

# REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN IN HOLLYWOOD



Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media  
*If she can see it, she can be it.™*

USC Viterbi  
School of Engineering

“THE ONLY THING THAT SEPARATES WOMEN OF COLOR FROM ANYONE ELSE IS OPPORTUNITY. YOU CANNOT WIN AN EMMY FOR ROLES THAT ARE SIMPLY NOT THERE.”  
— VIOLA DAVIS

# INTRODUCTION

This study examines representations of Black women and girls in entertainment media in 2019. Much of the existing research on race and gender in entertainment media analyzes representations of women and Black people as two distinct groups, but far less is known about the intersectional depictions of Black girls and women in Hollywood. It is important to note that the number of Black female characters in film and TV is too small to examine Black women and girls separately, so the analysis is combined throughout this report.<sup>1</sup>

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This section presents four sets of findings: Representations of Black female leads in film; representations of Black girls and women in family films; depictions in family television; and a comparison of film and TV. Our findings are organized into positive findings and negative findings in each section to give the reader a clear sense of how Black female characters are depicted in entertainment media.

## BLACK FEMALE LEADS IN FAMILY FILMS

- Black girls and women are 6.5% of the US population, but only 3.7% of leads/co-leads in the 100 top-grossing films of the last decade. This figure has improved in recent years.
- Only one-in-five (19.0%) of Black leading ladies from the past decade have a dark skin tone.<sup>2</sup>
- Most Black leading ladies (57.1%) from popular films in the past decade are depicted with hairstyles that conform to European standards of beauty as opposed to natural Black hairstyles.

## BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS IN FAMILY FILMS

### *Positive Film Findings*

- Black girls and women are 6.5% of the US population, 6.1% of all characters, and 5.7% of leading characters in 2019 family films.
- Black female characters and other female characters of color are less likely to be portrayed as working in a service job (a common racialized media stereotype) than white female characters (7.5% and 11.8% compared to 15.2%).
- Black women are more likely to be depicted as working in a Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) occupation than other women of color and white women (14.3% compared to 9.6% and 9.6%, respectively).
- Black women are just as likely as white women to be shown as a leader (41.3% and 43.1%).<sup>3</sup>
- Black female characters are far more likely to be shown as “smart” in family films than white female characters or other female characters of color (54.1% compared to 44.2% and 42.6%, respectively).

- Among female characters with occupations, Black women (69.1%) are more likely than white women (52.3%) or other women of color (50.7%) to be depicted as hard working.

### *Negative Film Findings*

- When it comes to sexualization, Black women (13.5%) and other women of color (14.8%) are more likely to be depicted as partially/fully nude than white women (9.0%).
- Other women of color (56.9%) and white women (51.2%) are significantly more likely to be depicted as attractive than Black women (41.4%) in family films.
- Black female characters are more likely to be shown as violent than white female characters (29.3% compared to 24.6%) and twice as likely to be violent as other female characters of color (14.8%).
- In the top films, white women (27.2%) are more likely to be depicted as being in a romantic relationship than Black women (22.7%) or other women of color (25.9%).
- White women (16.9%) are more likely to have at least one sexual partner in films compared with Black women (13.3%) and other women of color (14.8%).

## BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS IN FAMILY TELEVISION

### *Positive TV Findings*

- Black girls and women are 6.5% of the US population, 6.2% of all characters, and 6.4% of leading characters in 2019 family TV.
- Black girls and women are more likely to be shown as attractive (48.5%) compared to other women of color (44.6%) or white women (41.6%).
- Black women are more likely to be shown in a STEM occupation (5.6%) than other women of color (3.0%) or white women (3.3%).

- More Black female characters are shown as leaders than other women of color or white women (40.9% compared with 36.0% and 34.6%, respectively).
- Black female characters are far more likely to be shown as “smart” in family television than other female characters of color and white female characters (32.7% compared to 22.2% and 26.4%, respectively).

### *Negative TV Findings*

- Black female characters and other female characters of color are twice as likely as white female characters to be shown with a degree of nudity (5.2% and 4.9% compared with 2.5%).
- Compared to white female characters, Black female characters and other female characters of color are twice as likely to be shown in revealing clothing (10.7% and 8.7% compared with 4.5%).
- Black female characters are more likely than white female characters and other female characters of color to be verbally objectified by other characters in family TV (1.4% compared with 0.5% and 0.6%, respectively).
- White female characters are more likely to have an occupation (89.6%) than Black female characters (70.5%) or other female characters of color (58.8%).
- Black female characters are twice as likely as white female characters and other female characters of color to be shown in a service industry job (56.3% compared to 26.4% and 20.6%, respectively).
- Black women (5.6%) are less likely than white women (8.7%) and other women of color (11.0%) to be shown in a romantic relationship, but more likely to be shown as having at least one sexual partner.

## COMPARISON OF BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS IN FAMILY FILMS AND TELEVISION

### *Sexualization & Objectification*

- Black female characters are twice as likely to be shown wearing revealing clothing in family film than in family TV (20.3% compared with 10.7%).
- Black female characters are more than twice as likely to be shown as partially/fully nude in

in family films than in family TV (13.5% compared with 5.2%). In family films, Black female characters are seven times more likely to be visually objectified with camera angles than in family TV (6.7% compared with 0.9%).

- Black female characters are three times more likely to be verbally objectified by other characters in family films than in family TV (5.3% compared with 1.4%).

### *Work & Leadership*

- Black women in family films are three times more likely to be shown as *not* having an occupation than in family TV (39.6% compared with 10.4%).
- Black women in family TV are seven times more likely to be working a service job than Black women in family films (56.3% compared to 7.5%).
- Black women in family films are nearly three times more likely to be shown in a STEM profession than Black women in family TV (14.3% compared to 5.6%).

### *Violence & Criminality*

- Black female characters in family films are twice as likely to be shown as violent than Black female characters in family TV (29.3% compared with 13.0%).
- Family film has three times more criminal Black female characters as family TV (6.7% compared with 2.3%).

### *Character Traits*

- Black female characters are more likely to be depicted as funny in family TV than family film (55.8% compared with 30.7%).
- A higher percentage of Black female characters are shown as smart in family films compared to family TV (54.1% compared to 32.7%).
- Black women are shown as harder working in family films than in family TV (69.1% compared with 43.4%).

### *Relationships & Sex*

- Black women are four times more likely to be shown in a romantic relationship in family films than in family TV (22.7% compared with 5.6%).
- Black women are twice as likely to have at least one sexual partner in family films than in family TV (13.3% compared with 5.1%).

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# FULL REPORT

This study examines representations of Black women and girls in entertainment media. Much of the existing research on race and gender in entertainment media analyzes representations of women and Black people as two distinct groups, but far less is known about the specific depictions of Black girls and women in Hollywood.

This report starts with a summary of previous studies on the intersectional oppression that Black women face and how media representations reinforce this. We then describe the methodology used in the study and present our major findings and recommendations for improving media representations of Black women and girls.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES

This section presents findings from previous studies on media representations of Black girls/women. We begin with an assessment of how Black women have historically been depicted in Hollywood, then turn to an examination of modern representations and breakthroughs for Black female characters in recent years.

### HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS

Black women's history in Hollywood is a history of underrepresentation and misrepresentation. Films were first aired to a mass audience in 1891, and for many decades after, Black women rarely appeared in films.<sup>4</sup> When they did appear, they were cast in degradingly stereotypical roles. Black women appeared as three common stereotypes in the early years of film and television: The Sapphire, The Mammy, and The Jezebel.<sup>5</sup>

The Sapphire stereotype comes from a character on the Amos 'n' Andy radio and later television sitcom that started in 1928. It was created by two white men who performed racist minstrel caricatures of Black characters. The Sapphire character is a Black woman who is depicted as impure, masculine, strong, controlling, and aggressive.<sup>6</sup> She estranges her family because she is so difficult and bitter.<sup>7</sup>

The second prominent stereotype of Black women is The Mammy. She is nurturing and submissive and shown as a caretaker of white children and families.<sup>8</sup> The Mammy caricature comes from the era of slavery when Black women were often the caretakers of their own children and the children of slave masters. The Mammy stereotype is typically a dark-skinned woman with a large body type who is supposed to be desexualized and unattractive. The "original" Mammy was Hattie

McDaniel, the first African-American person to win an Academy Award for her role as "Mammy" in *Gone With the Wind* in 1939.<sup>9</sup> The mere fact that McDaniel was not given a proper name for this role reinforces the idea that she is a stereotype and not a complex character with personality and agency. The Mammy stereotype persists in movies today, the most notable being popular Black women characters played by Black men.<sup>10</sup>

The third historical stereotype of Black women in media is The Jezebel—a hyper-sexualized Black woman who uses her sexual prowess as a means of control.<sup>11</sup> She is uncivilized, immodest, and sexually deviant. The Jezebel stereotype emerged during slavery as a "justification" for white men raping Black women (premised on the idea that Black women were so sexually voracious, they could not be sexually violated).<sup>12</sup> It stands in contrast to white women of the time who were thought of as civilized, modest, and sexually pure. As for physical appearance, The Jezebel tends to be light skinned with straight or "good" hair and thinner lips and a smaller nose.<sup>13</sup>

### CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS

In 2013, Oscar nominee Viola Davis noted that Black actresses are "in crisis mode," lacking both roles and opportunities to highlight their talents.<sup>14</sup> Media representation comes in two forms: the

quantity of representation (how *often* a group is shown), and quality of representation (*how* they are portrayed when they do appear in content). The quantity and quality of Black women's representations in entertainment media has improved considerably in recent decades, but more work remains to present Black women in fair and just ways.

Despite persistent, foundational stereotypes in Black women's representation, their rate of representation has improved in recent years.<sup>15</sup> Few Black women appeared as characters in television in the 1970s and 1980s, and during that period, Black women in major roles decreased from 9.6% to 2.4%.<sup>16</sup> Today, Black women are 14% of prominent characters on prime-time television shows<sup>17</sup> and 6% of prominent characters in popular films.<sup>18</sup> This means the representation of Black women in film mirrors the US population, and their representation in television is even better. In short, previous studies find that Black women are finally appearing on screens in an equitable way.

We also see improvements in recent years when it comes to quality of representation. Black women's on-screen occupations today are predominately "high-status" or white collar compared to a study from 1997 and 2006 that finds that 60% of Black women characters were depicted as service workers.<sup>19</sup> The 2018 blockbuster film *Black Panther* presented Black women as scientists, leaders, and freedom fighters instead of reducing them to subservient roles. But despite these obvious improvements, stereotypes of Black women persist.

Recent studies find that The Sapphire, The Mammy, and The Jezebel are still present in contemporary entertainment media. The Sapphire has evolved into the Strong Black Woman and the Angry Black Woman stereotypes. She is angry, loud, aggressive, ill-tempered, illogical, potentially violent, and hostile.<sup>20</sup> The Strong Black Woman stereotype advances the notion that Black women can handle mistreatment because they are tough and can endure pain.<sup>21</sup> The Angry Black woman stereotype furthers the idea that Black women's anger cannot be legitimate, therefore any expression of such is inherently irrational and overwrought. In a recent survey of Black women viewers, 53% say Black women television are typically depicted as "argumentative."<sup>22</sup>

The modern incarnation of The Mammy is a non-threatening Black woman with a large body

type. A recent study of reality TV programs finds that 93% of Black characters are portrayed as having a large body type—a significantly higher percentage than women of other races.<sup>23</sup> The remarkably high percentage of Black women with large body types in reality television reinforces The Mammy stereotype.

The Jezebel stereotype persists with the hyper-sexualization of Black female characters in contemporary entertainment media who are disproportionately dressed in provocative clothing<sup>24</sup> and otherwise hyper-sexualized.<sup>25</sup> One study of primetime TV programs finds that Black female characters are dressed more provocatively and less professionally than their white and Latinx counterparts, even in workplace settings that call for professional attire.<sup>26</sup> A study of Black women's representations over time finds that Black women are significantly more sexualized than Latinx and Asian American women characters, and are sexually objectified more than Black men.<sup>27</sup> A more recent incarnation of The Jezebel stereotype is the racist Welfare Queen stereotype that emerged in the 1980s that painted Black women as having many children while being sexually promiscuous, lazy, and dependent on the state for financial support.

The persistent stereotypes of Black women in media have impact in the real world. They serve as invisible norms against which Black women are judged. If they get angry, it is easy to dismiss it as illegitimate because their anger is so commonly depicted as unwarranted or illogical. Furthermore, Black women's perseverance in the face of hardship is seen as normal, which has the effect of erasing the depth of injustices they face on an everyday basis.<sup>28</sup> Black women in positions of power face a double standard for not being "properly pleasing" in subordinate or caretaking roles. Another deep impact of stereotypes of Black women in media is that a multitude of narratives about real Black women's lives are absent.<sup>29</sup> Black women are commonly reduced to a few dominant stereotypes in entertainment media instead of being depicted as complex human beings with varied lived experiences.

In recent years, advocates have also noted colorism in representations of Black women in Hollywood. Colorism is discrimination against individuals with darker skin tones who are of the same racial/ethnic group. In Hollywood, dark-skinned Black women are rarely cast in leading or major roles. Virtually all prominent roles for Black women feature Black women with lighter skin.<sup>30</sup> This bias against

dark-skinned Black people started during slavery when skin color determined the type of work an enslaved person was assigned. The bias in favor of casting light-skinned Black women reinforces a white, European standard of beauty and boxes Black women into a narrow standard of attractiveness. We measure skin tone representations in film leads from the past decade.

Advocates have also focused on racism in Hollywood with an examination of Black women's hairstyles. Black female characters have traditionally appeared with straightened hair that is a product of prevailing white standards of beauty.<sup>31</sup> Sitcoms aimed at Black audiences in the 1990s and beyond grappled with the complex social meaning of Black women's hairstyles, but in content aimed at wider audiences, Black women virtually always appear with straightened hair, a wig, or extensions instead of braids or natural hairstyles (e.g., afros, twists, headbands, and deadlocks). Scholar Ella Turenne notes that hairstyle freedom in entertainment media has traditionally been reserved for white actors: "They are able to change their hair in lots of different ways without encouraging any backlash. But once

Black women do anything like that, it seems as though it's something radical and everyone takes notice. That goes back to what is socially acceptable."<sup>32</sup>

A number of popular TV programs in the last few years have featured Black women with natural and other hairstyles that challenge white standards of beauty, including *Insecure*, *Blackish*, and *Dear White People*. This is a positive shift given that Black women experience higher anxiety about their hair than women of other races/ethnicities and feel intense social pressure to straighten their hair.<sup>33</sup> A study by the Perception Institute finds a substantial implicit bias against Black women's natural hair when it comes to perceptions of beauty and professionalism.<sup>34</sup> Black women with "white" hairstyles are seen as more beautiful and considered to be more professional in experimental settings than Black women with natural or other hairstyles. Entertainment media is a source of this bias but can also be a powerful tool in shifting perceptions of Black women's hair. We examine Black women's hairstyles for leading characters in film from the past ten years.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology we used to produce the data in this report is content analysis, an approach that is ideal for systematically analyzing the content of communications. We generated a Black female lead dataset, a family film dataset, and a family television dataset. Our focus on family content is intentional since this content has the most impact in shaping perceptions of young people. Statistically significant differences are reported at the .05 level throughout this report.

### ***Black Female Lead Dataset***

We analyzed Black female leads and co-leads from the top 100 grossing films from 2009 to 2019, based on *Box Office Mojo* rankings. The final dataset includes 42 Black leading ladies.

### ***Film Dataset***

Our film dataset includes 957 female characters in the top-grossing family films of 2019 (rated G, PG, or PG-13). The top family films of 2019 were identified using data from *Box Office Mojo* and include live action and animation. Leading and co-leading characters are defined as those who drive the unfolding storyline. Characters who are not leads but contribute to the storyline are classified as supporting characters. Other speaking characters who do not drive the storyline are coded as minor characters. This dataset includes 75 leading/co-leading and supporting Black female characters who were more prominently featured in films.

### ***Television Dataset***

Our family TV dataset includes 1,852 female characters in the 50 most watched shows for kids ages two to thirteen. The most popular programs were identified using *Nielsen* rankings, and include live-action and animation. This dataset includes 215 leading/co-leading and supporting Black female characters who were prominently featured in television.



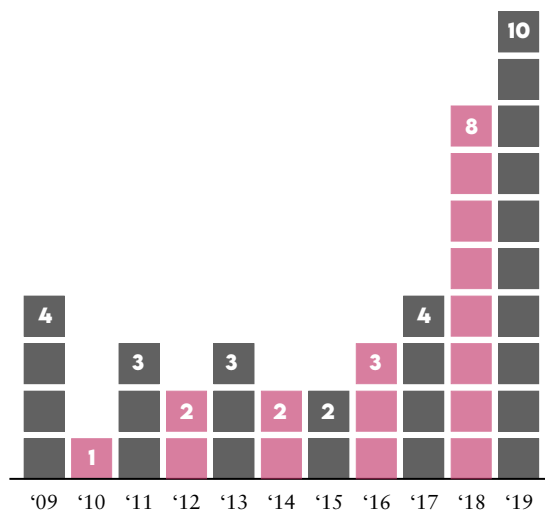
# FINDINGS

We present our major findings in this section, starting with an analysis of skin color and hairstyle for Black female leads from 2009 to 2019. We then analyze Black female representation in film and television. We analyze how often Black girls and women are depicted and the quality of their representation in terms of sexualization, work and leadership, violence and criminality, characteristics and traits, and tropes and stereotypes.

## BLACK FEMALE LEAD FINDINGS

Black girls and women are 6.5% of the US population, but only 3.7% of leads and co-leads in the 100 top-grossing films each year from 2009 to 2019. As shown below, this figure has improved in recent years and Black female leads now match their numbers in the US population.

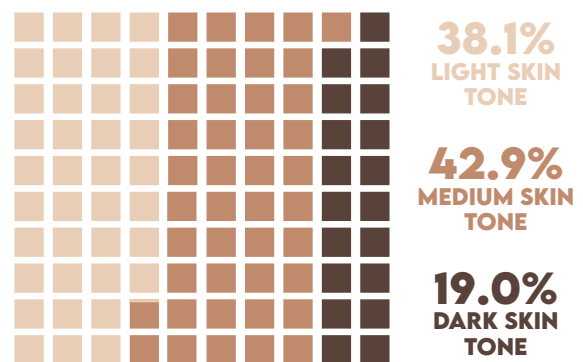
**FIGURE 1**  
BLACK FEMALE LEADS OVER TIME, 2009 - 2019



We now analyze the skin tone and hairstyles of these 42 Black leading ladies. More specifically, we want to know whether light-skinned Black women are cast as leading characters and whether their hairstyles typically conform to European standards of beauty.

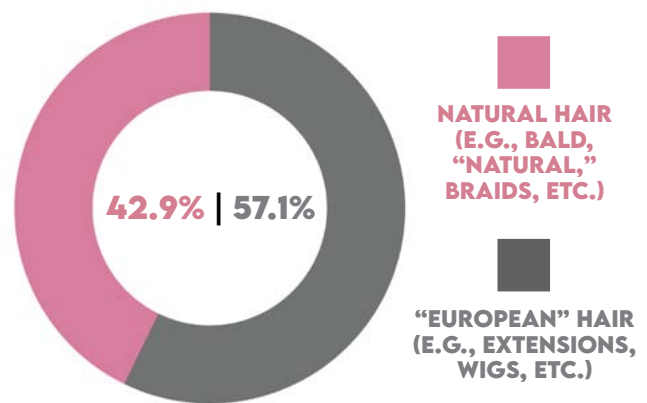
When it comes to skin tone, as shown in Figure 2, only one-in-five (19.0%) Black leading ladies have a darker skin tone. This confirms that Hollywood has a bias in favor of Black women with lighter skin in blockbuster films. The virtual erasure of dark-skinned Black women as leading ladies in popular films has not improved in the past decade.

**FIGURE 2**  
SKIN TONE FOR BLACK FEMALE LEADS



We also find hairstyle bias in Hollywood. A solid majority of Black leading ladies are depicted with hairstyles that conforms to European standards of beauty (57.1%).<sup>35</sup>

**FIGURE 3**  
HAIRSTYLES FOR BLACK FEMALE LEADS

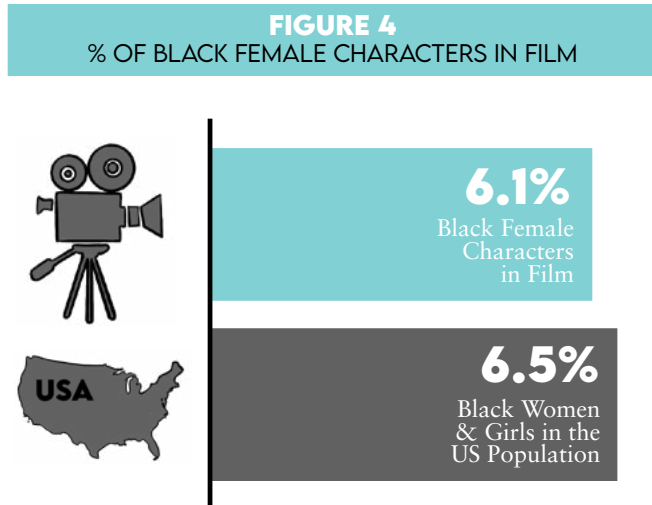


To summarize, when the top-grossing films feature Black female leads/co-leads, these leading ladies are mostly depicted with light skin and hairstyles that reflect European standards of beauty.

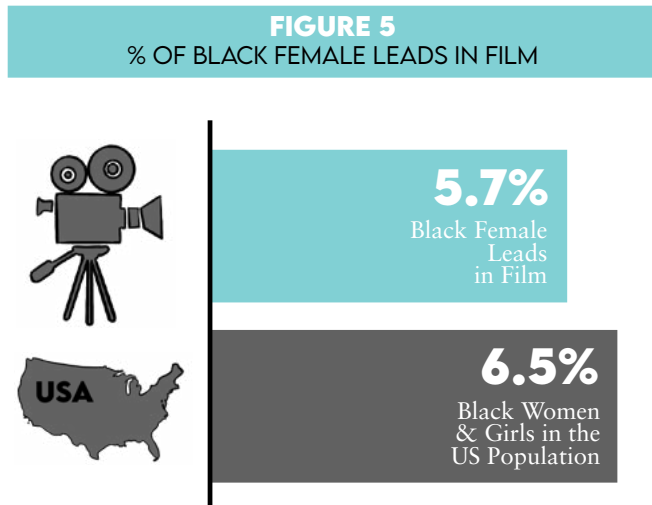
# FILM FINDINGS

## QUANTITY OF REPRESENTATION

Black girls and women are 6.5% of the US population, and we find that they are reasonably represented in the top-grossing films. As shown in Figure 4, Black girls and women make-up 6.1% of all characters in film. This means the percentage of Black female characters in the top-grossing movies achieves the benchmark of the population.



Black female characters are also represented as leading characters at nearly the same rate as the population (5.7% compared with 6.5%).



We find little intersectional diversity when it comes to depictions of Black girls and women.

- No Black female characters are presented with a physical, cognitive, or communication disability and few are depicted as LGBTQ+.

- Only 16.3% of Black female characters are depicted as ages 50+; less than half of the population figure of 34.0%.
- Black girls and women are also under-represented when it comes to characters with large body types (10% compared with 39.8% in the population).

**FIGURE 6**  
INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS, FILM

Identity Group	% of Black Female Characters
Disability	0.0%
LGBTQ+	1.1%
Age (50+)	16.3%
Large Body Type	10.0%

## QUALITY OF REPRESENTATION

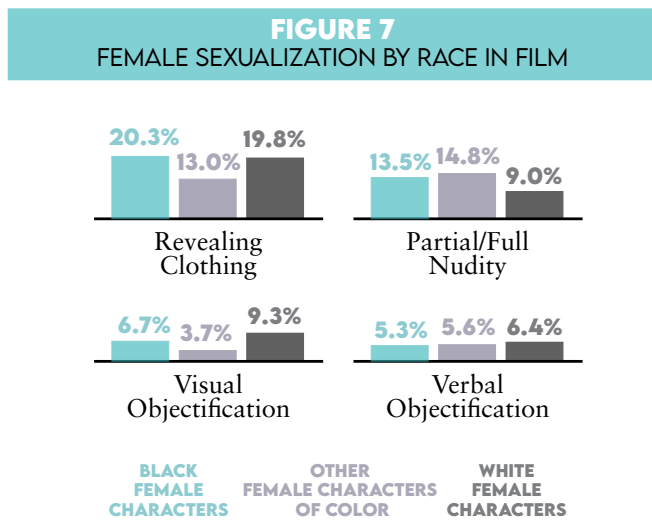
Another way of understanding how entertainment media signals the importance of various groups is by the quality of their representation. In this section, we summarize findings pertaining to sexualization, work and leadership, violence and criminality, character traits, and romance and sex. We compare Black female character representations to other female characters of color and white female characters to highlight differences in portrayals that are specific to Black women and girls.

### *Sexualization & Objectification*

We find that in film, Black female characters are more sexualized than other female characters, which reinforces The Jezebel stereotype. Sexualization occurs when a person's value is primarily derived from their sexual appeal, when sexuality is inappropriately imposed on someone, or when a person is sexually objectified.<sup>36</sup> We measured sexualization through revealing clothing, partial or full nudity, and whether the character was visually objectified with camera angles or verbally objectified by other characters in the film. We find that:

- One-in-five (20.3%) Black women are shown in revealing clothing—a similar rate to white

- women (19.8%) but nearly twice as much as other women of color (13.0%).
- When it comes to being shown as partially or fully nude, Black women (13.5%) and other women of color (14.8%) are more likely to be depicted in this way than white women (9.0%).
- White women are the most likely to be visually objectified with camera angles while female characters of all races are roughly as likely to be verbally objectified by other characters.



We also measured rates of attractiveness using a scale that ranges from ugly/repulsive to worse than average looking, average looking, better than average looking, and stunning/very attractive. For ease of analysis, we combine “better than average looking” and “stunning/very attractive” when assessing whether a character is depicted as physically attractive. We find a difference by race for female characters:

- Other women of color (56.9%) and white women (51.2%) are significantly more likely to be shown as attractive than Black women (41.4%).

This means that while Black female characters are commonly sexualized, they are not presented as physically attractive as often as other female characters, which reinforces a white standard of beauty and the stereotype of Black women as less feminine or desirable by societal standards.

### Work & Leadership

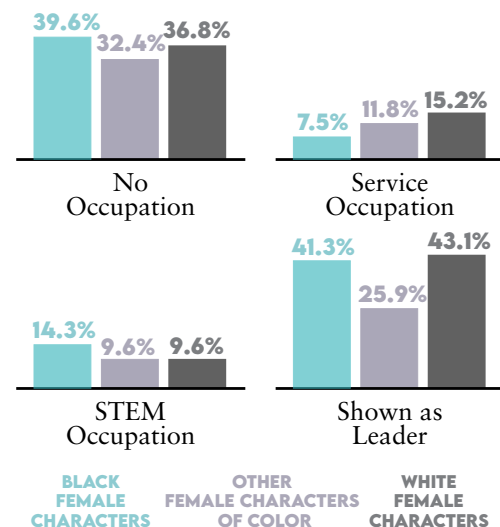
Depictions of work and leadership are important indicators of a character’s contribution and value to society. We find some significant gaps by race for female characters:

- Black female characters are more likely than white female characters or other female

characters of color to be shown without an occupation (39.6% compared to 36.8% and 32.4%, respectively).

- Black female characters and other characters of color are less likely to be portrayed working in the service industry than white female characters (7.5% and 11.8% compared to 15.2%). This is a positive finding given previous research that finds that Black characters have historically been overrepresented in service jobs in entertainment media.
- Another positive finding is that Black women are more likely to be depicted as working in a Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) occupation than other women of color and white women (14.3% compared to 9.6% and 9.6%, respectively).
- Black women are just as likely as white women to be shown as a leader (41.3% and 43.1%), while far fewer other women of color characters are shown as leaders (25.9%).

**FIGURE 8**  
FEMALE WORK & LEADERSHIP BY RACE IN FILM

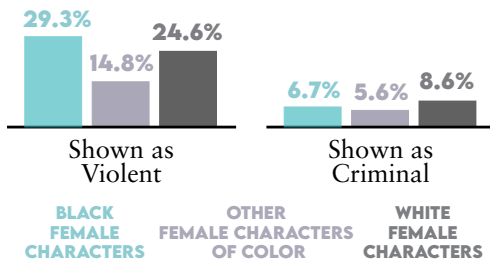


### Violence & Criminality

Another way that Black women and girls are dehumanized in entertainment media is through depictions of Black female characters as violent or involved in criminal activity.

- Black female characters are more likely to be shown as violent than white female characters (29.3% compared to 24.6%) and twice as likely as other female characters of color (14.8%).
- Black female characters and other female characters of color are significantly less likely than white female characters to be shown as criminals (6.7% and 5.6% compared to 8.6%).

**FIGURE 9**  
FEMALE VIOLENCE & CRIMINALITY BY RACE IN FILM



### Character Traits

We also examined how character traits are presented in family television and films, with a focus on intelligence, humor, and work ethic.

- A greater percentage of white female characters are depicted as funny (37.4%) than Black women or other women of color (30.7% and 33.3%, respectively).
- Black female characters are far more likely to be shown as “smart” in family films than white female characters or other female characters of color (54.1% compared to 44.2% and 42.6%, respectively).
- On a positive note, we find that among female characters with occupations, Black women (69.1%) are more likely than white women (52.3%) or other women of color (50.7%) to be depicted as hard working.

### Relationships & Sex

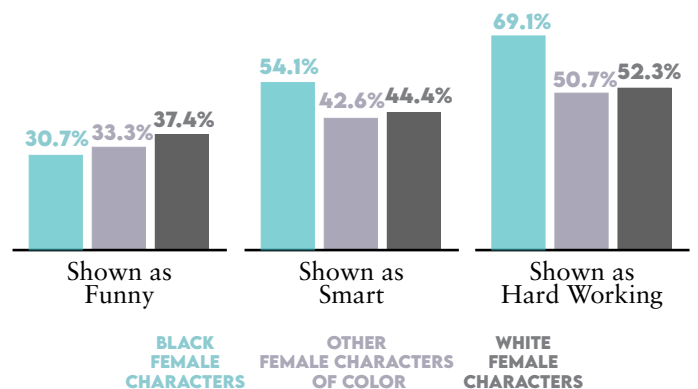
When it comes to relationships and sex, we find that Black women are less likely to be shown in a relationship or as having a sexual partner:

- White women (27.2%) are more likely to be depicted as being in a romantic relationship

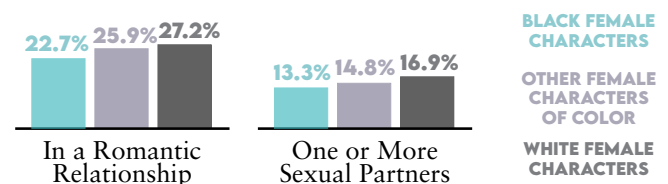
in the top films than Black women (22.7%) or other women of color (25.9%).

- White women (16.9%) are more likely to have at least one sexual partner in films compared with Black women (13.3%) and other women of color (14.8%). Sexual partners are defined as people with whom the character engages in a range of sexual behaviors. This finding, combined with the finding above that Black women are more sexualized than white women, indicates that Black female characters are typically depicted as sexual objects but not sexual subjects.

**FIGURE 10**  
FEMALE CHARACTER TRAITS BY RACE IN FILM



**FIGURE 11**  
FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS & SEX BY RACE IN FILM



## TELEVISION FINDINGS

In this section, we present the findings of the same analysis we conducted above for film, but this time, the data is from television. We matched this comparative analysis as much as possible (by year, top-viewed, family content) so we can compare these statistics. We present findings for quantity, followed by quality of representation.

### QUANTITY OF REPRESENTATION

Figure 12 shows that the percentage of Black girls and women in family TV roughly matches their presence in the US population (6.2% compared with 6.5%). This is an important finding that

**FIGURE 12**  
% OF BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS IN TV



**6.2%**  
Black Female Characters in TV



**6.5%**  
Black Women & Girls in the US Population

means representation of Black female characters in the most-viewed family TV shows matches their presence in the broader society. The percentage of leading Black girls and women in TV also matches the population (6.4% compared with 6.5%).

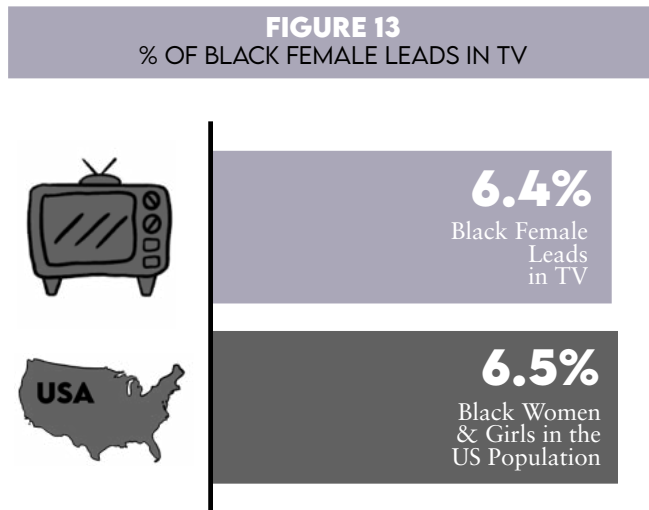
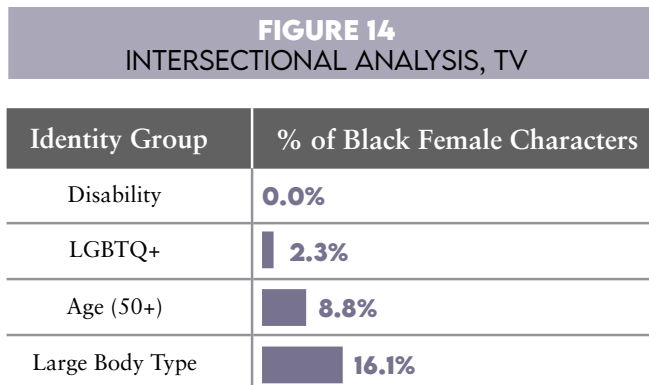


Figure 14 presents an intersectional analysis of representation for Black women and girls.

- No Black female characters are shown with a disability.
- When it comes to sexuality, 2.3% of Black girls and women are shown as LGBTQ+ (lower than the 4.5% of LGBTQ+ people in the population).
- About one-in-ten (8.8%) Black female characters are ages 50+, which is also well below the population figure of 34.0%.
- Nearly four-in-ten people in the US have large body types (39.8%), but only 16.1% of Black female characters in family TV are depicted with large body types. As noted above, this finding is complicated. Content creators walk a line between depicting Black girls and women as they are in the broader population when it comes to body size, but without reinforcing The Mammy stereotype by representing most Black female characters with a large body type.

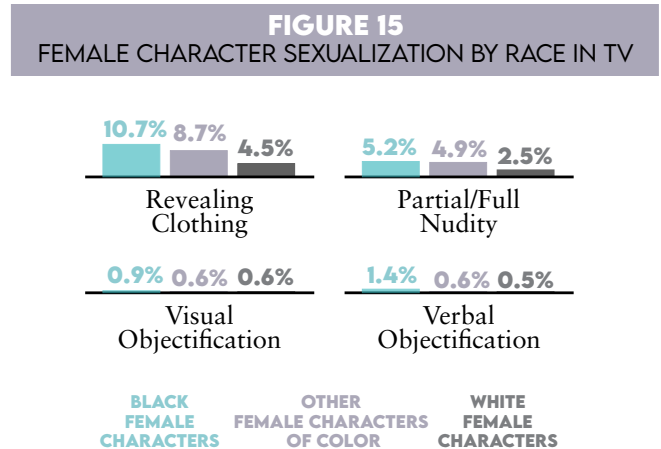


## QUALITY OF REPRESENTATION

In this section, we report findings from the most-watched family TV shows of 2019 in terms of sexualization, work and leadership, violence and criminality, character traits, and romance and sex.

### Sexualization & Objectification

- Black female characters and other female characters of color are twice as likely as white female characters to be shown with some degree of nudity in family TV (5.2% and 4.9% compared with 2.5%). This reinforces the troubling Jezebel stereotype for Black women.
- Black female characters and other female characters of color are twice as likely to be shown in revealing clothing than white female characters (10.7% and 8.7% compared with 4.5%). This is further reinforcement of The Jezebel stereotype in family television.
- Few female characters of any race/ethnicity are visually objectified with camera angles in family television.
- Black female characters are three times as likely as white female characters and other female characters of color to be verbally objectified by other characters in family TV (1.4% compared with 0.5% and 0.6%, respectively).



When it comes to character attractiveness, Black girls and women are more likely to be shown as attractive (48.5%) compared to other women of color (44.6%) or white women (41.6%).

### Work & Leadership

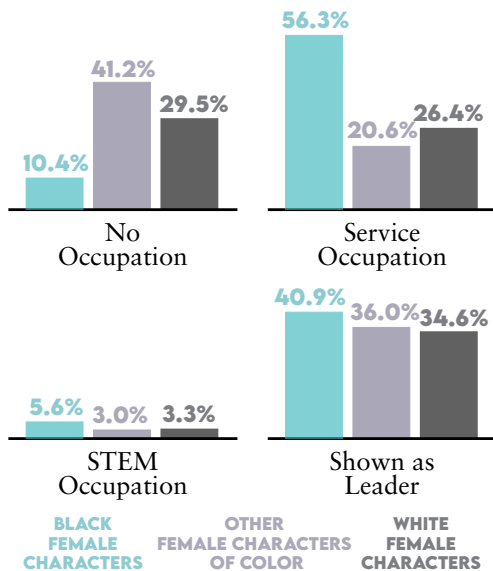
- Black female characters are three times less likely than white female characters to be shown without an occupation (10.4% compared to 29.5%), and four times less likely than other female characters of color (41.2%).

- Black female characters are twice as likely as white female characters and other female characters of color to be shown in a service industry job (56.3% compared to 26.4% and 20.6%, respectively). This is a troubling finding, coupled with the finding above. This means that Black women are often shown as working in family TV, and when they are shown as working, a majority are in service positions.
- Black women are more likely to be shown in a STEM occupation (5.6%) than other women of color (3.0%) or white women (3.3%).
- More Black female characters are shown as leaders than other women of color or white women (40.9% compared with 36.0% and 34.6%, respectively).

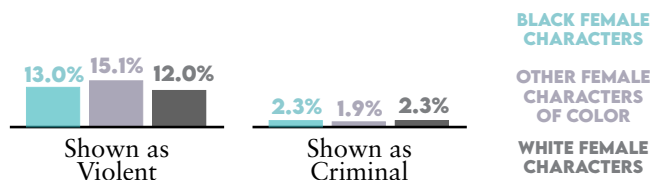
### Violence & Criminality

- We find no significant differences by race in terms of women shown as violent or criminal in family TV.
- When it comes to violence, we find that more than one-in-ten female characters is shown enacting some form of violence in family TV. Black women do not stand out in this regard.

**FIGURE 16**  
FEMALE WORK & LEADERSHIP BY RACE IN TV



**FIGURE 17**  
FEMALE VIOLENCE & CRIMINALITY BY RACE IN TV

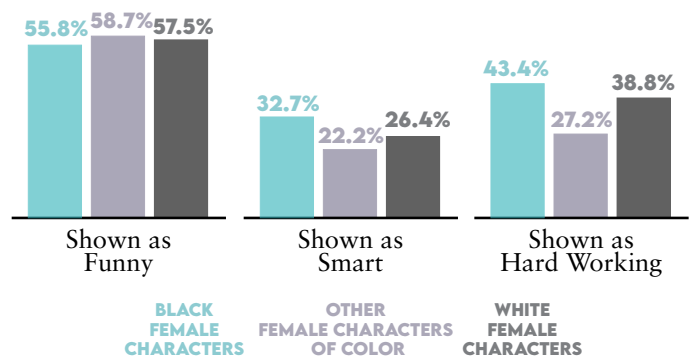


### Character Traits

We analyzed differences in character traits by race and gender with a focus on humor, intelligence, and work ethic.

- We find no significant difference in female character humor by race. Black women, other women of color, and white women are equally likely to be shown as funny.
- Black female characters are far more likely to be shown as “smart” in family television than other female characters of color and white female characters (32.7% compared to 22.2% and 26.4%, respectively).

**FIGURE 18**  
FEMALE CHARACTER TRAITS BY RACE IN TV

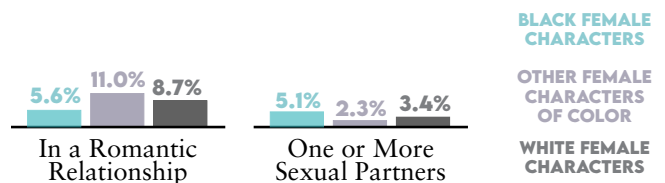


### Relationships & Sex

We also measured representations of romantic relationships and sexual partners to see whether this varies by race for women characters.

- Black women (5.6%) are less likely than white women (8.7%) and other women of color (11.0%) to be shown in a romantic relationship in family TV. This signals that they are less worthy or capable of relationships than women of other races/ethnicities.
- Despite being less likely to be shown in a relationship, Black women are more likely to be shown as having at least one sexual partner in family TV than other women of color or white women (5.1% compared with 2.3% and 3.4%, respectively).

**FIGURE 19**  
FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS & SEX BY RACE IN TV



# COMPARISON OF BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS IN FILM & TV

Another way to consider representations of Black girls and women in Hollywood is to compare how they appear in film and television. We examine film and TV representations in terms of character quantity and quality of representation.

## QUANTITY OF REPRESENTATION

- Black girls and women show up about as often in film and TV, and their character numbers meet the population benchmark. When it comes to quantity of representation, Black female characters are well-represented in contemporary family content—a stark contrast to decades of being erased in entertainment media.
- Representations of Black female characters lack intersectionality. No Black female characters in film or TV are shown as having a disability, and few are shown as LGBTQ+, ages 50+, or having a large body type.
- Black female characters ages 50+ are twice as likely to appear in film than TV (16.3% compared with 8.8%).
- Black female characters in TV are more likely to have a large body type than Black female characters in film (16.1% compared with 10.0%).

**FIGURE 20**  
% OF BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS IN FILM & TV

Prominence	% in Film	% in TV
Overall Characters	6.1%	6.2%
Leading Characters	5.7%	6.4%
Has a Disability	0.0%	0.0%
LGBTQ+	1.1%	2.3%
Age (50+)	16.3%	8.8%
Has a Large Body Type	10.0%	16.1%

## QUALITY OF REPRESENTATION

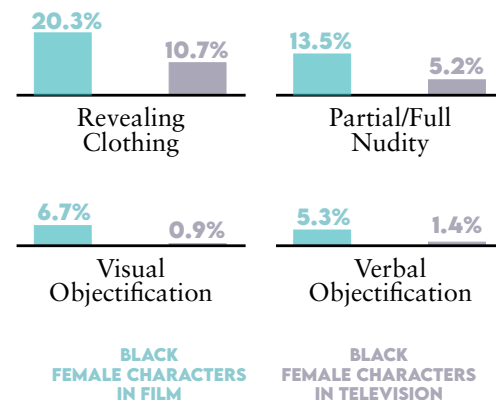
In this section, we compare the quality of the representations of Black girls and women with sexualization, work and leadership, violence and criminality, character traits, and romance and sex.

## Sexualization & Objectification

We find significant differences in family film and TV content when it comes to the sexualization and objectification of Black girls and women.

- Black female characters are twice as likely to be shown wearing revealing clothing in film than TV (20.3% compared with 10.7%)
- Black female characters are more than twice as likely to be shown as partially/fully nude in family films than TV (13.5% compared with 5.2%).
- In film, Black female characters are seven times more likely to be visually objectified with camera angles than in family TV (6.7% compared with 0.9%).
- Black female characters are three times more likely to be verbally objectified by other characters in family film than TV (5.3% compared with 1.4%).

**FIGURE 21**  
SEXUALIZATION & OBJECTIFICATION IN FILM & TV



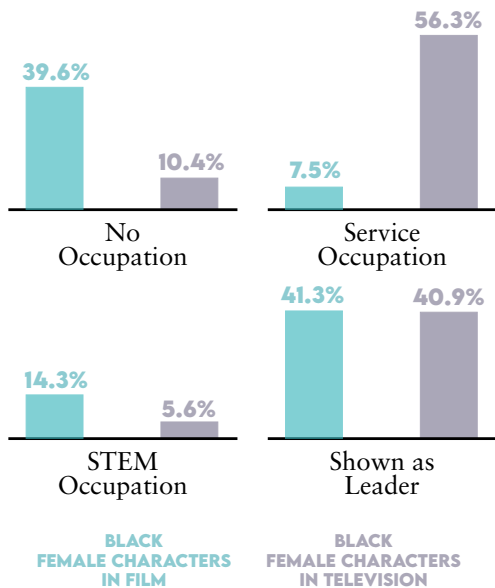
## Work & Leadership

We find substantial differences in representations of work and leadership for Black women in family film and television.

- Black women in family films are three times more likely to be shown as not having an occupation than in family TV (39.6% compared with 10.4%). In other words, nine-in-ten Black women in family TV are shown working compared to six-in-ten Black women in family films.
- Black women in family TV are seven times more likely to be working in the service sector than Black women in films (56.3% compared to 7.5%).

- Black women in film are nearly three times more likely to be shown in a STEM profession than Black women in TV (14.3% compared to 5.6%).
- Black women are equally likely to be shown as leaders in family film and TV.

**FIGURE 22**  
WORK & LEADERSHIP IN FILM & TV

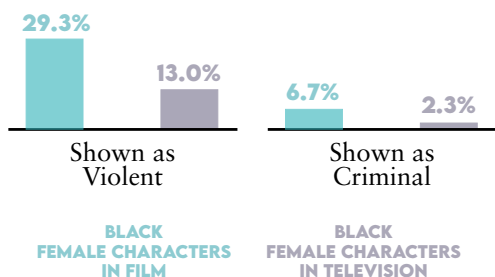


**Violence & Criminality**

We find substantial differences in Black female character’s representations of violence and criminality in family films and family TV.

- Black female characters in family films are twice as likely to be shown as violent than Black female characters in family TV (29.3% compared with 13.0%)
- Family film has three times more criminal Black female characters as family TV (6.7% compared with 2.3%).

**FIGURE 23**  
VIOLENCE & CRIMINALITY IN FILM & TV

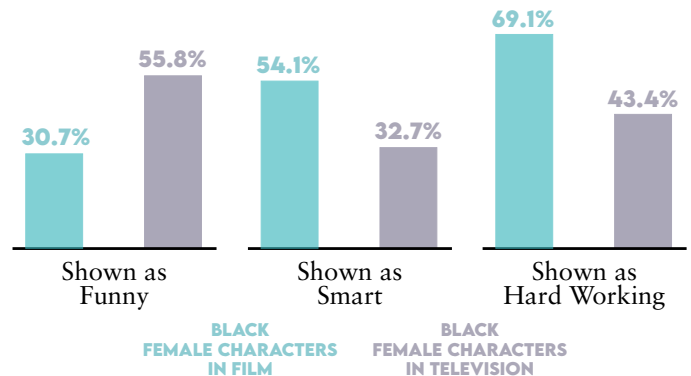


**Character Traits**

Family films and TV depict Black female characters in different ways when it comes to character traits.

- Black female characters are more likely to be depicted as funny in family TV than family film (55.8% compared with 30.7%).
- A higher percentage of Black female characters are shown as smart in film compared to TV (54.1% compared to 32.7%). This finding, coupled with the one above, means that Black women in television are shown as funny women who are less intelligent.
- Black women are shown as harder working in films than TV (69.1% compared with 43.4%).

**FIGURE 24**  
CHARACTER TRAITS IN FILM & TV

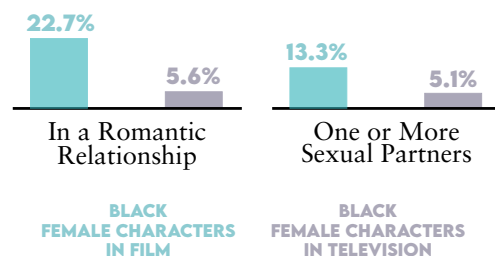


**Relationships & Sex**

We find significant differences in portrayals of Black women in family film and television.

- Black women are four times more likely to be shown in a romantic relationship in family films than TV (22.7% compared with 5.6%).
- Black women are twice as likely to have at least one sexual partner in family films than in family TV (13.3% compared with 5.1%).

**FIGURE 25**  
RELATIONSHIPS & SEX IN FILM & TV





# CONCLUSION

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We examined representations of Black girls and women in popular family films and TV in 2019, as well as leading Black ladies from 2009 to 2019. Compared to previous studies, we find that Black girls and women have made substantial progress when it comes to showing up in entertainment media in numbers that reflect the broader population. However, when they appear, it is often in ways that reinforce stereotypes. This conclusion presents a more narrative assessment of the findings presented above.

## *Character Prominence*

For the last decade, Black women rarely appeared as leads in the top-grossing films, but strides have been made in recent years. Black women and girls now show up at the same rate as their numbers in the population in both film and TV, and they appear as leading ladies on par with their presence in the US population.

## *Skin Tone & Hairstyle*

Black girls and women with dark skin rarely appear as leading ladies in the top-grossing films. Only one-in-five leading Black female characters from the past decade has dark skin. This indicates that colorism is persistent in Hollywood. Also, a large majority of Black women who appear as film leads have European hairstyles—long and straight—as opposed to natural Black hairstyles. Taken together, these findings indicate a strong bias toward Black women who conform with white standards of beauty.

## *Sexualization & Objectification*

Black women are more sexualized and objectified than other women of color and white women in both film and television. Black women are more likely to be wearing revealing clothing and to be depicted as partially/fully nude in both mediums. In family television, Black women are more likely to be verbally objectified by other characters in the show. When it comes to physical attractiveness, separate from objectification, Black women are depicted as less physically attractive than women of other races/ethnicities in family films, but more attractive than other women in family TV. These consistent and persistent gender gaps in Black women's hyper-sexualization reinforce the old, tired Jezebel stereotype.

## *Work & Leadership*

Work and leadership representations are a mixed bag. When it comes to having a job, fewer Black women are shown as having an occupation than other women in both film and TV. This bolsters the harmful stereotype that Black women are less likely to be employed, an inaccurate idea that derives from the racist Welfare Queen trope propagated in the 1980s depicting Black women as lazy and dependent upon state resources.

We have mixed findings for the jobs Black women are shown working in family film and television. When shown with an occupation, Black women are more likely to be in STEM than other women. This advances the positive notion that STEM is for Black girls and women, which is important considering that Black women hold only 2.5% of STEM positions in the US.<sup>37</sup>

When it comes to service sector jobs, Black women are less likely to be working a service job than women of other races/ethnicities in family films but more likely in family TV. Surprisingly, over half of Black women in family television are shown in service jobs. This plays upon The Mammy stereotype that Black women exist to serve and care for others.

With leadership, Black women are just as likely to be shown as a leader as women of other races in family films, and more likely to be a leader in family TV. This finding has special significance given Black women's vast under-representation in the halls of corporate and political power in the real world and a century of harmful media stereotypes depicting them as second-class citizens.

### *Violence & Criminality*

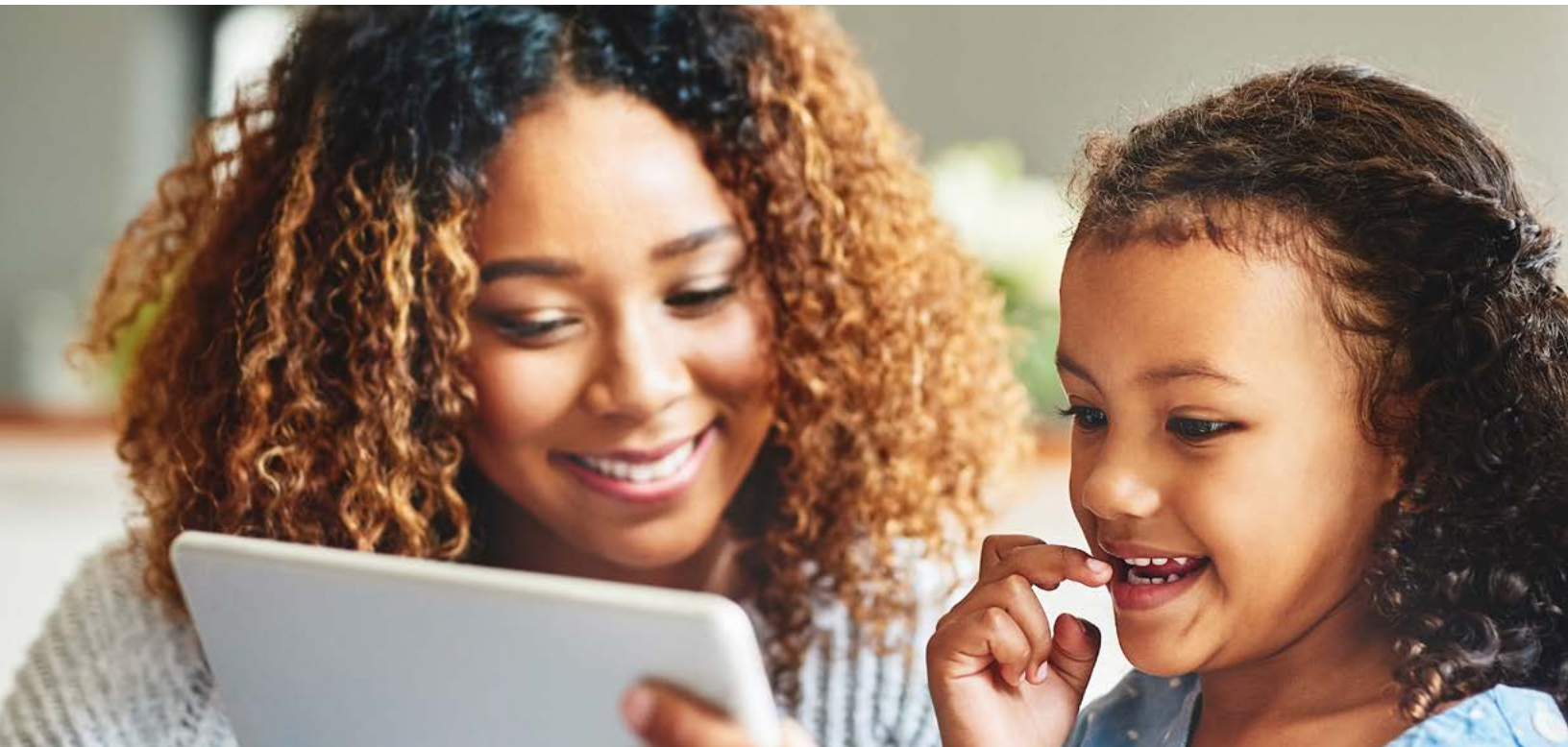
We have mixed findings when it comes to depictions of violence and criminality with Black female characters. No differences emerge across the board with criminality, but we do find a significant violence gap in family films. Black girls and women are far more likely to be shown as violent than women of other races/ethnicities. This perpetuates harmful stereotypes of Black criminality that serve to “justify” higher rates of Black incarceration, despite racial profiling in who is detained and arrested for the same crimes and racist gaps in convictions and sentencing.<sup>38</sup>

### *Character Traits*

The findings for character traits are positive across the board. Black girls and women are more likely than other women to be shown as smart in both family films and TV. This challenges longstanding racist stereotypes of Black people and intelligence and is an incredibly positive finding. We also find that Black girls and women are presented as hard working than girls and women of other races/ethnicities in both mediums. This presents a challenge to the racist Welfare Queen trope that implies that Black women lack a strong work ethic.

### *Relationships & Sex*

We have mixed findings when it comes to relationships and sexual partners. When it comes to being in a romantic relationship (from exclusive dating to marriage), Black women are less likely to be shown in a relationship than women of other races/ethnicities in both film and television. This plays upon harmful stereotypes of Black women as more likely to be single than other women. In family films, Black women have fewer sexual partners than other women, but in TV, they have more sexual partners. This means that family TV depicts Black women as being less committed but more sexual, a direct play upon The Jezebel stereotype.



## **HOW TO CITE THIS STUDY**

McTaggart, Ninotchka, Vaness Cox, Caroline Heldman, Rebecca Cooper, Nathan Cooper-Jones, Meredith Conroy, Camryn Brennan, Emma Burrows, Pamela Campos, Sofie Christensen, Cameron Espinoza, Milena Fava-Pastilha, Melanie Lorisdóttir, Romeo Perez, Hannah Phillips, Sarah Trinh, Jenna Virgo, Jeremy Yoder, (2021). Representations of Black Women in Hollywood. The Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media.

# INTERVENTIONS

## ACTION STEPS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

### CONTINUE TO...

- ...write and cast Black girls and women at at least the same rate as their numbers in the US population.
- ...write and cast Black women as leaders in politics, in the C-suite, as CEOs.
- ...write and cast Black women as working in STEM.
- ...write and cast Black female characters as smart.
- ...write and cast Black female characters as hard working.

### TAKE ACTION

- Become aware of the persistence of stereotypes affecting Black girls and women (e.g., The Sapphire, The Mammy, the Jezebel, the Angry Black Woman, the Strong Black Woman, the Welfare Queen, etc.) to avoid them when making writing, casting, and other content production decisions.
- Cast Black women with a diversity of skin tones and feature different hairstyles. Avoid hyper-sexualizing Black women characters with revealing clothing and depictions of partial or full nudity.
- Avoid objectifying Black women characters with camera angles and through other characters reducing them to a sex object with comments about their appearance.
- Depict Black women as having an occupation/job.
- Avoid writing/casting Black women in service jobs that fit racialized stereotypes.
- Avoid writing/casting Black women as characters who engage in violence.
- Depict more Black women in romantic relationships.
- Depict Black women as having similar numbers of sexual partners as women of other races/ethnicities.

## ACTION STEPS FOR BEHIND THE SCENES

### COMMIT TO FULL CULTURAL EQUITY

Efforts to diversity representations in entertainment media have primarily focused on increasing the number of women and people of color behind the scenes and on the screens. We call for an intersectional consideration of Black women in efforts to make content more diverse and inclusive. The more identities represented on screen in entertainment media, the wider the audience appeal.

### DIVERSIFY HIRING IN WRITING AND DIRECTING

Diversity in the writing rooms and director's chair translates into more diversity on the screen, so the problem with representation starts with inequitable hiring practices. Studies show that few people of color are in key decision-making roles, and that there has been no improvement in the last two decades. Studios must truly commit to anti-discrimination in their hiring practices, and set hiring goals to diversify their workforce instead of continuing to pay lip service to being inclusive.

# ENDNOTES

1. For our 2019 film analysis, 13.3% of the characters in the sample are under 20. For our 2019 TV analysis, 53.0% of the characters are under 20.
2. Our skin tone analysis is based on a standard five-point skin tone scale that ranges from light to dark. Dark skin tone reported here is based on the highest number on the skin tone scale.
3. A character is considered to be a leader if others followed his or her behavior and/or directives. Leaders could occupy formal positions of power in corporations, politics, criminal organizations, or the military, or more informal positions of power, serving as leaders in social groups.
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