

Media Representations of Popular Culture Figures and the Construction of Black Masculinities

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The present study explores the construction of masculinity among young Black men. Of central concern is young Black men's subjective reflections on the role that popular culture and media have in informing how they understand and define their ideas of masculinity. The study uses interview data from a larger pilot study, the Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health Project, where participants sought to elucidate perceptions of the intersections between manhood and mental health. Study participants included 18- to 26-year-old Black men ($n = 11$) enrolled at a university in the Midwest. When asked to describe and identify their definitions of manhood, participants referred to well-known male media figures of the past and present, and specifically identified various social movement leaders, athletes, and entertainers who were central to their conceptualization of manhood. Moreover, men identified both positive and negative qualities of these popular figures to determine aspects they either aspired to adopt or reject when forming their own ideas about manhood. Study findings show that popular culture figures play complex roles in Black men's constructions of masculinity while uncovering that Black men use the images of these figures to deconstruct harmful, antiquated stereotypes and tropes associated with Black masculinity. Popular culture figures are also used to highlight and grapple with complex messages about the disposability of Black men's lives.

Keywords: Black/African American men, masculinity, gender, popular culture, media

Special attention has been given to examining how men learn what it means to be a man and how they come to identify certain behaviors and beliefs as male characteristics (Bowleg et al., 2016; Mahalik et al., 2003; Parent & Moradi, 2009). These studies suggest that men are socialized early in life to adhere to traditional masculine norms, which oftentimes prevents help-seeking for both trivial and important matters, including health complications and

issues related to their physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Bowleg, Teti, Malebranche, & Tschann, 2013; Matthews, Hammond, Nuru-Jeter, Cole-Lewis, & Melvin, 2013). Given the negative impact that adherence to some traditional masculine norms can have on men's well-being, it is important for scholars to examine the factors that contribute to their understanding of what it means to be a man.

Numerous studies have found that Black Americans and young adults (e.g., <30 years old) consume more TV and use more mobile Internet services than other groups (Bickham et al., 2003; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Ward, Day, & Thomas, 2010). Furthermore, men report higher rates of Internet use compared with women (Lenhart et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2014, 2015). However, there are few studies that consider how young Black men interact with and make meaning of media images and how these media images inform their understandings of what it means to be a man. Professional Black male athletes, musicians, and political figures hold unique social positions that both highlight their popularity and influence people's beliefs about performance of gender (Collins, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992; Rhoden, 2006). Although representations of Black men in popular culture have previously been examined in the literature (Majors, Tyler, Peden, & Hall, 1994; Neal, 2005, 2013), few studies focus on how these popular figures shape beliefs about masculinities for young Black men who are still working to define and construct what manhood means within the context of their own lives. This qualitative investigation used one-on-one interviews with Black male undergraduate students to explore how young Black men use figures within popular culture to define, conceptualize, and interpret their own sense of masculinities and manhood.

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Constructions of Masculinities

Following the advances of the feminist movement, researchers sought to uncover ways in which manhood is constructed and performed among men (Connell, 2014; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Smiler, 2004). Connell (1995) coined the term *hegemonic masculinities* to assert that men's performance of manhood can be described along a continuum. Connell's intentional use of the plural term "masculinities" emphasizes the complexity of men's constructions of gender and highlights the fact that gender is neither one-dimensional nor stagnant (Connell, 1995).

Scholars have since tested the relevancy of this representation of masculinities among men of various ages, social classes, and ethnicities (Gutman, 2003; Hunter, 2005; Langa, 2015; Locke & Mahalik, 2005). However, it is noteworthy that some of the earliest and most prominent research in men's studies used mostly White male samples and did not account for the role of race within Black men's constructions of masculinity (Griffith, Gunter, & Watkins, 2012). Consequently, Black masculinity has often been regarded as a stagnant monolith. This study provides a more in-depth, nuanced analysis of Black men's subjective reports of the beliefs, concerns, and abilities associated with their views of Black masculinities.

Black Masculinities

Three decades of research have highlighted the importance of attending to the nuanced and traditionally overlooked complexities that Black American men encounter in their daily lives (Bowman, 1989; Hunter & Davis, 1992; Young, 2004). Scholars have advanced positive approaches and frameworks for describing Black manhood, which served as an important departure from earlier works that were based on deficit models (Frazier, 1939; Moynihan, 1965; Pettigrew, 1964). Findings rooted in positive frames indicated that familial involvement, independence, and self-esteem were central components of Black men's notions of masculinity (Hammond & Mattis, 2005). Black men also identified factors such as personal aspirations, social consciousness, and responsibility to themselves and others as core tenets of their ideas surrounding manhood (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Young, 2004). Taken together, these findings indicated that Black men's definitions of manhood are rooted in their relationships with both themselves and others, specifically as it relates to their commitment to their families.

More recently, scholars have continued their efforts to interpret the conceptualization of masculinities and masculine ideologies among Black men in the United States (Bowleg et al., 2011; Laing, 2017; McGuire, Berhanu, Davis, & Harper, 2014). Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, and Luque (2014b) found, for example, that in their constructions of masculinities, college-educated Black men distinguished between what it means to be a man and what it means to be a Black man. In their descriptions of the social ecology of gender construction, participants identified their fathers, friends, and even themselves to be the most prominent forces responsible for shaping their views about masculinity (Mincey et al., 2014b). The current study extends this work by demonstrating how other figures in young men's lives, specifically popular culture and media figures, may also inform young Black men's beliefs about manhood.

Black Men's Usage of Media

Evidence suggests that popular culture plays an important role in the lives of young Black Americans. Black Americans consume higher rates of TV than their peers from other racial groups (Bickham et al., 2003; Greenberg, 1993; Ward et al., 2010). A recent report by Nielsen Media Research (2016) found that Black young adults spent 33 hours a week watching TV and spent more hours on social media than any other group. Black young adults in the study identified TV, movies, and sports as the primary leisure time activities (Nielsen Media Research, 2016).

Consistent with these findings, another study found that Black men were most interested in music and sports-related media content and reported receiving information from three primary sources: TV, the Internet, and print (e.g., magazines and newspapers; *The Opportunity Agenda*, 2011). In addition to consuming large amounts of media, young Black adults were cognizant of the racial representations apparent in the media content that they viewed. Nielsen Media Research (2016) found that 62% of young Black adults expressed positive feelings when viewing celebrities from their same ethnic background. This finding underscores the importance of interrogating how young Black adults, generally, and young Black men, specifically, process and interact with media images and the messages popular culture transmits.

Representations of Black Men in Popular Culture

To understand how young Black men make meaning of images in popular culture, it is important to deconstruct the ways that Black men are represented. Fiske (2010) framed popular culture as deeply contradictory and influenced by power dynamics within the context of class, gender, race, and other social categories. Signs of domination and subordination that are central to our social system are situated in popular culture, and ultimately inform our social experiences. Indeed, the representations of Black men in media are often laden with stereotypes that depict Black men as violent, criminal, and hypersexual (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004). Mainstream media sources often provide limited examples of potential role models for young Black men to set their aspirations. Avery, Ward, Moss, and Üsküp (2017) explored representations of masculinity and femininity in popular music by examining the impact of gendered messages portrayed in music by Black artists from 1990 to 2010. Their findings showed that hypermasculine messages were more common in rap/hip-hop music when compared with other genres, and these messages often characterized Black men as "materialistic, competitive, sex-focused, and risk-taking" (Avery et al., 2017, p. 24). In their content analysis of newspapers, Smiley and Fakunle (2016) found that across various news reports, Black men who were victimized by police (e.g., Michael Brown and Tamir Rice) were described using negative, criminalizing stereotypes. Considering the high levels of media that young Black men consume, it is important to investigate how Black men negotiate negative images in media and how these images inform their constructions of masculinity.

Although scholars have examined representations of Black men in popular culture, much of this work has not included the direct words and voices of Black men. Simply put, scholars have addressed experiences about Black men but have not always asked Black men how they subjectively interpret the connection between media and masculinity. Previous work has explored the impact of

media and popular music among Black boys and girls (Maxwell, Abrams, & Belgrave, 2016; Wingood et al., 2003) and Black youth broadly (Bryant, 2008; Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). However, there has been limited research examining how Black youth's experience of popular culture relates to their endorsement of gender roles. In one of the few studies that has explored the link between media consumption and gender construction, Ward et al. (2005) found that Black adolescent boys and girls who reported higher rates of TV consumption were also more likely to hold traditional views and attitudes toward gender roles. Another study suggested that Black boys were less likely than girls to recognize harmful and negative stereotypes perpetuated in media outlets and were more likely to adhere to these negative messages (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014).

The Present Study

Although previous studies provide some evidence that media usage can be associated with endorsement of traditional gender ideologies particularly among children and adolescents, they do not provide a context for understanding how young Black men process and make meaning of media images as they develop their ideas of manhood. The present study seeks to redress these gaps in the literature. This study explores masculinity among young Black men by exploring how members from this group use popular culture figures to construct and conceptualize manhood. The following research question was used to guide the current study: How do young Black men use media and popular culture figures to conceptualize and construct their ideas, perceptions, and beliefs about masculinity? In doing so, our study aims to expand extant research on influential forces in young Black men's construction of masculinity (Franklin, 1994; Mincey et al., 2014b).

Method

Participants

Data from the current study come from a larger intervention—The Young Black Men, Masculinities, and Mental Health (YBMen) Project (Watkins, Allen, Goodwill, & Noel, 2017). The aim of the YBMen Project was to understand young Black men's conceptualizations of the intersections between manhood, mental health, and social support (Watkins et al., 2017). The pilot YBMen Project was a 5-week psychoeducation intervention administered through a private Facebook group that was moderated by the principal investigator. Popular culture prompts (e.g., YouTube videos, news headlines, photos, and song lyrics) were used to generate discussion among participants to better understand their ideas related to manhood, mental health, and social support.

To be considered eligible for the study, participants needed to (a) identify as a Black/African American man, (b) be between 18 and 26 years old, (c) be enrolled as a student at the participating school, and (d) never have been previously diagnosed with a mental illness. The latter consideration is particularly important, as the YBMen intervention was not designed for treatment and, instead, was designed to foster social support and to promote mental wellness among young Black men. Convenience sampling was used to recruit 30 men to participate in the pilot intervention.

Nineteen men were selected for the comparison/control group, whereas the remaining 11 were assigned to the intervention group. Due to the design of the pilot YBMen Project, interviews were conducted with members of the intervention group only. Therefore, the current study reports data collected from 11 men who participated in the intervention.

Materials

The current study used semistructured interviews to uncover young Black men's thoughts, ideas, and perceptions about masculinity. The interview protocol addressed topics related to mental health, masculinity, and suggestions for ways to improve the intervention. Responses to the following two questions, or prompts, from the interview were used in the current study: (a) What does masculinity or manhood mean to you? and (b) Are Black men's experiences with masculinity different when compared with men from other racial groups? We collapsed analyses of the data across these two prompts when developing the overarching research question, as responses to both prompts offered meaningful insights for understanding the ways in which young Black men draw upon popular cultural figures in their definitions of masculinity.

Procedure

Data were collected across three time points: Time 1 (1 week before the intervention), Time 2 (immediately after the intervention), and Time 3 (2 months after the intervention). The current study focuses on qualitative interview data collected from Times 1 and 2 only, as data from these time points align most closely with the current research question. The institutional review board at the principal investigator's home institution reviewed and approved all materials related to the pilot YBMen Project.

Participants were recruited from a student group designed to help men of color get acclimated to the demands of college and campus life. Members of the research team visited the campus and attended student group meetings to solicit participation. Snowball sampling methods were also used, as campus staff and men from the student group encouraged others to enroll in the study. Interviews were conducted by team members and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Interviews were held in meeting rooms and classrooms at the partnering school's multicultural center. Research team members transcribed audio-recordings of the interviews verbatim. A three-person team listened to the recordings and reviewed all transcripts to ensure credibility and dependability (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Participants were offered \$15 to participate in the study at Time 1, \$20 at Time 2, and \$15 at Time 3. In sum, a total of \$50 was made available for those who elected to participate in all three data collection time points. Members of both the control and intervention groups were offered the same incentives.

Data Analysis

The first author initiated the analyses for this study, with other members of the study team joining the process during the team-based analysis and interpretation of the data. The analysis team comprised four graduate students—three Black women and one Black man. Two faculty members, both of whom identify as Black

women, also participated in the analysis process. All team members were from the same institution and primarily focus their research on the well-being of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.

A critical paradigm was used to guide the qualitative analysis, as its framework directly aligns with the aims of culturally sensitive qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This approach urges researchers to be cognizant of researcher–participant power dynamics and includes the key components of “reflexivity, collaboration, and peer debriefing” (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, members of the analysis team regularly practiced reflexivity and peer debriefing throughout both the data collection and analysis processes. We were transparent when explaining our interpretations of the data and often discussed how our own beliefs, experiences, and expectations shaped our perceptions of the study outcomes. Thus, collaboration with the participants and staff at the partnering institution was central to determining dependability and credibility of not only the measures and research questions asked, but also for plans and strategies for effective recruitment (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). Team members were trained to administer the study protocol and to uphold ethical standards when working with participants. Staff at the partnering institution were asked to provide feedback on recruitment materials before the study began to ensure that approaches used by the research team were culturally sensitive and appropriate.

The analysis began by first scanning field notes, along with listening to audio-recordings of the interviews and reading verbatim transcripts of the interviews (Fernald & Duclos, 2005; Guest & MacQueen, 2008; Padgett, 2008). A spreadsheet technique was used to consolidate and integrate the qualitative interview data (Stockdale, 2002; Swallow, Newton, & Van Lottum, 2003).

This process occurred in four steps. Step 1 involved creating an “all-inclusive” data table where all the data were moved from the transcripts to a spreadsheet created in Microsoft Word. From there, descriptive titles were placed in the column headings that reflected the following: data collection time point, transcript number, interviewer question, participant response, notes, and corresponding theme(s).

In Step 2, a data reduction process referred to as the “rigorous and accelerated data reduction” technique for qualitative data analyses was used (Watkins, 2017; Watkins & Gioia, 2015). Here the analysts placed the research question at the top of the spreadsheet as a prompt to remove all data unrelated to the overarching research question. This step of removing unrelated data was repeated until the only data remaining in the spreadsheet were those that helped to address the research question. Data reduction tables in the present study underwent three reduction phases, with each phase representing a narrower and more concise focus that was more closely linked to the study objectives (Watkins, 2017). Once all unrelated information was removed from the table, data were combed to capture emergent themes.

Step 3 included a two-level coding process where an open-coding procedure followed by a more extensive and detailed focused coding sequence was performed. The first level of open-coding called for the preliminary analyses of chunks of text related to the research question. At this point in the analytic process, three themes were detected and examined for deeper review. Next, a more detailed form of coding was applied to find subthemes.

During this step, text chunks were again reviewed to identify supporting information and examples that aligned with the dominant themes (Grinnell & Unrau, 2014; Watkins & Gioia, 2015). In Step 4, direct quotes were highlighted to identify exemplar quotes that represented each of the three overarching themes. The coding and review of text chunks were done in tandem to extrapolate the overarching themes and ensuing subthemes that reflect young Black men’s unique perspectives related to manhood and masculinity.

Results

An in-depth analysis of the qualitative interviews revealed how Black men in our study formed their attitudes and beliefs about manhood and masculinity. Participants reflected upon various popular culture and media figures who shaped their conceptualizations of masculinity. Thereby, study findings illustrate a methodical process where men who participated in our study first described how other Black men are viewed within mainstream media and popular culture. From there, study participants went on to extrapolate how perceptions of the way other Black men are viewed within popular culture impacted their own beliefs in relation to masculinity and manhood. The research question, *How do young Black men use media and popular culture figures to conceptualize and construct their ideas, perceptions, and beliefs about masculinity*, was used to cluster participant responses into three distinct groups of people, which served as our major themes: (a) social movement leaders (i.e., influential members or leaders of important historical events of both the past and present), (b) athletes (i.e., persons who engage in competitive sports at the professional level), and (c) entertainers (i.e., actors, comedians, and musicians). A total of 12 subthemes emerged that described the ways in which various groups of people influenced masculinity for study participants; four were associated with each of the three major themes. These subthemes serve as supporting descriptors of information provided by the participants and allow readers to understand both the overlaps and distinctions across the overarching themes of masculinity identified by men in the study. Participants mentioned aspects of these popular figures’ personal and professional lives in deciphering what manhood means to them. Their responses are described below (Figure 1).

Social Movement Figures

The social movement figures theme acknowledged the impact of Black men who have been implicated in various sociopolitical events occurring within the mainstream U.S. context. Both historical icons and more recent social movement leaders emerged as key factors in some of the participants’ perceptions of masculinity. The four subthemes of leadership, power, injustice, and death reflected the core ideas in some of the participants’ responses. A crossing of generational lines occurred where men in the study began to emphasize the contributions made by prominent and well-known Black men from the past and present. Specifically, when asked to define what masculinity and manhood meant to him, Jonathan (age 19) shared the following:

Dr. King, the leadership that he had, that was kind of a form of masculinity because some people wouldn’t have the courage to do some of the stuff like he did . . . or had the power that he had to, you

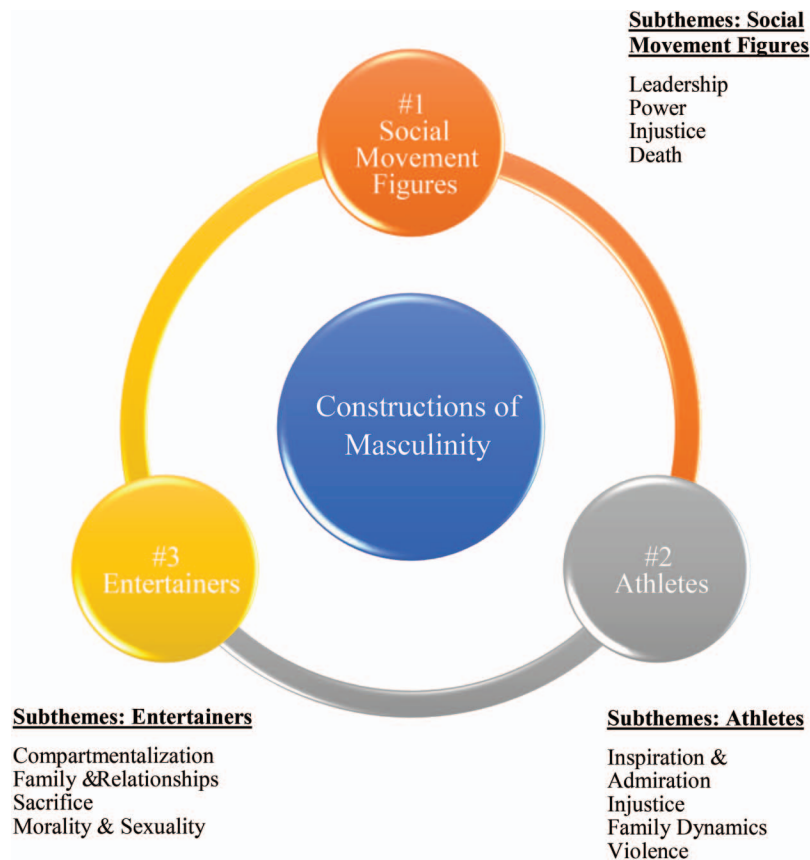


Figure 1. Study themes and subthemes. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

know, inspire others to follow him, which is a sense of masculinity.

Aaron (age 21) stated the following:

[Martin Luther King, Jr.] was kind of like a father figure for most people, so I say that would be a form of masculinity. His words were powerful, and impacted others into changing their lifestyle—so that would be a sense of masculinity and leadership.

Whereas some participants mentioned civil rights leaders and political figures, others noted the role of men who in more recent years became household names as a result of being victimized at the hands of the police. When considering the impact of racial injustice in the lives of young Black men, Bryce (age 20) expressed concern regarding interactions between law enforcement and community members, making specific mention of a young Black man whose death made international headlines in 2014. Bryce went on to state the following:

Like Mike Brown, Ferguson, all this other stuff, it's terrible. There's been a movement. Cops, stories, people being pulled over and the cops being very abusive . . . it's like the new "it" thing nowadays.

Bryce followed up by voicing his frustration and stating, "[Mike Brown] is dead but you still have your job and you're walking around breathing to get another day." Similar sentiments were expressed about the death of Trayvon Martin. Men's reflections on the fate of their counterparts who became household names be-

cause of their visibility as victims highlighted the reality that the biases held by some regarding the ways in which young Black men perform masculinity may put Black men in danger and could ultimately cost them their lives. In contrast, the endorsement of hypermasculinity by agents of power that can lead to the death of Black men costs those agents of power nothing.

Athletes

High-profile professional athletes were another distinct group that generated discussion surrounding masculinity among men in the study. Many of the participants highlighted different areas in the lives of professional athletes that they found to be inspiring, along with offering candid and provocative interpretations of the public backlash faced by some of the same men who are often in the spotlight. These descriptions were highlighted across four subthemes: inspiration and admiration, injustice, family dynamics, and violence.

For instance, when asked what manhood and masculinity meant to him, Trevor (age 23) shared, "Ray Rice . . . I looked up to him and Adrian Peterson. They were my favorite running backs, and look what happened to them." Trevor expressed his disappointment with seeing two people whom he held in high regard as exemplar representatives of manhood eventually facing domestic violence charges leaving indelible marks on both their families and

their careers. This was contrary to what he had understood and conceptualized masculinity to be.

When asked if Black men's experiences with masculinity differed from the experience of men of other racial groups, Eli (age 19) pointed to the differences in disciplinary actions when raising children. Referencing one of the same athletes named by Trevor, Eli stated the following:

Even with the Adrian Peterson situation, he had a good cause [in disciplining his child], but after seeing the pictures, I think he took it too far . . . Like people from other races were saying that he was abusing this little kid, even though he was trying to discipline the boy. But, he was saying that his parents raised him the same way. It was like [Adrian Peterson] was looking at his dad as being masculine because he was disciplining him for a good cause and trying to get him on the right track. But, when it came down to him actually doing what his father taught him, [Adrian Peterson] was looked at as bad.

Eli's struggle to ascertain the nuances and complexities of masculinity performance reflect the difficulty many people face when attempting to disentangle the intersections of manhood and race. This attestation reveals an interesting facet of Black masculinity where stereotypical images and notions of aggression, physical dominance, and dangerousness prevail. Many times we have seen this play out within romantic relationships, but Eli reflected upon Black masculinity and its relation to portrayals of fatherhood. Here, Adrian Peterson's example complicates the narrative of Black fatherhood within the public eye (i.e., it disrupts the mythology of the persistent absence of Black fathers). However, through this statement we are reminded that the ways in which Black men perform manhood can have severe consequences and could potentially lead to misunderstanding by those both within and outside of political and social systems, and to the uncritical reification of tropes of Black manhood that represent them as brutal, hyperaggressive, or dangerous.

Austin (age 19) expressed concern about the seemingly constant negative images of Black male athletes in the media by stating the following:

I mean Tiger Woods ain't make it no better with what he did [in reference to his extramarital affair]. It's like if you're an African American man then social media puts your business out there so much. But, when it happens to any other race [the media] acts like it's okay with them . . . It's crazy because if you're an African American man your business stays in the media.

Austin voiced frustrations with the portrayal of Black male athletes whose lives are more accessible and open to critique than ever before. This hypervisibility is, in part, due to the creation and expansion of multimedia platforms, where information can now be shared digitally through various media (Internet, social media sites, TV, etc.). Sexuality and morality appeared to be central to Austin's understanding of and reflections on representations of Black manhood. Austin describes a double standard in penalties for professional athletes who have been accused of committing crimes. He said the following:

But, I was just thinking about what happened to Ben Roethlisberger when he was accused of raping women and had sexual harassment charges brought against him, but he's still in the NFL today, and he's White. Then Ray Rice, being an African American guy, he gets put out [of the NFL] to be the enemy.

Nested within these responses is the subtheme of family dynamics, along with other conclusions that reflect young men's process of grappling with some of the dilemmas associated with navigating racialized manhood, sexuality, morality, justice, disparate treatment, and the hypervisibility of Black male bodies. Not only did study participants attempt to understand how these conflicting identities are represented within their own lives, but they simultaneously watched each of these aspects play out in the lives of public figures who are often idolized as icons of success and achievement. This emphasized the challenges Black men experience when learning to navigate various aspects of their masculinity within society, as they implicitly discern that the challenges of masculinity are not necessarily class-based and persist primarily as matters related to the intersection of race and gender.

Entertainers

The final and most robust group that study participants referenced when discussing their ideas and beliefs about manhood and masculinity were entertainers, including musicians, actors, and comedians. Sacrifice, family and relationships, morality and sexuality, and compartmentalization were the subthemes that emerged in most of the discussions about entertainers. Nearly all participants were intentional in naming male artists and entertainers whom they viewed as influential in their progression from adolescence and into emerging adulthood. When asked to describe his views on masculinity, Levi (age 18) noted the following:

Being a man doesn't necessarily mean if you're strong, or if you're big as hell, or if your voice is as deep as Barry White's . . . It doesn't mean all that. It means, what do you bring to the table at night? If you have kids, can you provide for your family once your parents get old? . . . Like Tyler Perry said, "a real man will provide for his woman no matter what." Hell, a real man will put on a wig and makeup and tell jokes for a living to provide for his family.

Levi's comment challenges the notion that masculinities are dependent upon physicality (e.g., on stature or the tone of one's voice). Instead, he highlights the view that relational and familial commitment are central components of the concept of manhood. This is a compelling point, as the examples of masculinity Levi provided, specifically those that represent caring (e.g., concern and unwavering or unconditional support of family), are commonly associated with traditional views of femininity. Moreover, he describes a seemingly extreme example of sacrifice where a man would and should be willing to subject himself to public humiliation and judgment by violating gender norms, all in the effort to provide for his family. Participants placed emphasis on men adopting a lifestyle of sacrifice, at all costs, to tend to the needs of their families. Such emphasis counters the narrowing stereotype that equates Black manhood with absence from and failure to assume responsibilities within families.

During the interviews, participants described societal and environmental factors that influenced their ideas surrounding masculinity and manhood. Jonathan (age 23) referenced imagery from popular culture when he stated the following:

[Masculinity] comes from different things that happens in society. I mean like with rap music, the men got the gold chain, all the girls, the money . . . and then for some of us we see that and we're like, "Oh, he's a really cool dude. Like he's a man because he's got all that."

This comment speaks to the role of imagery specifically within a genre of rap music. The impact of various images portrayed through music shaped these young men's perceptions and determined which behaviors are acceptable and what material goods might be desirable.

Appetites regarding relationship intimacy and personal connection were also expressed, and within this, conversations linked to self-worth and dignity were found to be important aspects of masculinity representation. During these parts of the interviews, participants began to diverge in opinions, as not all men in the study aspired to become like the artists they saw in the spotlight. For instance, Devin (age 24) extended the conversation of musical influence by saying the following:

. . . The lyrics in his songs aren't gonna help you become better in life, so it's like you cannot really say that he's masculine. I mean, to that individual he may have been masculine, but to me he's not. The words in his songs are not going to inspire me to become a better individual—they may be degrading and doing all these negative things.

In the same vein, Austin raised concerns when reflecting on the way that manhood is represented and described in music. He stated the following:

Tupac was emotional with his feelings and he was motivated with it. Now we got this new era of rap, like they just putting us down the wrong path. And we just sit there and listen to it. I admit, I'm not a hypocrite—I listen to it too, but I'm not out there doing it.

These comments usher us into a critical departure from the typical story that is often advanced within the literature. Men in this study established themselves as critical consumers of media and popular culture, identifying areas in music that in their view do not accurately reflect their definitions of manhood. In turn, these men choose to reject the notions of masculinity presented by *some* musicians. The explanations provided by Devin and Austin illuminate the process and balance of listening to music for amusement or gratification while not adhering to all the messages expressed in the songs—a process that represents men's ability to compartmentalize and distinguish *the performers* from *their performances*. Whereas some participants focused on the overarching themes generated in rap music, others paid more attention to specific examples from everyday life. Jarred (age 20) did just this when he stated the following:

I mean Jay Z, you can think of as a mentor in a certain way, but his lyrics and stuff like that, or even Lil Wayne, thinking about getting hoes . . . That's not the real image of [masculinity].

Along those same lines, another study participant expressed frustration with the representation of manhood some musicians portray. Noah (age 18) stated the following:

Dudes like Lil B who say that they're a man because they got different chicks in different spots, and they got baby mamas in different areas, that's not being a man. That's staying in your childhood mindset.

Participants recognized both the implicit and explicit messages promoted by the artists to be problematic. Moreover, they found balance in learning to enjoy music for its creative value while simultaneously ascertaining which aspects of the messages they will choose to adopt or renounce in their own lives.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how young Black men use media representations of popular culture figures to construct their own sense of masculinity and manhood. Herein, participants provided descriptive accounts of how the portrayal of Black male popular culture figures within mainstream media informed their own perspectives concerning what it means to be a man. This study builds on previous work examining the conceptualization of masculinities and masculine ideology among Black men in the United States by examining the experiences and perceptions of young Black men.

Results from the current study showed that participants recognized social movement figures when describing and constructing manhood. Participants referenced both modern young Black men like Mike Brown and historical figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although space and time separated the lives of these two men, their deaths within the context of a racially charged atmosphere tied their stories together for study participants. Our findings align with findings from Brooms and Perry (2016), who conducted interviews with 25 Black men to better understand their responses to the recent killings of other Black men. Participants in their study believed there were two reasons why Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown—who represent an age demographic that mirrors the cohort included in this study—were killed. The first reason was a lack of empathy, care, and value of Black life; the second reason suggests that these men were killed “simply because we're Black men” (Brooms & Perry, 2016, p. 12). These reflections on the perceived disposability of Black lives capture the pain experienced and expressed by some of the participants in the current study and reflect how the marginalization that Black men experience in society contributes to how young Black men conceptualize masculinity.

In the second theme, participants referenced professional athletes in their discussions while deciphering the implications of Black manhood today. Domestic abuse, infidelity, and sexual violence were all discussed as practices and behaviors to avoid. Thus, young Black men recognized that engaging in hypermasculine behaviors could negatively impact their interactions with the people in their lives (e.g., women and children). Conversely, father-son relationships, positive parenting, physical strength, and admiration were also discussed as positive areas, as many of the athletes served as sources of inspiration and ambition for the men in the study.

This complex narrative is especially important to highlight, as Black professional athletes are not monolithic. Frustrations ensued after some of the men acknowledged inconsistencies in the treatment of Black athletes within the media. Concern was raised when participants noted distinct differences in the ways that Black athletes are reprimanded for violation of various laws and organizational policies, particularly when compared with their White teammates. Our findings suggest that athletes may play a role in the way that Black men construct their masculine identities and their understanding of the racial biases specifically impacting Black men in America (Brown, 2017; Fuller, 2013; Fuller et al., 2016; Rhoden, 2006). More work is necessary to better understand the connections that Black men have to athletes and the implications of those connections for the ways participants make meaning of Black manhood.

The final core theme and four supporting subthemes generated from the study findings explored the impact of Black men from the entertainment industry. Men introduced several musicians, comedians, and actors who represented masculinities in various ways. Conversations surrounding sacrifice and relationships with family were prominent points of consideration, as both romantic and parental relationships were addressed at various times throughout the interviews. Participants in this study admonished many of the actions related to sexual practices (e.g., promiscuity or conceiving children with multiple women) that are prevalent within some music. Young Black men provided narratives that counter commonly held beliefs regarding the impact and influence of rap music and specific messages in rap music on their lives. Many of the contributions made by rap artists serve as uplifting, positive forces in the lives of young Black men where foci of lyrical content include violence prevention, political and social consciousness, and development of positive Black identities (Tyson, 2002, 2004)—and because of this, some might assume that the varying genres of rap that reference more negative ideas and experiences might be equally or even more influential among young Black men. This is not necessarily the case, as it is worthwhile to note that rap music within itself is multifaceted and complex. Men examine what they believe to be true about manhood and then juxtapose this against what is represented about Black men's masculinity in the media.

The findings from the current study challenge other research with Black youth that reported that “males were less likely to identify negative media stereotypes, but more likely to endorse the negative messages than females” (Adams-Bass et al., 2014, p. 384). Distinctions between young Black men and Black boys or adolescents may be related to unique factors associated with their developmental periods. As young Black men transition from adolescence to adulthood they are tasked with the need to develop their own unique beliefs and values system (Arnett, 2000, 2003). Emerging adulthood (18–25) is characterized as period of identity exploration and cognitive shifts in worldview that are facilitated in part by preparation for adult roles (Arnett, 2000). This developmental period provides a unique context for young Black men to deeply examine and challenge representation of masculinity in popular culture and use their analysis to inform their constructions of masculinity.

Implications and Future Directions

Our findings alert researchers to the need for additional investigations in this line of research, as some studies that have examined the influence of music videos on adolescents and young adults have included samples where Black men make up less than 10% of the study population (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008). Researchers conducting empirical studies should be intentional in working to include Black men in their samples. These efforts could ultimately be helpful to interrogating and combatting harmful stereotypes commonly attributed to Black men. The current study adds to existing knowledge by demonstrating that Black men can and do construct notions of masculinity that acknowledge their existence as both sexual and masculine beings without requiring the use of hypersexuality to determine their full sense of manhood. Moreover, men in the study refer to well-known social movement

figures, athletes, and entertainers to synthesize which aspects of sexuality they will use to inform their ideas, decisions, and behaviors regarding performance of masculinities.

The findings from this study demonstrate that the personal and professional lives of social movement leaders, athletes, and entertainers influence constructions of masculinities and manhood for young Black men. Researchers interested in the role of popular culture and media in shaping gender norms and practices for young Black men should consider the impact of social networking and media sites that are responsible for sharing information regarding both the positive and negative life events of celebrities. Gender scholars might delve deeper into participants' ability to balance the inconsistencies between the controversial music they support and the beliefs they endorse. Specific actions related to romantic relationships and promiscuity among some mentioned music artists were frowned upon and deemed as “not masculine.” Here the notion of compartmentalization comes into play when participants sort through the complexities of the personal and professional lives of famous men. Through this process, we see participants disentangle the performer's identity as a professional from the performer's identity as an individual outside of the characters he personifies on TV or in other media outlets. Continued efforts are needed to examine the meaning-making practices that undergird men's constructions of gendered and racialized social identities, and the ways that men hold, challenge, and negotiate contradictions associated with these identities.

Another important implication is that the young men enrolled in the study did not automatically adopt or mimic the actions of popular culture icons. Instead, participants carefully analyzed and deconstructed the meaning and consequences of varying actions proposed in the song lyrics and determined whether these meanings and actions were something they would engage. Men did the same thing when discussing some of the current events surrounding behaviors of some professional athletes and when deciding which attitudes were acceptable and aligned with their own personal values. These findings deviate from the fallacy that young Black men blindly or uncritically follow the actions of popular men in the media. Compared with Black male adolescents, young adult men may have a more sophisticated analysis of stereotypes and the implications of negative images. These findings reflect a need for more developmentally situated studies examining the unique ways that Black young adults interact with media.

Within the realm of popular culture, it is important for future investigations to extensively examine how young Black men use popular culture images to contribute to other domains in their lives. Despite the research findings that Black Americans use media at high rates, there is a dearth of research investigating the impacts of media usage on their outcomes or examining their perceptions of media content. The findings from this study indicate that young Black men draw from media representations in popular culture to construct their perception of manhood.

Using recently developed gender and masculinity scales developed for and normed on Black men could be another promising avenue of future scholarship (Bowleg et al., 2016; Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2014a; Schwing, Wong, & Fann, 2013). These measures could be paired with qualitative methods to produce mixed-methods studies that would better reflect the complexities of the lives of Black men (Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007).

Two areas within Black masculinities research that were not addressed in the present study are sexual orientation and nonconforming gender identities. Although none of the participants in this study provided responses that directly addressed these issues, we recognize that sexual orientation and gender identity are integral to masculinity performance and embodiment, and the ways that these representations of Black masculinity inform young Black men's constructions of masculinities should be considered. Our results did, however, demonstrate that music, particularly rap music, proved to be a strong influencer of masculinity beliefs. Masculinities researchers should consider the work of ethnomusicologists and scholars who study rap music, as entire anthologies have been developed to provide a more holistic, healthy, and balanced approach to the study of rap music (Gaunt, 2006; George, 2005; Kelley, 1997; Rose, 2008). An interdisciplinary approach to understanding the complex role of rap music in the identity development of young Black men could serve as a fruitful next step in the work to interpret the role of the media in shaping masculinities.

Participants in this study appeared to have a paradoxical relationship with rap music—noting that it is both encouraging and uplifting, yet can at times be disparaging and ineffective. These findings complicate conversations surrounding controversial lyrics in rap/hip-hop music, particularly when considering that Avery et al. (2017) found that less than 2% of the top popular rap/hip-hop songs released by Black musicians in their study contained homophobic content.

Nevertheless, other studies have explored the role of violence-related stereotypes oftentimes associated with Black men in rap music, along with the occurrence of misogyny within this genre (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Dixon, Zhang, & Conrad, 2009). Taken together, our findings suggest that it is necessary to explore the complex link between music, sexuality, and Black masculinities, as these topics should be explored in future studies.

Limitations

There are limitations within the present study that warrant consideration when interpreting the results. First, data were collected from an intervention that was piloted among a group of Black male college students. Because the intervention was still in its inaugural phase, recruiting a small sample was appropriate. However, future studies should work to include larger samples of young Black men, as it would be helpful for the topic of masculinity construction to be examined among more Black men. Along those same lines, considerations regarding the construction of masculinity should also be explored among a sample of community-dwelling adult men, as it will be important to further disentangle age cohort and generational differences in perceptions of masculinity, which will ultimately aid in the development and facilitation of more culturally relevant interventions for Black men. Similarly, men in the current study were recruited from an existing student group designed to support men of color on campus. The topics covered in the interview (e.g., social support and well-being) aligned with the goals of the student group. Therefore, results from this investigation may be different had men who were not members of the student group enrolled in the study. Finally, only the most dominant themes that directly related to the overarching research question were included in this review. This rigorous analytic process permitted the ideas, beliefs, and suggestions provided by participants to be critically analyzed to develop themes and subthemes. However,

concepts that were mentioned infrequently by only one or two participants were not incorporated into the present investigation.

Conclusion

The current study provides meaningful perspectives from young Black men regarding how they construct their ideas about masculinities and manhood. This is worthwhile to consider, as the ways young Black men embody and perform masculinities can inform their daily interactions and their well-being. It remains imperative to continue exploring the construction of masculinity among young Black men, as it could ultimately result in the improvement and expansion of culturally tailored services. Critically analyzing the attributes and characteristics of Black male figures within the media and popular culture presents a unique opportunity for researchers to advance this line of research. Additional efforts are needed to evaluate the most appropriate approaches and best practices within masculinities, media, and intervention research that will result in sustainable and effective change in the lives of young Black men.

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