

Wading Through the Stereotypes: Positive and Negative Associations Between Media Use and Black Adolescents' Conceptions of Self

L. Monique Ward
University of Michigan

Although concern is often expressed that frequent media exposure may adversely affect the self-esteem and racial self-esteem of African American youths, evidence to support this assumption has been limited. To examine this issue, the author collected data among 156 African American high school students, testing connections among racial self-esteem, three dimensions of self-esteem, and multiple forms of media use. Whereas initial comparisons revealed media use to be a negative correlate of self-esteem, further analysis demonstrated that this association varied depending on the media genre and the domain of self in question, the content of students' media diets, and the individual characteristics of the viewer. In addition, both stronger identification with popular Black characters and greater religiosity emerged as possible protective factors.

Adolescence is a critical time of self-reflection and self-definition (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Moshman, 1999) in which youths must work to determine both what kind of person they would like to become and how well they are meeting this goal. In making these judgments, teens draw on those around them, both for models and for feedback. Prominent among these influential "others" are parents and peers, whose approval and support have emerged as major contributors to teens' self-esteem (for a review, see Harter, 1998). Although less often studied, the media are also believed to play a prominent role in shaping self-conceptions, both by supplying ideals to internalize (e.g., the thin ideal) and by providing feedback about the importance of one's social group, values, or status. Indeed, media use is quite high during adolescence, comprising 7.5 hr of each day (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999) and offering an abundance of materials for identity construction (Arnett, 1995). For marginalized groups, in particular, the mainstream media are believed to offer critical insight into how the world at large views their group, its members, and their contributions.

During this critical time of self-definition, what happens, then, when members of one's group are *not* represented in the media or, when they do appear, are portrayed negatively or one-dimensionally? Might minority youths come to feel badly about themselves as a consequence of exposure to material that seldom includes them and relies heavily on stereotypes? Although these

questions have been raised repeatedly in the literature for several decades (e.g., Comstock & Cobbey, 1979; Graves, 1993; Stroman, 1984), little is actually known about the impact of media exposure on the self-esteem of minority youths. Few studies have formally examined this question, and those that have, yielded inconsistent results. Accordingly, in the present study, I sought to address this issue by examining associations between media use and self-conceptions among Black adolescents. My approach to this issue here is threefold. First, I summarize existing findings concerning both the portrayal of African Americans on television and the impact of that portrayal on the self-concepts of Black viewers. Second, I outline a number of explanations for the nature of those current findings. Third, I test connections between media use and self-conceptions among a sample of Black high school students. My goal in this study was to provide a greater understanding of the circumstances under which media use may be negatively, or perhaps even positively, associated with the self-esteem of Black youths.

The Portrayal of African Americans on Television

Assessments of group portrayals in the media have commonly focused on issues of recognition (or frequency of representation) and respect (Clark, 1972). Although African Americans comprise 12.3% of the U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001), their numbers in mainstream television programming often fall short of this percentage. Their presence on television has increased slowly from 1%–2% of characters in prime-time programs in the late 1950s (Lichter, Lichter, Rothman, & Amundson, 1987), to 8% in the 1980s (Greenberg & Brand, 1994), to a high of 16% in recent times (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). These numbers vary by genre, however, and are typically lower for soap operas and for children's programming (i.e., cartoons), in which only 3%–9% of the characters appearing are Black (for reviews, see Greenberg & Brand, 1994, and Stroman, 1984). Moreover, numbers alone do not tell the whole story. A recurrent criticism has been that when Black characters are included in TV shows, they frequently appear in minor, not leading, roles (Graves, 1996; Stroman, Merritt, &

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to L. Monique Ward, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 525 East University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1109. E-mail: ward@umich.edu

Matabane, 1989–1990), serving as comic relief or supportive sidekicks. The roles have also been limited with regard to their location, with Black leads often restricted to half-hour situation comedies that themselves are racially segregated (Graves, 1996; Stroman et al., 1989–1990). Thus, although African Americans appear to have achieved equity in terms of the frequency of their appearances on TV relative to their real-world numbers, the depth of their roles remains limited.

A second concern is the issue of respect, which refers to the extent to which a group's members are depicted positively and fully as human beings (Clark, 1972). Research indicates that images of African Americans in mainstream popular culture have traditionally been quite negative and demeaning, often centered on stereotypical portrayals (e.g., the gangster, the natural athlete, the clown; Berry, 1998; Lichter et al., 1987). Analyses of programming from the 1970s (for reviews, see Graves, 1996; Merritt & Stroman, 1993; Stroman, 1991) showed that Blacks were commonly portrayed as poor, jobless, lazy, unintelligent, and incompetent. They were overrepresented as hustlers and criminals, with a majority living in ghettos and slums. Black families were portrayed as conflict ridden and female dominated and as exhibiting little love toward their children. Evidence that these depictions have improved from earlier decades has been inconsistent. Some analyses of programming from the 1980s and 1990s reveal a greater breadth and equality of characterizations (e.g., Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, & Huang, 2000), with many Blacks depicted as holding high-status occupations and as competent, law-abiding members of the middle class (Matabane & Merritt, 1996; Stroman et al., 1989–1990). At the same time, other analyses reveal that stereotypical portrayals remain (e.g., Bristor, Lee, & Hunt, 1995; Oliver, 1994). For example, in an analysis of prime-time programming from 1996, African Americans, in comparison to Whites, were found to be more provocative and less professional in dress, were shown as more passive, and were judged as the laziest and least respected ethnic group (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). It appears as if ethnic-group disparities in media portrayals remain.

A Vulnerable Audience? Concerns About Young Black Viewers

Although young viewers in general are believed to be most vulnerable to television's messages because their real-world experiences and capacities for critical thinking are more limited, the case can be made that Black youths may be especially at risk. First, the consequences of television exposure are believed to be most pronounced for its most frequent viewers (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986, 1994), and African Americans are among the most frequent. African American children and adults have consistently been noted to consume more media than Whites and than other ethnic-minority groups, even after socioeconomic status (SES) is controlled for (e.g., Bales, 1986; Blosser, 1988; Greenberg, 1993). In a recent national survey, White youths reported watching an average of 2 hr 48 min of television a day (Roberts et al., 1999); the mean for Black youths approached 5 hr.

Second, Black children have been reported to hold a more positive orientation toward the media than have Whites (Comstock & Cobbey, 1979; Graves, 1996; Stroman, 1991). Evidence indicates that African Americans, compared with White Americans,

hold more favorable attitudes toward TV (Bales, 1986), report higher levels of satisfaction with TV (Albarran & Umphrey, 1993), and are more likely to report using TV for information and as a source of guidance (e.g., Greenberg, 1972). Evidence also suggests that Black children may believe in the reality of TV more than do children of other groups (Greenberg & Atkin, 1982; Poindexter & Stroman, 1981), although these findings may be somewhat dated. Thus, of all media audiences, Black youths may be especially vulnerable to television's influence because of their higher levels of consumption, their positive feelings toward the medium, and their greater use of television for learning about the world. These issues hold additional relevance for Black teens, in particular, because of the dual developmental tasks of identity consolidation and ethnic-identity development taking place during this time (Phinney, 1990).

One of the chief concerns raised by this paradoxical relationship between Blacks' underrepresentation on the screen and overrepresentation in the viewing audience is the impact on Black viewers' self-perceptions. One belief is that a group's absence from the screen indicates that its members are unimportant, inconsequential, and powerless (Graves, 1999; Powell, 1982). The expectation is that as a consequence, Black viewers will grow to feel that they are unimportant, do not count, and do not matter (e.g., Stroman, 1991), thereby destroying their own sense of worth and value. Others suspect that frequent media exposure, which is likely to mean exposure to stereotypical portrayals, will lead to the adoption of negative beliefs about African Americans. According to the premises of cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986), heavier media exposure leads people to cultivate expectations about the real world that coincide with the media images presented. Therefore, frequent exposure to stereotypical images of Blacks as lazy, unintelligent, and criminal will lead viewers of all races to believe that these attributes characterize Blacks in the real world. In this way, it is believed that frequent media use may lead Black viewers to believe that Blacks are inferior and that being Black is bad, thereby leading to lower self-esteem and lower racial self-esteem.

Although these concerns have been raised repeatedly over the past three decades, evidence to support them has been limited and mixed. First, despite the fact that Black youths, in general, watch more TV than do White youths, Black youths report higher self-esteem. In a meta-analytic synthesis of 261 comparisons obtained using objective, standardized instruments, Gray-Little and Hafdahl (2000) found higher self-esteem scores for Black children, teens, and young adults than for White participants. Second, empirical attempts to test potential media effects directly have produced mixed results. Work conducted with Black adults indicates that connections between media use and self-esteem depend on the genre or type of programming. Whereas greater exposure to mainstream entertainment programming has been associated with lower self-esteem (Allen, 1998; Tan & Tan, 1979), greater exposure to Black-oriented TV has been associated with a stronger endorsement of positive stereotypical beliefs about Blacks (Allen, 1993; Allen, Dawson, & Brown, 1989) but also with a weaker sense of Black autonomy and African self-consciousness (Allen, 1998).

A different pattern of results has emerged across studies testing children. In a 1986 study, Stroman examined associations between weekly hours of television viewing and the self-concepts of 102 Black third through sixth graders as measured with the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Findings indicated that

greater TV viewing was associated with a more positive self-concept among girls; no significant relations emerged for boys. McDermott and Greenberg (1984) examined associations among self-esteem, racial self-esteem, and 82 Black fourth and fifth graders' regular exposure to 5 Black programs and their liking of 11 Black characters. Assessments of self-esteem and racial self-esteem tapped students' evaluations of themselves and of "Black kids in real life" on five attributes. The results revealed that frequent viewing of Black programs and holding positive attitudes toward Black adult characters were each associated with higher self-esteem. Positive associations between Black media viewing and racial self-esteem were also found, but only among those who reported greater liking of Black characters. Therefore, global negative effects of media exposure on Black viewers' self-esteem have not emerged; instead, associations appear to be both negative and positive and appear to vary by the age and programming diet of the viewer.

Exploring the Complexities

Despite the logic and passion of the arguments presented, media exposure has not emerged as a consistently negative correlate of Black children's self-esteem. Several factors are likely to be responsible for this failed connection. One possibility is that African Americans may not be as susceptible to the negative influences of media portrayals as many propose. This position has been argued from several perspectives. Some observe that members of stigmatized groups, in general, employ strategies that protect their self-esteem from the prejudice and denigration of others (Crocker & Major, 1989). By drawing mostly in-group comparisons, for example, and by attributing negative feedback to prejudice against the group (not the self), African Americans may buffer their self-esteem from the media's often one-dimensional images. Indeed, some (e.g., Davis & Gandy, 1999) argue that as a result of their unique history in America, African Americans have developed skills in producing oppositional readings to mainstream media content and have learned to extract what is beneficial and to reject what is not. Others highlight the roles of experience and authenticity. Here the notion is that because television is believed to be most influential when firsthand experience or alternative sources of information are lacking (e.g., Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958), for Blacks viewing images of Blacks, this is seldom the case. Instead, Black viewers come to the screen with abundant first-hand experience of life as Black Americans and have been found to critique and reject media images that contradict their own realities and observations (e.g., Cooks & Orbe, 1993; Duke, 2000). Therefore, the argument is that the self-conceptions of African Americans may be less vulnerable to media images than initially believed because of these social comparison processes.

However, because these explanations do not account for the mix of negative and positive correlations reported earlier, a second possibility to consider is that associations between media use and Black viewers' self-esteem exist but are more complex than initial theorizing has suggested. More specifically, I suspect that the hypothesized negative effects of media exposure on self-esteem may not be global but instead may be tempered by the dimension of self-esteem in question, the content of viewers' media diets, the strength of viewers' connections to individual characters, and

relevant factors in viewers' individual backgrounds. I present the particulars of this argument below.

Factor 1: The media's impact on self-esteem may not be global but may apply to specific aspects of viewers' self-conceptions. Each of the studies reviewed earlier reported only global assessments of self-esteem. However, global assessment represents only one approach to measuring this construct, which is often viewed as multidimensional and even hierarchical, possessing three to eight or more different domains (e.g., for a review, see Harter, 1998). Because of both the visual nature of television and the nature of the attributes it frequently emphasizes (i.e., physical appearance), it is likely that some dimensions of self-esteem may be more affected than others. In addition, although often positively correlated (e.g., Phinney, 1992; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998), self-esteem and racial self-esteem are not equivalent and may hold different relations to media use. Therefore, in order to capture the full nature of the associations between TV viewing and self-esteem, investigations are needed that make more extensive assessments of students' self-evaluations.

Factor 2: The impact of media use on self-esteem is likely to vary with the content of viewers' media diets. A central assumption underlying this field is that since Blacks are underrepresented in the media, heavy media exposure necessarily means frequent viewing of mostly White portrayals. However, Blacks do not use only mainstream media. There is a large minority media market geared toward African Americans that features only African Americans and that includes Black-oriented magazines, movies, and TV programs. Indeed, evidence repeatedly indicates that Blacks gravitate to such media, watch them frequently, tend to judge Black characters favorably, and identify strongly with Black portrayals (e.g., Anderson & Williams, 1983; Dates, 1980; McDermott & Greenberg, 1984). For example, in a recent study of the media preferences among 8- and 9-year-old Black children (O'Connor, Brooks-Gunn, & Graber, 2000), 76% of the favorite musical groups named were Black, as were 56% of the favorite TV programs. Moreover, Black viewers are exposed to African Americans in "mainstream" programming, such as sports and music videos, where Blacks are prominently featured. Thus, the degree to which students are exposed both to Black-oriented media and to genres that heavily feature Blacks is likely to shape the nature of the outcomes. Some content (e.g., mainstream portrayals) may have a negative effect on Black youths' self-esteem, but some content may have a positive effect. This possibility was explored here.

Factor 3: Media use may be associated with Black viewers' self-esteem, not only as a consequence of their viewing amounts but also because of their connections with individual portrayals. Up to this point, the dominant theoretical model supporting research in this area has been cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1986, 1994), which focuses on viewing amounts and the differing perceptions of "heavy" versus "light" viewers. Yet viewing amounts should be seen as only one avenue through which TV use affects viewers. It is probable that viewers' connections with individual portrayals and characters may be equally influential, regardless of their viewing amounts. As an alternative to cultivation theory, Greenberg's (1988) drench hypothesis proposes that specific critical portrayals may exert a stronger force on impression formation and image building than might the sheer frequency of television viewed. This notion emphasizes the power of indi-

vidual performances to affect viewers, acknowledging that media portrayals differ in their depth, strength, and authenticity. In this way, rare but positive portrayals of African Americans could have a deep effect on the viewer and could overwhelm or “drench” the contributions of more everyday or stereotyped roles (Graves, 1999). It is therefore critical to examine not only viewers’ media exposure levels but also the extent to which they identify and connect with specific characters.

Factor 4: The strength of the media’s influence on self-esteem may vary across individuals, with some viewers being more vulnerable to negative influences than others. Because mostly positive associations have been reported thus far between media exposure and Black children’s self-esteem, it is possible that specific environmental forces are at work that counteract and buffer “outside” negative influences. One factor often noted for its beneficial impact on Black youths is religious involvement. Through the social control, emotional support, and values they provide (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Wilson, 1989), religious institutions are associated with several positive health and behavioral outcomes. For example, among adolescent samples, religiosity has been associated with reduced involvement in criminal activities (e.g., Donahue & Benson, 1995; Johnson, Jang, De Li, & Larson, 2000; Johnson, Larson, De Li, & Jang, 2000), lower levels of alcohol and substance abuse (e.g., Johnson, Larson, et al., 2000; Wallace & Williams, 1997), and lower levels of voluntary sexual activity and sexual risk taking (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Murray, 1994). Thus, if religiosity operates for Black youths as some kind of buffer against outside negative influences, it is possible that it may also ward off negative effects on self-esteem brought on by media exposure.

In summary, although concern is frequently expressed that frequent media use may depress the self-esteem and racial self-esteem of Black youths, the few empirical attempts to test this issue have yielded inconsistent results. Accordingly, the goal of this study was to explore this connection more fully by examining the conditions under which media use would or would not be negatively associated with self-esteem. Drawing from premises of the cultivation model and the drench hypothesis, this study assessed multiple domains of media use, examining both the *amounts* of various genres consumed (i.e., music videos), as well as viewers’ *identification* with popular media persona. It also investigated students’ exposure to mainstream and minority media. I expected that connections between media use and self-esteem would exist but would be tempered by the dimension of self-esteem in question, the content of students’ media diets, the strength of their connections to individual characters, and relevant factors in their individual backgrounds such as religiosity.

Although this study was largely exploratory, it was guided by the following research questions:

1. Are heavier exposure to and connection with mainstream programs and characters negatively associated with self-esteem and racial self-esteem? Do these associations vary by media genre?
2. Are heavier exposure to and connection with Black-oriented programs and Black characters positively associated with self-esteem and racial self-esteem?
3. To what extent does religiosity buffer negative (or positive) media influences concerning self-esteem and racial self-esteem?

Method

Participants

African American high school students ($N = 156$, 70% female) attending a summer enrichment program at a large Midwestern university participated in this study. Students completed a survey voluntarily as part of a seminar on media images and later participated in group discussions and projects on the topic. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years ($M = 16$ years), and there was relatively equal representation of 9th, 10th, and 11th graders. As a proxy for SES, information was obtained about parental education levels; the mean years of schooling were 14.7 for participants’ fathers and 15.2 for participants’ mothers, indicating some postsecondary education.

Data were also collected concerning the makeup of students’ primary caregivers and participants’ level of religiosity. Students were asked, “Who were your primary caregivers during the majority of your childhood years (ages 5–12)?” and were given space on the survey form to list their answers. Analyses indicated that 57% of participants were raised by a mother and a father, 23% by a mother alone, 16% by a mother and extended family members, and 4% by a mother, father, and extended family. The impact of being raised in a single-parent family was investigated in later analyses. To assess religiosity, the following three questions were used, each measured on a 5-point scale: “How religious are you?” (response options ranged from *not at all* to *very*); “How often do you attend religious services?” (response options ranged from *never* to *very regularly, usually once a week*); and “How often do you pray?” (response options ranged from *never* to *very regularly, at least once a day*). Responses to each question were scored from 0 to 4 and were then summed across the three questions to produce a religiosity score for each participant ($\alpha = .77$; $M = 8.7$).

Measures

Media measures. Two general types of media use were examined: viewing amounts and viewer identification. The first measure of viewing amounts assessed the number of hours participants watched prime-time comedies and dramas. A list was provided of all network comedies and dramas that had aired regularly (at least four times) on one of the six major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, and WB) during the spring of the 2000 broadcast season. Although students sample from many channels, the focus here was on the six major networks because these still attract the bulk of TV viewers and present the majority of fictional programs with recurring characters. Using a 5-point scale anchored by 0 (*never/not this season*) and 4 (*every week*), participants indicated how often they had viewed each of the 90 programs listed during the previous school term. Average monthly viewing amounts were then calculated based on the frequencies with which each of the programs was viewed and the length of the programs.

Also extracted from these data were participants’ hours of viewing of the following 12 programs with predominantly Black casts: *The Hughleys*; *The PJs*; *City of Angels*; *The Cosby Show*; *Sister, Sister*; *The Jamie Foxx Show*; *The Steve Harvey Show*; *For Your Love*; *The Parkers*; *Grown Ups*; *Malcolm and Eddie*; and *Moesha*. Two scores were created from these responses: monthly viewing of Black-oriented programs, which was calculated based on the frequency with which each of the programs was viewed and the length of the programs, and the proportion of Black-oriented prime-time programming, which reflected the extent to which these programs were featured in a student’s prime-time viewing diet. To assess exposure to other media genres, I also asked participants to indicate the numbers of hours in a typical day that they watched music videos and sports events or programming. In addition, participants were asked three questions that examined their monthly viewing of movies on cable or on satellite, at a theater, or on rented videotapes. Responses were summed across the three questions to produce a movie hours score for each participant.

The second dimension of media use examined students' identification (ID) with popular TV characters. Participants first indicated the extent to which they identified with 10 popular female characters and 10 popular male characters; the lists of characters were compiled from Nielsen ratings of top programs and from viewing habits reported in pilot research. Half of the characters listed for each sex were Black (e.g., Moesha, Malcolm from *Malcolm and Eddie*); half were White (e.g., Rachel from *Friends*, John Carter from *ER*). Ratings were made using one of four markers, anchored by *do not identify with at all* (1) and *totally identify with* (4). The option was also given to respond "N/A" (not applicable) for any character with whom the participant was not familiar. I then calculated the following mean scores for each participant, taking into account both the individual ratings and the number of characters evaluated: ID with Black female characters, ID with Black male characters, ID with White female characters, and ID with White male characters.

In addition, participants were asked to note their favorite TV character and to respond to a series of eight questions about their level of ID with this character. Responses were made using a 7-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*. Sample items included "I like what this character is about" and "I would like to have the type of life that this character has." An ID with favorite character score was created for each student by taking the mean of these responses ($\alpha = .82$).

Self-esteem measures. The State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) was used to assess participants' current evaluations of their worth and competence. This scale is a 20-item measure of global self-esteem that also consists of the following three subscales: Performance Self-Esteem (7 items; e.g., "I feel like I am not doing well at school"), Appearance Self-Esteem (6 items; e.g., "I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now"), and Social Self-Esteem (7 items; e.g., "I am worried about what other people think of me"). Responses to each of the 20 statements were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored by *not at all* and *extremely*. Thirteen of the items were worded negatively and were reverse scored such that a higher mean score indicated more positive self-esteem. Reliability coefficients computed for the current sample of African American youths were as follows: whole scale, $\alpha = .85$; Performance subscale, $\alpha = .68$; Social subscale, $\alpha = .67$; Appearance subscale, $\alpha = .82$.

The Private Esteem subscale from the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) was used to assess participants' feelings about being Black. The overall measure is a 16-item instrument consisting of four subscales that examine respondents' evaluations of their racial/ethnic group. The 4-item Private Esteem subscale assesses individuals' personal judgments about how good their ethnic group is. Sample items include "I feel good about my race" and "I often regret that I belong to my race." Using a 5-point scale anchored by *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*, participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement. Mean scores were produced across the four items ($\alpha = .64$), with higher scores reflecting higher racial self-esteem.

Results

Descriptives and Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for the key independent and dependent variables are provided in Table 1. Media exposure levels for this high school sample were extensive, as has often been reported. Students reported spending nearly 47 hr each month watching prime-time comedies and dramas, 3 hr per day watching music videos, and 2 hr per day watching sports programming. Although these numbers may be somewhat inflated because the survey was conducted during the summer months when leisure time is more plentiful, it does appear as if students' use of the media is substantial.

Table 1
Descriptives of Central Independent and Dependent Variables for the Full Sample

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Media use variables			
Prime-time hours/month	46.5	29.63	1–140.20
Music video hours/day	3.33	3.09	0–13
Sports program hours/day	2.07	2.64	0–11
Movies viewed/month	20.71	13.88	0–55
ID with favorite character	4.74	1.22	1–7
Black prime-time hours/month	11.52	6.10	0–24
Proportion of Black prime-time hours	.29	.17	0–1.00
ID with Black female characters	2.30	.95	1–4
ID with White female characters	1.68	.79	1–4
ID with Black male characters	2.14	.94	1–4
ID with White male characters	1.79	.87	1–4
Self-Evaluation Variables			
Performance self-esteem	4.20	.58	2.29–5.00
Social self-esteem	4.01	.71	1.83–5.00
Appearance self-esteem	4.00	.79	1.33–5.00
Total self-esteem	4.07	.58	2.21–4.95
Racial self-esteem	4.55	.61	2.25–5.00

Note. ID = identification.

To what extent are students exposed to predominantly Black media? In terms of prime-time programming, the 12 predominantly Black programs identified could potentially draw 26 hr of viewing each month. As indicated in Table 1, these programs were viewed an average of 11.5 hr each month and made up an average of 29% of students' prime-time media diets. The proportions were quite variable, however, and for 11% of the sample, these programs made up 50% or more of their prime-time diets. Devotion to individual Black characters was also strong. First, students identified more strongly with the popular Black female and male characters evaluated ($M = 2.30$ and 2.14 , respectively) than with the popular White female and male characters ($M = 1.68$ and 1.79 , respectively): $t(141) = 9.30$, $p < .01$ for female ID; $t(141) = 6.23$, $p < .01$ for male ID. Second, in the responses to the question "What character on a TV sit-com, soap, or drama do you most identify with?" 8 of the 10 characters named most frequently were Black. Leading the nominations was Moesha with 26 votes, followed by Jamie on the *Jamie Foxx Show*, Kim on *The Parkers*, and Tia from *Sister, Sister*. Indeed, of the 127 mentions compiled, 86 (68%) were for Black characters. Thus, as suspected, students' exposure to and connections with Black-oriented media were quite substantial.

The second set of preliminary analyses examined sex differences in students' media use. A series of one-way analyses of variance was conducted that tested for sex differences in each of the seven viewing-amount variables and four viewer-involvement variables. Findings indicated few differences in this area. In terms of viewing amounts, girls ($M = 3.76$) were found to watch more hours of music videos than were boys ($M = 2.33$), $F(1, 151) = 6.97$, $p < .01$. In terms of viewer involvement, girls ($M = 2.43$) identified more strongly with the popular Black female characters than did boys ($M = 1.97$), $F(1, 148) = 6.95$, $p < .01$; conversely, boys ($M = 2.37$) identified more strongly with the popular Black

Table 2
Zero-Order Correlations Between Media Use and Self-Esteem

Media use variable	Performance self-esteem	Social self-esteem	Appearance self-esteem	Total self-esteem	Racial self-esteem
General media use					
Prime-time hours	.04	-.11	-.05	-.05	.00
Music video hours	-.15†	-.11	-.05	-.14	-.09
Sports program hours	-.22**	-.18*	-.02	-.18*	-.17*
Movies	.02	-.07	.00	-.03	-.10
ID with favorite character	-.12	-.21*	-.19*	-.23**	-.14
ID with White female characters	-.04	.01	.09	.02	.05
ID with White male characters	-.10	-.15†	-.01	-.11	-.08
Black-oriented media use					
Black prime-time hours	.04	-.06	-.01	-.02	.09
Proportion of Black prime-time hours	.05	.09	.03	.07	-.01
ID with Black female characters	.02	-.03	.07	.02	.07
ID with Black male characters	.03	-.09	.18*	.05	.01

Note. Because of substantial missing data, $N = 114$ – 117 for the ID with favorite character variable; $N = 139$ – 154 for all other variables. ID = identification.
† $p \leq .08$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

male characters than did girls ($M = 2.03$), $F(1, 142) = 4.05$, $p < .05$.

Finally, preliminary analyses were conducted that examined zero-order correlations between the background variables (age, sex, single-parent family, mother's education level, father's education level, and religiosity) and the five self-esteem variables. Only a few significant correlations emerged. As previous research might suggest, greater religiosity was associated with higher appearance self-esteem, $r(152) = .22$, $p < .01$, higher performance self-esteem, $r(152) = .18$, $p < .05$, and higher overall self-esteem, $r(152) = .19$, $p < .05$. It was not, however, a correlate of racial self-esteem. The level of education of students' mothers also was positively associated with appearance self-esteem, $r(149) = .19$, $p < .05$. Because neither age nor gender correlated significantly with any of the self-evaluation variables, and because sex differences in media use were not extensive, the remaining analyses examined both sexes and all grades together.

Testing the Main Research Questions

The first research question addressed potential links between mainstream media use and students' self-evaluations. Zero-order correlational analyses were conducted between the five self-esteem variables and the seven general media use variables. The results, shown in the top portion of Table 2, indicate several significant connections among these variables, each in a negative direction. Here, the genre of the media played a central role. Although prime-time programs are the typical focus of research in this area, they made no contribution here. Instead, it was frequent viewing of sports programs that was negatively associated with performance self-esteem, social self-esteem, and racial self-esteem. In addition, stronger identification with one's favorite character was associated with less positive judgments of one's own social competencies and one's physical appearance.¹ Notable associations also emerged for frequent music video viewing and for

stronger identification with popular White male characters, which were linked to lower performance self-esteem and lower social self-esteem, respectively. Thus, although the results were genre specific, both frequent media exposure and stronger viewer identification were associated with lower self-evaluations.

The second research question emphasized the potential impact of Black-oriented media use. Might frequent exposure to Black programs and characters be positively associated with self-esteem? As indicated in the bottom half of Table 2, the findings here were minimal. Stronger identification with popular Black male characters was associated with more positive evaluations of one's own physical appearance. Surprisingly, exposure levels made no contribution; more frequent viewing of Black-oriented programs, assessed as a raw score or as a proportion, was *not* associated with students' self-esteem or with their racial self-esteem.

The final research question examined the extent to which religiosity moderates potential media influences on self-esteem. This question was addressed in two steps. First, a series of regression analyses was conducted that examined the extent to which religiosity, relevant demographic correlates, and the media use variables predicted students' self-evaluations when all factors were considered together. Because using all 11 media variables as predictors would substantially reduce statistical power, I selected for inclusion in each regression equation the following subset of variables that had emerged as significant correlates of students' self-evaluations: music video hours, sports programming hours, ID with White male characters, ID with Black male characters, and movie

¹ The race of the favorite character was not a factor. Students who selected a Black favorite character ($n = 85$) did not differ in their self-evaluations from students who selected a White favorite character ($n = 40$). These two groups also did not differ on the strength of this preference or on any of the demographic variables.

Table 3
*Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analyses Predicting Self-Esteem
 Among the Full Sample*

Predictor	Performance self-esteem	Social self-esteem	Appearance self-esteem	Total self-esteem	Racial self-esteem
Religiosity	-.04	-.22	.02	-.09	-.10
Music video hours	-.49**	-.49**	-.41*	-.57**	-.32
Sports program hours	-.40**	-.42**	-.22	-.39**	-.41**
Movies	.09	-.01	.01	.01	-.12
ID with Black male characters	.25*	.13	.35**	.28*	.14
ID with White male characters	-.21†	-.21†	-.22†	-.25*	-.04
Religiosity × TV Use	.60*	.72**	.49*	.74**	.52*
Mother's education ^a	—	—	.16	—	—
Adjusted R ²	.17	.07	.12	.14	.06
F	3.46	2.32	3.15	3.93	2.20
p	.002	.030	.003	.001	.039

Note. Standardized coefficients (betas) are reported. ID = identification.

^a Mother's education had emerged as a significant correlate only of appearance self-esteem and thus was included in the analysis only for that self-esteem variable.

† $p \leq .08$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

hours.² An interaction term was created and included in each regression analysis to test for the possible moderating role of religiosity. This term (Religiosity × TV Use) reflected the product of religiosity and the combined hours of viewing music videos and sports programming. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Each equation tested was statistically significant, accounting for 6.2% to 13.5% of the variance. As was seen in the earlier correlational results, both music video viewing and sports programming viewing emerged as significant negative predictors of self-esteem. More frequent viewing of music videos was associated with lower self-esteem on each dimension, and more frequent viewing of sports programming was associated with lower racial, performance, social, and total self-esteem. At the same time, stronger identification with popular Black male TV characters predicted higher performance, social, and total self-esteem; stronger identification with popular White male TV characters was a notable predictor of lower self-esteem on each dimension. Finally, the Religiosity × TV Use interaction term was a significant predictor in each equation, suggesting that the nature of these relationships varies based on level of religiosity.

Accordingly, to explore more fully the role of religiosity as a moderator, I used a median split of the religiosity score to divide the sample into low-religiosity (scores of 0–8; 42% of the sample) and high-religiosity (scores of 9–12; 58% of the sample) groups. The central associations tested in the regression analyses were then reexamined in correlational analyses, with separate analyses for these two groups. The results, shown in Table 4, indicate two very different patterns based on students' level of religiosity. For students reporting lower levels of religiosity, heavier media use correlated negatively with self-esteem and with racial self-esteem, especially concerning their exposure to music videos, sports programming, and movies. Indeed, of the 13 statistically significant and two marginally significant correlations reported in Table 4, all revealed media use as a negative correlate of self-esteem. A different set of relationships emerged among students reporting higher levels of religiosity. Here, greater exposure, to any medium or genre, was not related to self-esteem or to racial self-esteem.

Overall, religiosity does appear to buffer the negative effects of media use on self-esteem, such that heavier media use is associated with lower self-esteem and lower racial self-esteem only among those low in religiosity.

Discussion

At a critical juncture in their development, when issues of self and ethnic identity are especially salient, Black adolescents spend approximately 5 hr each day watching television, a rate that ranks them among the heaviest of all media consumers. Yet because African Americans on television are both underrepresented in leading roles and misrepresented as a group, many have argued that such high levels of TV use will lead Black children to feel less positively about being Black and about themselves in general (e.g., Graves, 1993; Stroman, 1991). The goal of this study was to test this assumption by exploring the specific conditions under which media use might contribute to the self-esteem and racial self-esteem of Black teens. I expected that negative associations between media use and self-esteem would not be global but instead would be tempered by the domain of self in question, the content of students' media diets, the strength of students' connections to individual characters, and relevant factors in students' backgrounds. The findings supported these expectations, demonstrating that both the media diet and the background of the adolescent play key roles.

First, the results did vary by the domain of self and by the media genre in question. Different and stronger sets of connections emerged for self-esteem than for racial self-esteem, further sup-

² The ID with favorite character variable was initially selected for inclusion as a predictor. However, closer examination indicated that 38 of the 156 participants did not name a favorite TV character, thereby creating a great deal of missing data for this variable. This variable was therefore removed from the regression analyses and was replaced with the movie hours variable in an effort both to test the full sample and to assess a broad array of media use.

Table 4
Zero-Order Correlations Between Media Use and Self-Esteem for Two Levels of Religiosity

Media use variable	Performance self-esteem	Social self-esteem	Appearance self-esteem ^a	Total self-esteem	Racial self-esteem
Low religiosity (<i>N</i> = 58–62)					
Music video hours	-.32*	-.41**	-.35*	-.42**	-.30*
Sports program hours	-.37*	-.30*	-.21	-.32*	-.31*
Movies	-.13	-.25*	-.25 ^b	-.24 ^c	-.37**
ID with Black male characters	.03	-.09	.18	.06	-.04
ID with White male characters	-.14	-.23	.02	-.13	-.07
ID with favorite character	-.16	-.34*	-.22	-.29*	-.10
High religiosity (<i>N</i> = 83–87)					
Music video hours	.01	.07	.19	.13	.05
Sports program hours	-.09	-.14	.08	-.06	-.08
Movies	.16	.06	.19	.17	.10
ID with Black male characters	.01	-.08	.14	.03	.05
ID with White male characters	-.10	-.09	-.10	-.11	-.10
ID with favorite character	-.08	-.09	-.18	-.15	-.21

Note. ID = identification.

^a Mother's education level served as a covariate. ^b $p = .058$. ^c $p = .057$.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

porting the need both to assess each of these constructs and to view them separately. Moreover, only particular media genres were influential. Emerging as the most consistent media correlates of self-esteem were regular exposure to sports programming and regular exposure to music videos, which predicted lower self-esteem on nearly every dimension; regular viewing of mainstream programming and regular viewing of Black-oriented prime-time programming were less influential. Indeed, if I had examined only total self-esteem and prime-time viewing, as is done in many studies, my results would likely have been null because these two factors were not related here. The strong showing of music videos and sports programming as negative correlates highlights the significance of these genres in adolescents' lives. Indeed, survey data indicate that the viewing of prime-time programming typically decreases from childhood to adolescence, perhaps contributing to its minimal impact here, whereas the use of music and the viewing of music videos increase (Arnett, 1995). Many youths report defining themselves and their peer affiliations on the basis of their preferences for particular music genres (Arnett, 1995; Hansen & Hansen, 2000), and 93% of teens identify popular music as an important part of their lives (Leming, 1987). In addition, both sports figures and music artists are commonly named among Black adolescents' favorite or most admired individuals, with Allen Iverson and the late rapper Tupac Shakur topping the list in a recent survey (MEE Productions, Inc., 2002). Consequently, with music and sports figures occupying such prominent positions among Black teens' favorite people, it is possible that the sexual desirability, wealth, and lifestyles showcased in music videos and associated with successful athletes may encourage upward social comparisons, making Black youths feel inadequate by comparison.

It is also possible that students with more satisfying lives and self-perceptions end up watching music videos and sports less frequently. Because these data are correlational, I argue here only for an association between these two forces, acknowledging that viewer self-esteem is likely to both shape and be shaped by media use.

Second, the findings indicated significant associations between students' level of identification with popular TV characters and their self-esteem, with the nature of these connections varying by the race of the portrayal. Strong identification with popular Black male characters such as Darrell on *The Hughleys* predicted higher performance self-esteem, appearance self-esteem, and total self-esteem. Strong identification with popular White characters such as Chandler on *Friends* predicted lower total self-esteem and approached significance as such a predictor for each subdimension of self-esteem. This contrast is striking, demonstrating the role of frame of reference. These findings are also consistent with those reported by McDermott and Greenberg (1984) concerning the benefits of the use of Black-oriented media, and with the premises of Crocker and Major (1989) concerning the protective aspects of stigma. As noted earlier, Crocker and Major argued that one protective strategy used by members of stigmatized groups is the making of mostly in-group comparisons. Accordingly, my data suggest that Black students who connect with and compare themselves more strongly to fictional Black characters appear to be using this strategy and also report higher self-esteem, either as a precursor or a result. Those who connect more strongly with White characters, and who appear not to be using this protective strategy, seem to be placing their own self-esteem at risk.

Finally, the findings highlight the significance of individual viewer characteristics such as religiosity. When students were viewed as a whole, various facets of media use were negatively associated with self-esteem. However, when the sample was divided into those reporting low versus high levels of religiosity (relative to their peers), negative associations appeared only among students low in religiosity. It is these students who appear to be most vulnerable to media effects, both positive and negative. What forces might be at work here in shaping religiosity's role as a buffer? One possible mechanism may be differences in amounts of exposure, perhaps with students of low religiosity consuming more media. However, this was not the case, for religiosity did not correlate with any of the media exposure variables (correlation coefficients ranged from $-.03$ to $.10$). It is also possible that religiosity may serve as an indicator of how strongly one is connected to the Black community. Typically, African Americans with strong religious commitments are also integrated into the Black community and its corresponding social networks (Allen et al., 1989). Being more connected to one's subgroup provides both protection against stigma (Crocker & Major, 1989) and alternative role models against which to evaluate media portrayals. Hence, students reporting lower levels of religiosity may possess fewer opposing models and value systems. A related finding was reported by Morgan and Rothschild (1983), who found that teens with fewer social affiliations were more vulnerable to accepting television's stereotypes about gender. Further work is needed to explore the mechanisms underlying this provocative connection.

Within the pattern of results reported here, one intriguing finding was that identifying strongly with one's favorite character was a negative correlate of self-esteem regardless of the character's race, although other contributions of viewer identification were race specific. In attempting to understand this contradiction, I suspect that the two "identification" measures actually tapped different constructs. For one measure, students indicated the extent to which they "related to" or "identified with" each of 20 popular TV characters. For the second measure, students named and then completed items about their favorite character, responding to statements such as "I'd like to look and dress the way this character does" and "This character is the type of person I'd like to be." I suspect that the first measure assessed mainly liking and similarity, and the second tapped emulation or idolization. Accordingly, it might be the case that high levels of emulation or idolization of any kind, whether of White or Black characters, may be indicative of possible frailties or vulnerabilities in an individual's self-esteem.

Despite the provocative findings and lessons offered, however, there were several limitations of the study's design that can be improved on in future research. One limitation is that the study's correlational nature does not permit conclusions about causality. Because both media use and self-esteem were measured at the same point in time, the direction of influence is ambiguous. Is heavy exposure to TV's one-dimensional images of African Americans driving the lower self-esteem outcomes, or are students with lower self-esteem withdrawing from other forms of social and peer interaction and watching more TV? Experimental paradigms are needed to clarify the current findings.

A second limitation is the lack of diversity of the sample in terms of participant SES, age, and sex. Because the majority of students were from well-educated, two-parent homes, future stud-

ies will need to include more heterogeneous samples, testing these issues among teens from less privileged backgrounds. A second concern about the generalizability of the results is the age of the participants. Findings from previous research with Black children (e.g., Stroman, 1986) suggested a positive association between media use and self-esteem. The findings obtained here with Black teens are more mixed, with mostly negative associations emerging. Because identity issues are especially salient in adolescence, it is quite possible that self-esteem may be more vulnerable to influence by media use during this time. To more fully examine the roles of age and developmental status, additional investigations are needed comparing these dynamics in a sample that includes students from a broader range of ages. Third, because only 30% of the participants in this sample were boys, possible sex differences in the nature of these dynamics may not have been fully explored. As noted earlier, the sex of the viewer played surprisingly little role here. Boys and girls did not differ in their levels of self-regard and differed on only 3 of the 11 dimensions of media use. Moreover, post hoc correlational analyses conducted separately among each of the groups revealed the same general pattern of correlations between media use and students' self-conceptions. It is unclear, however, whether these findings indicate that sex does not factor into these dynamics or whether there were too few boys tested for such sex differences to emerge. Finally, future research must continue to investigate the circumstances under which media exposure is beneficial or detrimental. This research should include further study of other media genres, such as talk shows and soap operas, and of specific demographic factors that might shape media use (e.g., the presence of siblings, levels of parental co-viewing).

In conclusion, this study extends our understanding of connections between media use and self-conceptions among Black youths. As expected, viewing amounts and viewer involvement levels emerged as significant predictors, lending support to both the cultivation model and the drench hypothesis. The data also indicated that media use was not associated with all Black students feeling that they are incompetent or unintelligent. Instead, the nature and strength of these associations depended heavily on the foundation of the individual and on the specific content of her or his media diet. It is hoped that the findings obtained here will provide ample fuel for further research in this area and for further study of factors that put some Black youths at risk.

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