featured in media through time. Her legacy gives way to this generation of “Baartmans”, who may not be physically caged in the streets for observation, they perpetuate the trend of these women’s black bodies being reduced to their sexual parts and placed on display for the masses. Today, contemporary American culture displays women who are often in reality, successful professionals in their field as the modern Hottentot Venuses on the covers of magazines.

If black women are included in the media consonance or counter-messages, then more research such as this study inform of the trends in representation compared to their reality. This study draws its attention to successful black women, as their portrayal in recent media may in fact correlate with the media’s accepted social norms; even when they include historically prejudiced and stereotyped narratives. The media’s visual power places society under a microscope whereas what norms may be implied and accepted in the real-world may be a problematic headline or cover image of a magazine. America’s historical social reforms such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Black and Proud movement, and the Women’s Power movement

carried the demographic a long way in reducing explicit racial prejudice by the turn of the millennium, while trends in the media's visual culture may continue to reinforce American society's tolerance for discrimination (Wander, Martin & Nakayama, 2005) decades into the future.

In 2016, Beckwith, Carter, and Peter contended that women outnumber men in earning business degrees, yet statistics show that there remains a lack of diversity in leadership positions. While the marginalization of a certain gender, race, or class may be attributed to a multitude of societal impacts and constructs, history has proven that women have continually worked their way to break through glass ceilings to become equally high-achieving members of society. These histories are often inclusive of white women only. Women of color face even greater barriers for opportunities and recognition as professionals, considering they tend to be excluded from the narrative of success altogether. When black women have been included in the media in the past, images tend to play on stereotypes that ridicule or limit their identity. While problematic, many of these portrayals of racial imagery cater to the dominant majority of consumers by either neutralizing or making humor of the negative perceptions (Wilson and Gutierrez, 284). Research by Forbes (2011) warns that corporations will lose their competitive edge and relevancy if they continue to lack cultural intelligence and diversity in their workplaces. Their research foreshadows the purpose of this current study which takes a closer look at these high achievers in society and the way the media portrays these professionals. Specifically, this study further discusses the various ways black women are represented when they *are* included in the media for their professional success.

If images that may be considered limiting or stereotypical such as the "Jezebel" and black superwoman image that Pam Grier popularized in the 1970s are still being circulated by the

media, one may find themselves questioning who has the authority over this celebrity culture and their frequently consumed images and messages. According to Sullivan & Hawisher (1999) women represent themselves in more complexly, creative, rhetorically effective ways when they have control over the visualizations. They reveal that women are not representing themselves in the media, leading to the line of questioning for this current research: who creates these images, who consumes them, and how are marginalized groups being represented? Pam Grier's Foxy Brown role led her to be the icon for stereotypical images of the black community, playing the role many criticize as objectifying her body and portraying a vengeful black woman. Grier has contended this representation and maintained that she represented "Female power" in a relatable heroine for families across the country (Sims, 2006). In 2015, Jeffries & Jeffries argued that what mainstream culture consumes is usually a caricatured or skewed perception of black women created by men and women outside of their demographic. While they may perform in society as successful professionals, it is important to note that the representation may be limited to those decision-makers of the media, often excluding women and minorities. This highlights the agenda-setting theory that the media's cumulation is a monopolized power, suggesting that the few who decide what the majority will consume may not accurately represent black women in particular. Jeffries & Jeffries provide an analysis of the modes in which black women are consistently stereotyped and objectified in media. In their case study, they encourage new portrayals of black female experiences, hence the reasonable questioning of what is currently seen in the media when black women *are* present. There are media platforms which distinctly feature successful people in society and previous research has made it clear that there is often an absence or limited view of black women represented. This current study places emphasis on the black women, though few, who the media choose to display and therefore, this research may

initiate the steps toward understanding or even shifting the media's messages associated with this demographic.

Dominant Cultural Values: The Media Perpetuates These Trends

While there are so many different roles that the media can play in the real lives of consumers, media outlets tend to share the intention of attracting new fans and generating a following. To this end, media tactics concentrate on sending messages that appeal to the lifestyles and beliefs of the target audience. The films that were targeted at minorities in the 1970s led to the Blaxploitation period in media at a time when the demographic was making progress socially and politically. These films typically featured negative stereotypical messages about urban communities. Pam Grier's Foxy Brown role played to the empowerment of black women as strong, sexual, social leaders. The media represents trends in society and communicates ideologies through the photographs and texts that are shared with the world. When the media features representations of people, we tend to compare our realities and identities to the images that correspond with who we are. Today, celebrities like Serena Williams visually represent the modern sexualized heroine stereotypical image. Kellner (2011) states that, "radio, television, film and other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of 'us' and 'them'" (p. 9). The materials that Kellner discusses include those popular culture representations that we see everywhere from big-screen productions, to the magazine images we repost on social media. Foundationally, prior research outlines the importance of visual culture in today's world, while displaying the need for more information on these messages. This current study addresses the problems surrounding the media's messages regarding black women in contemporary American society. For this purpose,

the current study deepens the understanding of cultural representation of black women on magazine covers.

These representations, however visual, are stories created by the media that also shape the values and worldview of society. This means that the media may do more than just represent society. The content may even impact the way corresponding groups see themselves and others. As mentioned previously, black women are often rendered invisible or represented in a stereotypical manner by mainstream media. Hence, this current research takes a closer look at media content that *do* feature black women. In the previous case study by Jeffries & Jeffries (2015), they analyzed visual rhetoric by exploring symbolic imagery messages from the content. Their findings revealed how visual messages are used to create and perform communication within the media texts. For example, they argue that though black women have made a stronger presence in film and television, the personal and professional accomplishments of these performers is continually in conflict with the stereotyped images portrayed. Black women tend to play silent, subservient victims of sexual exploitation. Their study concludes with the authors suggesting that the media's portrayals perpetuate and reify negative notions of black women as reality in society. As to extend their work to include how media messages impact society, this current study focuses on the trends in representation of black women in mainstream magazines. The celebrity culture that American society celebrates has demonstrated the value the media places on certain professions, rendering others nearly invisible. The implications of those trends may prove to be invaluable in a world where we interact constantly with media content. Certain trends materialize into entertainers dominating the images we consume. This type of influence may be correlated to celebrities and entertainers who successfully change careers into sports or fashion, even leading political campaigns in recent times. This study will analyze how the

content of modern mainstream magazines also creates a *visual culture* based on repetition of certain messages, a stronger impact on society than disparate, single images might contribute.

The term visual culture includes all manifestations of cultural life that are significantly expressed through visual aspects. Those visual representations are interpreted through individual and shared experiences (Carson and Pajackowska, 2001). In this case, visual culture has become an integral part of everyday American life with recent progressions in media technology. The rich visual content of the media enters the homes of the public through the shared spaces of the internet, then through their strategic image and message placement, the media informs much of what is visually acceptable to consumers. Similarly, McQuarrie & Mick (1999) agree that it is important to understand what stylistic devices are the most culturally bound, that is, which strategies are most created/informed/reflected by the dominant culture. For example, fans of magazines may have shifted their attention toward following social media pages in recent years rather than ordering mailed subscriptions, but nonetheless the people on the covers of major magazine remains a significant symbol of status within the culture. Because mainstream media reflects dominant cultural pillars, the content of mass media, namely the covers of top magazines, is the focus of this analysis. With black women as a double-marginalized population in society, the representation by media outlets may cater to a dominant culture's status-quo. In the context of magazine covers, black women's representation may indeed result in a limited view of success and therefore a limited identity in a visually driven society. McQuarrie and Mick (1999) claim in their research that there are subcultural differences in processing visual figures. After focusing on just this particular marginalized group and one status-shaping media outlet, the content analysis may orient the way portrayals of successful black women influence both the dominant culture as well as subcultures of contemporary American society. Through this

analysis of popular visual representations, the limitations to the identity of black women may be revised to express a broader picture of success. Whereas magazine covers represent the visually tolerated messages and images of success, professional black women may be misrepresented or underrepresented in culture-shaping platforms. In other words, this study unites visual depictions of black women in the media to ideologies on success of this marginalized group in order to highlight the agenda-setting power that visual media has to further cultural values over the public, especially such values that may be based on prejudiced or limited norms. This means that images once declared the Jezebel, the Hottentot Venus, or the overbearing Sapphire can transform into positive images of individuals like Beyoncé and Pam Grier who have rested on their image and talents to empower black women through the media. With the media's repeated images of these celebrities often associated with subjugation, sexualization, and racialization of black women's bodies, this current study highlights exceptional cases in mainstream American culture for greater understanding of these messages today (LaVoulle & Ellison, 2017).

Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight (2007) argue that visual culture is the understanding of cultural practices as ideology, social power, and constructed forms of knowledge. These researchers were also art educators who instructed on the ways that the media shapes most people's worldview. They further argue that those with social, political, and economic power define how groups without power are represented and stereotyped in visual culture. The purpose of the case study by Jeffries & Jeffries and this content analysis are to encourage more careful attention and accuracy in future media depictions of black women. As contemporary American society shifts toward greater inclusion, participation, and overall contribution from black women, the media is encouraged to bring these messages to the forefront. In a culture that gives primacy to the visible, white is a passport to privilege (McIntosh, 1997). The invisible professional is

based on the notion that magazine covers rarely feature successful black women, and when they do, they create a visual narrative on social norms and the perspectives of dominant groups in society (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007). With this current content analysis of visual culture, the narrative of mainstream magazines can be interpreted further. The results of the content analysis may allow future researchers to also call for a revision of the messages that the media create about different demographics, especially the groups that have been underrepresented or misrepresented in the past. Negative portrayals of successful black women, or even the lack of diverse positive images not only influences the way most of society sees them, but media representation may also shape the way black women in society see themselves. Caricatures like the mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel travel through time with the media as its driving force, yet the tolerance of the messages behind these images in today's American culture may be shifting toward reform, or even the glamorization and embracing of the profitability of their bodies by black women.

'Role' Models: The Tolerable Media Images of Black Women

Previous research opens the door toward a study on visual culture of this underrepresented demographic. Jeffries & Jeffries (2015) highlights in the introduction of their case study that black women have historically been among the most stereotyped, hypersexualized, and disenfranchised racial groups in the United States. Their contributions in the workplace are often reduced in significance rendering them invisible. Thus, the visual culture of successful black women may hold them to be virtual prisoners to the negative performances of themselves on the covers of magazines. These representations come regardless of the measures they take in lived experiences to disrupt these common misconceptions (Jeffries & Jeffries,

2015). Black women are among the most marginalized groups of minorities and successful black women are nearly “invisible” in the visual culture portrayed on the covers of top magazines.

For years, the perceived values and norms of the white majority in the United States dictated the images of minorities in the media. Conversely, recent trends in social reforms like the Black Girl Magic movement have shifted the representation and inclusivity of black women in mainstream media. (LaVoullle & Ellison, 2017). These new social reforms that are focused on visibility and representation led to the inquiry of this current research. While black role models have been featured in a wide range of media outlets consistently since the 1970s, these representations, even in contemporary American society are often based on what images the media believes will not trigger backlash among the white majority. Examples of the heteronormative, and tolerable ideologies portrayed through black people in the media include the *Cosby Show* in the 1980s (Palmer, 1994), where the acceptable images of minorities were widely based on the underlying white middle-class values. While media outlets are often controlled by a few conglomerates make decisions to cater to the majority, consumers are often led by American cultural standards from mainstream media. Advertisers tell people what to wear, which car to drive, how to be happy and even which jobs suit their demographic. Historical moments in pop culture have visually created what it means to be successful in America, yet consumers are often pursuing these unattainable ideals. Before there was Black Girl Magic, Me Too, and Black Lives Matter, there was the Black Power and Natural Hair movements that focused on encouraging and empowering black women since the 1960s. Similarly, the limited images and characterizations of black women has been said to be an indication of prejudice on the part of the media production rather than the consumers (Wilson & Gutierrez, 2003). While black women and other minorities actively seek representation and role-model status by the

media, there is still a limited availability of successful black women's characterizations available.

Representation of minorities *by* minorities often tells a different story of cultural values and tolerance. In the past, black media productions illustrated various modes of cultural resistance and representation—with conflicting messages promoting both capitalism and communalism; feminism as well as the authentic individual; patriarchy as well as liberation; the motherland of Africa as well as the American dream (Zook, 1994). The research identifies the range of identities represented by black producers. In the case of modern portrayals of black women, Woodard and Mastin (2005) conclude in their research on *Essence* magazine that this magazine is a liberating feminist text, opposing and dispelling the stereotypes of black women. Although their research identifies how counter messages may be present in black media productions, it remains that professional black women are invisible in mainstream media. Today, there is still little research on black women who are excluded from the image of success in America. By nature of their exclusion, black women are rarely the focus of scholarship—except for the repeated call for more visibility (Wallace, 1990; Covert & Dixon; Neely, 2015). However, further research on the portrayals of black women who *are* made visible within mainstream media bring much needed attention to the values that the media propagate on the covers of magazines and in the minds of the public.

There are several implications of what the identities represented in the media can mean for the corresponding groups in society. When the media engages its visual power to perpetuate negative stereotypes of marginalized groups, these images become part of the accepted and tolerated messages from the media. The way society sees black women on mainstream platforms influences the identity-shaping decisions black women make for themselves. To elaborate, there

has been previous research on the impacts of the stereotypical black women in media on black youth which suggest that black women look to the media for role-models, yet have historically been met with messages of negative and stereotypical roles (Berry, 2000; Brown & Witherspoon, 2002; Gorham, 1999; Martin, 2008). Some of the major stereotypes that have been repeatedly seen in the media include the mammy, the Jezebel, matriarch, sexual siren, Sapphire, and welfare mother or queen (Woodard & Mastin, 2005). These studies share the Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards and Stevenson (2014) agree with their arguments; that repeated exposure to media featuring stereotyped black characters create negative perceptions of black people by others. Their claims that people in society will tend to question stereotypes of their own demographic suggest that contemporary American subcultures interpret media messages in different ways. Hence, Gerbner's cultivation theory (1998) describes how repeated exposure to visual culture leads to viewers believing what they view are *real-world representations*. These arguments meet in the middle at this current research, where the women featured on the magazine covers are real-world representations of success, yet they portrayal may be limited or stereotypical. In the conversation between the acceptance or rejection of these potentially stereotypical representations of black women as reality, an examination of the content itself would best reveal what trends of implied American social values are explicitly visible in mainstream media. Are the sexual siren stereotypes seen in past representation still appearing in modern media? How are these stereotypes being presented in the media? Are representations of successful black women one-note or misguided? As it relates to black women, the content analysis may also reveal how future representation have opportunities to dispel negative perceptions created by the media's visual culture.

The Image of American Success: Who's on These Magazines Covers?

Successful people often look forward to the esteem of having their photograph published on a magazine cover—a gesture of acknowledgement as well as a representation of their success. Culturally, the magazine cover's job is to sell the magazine, and the selected celebrities experience this symbol of status that in modern American society. Regardless of their field, race, or sex, we observe successful and/or famous people appearing on the covers of top business and trade magazines with each new publication over the last 100 years, ultimately comprising and participating in the celebrity culture. As with any other subculture or minority group, the black women who are featured on the covers of top trade and business magazines generally have served in top positions in their organization, or they are considered to be high achievers in their industry. When mainstream media outlets make decisions on who will be the face to sell their magazine, there are considerations made on what consumers will tolerate. Although the media's choices must ultimately appeal to their target audience, culture-shaping media like the covers of top magazines have implications far beyond sales. Self-fulfilling prophecies are reiterated when women are rarely represented in top-earning positions, in math and science career fields, or when their identity is reduced in a limited fashion. The media's marketing strategies and conscious choices to repeat certain images and messages have power over the consumers who tend to be exposed to them. This is a consequence that American conglomerates have long used to promote certain norms, trends, and values to the public.

Agenda setting fulfills a need for us to orientate properly toward our environment as society continues to expand and change over time. Research on agenda setting by mainstream media outlets displays the power that visual culture has over society. Noelle-Neumann (1974) argues that limited research is the cause of the underestimation of the media's power. Arguably,

there is more to the media than the content that is published and circulated on the internet, box offices, or magazine stands. Perpetual consumption of the images and messages from the media fosters a sense of familiarity with these patterns and the tendency to also identify with them. For example, McCombs and Shaw's (1979) media agenda-setting theory has long been an illustration of this phenomenon in the past. This theory says that because of the media, people are made aware of certain issues, pay attention to certain things, and neglect or focus on certain features of society. The theory also suggests that people will include or exclude from their thoughts what the media includes or excludes in content, respectively. The agenda-setting theory raises inquiries on the purpose and the long-term effects of these messages on the public. Research like this current study continues to raise questions to uncover the exclusion of black women who are also targeted as consumers by nearly every major media outlet in modern America. If media outlets intend to continue marketing toward these same black women who are rendered invisible, then their practices of furthering stereotypical or limited images and excluding minorities will need to be revised.

By now, supportive research on the media's portrayal of marginalized groups (be they political, economic, or racial minorities) who are frequently depicted in a reductive, stereotypical, or negative manner is evident and widely distributed. What is less well-known is the effect of these visual representations in the collective culture—visual or otherwise. One early study by bell hooks (1992) states, "In white supremacist society, white people can 'safely' imagine that they are invisible to black people since the power they have historically asserted and even now collectively assert over black people, accorded them the right to control the black gaze" (p.168). This has been attributed to white slave-owners who would "punish enslaved black people for looking" (p.194), a traumatic experience that hooks states, may also inform black

spectatorship. This translates today, to the power that mainstream media asserts over marginalized groups by creating the very meaning of what it means to be successful. Very few black female celebrities are credited for representing their own identities in media images. For years, research has mentioned how the scarcity of women in charge of media is paralleled by the underrepresentation of women in the media (Wood, 1994). Psychoanalysts have associated the “gaze” with self-awareness, and the power to direct the images that black audiences interact with through the media. Meanwhile, hooks describe how white supremacy controls the way black people are situated in the media. Her research exposes how society’s understandings of black women are shaped by the dominant gaze. While the oppositional black gaze has been studied to identify the ways corresponding members of society have historically interacted with media content (Griffin, 2014; Mao & Zhang, 2009; Brooks, 2014), there is a gap in research on what messages are *currently* perpetuated about professional black women to the public. Analyzing these messages may hold a mirror up to the black gaze and allow opportunity for black women to think differently about and revise the media’s limited representation of their identities.

In Kristen Warner’s chapter on precarious diversity, “Strategies for Success?” (2016), she argues that the media perpetuates certain trends in order to maintain a white heteronormative status quo. She states that the conversation about identity politics implies that women laborers are all white and that all racial or ethnic minority laborers are all male. Her chapter concludes with implications for research on the way minorities survived “in spite of the uncertainty” associated with roles in the media. reinforces the concept of the “invisible” professional that this study will further identify by suggesting that we cannot possibly address the precarious creativity of black women without first making them visible in our conceptions of media images.

The current study will similarly examine successful black women seen on the covers of top trade magazines. The content indicates that these women are famous and acclaimed for their roles in their profession. In other words, Warner's claims on minorities prevailing despite their invisibility in the media suggest that the visual culture of professionals is present, but limited. Noelle-Neumann and Shaw pointed out that the absence of certain messages in the media, in this case successful black women, still sends a powerful message to the public about them. In culture-savvy magazines that circulate to millions of people in the United States, there remains a perpetual absence of prominent black women featured on mainstream covers, which, for example, indicates the magazine industry's agenda-setting of maintaining established racial hierarchies (Singletary, 2009). The depiction of black women in mainstream outlets plays a role in the way society perceives this group. In her study on gendered media, Julia Wood (1994) concludes that all forms of media communicate a message, many of which tend to perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical and limiting image of black women. This may falsely imply that culturally, black women are invisible in contemporary American culture. Historically, the media's power to shape perception and identity was worthy of examination, however the ceaseless connection we have with visual media and black body politics today calls for further analysis.

The characteristic of cumulation under the previously mentioned Spiral of Silence Effect theory is the continuation of the media treatment of a certain trend or theme over a period of time, which would be the portrayal of successful black women in this case. The visual culture created through repetition of stereotypical images tends to dominate the attention of the audience. This component is also responsible for what people perceive as the public opinion (Helton, 2002). This previous research brings out a concern for how corresponding groups in

society, may respond to these representations or be otherwise affected. When the media repeatedly distorts reality through exclusion of a marginalized group, the suggestion is made that the value of these people is paralleled and rendered invisible in society. For black women, celebrity culture continues to limit their identities, filtering what the public sees as a successful professional. The Spiral of Silence theory provides a partial explanation of how media content establishes a limited visual culture of successful black women. Stereotypical images repeated over time may reflect in the way society thinks about and behaves toward black women in general.

Influencing Identity: Magazines and Media Messages of Successful Black Women

The intersectionality of the media's agenda setting, and this current study lie in the portrayal of successful black women on the covers of top magazines. Magazines illustrate the trends of representation that eventually create a visual culture of messages. These messages are often adapted into the cognition of the public, and tolerable images transition into accepted representation of society. Celebrities like the Kardashian family who are notoriously featured on the covers on mainstream magazines exist in the minds of many as the way a successful person looks. Previous studies direct toward this new path of analyzing the media's agenda on successful black women today. Zook (1994) describes the revolution of black representation in television, stating that visual media colonizes our imagination—in much the same way a dominant culture imposes its values and belief systems on an existing population. She concludes in her content analysis that many producers build their networks with black audiences only to dump them, pointing out the role economy plays in shaping the media's messages. This study will review the ways black women in particular are portrayed by the media, and the future risks associated with marginalization of a group in pervasive media outlets. Many consequences can

be aligned to the media making one group invisible in its representation, and when negative stereotypical characters are propagated. If black women are contributing to society at a rate equal to and sometimes even higher than their white and male counterparts, then the media images that limit their representation may also reduce these contributions and the value of black women in reality. A revision to the messages found in this visual culture in the future may reveal the ways white privilege persists and black women continue to be marginalized.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The aim of this research is to examine the portrayal of successful black women by the media, and to describe the phenomenon of visual culture as it relates to stereotypical characterization of black women. With the identity-shaping power that mainstream media has over consumers, marginalized groups representation is significant. Over the past 100 years and still today, magazines, specifically the people on the covers, usually represent the influential, famous, highly ranked, or notorious members of society. Certain top trade and business magazines are even identified as *culture-shaping* due to popularity and the repeated presence of certain messages. Magazine covers visually create a culture of acceptable images of success through their subjective selection of influential people, the caption representing the image, and the appearance of the person's clothing to represent them. The caption, the clothing, and the people who appear on the cover work in tandem to send a visual message created by the media outlet. As a magazine cover is considered a signal of success and/or fame in a subject's respective field, this study will specifically examine black women who have been featured on the covers of top circulated magazines in the past seven years. With pilot research on this phenomenon examining magazine covers published between 2012 and 2017, the limited number of images available led to further inquiry on the topic. The current study continues to measure

trends black women representation from 2018 and 2019. The most current trends and messages formed in this content analysis broaden the scope of the pilot research, providing a larger sample size of images. The media's agenda setting creates a visual culture of stereotypical images for African American women and success. Black women are repeatedly marginalized in the roles they may have in these depictions.

Using content analysis of seven years of cover images from ten culture-shaping magazines, the current study identifies the ways that media perpetuates a limited and stereotypical image of successful African American women. If black women are portrayed in a limited or stereotypical manner through this visual culture, then what results will this have over the cognition of subcultures in society? Are these images the expectation for successful black women created by the media, or are they meant to pursue the media outlet's agenda of what black female youth ought to aspire to become? There are impacts that the media has over the way people see themselves so any repeated stereotypes may form negative perceptions of what it means to be a successful black woman in America. The representation, misrepresentation, or underrepresentation of successful black women on the covers of these ubiquitous magazines suggest how and why the invisible professional is perceived in the minds of the public.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

This content analysis will be conducted to support or refute the hypothesis that the repeated messages and visual trends in the portrayal of successful black women on the covers of popular culture-shaping magazines creates a "visual culture" and is a limited and stereotypical image.

RQ1: How are successful black women portrayed on the covers of mainstream magazines?

RQ2: How is a visual culture created in the portrayal of successful black women on the covers of mainstream magazines?

METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis: Qualitative Decisions Inform a Quantitative Method

This study is centered around visual culture, referring to ways that media images is part of social life. Certain message repeated over time form trends in visual culture, a phenomenon that requires a visual methodology such as a content analysis. At its core, conducting research using a content analysis method is basically finding patterns in what you see (Rose, 2016). More explicitly, this method is based on counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined population of images” (Rose, 2016, p. 88). Developed to analyze messages in mass media and to detect implicit messages in radio broadcasts (Krippendorff, 2013; Rose, 2016), a content analysis is chosen when researchers desire to avoid a certain bias, emphasizing replicability and validity of the results. Described as an explicit quantitative methodology, content analyses are based on a number of procedures and rules that allow for reliable and objective data. When considering factors of mass media, content analysis allows researchers to generate data for the generally large-scale quantities. As it relates to this current study, a content analysis is a visual methodology that not only provides quantitative data, but each of the stages of research are informed by decisions of significance. The results of this type of study are limited in the information it provides on identity and meaning making, but valuable in data analysis and for future replicated studies. Specifically, examining successful black women on the covers of mainstream magazines deals with relatively large quantity of images, and therefore the current study followed the basic four steps for conducting a content analysis: gather the images; develop the categories for coding; code the images; analyze the results. The steps for conducting this

study that follow were developed after considering the viability of this inquiry in a pilot study effort. In that research, the findings suggested partially that professional black women are portrayed in a limited and stereotypical manner. The pilot content analysis sample promised that with a broader scope and more images, more conclusive findings may be revealed.

Gathering the Images: Representative and Significant Stratification

When selecting the images that will be used for a content analysis, the question is raised about the *representativeness* or the most appropriate sources of said images. The top ten most highly circulated magazines in the United States are not necessarily the ones that feature successful people on the covers. With mainstream American magazines encompassing a wide range of categories, gathering the images began with clearly defining the population of images that will answer the research question. Therefore, the magazines were not selected based *solely* on the highest circulating magazines in the United States. Instead, the sampling procedure followed a stratified strategy to narrow the dataset to the most significant subgroup of magazines. A list compiled by the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) and the Association of Magazine Media that illustrate American society in the past ten years was consulted first as the population from which a sample would be culled for coding. The 92 images in the ASME list were selected from 44 different magazines, all of which were deemed as cultural representations to illustrate success in contemporary American society. In order to identify how successful black women are portrayed in mainstream magazines, after much consideration, these magazines were chosen to address the recent images of professional black women and the underlying trends that media outlets deem tolerable.

Circulation was, therefore, the second consideration for stratified selecting the population of media images. Based on the Alliance for Audited Media Circulation's most recent list (2016),

15 of the 44 magazines were also in the top 100 in the United States by circulation. These magazines range from 980,000 to over 23 million in circulation annually. This means that these magazines not only illustrate modern society, but they are also the images that Americans generally interact with the most. The covers of magazines unlike other forms of highly circulated media, are images curated to both sell the magazine and to represent the underlying values of the media outlet. For example, sports themed magazine covers not only feature images that are attractive to consumers, but also images that regard an athlete or major sporting event. Altogether, the 15 magazines vary in genre, an appropriate source for sampling the phenomenon of success. The final criteria of the magazine selection were based on the content of the magazine covers. Of the 15 magazines, twelve of them tended to show people on the covers, while the other three feature graphics and other illustrations. Finally, two additional magazines, *Essence* and *Ebony*, were omitted from the source population because they only depict African American people on every cover. Targeted at black women, these two publications specifically address their cultural needs, often working to dispel stereotypes rather than perpetuate them. The source population for this sample excludes images the marginalized minorities because they are not the most significant subgroup representations of successful black women. Those aimed at the majority of society better inform how mainstream media's agenda-setting may perpetuate certain trends. This left the stratified image population source of the top ten culturally savvy mainstream magazines that illustrate successful people, with the highest circulation, respectively: *AARP*, *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, *ESPN*, *Us Weekly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Forbes* magazine.

Lastly, time and current data were considered in the sample for the content analysis. Initially, the pilot research efforts for this study focused on a five-year span, with images

collected from 2012 to 2017. Despite some magazines printing weekly issues, there was only a total of 69 covers published by the stratified group of ten magazines that showed a black woman between 2012 and 2017. The current research broadened the scope of this sample by adding images of successful black women published after 2017. This provided an additional 52 covers from 2018 to 2019. Though the number of images increased exponentially in the last two years, the seven-year sample still provides a clear stratified sample for the image population in this content analysis. All of the images from the final source population of 121 were included in the sample. These were ultimately all of the covers that feature professional black women, promising a content analysis that is both replicable and accurately defines the visual culture that the media produces over time.

Developing the Categories for Codes

The next stage of this content analysis was crucial and involved coding, which is when descriptive categories are attached to the images. Content analysis as a research method allows researchers to develop a limited interpretation of the content's causes or predict the content's effects. One of the qualitative decisions associated with this content analysis lies in the development of the codes. The labels for the images were developed specifically around the agenda-setting theoretical concerns of this study. The decisions to create codes that will emphasize the meaning of the media messages allow for the results to be more interpretative, while not necessarily helpful to other researchers analyzing the same curated content. For example, the research questions mention that black women may be depicted in a stereotypical or limited manner, therefore the codes focus more on what type of attire the woman is wearing and not the color or brand of the attire. Rather than produce overwhelming data on the image, the research questions suggested the categories used for coding in this content analysis.

Using the approach of researchers Lutz and Collins (1993), the codes that were ultimately used determine factors of power, race, and history present in the images through trial runs on a few sample images. After testing the codes for being “exhaustive, exclusive, and enlightening” (Rose, 2015 p.92), each of the images in this current study was coded for the following: magazine title; type of attire featured black women are wearing; group size and gender of adults shown; the main focus or theme of the caption and photograph; and the overall message of the cover.

Coding the Content

This content analysis used the photographs and the accompanying text as visual figures in order to code the message of the magazine cover. While visual culture attempts to place the roles of visuals in society, images in mass media are rarely seen without text, voice, or music, which may alter the meaning of the image (Rose, 2015). In the case of magazine covers, the photograph on the cover tends to also have a large graphic caption that applies meaning to the photo. Hence, the caption of each cover was paired with the photographs as the source of content in order to truly capture the tone of the visual culture and provide a clearer definition of the codes, however limited. Images that seem to fall into more than one category were determined based on the main idea of the caption.

The overall theme of the cover was coded into three categories for which examples are illustrated below: job-related, personal life, or body image.

Figure 1
Example of Coding Categories for Overall Theme



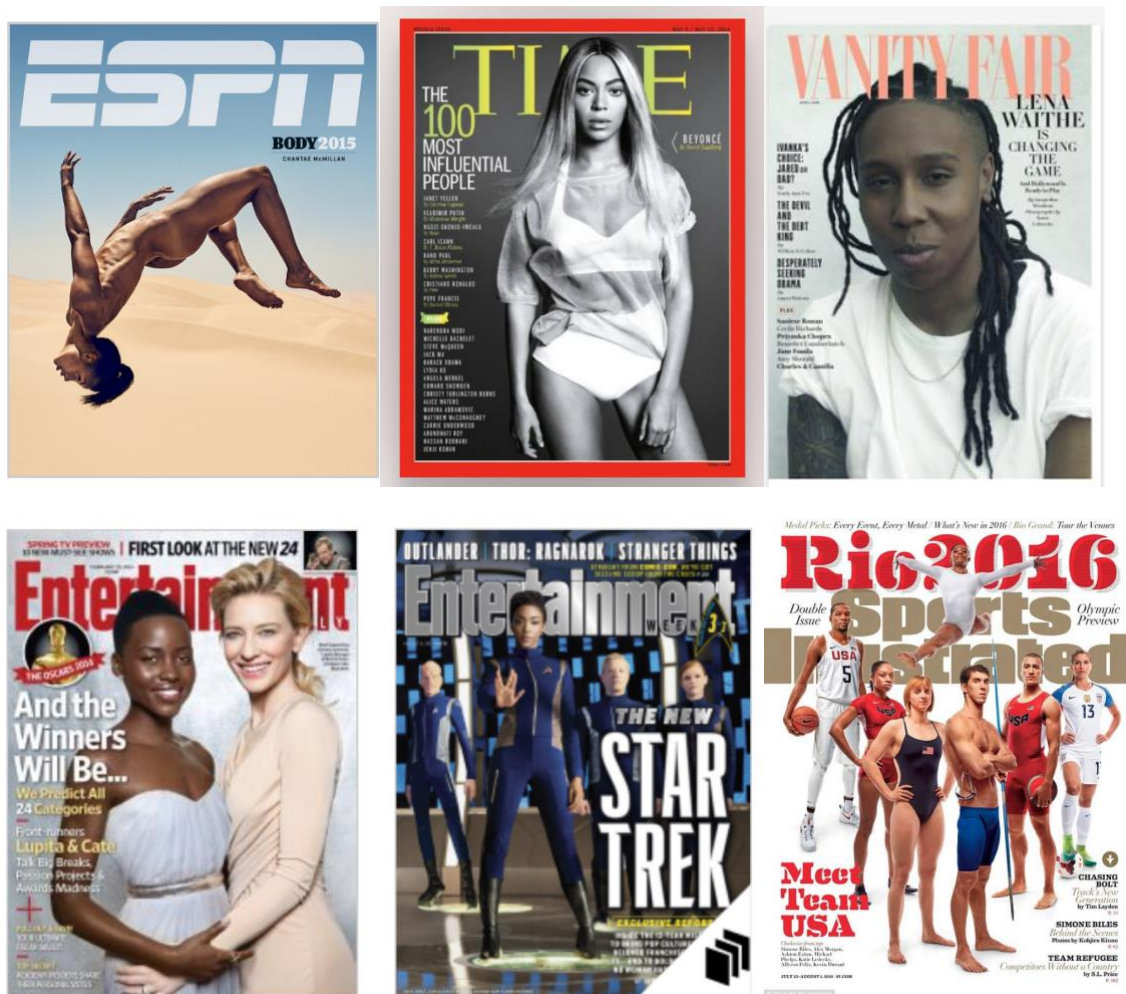
These categories were created by considering how they would best be enlightening, that is how they could produce a breakdown of imagery that would could be analyzed coherently. The photos and captions were determined to all fall into these three categories without overlap. The images that are job-related could describe those portrayals of professional black women that are based on her success rather than her sexuality, relationships or her physique.

Previous research on black women studies have identified that one of the major negative stereotypes of black women is qualified by sexualized or nude images. Bell hooks states that, “representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of nineteenth-century racism and which still shapes perceptions today” (hooks, 1992, p. 114). Her research partly informed the decisions for analyzing sexualized/male-gaze images within the current content analysis to determine if the same cultural phenomenon appear in media images today. In contemporary American culture, the social reforms that promote visibility for minorities may contribute to a critique, or even a change in the trends of black female sexuality represented in the media. The images in this study were therefore also coded for attire in the following

exclusive categories, with samples following respectively: nude; partially nude; casual; formal or cocktail; costume, athletic or business (profession-based) attire; or undeterminable.

Figure 2

Example of Coding Categories for Attire





The image and caption were both analyzed to also code the overall message as being positive, neutral, or negative. A major decision for the coding schema, which also creates limitations in the results was in determining which rhetorical messages would be codes as positive or negative. The determining factor was whether the nude and partially nude images of the celebrities were perpetuating stereotypical characters like the mammy, Jezebel, and sexual siren characters of past feminist research, or if the images could be correlated to celebrities reclaiming their bodies as profitable commodities to empower others, like Pam Grier's black superwoman character. The scope of this research using a content analysis method allots for a restricted definition of these larger social concepts.

In order for researchers who choose to replicate or further this study to quantify the images based on the negative or positive codes, it is necessary to decide on which rhetorical messages should be coded as such. Within this current study, major award recipients and business rhetoric was categorized as positive, since the overall message of the cover is based on the celebrity's career and achievement. Similarly, sexual visual rhetoric was categorized as negative, since the women on the covers of the magazines have made achievements in their professional career, sexual rhetoric is not generally not a positive portrayal of their success. While the negative codes of other nude and partially nude images create the quantifiable trends

used in this analysis, it is important to note that there are potential positive messages in those images worthy of future study on black women's beauty, power, and resilience in a racist and sexist society. One outlier in this group is a cover that featured retired supermodel Tyra Banks in a bikini, an homage to her achievement in 1996 as the first black woman on the cover of the magazines' swimsuit issue, with both covers illustrated below. With the caption of the 2019 publication also centered on her achievements, her attire alone did not qualify the image as negative and was coded as job-related and positive.

Figure 3

Sample of Positive Message/ Job Theme/ Partially Nude Images

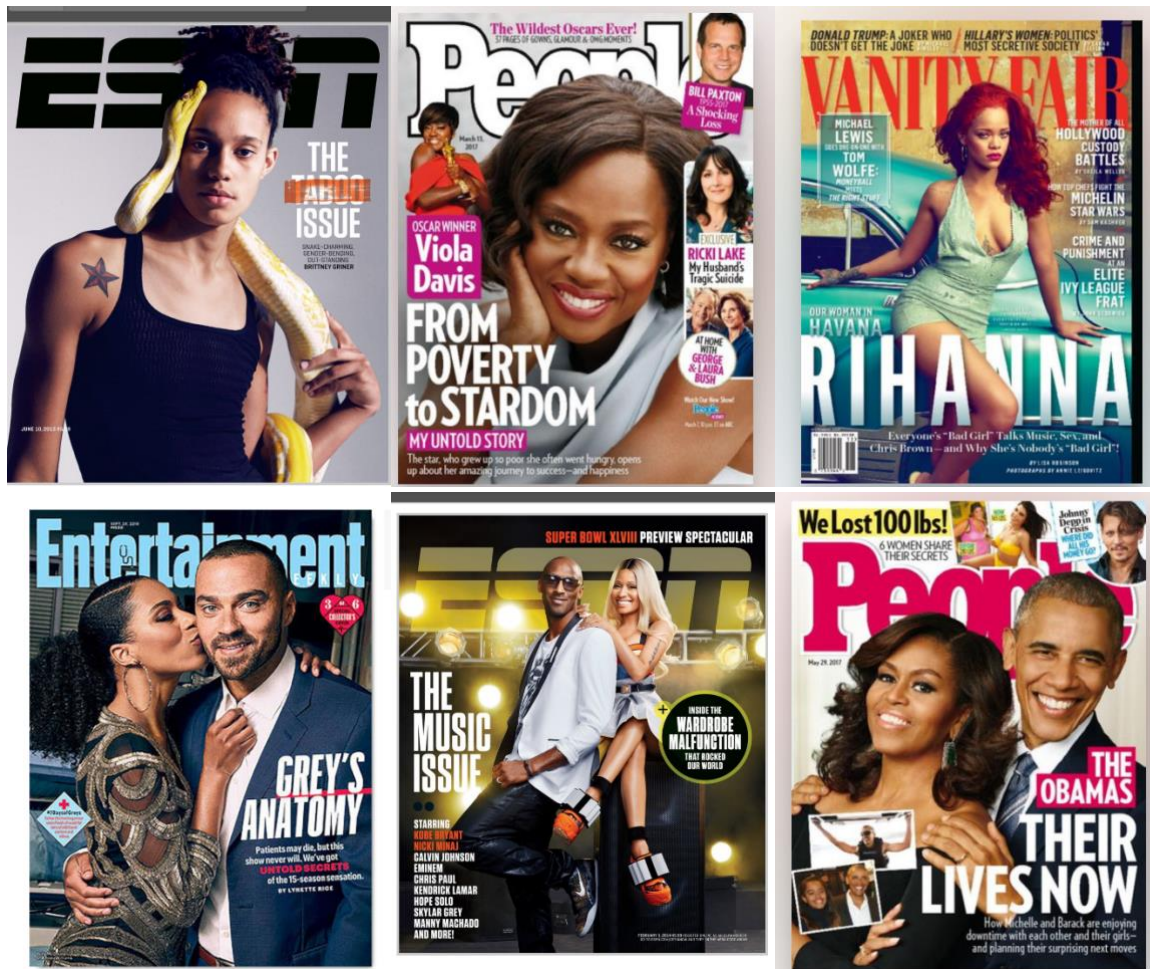


The last component coded in this content analysis is the number of people in the image, outlined by gender to illustrate the trends of black women in visually intermediary roles (Fraiman, 1994). Every aspect of the images that the research question must be addressed, therefore gender was the leading concern for these codes. While some images featured groups of 3 that included only one woman at all, there were also groups that consisted of 5 black women. The second consideration was on how images of individuals rather than couples or groups may

give more definitive results on how the black women are portrayed. For example, if there was a majority of images coded as positive, but most of them illustrated black women alongside their white and male counterparts, then the messages of successful black women may not be enlightening. Instead, it is significant that these codes focus on the number of people in the group as well as gender. Through trial efforts and sample images coded, the categories for group size in this study are individual, couple (male and female), two or more women, or a group of three or more (males and females), illustrated below, respectively.

Figure 4

Example of Coding Categories for Gender and Number of People





Black women are often excluded on the covers of magazines or sexualized if included at all, their professional image misrepresented or represented negatively by their attire or the corresponding caption. Their roles can potentially influence viewer beliefs, especially with the trends of this content being hyper-consumed by today's plugged-in society. The aforementioned content published in mainstream media over the past seven years was analyzed for this current study for the timeliest illustration of visual culture, as these trends in images are gaining popularity. This current research will further previous studies on how black women are represented in popular media while filling a gap in the field of rhetoric on the future implications and potential alternatives of these trends in visual culture for this underrepresented demographic.

Replicability and Reliability

Critics have discussed how content analyses focus on the mode of composition while ignoring certain aspects of visual imagery such as the production, circulation, and audience (Rose, 2015). For this reason, the current content analysis ensured that these considerations were made during the stratifying process. Limitations, such as the categorization of sexual rhetoric as negative and business rhetoric as positive relate directly to the inquiry of this current study, and others to come, which search for a visible professional black woman in the media and analyzes the ways she is portrayed. This study seeks to quantify how many of these portrayals are perceived as positive, negative, or neutral over a certain period of time in order to generate conclusions on the visual culture of magazine covers. This largely focuses on a set of ideologies represented in contemporary American culture, leaving numerous subcultures outside the scope of this research. Therefore, the specific mainstream ideologies of this study provide clear quantities, though future researchers should consider implications of these cultural norms. The source population of the images used for this study were selected based on the magazines that illustrate American society, for the highest circulation, and magazines targeted at the dominant majority publics. While problematic for research surrounding minorities, this allows the study to be replicable and reliable for measuring patterns in visual culture, while also suggesting that the current content analysis considers cultural meaning-making values of images as well, providing a broader cultural context for the results. This study identifies and describes the “visual culture” that the media creates through its portrayal of professional black women. The potential effects this phenomenon may have on corresponding groups in society is determined by analyzing when and how black women have been featured in the popular media in the past seven years for their profession or success. This information exposes the limited representation of professional black

women in the media and examine the content against the agenda-setting theory in hopes of promoting a more accurate portrayal of this demographic in future media. With careful attention to objective image gathering and code development, content analysis is a lens into visual culture-shaping phenomenon in the media.

The visual culture gathered from magazines, or the trends in media images impacting society, was measured through the appearance of successful or influential people and the supplemental captions in popular publications. Coding these images provides quantitative data, though informed by the qualitative decisions of the researcher. The qualitative decisions included determining the categories for the content analysis. However, each of these decisions was tested for three previously mentioned characteristics: being exhaustive, exclusive, and enlightening to the research question.

In order to address questions that may be raised about replicability, content analyses coding categories cannot be ambiguous, so each of the categories was clearly defined. This was tested using a coder reliability process where the categories are clearly defined and understood. For example, attire that was coded as partially nude was also understood to be attire that is considered lingerie, sexy, or mostly nude. To achieve this interrater reliability, the images were coded by three black women, ages 21 to 30. A brief discussion ensured that the coders understand how to use the instrument, then they can independently code the images. As previously mentioned, this allowed for appropriate findings for this quantitative method, but challenges research that suggests different meaning behind the same codes. The instrument and the coders were selected with acknowledgement to text interpretations that may generate a different meaning for individuals who lack cultural competency (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). This means that figurative language in the captions, costumes from modern movies or television

shows, and other culturally specific details could cause a discrepancy if coders are not aware of their meanings within the context. Each coder was trained based on the sample code sheets completed by the primary researcher. A sample image was coded in order to ensure that coders were well prepared to conduct this study. Any results that did not have 100% agreement between coders were briefly discussed until an agreement was met. Images were gathered from 2012 through 2019 editions of the magazines so that results could be analyzed for the most current trends of success.

While limitations such as the circulation of media images and the professions that cultivate fans, this study will be validated by the prevalence of black women in certain majors in colleges in the U.S., trends in the current employment markets, and historical connections of the media's influence on corresponding groups in society to modern social movements that promote minority visibility. Validation of research findings will be possible by noting who the targeted demographic includes for the curated content of this study. Ultimately, the process will bring to light the hypothesized connection between black women in the media and the careers that black women pursue in modern society. The results of the content analysis may inform visual cultural shifts in representation of successful black women by the media in the near future.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Qualitative Assessment of Quantitative Data

Content analysis is a quantitative methodology for interpreting visual texts that explores more than just the frequency of the codes, but also suggests qualitative relations between the coded results. This means that the results of this study are not only represented by the number of times trends appear within the magazine covers; the results are also interpretive understandings of how the codes connect to each other and the wider context of society. Although informative

when analyzed for trends, there are a number of limitations present in the coding schema definitions that may prove problematic in analysis. For example, labeling the messages as positive, negative or neutral has the potential to be interpreted differently based on historical and personal context of the coder. In addition, while magazine editors tend to direct the images featured on these covers, there are various ways that professional women choose to dress and portray themselves which may appear sexualized but does not necessarily indicate a negative cultural message in their perspective. The current content analysis provides an analysis of symbols associated with the limited view of professional black women, however problematic these symbols may be. The coding schema created to analyze successful black women was established for this specific context, with the different layers of codes all relating to a mainstream societal message that can be interpreted from the images. The meaning-making of the frequencies is most enlightening when they are compared to other codes. To do that required analyzing additional factors such as associations and correlations among the categories. This included comparing the attire codes to the theme of the image codes, the number of individuals in the image compared to overall message, and so forth, suggesting deeper connections worthy of elaboration. Therefore, discussing the qualitative significance of the themes that emerge from the quantitative results of this research provides an outlook unique to content analysis and to this study.

It is reasonable to note that while these connections draw a deeper conversation about black women's representation, the codes that define the data possesses limitations in focusing on majority audience norms. Mainstream media outlets may not share a common agenda or message on minorities, so in coding these images, considerations like identity and intention can be interpreted further for greater enlightening. What this implies is that the current study can serve

as a catalyst for further discussions on black women who are included in mainstream contemporary American celebrity culture.

RQ1 Response: Successful Black Women Portrayed on Mainstream Magazine Covers

The current inquiry began with the previously mentioned pilot study which only included a sample of 69 images, raising questions on how black women may be portrayed by *other* magazines, other media platforms, or within other periods of time. For example, research suggests that black women, not only as celebrities and professionals, but even as victims of crime have been rendered as invisible by the media time after time, while broadcast news outlets, police shows, and newspapers creating a narrative of victimization toward white women (Oliver, 2009; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Neely, 2015). Again, in a society based greatly on colonial logic, black women in particular have been intertwined in racist assumptions. Media images that appear to devalue and misrepresent the minority group poses a potential threat to the integrity of black bodies in reality. The dominant cultural gaze has historically portrayed black women as “primitive and sexually intensive” (Gilman, 1992, p. 177) while the media personifies the cultural figure of chaste white womanhood (Brown, 2015). If the current content analysis supports the hypothesis of this study, then there may be underrepresentation or misrepresentation of black women as contributors to the greater mainstream celebrity culture worthy of deeper examination in the future. The first research question posed to assess this hypothesis was, how are successful black women portrayed in the mainstream media? The findings supported the claim that the portrayal of professional women on the covers of top magazines is indeed limited. With only 121 images published across ten highly circulated, culture-shaping publications in the span of seven years, the statistical results of the content analysis delineate the gap in representation of these women by the media. Social reforms taking place concurrently with the

publications of these images also suggest that there is still an underlying issue of visibility of minorities in modern media. Black women like Beyoncé and Serena Williams who are pictured often in the media and participate in the highest level of celebrity culture boldly challenge previous notions of black body objectification with their mere presence on the covers on these mainstream magazines. The limited depiction of successful black women on the covers of these magazines lie not only in the number of publications, but also in the closer examinations of these images, where often the photographs, especially those coded as positive and job-related, are of these same few women. Serena is visible quite often, not only on the covers that focus on sports, but also on the covers on major business and even fashion magazines, demonstrating how modern black celebrities are willing to move toward a shift in popular American media trends in the near future.

Figure 5

Positive Message/ Job Theme Images by Celebrity











The invisible professional in this study was defined as the potentially limited and stereotypical depiction of successful black women in mainstream media over the past seven years. The images were gathered from ten pop culture magazines display instances of diversity, yet the underlying messages behind representations of marginalized minorities raised questions on how black women are portrayed when they *are* included, however rarely this may occur. This has implications beyond the seven-year analysis of this current research, with images of mass media constantly being published that influence this double-marginalized group in society. Social reform movements, as mentioned before, are a clear indicator that there is a greater underlying threat to black bodies in reality than this content analysis could measure with codes

for rhetorical messages in the media. The absence of diversity in these mainstream media images plays a role in the making of racial inequality in society(Gray, 2016).

The content analysis that is presented in this current research recorded several trends in the portrayal of successful black women on the covers of magazines, including attire and whether the cover is rhetorically a positive, neutral, or negative representation. Starting with the quantity of the magazines, the sample included *all* of the covers published in the past seven years by ten highly circulated magazines that depicted a successful black woman. *Entertainment Weekly* had 32 publications, with several images of the same woman; *ESPN* and *Sports Illustrated* had eleven, including special profile covers like the Taboo Issue, the Body Issue, and the Music Issue; *Us Weekly* and *Rolling Stone* each had nine; *People* had 15; *Vanity Fair* had ten covers; Time had sixteen. *AARP*, the most highly circulated magazine, not only in the image source population, but in the entire United States, had four publications with black women on the cover; Forbes magazine, with the smallest circulation of the sample, had only four black women on their cover from 2012 to 2019.

Table 1
Covers Featuring Black Women by Publication

Publication	Total Covers Featuring Black Women 2012-2019
AARP	4
Entertainment Weekly	32
ESPN	11
Forbes	4

People	15
Rolling Stone	9
Sports Illustrated	11
Time	16
Us Weekly	9
Vanity Fair	10
Grand Total	121

In the pilot research which only included five years of content, the numbers of covers published that featured a black woman contrasted from those within the most recent two years. The promise of greater images in the sample population was indeed granted and the current study sample of over 100 images may now provide more conclusive results. Images of successful black women were published more than twice as frequently annually in the past two years than in the previous five. While *Entertainment Weekly* published 17 covers portraying black women the first five-years of the pilot research, *Forbes* and *AARP* each only had three covers. Therefore, among the magazines deemed to be the most culture-shaping in modern society, there were some that dominate the messages for professional black women. However, following this line of inquiry, the question remained on whether these magazine outlets had more to contribute to the visual culture of black women in more recent years. The results were that *Entertainment Weekly* added 14 more images to the source population in 2018 and 2019, while *Forbes* added two, and *AARP*, just one. *Us Weekly* contrasted most obviously with its other weekly publication counterparts,

with no images of black women on the covers in the last two years. This demonstrates that the frequency of the publication was not consistent with the likelihood that a black woman may be on the cover.

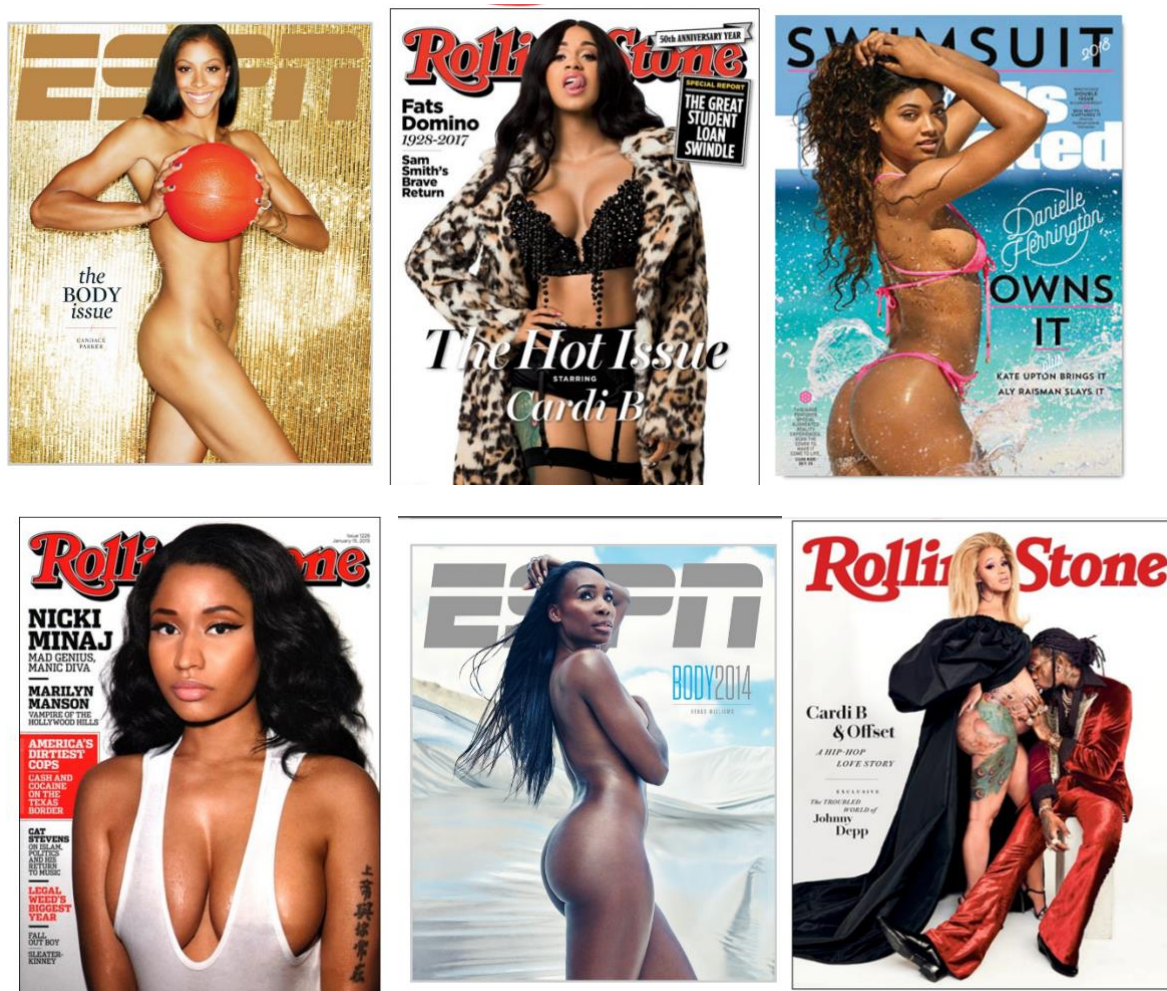
Table 2
Covers Featuring Black Women by Publication and Year

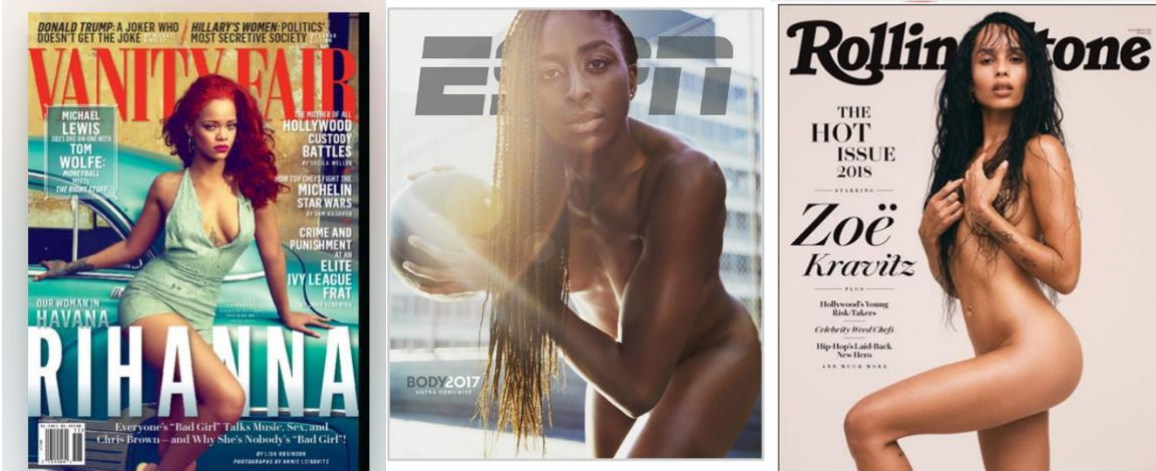
Publication	Total Covers 2012-2017	Publication	Total Covers 2018-2019
AARP	3	AARP	1
Entertainment Weekly	17	Entertainment Weekly	15
ESPN	10	ESPN	1
Forbes	2	Forbes	2
People	9	People	6
Rolling Stone	4	Rolling Stone	5
Sports Illustrated	6	Sports Illustrated	5
Time	4	Time	12
Us Weekly	9	Us Weekly	0
Vanity Fair	5	Vanity Fair	5
Grand Total	69	Grand Total	52

The codes of positive, neutral, or negative were applied to the images to examine how successful black women are represented in the media. Once again, there were some images that promote sexualized characterizations of professional black women by having her appear in lingerie, sexy attire, partially nude (such as wearing a bikini), or completely nude. While it is previously explained that there are other interpretations of sexual rhetoric, the coding schema created around this content was limited to defining sexual rhetoric as negative. Captions that focused on negative characteristics of the woman and images that propagate negative stereotypes directed at the male-gaze (nude or partially nude) were coded as negative.

Figure 6

Sample of Negative Message/ Nude or Partially Nude Images

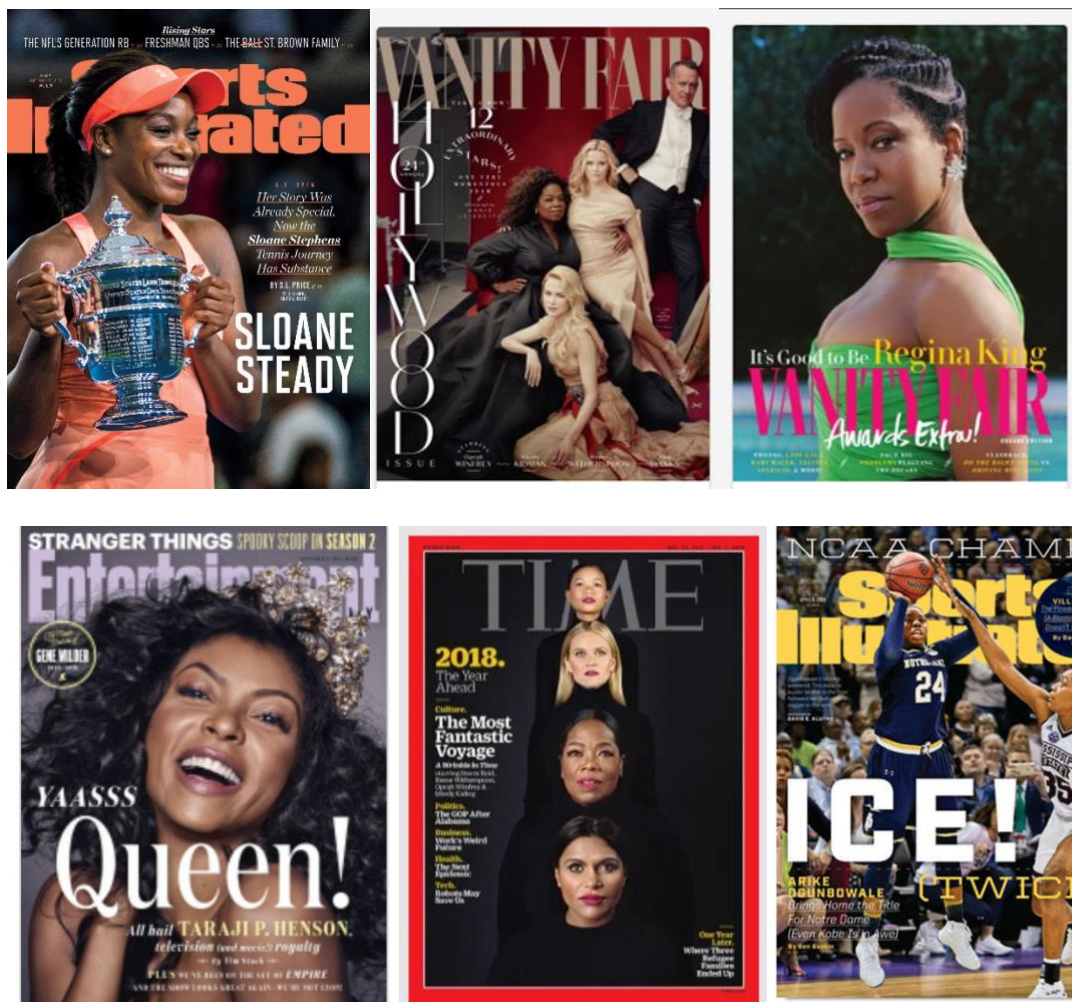




Also sampled below were covers that depicted professional women in business attire, athletic attire, formal or cocktail attire, or appropriate performance costumes illustrate a visual culture of professionalism. Covers that focused on the woman's career or accomplishments were coded as positive. This appropriately measured the visibility of a certain ideology of successful black women in this content. Celebrities seen on these covers, who generally work as entertainers and professional athletes, represent a microcosm of the much greater contributions that black women bring to the contemporary American workforce.

Figure 7
Sample of Positive Message/ Professional Attire Images





If the image and caption were not mostly negative nor positive, the image was coded as neutral. Among these were several images that had ambiguous captions and undeterminable attire. Without a value or claim mentioned in the caption, the neutral images generally displayed today's tolerable images of professional black women paired with text that avoid promoting any negative or positive cultural perceptions of the woman herself, leaving ambiguity in meaning. Most of the images coded in the neutral category focus on promoting a brand, a movie, or a television show. While addressing quantity in these fields, the results do not provide insight on the larger scale of professional black women in contemporary American society.

Figure 8
Sample of Neutral Message Images



In total, there were 24 negative images, 40 neutral, and 57 positive illustrations of black women. This study zoomed in on the various ways successful black women are portrayed when they participate in celebrity culture or when they are featured for their professional accomplishments, and therefore the sample of 121 images allows for many messages to be decoded. The message trends in these magazine images are the indicators for visual culture of black women.

Table 3
Overall Message of Covers by Publication

Publication/ Overall Message	Total Covers
AARP	4
positive	4
Entertainment Weekly	32
negative	2
neutral	13
positive	17
ESPN	11
negative	7
neutral	2

positive	2
Forbes	4
positive	4
People	15
negative	2
neutral	11
positive	2
Rolling Stone	9
negative	4
neutral	4
positive	1
Sports Illustrated	11
neutral	1
positive	10
Time	16
negative	1
neutral	5

positive	10
Us Weekly	9
negative	8
positive	1
Vanity Fair	10
neutral	4
positive	6
Grand Total	121

Each magazine cover was coded for primary theme of the image and caption. The three central ideas were job-related, personal-life, and body/male-gaze themed. There were 30, 27 and 12 images coded for each theme, respectively. There were 22 images coded as positive and job-related. Only one job-related image was coded as negative, with the remaining seven coded as neutral. There were four personal-life, and three body themed images also coded as positive. Five of the images that focused on the black woman's body were negative portrayals and four of them were neutral. Finally, the remainder of the personal-life magazine covers were mostly negative, with 18 coded as neutral and 17 coded as negative. And seven coded as positive.

Table 4
Overall Message of Covers by Theme

Theme/ Overall Message	Total Covers
body	15
negative	6
neutral	5
positive	4
job	64
negative	1
neutral	17
positive	46
personal	42
negative	17
neutral	18
positive	7
Grand Total	121

There were 64 magazines in this sample that displayed a black woman alone on the cover. Of these individual features, 17 were a negative representation of the woman, 29 were positive, and 18 were neutral. As described earlier, the images that were coded as an individual with positive representations was overwhelmingly shadowed by images of the same few women: media mogul Oprah Winfrey, actress Viola Davis, Olympic gold medalist and gymnast Simone Biles, tennis player Serena Williams, actress Lupita Nyong'o accounted for more than 25% of the images used in this study, and over half of the images coded as positive. Similarly, images of groups (single and mixed gender) were primarily positive, with 14 of the were positive, and seven were also coded as neutral, and 3 coded as negative. The three group images that were coded as negative were all-female groups. There was one image of a male/female couple that was coded as positive, with the other eight evenly divided between negative and neutral portrayals.

Table 5
Overall Message of Covers by Number of People

Number of People/ Overall Message	Total Covers
couple	16
negative	4
neutral	10
positive	2
one	64
negative	17

neutral	18
positive	29
three or more male/female	19
neutral	8
positive	11
two or more women	22
negative	3
neutral	4
positive	15
Grand Total	121

Under the critical eye of racial stereotypes and limited portrayals of black women, these frequencies display that a greater percentage of the negative images were those where the black woman was alone on the cover. When examining the mixed-gender groups, there were no negative perceptions revealed. What does this truly say to the portrayal of successful black women? There is a limited portrayal, especially when black women are few in published quantity

Nude or partially nude images, which were categorized as sexual rhetoric in the coding schema, accounted for 17 of the 121 images. Another 20 of the images featured women in formal or cocktail dresses. There were 22 images of women in casual attire and 38 images of women in

professional dress (costume, athletic wear, or business attire). There were 24 covers where the woman's attire could not be determined.

Table 6
Overall Theme of Covers by Attire

Attire/ Overall Theme	Total Covers
athletic or costume	24
body	2
job	19
personal	3
business	14
body	1
job	10
personal	3
casual	22
body	1
job	7
personal	14

formal or cocktail	20
job	15
personal	5
lingerie/sexy/partially nude	11
body	5
job	3
personal	3
nude	6
body	5
personal	1
undeterminable	24
body	1
job	10
personal	13
Grand Total	121

RQ2 Response: Visual Culture Created in These Portrayals

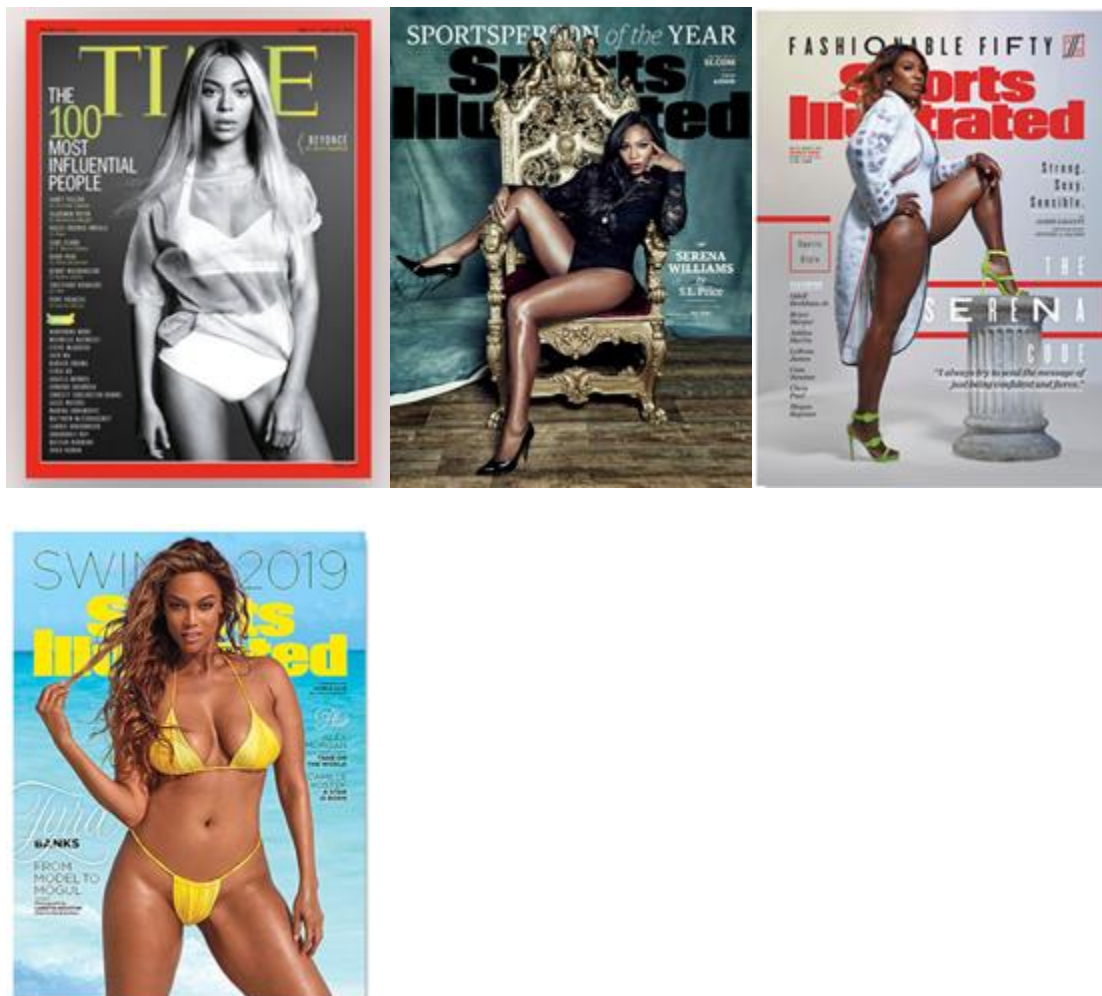
Today, mainstream society consumes and interacts with more images than ever before, placing visual culture at the forefront of people's screens, their eyes, and often, their minds. With this realization, the messages that the images send become worthy of further analysis. In the case of black women, identified as the invisible professional in this study, The content analysis that was conducted to support or refute the hypothesis that the portrayal of successful black women on the covers of top American magazines creates a "visual culture" and is a limited and stereotypical image. The second inquiry used in this current study was, what trends (visual culture) are displayed in the portrayal of successful black women in the mainstream media? The trends that would illustrate racial limitations and stereotypical images like the sexual siren or the Sapphire caricatures mentioned previously in this current content analysis would be non-professional attire, especially women who are nude or partially nude; non-professional themed covers that focus on the woman's body or her personal life; images of women with at least one man; and lastly, images that are perceived to send negative messages about successful black women. These trends are quantified in the results of this content analysis and illustrate the issue that this study attempts to reveal on visibility of black women. The interpretation of these messages, however, are limited to the definition of negative by this schema, which could be seen differently by researchers who analyze the same content against different subcultural norms.

The results of the content analysis suggest a correlation between professional attire and the overall message of the magazine, with only 3 professionally dressed women depicted negatively based on the coding schema, and 16 of the professional images sending a positive message.

Figure 9*Negative Message/ Professional Attire Images*

However, there was still only 31% of these images that featured women in attire considered professional in their fields, and 17% showed successful black women completely or partially nude. This means that the nude and partially nude sexual rhetoric coded as negative may have implications in celebrity culture that are completely separate from the value of professional black women within this analysis. Furthermore, there were nearly 57% of the magazine covers that were non-professionally themed, with 17% primarily focused on the black woman's body. This demonstrates the visual culture of successful black women in the media and the reliance on body and attractiveness as the central focus in their representation. There were no nude images and only four of the partially nude images that were coded as sending a positive message. When inspected closely, these images were of pop artist, Beyoncé, as one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people, retired supermodel Tyra Banks who is noted as a mogul, and two covers show tennis player, Serena Williams, as the sportsperson of the year on one cover, and a personal quote on the second cover.

Figure 10
Positive Message/ Partially Nude Images



Celebrities like Serena Williams and Beyoncé suggest a shift in both visibility and identity of black women in media images, often choosing to use their influence to commoditize and celebrate black bodies. Each of these women were highlighted for tremendous achievement on these magazines but were dressed for the male-gaze. The reasoning behind their nude and partially nude representation may be a positive stance of glamorizing their bodies to continue to empower black women alongside the social movements of today, or it may be media outlets furthering the stereotypes of historical feminist research on black female body politics. The quantitative results of this study are open for further analysis on identity and meaning-making,

but the trends are evident and appropriate for the definitions of this study. The data ultimately supports the hypothesis that the visual culture of successful black women is often limited to their physical appearance and sexy attire, despite their achievement in a specific profession.

Table 7
Attire of Covers by Overall Message

Overall Message/ Attire	Total Covers
negative	24
athletic or costume	2
business	1
casual	5
formal or cocktail	2
lingerie/sexy/partially nude	3
nude	5
undeterminable	6
neutral	40
athletic or costume	5
business	6
casual	9

formal or cocktail	8
lingerie/sexy/partially nude	4
nude	1
undeterminable	7
positive	57
athletic or costume	17
business	7
casual	8
formal or cocktail	10
lingerie/sexy/partially nude	4
undeterminable	11
Grand Total	121

Contrarily, this study revealed that the majority of the women featured on magazine covers are fully dressed, either professionally, casually, or formally, suggesting that the issue is not how much clothes they are wearing, but the potentially negative connotation of the image and caption, and the implications this has on modern society.

The major trend in visual culture that this study measured was the relationship between non-professionally themed images and the overall message of the magazine cover. Of the 29

covers that had a positive message, 76% of them depicted job-related themes. On the other hand, there were 22 covers that had a negative message, and 95% of them were non-professionally themed. The single negative, job-related image was a depiction of a woman who stars in a television show as a mentally disturbed convict. Although this image is promoting her television show, the role that the black woman plays on the show appears stereotypical and negative based on the ideologies that govern mainstream American media. The content analysis showed that the media's visual culture of successful black women includes both positive and negative depictions, but the images are often a limited view of this culture.

CONCLUSION

Previous research has implied that the media uses agenda-setting power to perpetuate negative images of racial minorities. While men and women in all groups of society strive to be successful, the media's visual culture depicts certain limited or stereotypical trends in the portrayal of successful black women, which this case study attempted to define. A content analysis of ten top American magazines illustrated the trends in their attire, the number of people in the image, the theme of the image and the overall message of the covers. A deeper analysis of the media's images will uncover a larger scope of research for these visual culture trends. The most prevalent trend in visual culture based on this current study, is that black women are not often displayed on the covers of these top ten magazines. Among all of the weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly issues published in the past seven years, there were only 69 images of black women from 2012 to 2017 then 52 more from 2018 to 2019 for a grand total of 121 images. A total of 64 images featured a black woman alone on the covers. Of these 64 images, there were 16 images of women nude or partially nude. This frequency supports how the media may only illustrate a

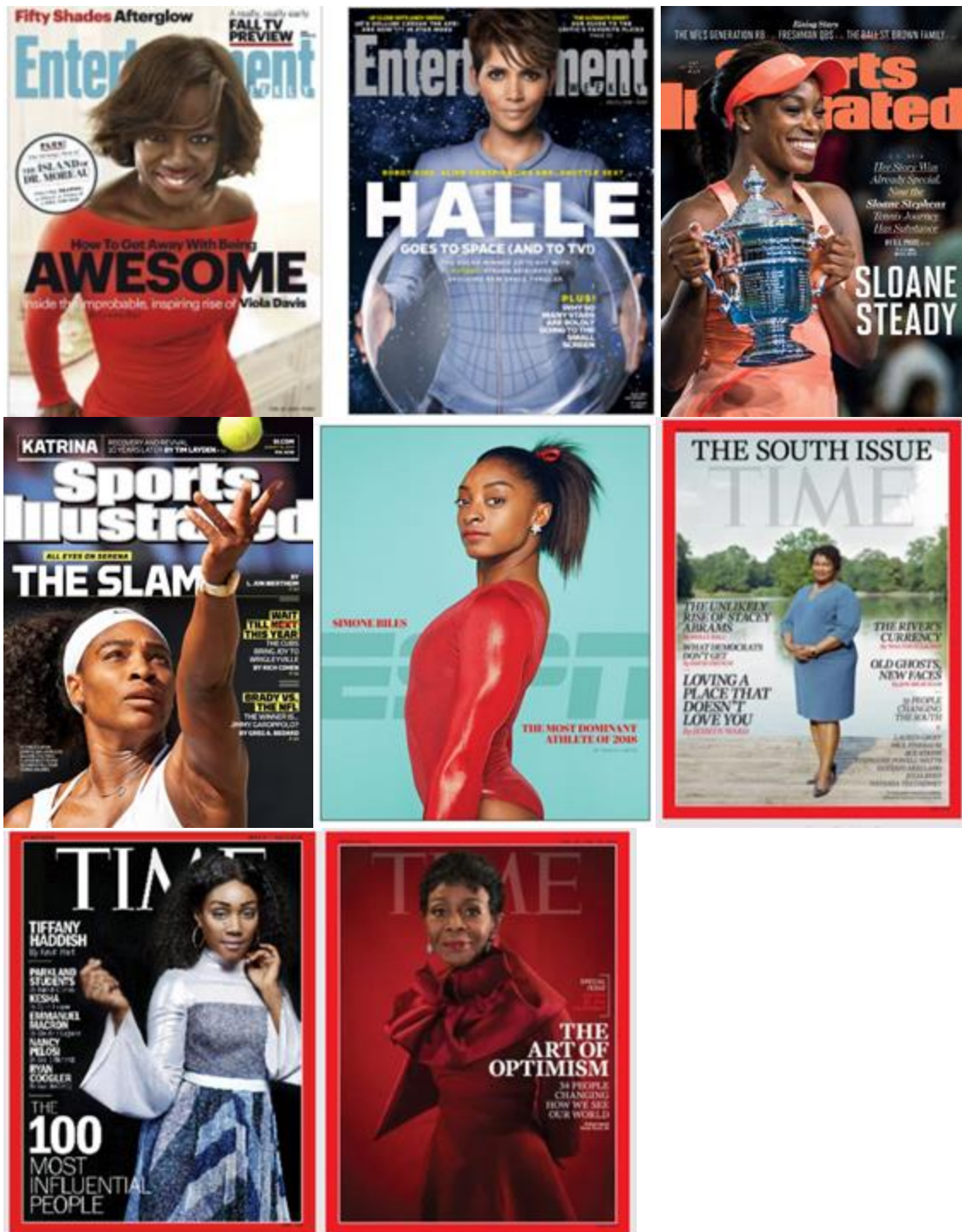
limited number of successful black women, and depicting her in a sexual or negative manner, perpetuating the male-gaze stereotypes of colonial times (Gilman, 1992).

Ultimately, these implications resound with youth who look to the media for role models and exposure to a variety of professions. With only 34 cover images published featuring an individual, fully clothed, black woman by these magazines in the past seven years, this demographic remains marginalized by the mainstream media. Black youth have discussed the effects of negative images on their perception of black women in previous studies. This content analysis defined limitations and stereotypes based on the visual rhetoric of the images and captions. After peeling back layers of representation of successful black women on magazines, there were a total of twelve job-themed covers that portrayed a professionally dressed individual black woman in a positive or neutral way. Two of those twelve images were of the same actress, Viola Davis, with two more of the same athlete Simone Biles. The twelve images were dispersed between three of the ten magazines, Entertainment Weekly, Sports Illustrated ESPN, Vanity Fair, and Time magazine.

Figure 11

Positive or Neutral Message/ Individual/ Professional Attire Images





This study was partially successful in measuring the hypothesis and answering the research questions: RQ1: How are successful black women portrayed in mainstream media? And RQ2: How is a visual culture created in the portrayal of successful black women on the covers of

mainstream magazines? Future studies should explore limitations of this current study, such as the different visual culture created by other mainstream media outlets of television and films, in different time periods, or when directed at different audiences. The major limitation is in the comparisons of the trends in the data. While connections can be made between the rhetorical messages and society's perception of black women, there are counter-messages on this study's definitions of negative and positive representations that exist in research on subcultures in America. Research that utilizes this data or this method should consider the social climate and opposing views on identity-shaping during the time period. Although this current content analysis included seven years of magazine covers, comparing these trends to television, film, and other print sources would deepen the understanding of the problematic ways the media portrays black women. Furthermore, using a content analysis method, considering various levels of circulation across platforms may render greater findings on this phenomenon. Another limitation to this study was a focus on the classic media outlet, magazines, while ignoring the newest platform for contemporary mass media, social media. Networks such as Facebook and Twitter are rich in visual rhetoric and are recommended for future content analyses on the same phenomenon. Finally, professional black women are becoming more and more visible in society, and relatively, in the minds of a white majority society. The agenda-setting media influences public cognition; therefore, further research to elaborate on how the marginalized minority is portrayed may provide a profound outlook on this visual culture.

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