

Women's Roles in Relationships: Dating While Black

A Sociological Content Analysis of the HBO Original Series: *Insecure*

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I. Abstract

This article reveals the several distinctions that the third season of the HBO Original Series: *Insecure* discloses between Black men and women in the dating world. While there are other forms of media that have revealed the general ideas about stereotypical gender roles, societal barriers, and differentiations existing within Black relationships, the show *Insecure* provided substantial analysis that uncovered the roles Black women play while dating. Qualitative content analysis was the strategic research method used to analyze this show. Detailed data was gathered on the show's third season which allowed for general observations to be recorded and the findings framed in a way that created themed patterns. *Insecure* is particularly well-liked among Black millennials as it seems to accurately depict the struggles and absurdities of being young, black and dating in the big city.

II. Introduction

This study explicitly encompasses the third season of *Insecure* which is an American comedy-drama chronicling the lives of Black millennials. *Insecure* is partially based on its creator Issa Rae's critically-acclaimed web series *Awkward Black Girl*. *Insecure* explores the Black female experience from the perspectives of two women in their late 20's. One woman is a successful attorney and the other works at a non-profit which benefits middle-school aged students of color. The two women are radically different, but equally supportive of one another. *Insecure* depicts Black women in a positive way that reality television does not. The women are not competing against each other for the attention of men nor are they the typical reality-show diva. *Insecure* is favored because it offers a different view in the conversations surrounding sexuality, race, and culture within the Black community that other forms of media attempt to abolish. The conflicts in *Insecure*, whether romantic or platonic are organic. The cast includes men and women from various backgrounds, ethnically and socioeconomically, and the show's emotional intelligence addresses race and coding. The topics discussed and themes found in *Insecure* range from emotional fulfillment to the ooh's and aah's of dating while Black.

III. Literature Review

In most traditional heterosexual relationships, the roles, or gender roles, are often very clear. The man is deemed the protector and the head-of-household, whereas the woman is defined as the nurturer, the housekeeper and the more submissive of the two. This is not the case in Black relationships. According to an excerpt from *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, "studies have shown that [black women] tend to hold more egalitarian gender ideologies than White women or Latinas" (Hall & Pichon, 2014). Black women are more likely to embody masculine characteristics, such as assertiveness or independence (Hall & Pichon, 2014). Black

couples face major scrutiny when trying to attain ideal gender roles in society. More importantly, Black women are judged due to their roles in society and in their relationships. This is likely due to historical events, like slavery, and institutional stressors, such as: racism, poverty, etc. The slave owner's exploitation of the Black woman's sexuality was one of the most notable elements differentiating the experience of slavery for men and women. Much throughout slavery and well into the Jim Crow Era, America deemed Black women as innately lustful beings (PBS, 2004). During slavery, Black women were stripped of their clothing then, oiled down so that perspective buyers/ slave masters could poke and prod them. Today, Black women are often displayed in the media as loud, unintelligent and are still highly sexualized as they were during times of enslavement (Jeffries & Jeffries, 2015). In the media, Black women are seen in sexually suggestive clothing, and having voluptuous breasts, large hips, big bottoms, etc. (Sanchez, et al., 2017).

Following slavery and long after the era of segregation, Ronald Reagan assumed office in January 1981, and he immediately began lobbying for Reaganomics. This was a program that Civil Rights leader Vernon Jordan said would make the "poor poorer and the rich richer" (Tolson and Hand, 1985). During this time period, more than 7.8 million Blacks were living in poverty, the implementation of Reaganomics was a seemingly evident attack on the Black community (Tolson and Hand, 1985). Despite the bonds of slavery and poverty, the gender stereotypes associated with Black women are that they are deemed strong-willed and independent, whereas, black men are absent and unreliable (Sanchez, et al, 2017). Black men are categorized as absent and unreliable because they were. With the reign of Reagan, Black men resorted to violence as a means to provide for their families – resulting in lengthy prison sentences. Black women were

left no choice, but to assume their new position as head-of-household (Crutchfield and Weeks, 2015).

Along with the aforementioned gender stereotypes, a Black woman's skin complexion plays an important role in the Black community as well. There is an apparent distinction associated with varied skin colors within Black communities in America (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). Certain perceptions of and preferences for skin color are related to beliefs about personality and behavioral expectations of Black women. Black women with lighter-skinned complexions are deemed, by society, as being more beautiful than Black women with darker-skinned complexion. The valuing of skin color within the Black community substantially affects social interactions and socioeconomic experiences. Darker-skinned Blacks are more likely to face greater barriers to achievement compared to lighter-skinned Blacks (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). Connotations like these were also apparent during slavery, darker-skinned slaves were required to work in the fields and lighter-skinned slaves worked in the house (X, 1963).

As mentioned previously in the text, these roles and gender stereotypes evolved into generations of Blacks both consciously and subconsciously teaching themselves these aforementioned principles to be true: Black women hold an egalitarian role in their relationships while Black men are absent and absent-minded, and lighter-skinned Blacks are better than darker-skinned Blacks.

IV. Methodology

The procedure used in this particular project was a qualitative content approach. While traditional experiments are developed using a hypothesis, and researchers are attempting to prove their idea, the method used in this study was an effective process to analyze visual forms of media such as television shows. This research method allowed for patterns to naturally emerge

giving the researcher the ability to accurately and efficiently analyze a plethora of digital content. In traditional experiments, a qualitative content approach would have caused researchers to overlook content found in the third season of *Insecure*. In the initial viewing of the subject television show, basic plots, ideas, and other strategic thoughts were collected. During subsequent viewings, each episode in the third season of *Insecure* were examined, observed, and coded precisely. A latent coding method was completed using a chart which allowed for codes to be grouped; then, the researcher was able to easily combine and group similar codes where themes were found and developed. This season of *Insecure* consisted of eight episodes in which the researcher was able to gather some information on the roles of Black women within their relationships whether intimate or platonic.

V. Findings

Following data collection through a content analysis approach, three apparent themes emerged while viewing the third season of *Insecure*. The themes that appeared during subsequent viewings of the show were: demarcation of gender roles, gender stereotype conformations, and racial stereotypes within the Black community. While the three aforementioned themes appeared throughout the third season several times, some themes appeared many times in just one episode.

Themes	
Demarcation of Gender Roles	Gender Stereotype Conformations
Racial Stereotypes within the Black Community	

Demarcation of Gender Roles

Gender roles are beliefs pertaining to the tasks, personalities and behaviors that men and women are expected to embrace based upon societal norms (Hall & Pichon, 2014). Sometimes,

gender roles greatly influence and define the interpersonal relationships between men and women. Studies done exclusively with Black women have revealed that women from this cultural background have more individualistic gender ethics, principles, and beliefs than White women or Latinas. The character Molly, in the show *Insecure*, has a constant battle with defining who she is while navigating the various romantic and professional obstacles in her life. In season three, Molly finally gets the recognition she's been yearning for at work and she also comes to terms with clear boundaries for her dating life. Molly's go-with-the-flow outlook in her past relationships diminishes as she becomes increasingly empowered to know what she wants from her partners and in her work-life. For example, Molly severed ties with Dro, a long-time friend in a polyamorous marriage. This was a clear example of how Molly wanted to take control of the reins of her dating life. Additionally, Molly spent time during her much-needed girl's trip to complete a deadline-driven work assignment in an effort to prove that she was as competent as her male counterparts. Furthermore, Molly, although hesitant, welcomes the idea of a normal relationship with her Asian beau, Andrew. His role in *Insecure* is ground-breaking in the sense that the relationship between Black Molly and Asian Andrew challenges the audience's stereotypes of who is allowed to fall in love (Yam, 2018). Asian men and Black women aren't usually shown in romantic relationships in society and media. Despite her need to "reclaim her life", Molly realizes that things between her and Andrew seem normal, and she sabotages their courtship. Frightened and unable to fully grasp the concept of a healthy relationship, Molly destroys Andrew's spirit and ditches him on their date. While her workplace dynamics are intriguing, Molly's personal relationships flop as her pride often gets in the way. Although women like Molly should harness their more influential traits in the work environment, dependent and relational values should be used within their intimate relationships.

Gender Role Stereotype Conformations

The gender stereotypes placed on and associated with Black romantic and platonic relationships are evident in the third season of *Insecure*. Black men are often stereotyped as being absent and/ or absent-minded. The character Daniel, a music producer-in-the-making, has a tumultuous past with Issa, played by the show's creator, writer and director. Daniel was also the man Issa slept with to cheat on her ex-boyfriend Lawrence. Daniel's character has severe commitment issues and is portrayed as having bad communication skills. In the first episode of the third season, Issa is couch-surfing at Daniel's and they are both struggling to communicate their true feelings for one another. This lack of communication is evident as Daniel flaunts his flings in front of Issa. As Issa challenges the gender role stereotype that Black women are more assertive in their relationships, Daniel conforms to the stereotype that Black men are absent. In addition, Issa and Daniel are struggling within their careers, but Daniel's pride and Issa's inconsistencies make it hard for the two to rekindle whatever past relationship they had. Daniel's battle with the stereotype that men aren't supposed to ask for help subsides when Issa steps-up and acts as his wing-woman during a client meet-and-greet at a club. Although, the meeting went sour, the two finally had the chance to lay their cards on the table and open up, completely challenging societal gender stereotypes. When Issa reconnects with Nathan, a Lyft passenger, she is more open and submissive to allowing him to see who she really is. Issa once again challenges the egalitarianism Black women are supposed to embody based on the gender roles placed by society.

Racial Stereotypes in the Black Community

Insecure displays a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds in its third season. This particular show also reveals racial stereotypes that many in the Black community face on a daily basis. At

the end of season two, Molly learned that she was being paid less than her white counterparts at her law firm, and her request for a raise was subsequently denied closely tying to the racial stereotype that Black women are often mistreated and patronized in the workplace. According to the National Women's Law Center, women earn 80.5 cents for every dollar a man earns, and Black women make just 63 cents for every dollar. Faced with the demotion at her previous employer, Molly had a new outlook on life and was able to land a lucrative job at an all-Black law firm. *Insecure* supports the stereotype against Black businesses lacking professionalism. In the second episode of the third season, Molly's office, with the scenic view of the city, is cluttered with boxes. Her colleagues at the all Black law firm treated the space as an extra storage area. There are stereotypes associated with Black women, the gender norms and prejudices against women in terms of their careers and also the racial stereotyping about Black women being too aggressive and over (yet undeservedly) confident. Molly upholds this stereotype as she obsesses over being perfect at work to impress the boys, and compete with Taurean, her male counterpart at the new firm. These themes of empowerment and struggling to set boundaries is evident in the lives of Black men and women competing to perform well in a society where they were set-up to fail.

VI. Conclusion

After vehemently observing *Insecure* and researching the various themes revealed in the show, many conclusions were provoked. The show effortlessly reveals the struggles and battles affecting Black college-educated individuals transitioning from their late 20's into their early 30's. More importantly, the show allows for viewers to see the perspective of the dating world from two very different Black women. Molly, the successful attorney, who is navigating her complicated dating life and Issa, the catalyst for community outreach, who is testing the waters

of the dating world following a self-inflicted break-up. Audiences can relate to the challenges faced by the characters within *Insecure*. Following several viewings of each episode in the third season, the researcher of this content analysis was able to find three themes: demarcation of gender roles, gender stereotype conformations, and racial stereotypes within the Black community. While the themes can be drawn from any television series, *Insecure* has been hailed as revolutionary because it surfaced during a much needed time, following the Obama-era, when the Black empowerment movement received a blow with the announcing of the Trump administration. In addition the *Insecure* debuted its sharp, witty self after predominantly Black sitcoms like: *Moesha*, *Girlfriends*, and *A Different World* disappeared. *Insecure* allowed for Black people to be featured on television in a way that hasn't happened since the 99's into the early 2000's.

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