

# Representation and Stereotypes of Black Mothers in Television Sitcoms from 1968 to Now



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## INTRODUCTION

From newspaper articles to television productions, American culture is constantly being absorbed by audiences, shaping perceptions of populations into the images permeated through society. This influence of media consumption can be seen in the realm of television, a topic which Wooten (2019) studied in relation to the portrayal of Black women, finding that “television becomes a part of our social experience and serves as a basis for social judgements such as racial attitudes and ethnic Stereotypes,” (Wooten, 2019, p. 60). Many of these stereotypes originated from slavery where the systematic dehumanization of Black women as “desexualized breeders of future slaves” or “ever promiscuous and sexually available” continued to fuel stereotypes (Feldstein, 2000, p. 5). Black women specifically have been historically portrayed on television within four main tropes: the “m\*mmy,” “matriarch,” “sapphire,” and “j\*zebel” (Cheers, 2018). The “m\*mmy” stereotype depicts Black women serving the purpose of childcare for white parents, slave owners, or employers (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016), creating a caricature of Black women in white, oppressive homes (Collins, 1990). Next, the “matriarch” trope depicts Black women as dominating, forceful and controlling, which has been used to paint Black women as not motherly or feminine (Collins, 1990). The next main stereotype, the “j\*zebel,” reduces Black women into sexually promiscuous and immoral characters to “justify sexual atrocities” (Cheers, 2018). The “welfare mother” stereotype depicts working class Black women as resource drainers who utilize social benefits to support their families (Collins, 1990), when systemic discrimination is at the root cause of many of these economic issues (López Trigo, 2021).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

In order to investigate historical trends in the representations and stereotypes of Black mothers in television shows, data was gathered from various television shows’ scripted actions and dialogue. This research specifically focuses on the population of television sitcoms which highlight Black families in their main cast. The sample contains six sitcoms: “Julia” (1968-1971), “The Jeffersons” (1975-1985), “The Cosby Show” (1984-1992), “Family Matters” (1989-1998), “My Wife and Kids” (2001-2005), and “black-ish” (2014-2022). These shows were chosen for their long run times, popularity during their airing periods, and roughly equal episode length.

From these six sitcoms, five episodes were randomly selected from each show to have data collected from them. To do this, a coding technique was used to correspond dialogue/actions from the episodes with the four main historical tropes of Black mothers identified in the background: the “matriarch,” “m\*mmy,” “j\*zebel,” and “welfare mother.” This resulted in qualitative data from the 30 total episodes, which was quantified using a linear square regression test to search for a statistical significant linear trend in the data. The regression was calculated with the shows assigned a number for their time period (1 being the earliest show “Julia” to 6 being “black-ish”), plotted against the frequency the stereotype. This resulted in four different regressions calculated for each stereotype, which were compared to the cutoff probability p-value of 0.05.

## DATA AND FINDINGS

Figure 1:

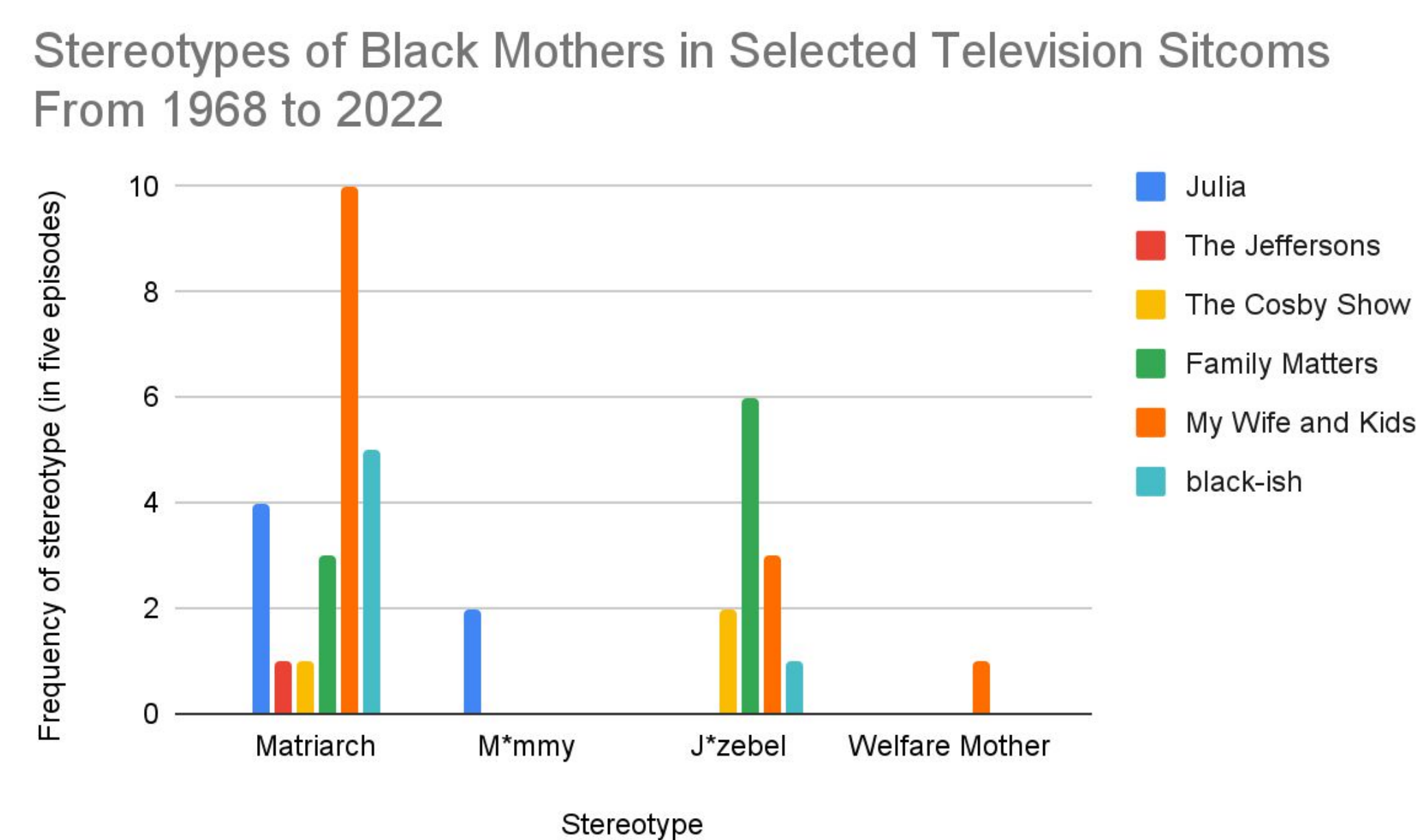


Figure 2: This graph shows the frequency of the four coded stereotypes (Matriarch, M\*mmy, J\*zebel, and Welfare Mother) in six different sitcoms over time (in order from oldest to most recent from Julia to black-ish).

The data presented in Figure 1 shows that the “matriarch” and “j\*zebel” stereotypes were more apparent than the “welfare mother” and “m\*mmy” stereotypes. The “m\*mmy” stereotype only appeared in the oldest studied show, “Julia,” while the “welfare mother” stereotype appeared only in “My Wife and Kids” which ran from 2001-2005. The “matriarch” stereotype peaked in frequency of appearance in “My Wife and Kids,” while the “j\*zebel” stereotype peaked in “Family Matters” which ran from 1989-1997.

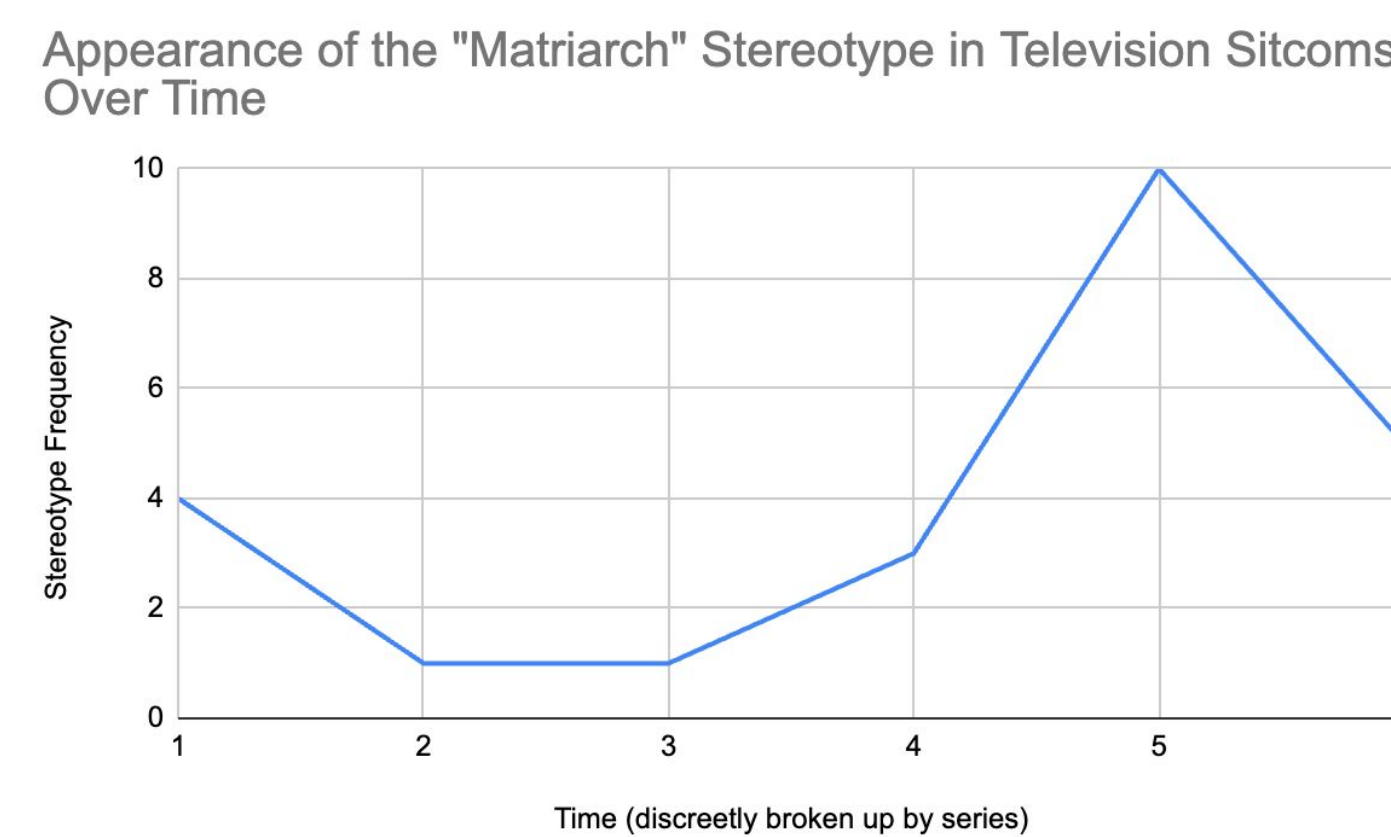


Figure 2 depicts the progression of the “matriarch” stereotype over time, which is broken up by the series, with “1” representing the oldest show “Julia” and “6” representing the newest show “black-ish.”

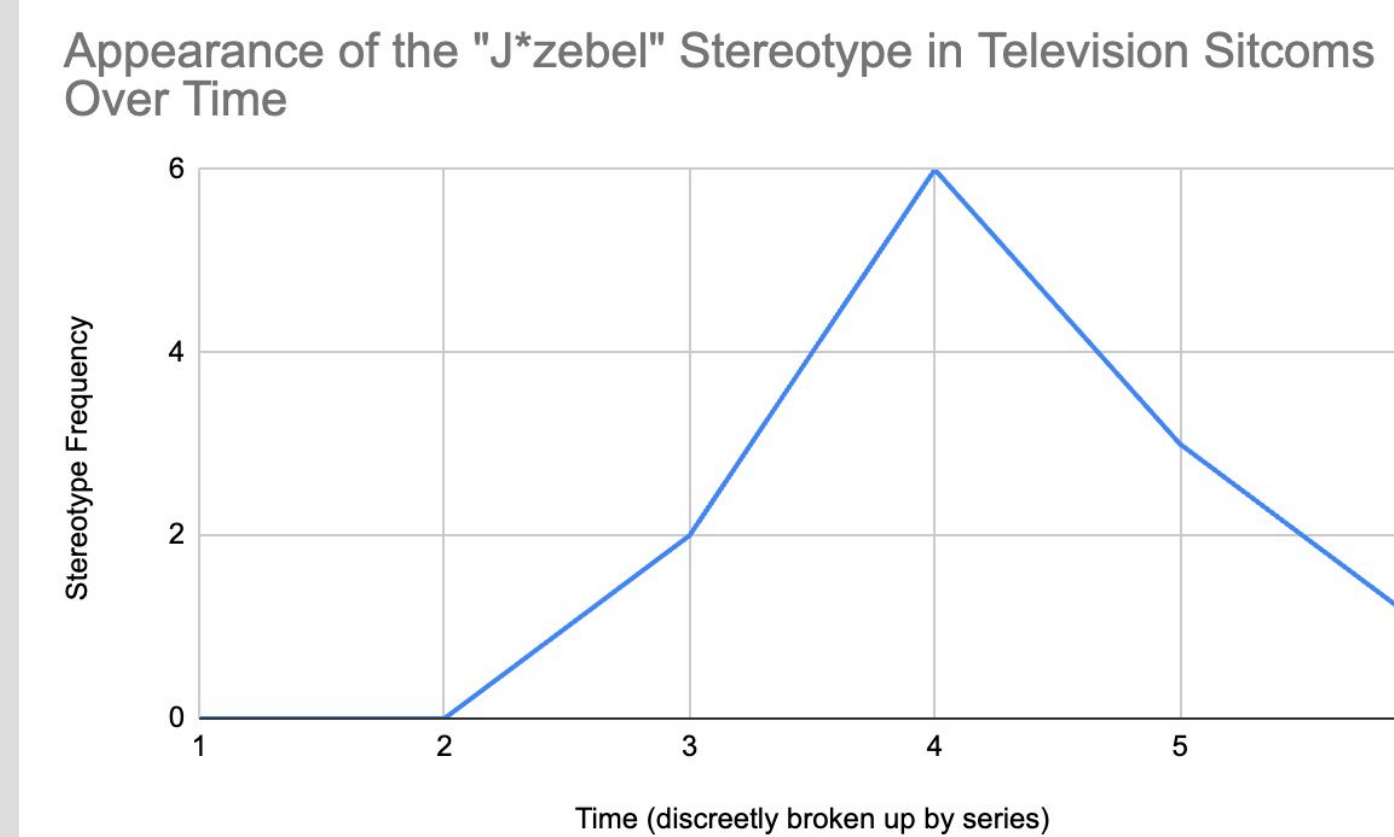
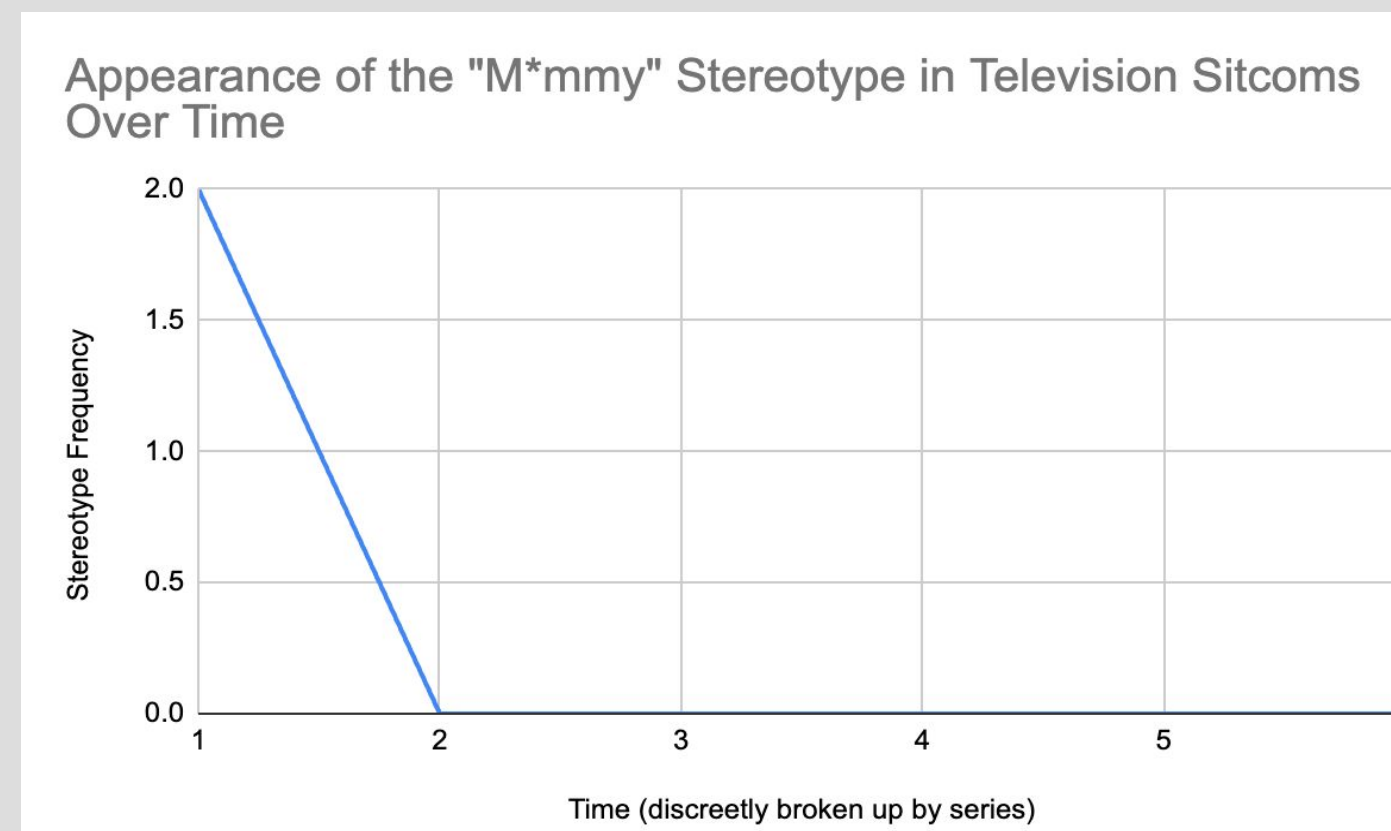


Figure 4 depicts the progression of the “m\*mmy” stereotype over time, which is broken up by the series, with “1” representing the oldest show “Julia” and “6” representing the newest show “black-ish.”

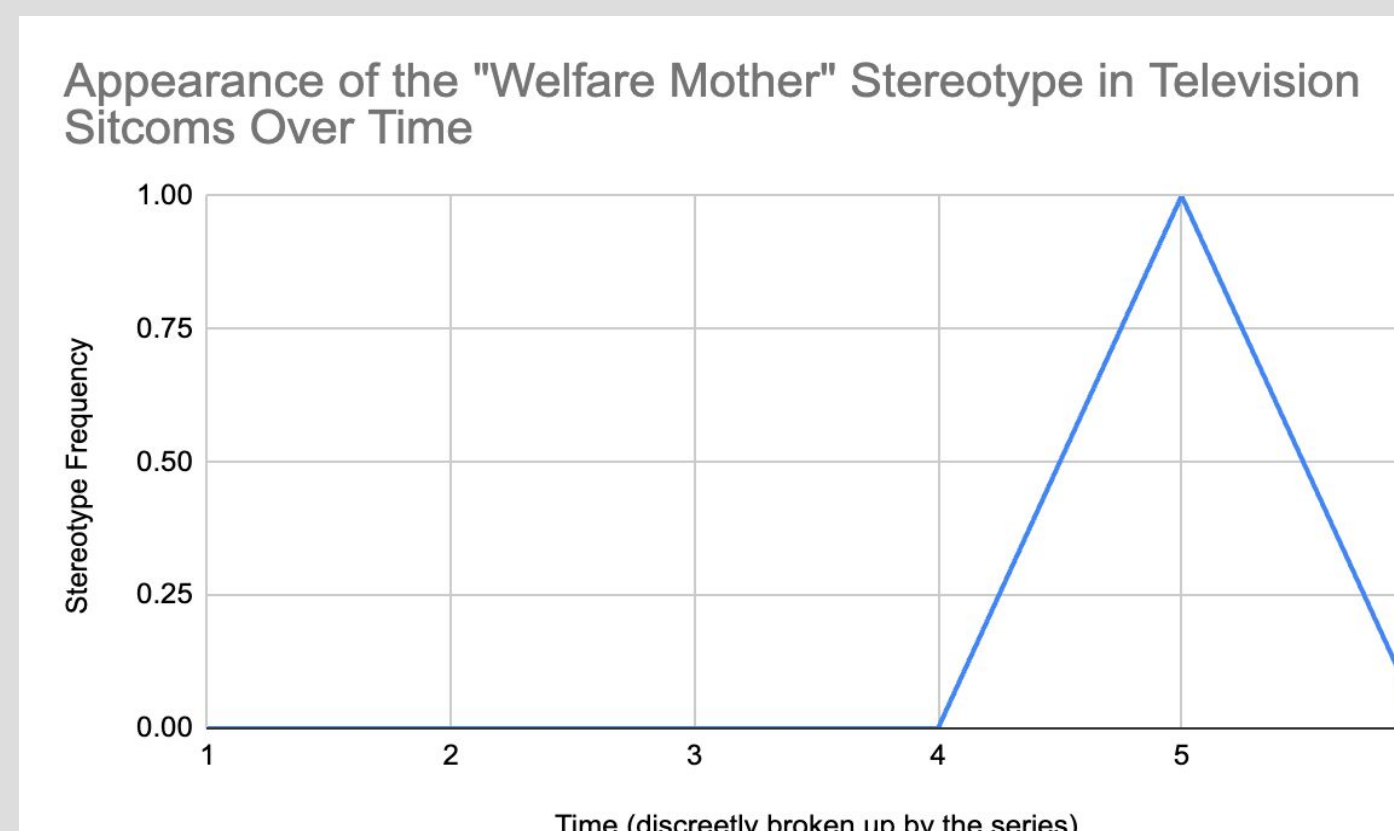


Figure 5 depicts the progression of the “welfare mother” stereotype over time, which is broken up by the series, with “1” representing the oldest show “Julia” and “6” representing the newest show “black-ish.”

## IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

To further explore these findings, a next step that could be taken by future researchers would be to explore this topic through different media representations — the nature of sitcoms impacted/limited the results of this study, but observing different kinds of shows could add a level of depth to the research. One path would be to observe sitcoms which do not feature/highlight a mainly Black cast but instead have Black characters who are less prominent to see the dialogue and actions between different racial groups. This could provide more nuance to the findings by comparing shows which intentionally feature a mainly Black cast versus those which do not portray Black mothers. Additionally, using dramas or reality television as opposed to sitcoms could look into how different forms of television writing represent the four main stereotypes.

These findings could be compared to the research conducted in this paper, providing more information on what forms of sitcoms or television shows are most/least stereotypically portraying Black mothers. This information could be utilized by audiences to heighten awareness of the representations which they encounter in everyday life. The more data that can be collected to lower the variability of the results, the more reliable the data can be, creating more trustworthy/complete information on this topic.

In the future, collecting data over a wide variety of shows across a large timespan will continue to build up the portfolio of research regarding the portrayal of Black mothers in media representations, giving more insight into how they impact audiences. Coupling this with audience surveying on their reactions to the stereotypes in the shows they watch could further explore the tangible results of media consumption.

## CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

The results of the linear square regression showed that the “matriarch” stereotype had a p-value of 0.158, “m\*mmy” having a p-value of 0.158, “j\*zebel” with p-value 0.405 and “welfare mother” with p-value of 0.441. All of these values were above the cutoff probability of 0.05, revealing that there is not a statistically significant difference in the number of appearances of all four stereotypes throughout the decades of the series.

Despite this, there are some qualifications that must be made to contextualize these results — a sample size of five shows from each series is very small, leading to high degree of variability in the data. Additionally, the nature of the chosen medium, sitcoms, may have led to the very infrequent appearance of both the “M\*mmy” and “Welfare Mother” stereotypes since the families in the sitcoms very rarely interacted with people outside of their close family and friends. Since the “m\*mmy” stereotype hinges on the submissive portrayal of Black women to white families, the lack of these relationships in most of the chosen sitcoms made this stereotype very rare. Furthermore, all of the families in the chosen sitcoms had established wealth, making the “welfare mother” trend less apparent. The “matriarch” and “j\*zebel” stereotypes were much more common: the “matriarch” stereotype spiked in appearance in the early 2000s sitcom “My Wife and Kids,” while “j\*zebel” spiked in the 1990s sitcom “Family Matters.” This reveals the non-linear nature of progress in stereotypical imagery: the analysis of this data accounted for finding a linear relationship overtime, while the data shows that stereotypes have evolved less gradually. Thus, it can be concluded that stereotypes of Black mothers in television shows have changed rapidly/abruptly through the decades and the cultural climate of the time of their release rather than linearly.

## REFERENCES

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