One could assume it is a given that Essence magazine dispels stereotypical images of Black women and that it works to liberate them from the strictures imposed on them by a world in which they live as an undervalued and marginalized minority. After all, this is the only longstanding women’s magazine that targets Black women and addresses specifically their cultural and emotional needs as African Americans and women. This content analysis examines whether Essence works as a liberating feminist text that dispels, as opposed to validates, stereotypical images of Black women. We hypothesize that (a) there will be more evidence to dispel the stereotypes than to perpetuate them and (b) that of the four major African American women stereotypes—mammy, matriarch, sexual siren, and welfare mother or queen—the matriarch and sexual siren stereotypes will be dispelled more frequently. Results support the former hypothesis entirely and the latter hypothesis partially.

**Keywords:** Essence magazine; Black women; Black womanhood; Black stereotypes; women stereotypes; Black popular culture

One of the authors remembers a girlfriend once saying with all seriousness, “You can’t be a Black woman and not read Essence. We all read Essence.” She said this nonchalantly, yet with reverence. It was just one Black woman speaking culture to another. This was while the author was an undergraduate in the late 1980s. But Essence had become a part of Black life long before it was stated so firmly what Essence meant to Black women. Essence continues to give Black women varied images of themselves to look at and read...
about, images that appear only rarely in mainstream White publications, if at all. Its masthead proudly proclaims that *Essence* is the magazine “for and about Black women,” and many Black women have an intimate, personal relationship with *Essence*.

One could assume it is a given that *Essence* dispels stereotypical images of Black women and that it works to liberate them from the strictures imposed on them by a world in which they live as an undervalued and marginalized minority. African American women have a rich literary history of fighting oppression through words (hooks, 1981, 1989). Although *Essence* magazine is presented as being a continuation of the rich history that forms and informs Black feminism, the magazine is owned and operated by Black men, and Black men in American society perpetuate their own patriarchy that mirrors their White male counterparts (Collins, 1991; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). The present owners (two of the five original founders), Edward T. Lewis and Clarence O. Smith, present *Essence* as a “lifestyle magazine directed at upscale African American women” (Whitaker, 1995, p. 79). At its heart, *Essence* is a very successful moneymaking venture that noticed a neglected market and capitalized on it. Therefore, the purpose of this content and contextual analysis is to examine whether *Essence* works as a liberating feminist text that dispels, as opposed to validates, stereotypical images of Black women.

At present, there is no published research that has exclusively examined *Essence*’s portrayal of Black women. However, findings of scholarly research have consistently supported that the images of Black women in the mainstream press, as a whole, are detrimental and stereotypical (Matabane, 1989; Rhodes, 1993). Media images of Black people in general can be, according to Hall (1990), categorized into three “base-images of the ‘grammar of race’”: the dependable, yet conniving, slave figure; the native who is both dignified and savage; and the clown or entertainer whose existence is defined by how well he or she amuses the White majority (pp. 15-16). Collins (1991) and Bobo (1995) further refined these definitions and applied them specifically to Black women. They identified four dominant and oppressive stereotypical images of Black
women: the mammy, the matriarch, the sexual siren, and the welfare mother or queen.¹

It is vital that Essence is studied to determine whether the magazine validates or dispels these images because of the power it wields among Black women. Market research as of 1993 estimated that Essence reaches 50% of all Black women who earn $50,000 or more and approximately 38% of its readers are college graduates (Whitaker, 1995, p. 79). Of all the magazines that cater to women, Essence is the only long-standing magazine (i.e., in print for 30 years) that targets Black women and addresses specifically their cultural and emotional needs as African Americans and women. The magazine boasts a monthly readership base of 7.5 million worldwide (i.e., United States, U.S. military, Civilian Personnel Overseas, Canada, and International areas) (Essence Magazine Media Kit, 2000). As of 1999, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, approximately 19.0 million African American women were U.S. citizens (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The Essence Magazine Media Kit (2000) maintains that the magazine reaches 69.3% of the total Black female population represented in the 18 to 49 age group. This statistic positions Essence as a potentially powerful site for voicing and redefining who Black women are in an arena that includes a large and varied population of Black women. The magazine reinforces this image listing its profile in the 2000 Editorial Planning Calendar as follows:

*Essence* is the magazine for today’s African American woman. Edited for career-minded, sophisticated, and independent achievers, *Essence* is dedicated to helping its readers attain their maximum potential in various lifestyles and roles. The editorial includes coverage of career and educational opportunities, fashion and beauty, investing and money management, health and fitness, parenting, home decorating, food and travel, as well as cultural reviews, fiction, and profiles of achievers and celebrities. (*Essence* Magazine Media Kit, 2000)

From its first appearance on newsstands in May 1970, *Essence* spoke to Black women and was privy to their concerns in a way that was culturally unique, distinct, and specific. Yet *Essence* possesses
a dual contextuality. It is part of a capitalist consumer and patriarchal system that enables it to be a successful money-making venture for the Black men who publish it, while its editorial content is controlled by Black women writers and editors who refuse to be defined by mainstream stereotypes. Although many of the Black women who edit and write for *Essence* may be reluctant to label themselves feminists, “as cultural producers [they] have taken on the task of creating images of themselves different from those continually reproduced in traditional works” (Bobo, 1995, p. 45). Therefore, a discussion of Black feminism is relevant to this article. Even though many Black women chose not to call themselves feminists, they follow the basic principles of Black feminism every day of their lives.

The practice of Black feminism recognizes a direct link between experience and consciousness. *Essence* serves as one of the best read and most valuable outlets for African American women fiction writers (i.e., Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Terry McMillian, etc.), journalists (i.e., Jill Nelson), historians (i.e., Paula Giddings), and essayists (i.e., bell hooks, the late Audre Lourde, Bebe Moore Campbell, etc.). *Essence* brings renowned writers and up-and-coming, both fiction and nonfiction, authors together in one glossy package that has the potential to be both entertaining and educational. Most of these writers and the editors-in-chief, past and present, self-identify as Black feminists or womanists. It is this fact that makes *Essence* a possible voice for Black feminism.

There are four basic principles that Black feminism endorses (Collins, 1991):

1. Racism, sexism, and classism are interlocking systems of oppression.
2. We must maintain a humanist vision that will not accept any amount of human oppression.
3. We must define ourselves and give voice to the everyday Black woman and everyday experiences.
4. We must operate from the standpoint that Black women are unique and our experiences are unique.
Black feminism is also composed of a body of knowledge and understanding that positions itself as critical theory to criticize and address social problems. It further argues that Black women intellectuals are central to the production of Black feminist thought. Black feminists contend that there can be no separation of ideas from experience and that Black feminism is not a set of abstract principles, but it is a set of ideas that come directly from the historical and contemporary experience of Black women (Collins, 1991; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 1981). As such, Black feminism stands uniquely poised to evaluate the stereotypes that *Essence* may or may not dispel and its standing as a feminist-oriented text. Given that *Essence* is marketed specifically toward Black women, Black feminist theory is the logical site from which to begin a critical analysis of this medium using both qualitative textual analysis and quantitative content analysis to describe how the *Essence* reader may decode stereotypical images within the magazine.

**METHOD**

The dependent variable of this study is Black women’s images. Existing research (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1989; Jewell, 1993) suggests that this variable can be broken down into four dominant stereotypical images of Black women: the mammy, the matriarch, the sexual siren, and the welfare mother or queen. Each individual issue of *Essence* contains between four and seven feature articles. The feature articles are the heart of the magazine and the part that differentiates it from other women’s magazines because of the exclusive focus on issues and topics of concern to Black women. Therefore, it is in these articles that negative, damaging stereotypes of Black women will be either dispelled or validated. A random sample of 80 articles taken from a master list of all features from 4 years (48 issues) of *Essence* was examined. From a list of 240 articles, every third article was coded for stereotypical images and for predominant article topic. The entire article was the unit of analysis. The results were analyzed using SPSS.
Essence has been a monthly publication since it began in May 1970. To get an indication of how Essence has changed over time, 24 issues published in the 1970s (i.e., January 1976 to December 1977) and 24 issues published in the 1990s (i.e., May 1996 to December 1996, January 1997 to December 1997, January 1998 to May 1998) were studied. These years were chosen because during its 30-year-plus publishing history, Essence has had six different editors, but only two have stayed more than 1 year.

Marcia Gillespie (the current editor of Ms. Magazine) was editor from July 1971 to July 1980. It was under her direction that Essence began to truly develop a distinct voice. In Gillespie’s words,

I wasn’t interested in what other women’s magazines did, because women’s magazines have been developed for a whole other kind of woman; one who had not come up through slavery, one who had not had to work, always work. One who had not been independent as Black women have been independent and on their own. (Taylor, 1995, pp. 49-50)

The years 1976 and 1977 were chosen for coding from Gillespie’s time at Essence because these were the middle years of her tenure; thus, it can be expected that by this point, she would have developed a particular personality, voice, and style for the magazine that matched her own.

Susan Taylor was the editor of Essence for approximately 19 years, from June 1981 to June 2000. Under her direction, Essence sailed into the 1990s and become a household necessity in many Black homes around the world. Taylor upgraded Gillespie’s service magazine and shifted its perspective firmly toward the Black middle class. Taylor expanded Essence’s coverage into international reporting and made it a magazine that included Black men in the dialogue. Her 1990s covers, more likely than not, featured a Black movie star who was currently being admired by the popular press and Black women (i.e., ‘Lil’ Kim, Will Smith, Cece Winans). Then, the opening feature story would revolve around that particular star. Taylor’s and formula remains in place today, and Essence continues to be a glossy, polished publication. As a result, this study examines a 2-year period during the tenure of each editor’s reign,
which allows an examination of stereotypical references during both editorial periods. The most recent 24 issues from the time this study was conducted were chosen to represent Taylor’s tenure as editor.

Coded categories. The conceptual definition of stereotypical images is all negative images of Black women that serve to support an oppressive patriarchal system that degrades and denigrates them according to race, class, and gender. Four stereotypical images are outlined by Black feminist literature: the mammy, the matriarch, the sexual siren, and the welfare queen.

Using Holsti’s coefficient of reliability, intercoder reliability was calculated at an acceptable level of .80. Eight articles were coded for this assessment (10%, N = 80). The first author coded all articles.

An article is deemed as validating the stereotype if it uses the language of the stereotype without attempting to put forth an alternate image. An article is seen as dispelling the stereotype if it uses the language of the stereotype or identifies the stereotype and then proceeds to show how it is a myth or attempts to put forth an alternate image.

For example, an article that contains a major presence of the matriarch stereotype and dispels it is “The Extraordinary Faith of Pauli Murray” (Scarupa, 1977). In this profile, Murray is celebrated as being the nation’s first Black woman Episcopal priest, and with startling regularity she has been “first,” “only,” or “before her time”: the only woman in her class at Howard Law School; the only woman in the distinguished New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkin, Wharton and Garrison. . . . She was talking about non-violence and feminism before most people knew what the words meant, and her Proud Shoes, the story of her maternal ancestors, preceded Roots by 20 years. (Scarupa, 1977, p. 91)

Murray has a strong sense of family and community, but she has no desire for children. She is an independent, kind leader. This article was coded as dispelling the matriarch stereotype because of the language it used and the celebratory tone that invites Black
women to share in Murray’s firsts and even become trailblazers themselves.

In this study, 80 articles were coded to determine whether the stereotypes were present and, if so, whether they were dispelled or validated. The entire article was coded for each stereotype. Thus it is possible that an article contained all four stereotypes, but it may only mention two in passing and validate them while overwhelmingly focusing on two other stereotypes and dispelling them.

The first image is that of the mammy. In this stereotypical category, the Black woman is characterized as a loyal domestic servant to White people. She loves, takes care of, and provides for her White family over her own. Collins (1990) purports that this image was “created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service; the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior” (p. 71). Contemporary examples that prove the persistency of this image include Florida Evans, the mother on the 1970s TV series Good Times, and Nell Carter, the housekeeper in the popular 1980s TV program Gimme A Break. Both characters were large, deep brown in color, self-sacrificing, loyal, humble, and usually jovial. This working class image, given the current marketing bent of Essence, will receive considerably less attention than the other stereotypes.

The next image is that of the matriarch. She represents the image of the Black woman as a mother within the Black home. The 1960s Moynihan Report solidified this image within the minds of many Americans with the image of a controlling, emasculating Black woman who dictated to both her children and her man their place in her home. This mother, too, works outside the home, and her children suffer for it. Collins (1990) explains how the matriarch image is “central to interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression”:

Portraying African American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children. Assuming that Black poverty is passed on intergenerationally via value transmission in families, an elite White male standpoint suggests that Black children lack the attention and care
allegedly lavished on White, middle-class children and that this deficiency seriously retards Black children’s achievement. Such a view diverts attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. (p. 74)

These two images work to box in Black women. Being the good mammy takes her away from her home. If she is employed and providing for her family, then she is not feminine and dependent enough and hurts Black men in their traditional patriarchal role. It becomes a no win situation. Claire Huxtable, the character in the immensely popular TV program The Cosby Show is the modern-day matriarch. Recent studies have shown that viewers saw her as overly aggressive, not maternal enough, too outspoken, and overly controlling toward both her husband and children. A woman can be seen as both a mammy and a matriarch, as with the case of Florida Evans and Nell Carter, who each possessed the visual characteristics of the mammy, but also the outspoken, controlling character traits of the matriarch.

The third image is that of the sexual siren, which represents negative portrayals of the Black women as bitch or whore. The sexually aggressive, uncaring Jezebel image is “central in this nexus of elite White male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (p. 77). White males fostered this image of Black women during slavery to excuse their sexual abuse and rape of Black women. Because Black women were such sexual animals, the White man could not help but get carried away. And because she was characterized as something other than human, the assault did not matter. This image of the Black woman cares for nothing but her own sexual satisfaction. It is an image the media love.

For example, in the critically acclaimed TV series Ally McBeal, the only Black female character is a promiscuous, kick-boxing assistant district attorney. She has friends, but loves herself more than anything. She dresses in skin-tight, short suits that reveal and display her legs, waist, and breasts. The Black gangster rappers, Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown, each wear next to nothing in their music
videos, on CD covers, and in pictures that accompany interviews given by them to magazines. These particular women, TV producers, writers, pornography executives, and so forth exploit the sexualized image of Black women for profit.

The fourth image is that of the welfare mother or queen. This stereotypical character is “essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image of slavery” (Collins, 1990, p. 76) when slave owners wanted Black women to reproduce more slaves and characterized them as beasts, as opposed to the genteel White woman with a delicate constitution. The new version that sees welfare mothers as breeding animals who have no desire to work, but are content to live off the state, positions Black women as “a costly threat to political and economic stability” and heterosexual marriage because she is portrayed as a woman living alone with her children (Collins, 1990, pp. 76-77). This image of the welfare mother or queen places the blame and responsibility of poverty on the shoulders of the Black mother and “shifts the angle of vision away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves” (Collins, 1990, p. 77). It also justifies the dominant society’s efforts to restrict the fertility of Black women. This scheming, manipulative, sexualized image is attached to the poor or working class.

**HYPOTHESES**

This study poses four hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* There will be more evidence to dispel the stereotypes than to perpetuate them.

*Hypothesis 2:* Gillespie’s *Essence* (1970s) will have more images of the mammy and welfare mother or queen stereotypes than Taylor’s *Essence* (1990s).

*Hypothesis 3:* The stereotypical images that will be dispelled most frequently will be the matriarch and sexual siren.

*Hypothesis 3a:* The matriarch and sexual siren stereotypes will be dispelled more frequently in the 1990s than in the 1970s.
FINDINGS

Of the 80 articles examined, 67.5% were written by Black women. Seventy-five percent of the articles concerned African Americans residing in North America, whereas 10% of the articles focused on Blacks residing in international settings. Sixty-five percent of the articles were set in an urban area. Well-known individuals were featured in most of the articles. More specifically, there were 20 profiles of successful women and seven profiles of successful men. A quarter of the articles dealt with relationships (e.g., between men and women, women and women, men and men, etc.). Racial discrimination by White people against Black people was the third largest topical category covered, and work-related and health-related articles were the fourth and fifth categories most often covered.

Hypothesis 1 was supported. As shown in Table 1, writers dispelled approximately 96% of the 1970s and 92% of the 1990s stereotypical references made in articles about the examined stereotypes.

Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Gillespie’s 1970s articles included two references, or 4.6% of total references (N = 44), to the mammy stereotype and 12 references or 27.3% of total references to the welfare mother or queen stereotype. In comparison, Taylor’s 1990s articles included eight references or 12.7% of total references (N = 63) to the mammy stereotype and 15 references, or 23.8% of total references, to the welfare mother or queen stereotype.

However, as shown in Table 2, based on the total number of stereotypical references, the welfare mother or queen stereotype was referenced and dispelled at a higher percentage, 27.3% during the 1970s than during the 1990s, 23.8%.

Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. During the 1970s, the matriarch stereotype was dispelled most often, n = 23 or 54.8% of total stereotypical occurrences (N = 44). The sexual siren was dispelled third most often, n = 5 or 11.9% of total occurrences. The welfare mother or queen was addressed more than twice as often as the sexual siren stereotype, n = 12 or 28.6% of total occurrences.
### TABLE 1

Dispelling Versus Validating Stereotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mammy</th>
<th>Matriarch</th>
<th>Sexual Siren</th>
<th>Welfare Mother or Queen</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispel</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Total articles = 40; Total occurrences = 44.
- Total articles = 40; Total occurrences = 63.

During the 1990s, the sexual siren, \( n = 19 \) or 32.8\% of total occurrences \((N = 63)\), was dispelled most often, followed by the matriarch stereotype, \( n = 16 \) or 27.6\% of total occurrences (see Table 2). The welfare mother or queen stereotype was referenced almost as often as the matriarch stereotype, \( n = 15 \) or 25.9\% of total occurrences.

Hypothesis 3a was partially supported. During the 1990s, the sexual siren was dispelled more often, \( n = 19 \) or 32.8\% of total 1990 occurrences \((N = 63)\), than during the 1970s, \( n = 5 \) or 11.9\% of total 1970s occurrences \((N = 44)\). However, the matriarch was dispelled more often during the 1970s \( (n = 23) \) than during the 1990s \( (n = 16) \). In fact, of the 1970 articles examined, 54.8\% of all references dispelled the matriarch stereotype. By comparison, only 27.6\% of the 1990 articles’ references addressed the matriarch stereotype.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*Essence* editors and writers appear to be clearly aware of the examined stereotypes and of a need to dispel them. As suspected, the mammy stereotype was covered least of all. This is not surprising as present-day life serves to dispel the mammy stereotype. That
TABLE 2
Categorical Occurrences of Black Female Stereotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mammy</th>
<th>Matriarch</th>
<th>Sexual Mother or Queen</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1970s (N = 40 articles)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispel</td>
<td>2 (4.8)</td>
<td>23 (54.8)</td>
<td>5 (11.9)</td>
<td>12 (28.6)</td>
<td>42 95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2 (4.6)</td>
<td>24 (54.6)</td>
<td>6 (13.6)</td>
<td>12 (27.3)</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1990s (N = 40 articles)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispel</td>
<td>8 (13.8)</td>
<td>16 (27.6)</td>
<td>19 (32.8)</td>
<td>15 (25.9)</td>
<td>58 92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (40.0)</td>
<td>3 (60.0)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8 (12.7)</td>
<td>18 (28.6)</td>
<td>22 (34.9)</td>
<td>15 (23.8)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Gillespie was the editor of *Essence* in the 1970s. Taylor was the editor of *Essence* in the 1990s. Numbers in parentheses are percentage of occurrences.


is, no longer are a larger number of African American women forced to either spend more time cleaning others’ homes or tending to others’ children more than their own for the purpose of surviving economically. Furthermore, the readers targeted by *Essence*, upscale Black women, are least likely of all Black women to contend with the mammy stereotype on a daily basis. The mammy stereotype was addressed twice in the 1970s and eight times during the 1990s, and the welfare mother or queen stereotype was referenced 12 times in the 1970s articles examined and 15 times in the 1990s articles. Each reference made to these stereotypes was dispelled.

Continuing on a similar vein, it is understandable that the matriarch stereotype was addressed heavily during both the 1970s and the 1990s. Of all the stereotypes addressed, the matriarch was covered most often during the 1970s and second most often during the 1990s. Strength is considered a criterion needed to succeed in the professional world. Yet women are often punished for having this character trait. Black women are doubly affected as their being strong can also conjure up the negative matriarch image. *Essence* writers seem to be aware of the need to address and dispel this potentially damaging stereotype. However, no efforts were made to
dispel several references to the matriarch stereotype. This oversight could indicate that *Essence* editors and writers, similar to many Black women, may struggle to separate the positive and negative characteristics of being a matriarch.

A different picture emerges for the sexual siren and matriarch stereotypes. The sexual siren was referenced only five times during the 1970s; however, during the 1990s, it was the most referenced stereotype (*n* = 22). Of the 22 times the stereotype appeared, three references supported the stereotype. *Essence* writers, it seems, are very clear about the damaging qualities of the mammy and welfare mother or queen stereotypes; however, there seems to be less agreement about the matriarch and sexual siren stereotypes.

Perhaps the inability to dispel the negative images of these stereotypes is a reflection of the struggle Black women in general have in sorting through the conflicting positive and negative characteristics of the various stereotypes. Future studies in this area should attempt to provide a better understanding of whether *Essence* portrays a mirrored image of its targeted population’s beliefs about the stereotypical images or whether the magazine helps its readership to decide what elements of the stereotypes are acceptable or unacceptable.

In general, these descriptive findings of the study support the much-touted idea that *Essence* is a feminist-oriented magazine. Dispelling the stereotypes in such an overwhelming fashion provides solid empirical evidence that *Essence* adheres to some of the basic tenets of Black feminism. *Essence* strongly supports the feminist principles of self-definition and the connection of everyday experiences to consciousness. But the findings also reveal that *Essence* is a very middle-class-oriented magazine, and feminist principles call for activism at all levels. The images of the mammy and welfare mother or queen are the most working class of all of the stereotypes. These two images receive the least attention throughout the pages of *Essence*.

The delicate balancing act that *Essence* performs, which allows it to be both a capitalistic venture and a voice for Black women, is
apparent in the results of this study. By focusing on feature stories of successful entertainers, discrimination in the workplace, and relationships, it tends to inform and entertain Black women in the same way that White-oriented magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies Home Journal*, inform and entertain their readership. It promotes self-esteem and tells individual Black women how to cope with work, their men, and so forth without prompting activism. It plays into the American dream of individualism while ignoring the Black cultural ideology that values community. It uplifts the idea of the individual and individual achievement and downplays collective consciousness. That is, *Essence* ignores the many societal structural issues that work against poor Black women. For example, *Essence* covered the Million Woman March in Philadelphia after the event occurred and did nothing to promote the march within its pages in the preceding months.

There are few magazines targeted directly toward African Americans that are also owned and operated by African Americans. Quantitative and qualitative studies of these magazines are rare, and studies about African American women and their media usage are even more rare. More specifically, Rhodes (1993) reports that “women of color often fall through the cracks, unless a deliberate effort is made to study them as subjects, audiences, and producers of mass communication.” This is especially true of “mass communication research that has done little more than document the absence of African American women in the media” (Rhodes, 1993, pp. 25-26).

There is a great need for further quantitative and qualitative studies about *Essence* from the perspectives of readers, writers, and advertisers. For example, a quantitative comparison of what readers were writing about in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in letters to the editors and of editorial letters to the readers would give more insight into the issues of class and if the magazine’s focus has changed over time. The list of possible studies is endless. This study takes a small step to begin research that focuses on the mass media use of little-studied diverse population groups.
NOTES

1. Bobo (1995) identifies the fourth category as sexual siren, whereas Collins (1991) has named it the Black bitch or whore category. For the purposes of this project, we will use Bobo’s name because the mainstream image of the Black woman as sexual siren is a negative one that denotes bitch and whore.

2. Ruth Ross, Essence’s first editor, was seen as being too vehemently Black for the White investors and White mainstream publications, such as Time and the New York Times. Taylor (1995) describes the former assistant editor at Newsweek as being “young, smart, sophisticated, and very much a race woman” (p. 33), a race man or woman being someone devoted to ending the oppression of Black people. Time magazine reported that the first issue of Essence was too stridently militant and that “militancy carries over even into features on employment tips, travel, and a kind of Black Joyce Brothers psychiatric column” (“Black Venture,” 1970, p. 80). The writers of Time predicted that “after awhile, the young, urban, inquisitive, and acquisitive Black woman for whom the magazine is intended is going to get tired of being reminded of the long-standing, dehumanizing rape of the Black woman in America” (“Black Venture,” 1970, p. 80). Ross was asked to leave. Taylor (1995) says that the national mainstream media “apparently saw the magazine as a revolutionary organ seeking to incite Black women to Mau Mau acts of . . . who knows what” (p. 38).

Ida Lewis was the second editor. Before coming to work at Essence, she had spent the previous 5 years in Paris as a reporter for Life and as a freelancer after that. She was an experienced international freelance writer who had also worked for the Washington Post and the BBC (Taylor, 1995, p. 41). Lewis stayed at Essence for a year, which she describes as being one of complete chaos and never-ending pressure that came from White mainstream media, investors, and Black men (besides the publishers):

I mean politics surrounded us in every direction because you had people on the outside who had their vision of what the Black woman should be. And it was the men who were the most vocal, as if it were up to them to mold this new effort. (Taylor, 1995, p. 41)

She then describes a group of Black men led by Sonny Carson who stormed into the office and tried to take over the magazine so that they could control the images being presented to and about Black people (Taylor, 1995, p. 46). After Playboy magazine invested a quarter of a million dollars, Lewis had to contend with Bob Gutwillig, their representative, trying to get her to betray the Black men she worked for (Taylor, 1995, p. 43). She would not, and, after a year of constant upheaval and stress, she left.

Marcia Ann Gillespie was the third editor beginning in July of 1971. Before becoming the managing editor of Essence, she was a researcher at Time-Life Books. She remained editor-in-chief for almost 10 years and, under her direction, the magazine truly began to have a distinct voice. She says,

I wasn’t interested in what other women’s magazines did, because women’s magazines have been developed for a whole other kind of woman: one who had not come up through slavery, one who had not had to work, always work. One who had not been independent as Black women have been independent and on their own. (Taylor, 1995, pp. 49-50)

Taylor (1995) credits Gillespie with making Essence “more relevant to everyday Black women” and for making it “a real service publication” (p. 48). The legacy that Gillespie gave Essence is “that she molded the magazine to reflect the interest of a broad cross section of
Black women” (Taylor, 1995, p. 50). Part of the inclusiveness with which she gifted Essence’s content is because of Gillespie’s decision to self-define as a feminist. She recalls that decision in Inside Ms.: “I had reservations, felt more than a little intimidated by the word and all it meant,” she wrote. “Like many women still are. I was more than a bit suspicious of the movement because it seemed way too white and much too middle-class for its or my own good” (Thom, 1997, p. 230). But she came to believe that this movement is the only true welcome table. A revolutionary place where those who are of different races, cultures, abilities, and sexual orientations and who come from different walks of life can meet and be unafraid to disagree, dream, and struggle to create a truly just world. (Thom, 1997, p. 230)

It was at Essence that she first began to create such a place between the pages of a women’s magazine. She left Essence in 1980 to become a contributing editor at Ms. In 1993, she became editor-in-chief of Ms.

Daryl Royster Alexander was next in the line of succession. She stayed 1 year before leaving to go write for the New York Times.

Then came Essence’s present-day queen, Susan Taylor. Taylor got her start at Essence as the beauty editor in 1971. Taylor is said to epitomize what Essence and Black women are with “her flawless mahogany complexion and her long cornrows, plaited away from her face and streaming down past her shoulders (she was a pioneer of this now-popular braided hairstyle), she cut a dramatically beautiful figure” (Whitaker, 1995, p. 83). Her monthly column, “In the Spirit,” (as opposed to Gillespie’s “Getting Down”) has even led to a book.

3. The race of the author was determined by the way the author identified herself within the text.

4. The Million Woman March was Black women’s answer to the Million Man March on Washington, D.C., which was orchestrated by Black men who requested that Black women stay at home.

REFERENCES


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