

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S RECEPTION, INFLUENCE  
AND UTILITY OF TELEVISION CONTENT:  
AN EXPLORATORY QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study featured 33 in-depth interviews of college-aged, African-American women and offers baseline exploratory data about how a majority cultural artifact like televised depictions become utilized in the everyday lives of an underrepresented group in media studies. This research represents one of a few studies to explore how black females decode and utilize TV content, and offers a new theoretical framework to explain informants' decoded receptions, influence and utility of television. An inductive analysis of interview narratives found that viewers use TV content like a *looking-glass* to understand how they are seen by others and where they fit in the larger social arena. Television's normative cultural reflections are received, decoded, absorbed and self-applied to improve or enhance the social acceptability of black, female interpretive group members. The *incidental lessons* learned from the *television mirror* suggest that changing or reinventing oneself based on information gathered from TV content enhances viewers' *satisfaction* with themselves. Through TV transcripts black female informants in this study learn how they might improve their personal images to assimilate better into the social and professional circles of Caucasian-American lifestyles. Television's ubiquitous nature warrants a closer look at its influence and utility on TV audiences. This study posits that unwitting social and personal reasons promote the heavy television viewing behavior of African-American interpretive group members.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The ubiquitous nature of televised content in American culture has reached unparalleled heights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Television viewing now occurs in many varieties of public and private spaces. Americans are no longer limited to viewing television depictions at home. Television message viewing can now be accomplished while waiting in line at the bank, shopping at convenience stores, waiting in doctor and dental offices, airport lounges, and gas station pumps to name just a few places outside the home. The unlimited opportunities for viewing television messages behooves citizens, government and media industry managers, designers and producers to understand exactly how these communication forms are utilized by viewers.

Television viewing has been described as the “plug-in drug” (Winn 1977) and the impression is that governmental officials and political capitalists in American society have given their approval for citizen access and exposure to the “fix” in as many public places as conceivably possible. Like most drug addictions there are usually underlying causes or reasons that contribute to the development of a drug problem. Addiction to television content viewing may have causes as well. The following exploratory study presents some ideas about why young, African-American women in interpretive groups utilize television messages as often as they do.

### **TELEVISION CONTENT TRANSMITS MAJORITY SOCIAL SIGNS AND CUES**

Heavy viewing of TV content by African-Americans (Nielsen Media Research 2005) on its face would suggest that there is an abundance of programs of interest to this group. Based on media message signifiers reported in qualitative interview narratives of

this black female informant group, very few television depictions offer signs or cues related to the everyday life of African-American women like themselves—college educated with intentions to become a part of the social, cultural and professional circles of the Caucasian-American majority. Televised content inferences most often represent the majority, normative frames and viewpoints that are excluded from the experiences and lives of black female college students. TV depictions cultivate homogeneous signs and images reflecting the perspectives of white American issues and concerns (Wilson and Gutierrez 1985; Kern-Foxworth 1994; Dates and Pease 1994; Campbell 1995; Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996). Society becomes so used to televised statements, signs and cues of a general kind that it fails to realize the specific decoded or interpreted meanings of such discourse by television audiences (Williams 1975).

Television was invented as a result of scientific and technical research. Inherent in its electronic influence is the ability to alter individuals and groups basic perceptions of reality and interpersonal relationships between different groups of people. Therefore, televised content transmits and promotes the status quo. What has always been or existed socially, culturally, politically and economically will more or less be preserved through technological artifacts like television (Williams 1961).

#### MEDIA RECEPTIONS AND UTILITY

Media messages are consumed for a variety of reasons. Entertainment purposes are reported by informants most often as a reason for interacting with mediated messages. However, the literature review in Chapter 2 will offer a variety of unwitting influences of media consumption.

The utility of TV depictions are not always uniform across groups (Parks 1999). Minority groups may seek out television messages for instructions about how to assimilate better into the cultural and social arena of groups that dominate the political and economic authority within society. Consuming those unconscious mediated frames, in many cases, lead to the reinvention and alteration of personal beliefs about self. Even the selection of a particular type of televised content that features people of color is chosen based on its alignment with majority cultural beliefs and viewpoints. Individuals purposely view mediated programs that are cognitively consistent with their beliefs about themselves and the world.

The inference is that television viewing is used for more than just entertainment. Empirical findings from previous studies support such a thesis (Herzog 1944; Horton and Wohl 1956; Rayburn and Palmgreen 1984; Richins 1993; Parks 1999). The expectancy-value process model of television use offered that viewers consume media expecting some kind of personally applicable value or payoff. Television is the medium of choice used by individuals for learning the ways and becoming a functioning member of society (Williams 1975). Those specific utilities of TV message offerings may explain the underlying needs or reasons for intense affinity to the medium by minority groups.

Such groups, like African-Americans, have historically been represented in media as socially and economically different and separate since prior to the end of the Civil War (Kern-Foxworth 1994). This study is distinct in its offering of baseline information about young, black female interpretive group members. Television ownership, viewing habits, most often watched programs and people, television content that irritate informants and other beliefs and utilities are analyzed. Many of the findings related to the utility of

television messages are still not quite understood by viewers or by the social scientists who research the everyday utility of televised content in the lives of its audiences. Exploratory inductive studies like this one allow for viewers' emic reports about television's influence leading to methodical analyses and the development of new theoretical frameworks related to the overall and specific utility of televised content.

Analytical findings related to the utility of television content by this study's young, black informants resulted in the development of a new theoretical framework – The “Looking-Glass Self” theory of Media Influences. Just as Francis Bacon suggested in 1620 (forthcoming DeFleur & DeFleur 2006) inductive studies provide opportunities to observe through the senses the utility of TV content. The arrived-at theoretical underpinnings can later be tested through deductive methods. Statistical correlations were computed using belief statements about TV, personal values and life satisfaction and were found to be supportive of the newly-developed theory. As mentioned earlier, this baseline study will serve as an under girding for future studies related to the utility of TV messages, particularly as the utilities relate to African-American women.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of audiences interpreting or decoding cues and signifiers in mediated depictions is well documented. Many studies offer empirical data and analyses about the various ways that audiences are influenced by how they interpret mediated transcripts. Media discourses offer frames and themes that ultimately are accepted by one group about another group creating real or false social beliefs about specialized groups (Kennedy 1945; DeFleur 1970; Hartmann and Hubbard 1974; Asante 1980; Radway 1984 and 2003; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Richins 1991; Berger 1991; Kern-Foxworth 1992; hooks 1992 (note: hooks does not capitalize her name); Albarran and Umphrey 1993; Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996; Potter 1999; Harwood 1999; Parks 1999; Fujioka 1999; Perlmutter 2000; Rocchio 2000; Tompkins 2000; Bobo 1995; Frisby 2000; Appiah 2000; Adegbola 2000; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985; Mander 2002 ; Covert and Dixon 2004). For example, one ethnographic study explored how real-life police officers negotiated their everyday duties in front of a backdrop of mass mediated images of TV cops (Perlmutter 2000). Many problems of perception arise on the part of citizens when their interactions with police officers fall short of their expectations based on unreal mediated portrayals. Street cops indicated that mass-mediated cops possessed more influence on how everyday people defined and appreciated police work more so than real-life officers. Likewise, the young matriculating African-American women informants used in this exploratory study offer insights about how distorted televised content inferences influence society's expectations of black females' social and physical attributes. At the same time, this study reports how those same distorted TV messages

and images are used by African-American women to make decisions about their personal satisfaction with life.

Media studies literature lacks comprehensive research that strictly highlights the influence of television in the lives of African-American women. This study will address that void in an exploratory manner and serve as a foundation for future media studies about these underrepresented informants and the role that television content plays in their lives.

#### MEDIATED DEPICTIONS AS SIGNIFIERS

The meanings of language signs and cues depicted in media do not come from the way reality is actually structured and ordered (Berger 1991; Rocchio 2000; *The Advocate* 2005). Language and symbolic systems such as television and film content are not necessarily developed out of reality. Instead, they are organized, shaped and structured from their creators' perceptions of reality (Rocchio 2000). What this implies is that producers and writers in image-producing industries, like television, film, newspaper, radio and the Internet, create content based on their personal perceptions of reality. Often such content does not provide a true representation of how people live and exist in the real world.

#### BELIEFS SHAPE PERCEPTIONS

A long-established principle is that what people believe the world to be like is a social construction based on what they learn in exchanges with other people—including the mass media. That conclusion was established by Plato in his Allegory of the Cave, set forth in his *Republic* (Spens 1763; Boyd 1962). In modern times, social scientists have long claimed that the way people see things affects what they know or may already

believe (Berger 1991). That is, when images are presented to a viewer via a medium, that person is not just looking at the image but at the relationship between the image and themselves and how they fit into the larger society (Cooley 1902). Media messages and images are the result of collective contributions of history (Williams 1961; Thiongo 1986). Often what is lost on media audiences is the fact that the content they see or hear represents a recreated or reproduced perspective on reality. Image industry constructions in most cases are designed to be consistent with the dominant Caucasian-American culture, with little regard for the influence that such creations may have on people who share other cultures.

Participants within a culture give meaning to people, objects and events. The words used to symbolize or tell stories about blackness, the images produced to represent blacks and the emotions associated with televised content about blacks act as signs that are decoded and given meaning within the minds of audiences (Hall 1997). Meanings do not inhere in things, like mediated depictions; they are constructed and produced using representational systems as signs. Therefore, exposing and correcting media constructions of African-American people and their culture, in particular, would be considered the first step to achieving real egalitarian discourse about race in America.

#### TELEVISION AS A LEARNING SOURCE

Perceptions and translations of media messages are compounded when people in contemporary society receive most of their knowledge and information about others repeatedly and indirectly through television transcripts (Rocchio 2000). Vicarious experiences via television may become a part of viewers' social experiences and serve as a basis for social judgments based on racial attitudes and ethnic stereotypes. Television

depictions and the messages disseminated by the medium must not be treated as unimportant to the audiences that view them. Potential interpretations and the resulting influence may be crucial in terms of individual and group translations related to personal identity and social behavior (Lecan 1991).

Researchers continue to argue for the development of newer, more sophisticated methods for analyzing television content. Scholars have initiated calls for media studies to move beyond the search for stereotypes by seeking out methods that allow for the gleaning of complex relationships between televised content and the translations of such content by various audience groups (Hartmann and Hubbard 1974; Asante 1980; Wilson and Gutierrez; hooks 1992; Dates and Pease 1994; Marable 1994; Campbell 1995; Rocchio 2000).

#### DECODING MEDIATED MESSAGES

Media viewers' real-life social positions assist in the determination of which sets of media discourses they will likely encounter. Across cultures, mediated messages most likely do not produce universal influences. Audiences see what they look at and to look is an act of choice (Berger 1991). Individual Differences and Social Categories theories highlighted the value of personal and societal prisms through which media influences flow (DeFleur 1970). Individual Differences theory argued that because people vary greatly in their psychological make-up and because they have different perceptions of things, like media messages, the influence of media differs from person to person. The Social Categories theory assumes that there are broad collectives, aggregates, or social categories in urban-industrial societies whose behavior in the face of a given set of stimuli, like TV depictions, is more or less uniform. That is the precise suggestion of this

dissertation project. The interpretive community of young, black female participants decoded and utilized media content in a basically uniform manner among the membership.

#### ROLE OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS IN MEDIA RECEPTIONS

Intrinsically mediated representations do not determine meanings and relationships until they are decoded by their receivers (Mithen 1996). Other empirical studies demonstrated that mediated messages are received and decoded differently across cultural and racial lines (Greenberg and Dervin 1970; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985; Bobo 1995; Adegbola 2000; Appiah 2000; Frisby 2000; Covert and Dixon 2004). One such study found that regardless of what shapes magazine portrayals of women of color, magazine content clearly influenced the (decoded) perceptions of its readers (Covert and Dixon 2004). High and low ethnic identifiers within the same racial group responded differently to culturally embedded advertising (Appiah 2000). Such observations support differential readings of the same text even between members of the same culture.

Radway's (1984) media reception study in *Reading the Romance* dissected the personal, social and ideological influence of romance novels on a group of Midwestern women in an attempt to explain the literary genre's popularity. A pioneer in literary reception studies, Radway posited that "comprehension is actually a process of making meaning." As one decodes mediated narratives, each individual viewer simultaneously determines the significance of the cues, signifiers, language and images based on previously learned cultural codes. Therefore, if a viewer exists as a member of a specialized category, the interpretation of the mediated narrative may be guided by that

group's learned cultural codes, or the majority culture's codes—or a mixture of both minority and majority culture codes (hooks 1992; Kern-Foxworth 1994).

History, traditions, job experiences, ethnic origins and even residential patterns must be differentiated to understand linguistic decoding of media messages and transcripts (Rosengren and Windahl 1972). Researchers point to the importance of not assuming that members of category X hold social and personal lifestyle beliefs of those in category Y as a function of their absorption of mediated transcripts (Neale 1977; Ellis 1977; Critcher 1978). Therefore, interpretation of media messages by African-American female populations may differ in ways other than race when compared to white females. The idea that human reality is socially constructed by a symbolic interpretative process introduces a potent concept for determining the influence of (decoded) mediated content (Streeter 1996).

#### THE “SIMPLICATION” FUNCTION OF WHAT MEDIA PROVIDES TO VIEWERS

Television's textual messages and images can make life simpler (Henning and Voderer 2001). That is, viewers do not have to begin from scratch when they encounter other people. They have perceptual frameworks learned from television (and other sources) ready to use. In other words, by learning from media depictions, they construct normative societal beliefs that offer utility to viewers in determining their opinions about a variety of perceptions about themselves and their place in society (Wilson and Gutierrez 1985; Harwood 1999).

Members of a specialized population, because of their common viewpoints and experiences, interpret language and narrative cues in a similar fashion. Interpretive community theory suggests the way a community interprets television narratives has no

bearing on the reality of televised transcripts. Instead there are myriad realities that may be symbolized and decoded equal to the number of different interpretive communities. This underscores the fallacy of the Magic Bullet theory that suggested a mediated message targeted to an audience would impart the sender's intended message and be decoded the same way by each member of the audience. People with similar backgrounds will have similar patterns of media exposure and similar reactions to that exposure (DeFleur 1970). According to Social Categories theory, category members' decoded impressions of television would be similar as well.

#### INCIDENTAL LEARNING

People go to the media for various reasons. One of the most common is to be "entertained." While being entertained, however, they are exposed to "lessons" about what other people, or even themselves, are believed by society to be like. These are "incidental" lessons. Such lessons may not be intended by the producers as instructional information, and they are learned in an unwitting manner by the viewer (Schramm, Lyle and Parker 1961). The influence of television may be thought of as an interaction between characteristics of television and the characteristics of viewers. Thus mediated content may represent instruction, like that of a teacher to a student (Radway 2003). However, at the same time, the student may decode said instructions and use them in ways the teacher did not intend. Such an interpretation may be true for how African-American female interpretive groups interpret and apply inferred mediated social norms and lifestyles to their personal lives.

Any and/or all mediated transcripts may serve as instructional guidance for their viewers, readers or listeners (Radway 1984; Blumler, Brown, and McQuail 1970;

Baldwin 1990; hooks 1992; Hall 1997; Gandy 1998). For example, the late 1960s television show, *The Saint*, served as a personal reference or source of identification for its viewers. Information imparted by television teaches incidental lessons, viewpoints, ideology or cultural ideas to all viewers. Those media messages are decoded and used to accept or oppose dominant cultural beliefs and mores. The invisibility of preference for “whiteness” maintains the status quo, making it difficult or impossible for Caucasian-Americans to decode the whiteness as superior messages in media content that is clearly visible to TV viewers of other cultures (Dyer 1997).

Sociology suggests that individuals within interpretive communities agree to interact within the larger social system using mediated information and lessons to assist them in adjusting or assimilating into that larger social arena (McQuail and Gurevitch 1974). Within the context of a functionalist model, one may assess the extent to which the media shapes differential interpretations associated with race and ethnicity (Gandy 1998).

#### TELEVISION OFFERS MAJORITY PERSPECTIVES

Media consumers tend to ignore the structures of domination in mediated expressions of minorities represented in cultural depictions (Bogle 1973; Asante 1980; Fiske 1989; hooks 1992; Marable 1994; Bobo 1995; Campbell 1995). The social construction of reality via media for the most part only offers majority frames and themes. Structural and cultural hegemony in newspaper, radio, television and internet transcripts are written and designed predominantly by Caucasian-Americans (Lippmann 1922; Gerbner 1996; Hill and Hughes 1998; Kellner 2000; Couldry and Curran 2003). Television narratives lack programming design input from specialized interpretive groups

like African-American women (Campbell 1995). In most cases, cultivated media images are homogenous in that they reflect the perspectives of the white mainstream views of the world and how it ought to be (Asante 1980; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985; hooks 1992; Kern-Foxworth 1994; Dates and Pease 1994; Bobo 1995; Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996). Systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism and racism, such as media structures, actively coerce blacks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, thereby creating the potential for blacks to become self-haters (hooks 1992; Morgan 1999). Whiteness is associated with order, rationality and conformity to social convention; blackness conveys disorder, irrationality and looseness (Dyer 1997; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985). Regardless of how African-Americans decode television messages, mediated cultural hegemony poisons black folk's minds about their personal attributes and societal positions within the dominant Caucasian-American cultural environments (Baldwin 1990).

Television representations should be considered inventions or pretenses that prevent the possibility of real knowing. Real knowing refers to the decolonization of black folks' minds to remove the lens of white supremacy and discover the truth about why negative frames of black folks have existed throughout the history of American media industry structures (hooks 1992). For instance, in relation to key markers of identity including: 1) class, 2) age, 3) gender, and 4) ethnicity, representation involves not only how blacks are identified in media depictions but also the frames and agendas used in the production process of mediated content about blacks (Campbell 1995). Ethnic identity is defined as an individual's knowledge of his or her membership in a social group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership

(Phinney 1992). A strong African-American identity may display attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with core cultural values such as customs, language, dress, foods, religion, commodities, and media message utility (Appiah 2000). A review of television programs in 1999 indicated that meaningful portrayals of African-Americans were confined to certain channels, on certain nights of the week (Hunt 2000). Comparing the relative progress African-Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how they are represented, particularly in the mass media, little has changed in the area of minority representation (hooks 1992).

#### MEDIA LACK MINORITY GROUP INPUT

Cross cultural studies offer that cultural depictions are complex entities that feature profound influence on differential interpretations of mediated messages (Korzenny & Ting-Toomey 1992; Morgan and Shanahan 1999). The lack of significant input by African-Americans in general and African-American women specifically in programming content may lead such women to develop negative opinions about their own life satisfaction. Minorities rarely serve as on-camera news sources and feature stories virtually always highlight white people and activities in white communities (Campbell 1995). In stark contrast, media generally depict black women as poor, desperate or dangerous. They are often seen as prostitutes, welfare recipients, second-story characters and unwed mothers. Media in all forms mirror popular traditional notions of African-Americans (Bogle 1989; Kern-Foxworth 1994; Bobo 1995; Wilson and Russell 1996; Hall 1997; Gandy 1998). Regardless of the form of media, the resulting messages and images about specialized groups generally remain the same. In mainstream culture, whites create and control the images of those who are not a part of

the mainstream (Wilson and Russell 1996) for economic reasons. Such depictions are rarely based on actual contact or interaction with specialized group members (Katz and Braly 1935).

#### UTILITY OF MEDIATED DEPICTIONS BY AFRICAN-AMERICANS

Members of aggregate special populations decode mediated representations about themselves and potentially seek to reinvent or alter their belief systems and physical appearances to reflect what media tells them are acceptable to Caucasian-Americans. The action/motivation aspect of the utility of mediated messages results from personal comparisons to others of one's in-group members shown in TV content. Such actions may include but not be limited to: 1) paying for sometimes painful and caustic, chemical alterations (straightening) of one's hair at the molecular level and referencing such changed locks as "good" hair (Byrd & Tharps 2001), and 2) using chemically-based facial crèmes to lighten one's skin tone because lighter-skinned blacks appear more often, and in more favorable ways, in mediated content than darker skinned blacks (Kern-Foxworth 1994). Some black adolescent girls are convinced that straightened hair is more beautiful than their naturally curly, kinky hair (hooks 1992). Therefore, because of the absorption of TV content, the beliefs becomes ingrained that lighter skin makes individuals more worthy, more valuable in the eyes of others leading to the creation of only one kind of beauty—euro-centric, white skinned beauty. Motivations for personal appearance alterations and beliefs include: 1) access to jobs, 2) social standing, and 3) acquisition of a more affluent lifestyle similar to that of the majority of whites represented on television (Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985; Bogle 1989; Campbell 1995).

Alterations of personal thoughts, opinions and attributes suggest attitudinal (decoded) influences of mediated narratives (Herzog 1944; Lazarsfeld 1944; Potter 1999; Baran and Davis 2000). Interpretive communities' similar references, experiences and media language decoding processes elicit similar cognitive actions and motivations (DeFleur 1970). Other potential actions prompted by the way media is decoded may include: 1) a change in general or specific attitudes, and 2) the redevelopment or reinvention of personal beliefs. Broadcast and print media content strong-arms viewers and listeners to invent personal identities (Couldry and Curran 2003; hooks 1992; Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996). The resulting implication is that television transcripts exert control over social judgments about their viewers by their viewers based on how media content is decoded (Fujioka 1999).

In particular, members of sub-cultural groups secure information from outside their lived culture to assimilate successfully into the larger socio-economic arena. Successful assimilation is defined in terms of economic and social accoutrements. Additionally, the utility of television messages center around: 1) intensity of the experience; 2) social and psychological contexts; 3) social interaction and life satisfaction characteristics (Rubin 1985). Almost any type of media content may serve multiple functions for its audience (Rosengren Windahl 1972; Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974). TV promotes cultural integration, which promotes the goals and fills the revenue pockets of society's cultural designers (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

#### SELECTIVE MEDIA EXPOSURE

Some interpretive community members may even seek out mediated transcripts that are decoded as supportive of their group identification (Harwood 1999; Appiah

2000). These sought-out media messages confirm the interpretive communities' positive beliefs about themselves as members of society's mainstream, and simultaneously strengthens their cohesiveness and perceived success.

Scholars continue their attempts to demonstrate substantial cognitive effects of media messages under the rubric of framing (Gandy 1998; Schiller 1996; Curran 1990). One study suggested that television is considered "play." In actuality however, media viewing possesses great power in shaping our understanding and patterns of behavior (Parks 1999). In exercising choices of media and media content, viewers reveal information about how they perceive themselves and their personal values. This study includes an inquiry into the personal value statements of informants. Only critical cultural reviewers and researchers committed to a total denial of the unconscious or covertness of culture would maintain that mediated stories and text are simply innocuous entertainment (Radway 1984).

One way that individuals achieve social comparisons is through cognitive selection of programming that feature positive portrayals identified as in-group members. A family and media use study reported that the way families attend to media is an expression of how it represents itself and where the family situates itself in the world (Parks 1999). This relates to cognitive consistency, a tenet of attitudinal change theory (Baran and Davis 2000). The implication is that people seem to seek out media messages consistent with already-held values and beliefs of those around them, such as members of interpretive or closed self-selected groups like the one featured in this study. Evidence supporting such a theory may be found by discovering what televised programs are

regularly viewed by members of interpretive community groups---which will be one feature of the present study.

Another example of media content utility as a behavior/attitudinal guide for its audiences is exhibited by teenage girls toward the movies “Flashdance” and “Fame.” Interests in those movies by young women viewers had far more to do with their desire for physical autonomy than with any simple notion of acculturation to a patriarchal definition of feminine desirability (McRobbie 1984). The inference is that relationships between mediated transcripts and their audiences may be more influential in a deeply emotional and cognitive manner than they appear (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Parks 1999).

The more race-specific positive cultural cues decoded in media advertising targeted to blacks, the more blacks find the ad appealing (Appiah 2000; Frisby 2000). Overall cognitive uses and influences of mediated information has been found to include: 1) source of information for daily living; 2) guidance in preparing for the demands of upward mobility; 3) matching wits against (as in game show viewing); 4) provide structure and pace to daily activities, and 5) acquisition of reassurance about personal dignity and usefulness (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974).

#### OPPOSITIONAL DECODING BY AUDIENCES

Decoding then, may result in the realization of the actual message sent or it may not. *Ms. Magazine* reported that women routinely engaged in oppositional decoding of popular media content (Steiner 1988). The “No Comment,” feature of the magazine invited readers to submit examples of subtle and not so subtle male domination. Based on Steiners’ analysis of the magazine feature, readers chose to interpret examples of male

domination in a way that served their interests rather than the interests of the patriarchal elite. Some media content disrupts the social surface (Fiske 1989) and may be decoded by viewers and listeners from an oppositional perspective. The films, “The Color Purple,” and “Waiting to Exhale” served as mediated artifacts utilized by black women to oppose the more colonized, oppressive general media representations of their group. For instance, *The Color Purple* was considered highly contentious and extremely problematic for some black men and women. However, many black women used the movie’s representations to carving out a space for their cultural causes and concerns. Their spontaneous, unorchestrated reactions united a significant number of women to fight for something that was meaningful to them (Bobo 1995).

African-Americans represent a large percentage of the television audience and tend to watch more television than the American population as a whole (Nielsen Media Research 2005). This creates the imperative that media studies investigate the general influence of television messages on the lives of this specialized group. The present study attempted to do just that.

Various mind intelligences and functional involvements are concerned with thinking and problem solving, not just with the acquisition or cognitive absorption of information from traditional media narratives (Mithen 1996).

#### EXPECTANCY-VALUE MODEL APPROACH TO MEDIA USE

Interestingly, the reception and influence of television transcripts and media narratives are simply read or decoded as unimportant to viewers (hooks 1992). In general, the decoded use of mediated narratives for “personal reference” may spring from a need for self-esteem (Frisby 2000). Thus, the importance of individual applications of

television transcripts may focus on social interaction and life satisfaction (Rubin 1985; Frisby 2000). In studies about how children apply mediated transcripts, some researchers posited that television did nothing to children but that the children did something with their television viewing experiences (Schramm, Lyle and Parker 1961). In this regard, the expectancy-value process model approach to mediated messages offers that viewers seek out media narratives expecting some type of personally applicable value (Rayburn and Palmgreen 1984). Ironically, the expected value of mediated transcripts may not surface but interaction with the transcripts continues (Lazarsfeld 1944). The non-stop nature of televised exposure to the lifestyles and social behaviors of people seen on television contributes to decisions to interact with media (Richins 1993). One study reported that the influence of television content absorption is related specifically to racial socialization for African-American families (Parks 1999). The same study found that white families recognized mediated bigotry but could look past it; the black families could not.

Media violence studies report that the impact of mediated narratives may be immediate or long-term (Potter 1999). One reason for possibly delayed utility or influence of the transcripts is that the information received may need to be crunched down and mulled over and later interpreted on a personal or group basis.

#### LINES BLURRED BETWEEN NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL IMAGES

Television or any visually endowed media including newspapers, books and the Internet, consist of text and images or just images as transmissions of knowledge and information (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The phrase, a picture is worth a thousand words, literally expresses the word/language symbolism implied to an image.

Therefore, televised images should simply be thought of as another dimension of the narrative. Image transcripts represent as much a source of instructive information transmission as spoken TV messages. TV images displace personal abilities to create self images and the social world outside peoples' mind pictures (Mander 2002). Human beings appear not to have been equipped by evolution to distinguish in a cognitive way between natural images and artificially created (mediated) images. This is the case now, but Mithen (1996) surmised that this has not always been the case as the human mind developed down through the epochs. Most experiences of the world are no longer direct or primary; they are secondary and mediated (Mander 2002). Dependence on mediated experiences may leave many members of society beholden to whatever mediated transcripts present even in the presence of reality (Gerbner 1998; Morgan and Signorielli 1990). The reading or decoding of TV content by African-American viewers or other cultural groups outside of Caucasian-American groups may need to be referred to as intercultural communication.

#### NEGOTIATED RECEPTIONS OF MEDIATED MESSAGES BY AFRICAN-AMERICANS

Mass communication received and decoded by those who are underrepresented in the ranks of media content designers may not have developed nullification and/or negotiation skills. Dichotomous reception mechanisms are a necessity for viewers who are excluded from the production and design of mediated messages. This is especially true for the most vulnerable viewers in the ranks of minorities or sub-cultures—the children.

Researchers for more than 50 years have deconstructed mediated transcripts and offered explanations about how African-Americans decode negative and biased TV

content about themselves. Farai Chideya (1995) encourages African-Americans to fight mediated cultural misinformation about themselves and their communities. Suggestions for collective opposition should include blacks teaching blacks how to decode or read mediated transcripts (Asante 1980; Bobo 1995; Rocchio 2000; Biagi and Kern-Foxworth; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985). In *When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost*, Morgan (1999) posited that the only way black women will begin to experience empowerment is through personal enlightenment. African-American women must tell the truth about their lives to others who report information about them.

The traditionally common, unbalanced, and extreme portrayals of African-Americans may lie at the heart of this study's newly developed theory that personal life satisfaction of black women is determined by their negotiation of media messages. Media consumers compare themselves to mediated transcripts and potentially allow the images to alter their personal opinions about self perceptions (Richins 1991; Bloch and Richins 1993). Mediated messages inherently involve relations of power and are used to determine how society is ordered (Rocchio 2000). Decoded negotiations of TV content by minority audience members affect the influence of such messages.

Hispanics viewers report that television content helped them to learn about themselves and others; indicating that Hispanics decoded television content for acculturation purposes (Albarran and Umphrey 1993). Those findings suggest the presence of negotiation skills in dealing with the media for that group. The utility of TV content in bettering the acculturation of immigrants new to American society would seem to improve an individual's life satisfaction, but at this point in the development of the literature that belief is still just an assumption. African-Americans may also experience

acculturation. Cultural orientations as frames of reference mirror specific types of acculturation including: assimilation, biculturalism and separatism. Resembling the experience of immigrants when they come from other countries to work and live in America (Tompkin 2000). This study seeks to provide empirical data that can be used to understand more clearly how television messages are negotiated and utilized by young, black women in determining their satisfaction with life.

Other studies indicate that decoded TV transcripts resulted in self-doubt and inadequacy when viewers used them for comparison; primarily because most TV messages contained idealized images versus realistic images of people's lives (Lasch 1978; Freedman 1984). Some empirical research presented arguments against television viewer's total belief in mediated transcripts. One such study offered that college students understood that television transcripts were unrealistic (Potter 1999). Such beliefs by those students could be the result of negotiated readings.

#### IN-GROUP SIMILARITIES PROMPT INCREASED MEDIA INFLUENCE

Existing literature about media influence or effects on African-American women, suggest that personal similarities to people seen on television is a key factor in mediated influences. Ethnic group members tend to prefer to compare themselves with in-group images and messages rather than out-group members. Such preferences protect the self-concept or self-esteem of specialized group members from threatening comparisons (Crocker and Major 1989). One study surmised that women of color engaged in self-evaluation and/or comparisons to mediated images of thin, attractive white females, but those comparisons did not negatively influence the women's mood levels nor significantly affect self-concepts (Frisby 2000). The present study analyzed the influence

of television messages on African-American women. Due to the fact that television is considered ubiquitous and that blacks reportedly view more television than any other age or group category, the potential influence of television on their lives may be greater than that of print ads (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Nielsen Media Research 2005). Another study suggested that television played a somewhat different role in the lives of blacks than of whites who had similar levels of income (Simmons 1970).

## LIFE SATISFACTION

One basic inquiry of this study focuses on the use and influence of television content by a black female interpretive group to determine personal satisfaction with life. The almost nonexistence of studies that focus on how this underrepresented research group utilizes mediated content will add to media studies knowledge in this area.

## DEFINITION OF LIFE SATISFACTION

Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985) stated that life satisfaction represents one of three components that factor into the general construct referred to as “subjective well-being.” Subjective well-being is a combination of positive affective appraisal, negative affective appraisal and life satisfaction. These researchers distinguished life satisfaction from affective appraisal in that it is considered more cognitively driven than emotionally driven. Life satisfaction can be assessed specifically to a life domain such as work and family or it may be used to determine an individual’s opinion about his or her overall or “global” life satisfaction (Diener et al. 1985). So, for the purposes of this dissertation project, life satisfaction is defined as *personal expressions of an individual’s overall well-being*. Each study participant was directly questioned about their opinions and beliefs regarding their personal satisfaction with life and how television may

influence those opinions. As will be discussed, that inquiry went a long way toward creating greater understanding of the utility of television in the lives of this informant group of African-American women. This study project created an empirically-based exploratory basis for linking television viewing habits to life satisfaction.

#### RACE INDICATES LIFE SATISFACTION

Studies by Clemente and Sauer (1976) provided evidence that race represented one of two independent variables considered the most salient in predicting satisfaction with life. The other variable is health. Caucasian-Americans appeared to possess more satisfaction with life than did African-Americans. However when age is introduced as a specifying variable, the phenomenon of racial effects on life satisfaction were found to be less evident. Viewers with less general life satisfaction watched more television without regard for the content (Espe and Seiwert 1987). Individual's internal sense of order is wrapped-up in desires organized around a hierarchy of needs and goals. Each person possesses different hierarchies of needs and goals (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990) based on time and cultural position parameters. This is especially important for this study, since African-Americans more or less live in a different cultural existence from Caucasian-Americans. The major difference in this project compared to the Clemente and Sauer (1976) studies is that a qualitative TV content reception analysis versus a quantitative statistical analysis was conducted. Verbal response analyses to personal interview questions about television viewing habits, utility of media and expressed opinions about life satisfaction were completed and reflected the cultural/textual interpretive community design of the study. This study will not have external validity

related to African-Americans in general, and will only be applied to limited self-selected black female interpretive groups like the convenience sample used in this investigation.

Freudiger's analysis of life satisfaction for three categories of married women found that, "race, or whiteness," was a significant contributor to life satisfaction for working wives. This finding illustrated what she referred to as problems faced by black wives (Freudiger 1983). A limitation of Freudiger's study is that she does not address what she thinks would be life satisfaction problems faced by black wives. In listing the most salient variables in determining the life satisfaction of the three categories of women, Freudiger's study found that "working wives" ranked race as sixth in importance; "formerly employed" housewives ranked race as third in importance in terms of life satisfaction and "never employed wives" did not list race at all as an important variable in determining their life satisfaction. In the case of the latter group, it appears that if individuals live a life that only involves interactions strictly within their racial group, race is not an issue in determining their satisfaction with life. That may be the case for stay-at-home white females. Freudiger's (1983) evidence supports the general importance placed on race as an indicator of life satisfaction. More recently, Jacques (1998) reported that both race and sex affected the dependent variable life satisfaction when accounting for the effects of television viewing.

#### TELEVISION INFLUENCES SELF PERCEPTIONS

The utility of mediated messages by women provides solace and compensation for wishes and expectations that outrun personal achievements (Herzog 1944). Viewing televised advertisements influence and ameliorate the perceptions that blacks possess about themselves (Kern-Foxworth 1994). Historians, sociologists and psychologists have

determined that advertising plays a major role in creating values and instilling notions of self-worth in people (Gates 1987; Jacques 1998; Parks 1999; Frisby 2000). Mediated advertising sells and promotes self-concepts (Joseph and Lewis 1981; Entman 1994; Frisby 2000). Black women are either ignored or portrayed in an unfavorable light in televised images and transcripts. The lack of depictions of black females neither improves societal knowledge about her nor knowledge about herself (Shepard 1980). The influence of media messages for personal reference is derived from a need for self-esteem (Bobo 1985; Frisby 2000). Other researchers offered that exposure to advertising images altered consumers' standards in terms of what they desired for themselves (Richins 1991; Bloch and Richins 1993). This supports research findings indicating that mediated images and transcripts lower self perceptions and create self-doubt and inadequacy in the minds of audiences; especially so when viewers compare themselves to people and the lifestyles depicted in mediated advertisements (Richins 1991; Bloch and Richins 1993; Lasch 1978; Freedman 1984). Media users are constantly exposed to images of exceptionally attractive people (Richins 1991). Continuous widespread TV images that devalue black women decrease the chances that these women will develop a positive self-concept (hooks 1992).

#### TELEVISION VIEWING HABITS

Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found that television viewing accounted for 6.6% of respondents' primary activity while at home. According to data from the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) most respondents reported they personally watched an average of two hours of television a day. Current television viewing statistics indicate that the average American reportedly watches television two to 4 hours a day (Gallup

2000; Csikszentmihalyi 2002; Nielsen Media Research 2005; Kubey and; Magid 2005). Researchers discovered that individuals in industrialized countries currently commit three hours a day to the pursuit of television viewing (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 2002). One report indicated that by the time most Americans are 18 years old, they have invested more time in front of the television set than they have spent in school and far more hours than they have spent talking to their teachers, friends or even their parents (Minnow and LaMay 1995).

By the age of 18, a teenager will have seen 350,000 commercials. At age 70, the average person will have spent approximately seven years watching TV (American Academy of Pediatrics 1990). Even 10 years ago, most General Social Survey respondents reported viewing television and absorption of its content for two hours a day (GSS 1998). Interestingly, in 1982 GSS respondents of an African-American subset reported viewing television for three hours per day as opposed to the two hours reported by all other respondents at that time (Kilborne 1987). That is particularly important for this study's research group because most respondents were born in 1980, 1981, 1982 and 1983. These statistics suggest a historical and ever increasing amount of television messages consumption by African Americans. When those statistics are added to the fact that black television viewers report more favorable attitudes toward television than whites, the potential influence of television messages on blacks multiplies.

#### HEAVY TELEVISION VIEWERS

The heaviest viewers of television come from low-income households (The Media Project 2005). African-American households watch more television during daytime and primetime periods than all other U.S. homes across all ages and all groups (Nielsen

2005). On average blacks reportedly watched two hours more of primetime television and close to five hours more of daytime television per week than all other groups across all age categories (The Media Project 2005). On average, African-American households watched 9.19 hours of television during daytime periods (10a.m.-4p.m. Mon.-Fri.) a week compared to 6.41 hours for all other groups (Nielsen 2005). Nielson Media Research also reported that black households watched 15.59 hours of television a week during primetime periods (8p.m.-11p.m. Mon-Sat. and 7-11p.m. on Sundays) compared to 14.36 hours for all other groups. Many implications could be derived from those viewing statistics, including that daily television viewing is high on black and white audiences list of priorities. African-Americans clearly indicate a desire or need to view more television than other groups particularly during the daytime. That fact supports the importance of research such as this one to find out how African-Americans are using their heavy consumption of televised messages.

#### TELEVISION OWNERSHIP

Ninety-eight percent of all U.S. households own at least one television set and the average home includes 2.24 television sets (Nielsen Media Research 2000). Forty-one percent (41%) of households have three or more television sets. These statistics further underline the importance of television viewing and television ownership in American society (Nielsen Media Research 2000). Add the fact that the television is turned on in most homes for an average of five to seven hours a day. The potential influence of televised content becomes so powerful that the degree and variety of effects may never be fully understood.

TV audiences believe that their everyday viewing demands nothing of them (Radway 1985). Lost on most viewers is television's power and influence. Such influence is analogous to that of a guru and his or her followers. No matter where the TV pied piper leads viewers, they believe they have the power to step away at will from the guidance and avoid any residual effects.

Many implications could be derived from the aforementioned viewing statistics including that: 1) daily television viewing is high on audiences list of priorities, particularly black audiences on a daily basis, and 2) that television is the new authority or social mirror, maybe especially so for sub-cultural groups like African-American females (Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996).

Many studies indicate that women watch more TV in a much more involved way than men and seem to plan to watch television more often (Bogart 1972; Parks 1999). TV viewing features the characteristics of a ritualistic experience. Women watch television 4.5 hours a day, while males watch 40 minutes less than females (Nielsen Media Research 2000; Parks 1999). A study from 1972 reported that black women spent 41% more daytime hours in front of the television set than did white women (Bogart 1972).

Henning and Vorderer's study predicted the amount of time spent exposed television content is based on the need for cognition (Henning and Vorderer 2001). Individual viewers may be distinguished by cognition. Differential attitudes toward cognitive skills may distinguish gender and group differences in time spent viewing television. Theoretically, this implies that the lower a viewers' need for cognition, the less pleasant they feel when they have nothing to do. Therefore, the easiest way for individuals to escape the pressure to think or to decide what to do with their spare time is

to view television. Such a theory has major implications for uneducated, low income viewers. One study reported that for people who are alienated from self, television transcripts appear to offer an instant means for structuring attention that permits escape from the discomfort that occurs during idle time (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Different aspects of conventionality, ranging across values, attitudes and reported behaviors are associated with psychological involvement with television (Weigel and Jessor 1973). Television cultivates or creates a certain view of the world, maybe even a distorted view that audiences accept as reality (Gerbner 1993). The influence of negative media content in the form of distorted televised images of African-Americans is compounded by the belief that such viewers have a high level of confidence in what they see on television (Durand, Teel and Bearden 1979).

In conclusion, this literature review indicates a great deal of support for the need to understand better the influence of television messages on life satisfaction. Most important is the fact that little to nothing exists in mass communication/media studies literature about black women and television content influence. Fifty years of critical cultural empirical findings regarding the influence of television transcripts on African-Americans must be combined with certain media studies literature to expand our knowledge in this area. This dissertation attempts to do just that. However, this is just one study. To support further, or to deny the findings of this study, future research projects will need to focus on the influence of cultural offerings and how they are decoded by African-Americans.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From the vast literature on television ownership, viewing and influences, at least four primary questions emerge that are worthy of additional study related to African-American women's viewing effects. An attempt to answer those questions will be a focus of the present study. As stated, this exploratory study will seek answers to the following research questions in an effort to create baseline data about African-American women and television reception, influence and utility for future studies. This exploratory study seeks answers to the following research questions designated as RQ below:

RQ1: What correlations exist between statements related to informants' beliefs about the utility of television depictions?

RQ2: What correlations exist between beliefs about personal values and beliefs about the utilization of television messages?

RQ3: What correlations exist between beliefs about life satisfaction and beliefs about personal values?

RQ4: What correlations exist between beliefs about the utilization of television content and beliefs about life satisfaction?

Due to the limited number of media studies about African-American women's reception, influence and utility of television's content, this purposively exploratory study does not offer any stated or directional hypotheses.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The exploratory nature and purpose of this dissertation, as explained, is to elicit and analyze in-depth interview data and survey responses from young African-American women who are enrolled in a historically black university, regularly view television, and who were willing to be interviewed for the purposes of the study. Ideally---with a truly vast and unlimited budget and no restrictions whatever on time---one would somehow assemble the names of all such persons in the United States and then develop a means of randomly selecting a limited number from that population to be interviewed. In that way, a truly “representative” sample could be developed. Obviously, that would be a Jovian task. Then, contacting such individuals across the United States for such interviews would pose its own (insurmountable) logistical and budgetary problems.

#### THE SAMPLING PROCESS

Lacking such unlimited time and budgetary resources, an alternative strategy had to be devised. Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted on what could be characterized as either a “convenience” or a “quota” sample. That is, study informants were young, African-American women who fit the criteria, who were available to the author and who were willing to be interviewed. Clearly, this manner of selecting subjects departs from the classic model and no claim can be made that this convenience/quota sample is “representative” of all such persons who live in the United States. Nevertheless, the data yielded from the interviews conducted can be regarded as a “starting point” for probing the issues under study in the dissertation. While the conclusions reached cannot be said to characterize all young, educated African-American women who view television and

live in the United States, they do offer initial, exploratory findings that can be studied more fully as research on the issues develops further in the future.

#### INFORMANT GROUP

A local organization consisting of 42 African-American female college students was identified as a source for securing informants for this study. The small specialized group, located in southeastern Louisiana, existed as an officially recognized student organization on the campus of a historically black university. To secure access to group members, the investigator, a 27-year member of the student's umbrella organization, became an active member of the organization's local alumnae chapter. Of the two alumni chapters that existed in the local area, only one served as the official advisor to the student chapter. The investigator presented the research topic and objectives at one of the student chapter's monthly meetings. The presentation included a request for members to volunteer as study participants. One month after the request was made, all 42 members agreed to serve as informants for the project. The investigator's membership in the advisory alumnae chapter was critical in gaining access to this underrepresented group of informants in media studies. Ultimately, 33 members actually participated in the study. Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* study deliberately subjective non-representative ethnographic sample consisted of 42 informants. *Policing the Media*, another similar ethnographic study, used 10 fully involved informants (Perlmutter 2000).

The investigator provided a spiral notebook for prospective study participants to provide their names and telephone numbers. In qualitative analyses, such as this one, of a purposively subjective, small interpretive community, 33 interviews out of a membership

of 42 represented a 78% interview participation rate and television questionnaire response rate. Fifteen (15) informants participated in personal interviews. The remaining 18 informants were interviewed over the telephone. The length of each interview varied between one and a half to three hours. As the study proceeded, the personal interviews became increasingly difficult to schedule. In fact, each scheduled interview, personal or telephone, needed to be rescheduled at least two or three times before an interview actually occurred. This is indicative of the sometimes difficult task of securing informants such as the ones used in this study.

#### OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Three characteristics of the interpretive paradigm includes: 1) the study of symbolic discourse that consists of images and conversations; 2) the study of the interpretive principles that people use to make sense of their symbolic activities; and 3) the study of contextual principles, such as the roles of participants, their environment and personal positions within society and the world that guide the interpretation of a discourse (Ting-Toomey 1984). The first interpretive paradigm mentioned above best represents the methodological paradigm used in this study.

Open-ended questions prompted discussions of television messages, their reception, influence and use in the daily lives of the study informants (Miles and Huberman 1994; Mathers, Fox and Hunn 2002). The project investigator used the television influence topic guide to keep discussions on track about informants' receptions and utility of television content. Informants were allowed to share thoughts and observations about their receptions, potential influences and utility of television messages and images. The six (6) open-ended questions asked are listed below:

1. Why do you own a television?
2. Why do you turn on the television?
3. Do you watch television most often alone or with others?
4. What television programs do you watch most often?
5. What people on television do you like most?
6. What do you see on television that irritates you?

Reported answers to open-ended questions were extrapolated from the unstructured interview narratives using informant's own words.

#### UNSTRUCTURED NARRATIVE INTERVIEW DATA

The unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted over a 4-month period between February and June 2004. In-depth interviews facilitated the gathering of qualitative data from subjective accounts of research informants (McQuail and Gurevitch 1974). The qualitative method was considered more appropriate than controlled experiments and representative sample surveys to extract personal beliefs from informants' about their receptions of television. Evidence of emic and etic study findings offered in the Literature Review Chapter will be supported in the findings reflected in this study.

The deliberate subjective methodological approach used here was most appropriate for the chosen informant group. That method allowed for greater intimacy and openness between the researcher and the informants. A relationship between the interviewer and informant is necessary when using an unstructured interview method (Miles and Huberman 1994). The researcher was accepted and identified by the research informant group as a member of their beloved social/service organization. A great

synergism developed between the two parties because of the investigator's organizational association with the informant group. Data from the unstructured interview narratives was analyzed to provide answers to open-ended questions using informant's own words.

As mentioned earlier, the research group was not a randomly chosen sample of African-American women. Therefore, any conclusions drawn from this exploratory study will be carefully extrapolated. Great caution will be used in any attempts to apply the findings to other black interpretive communities.

A total of 33 interviews were conducted. Fifteen (15) personal interviews and 18 telephone interviews were conducted. All personal interviews with the exception of two were held at the local historically black university's campus in the recreation room of a centrally located dormitory. Study participants were familiar with the campus building. Several informants lived in the dormitory where most personal interviews took place. The two (2) remaining personal interviews were held in different locations. One was held in another campus dormitory room of one informant and the other was held off-campus in the investigator's car at a location near the respondent's job. That respondent came directly to the interview after leaving work at the end of the day. Most respondents, when asked, preferred to be interviewed in a location outside of their personal residence, no matter if they lived alone, with a roommate or at home with their parents and/or siblings. The multiple rescheduling of most interviews allowed informants to dictate the time and, in a lot of the cases, the length of the interviews. Most scheduled interviews required the investigator to sit in the dormitory recreation room all day waiting for informants to attend their interview appointments. Many times informants did not show-up for their

appointed interviews. Ultimately, four months were needed to schedule, reschedule and conduct personal and telephone interviews with 33 student informants.

The initial 15 personal interviews were tape recorded. The remaining interviews were conducted over the telephone and required extensive note taking on behalf of the investigator. Many informants who could not find time to meet for a personal interview jumped at the chance to do a telephone interview. All notes and cassette recordings from the telephone and personal interviews were taken and transcribed by the project investigator. Unprecedented rich, firsthand data about television's textual receptions' influence and utility in the lives of the informants was gathered.

#### TV RECEPTION, INFLUENCE AND UTILITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Following each qualitative interview, informants were asked to complete an exploratory questionnaire about their TV viewing habits, utilization beliefs, personal values beliefs and life satisfaction beliefs. The researcher read each question to each respondent and many times probed for greater explanation of the answers given. The questionnaire instrument (See Appendix 1) consisted of five sections that secured information about: 1) demographics of informants; 2) daily media use habits; 3) beliefs about television's influence and utility; 4) personal values beliefs; and 5) beliefs about personal life satisfaction.

The demographic data collection section asked for information (See Appendix 1) about the respondents that included but was not limited to: 1) marital status; 2) age; 3) racial identification; 4) annual income; and 5) college classification. Section 2 of the questionnaire included open and close-ended questions (See Appendix 1) about

respondent's daily use of television, radio and newspaper media. Comparisons of various media were analyzed.

Section 3 included 10 statements (See Appendix 1) indicating strictly personal beliefs about the influence of television. Examples of the kinds of statements used to solicit data about respondents' beliefs concerning their interaction with television content included:

"I compare myself to people I see on television";

"I feel television helps me to improve my life";

"I watch television to get ideas about how to dress."

A Likert-type answer scale was provided for informants to respond to each belief statement. The response choices were: 1) strongly agree; 2) agree; 3) slightly agree; 4) neither agree nor disagree; 5) disagree; 6) slightly disagree; and 7) strongly disagree.

Section 4 asked informants to respond to six (6) statements about personal value beliefs. The same Likert-type scale of responses was used (See Appendix 1). Examples of statements used to solicit data on this topic included:

"I plan to marry and have children";

"I enjoy getting together with my parents often;"

"Trying to understand myself and others is a waste of time."

The same Likert-type response scale as mentioned above was used to allow informants to respond to life satisfaction belief statements in section 5. Five statements (See Appendix 1) were used to unveil respondent's beliefs about their satisfaction with life. Examples of statements in this section are:

"In most ways my life is close to ideal";

“The conditions of my life are excellent”;

“I am satisfied with my life.”

## DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Qualitative analyses of individual receptions of TV depictions have the potential to create understanding about television’s influence and utility. Human values and goals, pertaining to television viewing, must be assessed in determining the value of media messages (Parks 1999). Any meaningful perspective without a model that recognizes qualitative distinctions in human experiences falls short of accurately understanding the reception of mediated information (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

The qualitative method places the most important aspect of media receptions in the individual viewers’ mirror-like processing and interpretation of the messages they receive from television. Willms and Johnson’s (1996) qualitative data analysis processes were applied to all open-ended questions.

The most commonly collected qualitative data are answers to open-ended questions. After collecting and ordering data, a 5-step analytical process was conducted as outlined below:

### Analytical 5-Step Process for Open-ended Questions (Willms and Johnson 1996)

**Step 1:** List all answers as informants provided them including the questionnaire number to avoid losing connection with other data each informant may have provided;

**Step 2:** Read all answers carefully, remembering the purpose of the question;

**Step 3:** Make rough categories of all answers that seem to belong together and create a frame label in the form of one key word or phrase;

**Step 4:** List all answers again within 5-7 appropriate frame categories;

**Step 5:** Inductively interpret each list of dominant or most meaningful categories within each frame.

\*This process is not as exact in terms of order of steps. The researcher went back and forth between steps until the process yielded the most dominant frames.

This analytical process was recreated for each appropriate open-ended question. By counting answers and, at times, combining smaller frames with appropriate larger ones, the research unveiled inferences and nuances about the reception, utility and influence of informants' television viewing. Informants will be identified in the findings by the numbered order in which they were interviewed.

Elaborate unstructured narratives transcribed from in-depth interviews as a rule are bulkier than answers to open ended questions (Willms and Johnson 1996). As mentioned earlier a meticulous 150-page transcribed document resulted from the 33 in-depth interviews. The transcribed data contained rich and insightful information. A reduction of non-pertinent data and an ordering of applicable data were completed. Listed below is the 5-step analytical process used to reduce the unstructured interview data:

Analytical 5-Step Process for Unstructured Interview Narratives (Willms and Johnson 1996)

**Step 1:** Reread study objectives and discussion topics;

**Step 2:** Number the material according to the broad discussion topic it pertains to and make notes in the margins to define sub-topics;

**Step 3:** List all key words that belong to a certain topic within each sub-category developed in Step 2;

**Step 4:** Interpret the data;

**Step 5:** Place frame labels and appropriate data into compilation sheets.\*

\*Compilation sheets used to reduce qualitative interview data consisted of a number of columns with larger topics listed below column frame headings.

Information was placed on each compilation sheet using key words and sentences clear enough to recall the actual statements made by individual informants. This approach allowed the investigator to go back and forth between individual informant compilation sheets and the original transcribed data when needed. By combining the open-ended question answers and actual statements from informants, the researcher's inductive interpretation of African-American women's reception, influence and utility of television content was made easier (Willms and Johnson 1996).

A cognitive or conceptual (thought pattern) model was inductively developed to indicate how one frame influenced another. The conceptual model represents a key analytical tool in the development of inferences and nuances about TV depictions influence (See Conceptual Model in Chapter 5). The extrapolated big picture derived from the data analyses led to the development of a new theoretical framework- The Looking Glass Self Theory of Media Influences. Chapter 5 of the dissertation provides a detailed discussion of the newly developed theory from the standpoint of the results of the data analysis and conceptual model. This is particularly important since media studies are still in the early stages of theory development and methodologies designed to measure or evaluate the reception of televised depictions (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

#### QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

This study is exploratory and its topic sits at the frontier of media studies literature about minority interpretive group receptions and utility of majority created television content. Parametric statistics beyond some associations of measure correlations will not be applied to this study. The goal of this study is to identify and

develop concepts and theoretical grounding that can only come forth using an inductive methodology (forthcoming by DeFleur & DeFleur 2006). Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in 1620 basically announced to the world a new scientific investigation that made use of exhaustive inductive reasoning based solidly on extensive empirical observations obtained through the senses.

Qualitative research or inductive reasoning shares the theoretical assumptions of the interpretative paradigm. That paradigm is based on the notion that social reality is created and sustained through subjective experience of people involved in communication (Morgan 1980).

Exploratory inductive research unlike its counterpart, deductive reasoning, relies less on restrictive a priori classification on the collection of data and are not driven by very specific hypotheses and categorical frameworks (Cassell & Symon 1994). Qualitative analysis is more concerned with emergent themes and idiographic descriptions to produce a universal claim or principle derived from collected data. In this study, that would be narrative data collected and analyzed using a content analysis. Any attempt to quantify the predominantly qualitative data collected for this study would contradict the overarching interpretative research paradigm. Having completed a large (33) number of qualitative in-depth interviews, an attempt to parametrically interpret the data would be wrong. Such an illogical approach would undercut the interpretive design and create a methodological paradox (Mathers, Fox and Hunn 2002). Instead, for exploratory qualitative analyses, the gleaning of frames, key words and cognitive patterns was necessary to develop conceptual frames that led to the offering of a new theoretical framework about black females' interactions with televised content. Descriptive statistics that did not offer noteworthy or salient numerical support related to the four stated

research questions were not reported in the Results Chapter. Only the most highly associated belief statement statistics were reported.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The results obtained from the interviews and the exploratory questionnaire provided a basis for an inductive analysis of the three types of data collected in the study: 1) demographics; 2) open-ended questions and unstructured interviews; 3) questionnaire responses. The results reported here offer insights and baseline findings for future studies about African-American women and television content receptions, influence and utility.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Each study informant used in this study was a matriculating young black female. All informants identified themselves as African-Americans between the ages of 20 and 28 with a mean age of 22.3 (sd= 1.91) years old. Six (6%) percent of informants were of mixed race heritage. The two (2) multi-racial informants reported a hereditary background that included some combination of African, Native American, Portuguese, Spanish and French ancestors. Thirty-one (93.9%) informants were single. One informant (3%) was married and one (3%) was divorced. Seventy-eight (78%) percent of them lived with family, friends or a roommate and 21.2% lived alone. Respondents' mean number of weekly work hours was 14.6 (sd=14.99). Most (75.8%) earned less than \$8,000 a year. Over eighty-percent of (84.8%) informants were classified as college seniors, 12.1% juniors and 3% freshmen. Many (87.9%) received a combination of educational financial support from the university and their parents.

### FINDINGS FROM OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Answers to open-ended questions represent the most commonly collected type of qualitative data (Willms and Johnson 1996). This methodology assured the capture of emic perspectives on the topic at hand. Informants more or less described for the

investigator their utility of televised messages. Dominant frames, key words and thought patterns emerged to create a more enlightened understanding of African-American women's reception of media depictions and portrayals.

Logic dictated the reporting of informants' responses to open-ended questions about television content receptions, influence and utility. Appropriately selected accompanying comments in informants own words are presented with the findings of each open-ended question. The topics about which the respondents reported related to the following six (6) questions:

1. Why do you own a television?
2. Why do you turn on the television?
3. Do you watch television most often alone or with others?
4. What television programs do you watch most often?
5. What people on television do you like most?
6. What do you see on television that irritates you?

#### Reasons for Owning a Television

Analysis of the unstructured narratives related to television ownership offered three frames. The frames suggested that TV ownership served several functions in the lives of these young women inclusive of but beyond the most common frame of entertainment (Radway 1984; Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974; Rosengren and Windahl 1972). The three (3) dominant reasons offered by informants for television ownership were: 1) entertainment, 2) educational convenience, and 3) social demands (See Table 1).

Table 1  
**Contributing Factors in Television Ownership**

ENTERTAINMENT	EDUCATIONAL CONVENIENCE	SOCIAL DEMANDS
Match wits against	View the world	Societal acceptability
Something to do	Exposure to information and incidental lessons	Enhance social existence

Some of the comments offered by informants are as follows:

“Well, I have to have a TV. Because when I am at home, I live alone, it’s very quiet and there would be nothing to do. So I would say for entertainment.” (#16)

“I like the entertainment and the lessons I learn from it. I feel I have an open mind to life lessons portrayed.” (#32)

“Television is just a convenience and for entertainment purposes.” (#29)

“It is convenient.” (#28)

“Because the way society is, your needs list demands that you own a television. It is the same reason why you need a sofa.” (#22)

“It is socially unacceptable not to have a TV. I own one for entertainment.” (#23)

“I don’t know. I guess because there’s always been one around for as long as I can remember. It helps keep you informed as well as just abreast of what’s going on be it entertainment, news, music or anything. Just so you can actively function with other people and interact with them. Right now, with our age group, people run around quoting parts of the Chappelle shows and it’s kind of like, if you haven’t seen the shows you don’t get it. You have to know what’s going on.” (#11)

Other informants felt that television ownership became a distraction while in school. Some just expressed that they could not live without owning a television:

I don’t own a television because my first semester, I borrowed a television from my sister’s boyfriend. At night I would watch a lot of game shows. When I returned it to him, I did not want to get another one because I did not want it to be a distraction while I was

in school. (#1) *Note: This informant has access to a television at her job as a resident assistant on campus.*

Because I really have found that I just can't, I can't do without it.  
 (#4)

Clearly, television ownership, in the minds of these interviewees, enhances their social skills and is considered a *need*, like that attributed to a basic piece of furniture. In fact, some comments indicate that not owning a television is considered anti-social; and one would be looked down upon if he/she did not own a TV or at the least have access to one.

Motivation to Turn on the Television

Three dominant motivational frames were identified from the analysis of informants' responses. These frames included: 1) boredom/need a break from life's stresses; 2) habit/routine; and 3) need for background noise and feelings of safety. Underlying those frames were three primary reasons for actually turning on the television set (See Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2  
**Informants' Motivations for Watching Television**

Need to get a break from Life's Stresses	Watching TV makes me Feel satisfied About My Life	I feel happy when I watch TV
69.8%*	30.3%*	75.7%*

\*Agreement percentage equals the combination of strongly agree, agree and slightly agree responses.

Table 3  
**Factors Underlying Motivations to Turn on the Television Set**

Boredom/Need for a Break from life's stresses	Habit/Routine	Need for Background Noise And To feel Safe
Nothing else to do	Watch favorite programs	Break silence
Avoid Cognitive activities	Everyday activities	Mimic life/guests
Nothing better to do	Secondary activity	Comfort and Safety
See what's going on in the world	Ritual	-

Examples of informants' comments are as follows:

“Either I have nothing else to do or I’m bored or I just have some extra time and want to see what’s on.” (#11)

“At some point among all the activities I participate in, I get tired of them and need something else that does not require me to give input or advice or use energy to solve a problem. That’s why I do not watch dramas or shows that require you to solve the characters’ problems.” (#18)

“Nothing better to do at the moment or I just don’t feel like doing homework.” (#6)

Boredom, and needing to withdraw from life’s stresses, expresses a concept that “workless” or involuntary attention is all that is cognitively required to view television (Henning and Vorderer 2001; Krugman 1971; Munsterberg 1916). The literature on viewers’ decreased need for cognition may play a role regarding this finding. Having an opportunity to relax and lower cognitive activities would certainly rank high on the list of priorities for these participants considering their status as college students. Therefore, when they want to escape from their highly cognitive activities, they seek out television depictions. Relaxing from life’s stresses appears to represent an important explanation why viewers find it easy to focus for long periods of time on ever-changing televised content.

A great deal of thinking, reading and learning activities require effort. Viewing television is less likely to require effort (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990), therefore, the suggestion is that viewers seek out media content expecting some type of psychological application, release or escape (Rubin 1985). As an extension of those applications, televised transcripts developed by others outside of informant’s culture and who have little contact with the informants’ culture, seemed preferable to other culturally

related leisurely activities. This may express a desire by informants to identify with the larger culture's hegemonic ideas about how to spend their time (hooks 1992).

The comments of other informants offered habit and routine as reasons for turning on their television sets. For example:

“Out of habit. Sometimes it's out of habit. Depending on the time of the day, I may want to watch something specific.” (#4)

“Because it's routine. To watch shows I want to watch that are already on.” (#29)

“Out of habit. Habit. I just walk into the house and just turn it on, even if I don't look at it. I like the noise in the background.” (#33)

Viewing televised depictions because the activity is part of a daily routine or habit indicates that television has merged seamlessly into these respondents' everyday existence (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Mediated messages contain many inherent political, economic and social influences (Lecan 1991; hooks 1992; Baldwin 1990; Rocchio 2000). Casual and prolonged television viewing behavior allows for the absorption of underlying TV messages that support a patriarchal, colonizing structure invisible to most viewers. Radway (1984) contended that was the case for romance genre books read by Midwestern housewives. Some women reported they were simply reading romance novels to escape the boredom of housework and child-rearing. Media cultural consumers, like romance novel readers and young black female TV viewers, overlook the subtle patriarchic messages of mediated content during prolonged, casual viewing behaviors. Mass culture's ideological control is all-consuming and ubiquitous. The cultural hegemony of media in any form limits consumers' abilities to look beyond the surface regarding media messages (Radway1984). This allows television audiences, at

times, to reduce their interactions with television messages to merely background noises.

For example informants in the present study commented that:

“I like the noise in the background. When I am cleaning and cooking, it makes me feel safe and comfortable at home. Even if it’s the snowy screen, I want the TV on.” (#25)

“Too quiet in the house. I even sleep with the TV on for safety.” (#23)

“It being too quiet in the house. Probably just to hear something going on. You know if you are in a quiet place, you would get sleepy faster than having music or something going. It feels like there’s life in the house, the (TV) noise.” (#13)

“Noise. For one, I stay by myself. Just to see what’s happening on TV, makes me feel like there’s company in my house. It’s like a ritual almost to hear the TV.” (#16)

“I turn on the TV to hear other people’s voices.” (#19)

Long before televised messages are encountered, the influences of TV’s physical presence and sounds play a social role in the lives of these viewers. Informant’s indicated that the actual television set in its material form adds status to its owner. The logic would follow that owning an expensive television artifact such as the new high definition, big screen kind would greatly add to the status of its owners.

Television’s transmission of sounds similar to humans talking and laughing or otherwise interacting in everyday life seem to provide a sense or feeling of comfort and safety. For some informants, human voices and sounds created the artificial existence of guests or company in the home (Horton and Wohl 1956; Tsao 1996). Such descriptions of television prior to the actual cognitive absorption of its portrayals suggest a deep attachment to the TV artifact, beyond viewer’s beliefs that they primarily own a television for entertainment purposes. Utilization of the TV set’s physicality and

transmission of sounds, without regard to its content, suggest a more socially personal utility than previously thought (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990). TV and the sounds it transmits in the living space of individuals are utilized in ways that even they—and the social scientist—would have had difficulty predicting or hypothesizing about.

#### Watching TV Alone or with Others

Informants offered a variety of responses about viewing television alone or with others. Most (66.7%) reported viewing television alone. Many studies document that aloneness leads to television viewing (Davis and Kubey 1982; Danowski 1975; Hess 1974; Meyersohn 1965). In this study, however, some informants clearly planned and preferred to watch television alone. Others reported that they viewed TV most often with friends, family members or roommates. The activity of watching television alone or with others is sometimes indicative of the level of concentration or involvement that an individual gives or plans to give the televised content. Serious purposive viewing of TV messages may reflect intense concentration or stupor (Winn 2002). One study reported that women are much more involved in television viewing than men (Parks 1999; Salomon 1979). Gender differences in concentration with TV content may be modified by how intently an individual views a program. In addition, the utility of TV messages expressed by informants indicates the level of experience a person has with the medium. This could explain the sometimes stark differences of TV message viewing times between various categories of people and between cultures. Such empirical findings have important applications for black viewers who view more television than any other group across age categories (Nielsen Media Research 2004).

Television viewing alone or with others may be utilized in many ways, although informants claim they own and watch television primarily for entertainment. Viewing with or without others was contingent upon 14 factors related to three frames: the viewer, the viewing environment and the television set and message content. Viewer profile frames and environmental frames contributed most to the decision to watch TV alone or with others. (See Table 4).

Table 4  
**Contributing Factors in Respondent’s Decisions to Watch  
 Television Alone or With Others**

VIEWER PROFILE FACTORS	ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS	TELEVISION RELATED FACTORS
Mood	Time of Day	Programming Interests
Desire to be alone vs. Desire to be social	# of people living in the home	Location of TV set
Compatibility with Co-viewers	Activities of others Living in the home	Parental Rules for television viewing
Contentment with being alone	Location of others In the home	-
Degree of interest in programming	Work schedules of others living in the home	-
Beliefs about entertaining guests	-	-

Examples of informant’s comments relative to these frames are provided below:

“Predominantly I watch TV alone. I tend to be kind of a loner. It’s like I have good friends, but at the end of the day most of the time I am by myself and I’m content with being that way.” (#4)

“Yes, I watch TV alone. My parents they paint together. My brother is in his own world, so it’s just me. And most of the time when I’m watching television, it’s late at night and everybody’s sleeping.” (#5)

“I predominantly watch TV alone. When friends are watching TV in my presence, I prefer to talk instead of listening and watching TV.” (#18)

“Depends on how I feel. If I’ve had a hard day, I just go straight to my room to watch TV. Or if somebody is already in the front room watching television and it’s something I want to watch, I go watch it with them versus having on two TVs. A lot of times my Mom is in bed when I get home, so I just have to watch it by myself.” (#12)

“With others. When people come over I turn on the TV.” (#25)

Such comments lend credence to the report that for many viewers, television performs some of the functions that conversation or person-to-person interaction once played in maintaining everyday life (Cooley 1902). Furthermore, the concept that the complexities of post-modern life leave little time for social interactions leads to the conclusion that TV and its messages/content now fulfills the needs of social exchanges between humans.

The decision to view television is often dependent on the timing of individual productive and maintenance activities such as working, cooking, eating and sleeping (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990). TV then becomes a massage, a “there, there,” a need, an addiction, a psychic fortress—a friend (Fowles 1982).

#### Most Watched Television Programs

Many researchers put forward the thesis that individual subjective accounts of media content receptions provide the greatest chance of providing real understanding about television’s influence. This study offers qualitative empirical support for that thesis. Informants in this study report watching four (4) types of programs most often: *sitcoms/soap operas, reality, documentary/investigative and game/health* type shows. Sitcoms/Soap Operas and reality shows represented the types of programs most often watched. As mentioned earlier, understanding the hierarchies of personal needs and goals

allow for greater understanding of why certain televised depictions are chosen and how individuals decoded them (See Table 5).

Table 5  
Types of Programs That Were Watched Most Often

SitComs/Soap Operas	Reality Shows	Documentary/ Investigative Shows	Game/Health Shows
Positive depiction of black girlfriends	Preference for real people vs. actors	Peer into Lives of others	Match wits against
Wholesome Storylines	Utility of Ideas	Educational/Career Utility	Educational/Career Utility
Ideal Family Structures	Compare Myself to others	-	-
Blackness personified; African-American cast	Watch with friends	-	-
Nothing Bad Happens on Disney	Audience Participation (voting for contestants)	-	-

Comments about the programs informants watched most often included:

“I watch a lot of *The Cosby’s*. Like I stay up for that, it’s like, you know, wholesome, clean entertainment. I could relate to them. I thought their household was funny just like mine. That’s why I really love that show.” (#6)

“*Girlfriends* is a good depiction of me and my friends.” (#13)

“The *Cosby* Show because the plots show a good, ideal African-American family structure.” (#14)

“Nothing too bad happens on Disney channel shows. I like cute funny stuff.” (#18)

“I like hearing about people’s lives.” (#21)

“I like reality shows where I can see real people on television versus actors.” (#23)

“I actually voted for a performer (on *American Idol* program). (#29)

I’m interested in shows that I can learn from, particularly medical shows.” (#25)

“I know we need to be real, you know, and show a bit of reality and not run from it. The show, *A Different World*, totally inspired me to go to a historically black college or university.” (#7)

“I remodeled my room because of an HGTV program I saw.” (#5)

Based on programs that were watched most often, informants are suggesting a need or desire for positive depictions about themselves as African-Americans. Informants look for portrayals of blacks in wholesome, ideal family-type situations where everyday life is perfect and without negative racial overtones. The goal is to seek out depictions that show positive things about black American lives where nothing bad happens. Instead of actors, the young women preferred real black people’s lives to be portrayed. This would indicate some sort of proof that the ideal and socially acceptable lives of positive African-Americans would be within their reach as educated blacks who want to represent normative values (hooks 1992).

Informants predominantly mentioned thirteen (13) different situation comedies and three (3) different soap operas as representative of the type of programs they watched most often (See Table 6).

Race is an important factor in the programs selected by the respondents. Clearly, blackness is an important aspect in the choice of portrayals informants primarily selected. Race, of course, is a significant cue of similarity between a viewer and television show characters (Appiah 2000). Black viewers are more likely to identify with and rate more favorably programs featuring black characters (Choudhury and Schmid 1974; Greenberg and Atkin 1982; Whittler, 1991; Appiah 2000). Other empirical research provided evidence that individuals who identify with television characters are more affected by the mediated messages espoused by those characters. That seemed to be the case in these findings. Eighty-one percent (81%) of the sitcom/soap operas mentioned by informants included a majority of black cast members.

Table 6  
**Most Watched Situation Comedies and Soap Operas**

Situations Comedies (SitComs)	Soap Operas
Girlfriends * (cable only)	The Young and the Restless (CBS Network)
Half and Half* (cable only)	Days of Our Lives (NBC Network)
Eve* (cable only)	Passions (NBC Network)
The Cosbys* (cable only)	-
Friends	-
The Parkers* (cable only)	-
One on One * (cable only)	-
Family Guy (cable only)	-
Bernie Mac* (cable only)	-
Golden Girls (cable only)	-
All of Us* (cable only)	-
The Chapelle Show* (cable only)	-
My Wife and Kids * (ABC Network)	-

\*represents all or majority black cast

Nielsen Media Research (2004) reported 10 Top Primetime programs for African American households for 2003-2004. Nine out of 10 of the programs identified by this study's informant group were included on the Nielsen Media Research (2004) list. Those programs included: 1) and 2) *American Idol*-- Nielsen mentioned this show twice for the two different weekdays it is broadcasted on TV; 3) *Girlfriends*; 4) *Eve*; 5) *Half and Half*; 6) *America's Next Top Model*; 7) *My Wife and Kids*; 8) *The Parkers*; and 9) *All of Us*. NFL Monday Night Football was the 10<sup>th</sup> highest rated prime-time program for African-American households. That program was the only Nielsen list show not to appear in the list derived from this study's informants most watched programs. This project featured an all female research group, which may in part explain why Monday Night Football did not emerge as one of the TV programs watched most often.

It is important to mention here that most of the most watched programs were offered only on cable channels. This finding highlights the exclusion of black frames from the top 3 network programming structure. That fact intrinsically suggests some sort

of exclusion of blacks from the so called “normal” television channels. In fact, the placement of the favored shows for blacks on cable channels is referred to in some black communities as the black stations or black channels creating a potentially negative frame for both blacks and those outside of black culture. In addition, the lack of black network programs creates a separate but equal frame beyond real-life experiences to fictionalized television content as well. This reflects societal beliefs reminiscent of social mores prior to racial integration policies. This is, in a nuanced sense, proof of the long revolution referenced by Raymond Williams (1961). Deep cultural revolutions are a large part of society’s most significant living experiences and are being interpreted and indeed fought out in very complex ways in the world of art and ideas. The great processes of change are revolutions that continue to evolve.

Table 7

**Reality, Documentary/Investigative and Game/Health Shows Watched Most Often**

Reality Shows	Documentary/Investigative	Game/Health
American Idol****	CSI **	The Baby Story****
MTV Real World****	Law & Order**	The Wedding Story ****
Fear Factor****	City Confidential***	The Dating Story ****
The Bachelor* ***	Dateline	Extreme Operations ****
College Hill* *	American Justice	Family Feud ****
MTV Real Road Rule Challenge****	CSI: Miami**	Weakest Link ****
Survivor****	Law & Order: Criminal Intent****	Price Is Right **
HBO Poetry Jam*	Court TV**	Who Wants to Be A Millionaire
Maury Povich****	Law & Order: SUV**	-
Big Brother	JAG****	-
America’s Next Top Model*	True Hollywood Story****	-
For the Love of Money	-	-
-	-	-

\*majority black cast/characters  
 \*\*\*black actor/narrator

\*\* regularly recurring black cast/characters  
 \*\*\*\*black cast/characters/players

For this study’s respondents, race and ethnicity is high on the list of priorities regarding the shows informants watched most often (Appiah 2000). Table 6 lists the

reality, documentary/investigative and game/health shows informants reported watching most often (See Table 7).

The type of television shows informants reported viewing most often suggest more lifestyle, informational/instructional, criminal justice kinds of interests and potential influences. At the same time, the types of shows not mentioned are just as indicative of influences and utility of television viewers. Three secondary program frames were found and included news/talk, cartoons, and music videos. Relative to this, informants offered the following comments:

“News about my university that is negative news gets the play and the positive news about it is overlooked or not reported at all.”(#20)

“The news. How a Caucasian is convicted of a major crime they (news reporters) don’t necessarily go into details. They don’t really focus on his face. But with a person of color, BAM!” (#7)

“There is a lady on the Spanish Channel (Univision) and she has a show (talk show). She is the Latina Oprah Winfrey, because she will discuss the race issues that exist in the Latino community. That stuff is just fascinating to me.” (#7)

“Actually I end up watching cartoons and that’s because it’s late at night and it’s just something on to put me to bed.” (#5)

“Sometimes, a lot of kids are at my apartment so I watch a lot of cartoons.” (#8)

“I look at BET, MTV and VH-1 music videos.” (#24)

Informants never mentioned political talk programs as representative of the type of programming they most often view. One explanation for informants’ lack of interest in such programs may be related to hook’s (1992) thesis about the revolutionary attitude of some African-Americans and other colonized peoples regarding mediated news

program messages produced by Caucasian-Americans. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks (1992) offered that

Decolonization continues to be an act of confrontation with a hegemonic system of thought; it is hence a process of considerable historical and cultural liberation. As such, decolonization becomes the contestation of all dominant forms and structures, whether they be linguistic, discursive or ideological. Moreover, decolonization comes to be understood as an act of exorcism for both the colonized and the colonizer.

The suggestion is that some informants have a sort of aversion to what they consider biased news information reported in the media about blacks. News information represents one of the most serious content offerings of the television medium. Yet, informants expressed the following negative assessments of such programming:

For example one informant offered the following comment:

‘I don’t tend to like to watch the news. I’ll watch it if I know something big is coming up like gubernatorial elections. Some things like that. But other than that, just daily news, I don’t prefer to watch it because of how it’s presented most of the time. Sometimes it’s not presented fairly or accurately. You know, news is for itchy ears, it’s what people want to hear. It’s not necessarily what’s good for them or what’s important for them to know. It’s for itchy ears. So I don’t prefer to have my ears scratched.’ (#5)

“I don’t like when the news attacks people by race.” (#12)

For young educated black females to more or less minimize their exposure to news program offerings in their selection of media messages reflects some level of discontent and exemplifies a well-established belief that many African-Americans may hold about news reporting in America (Chideya 1995; Campbell 1995; Biagi and Kern-Foxworth 1997). The text of news programs are for the most part constructed by Caucasian-Americans (Campbell 1995) who may not have divested of racism and even

by people of color (black people) who may still see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism (hooks 1992). A more balanced and diverse representation of African-Americans in television news content could decrease or tone down white supremacy in American culture, as has been discussed by Biagi and Kern-Foxworth 1997. Loving blackness represents political resistance (hooks 1992). Program choices and preferences allow informants to project self-esteem and on some level show satisfaction with who they are, especially in a society that appears to devalue their existence and personal attributes. On the other hand, the lack of interest in news programming could be age related. News programs are generally most often watched by older audience groups.

Table 8  
**Factors that Influenced the People Respondents  
 Like to See On Television**

<b>Blackness</b>	<b>Personal Appearance</b>	<b>Lifestyle</b>
Black entertainers	Attractiveness	Educated and non-educated
Mostly black actors	Style	Rags to riches
Positive image of African-Americans	Wholesome	Striving for goals
Strong black woman roles	Good looking	Down to earth
Black	Fashion sense	Smart
Good family relationships	Dreaded hair	Versatile
Black and a good actor	Eclectic	Non-conformist
Represents blacks well	-	Gives back to community
Black people	-	Keeps it real
Black women	-	Inspirational
Black women at the top of the ladder	-	Teaches others
Black and successful dressers	-	White but good family relationships
African-Americans	-	-

Table 9  
**People that Informants Liked to See on Television**

Singers	Actors	Blackness	Rappers/ Athletes	Talk Show Hosts	Ministers/Intellec and politicians and others
Beyonce***	Steve Harvey***	Black People	Sister Soulja***	Les Brown***	Farrakan***
Alicia Keys***	Bernie Mac***	African-Americans	Eve***	Sway on MTV***	Cornel West***
Janet Jackson***	Nia Long***	Black women	Mos Def***	Oprah***	Dr. Ella Kelly, college prof***
Fantasia***	Jada Pinkett***	Black women at the top of the ladder	Shaquille O'Neal***	Christina on Univision (Spanish TV)	Rev. T.D. Jakes***
Usher***	Nicky Newman	Professional Black women	-	Montel Williams***	No white people, not for me
-	Halle Berry***	Black and successful dressers	-	-	Clinton more so than Bush
-	Sean Connery	-	-	-	-
-	Daymon Wayans***	-	-	-	-
-	Cosby Family actors*	-	-	-	-
-	Sidney Poitier***	-	-	-	-
-	Golden Girl actors	-	-	-	-
-	Denzel Washington***	-	-	-	-
-	Morris Chestnut***	-	-	-	-
-	Will Smith***	-	-	-	-
-	Bill Cosby***	-	-	-	-
-	The Parkers actors*	-	-	-	-
-	Felicia Rashad***	-	-	-	-
-	Angela Bassett***	-	-	-	-
-	Martin Lawrence***	-	-	-	-
-	Joan (Girlfriends)*	-	-	-	-
-	Drucilla(Y&Restless) **	-	-	-	-
-	Hope Brady (Days)	-	-	-	-
-	Amy (Judging Amy)**	-	-	-	-
-	Law & Order actors**	-	-	-	-
-	CSI (lead actors)**	-	-	-	-
-	“Black guy” on CSI	-	-	-	-
-	Jerry Bruckheimer	-	-	-	-
-	Sanaa Latham***	-	-	-	-

\*majority black cast/characters

\*\*\*black singer/actor/rapper/athlete/talk show host/minister/intellectual/politicians

\*\* regularly recurring black cast/characters

\*\*\*\*black cast/characters/players

People Informants Liked to See On Television

Concerns that blacks are often shown in a negative light in media representations is a consistent recurring frame within interview narratives of informants. The depictions of blacks, in particular their outward appearances and lifestyles are of great importance to study participants. Three large frames surfaced from the analysis of the people

respondents liked to watch on television: 1) blackness; 2) personal appearance; and 3) lifestyle. Blackness and lifestyle represented the two largest frames (See Table 8).

The television personalities liked most by informants represented six (6) categories: singers, actors, black people, rappers/athletes, reporters, talk show hosts, ministers/intellectuals/politicians. Actors were the most often mentioned people. References to certain televised people allow for the gleaning of nuances about TV content receptions, influence and utility (See Table 9). For example, one informant offered that, “I feel like the African culture in every part of the world is so tainted and just so put down and so under appreciated.” (#7) Ruling groups have reasons for not wanting to recognize the true scale of a revolution, but for others a change in viewpoints is considered a genuine crisis of consciousness (Williams 1961). Television managers and other cultural authorities concerned with equality across cultures in American society must do what is necessary to try to resolve and clarify disparities in reality and in the socially constructed reality of televised content representations of all groups of people.

Ethnic group members prefer to compare themselves with in-group images and messages rather than out-group ones. Such preferences protect the self-concept or self-esteem of specialized group members from threatening comparisons as expressed by Crocker and Major (1989) and Frisby (2000), and exemplified in the sample of responses obtained in this study:

“I like black entertainers like Beyonce and Alicia Keys.” (#2)

“Janet Jackson. She is attractive (to me) because of her rags to riches story and Fantasia because I like the reality of her striving for a goal.” (#4)

“Usher. I like his style and singing.” (#24)

“Morris Chestnut, mostly black actors.” (#9)

“Will Smith. He has style and is a good actor in wholesome family roles.” (10)

“Bill Cosby. He presents a positive image of African-Americans.” (#11)

“Felicia Rashad (*The Cosby's*). I like the portrayal of their marriage. They have a happy home and they work together in solving their problems.” (#13)

“Angela Bassett plays strong black woman roles and Martin Lawrence because he keeps it real.” (#14)

“Drucilla. She is black. Hope Brady. She is white but Hope is beautiful and she has a good relationship with her kids and husband.” (*These are soap opera actresses*) (#15)

“The *CSI* lead investigator. The other characters have a fashion and style sense.” (#22)

“Denzel Washington. He is black and a good actor. He just looks good and represents blacks well.” (#32)

Informants are keenly interested in positive representations of African-Americans in mediated content. Like programs preferred by informants, the preferences for people seen on television revolves around the frames of blackness, personal appearance and lifestyle. Media constitutes powerful tools for influencing cultural expectations associated with black women (Wilson and Russell 1996). Media depictions in the right hands have the power to not only transform cross-racial relationships; they also have the power to create positive beliefs about members of a racial group about themselves. Study informants believe that blacks have been portrayed negatively in mediated representations based on race, personal attributes and the lifestyles of blacks portrayed on television. These young black female informants appear to believe that each negative or

positive representation of any black person on TV creates the same impression in reality of them. Negative representations of blacks ultimately influence their personal beliefs about their existence as a black people in society as well as the beliefs about blacks held by others based on televised message consumption.

#### Television Depictions that Irritate Informants

Four frames pertaining to television portrayals irritated interviewees: 1) biased/negative depictions of blacks; 2) lack of concern for impressionable children, 3) whites seen more often on television than blacks; and 4) the stereotyping of southerners. Biased negative depictions of blackness represented the largest frame (See Table 10).

A great deal of public discourse in America represents dangerous nonsense (Postman 1985). Mediated messages are dangerous in terms of their potentially negative inferences about certain groups in society. Dissension by blacks to mediated Aunt Jemima ads has been documented as far back as the 1920s (Kern-Foxworth 1994). In 1932, a study was conducted on the reactions of black consumers to two proposed Aunt Jemima pancake mix advertisements (Edwards 1932). The advertisements were similar in design, however, one featured a picture of Aunt Jemima prominently displayed and the other made the pancakes its focus. Study participants were asked to select the ad that caught their attention more quickly and thoroughly. Some of the frames and comments offered by blacks in 1932 about the Aunt Jemima ads resemble frames and comments made in the present study relative to present-day televised depictions of blacks.

Examples of the comments made by respondents in 1932 are given below to provide a basis of comparison to comments made by respondents in the present study:

“Because dislike pictures of Aunt Jemima with towel around head.” (offered by semi-skilled male laborer)

“Picture of cook exaggerates color of negro.” (semi-skilled laborer)

“Picture of Aunt Jemima not to my taste. We cooks don’t look like that.” (semi-skilled female laborer)

“Picture reminds me of slavery.” (semi-skilled female laborer)

“Illustration utterly disgusts me.” (skilled male laborer)

“Not interested. Don’t like head rag and bandanna. Colored people don’t wear them now. Don’t see why they keep such pictures before the public.” (semi-skilled female laborer)

“Don’t like colored characters in advertisements. Always shown as menials.” (skilled female laborer)

“Don’t like the way colored woman is dressed.” (male businessman)

“I am against the use of old-time female mammy.” (female businesswoman)

“Picture of Negro “mammy” would keep me from reading advertisement.” (female businesswoman)

“Don’t like exploitation of colored people. Whenever I see a picture such as this I am prejudiced against product.” (female businesswoman)

“The log cabin and colored woman cause me to lose interest in the brand of pancake flour.” (male businessman)

Even 73 years ago in 1932 blacks were expressing concern in their comments about mediated depictions of themselves. Similar frames such as personal appearance, lifestyle and concerns about slave depictions mirror comments offered by educated females in this present-day study. Mediated depictions are coded messages that act as symbols of cultural beliefs and thoughts that are passed from one generation to the next (Williams 1961; Lecan 1991; Berger 1991).

Meanings attached to decoded mediated symbolism regarding television content about blacks in 2005 are reflected in comments of informants about television content that irritate them. For example:

Table 10  
**Television Textual Messages that Irritate Informants**

Biased/Negative Depictions of Blackness	Lack of Concern for Impressionable Children	Whites Seen More Often than Blacks	Stereotyping of Southerners
Speak in ghetto-like words and tones	Sex-related commercials	Blonde-haired, blue eyed, white skinned, skinny women appear most often in commercials	Language/speaking skills
Predominantly Fat/Obese black women	Venereal disease commercials	White people, white people, white people	Clothing and appearance
Diminished attractiveness/sexiness of black women	Sexual enhancement medications	Whites unfamiliar with aspects of black people's lives	Thought about responding to such stereotypical portrayals
Crimes stories focus on blacks	Family structures	-	-
Blacks in slave era portrayals	Profanity	-	-
Lack of black women in make-up commercials	Naked women	-	-
Misleading realities of black life	Sexually-charged programs	-	-
Blacks shown predominately as poor	Gays kissing on television	-	-
Statistics about Blacks and AIDS/HIV	-	-	-
Lack of positive Aspects about Black life	-	-	-
No balance/variety in representations of blacks	-	-	-
Few minorities on reality shows	-	-	-
Unfair voting results on reality shows based on appearance not talent	-	-	-
Black teens used in pregnancy scenes	-	-	-
Shows with predominantly Black cast members limited to UPN and WB Channels	-	-	-
Stereotyping/typecasting of blacks	-	-	-
Lack of appreciation for black culture	-	-	-

“Mostly I think 90% of the portrayals of black women are negative on television. It kind of diminishes the attractiveness of black women. One of my main goals is to have a family and have a husband and if I’m not attractive, you know, how will I get a husband? A black woman’s role is just to help somebody else and to be there for somebody else rather than be helped. When you see

these types of things with black women, it is kind of discouraging. It just aggravates me when I see stuff like that.” (#1)

“Black people, we need stuff, you know, certain information. We need certain things to uplift us as a people.” (#4)

“Blacks are typecast. They always typecast African-Americans to me. Or they always have to be funny. No one has a dry sense of humor like some white sitcoms. Like the white characters have a dry sense of humor or witty humor. Black people, normally their humor is vulgar or it alludes to sex, no variety. I think they (blacks) are dry sense of humor kind of people too.” (#6)

“It upsets me when stuff happens to black people (on TV). Like the slavery days when they make shows of that. Maybe like Kunta Kente from *Roots* and the beatings that he took, all those.” (#8)

“Like these herpes commercials when people say I have genital warts or something like that. Or that they use Valtrex. That’s disgusting. When they have the condom commercials, they sing Trojan Man. The condom commercials are too explicit. You know, you have all ages of children watching television and children pick up things these days and times. They might want to talk about such things at an inappropriate time.” (#9)

“The make-up commercials, those bother me. Everybody on there looks alike. They’re all skinny white women with long blonde hair. And that’s not the average person. I would suggest they go out and recruit some real people. Put me on there. My face is pretty. And my hair looks nice.” (#10)

“It’s kind of like with that whole College Hill (black reality program) thing. I know that that show is not a reality of our life here. It’s supposed to be a reality show about my school and if it’s not the reality of an average student, it can’t be the reality of theirs (the show’s characters).” (#11)

“Showing the Hilton Twins all day and pretty much every channel white people, white people, white people, white people. I don’t have nothing against them, but I’d like to see some more color on TV. I’m an African-American and you see all these Caucasians on TV. You know, I’m like we’re out of colored people? Every channel you go to its white people, white people unless you go to BET or other specific channels like UPN.” (#15)

“The way people from the South are stereotyped in language and appearance.” (#3)

“I don’t like stories that negatively depict southerners. I’ve thought about how I can respond to such portrayals.” (#27)

“It seems like today its okay to say like certain words on TV. Back in the day, you couldn’t say any curse words on TV. Now it’s like they just get too carried away with them.” (#14)

“Gay activists and people kissing on TV is too much homosexual activity.” (#16)

“Shows about gay/lesbian stuff are totally out of order. At age 8, I didn’t see shows like that on TV. I don’t agree with that lifestyle and I don’t want my children exposed to it through television.” (#28)

“Naked Girls on videos irritates me and men who put the naked girls on TV. Naked girls blamed for appearing naked. Sexually charged shows add to the lack of shows that children can watch with their parents.’ (#18)

“I hate reality shows. There are not enough minority players. The minorities on reality shows are seen as threats who may win, so they are removed.” (#29)

“Blacks used in teen pregnancy scenes.” (#33)

Media is a powerful tool for maintaining cultural beliefs in images and content of televised messages (Williams 1961; Wilson and Russell 1996). Depictions of African-Americans remain relegated to a “sitcom ghetto” (Chideya 1995). To some, most portrayals of blacks on television are comedic. Those mediated depictions continuously fail in their quest to realistically represent blacks in typical life situations. The lack of reality-based, balanced representations of African-American lives on television screens is considered by many scholars as particularly harmful considering that blacks watch significantly more television on average than whites across all ages and groups (Nielsen Media Research 2004; Campbell 1995; hooks 1992; Gerbner, Mowlana, Schiller 1996).

Study informants indicated some level of negotiating skills in decoding televised depictions. These negotiation skills seem to involve desperate and many times unsuccessful efforts to separate themselves from the distasteful messages and images of blacks they see on television (Robinson 1998). Negative signs or symbols, presented in mediated public discourses, serve as mirrors to African-Americans suggesting to them how they are seen by the larger society. The following quotation from Stuart Hall's *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) serves as one theory about the potential harm related to the hegemony of cultural impropriety:

The ways in which black people, black experience, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization.

A significant level of awareness of televised content bias and negativity in representations of African-Americans exist among these young, black female informants. Statements by the women reflect a just under-the-surface belief that a conspiracy exists involving the white power structure to limit blacks' upward mobility or acquisition of jobs and life goals. For example:

“My ultimate goal is to be a talk show host. And it's like I know it's going to be real hard for me 'cause for one, I'm a female, for two I'm an African-American and three, I see all these Caucasians on TV.” (#15)

The reality for African-Americans is that, from 1932 to 2005, basic mediated depictions and inferences about them may have changed on the surface, but the underlying frames appear to have remained the same.

#### SUMMARY OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS/ UNSTRUCTURED NARRATIVE RESULTS

##### ➤ Television Meets Social Needs of Informants

The many overarching frames extrapolated from informants' responses to the six (6) opened-ended questions about television, its reception, influence and utility in their lives points to a mediated content relationship that is both complex and contradictory. When asked about their television ownership, informants reported that they owned a TV for entertainment, educational and social needs and demands. Motivations to turn on TV included boredom, need for background noise and the fact that turning on the television was habitual, a sort of "ritual". All those reasons point to television's ability to fulfill the need for human interaction. The utilization of television seems to substitute or even replace ortho-social or face-to-face relationships through a para-social experience with people/characters viewed through the mediated conduit of television depictions (Horton and Wohl 1956; Tsao 1996). Even the decision to watch television alone or with others is shrouded in social interaction. The social need or desire can now be fulfilled by interacting with real-life people or the recreated, reproduced people and characters of a televised situation comedy show. In a sense either "social" situation will meet the individual desire for social interaction. As stated earlier, human beings appear not to have been equipped by evolution to distinguish in a cognitive way between natural images and artificially created (mediated) images (Mithen 1996). For example one informant stated, "I turn on the television to hear other people's voices."(#19) In her mind the televised transmission of a human voice is just that, a human voice, not a recreated transmitted human voice. Black families used the media for racial socialization, choosing more to watch programs that starred African-Americans (Parks 1999). White families made viewing choices for reasons other race. Such findings

support the charge of the complex nature of televised textual reception by study informants.

The types of programs watched most often by study informants featured “casting groups” or families. In fact family lifestyles represented the majority of the programs the young women indicated they viewed most often including: *The Cosby’s*, *The Parkers*, *Family Guy*, *My Wife and Kids*, *Bernie Mac*, *The Young and the Restless*, *The Wedding Story*, *The Baby Story*, and *The Family Feud* game show. TV mediates and underscores family relationships (Parks 1999). The concept of family mythology in family therapy studies suggests that families unconsciously create frames about how they represent themselves, the stories they tell their children, and where the family situates itself in the world. Therefore, how a family or family members attend to media offers some type of unselfconscious expression of that mythology (Parks 1999). The complexity of television content reception, influence and utility lies in what an informant says about why they own a television or even the motivations to turn on the set to view it. The complex nature of TV content utility is further offered in informants own comments and beliefs about the pictures and messages they receive and decode from television that many times are illogical. When asked directly about whether they used TV to get ideas about how to dress, most respondents appeared hesitant to answer in the affirmative, although some did. At the same time others said they did not agree with the statement, but later in their interview narrative would offer comments that indicated they did watch TV to get ideas about how to dress. This is the type of ambiguity that exists in the minds of television viewers’ beliefs about the utility of televised messages. The medium is so maligned in

one perspective but in another, it is reportedly needed to disperse helpful information to the populous.

➤ Contradictions about Utility of Televised Depictions

The contradictions of beliefs about the utility of televised depictions are exhibited in the fact that respondents choose to watch programs that portray some of the exact frames about blackness that they say irritates them. For example, *College Hill*, a black reality program portraying the lives of black males and females at an HBCU, is criticized by the young women for not being a realistic portrayal of their lives at an HBCU. At the same time they continue watching such shows. As one informant said, “I just think it is interesting to see how other people, like college students live, and the ways of some of them, and just to see their personal life and how different they are from me and how I can agree with them.” (#6) The informant’s comments justify or explain her negotiation of a program that featured a black female character that she thought presented a negative image. That *College Hill* character is infamously known among informants as displaying sexual promiscuity and for not wearing underwear.

Some informants expressed dislike for the character, Monique, on *The Parkers* situation comedy show because of her controlling, domineering personality and attitude, loud finger-snapping behavior, heavy body-type and skintight clothing. However, the show emerged in this study as a program most watched by study participants. The question is why do informants continue to watch programs that feature characters they find unacceptable within their interpretive community. One informant may have answered that question when she said that, “I sit down and watch it (*The Parkers*) because it’s funny and I know that whether I watch it or not it will still be there.” (#1)

Black viewers feel shame when they see distasteful and irritating portrayals of themselves. Those shameful feelings somehow culturally connect them to such characters (Robinson 1998). The shameful feelings may not be related intrinsically to the negative depiction, but to the viewer for willingly accepting or watching the intended humiliation offered by the mediated content. The characters, the models and the symbols that represent blacks in advertising have always been important to blacks, because they are aware that African-American representations determine how blacks feel about themselves and their race and how others perceive them as well (Kern-Foxworth 1994).

Television offers depictions that support social heritage (Williams 1961; Rocchio 2000). Therefore, those who hold the authority to maintain the status quo are also in charge of creating frames and messages about others who are not privileged to do so. Minorities, especially African-Americans, too often have little control over the tone and content of televised transcripts (Chideya 1995) leading to the maintenance and continued development of negative mediated representations about them. hooks (1992) offered in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) that

If we compare the relative progress African-Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation.

This discussion offered evidence for the complex contradictions of televised content receptions, influence and utility in the lives of young African-American female viewers.

## QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

As stated earlier, this exploratory study sought to document a black female interpretive group's perspective on television content receptions. Table 11 represents insight into the phenomena by looking at specific interactive factors as they relate to study informants' utility of television, radio and newspaper media.

The following table provides a compilation of data items about each informant's daily use of various media and allows for comparisons of the use of three (3) types of media. Each informant is profiled based on seven (7) different topics: 1) plan to watch TV everyday; 2) hours of television watched per day; 3) plan to listen to radio everyday; 4) read a newspaper everyday; 5) # of television sets in the home; 6) # of people in the home; 7) cable's influence on TV viewing habits. Informants are identified by their interview order numbers only (See Table 11).

Social scientists have yet to completely answer questions about how television messages are received and used by audiences and what are the influences of their viewing habits (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990). For African-American women, in particular, the reception, influence and utility are even less understood. This study seeks to add to the literature about that phenomenon. The data offered in Table 11 reports very telling aspects about the utility of television viewing in the lives of these young women.

Sixty-three (63.6%) percent of informants make a conscious plan to watch television everyday. The most common reason given is that they have identified favorite programs that they don't want to miss. In terms of television viewing, informants on average watched 3.2 hours of television everyday (See Figure 1 below).

**Table 11  
Media Use Profiles**

<b>Informant #</b>	<b>Plan to watch TV everyday</b>	<b># of televisions in the home</b>	<b>Daily hours of TV Viewing</b>	<b>Plan to listen to radio everyday</b>	<b>Reads a newspaper everyday</b>	<b># of people in the home</b>	<b>Cable's influence on TV viewing</b>
1	NO	0	1	YES	NO	2	More options
2	NO	2	Less than 1hr	YES, I love music	YES	2	watch more
3	YES	4	4	NO	NO	2	Watch more
4	YES	2	5 (at least)	NO	NO	2	Watch more
5	NO	4	2	YES	YES	3	Watch more
6	NO	1	Watch 2hrs/wk.	YES in the car primarily	NO	2	Watch more
7	YES	1	On average 2 hrs.	NO	NO	2	Watch more
8	NO	3	3	YES	NO	2	Watch more
9	YES	1	6	YES in the car	NO	2	Watch more
10	YES	2	6	NO	Sometimes	1	Watch more
11	YES	2	3	NO	NO	2	More options
12	YES	8	5	NO	YES to also do the puzzles	4	More shows
13	NO	5	2	NO	NO	4	Watch more Cartoons
14	OH YES!	3	2	YES	NO, I need to.	1	w/o cable won't view
15	YES	2	6	YES	NO	1	Watch more
16	YES	2	3	NO	NO	2	No influence
17	NO	1	2	NO	NO	2	More shows
18	YES	3	3	NO	NO	2	Better selection
19	YES	2	Less than 1hr	YES	YES	2	Does not have cable
20	YES	3	1	Sometimes	NO	2	No influence
21	NO	4	3	YES	NO	6	Does not have cable
22	YES	3	4	NO	NO	3	More to watch
23	YES	4	4	NO	NO	4	More choices
24	YES	3	7	YES	NO	2	More shows
25	NO	1	3	NO	NO	2	I Like cable shows
26	NO	2	3	NO	YES	2	More chann
27	YES	1	2	NO	NO	1	No influence
28	NO	3	4	NO	NO	4	Watch variety
29	YES	2	6	YES	NO	1	Pay cable Watch cable
30	NO	2	3	NO	NO	1	No influence
31	YES	3	3	NO	NO	2	Watch more
32	YES	2	7	NO	NO	1	Watch more
33	YES	3	3	NO	NO	2	No influence

The average American spends 2-4 hours a day watching television (Frank N. Magid Associates 2005). Cable influenced 81.8% of respondents to watch more television because most of the shows they watched were only available on cable and because cable offered more programming options (See Table 12). These statistics support the fact that cable television plays a major part in the lives of these young black female informants.

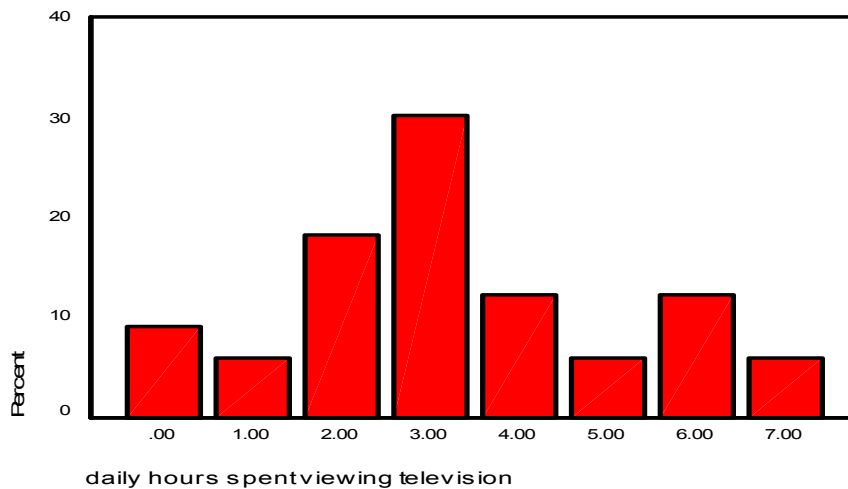


Figure 1 Daily Hours Spent Viewing Television

Compared to television, less than one half (33.3%) of informants stated they planned to listen to the radio everyday and only 18% reported reading a newspaper everyday. Television is clearly the most utilized and pervasive medium (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Parks 1999) within this black female group.

Watching television is a crucial slice of existence in postmodern society. One study found that people reported wanting to watch television over 90% of the time (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Most women in this study planned to watch television everyday and they followed-through on those plans. Watching television as much as these informants reported they did is made easier by multiple numbers of

individual household TV sets. In this study many informants' households (60%) included more than one television set. Many informants' homes (57%) included a television set for every person in the home (See Table 11).

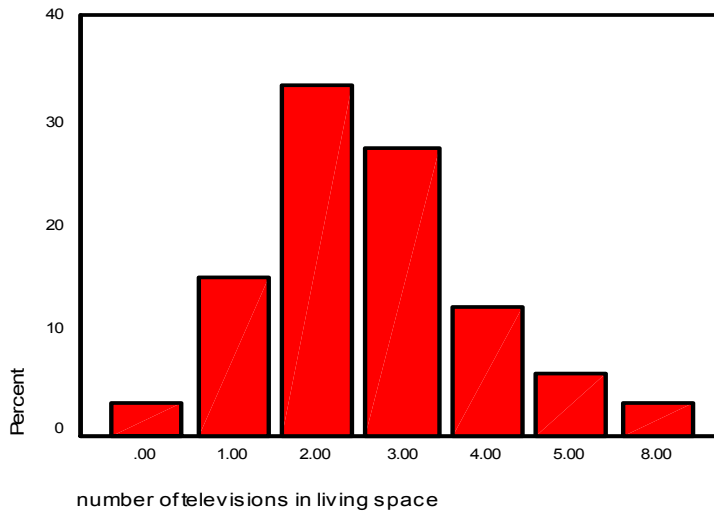


Figure 2 Number of Televisions in Living Space

Television is listed among the most freely chosen activities when spare or leisure time becomes available (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Viewing television portrayals accounted for 6.6% of primary activity at home. Table 11 shows that 75.8% of informants' households contained 1, 2 or 3 television sets and 21.2% have between 4 and 8 televisions in their homes (See Figure 2). Nationwide 98% of U.S. households own one (1) television (Nielsen Media Research 2000; Parks 1999) and the average U.S. household contained 2.24 television sets. The percentage of nationwide households with three or more TV sets is 66% (TV-Free America 2005).

Table 12  
**Reasons Cited for Cable TV  
 Influence on Viewing Habits**

(Cable Influences)
Because there are more options (#1)
More Options (#11)
I need cable for more shows and more offerings (#12)
There's more variety and more shows (#17)
Better selection. So much more to choose from (#18)
More to watch (#22)
More choices, more programs that I like (#23)
More programming choices (#24)
There are more things to watch with 200 channels than Without cable (#26)
More Variety (#28)
I am paying for those channels and I think I should watch them (#29)
If I didn't have cable I wouldn't watch television (#14)
The channels and programs I like to watch are on cable (#25)
Cable offers more of the shows I want to see (#31)
Cable offers different shows about things that I have an interest in (#32)

\*Informant Interview #in parentheses

Cable television allows for even more viewing opportunities (See Table 12). Phrases such as “I need cable for more shows and more offerings (#12)” and “If I didn’t have cable I wouldn’t watch television (#14)” expresses the desire for cable television services on behalf of these respondents. The word need in the first statement is an expression of the importance and perceived personal and social demands that manifests itself into the desire for more and more viewing options. The overall impression is that some level of survival and/or maintenance in everyday life is dependent upon the consumption of televised depictions. However, more viewing options for this group translates into more viewing of programs with black actors and characters. Most of the programs informants watched were offered only on cable channels (See Tables 6, 7). That explains the intensity of need expressed by these black, female informants for cable television services.

A day to day requirement to fill some social need or desire for television content emerges from the analysis of the interviews. Table 11 shows that 84 television sets exist when the number of TVs per informant household is combined. That number of televisions representing 33 household equates to 2.5 televisions per informant within the study. What is the need, allure or appeal of television depictions that requires this level of ownership and self-exposure to televised depictions? The answer based on this study centers around social needs and demands, and Chapter 5 ultimately offers a potential theoretical explanation for such heavy viewing habits by these young, African-American, female viewers.

#### BELIEFS ABOUT VIEWING TV DEPICTIONS

Findings from the questionnaire combined with previous results of the open-ended questions and unstructured interviews suggest the use of television as a mirror. Informants look into the television mirror to determine how they are seen by others and whether their reflection has value in their eyes and the eyes of others. Informants were asked to respond to 22 statements about their 1) utilization of television depictions, 2) personal beliefs and values; and 3) life satisfaction beliefs. These statements designed from an etic perspective were used to further extrapolate the reception, influence and utility of televised content. Informants responded to the statements based on a 7-point Likert-type response scale: 1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=slightly agree; 4=neither agree nor disagree; 5=slightly disagree; 6=disagree; 7=strongly disagree.

#### Utilization of Television Belief Statements

Informants' responses to seven (7) statements specifically about their beliefs pertaining to the utilization of television are shown in Table 13.

Table 13  
**Agreement with Belief Statements about the Utility of Television Depictions**

Utilization of TV Statement	Agreement Response Percentage
I compare my life to people I see on television.	27.3
I feel television helps me to improve my life.	21.2
People I see on TV portray lifestyles I would like to have.	63.6
I want to live my life like people I see on TV.	21.2
I watch TV to get ideas about how to dress.	66.6
I watch TV to get advice about how to live my life.	21.2
Watching TV makes me feel satisfied about my life.	30.3

\*Agreement represents a combination of strongly agree, agree and slightly agree responses.

More than one quarter (27.3%) of informants reported that they compared themselves to messages about or images of people they watched on television and one quarter (21.2%) also reported that TV helped them to improve their lives (Covert and Dixon 2004; Appiah 2000; Radway 1984). The majority (63.6%) agreed that they wanted to live the lifestyles of people they saw on television and 66.6% agreed that they watched television to get ideas about how to dress. One quarter (21.2%) reported watching TV to get advice about how to live their life. Table 14 shows the most significant relationships of belief statements pertaining to the how the young women utilized television.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**RQ1: What significant correlations existed between beliefs about the utility of television depictions?**

To determine whether there was a statistical correlation between different belief statements about the utility of television messages, a Pearson’s (r) measure of association procedure was conducted. Eight significant correlations were found between beliefs about the utilization of television content (See Table 14).

These significant relationships between beliefs regarding TV content utility provide additional evidence and support for the fact that these young women use television for

more than just entertainment. This inference based on Table 14 is that they are using television to:

Table 14  
**Correlations between Belief Statements  
 About the Utility of Television Depictions**

CORRELATIONS (r)	I Plan to watch TV everyday.	People I see on TV portray lifestyles I would like to have.	Cable influences me to watch more TV.	I compare my life to people I see on TV.	I spend my life doing meaningful Things.	I watch TV to get ideas about how to dress.
People I see on TV Portray lifestyles I would like to have.	.385*	-	-	-	-	-
I want to live my life like people I see on TV.	-	.489**	-	.458**	-	-
I feel TV helps me to improve my life	-	-	.441*	-	-	-
I watch TV to get advice about how to live my life.	-	-	-	.458**	-	-
I watch TV to be entertained.	-	.367*	-	-	.403*	.411*

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).  
 \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

1) assist them in determining what kind of lifestyle they want or don't want to live; 2) to see how others live who already have the kind of lives that they want to have; 3) to acquire information that will improve their current lives; and 4) to be entertained. This indicates that the heavy viewing of black female group members is purposive and not just viewing for the sake of viewing or just to pass time. The viewing unwittingly serves as a way to improve, mimic or alter their lives based on the transcripts offered by television (Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996). In a previous survey study (Grable 2002) featuring 385 racially mixed, randomly sampled college-aged males (34.5%) and females (65.5%) in northern Florida, who attended a predominantly white university and a historically black university, similar beliefs about the utility of TV depictions were

found. That study included six (6) exact and/or similar belief statements about the utility of television as found in the present study (See Table 15).

Table 15  
**Comparisons of Belief Statements about Utilization of TV Depictions  
 Between 2005 (present study) and 2002 Studies**

<b>% of Informants Agree in 2005 (All black respondents)</b>	<b>% of Agreement</b>	<b>% of Respondents Agree in 2002 (mixed race respondents)</b>	<b>% of Agreement</b>
Watch TV to get Info on how to live my life	21.2%	I watch TV to get advice about how to live my life	11.8%
I compare my life to people I see on TV	27.3%	Watch TV and Compare Life to People on TV	24%
I feel TV helps me to improve my life	21.2%	Watch TV to Improve my life	17.2%
People I see on TV portray lifestyles I would like to have	63.6%	Watch TV and want to Mimic People I see on TV	26.3%
Plan to watch TV Daily	63.6%	Plan to watch TV Daily	34.5%
Cable influences you to watch more TV	75.8%	Cable TV influences my viewing time	70.6%

\*Agreement represents a combination of strongly agree, agree and slightly agree responses.

\*\*Mixed race respondents included: Native Americans, African-Americans, White, Latin Americans, Asian/Pacific Islander(s)

Comparing the two studies across the board of six belief statements indicates that black female informants utilized television messages more for similar reasons than the mixed race and sex respondents in the 2002 survey study. The previous 2002 study provides supporting evidence about TV utility beliefs across race and sex. Parks' (1999) postulation that race and gender play a part in individual involvement with television is supported based on the two studies (Parks 1999).

### Personal Values Belief Statements

Personal values statements and unstructured interview data related to getting together with parents, the desire to marry and have children, how informants see their lifetime activities and thoughts about trying to understand others offers some baseline

data about value beliefs held by young black women (See Appendix 1). Informants do indeed utilize television to compare or help them to decide what beliefs they have about their personal values. The concept of family mythology in family therapy studies posits that families unconsciously create frames about how they represent themselves, the stories they tell their children and where the family situates itself in the world through interactions with television content (Parks 1999). Table 16 shows the level of agreement expressed by informants to six personal value statements.

Table 16  
**Personal Values Belief Statements**

<b>I enjoy getting together with my parents often.</b>	<b>Most of my life is spent doing meaningful things.</b>	<b>I plan to marry and have children.</b>	<b>Trying to understand myself and others is a waste of time.</b>
88%	91%	94%	3%

<b>When I try hard I can accomplish a lot.</b>	<b>People should work hard at their jobs because hard work benefits our country.</b>
96.9%	78.8%

\*Agreement represents a combination of all strongly agree, agree and slightly agree responses.

These personal values beliefs viewed in the context of other beliefs about the utility of television content—comparison to self and advice and self-improvement (Table 14)--indicate that television plays a role in the development and maintenance of these beliefs (Parks 1999). Personal values beliefs, such as familial relationships, can be discerned based on how a family interacts with televised depictions. Most (88%) young women in this study agreed that they enjoyed getting together with their parents often. Almost all (94%) expressed agreement with the statement that they planned to marry and have children someday. In addition, the programs they watched most often were wholesome family-type shows (See Table 6) that are appropriate for children to view. Therefore, based on the daily viewing habits (Graph 1) of these young women, the types

of programs they view, the beliefs they reported about personal values and utility of TV (Tables 5, 6, 7, 11,14, 15, 16) point to descriptive statistical associations to televised content.

**RQ2: What correlations existed between beliefs about personal values and beliefs about the utilization of television depictions (See Table 17)?**

Table 17  
**Correlations between Belief Statements  
 About Personal Values and Utilization of TV Content**

CORRELATIONS (r)	I watch TV to get ideas about how to dress.	I watch people on TV because I am bored.	Watching TV makes me feel satisfied about my life.	I watch TV to be entertained.
I enjoy getting together with my parents often.	.400*	-	-	-
When I try hard I can accomplish a lot.	-	.356*	-	-
People should work hard at their jobs because hard work benefits our country.	-	-	.401*	-
Most of my life is spent doing meaningful things.	-	-	-	.403*

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Four correlations exist between beliefs about personal values and beliefs about the utilization of television depictions (See Table 17). Information about how informants were raised, parental or other extended family members’ influences and their own life experience influences for the most part were not covered in this study. These Pearson’s associations are related only to interview narratives recorded during one interview with informants. However, Parks (1999) posited that black mothers indicated more confidence that their influence over their children’s personal beliefs would hold no matter the life context. Furthermore, black families appeared to exercise more direct control over their

children’s viewing and expected their influence to take precedence in all circumstances (Parks 1999). One informant disagreed with the statement, “I watch television to get advice about how to live my life.” Responding to a probe by the investigator about why she disagreed with the statement, the informant said, “Because that’s what your momma and the lord is for.” (#25) The informant is suggesting that when she needs advice, she talks to her mother or the god that she believes in. However, Tables 14, 15 and 17 suggests that she more than likely unwittingly seeks out advice or information from television as well. Does television content serve a major function in the lives of these young, black women? Based on the findings of this study, the indications are that television plays many roles in the lives of these young women.

Life Satisfaction Beliefs Statements

Responses to this scale of belief statements were designed to discover baseline beliefs held by respondents about their lives in general. Table 18 shows responses to each statement (See Table 18).

Table 18  
**Agreement with Life Satisfaction Belief Statements**

<b>In most ways my life is close to ideal.</b>	<b>The conditions of my life are excellent.</b>	<b>I am satisfied with my life.</b>	<b>So far I have gotten the important things I want in life</b>	<b>If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.</b>
54.6%	57.6%	48.4%	72.7%	63.7%

\*Agreement represents a combination of all strongly agree, agree and slightly agree responses.

Some of the comments offered by informants pertaining to beliefs about their life satisfaction are given below:

Statement: In most ways my life is close to ideal.

“Agree. It’s ideal for me but I don’t know if others think my life is ideal.” (#33)

“Strongly agree. My financial stability needs improvement.” (#22)

“Slightly agree. I’m not as spiritual as I could be. Figuring out what to do after graduation that would make me feel great. (#20)

“I slightly agree. I have a good supportive husband and two beautiful daughters. When I finish school, my life will be ideal.” (#28)

“Strongly agree because an ideal life depends on the person. I went to college, graduated with a degree, won a national award and I have good credit for a person who is 22 years old.” (#29)

Statement: The conditions of my life are excellent.

“Slightly disagree because right now I am in an apartment with electricity and \$5 to last for 2 weeks.” (#25)

“I strongly agree because of my family.” (#27)

“Slightly agree. I don’t have anything to complain about.” (#30)

“Agree. No complaints. Nothing to complain about.” (#33)

“Strongly agree. I have clothes, both parents, money, an apartment and I have had a car since I was 15.” (#15)

Statement: I am satisfied with my life.

“Disagree. I have not reached my goals as a doctor and wife.” (#1)

“Disagree. Once I pass state boards that will be a great accomplishment. I wanted to be a nurse since age seven and I have not accomplished that yet.” (#21)

“Slightly agree. Satisfied but it could improve with a career.” (#23)

“Strongly disagree. For right now.” (#25)

“Neither Agree nor Disagree. I am not where I want to be in school, a career or personally.” (#30)

“Disagree. This (statement) suggest I have accomplished everything I want and I have not. I will never be totally satisfied with life.” (#31)

“Agree. I’m just satisfied each year the lord has blessed me with so much as long as I am accomplishing things and not falling behind in my goals.” (#33)

Statement: So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

“Slightly agree. I am not where I want to be in life. I want to go to Pharmacy school. I am waiting for a letter of acceptance. (#16)

“Agree. Not having a car is one important thing I am missing.” (#24)

“Slightly agree. I have a good relationship with my mother that I didn’t have before.”

Statement: If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

“Strongly agree. I would want to speak to my brother who died; once more.” (#17)

“Slightly agree. I would change a relationship I had and offer to help other girls with the same concerns.” (#18)

“Strongly agree. I would not change anything. Any mistakes I made helped me to learn.” (#20)

“Strongly agree. I would change my first year in school. I had 2 or 3 credit cards and I would change that.” (#21)

“Strongly agree. I would change undergraduate grades and study more.” (#22)

“Slightly disagree. I would change my attitude about school.” (#23)

“Strongly agree. I’m happy. I wouldn’t change a thing.” (#24)

“Strongly agree. But I would change fussing and fighting with my mother.” (#25)

“Agree. I would have worked a little harder as undergrad and taken on a second major.” (#26)

“Strongly agree. I would not change anything.” (#27)

“Slightly agree. After high school, I would have gone straight to college.” (#28)

“Strongly agree. There are some things we might want to change. If I could change one of those things, I would not be where I am today. It is the whole picture or outcome, not one situation.” (#29)

“Neither agree nor disagree. Life lessons teaches us how we should have acted. I needed to know what I know now to decide what to change. But I’m not certain that I would change anything, if I could.” (#31)

“Disagree. Something that you can write down? I would change the way I rebelled against my Mom when I was younger.” (#32)

“Agree. No. You hear over and over that the lord takes you through different things to teach you.” (#33)

“Disagree. Personal decisions, actions and associates.” (#11)

**RQ3: What correlations existed between beliefs about life satisfaction and beliefs about personal values (See Table 19)?**

Table 19  
**Correlations between Belief Statements  
About Life Satisfaction and Personal Values**

CORRELATIONS	I enjoy getting together with my parents often.	Most of my life is spent doing meaningful things.	In most ways my life is close to ideal.	I am satisfied with my life.
In most ways my life is close to ideal.	.405*	-	-	-
I am satisfied with my life.	-	.414*	-	-
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	-	.376*	.394*	.588**

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Five correlations exist between belief statements about life satisfaction and personal values as seen in Table 19. The women in this study are highly motivated to achieve a certain level of assimilation and success in the larger society as a part of their acceptance into their interpretive community or secondary familial group. Interpretive group personal values require each informant to be a matriculator. Feelings of enjoyment

in getting together with parents and spending life doing meaningful things contribute to feelings that their lives are close to ideal and satisfying. This interpretive group seeks out opportunities to help others and contribute socially and financially to their group and the community at large. Participation in seeking educational goals is also another meaningful aspect of their lives that is important to their biological family and their organizational family.

Still as a result of television depictions, informants question their college pursuits because of people seen in televised portrayals who did not attend college but found social and financial success. One study participant offered the following comment

“I ask myself should I have come to college or should I have just gone to California or New York and just pursued by dream just straight ahead and just screwed college. I want to say that close to 80% or 90% (of actors on television or in the movies), you can’t quote me on this, I guarantee you have not gone to college. And I’m like dam, maybe that’s what I should have done. Especially (like) the little rappers and singers. (#15)

Comments like the one above indicate the significance of TV content in determining how personal values and satisfaction beliefs could be questioned or altered as a result of TV viewing. Family dynamics as a part of personal values combined with TV content interactions underscores the influence of TV messages on beliefs about life satisfaction Parks (1999). The theoretical suggestions of earlier empirical studies (Bloch and Richins 1993; Richins 1991) in Chapter 2 that these young women’s receptions and utility of televised messages are somehow tied to personal beliefs about overall life satisfaction (See Table 19) are supported in this study.

**RQ4: What correlations existed between beliefs about life satisfaction and the utilization of television depictions?**

Table 20  
**Correlations between Belief Statements  
 About Life Satisfaction and Utilization of TV Content**

CORRELATIONS (r)	I plan to watch TV everyday.	I watch TV to get ideas about how to dress.	I watch TV to be entertained.
The conditions of my life are excellent.	.402*	-	-
In most ways my life is close to ideal.	-	.391*	-
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	-	.413*	-
Watching TV makes me feel Satisfied about my life.	-	-	.429*

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Four correlations exist between belief statements about life satisfaction and utilization of TV content (See Table 20). Informants believed that viewing TV depictions everyday is numerically associated with the belief that the condition of their lives is excellent. What does this mean? One interpretation is that at some level of consciousness these black women find helpful tips and other information from televised scripts that enhance their lives. The way people see things affects what they know or may already believe (Berger 1991). These findings also suggest the materialism that exists in the use of television as an independent factor of life satisfaction. For example, watching TV to get ideas about how to dress is associated with the belief that so far I have gotten the important things I want in life. Having acquired money, clothes, a car and the ability to pay bills is important for informants to feel satisfied in life. This was alluded to earlier by informants' comments related to life satisfaction beliefs (pages 90-91).

## **CHAPTER 5: THEORY DEVELOPMENT, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Two broad issues stood out in this study pertaining to how black female interpretive group members decode television messages: 1) the lack of programs featuring blacks; and 2) the utility of television contents in the everyday lives of black females.

### **THE LACK OF BLACK PROGRAMMING**

Informants within this study most often watched 13 situation comedies (See Table 6) offered only on cable channels. Ten of these programs are also listed on the 2004 Nielsen Media Research list as the most often watched primetime shows by African-Americans nationwide. These 10 top shows largely depict black people, actors, and characters. Media studies offer that individuals select programming that features portrayals of others who look like and espouse words and actions similar to themselves (Appiah 2000). Such programming choices support the theory of cognitive consistency. By definition the theory is defined as a tendency on the part of individuals to maintain, or to return to, a state of cognitive balance; therefore the tendency toward equilibrium determines or drives their selection of particular media content (Baran and Davis 2000). This theory follows a central tenet of attitude change theory espoused by scholars such as Lazarsfeld, Klapper and DeFleur. Lazarsfeld, et al. (1944) noted that people seemed to seek out media messages consistent with the values and beliefs of those around them. Klapper (1960) wrote that people tend to expose themselves to mass communications that are in accordance with their existing attitudes and beliefs. For members of an interpretive group, attitudes and beliefs are more or less maintained as a group. DeFleur's (1970) Social Categories theory espoused that finding. The findings of the present study,

featuring a black, female interpretive group, support those three theoretical postulations as is evidenced in Tables 5, 6, 7, 8.

What is most glaring about those 10 most often watched shows is that they represent the small menu of programs featuring predominantly African-American frames that appear across all channel offerings of televised text. The impression is that nationwide and on a local basis those 10 programs are all that African-Americans have to select from when scanning television depictions that feature people and messages about themselves. The paucity of programs that appeal to blacks, and for that matter, the lack of black faces on television in general is one of several concerns expressed by study informants.

The social construction of reality via media mostly offers majority or Caucasian-American faces along with the same type of perspectives and frames (Lippmann 1922; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985; hooks 1992; Kern-Foxworth 1994; Campbell 1995; Chideya 1995; Rocchio 2000). A review of television programs in 1999 found that African-American representations were limited to certain television channels (Hunt 2000). African-Americans and minorities in general are rarely seen as on-camera news sources compared to the parade of white faces (Campbell 1995). This has been the case for media regarding African-Americans since prior to the Civil War ending (Kern-Foxworth 1994).

#### AN ECONOMIC THEORY ABOUT FACTORS THAT SHAPE COMMERCIAL TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

For longer than anyone wants to admit, speaking to consumers about the presence of people of color in television and other media transcripts has been absent from the landscape (*The Advocate* 2005). Why is that so? African-Americans are over 12 percent

of the American population. What underlying causes support the maintenance of the general lack of black people's images, voices and viewpoints in televised messages? One explanation is economics (Kern-Foxworth 1994; hooks 1992; Campbell 1995).

At its inception, television was selected for investment and promotion as a new and profitable phase of a domestic consumer economy (Williams 1975). Bagdikian (1983) points to effects of America's capitalist economy on the news media, condemning its appeals most often to groups with the largest aggregate purchasing power—Caucasian-Americans. The premise is that it is less important that people buy a certain newspaper or view a certain television program than it is for them to be the right kind of viewer. The standard cure for unwanted demographics in television is simple: Change, alter or limit certain content.

Let's examine the economic theoretical factors that shape commercial television programming (Defleur & DeFleur Forthcoming in 2006).

1. The economic institution of the United States is one of political capitalism, operating on principles and requirements originally set forth by Adam Smith.\*
2. The most fundamental requirement of that institution is that products or services are produced and marketed in order to make a profit for their owners and stockholders.
3. Making a profit requires maximizing the difference between the costs of production and the earnings obtained from the product or service.
4. The mass media in the United States are for the most part commercial activities that operate on those principles and requirements (with some minor content paid for by government or non-profit organizations).
5. Those who produce programming for the commercial media (print, film and broadcast) must produce products that make a profit in order to continue their operations, and without profits their enterprise could not survive.
6. The major source of income from which profits are derived for most such media is from revenues paid by advertisers.
7. For a commercial medium to earn maximum profits from advertising revenues, it must

attract the largest possible audience to the content or programming in which the advertising announcements are embedded.

8. *Therefore*, producing content or programming that fails to produce a large audience is less likely to attract revenues from advertisers---ultimately causing economic failure.

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\*Definitions: A social institution is that complex of norms, laws, customs and other accepted regularities in a society that are deeply established by social tradition and serve to make the behavior of its population stable and predictable in a broad sphere of behavior. Examples are the society's family pattern, prevailing religion, means of education, its political system and its economic activities.

Political capitalism is an economic institution in which privately owned enterprises produce and market products and services by keeping costs of production at a minimum and the price of that which is produced at a maximum in order to maximize profits—but within a system of legal requirements and limits imposed by the political institution.

A major proposition of such a theory is that the economic institution of the United States is one of political capitalism. Capitalism represents an economic institution in which privately owned enterprises, like the media, produce and market products and services by keeping costs of production at a minimum. The basic product of the television medium is time. Television ads are sold to advertisers seeking the largest number of audience eyeballs for their goods. For a commercial TV program to turn a profit, it must sell time TV advertising time while serving up large audiences to advertisers. Product advertisers require programs that maintain an appeal to the largest possible audience. Therefore, producing television programming that fails to attract a large audience with purchasing power will not attract revenues from advertisers.

Caucasian-Americans represent the largest group of people in the American marketplace. They are the prime target audience of advertisers. TV shows designed to attract such audiences must, in the name of profits, portray characters and frames that are most appealing to that majority group. This makes an economic theory of factors that shape commercial television programming a solid reason for the small and limited number of programs designed to appeal to African-Americans. Economic reasons

demand that television programs appeal to a cross section of groups and audiences such as ABC's *My Wife and Kids* situation comedy, because an audience consisting of a cross-section from different groups is a large number of eyeballs as well for TV managers to sell to advertisers. That show was not only nominated for several NAACP Image Awards for its popularity among African-Americans as a positive program, the show also received a 2002 People's Choice Award for Favorite New Television Comedy Series. The latter award spoke to the show's ability to capture the interest of groups outside of African-Americans. In that case, the audience for such shows represents a cross-over audience that appeals to television managers and advertisers alike for its potential profitability.

The other side of the economic theoretical concept also indicates support for status quo stereotypical representations of minorities in televised depictions. The theory could be utilized to explain why ultimately shows designed to appeal to African-American audiences and other sub-cultural groups will be developed and grow in the future. Capitalism concerns itself with the spending habits and power of any potential audience group regardless of the profile of the group members. If indeed the economic theory fully explained why a limited number of programs are geared to African-American audiences, the inference derived from the concept would also suggest that advertisers can afford to overlook the \$656 billion earned in 2003 (Target Market News 2005) by black households. That earned income represents a 3.9% increase over the \$631 billion posted for black households in 2002. Profit-driven media program designers and product advertisers can no longer profess that economics alone explain the lack of black frames in televised messages. Further studies involving program producers and designers must be

undertaken to determine reasons beyond economics that TV offers fewer programs that could appeal specifically to minority groups.

To add fuel to the fire regarding the lack of black programming, during the past couple of years, media industry concerns surfaced pertaining to how Nielsen Media Research counts program audiences (Mediaweek.com 2005). Viacom, owner of BET and UPN cable channels that provide most of the black cast/black frame shows in the televised content landscape, along with WB, NBC and ABC executives complained that ratings figures related to blacks and especially black women had decreased dramatically in comparison to previous years for certain black shows (Mediaweek.com 2005). Nielsen managers agreed that they, too, did not understand why such shows that traditionally appealed to black women appeared in the ratings to have fewer black women viewers. Inferences in the present study about topics and issues that irritated black female informants may be part of the decrease in black female viewership for some programs. Viacom suggested that Nielsen's audience sample regarding black viewers may be flawed. Those concerns are still under investigation by Nielsen. The point is that if the ratings or black audiences appear low for shows blacks are expected to watch, economics or profitability comes into play again. No matter how the economic theory comes into play concerns persists about TV depictions general failure to develop programs with black frames. Televised content possesses the power to subvert reality even in its explanations about why the commercial TV programming structure exists the way it does (Campbell 1995). Economic theory does justice in part as an explanation for the problem of the lack of blacks and black programming in televised portrayals. However, the theory

can also be used to support the few existing black programs and the development of more in the future.

#### SELECTIVE TRADITION DETERMINES TELEVISED CONTENT FRAMES

The principal of parsimony offers that the simplest explanation of a phenomenon when there is more than one explanation is usually the correct one. Another, simpler explanation for the lack of black programming on TV is that that's the way, traditionally, since television began in the 1940s, things have always been (Williams 1961). The program development patterns of televised content through selective tradition always possessed frames about whiteness not blackness. Tradition combines with the present and continues to serve as an overarching frame regarding how things are and will be. The structural pattern of what has always been is very hard to change. There is the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place. There is the recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period. There is also, as the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition (Williams 1961). This means that no matter the age or time when decisions about social rules and technological artifacts were developed, tradition generally continues to take precedence. So economics and tradition serve as the foundations that determine the socio-cultural perspectives primarily presented in televised content. Any change or alteration on a significant level will occur over a long revolutionary period of time, maybe until a variety of socio-cultural messages and images have been around long enough to be thought of as traditional.

## AFRICAN-AMERICANS UTILIZE TELEVISION DEPICTIONS IN UNWITTING WAYS TO SATISFY SOCIAL DESIRES AND DEMANDS

African-Americans are identified as the heaviest television viewers (Nielsen Media Research 2005). For this study they are also multiple owners of television sets, and believe in using TV to peer into the lives of others and wish for lifestyles of people represented on the small screen. Informants reported that they compared themselves to people on television content, sought out ideas and messages about how to dress from TV depictions. In general, young black women in this study's interpretive community decode mediated transcripts in hopes of being rewarded with information to improve their social interaction and assimilation into the dominant Caucasian-American culture. In seeking to improve their lives through the use of television content, informants find that the representations of blacks on TV rarely look like them, dress like them or act like them. In fact, based on comments from study informants, blacks in general on TV, with the exception of a few programs like *The Cosby's*, *Girlfriends*, and *My Wife and Kids* barely resemble or represent the social beliefs and environments that are thought of as desirable or acceptable to this study's participants. Research group informants preferred wholesome family images and stories versus what they think are mostly vulgar, sex-related, crime focused, misleading, negative, lack of balance representations of blacks in TV content. However, informants found ways to decode or negotiate their way through the mediated messages they found unacceptable. Due to the fact that TV media depictions are so plentiful and ubiquitous, mass audiences like heavy black viewers have become dependent on its offerings. Therefore, as members of a subculture, informants seek out and purposely engage TV messages and *incidental lessons*. TV viewers in this group and potentially other interpretive communities look into the television mirror seeking selected

transcripts to decode and mimic for social needs and upward mobility. In other words, informants use television like a mirror that reflects normative behavior they plan to use as a self model in an effort to fit into the larger Caucasian-American professional and social circles. This then introduces a new concept of a looking –glass self theory relative to utilization of televised content.

#### THE “LOOKING-GLASS SELF” THEORY OF MEDIA INFLUENCES

Based on analyses of the answers to open-ended questions, unstructured interviews and questionnaire belief statements, black women in this study indicate unwitting utilities of televised content, although it appears that their viewing habits are purposive. DeFleur and Dennis (1998) posited that professional communicators disseminate messages continuously to arouse intended meanings about culture in large attending audiences in an attempt to influence them in a variety of ways. Those messages are sent, received, decoded (as intended) and applied by viewers to create a more acceptable self, per the message design, to present to the larger world. Viewers ultimately seek out TV messages to reinvent themselves and/or personalities to achieve emotional, social and financial goals (Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller). Knowing how to talk, walk, dress, act and react on cue in a socially acceptable manner is the payoff for their TV content viewing habits.

Audiences’ self comparisons lead to actions resulting in potential changes in attitudes, redevelopment or reinvention of personal beliefs about self (DeFleur 1970; Couldry and Curran 2003; hooks 1992; Gerbner, Mowlana and Schiller 1996). Broadcast and print media content strong-arms viewers, listeners and readers into social conformity. This implies that when viewers see televised transcripts the messages and images reflect

social judgments about more acceptable attitudes, looks and ways of being and living in real-life that viewers attempt to replicate. The replication of TV textual beliefs and attributes depend on how viewers decode what is reflected back to them from the textual mirrors they peer into and the process continuously repeats itself. So, in fact, when viewers think they are using TV transcripts for entertainment purposes only, they are unwittingly using the content for other reasons. The following conceptual model shows how viewers cognitively process the mirror image utility of television depictions.

**Table 21**  
**Conceptual Model of**  
**The Looking-Glass Function of Television**

<u>TV's Depictions As</u> <u>Social Mirror</u>	<u>TV's Utility For</u> <u>The Person</u>
Offers versions of Social norms	Discover social norms
Depicts how people respond To various kinds of people	Learn how others respond To people like me
Portrays how people respond To people like me	Learn how others respond To people like me
Depicts how others think about People like me	Define or refine my self-image

For blacks, who are heavy viewers of TV content, the suggestion is that their need for guidance, incidental lessons and personal reinvention may be greater than other groups in society. However, at the same time, black viewers and others appear unaware of the subliminal messages, lessons and control that are built into televised depictions. Even the average media professional may not be aware of the just-under-the surface maintenance of the status quo transcripts they provide on a daily basis to their

unsuspecting audiences (Campbell 1995). Enlightenment about the mirror-like use of TV content could only have been observed and discovered using the interpretive methodology. Just as Francis Bacon posited in 1620 when he proposed the new inductive method of inquiry, inductive reasoning based completely on observations (obtained through the senses) enables concepts or theories to be formed regarding the study of a particular phenomenon (forthcoming DeFleur & DeFleur 2006). The qualitative methodology of this project allowed for emic issues to come to the surface. By analyzing the interviews of informants' beliefs about how they decode and utilize TV content, the TV mirror concept became clear. The study's interpretive method led to exactly what Bacon predicted—the creation of a theory that can be tested deductively in an effort to validate the soundness of the new theoretical framework.

Qualitative inductive interpretations and analyses of prompted the development of a The “Looking-Glass Self” Theory of Media Influences. The theory's seven (7) basic propositions are:

1. In their news and entertainment content, the mass media transmit to audiences *definitions of the social heritage*—including depictions of culturally shared beliefs about, and appropriate behaviors toward, various categories of people identified by age, race, ethnicity, gender, bodily features and other significant factors.
2. The meanings of signs and cues depicted in media portrayals regarding such categories do not come from the way reality is actually structured, but *reflect content-producers' views* of the manner in which beliefs, attitudes and norms for behavior have been traditionally defined in *dominant majority perspectives*.
3. Through such transmissions, mass communications display unintended *incidental lessons*, that can lead to, or reinforce, unwitting social constructions of reality on the part of audiences concerning the nature and worth of the members of various categories of people in the American society who are depicted in media content.
4. Insofar as the lessons and definitions provided in media content reflect *general cultural norms*—that is, portray dominant majority beliefs about, and appropriate behaviors

toward, various categories in the society—such interpretations serve to provide guidelines for all citizens within the society.

5. In this manner, for all members of audiences, media content signifies and defines the rules of *social placement, desirability and general level of acceptance* of individuals who are demographically located within the society's various categories (i.e., age, race, ethnicity, gender and bodily appearance).

6. As individual members of audiences see and interpret how people with their own personal characteristics, that define their own category memberships, are portrayed and treated in media content, they acquire understandings about *their own personal or self worth*, by attending to the depictions of the norms of interpretation of the general and dominant culture of their society.

7. **Therefore:** Mass media content, depicting the nature and worth of members of various categories, provides a "*looking-glass*,"—a social mirror—reflecting to individual audience members the manner in which the society defines them in positive or negative ways, and consequently providing them with standards for defining themselves.

The unveiling of the new theoretical framework outlined above surfaced from interpreting the reception, influence and utility of televised messages through observations of African-American women, however, the "looking-glass self" theory's scope of influence when proven through a later deductive approach should be applicable to any and all television content viewers. The theory's scope potentially includes all categories of people: black, white, American, French, Chinese, etc., from around the world in mediated situations including television, radio, Internet and newspaper. The suggestion is that individuals don't have to see media images as in television, newspaper and Internet content. The transcripts or spoken words of radio messages also allow individuals to create pictures in their own minds about the reception of received messages.

Sixty-one years ago, Herzog (1944) asserted that women listened to radio daytime serials for wishful thinking. Horton and Wohl in 1956 reported that television audiences created para-social relationships with actors and characters they viewed on TV. Since

those early days of radio and television, many scholars offered a variety of uses of mediated images ( Lazarsfeld 1944; Horton and Wohl 1956; Rosengren and Windahl 1972; Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974; hooks 1992; Kern-Foxworth 1994; Bobo 1995; Frisby 2000; Appiah 2000; Covert and Dixon 2004). The difference in this theoretical offering is that it does not limit the potential uses of the media as a tool-- a mirror. Any utility of television content identified or yet to be identified by social scientists may fit under the TV as a mirror overarching umbrella. In addition, the inference is that different individuals or groups seem to require varying doses of mirrored reflections of TV content. The looking-glass utility is only limited by the viewer. The influence and utility is very personalized and may be unknown to others unless the viewer chooses to share the way that they receive, decode and become influenced by utilizing the TV content mirror. These young, black women through personal interviews conducted by the investigator used the mirror in a variety of ways.

This proposed theory offers an expansion of the uses and gratifications theory in the new age of multiple forms of mass communication, while underscoring the very individual, customized receptions, influence and utilities of mass media content in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### Interpretive Group Informants Use Heavy Viewing of TV Content As A Mirror For Acquiring Social and Career-Related Information.

Televised content offers a mirror of images and messages that are sent and received by individuals in a personally customized manner. Black female informants seem to need the mirror more often and for longer periods of time than other groups in

society (Nielsen Media Research 2005). The basic utility sought by this group focused on: 1) entertainment, 2) educational convenience (incidental learning), and 3) social demands. One-third of respondents said watching television made them feel satisfied about their life and 75% felt happy while viewing television. Maybe their responses were based on the application of previously acquired information utilized to improve their lives and that more viewing could provide additional satisfaction. One informant reported that she watched programs like Family Feud to test her knowledge as indicated in her quoted response below:

“And if I know it (the answers to the game show questions), I feel okay. If I don’t know it (the answers), I need to get up on those things. I think about why I don’t know the answer. If it’s something I haven’t been exposed to, I’m okay with that, But if it’s something I should know I think I need to get up on that topic. I just overall want to be a well-rounded, intelligent person and attentive person. Being that type of person will help me reach my goals.”  
(#1)

Acquisition of knowledge that can be conjured up at will was important to these young women. As another informant stated, you must know what’s going on at all times.

#### Interpretive Group Informants Utilize Media Mirrors To Find Out What Others Think About Them.

Young, black women utilize media content to find out what the larger society thinks about them; and to alter the negative impressions they find when they refer to the TV mirror. Alterations of personal thoughts, opinions and attributes may result when they see and hear mediated messages that poke fun or suggest that certain attributes about blacks are unacceptable. This was true even in 1932 when blacks were asked to respond to two different advertisements that portrayed a poorly dressed fictional Aunt Jemima character (Edwards 1932). This study’s African-American women prefer representations

of other African-Americans who depict wholesome, family-type characterizations, and generally well-dressed, positive reflections of blackness. One respondent (#33) reported feeling irritated when teenaged black females were used in pregnancy scenes because she believed that such TV depictions promoted the belief that all black female teens are mothers. Even in the face of statistics that support the existence and truth about blacks in negative depictions as reality for some blacks, these women seem to question the portrayals. Another informant (#20) even suggested that the statistics about HIV/AIDS should be studied closer because she doubted media information that the numbers suggesting the disease was prevalent in the black community was accurate. This reflects the lack of trust in serious news content offered in televised content.

#### Interpretive Group Informants Use Cable To Expand The Reception Of TV Content They Like To View.

Televised messages that are appealing to African-Americans are found most often on cable channels. Access to cable is important to these young black women. Informants expressed a strong desire and need for cable. Eleven (11) of the 13 situation comedies most watched by this research group are broadcast over cable channels. Almost all of those programs were listed on the Nielsen Media Research (2005) top ten primetime programs watched by blacks nationwide.

#### Interpretive Groups Report Contradictions About The Utility Of Televised Content.

Interpretive group members simultaneously expressed preferences for programs promoting positive messages about African-Americans; they also reported viewing programs thought of as representative of negative messages about blackness. Many informants mentioned the show, *The Parkers*, as a program that depicts black women as

domineering, loud, obese and dressed in an inappropriate manner. Yet one of the programs' main characters, Monique, was reported as an actress other informants liked and admired. Such contradictions suggest that the same feelings of shame felt about negative or distasteful portrayals of blacks serve to maintain the connection that blacks feel they have with those characterizations. This finding indicates that there is a desire to see blacks on television in almost any characterizations, even negative ones, versus not seeing blackness represented at all. This suggests a problem of balance about representations of blacks in media.

#### Other Beliefs Expressed About The Reception Of TV Content By Interpretive Group Informants.

Over sixty percent (63.6%) of informants agreed that they saw people and lifestyles that they wanted to acquire in television depictions and more than sixty percent (66.6%) agreed that they watched television to get ideas about how to dress. As the TV mirror theoretical framework suggested, personal attributes or bodily appearances play a role (See Table 8) in why informants view television content.

As has been the case for blacks since before coming to the American continental shores as slaves, hair and appearance in general has social and cultural implications (Byrd and Tharps (2001). In the early fifteenth century, hair functioned as a carrier of messages in most West African societies. In American society many televised messages focus on products for improving the appearance of women from the top of their heads down to their feet. How women dress provides messages about them that determine their acceptability in society. This is particularly important for African-American women who feel minimized in any discussion about beauty. The utility of television content to

acquire information about how to dress or look to achieve social and professional success is important to these young women.

The “looking glass’ self theory developed earlier on personal attributes and personal decoding of reflections seen in the television mirror provides precision in explaining the how and why of textual message reception, influence and utility. The comparison provided between beliefs statements about TV content utility highlight the importance of media information in the lives of all groups and genders for the 2002 and 2005 media utility studies (See Table 15). The present study, compared to the racially mixed (Grable 2002) study of males and females indicated agreement (across the board) about television content’s multiple utilities.

Findings from this study indicate that black females use TV depictions more to help them to make decisions about their lives (See Table 15). Television message utility is important in decisions about: how to live life; how to improve life; what lifestyle should be sought after, and to make comparisons with self.

The results indicate that several personal value and utilization of TV belief statements have statistical associations (See Table 17). A correlation was found between informants’ beliefs that they spend most of their lives doing meaningful things, and that they watch TV to be entertained. This finding infers that viewing TV content is considered a meaningful activity. The logic is that the reception of TV information based on Caucasian-American perspectives helps the young, black women prepare for assimilation into the larger culture. Prospective improvements learned incidentally through media conduits like television can be used to achieve social acceptability.

Measures of association between life satisfaction and personal values belief statements uncovered several numerical correlations. One of the most highly correlated relationships was found between informants' beliefs that they had acquired the important things in life and that they were satisfied with their lives. The finding indicates that life satisfaction for this group is dependent on personal values. Believing that one's life is, close to ideal; spent doing meaningful things; and based on having achieved the important things in life, were used by this group to determine their satisfaction with life. However, at the same time, TV content, too, contributed to satisfaction beliefs. The TV content is used as the mirror to make comparisons about informant's lives to the lives of people seen on television. Following such comparisons or mirrored reflections, the young women made decisions about their personal satisfaction with life. If the TV mirror-based comparisons of people's lives like them were represented as socially unacceptable, the women would more likely decode such receptions in a personal way and seek personal reinventions or alterations to align their lives with the TV messages. The alternative interpretations of such content may lead informants to negotiate the media messages in an oppositional manner. That is, take the negative portrayals and find a positive angle that does not diminish their self-esteem.

Such comparison processes continue and repeat themselves on a daily basis, potentially every time an informant views TV content. Unwittingly informants keep returning to the content to keep confirming that they lead normal, acceptable lives based on the larger dominant culture's values and beliefs.

Statistical relationships were also found between beliefs about life satisfaction and the utilization of TV content (See Table 20). This study exhibited throughout its design

an inferred hypothesis between life satisfaction and TV viewing. The most interesting relationship existed between informants' beliefs that they watch TV everyday and that the conditions of their lives are excellent. This statement offers a connection between their opinions about their quality of life and TV message receptions. Few if any studies have looked at these two types of belief statements as they relate to African-American women in an interpretive group. This finding provides the strongest indication that the heavy television viewing found among black women is purposive. TV content viewing as indicated by many scholars (Kern-Foxworth 1994; hooks 1992; Bobo 1995) cited throughout this dissertation is not always mindless and a waste of leisure time. For these black female interpretive group members in American society, television represents a mirror used to understand how they are viewed by others. Once such mediated information is acquired, it may be used more or less to improve their personal and social images in negotiating their way through a society that in many ways considers them as different, outside of the norm and invisible in media content.

Is this level of television message utility common among the average black female interpretive group or any audience group across all age and group differences? That is a question that remains to be answered by future deductive studies using individuals and other diverse interpretive groups.

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APPENDIX  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN’S RECEPTION, INFLUENCE and  
UTILITY OF TELEVISION’S TEXTUAL MESSAGES  
QUESTIONNAIRE

**Dissertation Project**

Primary Investigator: Bettye A. Grable, Doctoral Candidate  
Louisiana State University  
Manship School of Mass Communication

READ TO INTERVIEWEES:

By responding to the questions in this study, you are consenting to participation in this dissertation project. All information obtained will be kept confidential by the investigator. Your name or any other identifying information will NOT be used in any documents, reports or books that may result from this collection of responses. You may refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. At any time during this interview, you may feel free to end your participation.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION:

1. Gender: FEMALE

2. Are you \_\_\_\_\_ single  
                  \_\_\_\_\_ married  
                  \_\_\_\_\_ separated  
                  \_\_\_\_\_ divorced  
                  \_\_\_\_\_ widowed  
                  \_\_\_\_\_ other

Explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. How many other people live with you in home, (dorm, apartment or house)? \_\_\_\_\_

4. How old are you?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. When were you born?

Month \_\_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_

6. During an average week last month, how many hours did you work?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. How long does it take you to get to school in the morning?

\_\_\_\_\_

8. Are you \_\_\_\_\_ Black

\_\_\_\_\_ Mixed Race or Other please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. Do you work while attending school?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

10. How much money did you make last year from your job?

\_\_\_\_\_ less than 8,000

\_\_\_\_\_ \$8,000 to less than \$12,000

\_\_\_\_\_ \$12,000 to less than \$16,000

\_\_\_\_\_ \$16,000 to less than \$20,000

\_\_\_\_\_ \$20,000 to less than \$30,000

\_\_\_\_\_ \$30,000 or more

11. Do you have a job?

\_\_\_\_\_

12. What is the title of your present job?

\_\_\_\_\_

13. What is your college classification?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Freshman
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sophomore
- \_\_\_\_\_ Junior
- \_\_\_\_\_ Senior

14. Is your income the only source of financial support you have?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Yes
- \_\_\_\_\_ No

Explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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Daily Media Use Habits

15. How many television sets are in your apartment or home?

\_\_\_\_\_

16. On average how many hours a day do you watch television?

\_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you plan to watch television everyday?

- \_\_\_\_\_ YES
- \_\_\_\_\_ NO

18. Do you pay for cable television?

- \_\_\_\_\_ YES
- \_\_\_\_\_ NO

19. Do you have access to cable television?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES

\_\_\_\_\_ NO

20. Does cable television influence you to watch more television?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES

\_\_\_\_\_ NO

21. What television programs do you watch most often?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

22. What people on television do you like most?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

23. What do you see on television that irritates you?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

24. Do you listen to the radio everyday?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES

\_\_\_\_\_ NO

25. How many hours a day do you listen to the radio?

\_\_\_\_\_

26. Do you plan to listen to the radio everyday?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES

\_\_\_\_\_ NO

27. What are your favorite radio programs?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

28. Who are your favorite radio hosts or personalities?

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29. Do you read a newspaper everyday?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES                      \_\_\_\_\_ NO

30. What newspaper(s) do you read when you read a newspaper?

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31. What kind of newspaper stories are of the most interest to you?

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Explain Why:

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### Beliefs about the Utilization of Television

For the following statements, please feel free to be open and honest. You may select one of the seven potential answers on the attached sheet I have given you to respond to the statements I read to you. Please tell me the answer that best describes your feeling about each statement.

32. I compare my life to people I see on television.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_    **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_    **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_    **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_    **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

33. I feel television helps me improve my life.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

34. People I see on television portray lifestyles I would like to have.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

35. I want to live my life like people I see on television.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

36. I watch television to get ideas about how to dress.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

37. I watch television to get advice about how to live my life.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

38. I feel happy when I watch television.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

39. Watching television makes me feel satisfied about my life.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

40. I watch people on television because I am bored.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

41. I watch television to be entertained.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Personal Values Beliefs**

42. I enjoy getting together with my parents often.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

43. Most of my life is spent doing meaningful things.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

44. I plan to marry and have children.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

45. Trying to understand myself and others is a waste of time.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

46. When I try hard I can accomplish a lot.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

47. People should work hard at their jobs, because hard work benefits our country.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Personal Beliefs about Life Satisfaction**

48. In most ways my life is close to ideal.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

49. The conditions of my life are excellent.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

50. I am satisfied with my life.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

51. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

52. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

**Strongly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Agree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Agree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neither Agree nor Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Slightly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_ **Strongly Disagree** \_\_\_\_\_

## VITA

Bettye A. Grable teaches theory and research courses as an associate professor at Boston University. Her research interests focus primarily on the reception, influence and utility of media content on the life satisfaction of diverse audiences.

Professionally, she has worked for 18 years in various public relations positions including a five-year stint as director of public information at Manatee Community College; promotions director at WSRZ radio station in Sarasota, Florida; television host of the FAMU Today weekly television program; and Scientific Editor in the College of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida. She also served as the first director of the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communication Minority Scholarship Program, later becoming the Community Liaison Officer, in charge of media relations and internal public relations, at the City of Tallahassee.

As a journal writer for the Florida House of Representatives Clerk's office, she assisted in the daily writing and production of the House's legislative journal. While there, she managed and produced the House of Representatives radio actuality service providing news and information about legislators' activities to radio stations around the state. More recently, she served as the National Office Manager for the Black College Communication Association (BCCA). In addition, she has taught journalism courses at Florida A&M University and Louisiana State University.

She holds a bachelor of arts degree in journalism from the University of Florida, a master of science degree in journalism from Florida A&M University and the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communication from Louisiana State University.