

The Effect of Negative Stereotypical Media Exposure on the Perception of Black Women:  
How African American Teens See the Jezebel Stereotype

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to make people more aware of the types of media they are exposed to and how that media can have an effect on their brains and the way they view people. Previous research has suggested that due to media priming and negative stereotypes being displayed of black women, people tend to perceive Black women in a negative light. We hypothesized that people who view the Jezebel clip will have a higher Jezebel score when viewing a different hypothetical Black woman's profile due to the activation recency hypothesis. Our second hypothesis was that, after participants watched the Jezebel video clip, a person's ethnic identity would influence how they perceived a Black teen. Our information and data were collected through various research studies and sources. We ultimately found that media priming does have an effect on the way people tend to perceive black women, but ethnic identity does not seem to have a direct correlation to whether or not people view black women better or worse. Our data suggests that negative stereotypical images do negatively impact the perception of black women.

## Introduction

Stereotypes geared towards Black women have been around since the early slavery days, but have since transformed, aligning with modern-day culture (1). What if media priming and stereotypical images affected how Black women not only view themselves but also interact with and view other black women? People who are consistently exposed to negative stereotypical images for a certain period of time will become media primed (2). They will eventually accumulate an interpersonal bias towards the negative stereotypical image they were shown. This is known as “the activation recency hypothesis” (2). Research also suggests that ethnic identity serves as a protective factor for black teens for these stereotypes (1). This essentially translates into the closer someone identifies with their blackness, the less likely their self-esteem is to be affected by negative stereotypes. This is important because we want to know how negative stereotypes forced on black women are influenced by others' cognitive and psychological behaviors. In our study, participants watched one of two video clips: a clip that attempted to prime them with negative stereotypes about Black women, or a control clip. We had participants complete the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure and the Jezebel Stereotype Test to assess how closely they relate to their ethnic identity and whether they view black women negatively.

In this section, we analyzed racial stereotypes, colorism, and academic identity, and how they affect African American girls' sexual attitudes. Researchers surveyed 270 girls ages 10–15, and measured their beliefs about stereotypes of black women (The Modern Jezebel Scale), academic self-concept, ethnic identity, colorism, and sexual behavior. Townsend et al. found that endorsing stereotypes and colorism was linked to greater sexual risk, while strong ethnic identity and academic self-concept were not generally protective (1). When paired with harmful stereotypes or colorism, even a strong identity could increase sexual risk. The authors suggest that prevention programs should build identity while also teaching girls to challenge negative societal messages around colorism. Interestingly, the authors found no relationship between belief in the Modern Jezebel stereotype and ethnic belonging. In our study, we are not studying sexual risk; we are studying the connection between people's thoughts about stereotypical images of black women and whether this is affected by one's perception of oneself.

Another study explored how media stereotypes shape perceptions of African American women. Specifically, it examines the impact of the *Mammy* and *Jezebel* portrayals on judgments in professional contexts. Using an experiment with 182 college students, participants were shown stereotype-based film clips and then asked to evaluate a mock job interviewee who was either African American or White. Monahan and Given found that the African American woman was more quickly linked to negative traits like “rude” and “lazy”, and exposure to the Jezebel stereotype increased associations with sexual characteristics, such as “alluring” or “erotic,” though explicit job ratings by the participants of the interviewees did not show this bias (2). The findings highlight that media stereotypes influence unconscious bias and that research must consider both racial differences and within-group stereotypes to fully understand prejudice. This source aligns with my paper due to the fact that priming from popular media can affect perceptions of black women, therefore causing bias. These findings support the activation recency hypothesis, which is a process whereby bias is created through short-term effects when

exposed to media priming within the moment and long-term effects when the process is repeated over a multitude of times.

In this section, we viewed how media stereotypes can influence people's interpersonal biases and judgments on people in neutral settings, specifically of African American women. Monahan et al. note in their research that the activation recency hypothesis holds that, when subconsciously activated through media exposure, media biases people mainly by their traits and how they evaluate others at a later time (3). The main stereotypical image found in the reading was "the welfare queen," which has a powerful influence and demonstrates how media can influence and portray media stereotypes and how they impact everyday life and people's opinions. A total of 76 people were asked to watch one of three stereotypical movie clips depicting a Mammy, Jezebel, or Welfare Queen, and then rated the characters using adjectives so the researchers could confirm the participants were influenced by the clips. Then they watched the mock interview of an African American woman and rated her personality and job suitability. Only the welfare queen stereotype affected people's opinions of the mock interviewee's job suitability. This idea connects to our paper because it shows how stereotypes can influence and trigger people's biases and evaluation of black women in today's society.

Additionally, we looked at how, according to research, exposure to different types of media can affect how people view women. Jeffries et al. analyzed how certain rap music can prime people's attitudes, in even a short amount of time, by researching how it affects men's acceptance of violence towards women (4). We can learn from the reading that, overall, the influence and exposure of misogynistic rap music can influence how men's attitudes towards women. This frequent contact with the music can trigger the activation recency hypothesis in people's minds. Jeffries et al. have 87 men listen to misogynistic music, neutral rap, and control music. They found that people who listened to the violent lyrics were more accepting of violence against women in certain situations and more likely to blame women for rape and sexual assault. However, we are not studying rap music and its behavioral effects. We are looking to see how people's thought patterns and behaviors can be influenced by media priming and exposure to other negative influences, which can have an effect on the way people view women.

In this section, we examined how researchers and intersectionality theorists suggest the importance of examining various stereotypes and their relationship with intersecting group identities. Specifically, researchers Rosenthal and Lobel investigated black women's stereotypes and their relation to sexuality and motherhood (5). In their experiment, they conducted an online study of 435 undergrads and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in reviewing the target race and pregnancy between black and white women's pregnancies. The black target was perceived more negatively compared to her white counterpart, with stereotypes such as "societal stereotypes about sexual activity, sexual risk, motherhood status, and socioeconomic status." The findings from this reading demonstrate the underlying importance of having a diverse perception and representation of Black women. As well as how these damaging stereotypes can affect black women.

Furthermore, we researched an article that claims that despite these judgments placed on black women, black women continue to be resilient to these judgments despite exposure to these portrayals. Jean et al. recognized how negative stereotypical images can also detrimentally affect interpersonal relationships and self-esteem and cause various mental health issues for black women (6). Despite these stereotypical images, some black girls have developed a resilience to these images and their media effects. Researchers found that a strong racial identity moderated the negative appraisals that black girls placed on themselves (5). These two studies connect to our project because we are investigating people's perceptions of black women when exposed to stereotypical images and how black women's self-esteem and self-worth are affected by external perspectives.

In this section, we researched a study that focused on the role the media plays in engaging in the accessibility of primed stereotypes derived from race-related news stories. Researcher Ramasubramanian examined whether news stories being so accessible can affect people's ability to be primed quickly (7). She had participants view either a training video on recognizing stereotypes or a control video before reading stereotypical or non-stereotypical news stories about black people or Asians. For the results of the experiment and major findings, Asians were seen as more benevolent compared to their black counterparts. Based on who reads the stereotypical or non-stereotypical news stories. The other major finding was that the more a person is influenced and exposed to stereotypical content, the more likely a person is to think negatively about the subject that someone is being shown. According to Ramasubramanian, a person needs a combination of strategies to counteract the activation recency hypothesis by providing counterexamples to stereotypes and pointing out the stereotypes they are currently involved in. This demonstrates the underlying importance of how black people are shown in the media and how that affects people's perception of black people. But more importantly, it also suggests it is possible to reverse stereotypes and the underlying bias towards specifically black people.

Power et al. examined whether the effects of negative priming stereotypes versus positive counter-stereotypic portrayals led to different attributions of guilt (8). Counterstereotypical media led to external attributions of blame for the black men the participants were reading about. However, stereotypical magazine articles tended to prompt people to assign internal attributions of guilt for black men. Both of these articles suggest that the media has a powerful effect on people's brains. With counterstereotypes, people tend to see Blacks as less negative, and with stereotypical media, people tend to see black people in a negative light.

Holistically, the research we have examined demonstrates that persistent and easily accessible negative stereotypes and images that are placed upon black women have an effect of priming people's brains to make stereotypical judgments (2, 3, 4, 7, 8). Our study contrasts with similar previous studies due to the experimental group of participants. Compared to previous studies and the sources we utilized, where most participants are white college students, we decided to use a younger demographic (high school students), specifically black students. We decided to use young black students because we primarily wanted to see how

black people, specifically, view someone from their own race and how that shapes how they view themselves or someone of the same race. In our study, a group of black high school juniors and sophomores watched either a stereotyped prime clip or a control clip. We then had the students complete two assessments: one was a Jezebel score test, which measured stereotypes applied to an additional fictional black teen students were asked to rate, and the other was a Multicultural Ethnic Identity Measure to measure their own ethnic belongingness.

We hypothesized that people who view the Jezebel clip will have a higher Jezebel score when viewing a different hypothetical Black woman's profile, consistent with the activation recency hypothesis. We believe this because research shows that when someone is exposed to certain media, they tend to actively recall the media they just consumed when making future judgments (3, 2). Second, we hypothesize that a person's ethnic identity will be related to how they judge a Black woman after seeing the Jezebel video clip. Research also suggests that the closer a participant identifies with their blackness, the higher the chance for a protective function of stereotypes affecting them (1, 6).

## **Materials and Methods**

A total of 52 high school students from The Neighborhood Academy participated in the study. Most of the participants in the study are African-American or mixed race. The group of participants was juniors and sophomores in high school. The age group of the juniors is between 15 and 17 years old.

The participants were given two surveys, one being a Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure to see how closely they aligned with their own ethnic identity. This questionnaire has 13 questions that utilize how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements being presented. The numbers the participants were able to rate through are 1 for strongly disagree, and it does not apply to them, and 5 for strongly agree. For example, one of the questions was, "I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group." Based on the response to the question, each of the participants would rank whether or not they agreed. After completing the questionnaire, their scores were totaled based on their ratings on a scale for each statement. If a participant scored anywhere from 0 to 5, that would mean they do not closely identify with their blackness. If a student scores 60+, it would mean they closely align themselves with their blackness.

The students also completed a Jezebel adjective test. Students were presented with a profile of a hypothetical black female teen, complete with photos and a text introduction. They were asked to evaluate the hypothetical teen's personality based on a series of adjectives. The Jezebel score has 6 adjectives that are known to be associated with the Jezebel stereotype (3). This test is used to see how the participants view black women after being media primed. The test also often has filler adjectives to disguise the purpose of the questionnaire. The participants rated from 0 to 5 how well each adjective describes the fake black women they viewed.

To carry out this study, we deceived the participants by not telling them the true purpose of our research. To their knowledge, our study was about whether or not people of a certain race or identity will gravitate towards certain movies or movie characters if they relate to them in identity. The participants were divided into two groups. After viewing the video clip and completing the ethnic identity questions, students were then asked to help with another “unrelated” project. Our other “project” was measuring how people view a hypothetical friend based on their profile. This is where the Jezebel adjectives would be given. We had one group watch a clip of a modern Jezebel in a movie while the other group watched a control.

We decided on and found these clips searching YouTube, and went with clips from the same movie for simplicity. We chose the clip with Beyoncé as Foxy because she had a significant portrayal of a modern-day Jezebel that we were looking for. The two groups would watch their assigned clips and then complete the same questionnaire after watching the clips. They would first complete a Multi Ethnic Identity Measure to identify how closely they relate to their Blackness, as well as stating what ethnicity/race they identify with. Upon completion of the questionnaire, they would view a hypothetical AI-created image of a new student coming to TNA. We created her to look like a stereotypical modern day jezebel that would appeal to a younger audience and gave her a mini bio for the participants to learn about her. We had both groups complete a Jezebel score questionnaire and use adjectives to describe the AI image of a modern Jezebel. To get the data from the questionnaire, we added the MEIM score on a scale of 1-5 and added up the circled numbers to find their ethnic identity score. Then, on the following page with the Jezebel score questionnaire, we only counted the five adjectives used to describe a Jezebel, not including any filler words.

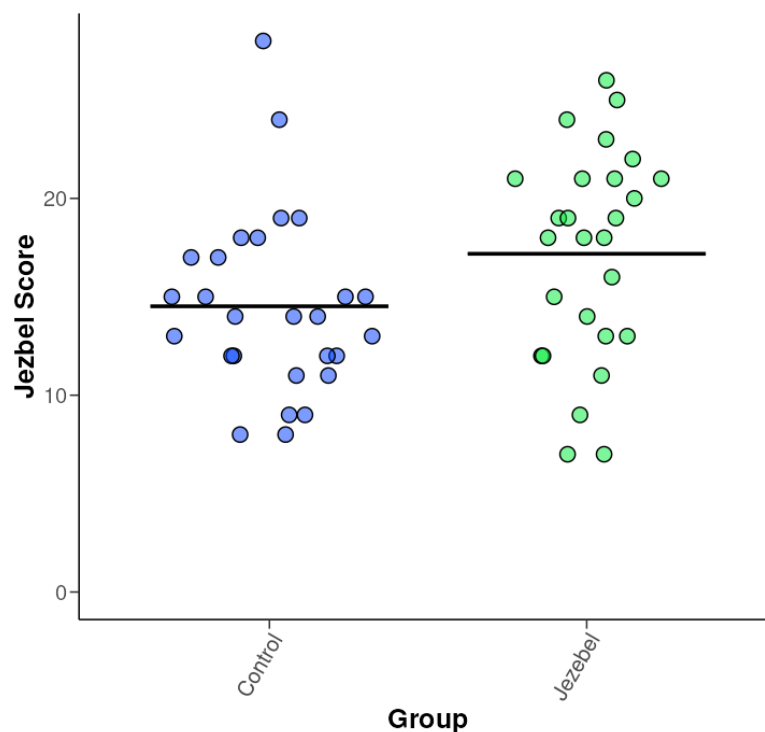
Differences in ratings for the hypothetical student between the two movie clips were measured using a t-test for independent samples. Relationships between ethnic identity and judgments of the hypothetical student were measured using a correlation coefficient r-test. The abbreviation M is the mean, and SD is the standard deviation. All tests were calculated using [vassarstats.net](http://vassarstats.net) with a 0.05 significance threshold.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to understand how perceptions of Black women's cognitive and psychological traits are impacted by harmful stereotypes that are imposed upon them by the media. Students watched one of two movie clips and were asked to rate a hypothetical black woman's personality traits based on the media exposure.

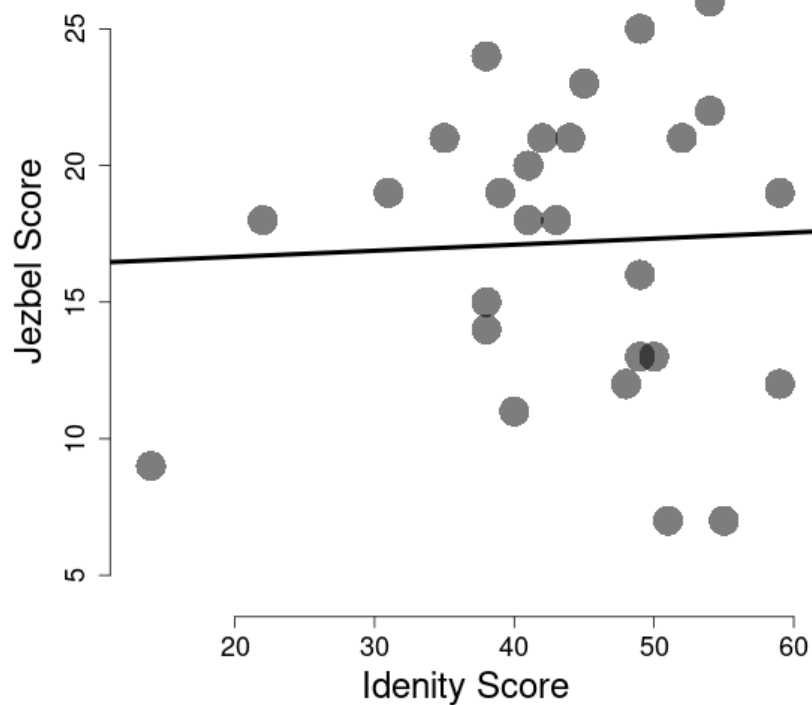
When collecting the data for the study, we utilized Black teenagers ages 15-17, ranging from sophomores to juniors in high school. In total, I surveyed 52 teenagers attending The Neighborhood Academy. I separated each grade into two groups: Jezebel and control. One class in both the sophomore and junior classes would watch a control clip video from the movie *Austin Powers* that had no images of a Jezebel presented in the clip. The other class was watching a Jezebel clip from the same movie, *Austin Powers*, this time having a stereotypical image of a modern Jezebel being portrayed by Beyoncé.

Based on our hypothesis, we hypothesized that people who view the Jezebel clip will have a higher Jezebel score when viewing a different hypothetical Black woman's profile due to the activation recency hypothesis. We believe this because research says that when someone is exposed to certain media, they will have the tendency to perform an active recall of the media they just consumed when making future judgments. An independent t-test revealed a difference in Jezebel scores between people who viewed the Jezebel clip and those who watched the control clip, with those who viewed the Jezebel clip reporting higher scores when profiling the hypothetical Jezebel teen. ( $t=1.94$ ,  $p=0.028$ ). People who watched the Jezebel video ( $M = 17.01$ ,  $SD = 479$ ) scored higher than people who watched the control clip video ( $M = 14.51$ ,  $SD=392$ ). Overall, we can reject the null hypothesis and accept our claim of the activation hypothesis having a true effect on the teens due to media priming.



**Figure 1. A difference between media priming and the activation of the recent hypothesis.** A total of 52 participants were split in half and shown two different video clips, then later rated a clip of a hypothetical teen girl. A t-test for independent samples found that the Jezebel score for participants who watched the Jezebel clip was significantly higher than the control group's Jezebel score.

Our second hypothesis was that, after participants watched the Jezebel video clip, a person's ethnic identity would influence how they perceived a Black teen. Additionally, research indicates that a participant's likelihood of being protected by stereotypes increases with how closely they identify with their Blackness. This was tested by measuring the Jezebel group and their MEIM score to see how closely they were related. An r-test was completed through VassarStats. The r-test did not find a significant relationship between ethnic identity and how they view a Black teen after watching a video clip. ( $r=0.0433$ ,  $p=0.827$ )



**Figure 2. The relationship between ethnic identity and Jezebel scores.** An r-test was completed between the Jezebel group's ethnic identity score and their correlation to the Jezebel scores. After testing, there was no significant relationship between ethnic identity and Jezebel score ( $r=0.0433$ ) ( $p=0.827$ ). This is a weak positive relationship: there is no correlation between identity score and how you view others.

## Discussion

In this study, we sought to understand how Black teens view other hypothetical Black women after being media primed by stereotypical images and whether or not their ethnic identity alters their perception of Black women even after being primed. Our first hypothesis was that participants who watched a movie clip featuring a Jezebel stereotype would rate a hypothetical Black woman as having stronger Jezebel characteristics compared to participants who watched the control clip due to the activation recency hypothesis. This hypothesis was supported because, after testing, the Jezebel group scored higher than the control clip group on the Jezebel score. There was a significant difference between the two groups (Figure 1). Our second hypothesis was whether ethnic identity had any effect on the participants' outlook on the hypothetical teens' Jezebel characteristics. There was no relationship found after testing, and we cannot support our hypothesis (Figure 2).

Our results are consistent with other studies by Givens and Monahan (2). Givens and Monahan found that the activation recency hypothesis suggests that if a person has recently engaged with a media stereotype, it stays active in the mind. As a result, people use that information to judge new or unrelated information compared to those who haven't been primed. In this case, it actually works well and demonstrates that media priming and the activation recency hypothesis do have an effect on how people perceive Black women. Our study found that the Jezebel group scored higher compared to the control group when completing the Jezebel score. The previous studies help strengthen our claim that the activation recency hypothesis does have an effect on the way people perceive Black women, even other black participants.

There are mixed findings on whether ethnicity serves as a protective factor for Black women from harmful stereotypes. Townsend et al. (1) found that ethnic identity was not protective when encountering stereotypes. While Rosenthal & Lobel found ethnicity was a protective factor for Black women. In our research, we found that it neither harmed nor helped people's perceptions of black women. There was no conclusive relationship between the data. In this case, it actually helps our study because this shows if the participants' ethnic identities didn't have an effect on their score results, then that means that the media priming did have an effect on the participants, meaning the priming videos worked and made an impact.

Throughout our study, there was only one main limitation. Our main limitation was the fact that we could not truly be certain if the video was what caused the participants to be more prejudiced towards the hypothetical Black women. We think the video caused it based on the data and results, but we cannot be certain because there is no clear way to measure if the video clip caused a change in perception, or if that experimental group had a preexisting bias in that direction.

Some future improvements could include separating participants' data by gender, which would more clearly allow us to see how women see themselves and how other genders view women. We also think that in future adaptations of this study, it would be intriguing to examine whether a lighter-skinned hypothetical female, compared to a darker-skinned female, would be

perceived more favorably and which one would be perceived as more likely to exhibit the Jezebel stereotype.

Overall, completing this research was fundamental to making people aware of their actions when potentially being media-primed. We suggest people should be vigilant when digesting certain media. This informational research is critical for parents and educators to know about what types of media they are allowing their children and teens to consume. Another target of this research is critical for content creators and marketing media producers to be more cautious when it comes to producing certain media that hints at negative stereotypes, especially regarding Black women. We believe these media producers have some moral obligation to understand that the media they are creating has an influence on the media's prime younger audiences. We also believe that this research will help in a professional or business setting when potentially attempting to conduct interviews or to progress in further data for informational purposes. Overall, the research we have conducted shows that media priming and negative stereotypical images do have an effect on the way people perceive Black women.

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