

The Portrayal and Representation of Black Women in Competition Reality Television

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The type of media content that I chose to analyze were competition based reality television shows and how they represent and portray Black women from the internal workings of production to the external on screen viewing. The shows that I analyzed were *The Bachelorette*, specifically season 13, and *Big Brother*, specifically season 24. As a watcher of reality television, I have noticed the rise in casting diversity, which I assumed to be a step in the right direction. Despite this, I have also noticed how some things have not changed, like how Black women are still being portrayed in a negative light and are confronted with labels and stereotypes through interactions and editing more often than other people. Because of this, I wanted to do a deeper analysis into the social significance of this issue by starting from the inside of the production and working my way out. Through my analysis, I have discovered that the perpetuated televisual structure of whiteness plays the most important role in how Black women have been continuously underrepresented and are negatively portrayed in competition reality television, with executives failing to use their editing choices and casting decisions to justly and accurately represent Black women.

Throughout history, Black women have been ideologically controlled by the images seen in mass media (Lundy, 2018) whilst being underrepresented. Reality television, more specifically competition based shows are a contemporary contributor to this issue. The main reason for this is the televisual structure of whiteness that creates the nature of casting, editing decisions, and promotion for these shows. *The Bachelor* universe is a prime example of how, from the outside, they created one of the most historical seasons that featured the first Black lead in their franchise, yet internally remains color-blind and avoidant to the wrongs they have committed to create and represent this moment in time.

Season 13 of *The Bachelorette* starred Rachel Lindsay, *The Bachelor* franchise's first Black lead, seen in figure 1. However, according to the show's former host, Chris Harrison –who has since “stepped down” from his position due to a controversy in which he dismissed racism in 2021 (Stevens, 2021) – and casting director Lacey Pemberton, the casting choice for Rachel was about finding “the best lead,” who just happened to be Black (Goepfert, 2018); they were not actively seeking out a Black lead. This color blind casting technique used by the directors perpetuates the idea that Lindsay was the perfect candidate despite her Blackness, not because of her Blackness. According to the director, Kevin Fuchs, the formula for choosing the next star comes from the previous winner's top picks, which is something that is out of production's control. Lindsay happened to be in the top three of the previous season of *The Bachelor* and was a fan favorite, which is something that also plays a role in who gets chosen as the next star. So, the people who have the power to change this structure can create more diversity, however ultimately place responsibility on the lead (who is usually white) and the majority white audience rather than themselves to choose the next star, minimizing the racism that has been taking place for decades. Not only this, but the (white) executives framed Lindsay's season through diversity numbers, yet only briefly mentioned Lindsay's race before following the same format as every other white-led season (Goepfert, 2018). It is clear that by dismissing the cultural specificity of having the first Black female lead on the show, they are perpetuating the idea of the post racial tv ideology, in which the nod at the need for diversity is present, but only at the superficial level or when it works to their benefit.

This superficiality speaks volumes through the departure of Mike Fleiss, the creator of *The Bachelor* franchise. The reason for his sudden departure was due to an investigation conducted by Warner Brothers into allegations of racial discrimination. It has been said that

despite Lindsay's historic season and the first Black Bachelor introduced just three years later in 2021, Fleiss has been resistant to increasing diversity on the show, going as far as retaliating against production staffers who created more diverse casts with BIPOC people on the show. His reasoning: "“minorities don't get ratings”" (Wagmeister, 2023). This ties back to the colorblind racism perpetuated in Hollywood and their tendency to excuse their inherent racial bias by blaming the market, despite having no evidence to back this claim up; it also naturalizes racial prejudice, assuming that a majority white audience will only gravitate toward stories about other white people (Yuen, 2016). However, when it came to casting Black candidates, there were only certain people who were deemed acceptable. Former *The Bachelor* franchise producer Jazzy Collins, who is a Black woman, started working in the casting department during Lindsay's *The Bachelorette* season. She noticed that there was no formal mandate for when it came to casting Black candidates, but the reaction she got from her supervisors when she showed them a Black woman with hair that was natural, braided, or in locks proved otherwise. She claims that they would say that these women were not right for the show, but when she showed supervisors a Black woman with straightened hair or with a wig, they would gravitate towards her. Collins also acknowledged that she was paid less than her white colleagues despite having more experience than them, left out of meetings, and deemed "aggressive" when pointing out problems. Following suit, she mentioned that when a Black Emmy-nominated producer applied for the show, they were told they had to start as an associate at the bottom level of the franchise (Dellatto, 2021). It is clear that the issue of race and *The Bachelor* franchise is perpetuated from deep within the white-structured televisual business itself, with inherent racism being a trait seen in many important people of power, including the former host and creator. These decisions made off screen greatly affect what is happening on screen, which is what viewers and fans are most

apt to know about. With this, the lack of on screen diversity within the franchise has sparked the creation of the Bachelor Diversity Campaign in 2020 by a group of 13 super fans, which attempts to hold network ABC accountable for their casting decisions. The Bachelor Diversity Campaign also created a petition asking for more contestants of color which over 160,000 people have signed (Dellatto, 2021).

Stereotypes do not just simply appear in the media; they are developed over time through the continuous portrayals of specific people. These continuous portrayals within the media establish a sense of credibility, despite being completely unwarranted, and can lead to the formation of prejudices and judgements based on said stereotypical image. The “real” in reality television also leads some viewers to believe that what they are watching is a true and accurate representation of how the world works and how people act, which is another reason for the belief in various stereotypes (Tyree, 2011). When it comes to Black women, their representations are especially harmful because they are assumed to be a representative of their entire race and or gender through their actions and choices (Boylorn, 2008). In competition based reality television, there are many black female stereotypes that have been perpetuated over the years, however one of the most prevalent is the angry black woman. Rachel Lindsay, the first Black Bachelorette, criticized the way that she was portrayed on the season 13 finale. Though Lindsay found her love, got engaged, and lived happily ever after, the finale of her season is not centered around this at all. Instead, it centers around the departure of the season’s runner-up, Peter Kraus, which brought extreme emotions and rumination to the table. Not only this, but Lindsay compares her season finale to the season 14 finale, which had a completely different formula. In season 14, the pre taped portion of the show aired on tv, and followed was the life aftershow in which white Bachelorette Becca Kufrin and winner Garret Yrigoyen could discuss their journey together in

the future. In season 13, however, Rachel Lindsay was forced to sit on stage for three hours watching the pre taped finale for the first time in front of a live audience, with her live reaction and interview cutting in between segments (Strause, 2018). In figure 2, Lindsay and runner up Kraus had just watched their difficult departure from each other for the first time live and their emotions were immediately put on display. Kraus feels as though he is being “attacked” by Lindsay, despite her calmness and support for him throughout the interview. Ultimately this paints her as the “angry black woman” stereotype.

In another competition based reality tv show called *Big Brother*, Taylor Hale, seen in figure 3 in season 24 was also failed by the editing choices made by the executives of the show, which ultimately minimized the mistreatment that was taking place inside the house. The edit of the show framed the tension between Hale and the rest of the house as a result of an incident that happened between her and houseguest Paloma Aguilar, in which Hale was painted as a liar (despite not being one). This is seen in figure 4, with Aguilar sitting on the grass telling her other houseguests about what had “happened.” With this, the show made it seem like a misunderstanding. However, her mistreatment started days before this when her houseguests encouraged Hale to dress up and model her outfit she brought for the finale, but then proceeded to bad mouth this decision to each other and in the diary room. The final edit of the show left out this public bashing and completely misrepresented Hale and the situation, essentially painting her as the enemy (Joest, 2022). Azāh Awasum, second runner up of the previous season who is also a Black woman, made a tweet (figure 5) about this situation, acknowledging that she made an effort to “dial back” during her time in the house for the fear of experiencing something like what Hale endured. This goes along with the idea of “stereotype threat,” which occurs when someone has the fear of being negatively stereotyped by others, which creates a feeling of

discomfort and has effects on how this person acts. It also speaks to the idea of Black authenticity, and how it is ultimately harder to “perform” than white authenticity (Squires, 2014) *because* of these looming stereotypes.

It is clear that through Hale and Lindsay’s experiences on competition reality television, Black women are some of, if not the most, vulnerable people to be faced with stereotypes and microaggressions, whether it be in person on their show, or on screen through editing. However it is important to acknowledge the critical role that executives play in creating these situations, ranging from overlooking past racial controversies of potential candidates in casting, to choosing to edit something in a way that creates “buzz,” but misrepresents the entire story and the people involved. Through every little decision made by executives in production, they are majorly affecting how Black women are being treated on their shows and viewed by their audiences. With this, it is imperative for the racial hierarchy within the C suites of the television industry to be dismantled, which is easier said than done. Black women should be casted because of their blackness, should be given the opportunity to share their stories, and should be represented justly. Black women should not be failed by competition reality television anymore.

Images



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Azäh Awasum 🇳🇮 🇺🇸

@azah_awasum



I made a cognizant effort to “dial back” in the house for these exact reasons. Dark skinned women always have this in the back of our heads. CBS teaches about racial microaggressions but a section on colorism would be beneficial. Taylor’s light will shine outside this house. [#bb24](#)

10:34 AM · Jul 10, 2022

674 Retweets **41** Quotes **6,088** Likes **51** Bookmarks

Figure 5

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