

REPRESENTATION MATTERS: COLORISM IN AMERICAN FILM: A KENT TEST
ANALYSIS OF “BLACK” MOVIES DURING THE 1990-2000 AND 2010-2020 DECADES

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Communication.

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ABSTRACT

Research has found that colorism is as impactful as racism in the black community. It has also found that colorism is an important factor in the self-esteem of developing African American girls. Colorism disproportionality affects darker skin African American women and causes society to see them in a negative light. The aim of this study was to examine American film through the lens of colorism. Using the Kent test, created by Clarkisha Kent, this study looked at several films popular among the black community between the decades of the 1990s and the 2010s. This study evaluated each film's contribution to colorism in American film by examining how darker skin female characters are portrayed compared to their lighter skin counterpart in the same film.

This study found that in the past 30 years, the problem with colorism in film has improved. When creating films, it is important to remember that how marginalized groups are portrayed reflect how society will perceive them. Including African American women in the decision making when it comes to how they are portrayed in film lead to successful positive images of darker skin African American women.

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Introduction

American film has a problem. Each year American media gradually erases the image of the mono-racial, darkskin, African American women. America has had a long-standing problem with racism, and it has poured into every aspect of American culture, including television and film. However, when there is racism, colorism is never far behind. Colorism is defined as the “prejudice or discrimination especially within a racial or ethnic group favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Colorism is a sector of racism that upholds the ideals of the white beauty standard and the institutions of oppression.

While colorism is not a new concept to the world, colonialism within the African continent and slavery in the Americas created a color hierarchy that caused even more damage to African slaves and their subsequent decedents. The divide in the United States began when white slave masters raped their slaves and then produced bi-racial children. Bi-racial children were at times treated better than their dark skin counterpoints. Eventually, in the United States those with lighter skin became a pseudo class of people that later transformed into a social hierarchy where mixed-race people had higher statues and privileges in both white society and the black community. While this a very abridged version of the history of slavery to modern day colorism, the point still stands that racism in America created the colorism that still affects communities within the United States and especially African Americans (Reece, 2018).

Since the introduction of African American actors in film, colorism has slowly become a big problem that needs to be addressed. American film is doing a poor job with its representation of African American women, even more so of dark skin African American women (Jones, 2019; Tapp, 2021). When 8-year-old Unique is watching her favorite Disney channel original movie, is she seeing someone like herself? What about 14-year-old Angel, is she seeing herself represented

in a positive light on the big screen in the latest teen drama? If both Unique and Angel were biracial or had lighter skin African American girls, the answer would be an astounding yes. However, Unique and Angel were both born to a dark skin African American woman and a dark skin African American man. They are both dark skin African American girls and they are not seeing themselves represented positively American television the way they should be.

Dark skin African Americans are portrayed in film using harmful stereotypes that in no way represent the majority of darkskin African American women. Dark skin African American women in film are rarely seen as the popular, pretty, love interest (Newman-Bremang, 2021), instead they are regulated to roles like the sassy supporting character to the main protagonist. They are depicted as loud, violent, masculine, and usually unlovable. In the 2017 film *Girls' Trip* the character Dina, played by Tiffany Haddish, is the darkest character of the main cast and is depicted as loud, violent, and hypersexual, fulfilling the jezebel trope of a hypersexualized black woman (Ferdinand, 2015). In the film, *MA*, Octavia Spencer's character Sue Ann is a modern mammy character as is Niecy Nash's character in *Never Have I Ever*. A mammy character refers to a nurturing, partner-less women who is always smiling and willing to please (Ferdinand, 2015). Many depictions of dark skin African American women are often used to depict negative feminine qualities (Ferdinand, 2015).

Representation means being able to see a person that looks like you with positive qualities that are not overshadowed by negative stereotypes (Ramos Chandler, 2021). Representation matters because it is what gives hope and aspiration to young girls and women (Ramos Chandler, 2021; Scott, 2021). When little girls and young women see a person that looks like them on television, it should not be constant negative stereotypes. Whether it is in their favorite television show, or their favorite film, darkskin African American women need positive

representations of people who look just like them in roles that are not reserved for the “mammy” character or the “sassy” best friend.

There are several stereotypes associated with African American women, especially dark skin women. Looking at film from two different decades starring African American women, this study serves to understand the stereotypes of African American women attached to their skin color and the progress, if any, made with the passage of time. The following literature explains colorism and its subsequent effect of African American women in film.

Literary Review

Colorism overview

Race has hindered their ability to get ahead in life, at least a little, according to 52% of African American adults in the United State (Menasce Horowitz, Brown, & Cox, 2019). After hundreds of years of slavery, racial discrimination, and segregation in the United States, the effects of America’s racist past are still holding strong today. The effects of the past show in wage gaps as well as crimes. In 2015, African American men only earned 73% of what white men were making and African American women earned even less (Patten, 2016). FBI statistics for the same year found that African Americans are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated for violent crimes and the same trends can be seen in property crimes (Du, 2021). This is, in part, because people make judgements about strangers based on their phenotypes, the observable characteristics that result from the interaction between their environment and their genotype. In a study done by Blair et al. (2002), whites were more likely to have a negative reaction to faces with phenotypes that appeared more African in nature. This has serious ramifications for African Americans in terms of being charged for crimes.

Skin color has been a driving force in the privileges one obtains throughout life. Before the Civil War, skin color among African Americans was linked to the social status of a person (Hughes & Hertel). Lighter skin in the African American community is associated with higher status as well as more positive characteristics (Keith & Monroe, 2016). Children are more likely to associate negative traits with dark skin males and positive traits with light skin males (Adams, Kurtz-Costes, & Hoffman, 2016). Colorism is learned at a young age and carries on through every stage of life. Studies have found significant preference for lighter skin in children from their preteen years to their teenage years. According to a 2007 study, male preteens viewed lighter skin African American women as more beautiful than women with darker skin (Stephens & Few-Demo, 2007). While preteen girls in this same study reported that women with darker skin are beautiful, girls ranging in age from 8 to 19 concluded that lighter skin was more desirable in relationships (Adams, Kurtz-Costes, & Hoffman, 2016). Lighter skin has a more positive connotation while darker skin has a more negative one (Uzogara, Lee, Abdou, & Jackson, 2014).

Skin tone bias in the socioeconomic sphere of African Americans

Skin tone bias is becoming more prominent in every field of life, from the justice system to occupational attainment (Landor, Simons, Granberg, & Melby, 2019). Seven surveys over the years have measured skin tone and other relevant variables and all have concluded that there is a consistent relationship between skin color and material well-being (Hochschild, 2007). Lighter skin individuals have greater opportunity in occupations like entertainment. The preference for lighter skin can be seen in the idealized depictions of women of lighter skin complexions in music videos and magazines (Landor, Simons, Granberg, & Melby, 2019). This phenomenon is seen in everyday occupations as well. Despite identical credentials, in an experiment setting,

lighter skin people were recommended for hiring by white subjects acting as managers more often than darker skin subjects (Hochschild, 2007). Skin color effects the socioeconomic achievements by African Americans nearly as strongly as racism does (Hughes & Hertel, 1990).

Upward mobility in America is determined by the level of education an individual achieves. This fact has historically kept most African Americans from reaching higher levels of success or socioeconomic status. In 2012, African Americans made up 14% of college-aged students (ages 18 to 24), yet just 9% of bachelor's degrees earned by young adults (Manuel Krogstad & Fry, 2014). The ramifications of this system are even further impacted by skin tone bias. In 2007 Hochschild found that lighter skin survey respondents had attained more years of schooling than the darker respondents. Those who benefited earlier from the color stratification imposed were able to later transmit resources for educational success to subsequent generations (Keith & Monroe, 2016). Colorism is seen throughout education from access to university to grade school. A color-based halo effect happens in the classroom when lighter skin students of color are seen as the good kids in the class, they often perform better because of their teacher's expectations (Hunter, 2016). When considering the teacher-pupil relationship, teachers hold social biases and tendencies such as perceiving lighter skin tones as smarter (Keith & Monroe, 2016).

Colorism's effects on self-esteem

Colorism isn't just affecting the romantic relationship status of African Americans, although it is a harming factor, it is also affecting the self-esteem of children, teens, and young adults (Perkins, 1996). Research shows that African American individuals use race related phenotypic features to judge themselves and others (Maddox, 2004). African American children, girls in particular, show problems in self-esteem due to their skin-color. In darker skin girls, skin

tone was a direct link to lower self-esteem (Landor, Simons, Granberg, & Melby, 2019). Skin tone bias creates problem in the mental health of African Americans. As more favorable traits are attributed to lighter skin, many Americans, [especially African Americans], would prefer to have lighter skin themselves (Hochschild, 2007). While self-esteem rises in darker skin African Americans by the end of high school, self-esteem is reportedly lower in elementary school (Adams and Kurtz-Costes, Hoffman, Rowley, & Volpe, 2020), an important development stage for children.

African Americans in film

While African Americans have been in television and film for about as long as it has been around, the roles that they can obtain have drastically changed over time. Before African Americans were given roles in film, there was blackface and minstrelsy. Blackface is the practice of wearing make-up, usually of extremely dark or black complexion, to imitate African American people. Minstrelsy is a form of entertainment that encompassed blackface, songs, dances, and comedy based on stereotypes of African Americans. Both blackface and minstrelsy relied on negative stereotypes and comic or cartoonish depictions of African Americans. As film moved on from these disrespectful practices, African Americans were regulated to only a few roles: the mammy, jezebel, slave, uncivilized African, or small and seemingly background roles (Urwand, 2018).

African American women on television and in film

Stereotypes of African Americans in film help mold the perception of the general audience towards African Americans in real life. In fact, film and television has always been a system of storytelling that cultivates the very attitudes that affect future culture selections and uses (Gerbner, Gorss, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982). According to Thomas E. Ford (1997),

portrayals of African Americans in a humorous context shape the likelihood that a white individual will target an African American in a stereotypical manner. Negative representations of African American women in film or the lack of positive representation has an impact on African American women and society (Jones S. L., 1998). Positive representation help create positive perceptions of African Americans to not only whites and other minorities, but to young African Americans as well (Bristor, Lee, & Hunt 1995).

Portrayals of African Americans as a whole have come far from where they once were, and while male progression in the field of entertainment has come a long way for African Americans, it still needs work. However, the representation of African American women in film needs even more work (Jones S. L., 1998) because of their unique standing at an intersection of their race and sex. African American women do not see a true portrayal of themselves in film. In many cases African American women are just there as an antithesis to the white standard (Tindall, 2012).

Studies have found that there has been an improvement in the image of African American women in the media since the 1960s, however these improvements only effect part of the population of African American women (Tindall, 2012). The literature mentions the overall improvement but glosses over the perpetuation of colorism in Hollywood. In 2012, Tindall acknowledged that the portrayal of African American women is lacking with examples like the *Parkers*, *Hawthorne*, and *That's my Mama*. These shows feed into the broad stereotype that African American women can be mothers but not women who are romantically desired. However, of the three sitcoms mentioned only one stars darker skin women, the *Parkers*, and the show is littered with unbecoming stereotypes of dark skin African American women. The pattern of overlooking the colorism problem is seen throughout several studies with very few exceptions.

In 2018, Maryann Erigha explored the rise of the professional women in African American romance films and listed five examples of the modern professional woman trope (Erigha, 2018). Only one of those five films has a dark skin African American women as a leading character that fits the trope. The same trend can be seen in articles by both Camille S. Alexander (2019) and April D. Lundy (2018). The negative stereotypes of African American women in film and television are addressed, however the colorism that comes along with that was not.

African American women see the effects of the negative representation of themselves on television and in film in their everyday lives. Racial identification and skin color are the most painful and central themes that emerge in group psychotherapy with African American women (Boyd-Franklin, 1991).

Overall, most academic scholarship has addressed issues related to negative representation of African American women in film, but little has been published on colorism related to film. In addition, no work has looked at change over time related to colorism and negative stereotypes of African American women in film.

Research Questions

This study aims to understand the changes related to colorism and stereotypes of African American females in film between 1990-1999 and 2010-2019.

1. How do representations of African American females differ between light and dark skin characters?
2. How has representation of dark skin African American females changed between the 1990s and the 2010s?

Methodology

This study analyzed six films released between 1990 and 2019. The sample of films is divided into two-time cohorts to assess change over time. These cohorts are: (1) 1990-1999 and (2) 2010-2019. In choosing films for this study the website Ranker was utilized for films between 1990 and 1999, a database that lets website users vote on categories of films. The films in this study were selected from the grouping of “The Best Black Movies Ever Made, Ranked” which contained 551,300 votes by 57,800 different voters. The survey’s rules state, “Movies must feature African American and African culture and/or mostly above-the-line Black casts” (Ranker, 2021). This database is unable to control for gender, race, or age, however it provides a diverse sample size that can be curated with specific filters. A comprehensive list put together by Buzzfeed, “These Are the Best Black Movies Released In The 2010s, According To Moviegoers,” was utilized for films between 2010 and 2019. The Buzzfeed article states, “Each film listed here has received an audience score of 60% or better on Rotten Tomatoes” (Carter Jr., 2019). As with Ranker, the ranking was unable to be controlled for gender, age, and race. Biopics are based on unique and historical events that are mostly true to the subjects and times the films depict and because of this they are excluded from the selection. In the first cohort, films from the time frame of 1990 to 1999, the films that were selected are *House Party* 1990, *Friday* 1995 and *The player’s club* 1998. In the second cohort, films from the time frame of 2010 to 2019, the films that were selected are *Madea’s Big Happy Family* 2011, *Barbershop: The Next Cut* 2016, and *Little* 2019.

This study implemented the Kent Test to gage the representation of African American women in film, particularly that of darker skin African American women. The Kent test was derived from the famous Bechdel test. The Bechdel test was created by Allison Bechdel in her comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* and consist of three questions to determine the representation of

women in a film and if that woman's role can exist outside of a man's role (Liao, 2017). In order for a film to pass the Bechdel test it must meet three criteria: (1) have at least two women with names; (2) these named women must talk to each other; and (3) in their conversations, the named women must talk about something other than a man (Fogel & Criscione, 2020). This study analyzed 6 films using the Kent test to determine whether or not the films have great or poor representation of African American women. Each film starts off with 7 points and points are deducted for every element from the below list that is not met. The higher the final score the film receives, the more positive representation of African American women the film has. Each film is graded on an African American women character according to the following criteria:

- A. The character must not solely be a walking stereotype or trope. If the only thing you remember about the character is that they are “the damsel in distress,” the “sassy Black friend,” a matriarch, or a hypersexual figure this point will be lost (Kent, 2021).
- B. The character must have their own plot that directly contributes to the to the film's overall narrative. If they do not, this point will be lost (Kent, 2021).
- C. The character must not be solely included in the narrative just to be the moral compass or to hold a man down. If this character only shows up to help a male character if he needs it and when he needs it and nothing else, then this point will be lost (Kent, 2021).
- D. The character must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character, including characters that only play friends, mentors, servant, or an antagonist to white women characters. The character must not be there only to make the white women character seem cooler or progressive. If so, this point will be lost (Kent, 2021).
- E. The character must not solely exist in the film for the purpose of fetishization. If a film only includes women of color for *the express purpose* of being fetishized, gawked at, or

drooled over, this point will be lost (Kent, 2021). The only exception is if the character is established at the beginning of the film as trying to subvert an existing trope or expectations.

- F. The character must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color, unless those characters are in *nothing more* than competition for a male character (Kent, 2021). If the characters are not related a bonus point will be added to the overall score.
- G. Lastly, the character must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media (Kent, 2021). If this character’s sacrifice is sudden and not at all in line with their established wants or values, especially if the sacrifice is for not for another women of color, then this point will be lost.

Point System:

7 - 8 Points	This film/piece of media contains strong representation for women of color.
5 - 6 Points	This film/piece of media contains sound representation for women of color.
3 – 4 Points	This film/piece of media contains middling to fair representation for women of color.
1 - 2 Points	This film/piece of media contains pathetic representation for women of color.
0 Points	This film/piece of media contains abysmal representation for women of color.

(Taken from Kent 2021)

This study remains true to Kent test. This means that the element D, remained as is during the evaluations even though it was decided to utilize films that have a predominately African American cast. The characters analyzed during this study were all black. There are no leading white women in the films being analyzed in this study. The white women that do appear in the films play such minor roles that they are not a factor in the Kent Test analysis.

These tropes are operationalized as following: 1. The matriarch is depicted as strong-willed, unbending, and asexual. Their lives revolve around others, mainly their children, in way that leaves no room for personal growth or happiness (Dionne, 2013). This also alienates them from male attention. 2. The jezebel as promiscuous woman, whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate or at worse insatiable (Versluys & Codde, 2014). The jezebel is immoral and thus has no qualities worth loving, besides her hot body (Dionne, 2013). 3. The sapphire or the independent, black woman is rude, loud, malicious, and stubborn (Pilgrim, 2012). This trope can be presented as a mother or a career driven women who is too particular to find a man worth falling in love with (Dionne, 2013). 4. The damsel in distress is a beautiful woman who is suffering a terrible fate where she needs help to survive (Enochs, 2021). This trope usually ends a romantic relationship. 5. The sassy black friend is the side character who has no real story line outside of the main character. They are there to be available to offer sympathy, then crack an outrageous joke (Mason, 2021).

The characters were categorized by their skin color. This study recognized that skin color is artificial and subjective. However, for this study skin tones were divided into two categories, light and dark. A 2014 study compared the subjective method of skin tone rating from the Felix von Luschan skin color chart to an objective experiment with a narrowband reflectance spectrophotometer and found a high degree of consistency between the two methods (Treesirichod, Chansakulporn, & Wattanapan, 2014). Character skin tone group placements were determined using the Felix von Luschan skin color chart. Light skin was represented by the colors represented by the numbers 19 through 27 and dark skin was represented by the colors represented by the numbers 28 through 36.

The researcher examined each of these characters and their classifications by reviewing the film multiple times through the lens of each category and isolating scenes relevant to each category to address the presented research questions. The characters were given points based on their evaluation throughout the entire film. Specific scenes were used to help further the analysis by way of examples. After each character was given their respective scores and analysis according to the Kent test, the films from cohort one were compared to the films in cohort two based on their Kent scores. This determined whether the representation of African American women, particularly that of dark skin African American women, have changed in the last 30 years. An intercoder-consistency was done on the film, *House party* (1990). It was found that the skin tone matching was reliable through all six coders. The Kent test results were found to be reliable with the three African Americans, with the same overall score and points deducted from the elements. The three white coders' points were nearly identical with a margin 1 above or below, however the elements in which the points were deducted varied. The main discrepancy in the coding was the fetishization of the darker skin African American women as well as the stereotypes that the women exhibited. The African American coders acknowledged the stereotypes that existed in Sharane and the fetishization, while the white coders did not code any characters as being fetishized or a stereotype.

Analysis

Films from the 1990s

House Party:

House party was released in 1990. It was written and directed by Reginald Hudlin with Gerald T. Olson as the executive producer. The film stars rap duo Kid and Play as well as Tisha

Campbell as Sydney and A.J. Johnson as Sharane. The film is a lighthearted comedy that tells the story of Kid's journey to and from a house party thrown by his best friend Play.

Sharane

This character represents the darker skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 30 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope (0)

Sharane is characterized as a jezebel. Sharane is not afraid of sexual conversations as she initiates them with her best friend on several occasions, even at inappropriate times. When they are sitting outside of her house, she makes fun of her best friend for being a virgin. She constantly flirts with the boys in the film and brings up sex to her best friend quite often. When you see Sharane she is dressed in outfits that are tight, short, and revealing. The only time she is not seen in clothing like this is her last outfit in which she is wearing pajamas.

When it comes to conversations with Sydney, Sharane jokes around when the conversation becomes more serious. She tries to stay on the light side of conversations. Her humor can be inappropriate at times, like when she makes a joke to Sydney at the party. Her role in the film is as a support friend for Sydney when she needs it or to be Sydney's competition for Kid. This would characterize her as not only a jezebel but as the sassy black friend as well.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

This character does not have her own story arc. Sharane's character could be replaced with any other female character or erased all together and it would not take away from the main

plot of the film. If her character was replaced with any other girl from school, the film would still run smoothly. Her relationship to Sydney is not much of a plot device as anyone could be in competition with Sydney when it comes to vying for Kid's affection.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

While the end of the story does need the help of this character in the way of bailing out Kid from jail, ultimately, she is not here just to hold down a man.

D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

This does not apply to this character or any character in the film because there isn't a central white female character in the film.

E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (0)

While it can be argued that the character is established as a woman who doesn't mind the sexual comments and fetishization, the film gives subtle hints to the opposite of this. Sharane refuses to kiss both Kid and Play on separate occasions while those male characters push for something more. This also happens again with Kid in a scene where they are alone, and Sharane tells him they have to take things slow. Sharane pushes off the advances that are sexual in any aspect. When she does flirt back it isn't sexual in nature. Sharane would rather dance with her friend than with boys at the party.

However, the males in this film see her as nothing more than a sexual being. Her first appearance in the film is when she is walking into the cafeteria of the high school right after the character Play says, "Def women, man. Imma be hooking you up with, man...Def women like those." According to urban dictionary, a dictionary for slang terms, def means to be cool or attractive (def, 2003) Play uses it to describe the appearance of Sharane. In a scene from the

party, where Kid and Play are talking about Sharane and Sydney, they refer to Sharane as a “project girl.” In this conversation it is alluded to that both men want to sleep with her. Play mentions the use of a motel and privacy, something a “project girl” does not have. Sharane’s best friend, Sydney, refers to Sharane as a ho in a scene where they are talking about the two main male characters because she was flirting with both. Sharane is seen as the more desirable of the two friends because the men think that Sharane is more willing to have sex with them since she flirts back more than Sydney.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (0)

Sharane and Sydney are best friends, however Sharane is just competition for the male character, Kid. The only female character she speaks with is the other person vying for Kids’ attention.

G. Must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media. (1)

There is no situation in which the character could or has sacrificed herself in this film.

Total score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would fail the Kent test with a total score of 3.

Sydney

This character represents the lighter skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 24 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (1)

Sydney does not fall under any tropes in this film. She can be considered a “goodie two shoes” however, her character is not actually the good girl. Her actions throughout the film indicate otherwise. In the scene when her parents come back home from attending a party,

Sydney tells her parents she decided to stay home and her parents reply with, “oh that’s my little baby. Our little pumpkin stayed home all by herself.” This was a blatant lie as Sydney was out all night at a party. She does other things that would characterize her as the opposite of a “goodie two shoes,” including sneaking a boy into her home. It should be noted that the goodie two shoes trope is not a trope being examined in the research and therefore would not apply either way.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

Sydney does not have a plot outside of being the girl Kid ends up with. The film could go on without her because she just is the love interest of the main character, Kid. While she is a motivation for Kid to sneak out and attend the party, she is not the only motivation. He also wanted to see Sharane and just attend the party because his best friend was throwing it. Without Sydney the film would easily be able to seamlessly continue.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of “holding down” some male character and his story. (1)

Sydney gets Kid out of trouble three times in this film. The first time is when his father shows up to the party looking for him and she blocks him from going up stairs to look for Kid. The second time is when she helps him sneak out of her room when her parents arrive home, however she was instrumental in putting Kid in that predicament. Lastly, she helps Sharane, Play and others bail Kid out of jail. Sydney does come to Kid’s rescue a lot; however, this was not the only times she was shown in the film.

D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

The white women in this film were mainly background characters and did not play big enough roles to be included in the analysis of this film.

E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

Sydney is not fetishized in this film. Her appearance is commented on in the film in the first scene like Sharane's, however this does not continue throughout the film. While Kid does mention wanting to sleep with Sydney, she does not exist to only be drooled at. The males do not talk much about Sydney at all and when they do, there is only one instance in which she is mentioned in a sexual way. This is the conversation with Kid and Play at the house party, where Play suggests to Kid that Sydney is a better match for him. Kid is the only male character who mentions wanting to sleep with her. Sydney is also not put through multiple situations with multiple guys that can be sexually suggestive.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (0)

Sydney only interacts with the one other prominent female character in the film and that is Sharane. Throughout most of the film she is in direct competition with Sharane to win Kid's affection. Evidence of their competition with one another is shown in several scenes in the film. One such scene takes place in Play's house during the house party. Sydney walks into the room and sees Kid with Sharane in a suggestive pose and gets visibly upset. Her shoulder's sink as she realizes what she is seeing. In another scene in Sharane's house, right after they leave the party, Sharane tells Sydney to take Kid away from her if she believes she can.

H. Must not be the go-to character "sacrifice" in a film/piece of media. (1)

There is no sacrifice to be made in this film for this character.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 5.

Comparative analysis:

Throughout this film Sharane, the darker skin toned of the two women, is fetishized and characterized as a jezebel, however it would seem she does not actually want the sexual

attention. However, lighter skin toned Sydney, who is characterized as the opposite, welcomes the sexual advances from Kid. The film paints Sharane's character in a more negative light and as a woman who would want to have sex with the main male characters, yet Sydney is the one that attempts to follow through with such a request. Sydney is painted up as innocent and they do this by mentioning her virginity. "Virginity implied purity...virginity loss was framed as an irrevocable loss of innocence (Carpenter, 2001). They drive this point home with how her parents treat her with an innocence that most people would use towards young children, "oh that's my little baby. Our little pumpkin stayed home all by herself." However, she lied to her parents, invited a boy into her room, snuck out of the house, and ended the night with kissing Kid, yet the film still tries to show her in an innocent frame. Sharane is painted as a tease, making the male characters "beg" for it. This film follows the stereotype of women with lighter skin being more innocent in nature and darker skin women being promiscuous.

Friday:

Friday was released in 1995. It was directed by F. Gary Gray and executively produced by Ice Cube and Bryan Turner. The film stars rapper Ice Cube, comedian Chris Tucker, Nia Long as Debbie and Paula Jai Parker as Joi. This film is about Craig, a recently unemployed individual caught up in a drug money problem, and his best friend Smokey during an adventurous Friday.

Debbie

This character represents the lighter skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 26 on the Felix von Luschan Skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

- A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (1)

Debbie does not portray any characteristics throughout the film that would associate her with the tropes analyzed in this paper. In the last scenes of the film, Debbie does become a damsel in distress when she is hit by Debo during a conversation about him hitting her sister. In this scene Debbie is seen protecting her sister. She goes up to Debo and they argue with Debbie saying, "I'm not scared of you. All these niggas around here might be scared of you. But I'm not." This shows that she can handle her own and is not in need of a man to save her. In the next scene the main male character, Craig, fights Debo because he hit Debbie and other reasons that were building up throughout the entire film. After the fight the two are seen making plans for the next day and it is insinuated that they will get together. However, the plot of this film does not hinge on Debbie being saved and therefore she would not count as a damsel in distress.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

This character does not have her own plot. She is used as a plot device for the main male character's narrative arc. She is a love interest for Craig and the film would still be able to play out without her in the film.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

Debbie does not hold anyone down in this film besides her sister. She is not shown helping any man with any problems.

D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

There are no white female characters in this film outside of background characters.

E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (0)

Debbie is fetishized in this film; however, it is not as heavily shown, unlike other characters in this paper. When Debbie is mentioned the first time in this film, the male character is talking about trying to “hook up” with her. The term “hooking up” is usually used when people want to have a sexual relationship with another person. Hooking up has various definitions, however, most researchers agree it involves some level of sexual behavior with a person without the expectation of a future relationship (Lewis, Atkins, Blayney, Dent, & Kaysen, 2013). In the very first scene Debbie is in, she is wearing a black sports bra and a pair of black biker shorts while running down the street. The men in this scene gawk at her as she passes by in slow motion. One male character says, “her momma gotta ass too,” insinuating that the male characters are indeed looking at her in a sexual manner. In the next scene she shows up in she is being leered at by the main male character and she is wearing a short skirt and a cropped top. When Debbie is in a scene she is usually being leered at by a male character, except in the scene leading up to the fight. This happens to be the only time Debbie is seen wearing something that covers her entire body.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (1)

In the final scene it is implied that she began a conversation with her sister off screen because she walks in the frame saying, “No. look at your face.” Even though it was brief, Debbie does have an interaction with another female character, her sister.

G. Must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media. (1)

This character does not make any sacrifices in the film.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 5.

Joi

This character represents the darker skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 29 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (0)

While some characters in this paper closely resemble the jezebel trope as it was original conceived, Joi does not. Joi resembles a more modern-day jezebel, also known as the hoochie (Versluys & Codde, 2014). In fact, the film is deliberately trying to get this point across as every time Joi appears on screen, the song Hoochie Mama by the 2 Live Crew is playing. The specific part of the song that plays is the chorus, “You ain't nothin' but a hoochie mama Hoodrat, hoodrat, hoochie mama.” The song is about a man trying to have sex with a woman who is always ready to have sex and is promiscuous. She is only seen wearing revealing outfits. Craig’s mother also refers to her as a “fast ass girl.” Fast is used in this context as slang meaning, a girl that starts engaging in sexual exploration before it is deemed appropriate by society standards and usually appears in an immodest fashion (Parker, 2018).

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

This character does not have her own plot. Just like the other female characters in this film, she exists as a plot device for the main male character. She is just another one of the male character’s antagonists he must deal with in the film.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of “holding down” some male character and his story. (1)

This character does not hold a man down in this film. She does the opposite of helping the male character, as she is one of his antagonists. She also refuses to give him money that could save his life because she saw that another woman was trying to get his attention.

- D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

There are no white female characters in this film outside of background characters.

- E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

The film well establishes that this character is a hoochie mama and therefore it is within her characterization to dress and act the way that she does. In accordance with the Kent test, this character would not be considered to be fetishized because of her characterization. She is also not gawked at or drooled over by the men in the film.

- F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (0)

Joi does not have any on screen conversations with another female character in this film. She is also never heard on the phone talking with another female character as well. There is a scene right before she is shown on screen for the first time in which Craig's mother lets him know that there is someone on the phone for him. We are not shown his mother answering the phone and we do not hear this over camera either.

- G. Must not be the go-to character "sacrifice" in a film/piece of media. (1)

This character does not make any sacrifices in the film.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 4.

Comparative Analysis:

This film does a great job at establishing the differences between these two characters. Debbie, the lighter skin toned female, and Joi, the darker skin toned female are two vastly different characters and are both love interests to Craig, the main male character. In using music during Joi's scenes, the film foreshadows what is to come and how the characters and audience should feel about Joi. There are several ways in which background music highlights dramatic activities. Two of the most common are foreshadowing and accompaniment (Bolts & Schulkind, 1991). When other characters talk about both Debbie and Joi, it is always in comparison of the two. In the first scene Craig's mother compares the two and shows her disdain for Joi while propping up Debbie. The film establishes Debbie as a better alternative to Joi because she is in school and doing well for herself. This is seen in their dress, the way they talk, and their morals.

Both women are seen wearing clothes that are revealing. However, Debbie is never shown wearing less clothing than Joi and outside of her exercise clothes, Debbie only shows a strip of her stomach. Joi, on the other hand, is seen wearing clothes that show her stomach as much as possible. Debbie speaks with little to no AAVE, African American Vernacular English, and Joi uses AAVE and slang when she speaks. The use of AAVE is used to show a gap between the intelligence of the characters, as no one the film establishes to be intelligent uses AAVE. There has been a longstanding stereotype in the United States that only white Americans speak standard English as a sign of intelligence. This signals the importance of language when it comes to racial identities and how this makes a difference in how African Americans are heard and perceived (Versluys & Codde, 2014). Lastly, the morals of the characters are shown to be vastly different with Joi portrayed as disrespectful and a cheater. In her conversation with Craig about him cheating on her she has a man in her bed sleeping right beside her. Debbie, however, is

shown to be a protector and a good friend. She defends her friend against the insults from Smokey as well as her sister from an abusive man.

Player's Club:

Player's Club was released in 1998. It was directed and executively produced by Ice Cube. The film stars LisaRaye McCoy as Dianna and Monica Calhoun as Ebony. This film is about Dianna, a single mother, trying to make a better life for herself and her son. She does this by going to school during the day and stripping at night. She manages to make it to her senior year without any problems until her cousin Ebony comes to town and starts working at the strip club with her.

Dianna

This character represents the lighter skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 27 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (1)

Dianna's characterization does not follow any of the tropes that are being examined in this paper. Most would assume that as a stripper she would fall into the jezebel category or maybe even the damsel in distress, but she subverts both tropes. Even though she is a stripper, she herself is not overly sexual in scenes outside of the strip club. There are times when she is in the club, yet does not hold overtly sexual conversations or engage in sexual actions outside of dancing. Dianna does not need a man to save her in this film, in fact she is the one put into the hero role. Her romantic relationships do not start off as someone trying to save her and take her away from the life she is living. She does this all on her own.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (1)

The main plot of this film is Dianna's story. She is a college student working her way toward her bachelor's in journalism. During the day she attends classes and takes care of her son and at night she works as a stripper. Dianna became a stripper because it was easy money and it helped her pay for school and her son's care. The entire film revolves around Dianna's senior year in college and how working as a stripper conflicts with her school and home life. As the main character and main story line in the film, this film would not work without her character.

- C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

Dianna does not hold down any man in this film. As mentioned previously, she is the one coming to another's aid. The men in this film that interact with her or have a relationship with her do not need her help in any way in this film.

- D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

There are no white female characters in this film outside of background characters.

- E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

Dianna is fetishized heavily in this film. Fetishization is a liability of being a stripper, however, as she is the main character in this film, she does not exist just for men to gawk at and make inappropriate gestures at. She has her own plot that drives the narrative forward and fetishization is just a caveat of the main plot of this film.

- F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (2)

Dianna talks with multiple women at her job. In most scenes in the club she is talking to another female character. None of the characters are competitors of hers when it comes to her romantic ties. There is a scene that might suggest otherwise. The scene in question is where

Dianna is followed home after working at the club and she runs to her bedroom to get help from her boyfriend, only to find him in bed with her cousin. At the end of the scene and the following scene she kicks both her boyfriend and Ebony out of her house. This was not considered competition because it was not a conflict that was building up throughout the entire film, but instead a one-off scenario that occurred.

G. Must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media. (1)

This character does not make any sacrifices in the film.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 8.

Ebony

This character represents the darker skin women with a skin tone number 32 matching that of on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (0)

Ebony fills the role of a jezebel in a lot of the film. This is due to the nature of her job and the fact that the film does not flesh out her character’s life outside of the club. In the club, which she is in for most the film, the theme of sex surrounds the setting. Because her character is not fleshed out in a way that gives the audience time or space to know her outside of her job, she comes off as a promiscuous woman. In the few scenes set outside of the club this theme follows her because of the nature of the scenes. In one such scene, for example, she is at a party with Ronnie and Tricks, two women from the club who are known for getting in trouble where she is paid to strip and sleep with the men there.

Ebony could also be considered a damsel in distress because she is constantly in situations in which she needs saving. However the person that comes to her rescue is always her cousin and, therefore, she would not fit the trope completely. Her savior is her cousin and not the male character she eventually falls in love with.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (1)

Ebony is the younger cousin of Dianna. She gets a job at The Player's Club with her cousin after noticing the amount of money her cousin is getting. In doing so she becomes out of control and starts to mix in with the wrong people at the club, mainly Ronnie and Tricks. This fuels the plot's conflict and contributes to the final resolution. Without Ebony, there is no conflict in the film and Dianna would have graduated from college with no problems in her work life. In fact, Dianna's initial narration at the beginning of the film foreshadows this conflict. "I got all the way up to my senior year without being caught up in any bullshit the club had to offer," Dianna said. "Everything was cool. At least until my 18-year-old cousin moved out here from Tallahassee." Ebony is a central component of the plot and her narrative arc drives this film forward.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

There is no male character that Ebony interacts with that constitutes her holding him down.

D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

There are no white female characters in this film outside of background characters.

E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (0)

Ebony is fetishized in this film heavily and because of this fetishization, she is raped. Black female sexuality has long been viewed negatively and historically there has been a lack of legal protection afforded to African American women in this regard. This has led to African American women being seen as legitimate victims by society and it has manifested in higher rates of sexual assault in this demographic (Holmes, 2016). The men see her as only a sexual being and nothing else. Unlike Dianna, Ebony is solely seen as someone to gawk at or have sex with by men in the film. In the club, Ebony goes up to two men and ask to dance for them. They deny the request, so she asks them what will get her paid. They decide they want to have sex with her. In this scene Ebony says, “Y’all don’t want me to dance inside but y’all want to take me home.” To which the males reply with, “dancing and fucking are two different thangs.” Ebony’s character is only looked at and hypersexualized by the men in the film.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (2)

Ebony is seen having conversations with multiple women of color in the film. The main women she interacts with are Dianna, Tricks, and Ronnie. As mentioned in Dianna’s analysis, although Ebony does sleep with her cousin’s boyfriend it is not seen as direct competition for a male character. There are no other instances of Ebony and the women she interacts with being competitors when it comes to a male’s affections.

G. Must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media. (1)

This character does not make any sacrifices in the film.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 6.

Comparative Analysis:

The entire film tries to gain sympathy from the audience by building the plot around Dianna, the lighter skin toned female, as a single mom trying to make a better life. They use Ebony, the darker skin toned female, as a stark contrast to achieve this goal. An example of this is when Dianna is followed home but manages to get away and is not harmed in any way. Dianna is put into a situation where she gets out unharmed because she learned from past mistakes. Ebony, however, is put into situations where she could get hurt and does not learn from past experiences. This leads her to be beaten and raped at bachelor's party. The film shows that Dianna is the smart one for learning from her mistakes and keeping herself safe. This gives evidence to the idea that Dianna is more intelligent and in control of her life than Ebony. This film is using a rape to signify the naivety and vulnerability that comes from not having control. Films depict a woman's naivety as the reason they are raped. Women in these films lack control and agency over their lives and ultimately their bodies (Projansky, 2001).

Films from the 2010's

Madea's Big Happy Family:

Madea's Big Happy Family was released in 2011. It was directed Tyler Perry and executively produced by Ozzie Areu, Joseph P. Genier, and Michael Paseornek. The film stars Tyler Perry as Madea, Cassi Davis as Aunt Bam, Shad Moss as Byron, Teyana Taylor as Sabrina, and Lauren London as Renee. The film is based on a play by Tyler Perry that tells the story of a dying mother trying to get all her children together for an important family dinner, where she will tell them about her illness.

Renee

This character represents the lighter skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 26 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

- A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (1)

Renee does not fit the characterizations to associate her with any of the stereotypes that are being analyzed in this paper.

- B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

This character does not have a plot outside of her relationship to her boyfriend, Byron. If she were not in the film, it would still be able to work. Her character is nothing other than a plot device for her boyfriend and without his storyline, hers would not exist. Renee is used as a plot device to showcase the strife Byron has with the mother of his child and his struggle to stay on the right path.

- C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of “holding down” some male character and his story. (1)

Renee acts as an antagonist to the male character with whom she is in a relationship. She does not hold him down, rather she is causing the trouble he needs help to get out of.

- D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

There are no white female characters in this film outside of background characters.

- E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

Renee is not fetishized at all in the film. She is not drooled over or gawk at by the male characters.

- F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (2)

Renee has conversations with Byron's mother as well as his baby's mother. While none of the conversations with the baby's mother are pleasant, they are not about competition over the boyfriend. All of the conversation that Renee has are held with female characters that are not related to her.

G. Must not be the go-to character "sacrifice" in a film/piece of media. (1)

This character does not make any sacrifices in the film.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 7.

Sabrina

This character represents the darker skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 31 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (1)

At first glance or watch of this film, it may appear that Sabrina falls into the jezebel or hoochie stereotype. Ultimately, she is not a jezebel or hoochie because the main feature of this stereotype is promiscuity, which is not part of her character. While Sabrina does dress in a very promiscuous way, it is never mentioned that she herself is promiscuous. Her sex life is not brought into question beyond establishing that she is the baby mother to Bryon.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

Sabrina exists only as an antagonist against Byron and is not important to the overall plot. She has no narrative arc outside of being the mother to Byron's child. If she were to be removed from the plot, it would not stop the film in anyway.

- C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of “holding down” some male character and his story. (1)

There is no male character that Sabrina is holding down. As forementioned, she is the cause to a problem for a male character and does not show up to help him in any way.

- D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

The white women in this film were mainly background characters and did not play big enough roles to be included in the analysis of this film.

- E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

Sabrina is not fetishized by any male character in this film. While she does dress in a provocative manner, it is seen as more of a character trait and not for the attention of the males in the film or audience.

- F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (2)

Sabrina talks to her baby’s grandmother and great aunts as well as to the girlfriend of her child’s father. None of the conversations with the girlfriend are pleasant, but it is not due to competition. All of the conversation that Sabrina has are held with female characters that are not related to her.

- G. Must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media. (1)

This character does not make any sacrifices in the film.

Total: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 7.

Comparative Analysis:

The characters in this film have flaws and negative qualities, however not to the extent that they fail the Kent test. The film establishes Renee, the lighter skin toned female, as the better

choice when it comes to her and Sabrina, the darker skin toned female . Both Renee and Sabrina are constantly asking Byron for money and causing trouble in his life, however, Sabrina is loud and over bearing at all times and Renee is subtle with her attitude. Sabrina is what one might think of as an African American girl from the hood. Sabrina is a loud and opinionated woman who has a terrible relationship with her baby's father. Sabrina is disliked by not only Byron, but by Byron's family as well, and it is openly shown in the way that they treat her. This is shown in a scene when the family was together at their mother's house. Byron's sisters were in Sabrina's way when she was trying to leave the house and instead of moving out of the way, they antagonized her in several ways, one of these ways being correcting her AAVE. As mentioned earlier, the use of AAVE is a way the film establishes the intelligence level of an individual.

Renee is just as opinionated; however, she is not loud, and her disrespect is subtle. Renee is the type of girl that runs after thugs because they make quick money, and she wants to be kept in nice things. She wants all of her bills paid for her and she wants men to constantly spend money on her. The film establishes this by having Renee say this exact thing to Byron when they are in his bedroom. She must always be dressed nicely and in expensive clothes. She constantly asks Byron for money, and until Madea gets involved at the end of the film, no one besides his mother mentions this in a negative way. When it comes to how the family treats her, only Aunt Bam openly states that she doesn't like Renee. No other person shows her any hostility.

Renee and Sabrina have overwhelming negative qualities, but only Sabrina's are mentioned constantly until the end of the film.

Barbershop: The Next Cut:

Barbershop: The Next Cut was released in 2016. It was directed by Malcolm D. Lee and executively produced by Becki Cross Trujillo, Jeff Kwatinetz, Malcolm D. Lee, and Ronald G.

Muhammed. This film stars Ice Cube as Calvin, Common as Rashad, Eve as Terri, and Nicki Minaj as Draya. The film is about Calvin, a husband and father, who own a barbershop in a dangerous neighborhood. Calvin is thinking about moving his shop because of the violence. Calvin and the rest of the barbers try one last attempt at saving the neighborhood but after the murder of a local boy, who often visited the shop, Calvin is set on moving his shop.

Draya

This character represents the lighter skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 27 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (0)

Draya is the embodiment of the jezebel trope. In every scene she is in she wears skintight clothes, like a bodysuit or just a bra and an open short jacket with tight fitting clothes. She constantly seeks male validation and uses her assets to gain attention from men. Her character is centered around the fact that she wants a man with money. She is very aware of her attractiveness and mentions it several times.

She openly flirts with a married man, Rashad. Rashad takes her home because it was late at night and dangerous, and she makes sexual advances on him in the car. In a scene in the barbershop, she thanks Rashad for a ride home in front of his wife, Terri, and in doing so she intentionally gives off the idea that it was more than a ride home. Draya's conversations center around sex and men. Even when she apologizes at the end of the film, Draya is still inappropriate and makes sexual advances toward both Terri and Rashad saying, "If you and Rashad were looking for, like, a third girl to help you out, you know, and get it poppin or anything like that, I would be down for that. Mull it over."

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

Draya's storyline is a small subplot that can be taken out of the film. There is nothing important her character brings to the overall plot of the film. It would be possible for Draya to be removed from the film and have her subplot stay in the film because it focuses on the married man and his wife more than Draya herself. Draya's character could be replaced with an unseen and unknown entity and the subplot would still work.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

In this film, there is no instance of this character holding a man down. Draya is a single black woman, she holds no true romantic ties to anyone in the film.

D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

The white women in this film were mainly background characters and did not play big enough roles to be included in the analysis of this film.

E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (0)

This character was fetishized throughout the entire film. The men of the shop as well as the patrons leered and made comments about her body often. In the first scene she appears in, a man is trying to hit on her. In a conversation about what men want and what women want in relationships, Draya uses a metaphor comparing her body to a credit card that never gets declined and one man agrees in a suggestive tone saying, "I bet" while he looks her up and down. Draya's character, however, is characterized as knowing men want her for body and she likes to show it off. She likes the attention she gets from the men and according to the Kent test, because this is her personality, this would disqualify her from gaining this point.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (2)

Draya has several conversations with women in this film who are not members of her family. These conversations are mainly the women talking about men, however according to the Kent test this does not disqualify the character from this point. Draya is direct competition for another character, however it is not the only conversation she has in the film. The conversation she does have with this competition is her apologizing for her inappropriate behavior.

G. Must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media. (1)

There was no point in this film where the characters were put into a situation in which they had to sacrifice themselves in any way.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 5.

Terri

This character represents the darker skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 29 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (0)

Terri is a hard-working woman with a good career and family. In every scene she appears in, her outfits are casual or business casual and they do not show off her physical assets in a sexual manner. Terri would fall under the Sapphire trope, because of her demeanor towards her husband and her ambitious career.

Terri is a very ambitious woman when it comes to her career and at times she puts it before her family. While there are scenes in this film that show she can be committed to her family, these fall near the end. Her husband mentions in a scene at their home that she works a

lot and says, "...you come home every other night from some video shoot or athletes commercial." In her first scene, she is asking Rashad to pick up their child because she made a last-minute appointment for work. Terri also has no time for love or in this case for her husband. This is seen in her first scene when her husband says, "You gonna be burnt out tonight, it's okay though I'll wait for the morning for that lazy side booty." This was said after she suggested making it up to him with "that thing he likes." This suggests that they are not having sex regularly as she is always working,

Terri's demeanor towards her husband is rude or malicious in most of the film. It can be attributed to their central conflict with Draya. She suspects him of cheating on her with Draya. Terri catches them in a closet together alone and it seems intimate. Draya also makes suggestive comments about her and Rashad's relationship, even though there is nothing truly going on. It can be argued that Terri is justified in this demeanor because of the evidence presented in front of her, however, this demeanor is shown in other places like when it comes to Rashad's son. It isn't until the end of the film where Terri and her husband resolve their issues. In the end, Terri apologizes to him for jumping to conclusions as they finally resolve their issues.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (0)

Terri's entire plot revolves around her husband Rashad and the possibility that he is cheating. The film can be driven forward without this plot line in the film.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

In this film, there is no instance of this character holding a man down. Terri is married, but she shows up in multiple scenes that do not revolve around her husband needing to be helped or saved.

D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

The white women in this film were mainly background characters and did not play big enough roles to be included in the analysis of this film.

E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

Terri is not fetishized in this film and a main conflict between her and her husband is that he might be going outside his marriage to find someone more desirable. Terri's character is well respected by not only the men in the barbershop but by the men in her career as well. She is a barber for the rich and famous because she is highly regarded for her skill with clippers and not for the way she looks. The men do not leer or make lewd comments and gestures to her in this film.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (0)

Terri has no other interaction with the women in the film outside of Draya. Draya is the character who is constantly flirting with Rashad, Terri's husband, and insinuating things happened between them when she is around Terri. In this instance, Draya is direct competition for Terri. Terri has two conversations with Draya, once in the barbershop and the other at Terri's home where Draya apologizes for her inappropriate behavior towards Rashad.

G. Must not be the go-to character "sacrifice" in a film/piece of media. (1)

There was no point in this film where the characters were put into a situation in which they had to sacrifice themselves in any way.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would fail the Kent test with a total score of 4.

Comparative analysis:

This film was an interesting case because both characters are close in skin color. There were no women in the film that had a major or even side role in the film that would score higher than a 29 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart. Those darker than a 29 were relegated to background characters in the film. Terri is technically the darker character only because she has more red undertones than Draya, the light skin toned female, who has more yellow undertones. The film itself could be its own commentary on colorism.

The two characters being analyzed, Draya and Terri, differ in many ways. Draya is the overly sexual character while Terri is the ambitious career woman. In the end of the film the characters make up and are on good terms. The film equally condemns the characters to walking tropes, however, one is painted more in a negative way than the other. While Draya is fetishized and sexual in nature, the film shows this in a more appealing light than that of Terri, who is ambitious to a fault. Her husband is made the butt of jokes that center around Terri being the breadwinner of the family. With Terri apologizing at the end of the film for jumping to conclusions, it seems as though the film is trying to humble her character by making her apologize as though her assumptions were not a logical leap. Draya does apologize for her behavior at the end of the film as well, but it is in a lighter mood, and she still continues with her inappropriate behavior. Only Terri was taught a lesson.

Little:

Little was released in 2019. It was directed Tina Gordon and executively produced by Regina Hall, Preston L. Holmes, Joshua Martin, and Marsai Martin. The film stars Marsai Martin, Regina Hall as adult Jordan, and Issa Rae as April. The film is about Jordan, a tech mogul, who torments everyone she interacts with. She was traumatized as a child by bullies and has now grown into one herself. When she picks on a little girl outside of her company, she is transformed onto her younger self and must learn to become a better person than the kids who used to torment her.

Adult Jordan

This character represents the lighter skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 25 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (0)

Jordan falls under the sapphire trope. She is a hardworking woman; however, she is also rude to everyone she encounters. She treats her employees like they are her servants and ridicules them constantly. In a meeting with her employees, she takes an apple from a man and licks all over it and then proceeds to make him take a bite. She calls her employees names and is, overall, a bad boss. Jordan is considered wealthy and looks down on those who are not. On her way into her office, she cuts a line for coffee and as she leaves, she says, “Don’t hate the players, hate your little broke ass game. Have a cheap day.” Not only is she like this with her employees and strangers, but she also acts this way towards her love interest as well. Although this film is about becoming a better person through a transformation, Jordan spends a significant amount of time acting like this before her transformation and it is an established personality trait.

B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (1)

This entire film is about Adult Jordan being transformed into her younger self, so she learns to become a better person. She treats everyone badly and eventually treats a little girl the same way, who then wishes she were little like her, so she could put her in her place. This film cannot work without her character because her narrative arc is the film's plot.

C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

Jordan does not hold any man down in this film.

D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

There are no white female characters outside of background characters.

E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

Jordan is not fetishized in this film at all. She is not gawk at or drooled over.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (2)

Jordan interacts with her female employees and has conversations with them. None of the women she has conversations with are related to her and none of them stand as competition for a man either.

G. Must not be the go-to character "sacrifice" in a film/piece of media. (1)

There is no sacrifice in this film by this character.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 7.

April

This character represents the darker skin women with a skin tone number matching that of 30 on the Felix von Luschan skin color chart.

Kent Test Results:

- A. Must not solely be a walking stereotype/trope. (1)

April does not fit the characterizations to associate her with any of the stereotypes that are being analyzed in this paper.

- B. Must have their own plot / narrative arc. (1)

April is Jordan's assistant. While April's story line intertwines with Jordan's a lot, she does have her own plot. April is a talented individual who wants a promotion at her job. Because Jordan is difficult, April does not stand up to her. However, April has a friend that she flirts with and helps her gain confidence in herself. They flirt throughout the film and eventually end up together in the end. April is also the one who helps younger Jordan on her journey to become a better person. While this could have been done by anyone, like another kid or teacher at school, the climax hinges on April. April designed an app to help the company get out of trouble, and although the app was rejected, it was still a pivotal moment in the film. April is important to this film, and it would not work without her character.

- C. Must not be solely included in the narrative just for purpose of "holding down" some male character and his story. (1)

April does not hold any man down in this film.

- D. Must not solely be included in the narrative to prop up a white female character. (1)

There are no white female characters outside of background characters.

- E. Must not solely exist in the film/piece of media for the purpose of fetishization. (1)

April is not fetishized in this film at all. She is not gawked at or drooled over by any male character.

F. Must have at least one interaction with another woman/femme of color. (2)

April has many interactions and conversations with other women of color that are not competition for a man. These conversations are also held with people who are not related to them.

G. Must not be the go-to character “sacrifice” in a film/piece of media. (1)

This character does not make any sacrifices in the film.

Total Score: If the film was based solely on this character, it would pass the Kent test with a total score of 8.

Comparative Analysis:

The film does a great job at fleshing both characters out. We get a glimpse of their back stories in the film through prop placements, flash backs, and conversations with other characters. Lighter skin toned Jordan’s main backstory is given as a flashback, and it shows the character’s motivations and reasoning behind her current behaviors. Darker skin toned April’s main back story is shown to us through props mostly and her conversations with her love interest in the film. Each character has flaws; however, Jordan’s are shown in a much more negative light.

Jordan, as mentioned above, is a terrible person and it is reinforced time and time again. Even after her transformational journey, there are still pieces of her old personality that are shown at the end of the film. When she is gathering her staff, her demanding and rude tone is still there even though she is doing something nice for her employees. Her selfishness is not completely gone as well. She adds her associates to her company’s name, but it is small and easy to miss. The film does a great job at handling her growth; however, it was decided that she still fits the sapphire trope because these flaws are still present by the end of the film.

April’s flaws are shown as not because of who she is but because of who her boss is. She is timid at times and does not say what she really wants to because of how her boss acts and reacts. In her first scene we see her listening to the audiobook “so you want to punch your boss.” Later that same morning she is on the phone with her boss and mouths out what she really wants to say while answering her boss in a way that her boss would like. She is insecure not because it’s who she is, but because of who her boss is and how her boss makes her, and the other employees, feel.

Discussion:

Three films were put against the Kent test from the years 1990 to 1999. The average score on the Kent test for the light skin female characters was a 6 and the average score for the darker skin female characters was 4.3. Each character was put against the Felix von Luschan skin color chart as well, and from the 1990’s cohort the lightest woman was a 24 and the darkest woman was a 32.

The three films from the years 2010 to 2019 were also analyzed against the Kent test. The average score on the Kent test for the light skin characters was a 6.3 and the average for the darker skin female characters was a 6.3. Each character was put against the Felix Luschan von skin color chart as well, and from the 2010’s cohort the lightest woman was a 25 and the darkest woman was a 31.

Character Skin Color Chart	
1990 - 1999	
<i>House Party</i> (1990)	Sharane - 30
	Sydney - 24
<i>Friday</i> (1995)	Joi - 29

	Debbie - 26
<i>The Players Club</i> (1998)	Ebony - 32
	Dianna - 27
2010 - 2019	
<i>Madea's Big Happy Family</i> (2011)	Sabrina - 31
	Renee - 26
<i>Barbershop: The Next Cut</i> (2016)	Terri - 29
	Draya - 27
<i>Little</i> (2019)	April - 30
	Jordan - 25

*Characters are listed as darker skin first in each film.

RQ1: How do representations of African American females differ between light and dark skin characters?

In the films from the 1990s and the 2010s, the darker skin African American women were more likely to have all or partial qualities of the jezebel trope. They were oversexualized characters whose purpose in the film was to be drooled after by the men in the film. The light skin female characters were more likely to be from a good home, in school, or working a more traditional job. The exceptions to this being the films *Little* (2019) and *Barbershop: The Next Cut* (2016).

The darker skin female characters were not as essential to the plot as their lighter skin counter parts in many of the films. While both female characters in four of the six films were non-essential to the overall plot, the lighter skin female characters dealt directly with the main protagonist more. They could be considered a secondary character while the darker skin female

characters were tertiary characters at best. *Player's Club* and *Little* were unique in that both female characters were essential to the film's overall plot since the films' stories centered around the female characters.

These films also showed a significant difference in the characters by the way they dressed. In four of the films, the darker skin character is seen in more revealing clothes throughout the film than their light skin counterparts. The lighter skin female characters were dressed in less revealing clothes unless they were doing a certain activity. In *Player's Club*, Dianna, the lighter skin character, is seen dressed in revealing clothes only when she is at work. The two films that do not follow this pattern are *Little* (2019) and *Barbershop: The Next Cut* (2016). In *Little*, both the characters analyzed were dressed in more modest clothing and in *Barbershop: The Next Cut*, the light skin character wore more revealing clothes, and the darker skin character was dressed modestly.

RQ2: How has representation of dark skin African American females changed between the 1990s and the 2010s?

Between the two sets of films, the overall score of darker skin characters raised substantially, going up 2 points, while the overall score for lighter skin characters went up by .3. There were other changes seen in the 2010's films as compared to the 1990's. One important change was seen in the fetishization category, as only one character from the 2010's was fetishized compared to three characters from the 1990's. The types of stereotypes were different between the decades as well. In the 1990's the jezebel or hoochie stereotype was shown in every film, in one aspect or another, however this was seen in only one film from the 2010's. In the 2010's the more prominent stereotype found was that of the sapphire. Women in these films were mostly seen in their place of work and with their families. Between the 1990's and the

2010's, the films show that change has happened over the last 30 years. In the more recent films, we see that the jezebel stereotype is not as prominent and isn't regulated to just darker skin African American women.

Skin tone	Kent test Results
1990 - 1999	
Sharane - 30	3 - This film/piece of media contains middling to fair representation for women of color.
Sydney- 24	5 - This film/piece of media contains sound representation for women of color.
Joi - 29	4 - This film/piece of media contains middling to fair representation for women of color.
Debbie - 26	5 - This film/piece of media contains sound representation for women of color.
Ebony - 32	6 - This film/piece of media contains sound representation for women of color.
Dianna - 27	8 - This film/piece of media contains strong representation for women of color.
2010 - 2019	
Sabrina - 31	7 - This film/piece of media contains strong representation for women of color.
Renee - 26	7 - This film/piece of media contains strong representation for women of color.

Terri - 29	4 - This film/piece of media contains middling to fair representation for women of color.
Draya - 27	5 - This film/piece of media contains middling to fair representation for women of color.
April - 30	8 - This film/piece of media contains strong representation for women of color.
Jordan - 25	7 - This film/piece of media contains strong representation for women of color.

Average Kent Test Score by decade	
1990 - 1999	Average
Darker Skin	4.3
Lighter Skin	6
2010 - 2019	
Darker Skin	6.3
Lighter Skin	6.4

Moving Forward

This may be a positive outcome of recent attempts in American society to begin addressing the racism problem in this country. With the inception of #BlackLivesMatter in 2013 after the killing of Trayvon Martin, racism has been in the forefront of social issues in this country. When racism is talked about and addressed, so is the issue of colorism, as it is a factor in racism as a whole. Showing darker skin African American women as oversexualized and

fetishized in films contributes to the under reported and under criminalized sexual violence against darker skin African American women. When this demographic is only seen one way and not as a woman with goals and dreams outside of a man, it helps feed the argument that these women are less innocent and more promiscuous than their white counter parts.

Bringing up white women in a paper about colorism may seem odd, but because of the proximity to whiteness that lighter skin African American women have, they are afforded some of the privileges that are established in American society for white women. White is seen as pure and innocent and the closer a person is to that, the more they are seen in that way. Showing positive images of darker skin African American women would not only help change the perception of this demographic in society, but it would help change the overall perception of African American women. These negative representations of African Americans on the screen are being so ingrained into society that they are seen as normal characterizations of African American women. Anecdotal evidence from the interceding consistency shows that white people do not see and interpret African American characters the same, with white people not seeing the harmful stereotypes placed on the characters.

African American centered films need to break down the color wall within the African American community because it hinders the progress within our community and society. The films in this study have shown that progress has happened over the last 30 years, but there is more work to be done. The highest scoring film on this list was the only film in which the director, writer, and producer were African American women. Even though they were lighter skin women, adding an African American woman in the production process would be beneficial in making films that show all African American women in a better light. Future films could also use a version of the Kent test through each step of the film making process. This does not mean

the films need a perfect score in order to be made, but adding this guideline would ensure that darker skin African American women are not used as caricatures and sex objects.

Limitations

A central limitation within this study was the fact that the films chosen were African American centered films. While colorism is a huge problem in the African American community, colorism is depicted in films that are not African American centered as well. The founder of the Kent test has run the test on several non-African American centered films, like 2019's *The Unforgivable* and 2021's *Tick Tick Boom*, which failed the test as well. It would be beneficial to also study films that do not revolve around African American culture. Further research into colorism in American film, would benefit from access to the screenplays of movies the research is analyzing, insight on how the writers described each character would help analyzers understand what the actors were using as a starting point for their portrayals of the character. Audience interpretations of the characters were not done in this study, however further research with exit interviews from participants watching the films would help researchers with how these characters are being interpreted by society. A final limitation was that confirming photo identification of all producers, directors, and casting directors was unsuccessful for all films involved in this study, so this was eliminated from the analysis.

The Kent test is a good starting point when evaluating films based on their representations of women of color. However, in the future a few changes would make this tool better in determining the level or presentation of women of color. In this study the Kent test was adapted to specifically compare dark and light skin African American women in films. The tool could be adapted beyond what this study did to gain more depth of understanding in the level or representation a film has for darker skin African American women. One suggestion would be to

add a way to rate the severity of the Kent elements instead of simply deducting a point per element identified. With the Kent test as it is designed now, a film could pass the Kent test even though it contained strong racism or colorism in one or two elements. Because the test does not consider the severity of the elements being tested, the film might not lose enough points overall to fail the Kent test. The severity in which a character fits into stereotype and trope, element A, or the extent into which a character is fetishized, element E, should have more consequences than just the loss of 1 point. For example, Ebony is raped in *The Player's Club*, yet her character still passes the Kent test. If the level of fetishization leads to sexual violence, it should hold more weight than that of the woman just being visually objectified the entire film.

The Kent test could be further strengthened by operationalizing Element A. Not having clear definitions for stereotypes in Element A may cause researchers to miss some stereotypes. In this study, the stereotypes looked at were focused on African American women, so other tropes may have been overlooked. Lastly, in the original Kent test, it fails to state whether a character can gain a bonus point if they missed the initial point in element F. This can be seen in *House Party*, where the two characters are in competition over a man, however, they are not related. This leaves the test open to discretion and makes it less objective. However, overall, the Kent test is a good tool, and it helps start a conversation about the representation of women of color in the film industry.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

House Party (1990)



Sydney



Sharane

Friday (1995)



Debbie



Joi

Player's Club (1998)



Dianna



Ebony

Madea's Big Happy Family (2011)



Renee



Sabrina

Barbershop: The Next Cut (2016)



Draya

Little (2019)



Adult Jordan

Terri



April