

A Bright Future for Black Reality Television : From BET's *College Hill* to Zeus Network's

Baddies South

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Abstract:

College Hill premiered in 2004 on Black Entertainment Network (BET) as the first Black reality television show. For the first time in the history of the genre, this meant the introduction of all-Black casting. With the excitement of its initial premier, Black audiences seemingly had high hopes for the series, but were ultimately let down due to stereotypical representations of Blackness presented in the series. Fastforwarding almost twenty years later, Zeus Network has come into the spotlight as one of the first Black-owned streaming networks producing primarily all-black reality content. Much of Zeus Network's content displays different ways of being Black drawing on important discussions—diverging from normative politics of respectability. Drawing on early literature from Black feminist scholars, Black popular culture, and television studies, I argue that the introduction of Black reality television through the medium of Black-owned streaming platforms lends itself to the creation of a more diverse Black experience and representation of Blackness. Furthermore, I also argue that Zeus Network, through its affordances, enables subscribers to engage more actively in dialogue with one another that is celebratory in nature of Black joy and varied empowering representations of Black women.

Introduction

Jersey Shore. Love Island. Big Brother. Keeping Up With The Kardashians. Do these titles sound familiar? If these titles do sound familiar, that means that you also might indulge in what some might label as “trashy reality television.” I would more correctly label these titles and the content alike as perhaps not trashy, but simply–interesting reality television. Although reality television has its claim to be fully authentic, there are many speculations surrounding a more configured and sketched out form of reality that is presented within the genre. By this claim of “sketched and configured,” I mean that although the genre makes it look as if there are no dramatic cuts or ways in which producers are using certain attributes of the show to create storylines–more often than not, this is exactly the case. As I begin writing this thesis, I thought about my true feelings toward the genre that is reality television. First, I thought about the genre as being an escape away from my own reality. I find relaxation and even sometimes amusement in being able to sit down and watch someone else's life through a screen.



Kim Kardashian realizing she lost her earring in Bora Bora (E!, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*)

While I may be able to wonder in some instances what my life would be like if I were in some situations reality television presents, I found relaxation in knowing that those things would never

happen to me—such as, losing my diamond earring during a family trip in Bora Bora or picking between thirty two men in order to find my husband in a matter of weeks, but there was something about being able to visualize those scenarios for myself. Nonetheless, after going down the path of deeming reality television as an escape away from my own reality, it almost became *too* realistic. That is, I was not able to see any glimpse of my own reality represented in the genre. Of course, I loved shows such as, *The Bachelorette*, *The Real World*, and *America's Next Top Model* just to name a select few. However, I started asking myself: “Where are all the Black people?” Even in the case of shows such as *America's Next Top Model* where Black cast members such as Tyra Banks were placed at the forefront, the majority of the rest of the cast were white. The lack of representation, especially those of Black women, is not a new phenomena. As more and more Black girls and women are exploring their own identities with media, it is imperative that those identities are well represented—in all its various forms. As I began to be curious about Black reality television, I viewed popular Black reality episodes of *College Hill*, *Bad Girls Club*, *Bring It*, and of course, *The Flavor of Love*.

College Hill became the first Black reality television series, and with much anticipation for its release, Black audiences had hoped that this would mark a new space in the genre. Unfortunately, in the case of *College Hill* and much of the content being labeled as Black reality television becoming a great source of entertainment, it also was very much inaccurate in my own experience of Blackness. While I understand that the beauty in Blackness lies in its different ways of being, I saw many of the same depictions that were extremely harmful and even sometimes over exaggerated. To be represented in these spaces is merely not enough—there must also be an emphasis on the diversity and reliability of representation. Without the correct

representation of different types of Blackness there may be an influx in stereotypical depictions of Black folk.

Hence, it is not enough to simply cast Black individuals for a reality television show if those individuals do not have agency in the way in which they portray themselves on screen. Tyree (2011) conducted a study that sought to analyze ten reality television shows airing from 2005 to 2008 to investigate whether producers were casting African American individuals who fit into traditional and even new stereotypes revolving around the Black community. In each instance of the shows analyzed, each show had at least one participant who fit into stereotypical characters, including the angry black woman, hoochie, hood rat, homo thug, sambo, and coon (Tyree, 2011). This study provided evidence not only of the presence of the harmful portrayals of Blackness, but also presented the idea that those in charge of casting had much to do with these portrayals. More specifically, Black women are consistently being placed into stereotypical roles and depictions. Gammage (2016) explained that, “animalistic portrayals of Black women can be traced back to 19th century cinematic representations of Black womanhood. Alongside the demonization of Blacks lay the hyper-violent, sex crazed stereotype of Black peoplehood, symbolizing a savage, uncivilized culture” (p.82). The impact that early cinematic representations portrayed of Black women clearly has an impact on what should and is deemed as “reality” for Black women today. Nonetheless, even the depictions of Black women that involve being examples of those who are considered “overachievers” and “highly materialistic” play into the wrongful depictions of Black women. If audiences are persistently being shown derogatory portrayals of Black folk, how can one expect audiences to depict and perhaps even view Blackness in its authentic form. Perhaps even more importantly to me, if incorrect representations of Blackness are being presented, how will those part of the Black community be

able to find their identities and experiences on-screen and what are the implications of the absence of correct representations?

Reaching toward a more positive outlook, with the proliferation of digital media and the introduction of streaming platforms, there has never been so much content being shared across devices. In the midst of the early days of our COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to find a variety of streaming platforms that offered Black reality content. More specifically, I ran across a Black-owned streaming platform called Zeus Network. I was drawn to the platform, because I was such a big fan of *Bad Girls Club* presented on Oxygen Network starting in 2006, and many of the past cast members of the show were returning to the big screen through a series presented by Zeus Network known as *Baddies*. Nataline Nun, who appeared on the fourth season of *Bad Girls Club*, was announced as the executive producer of the new series, and I knew that I could not miss out on the premiere. Yet, this did not come without hesitation. Knowing the nature of *Bad Girls Club* as it originally appeared to be an intervention for young women trying to better their toxic behaviors—seemingly, turned to the majority of the seasons surrounding endless fights and arguing between cast members. However, after doing initial research on the Black-owned network, it seemed as though this content appeared to be different in its nature—still showing the dramatic fights and arguments, but also shedding an imperative spotlight on different representations and experiences of Blackness.

My experience as a subscriber of the Zeus Network inspired me to understand the way in which streaming services, that are Black-owned, have become a catalyst for Black reality television. Moreover, it is imperative to understand the shift in content creation as it specifically relates to Black reality television—from the first Black reality television show *College Hill* (2004) to the newest productions in the spotlight such as *Baddies* (2018). In particular, this thesis does

not aim to answer a specific research question. Rather, in this thesis, I argue that the introduction of Black reality television through the medium of Black-owned streaming platforms lends itself to the creation of a more diverse Black experience and representation of Blackness. Furthermore, I also argue that Zeus Network, through its affordances, enables subscribers to engage more actively in dialogue with one another that is celebratory in nature of Black joy and varied empowering representations of Black women.

Black Reality Television, Popular Culture, & Respectability

Early scholars such as Stuart Hall point to an important conversation surrounding Blackness that continues to be essential in conversations about Black reality television today. Hall states, “But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high and low; resistance versus incorporation...” (1993). Hall is writing about the context of Blackness in Black popular culture at the time, (i.e. music, fashion, and film) and urges readers to understand the complexity of Blackness. Blackness is not necessarily a stagnant or confined identity, but it [Blackness] relies on a complex set of cultural practices, experiences, and histories. Hence, when experiencing Black popular culture, one should note that even if they may deem a particular trope of Blackness as present, it is important to recognize that these tropes that individuals witness varies across audiences. Nonetheless, Hall also understands the ways in which identity can be misconstrued when it is accompanied by the name of “popular culture.” Those experiencing Black popular culture are instructed by Hall to consider their own biases when examining Black popular culture (1993). Instead of deeming certain images within Black popular culture as “negative,” individuals should consider the truth in these images. The notion that popular culture,

“commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience” (Hall, 1993). My work wishes to understand the complexities of the confined label of “popular culture” as it relates to the recurrent derogatory and stereotypical images of Blackness in the realm of reality television as well as Black reality television. Pickins (2015) illustrates the relationship between respectability and ratchetness. In this work, she completes a study of Tamar Braxton (TV star & background singer) and suggests that ratchet performance becomes visible when it comes out of cramped cultural spaces—indicating that viewers of reality television deeming these works as simply “ratchet” are limiting Blackness to a space of cultural confinement. I bring Pickins in here, because Pickins’ work extends a specific niche of Hall’s, and focuses on “ratchet” as an end-all-be-all catchphrase that was commonly in conversation with the Black reality television genre. Hence, one can understand that the same way in which Hall calls out the negativity surrounding Black popular culture, Pickens does the same, but specifically focuses on the notion of “ratchetness” as a label of Black reality television.

I find the use of ‘ratchetness’ to be complex and even helpful in understanding Black reality television. Warner (2015) discusses the meaning and complexity of ratchetness—exceeding normative bounds of acceptability. In this sense, ratchetness serves as a tool of reclamation and exploration outside of respectability—allowing Black women to engage in community with one another through various topics. The idea of respectability for Black folk first came into the light in Higginbotham’s 1994, *Righteous Discontent*. Higginbotham describes, “Duty-bound to teach the value in religion, education, hard work, the women of the black Baptist church adhered to politics of respectability that equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group” (1994, p.30). Taking this definition and usage of

respectability challenges the need and use of ‘ratchetness’ as a tool for agency and authenticity. Hence, I want to complicate the usage of the term “ratchetness”, as I believe it allows Black women to defy the means of respectability and other aspects of Black life that are or should be deemed as normative in their portrayals of self on Black reality television. Hall goes on to state that [Black] popular culture is a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time” (1993). Hall’s work on Black popular culture illustrates an important concept in my own work that relates to Black audience reception and portrayals of self on Black reality television. It is imperative to consider the implicit influence of Black popular culture when viewing Black audience’s experiences of the premiere of *College Hill*. There may be complexities in the ways that viewers are grappling with the representations of Blackness that may be presented in the series.

Activating the Negative Image in Black Reality Television

Gates (2018) describes negativity and negative images, specifically those of Black popular culture. Gates argues in *Double Negative*, “that reclaiming these overlooked images from black popular culture and offering an alternative history of their meanings and possibilities also provides a strong intervention in present-day debates about proper black behavior and the role of popular culture in the current socio-political moment” (2018, p.21). Gates (2018) also acknowledges the idea that negotiating between negative and positive images allow for “intriguing possibilities for queer, feminist, and otherwise nonnormative subjectivities” (p.20). During my exploration of Zeus Network, it became evident that the platform allows the spotlight

to be on a wider spectrum of Black voices from different gender identities to sexual orientations. I had never witnessed so many different portrayals of Blackness in one space. Yet, whether or not individuals deem the content of the network as appropriate or not, it is clear that the network is able to diversify the types of representations they are implementing.

Through “negative images” audiences are able to perhaps create a means of cultural meaning making for themselves. Instead of assuming that viewers of Black reality television are only tuning in because of the “drama” and “derogatory theatrics,” these negative images should be seen as a way for viewers to look towards the show to become a repository of identities and experiences that have been discarded by the “respectable media” (Gates, 2015). In her work, Gates understands the way in which Black reality television can be known for its derogatory or negative images of Blackness along with the audiences’ knowledge of the portrayals. However, in a more positive turnaround, Gates finds use in these images and applauds them not for their negativity, but for their ability to create an additional step of analysis in response to the images.

“What the idea of the negativity offers, then, is a mode of analysis for seeing the work that these texts are doing in the first place. For, rather than cut off the analysis at the first sign of stereotypes or politically regressive constructs, negativity seeks to move the discussion past this first level of scrutiny and onto the question of what meanings these texts hold relative to the culture that produce both them and their positive compliments” (Gates, 2015).

My thesis relies heavily on Gates’ concept of the negative image and the way in which audiences are able to implement this analysis in their own viewing of Black reality television.

Black Reality Television & Streaming Platforms

The introduction of streaming platforms coupled with Black reality television seemingly allows for more agency in the content that is produced and the affordances that are offered for subscribers. Lotz (2017) describes reasons behind the success of subscriber-based streaming services and other internet-distributed media. Lotz (2017) makes the claim that, “The strategy of bundling access to an array of content in portals—as opposed to selling individual series as done by transaction retailers such as iTunes and Amazon—is related and yet demonstrably different. It is not that the economics of transaction functionally require bundling to make efficient sale of a good, as was the case of physical media. Rather the portal strategy of collecting goods in a library is a response to heterogeneous taste, the risk averseness of audiences to paying to try new programs, and the marketing costs of transacting single goods” (p.36). Here, one can understand one of the various ways in which internet-distributed media are able to create unique portals for themselves, in this instance serving as a unique collection of cultural goods, pointing to an important aspect that allows for the diversification of Black reality content. Moreover, in the case of Zeus Network, streaming networks such as itself have access to subscriber portals. Lotz (2018) describes that, “Subscriber-funded portals also require creative professionals skilled in data science and analysis to evaluate subscriber behavior in data because of the much richer information available to these companies” (2018, p.44). Hence, Zeus Network as an example, has perhaps based their production of content on their very niche subscriber behavior. In this sense, I have hope that Zeus has been able to consistently create diverse Black content in the name of correct representation. This allows for an interesting discussion for my own work in how the Zeus’ audiences and subscribers perceive the content that Zeus is setting forth and how this differs from cable-based Black reality television like *College Hill*.

Looking Ahead

To return to the argument of my thesis, I argue that the introduction of Black reality television through the medium of Black-owned streaming platforms lends itself to the creation of a more diverse Black experience and representation of Blackness. I also argue that Zeus Network, through its affordances, enables subscribers to engage more actively in dialogue with one another that is celebratory in nature of Black joy and empowering variations of representations of Black women that shy away from respectability. In order to expand and find credible the argument I have set forth, my work employs a mixed-method approach encompassing historical analysis, content analysis, and critical technocultural discourse analysis. The first chapter looks to understand Black audience reception in response to the premiere of the first Black reality television series, *College Hill*. Chapter two seeks to uncover the appearance of certain themes surrounding Blackness and Black womanhood that are presented in certain episodes of Zeus Networks' second *Baddies* installment, *Baddies South*. It is imperative to understand the dominant narratives that are portrayed on *Baddies South* in order to understand the differences in Black audience reception in comparison to *College Hill*. The last chapter seeks to understand the affordances and activity permitted by Zeus Network as a platform for their subscribers and how this impacts discourse between subscribers on the platform. I aim to place an emphasis on the importance of Black-owned streaming services like Zeus to create positive and effective change for Black reality television.

Chapter One:

They Tried to Tell Them: Black Audience Reception and the Premiere of the *College Hill*

For many years, reality television has made its infamous promise of upholding and portraying raw and uncut images to its viewers. In the early 1990s, this genre began to capture the attention of American audiences with shows such as *The Real World*, in which young adults are chosen to live in a new city together while showcasing their lives to their viewers. As the genre began to grow, fastforwarding almost fifteen years later, reality television became a mainstay and became the format of choice for many networks and cable stations (Tyree, 2011). Although reality television seemed to be thriving in its space, the genre made it seemingly harder for minority groups, specifically Black folk, to thrive along with them. Viewers especially began to notice this during the early rise of majority Black-casting in reality television during the early 2000s.

In the early 2000's, the first Black reality television show emerged. *College Hill* aired on Black Entertainment Television (BET) in 2004 and highlighted the experiences of Black students who were enrolled at Black historical colleges (McGloster, 2019). The show's reception grew outwardly positive for viewers because of its "unscripted nature" (McGloster, 2019). The show left viewers, especially Black viewers, with feelings of hopefulness for a new space in a genre that the Black community had been previously excluded from (McGloster, 2019). After the success of *College Hill*, the Black reality television genre began to emerge—ranging from reality dating game shows like *Flavor of Love* (2006) to watching the professional lives of successful Black women like *Married to Medicine* (2013). Soon after the Black community claimed their space in the realm of reality television, reactions to the presumed repetitive tropes and stereotypes were brought forth. Specifically, these reactions were mostly witnessed and

communicated through those from the same community (Edwards, 2016). Black communities were growing weary of Black reality television portraying Black men as “thugs” and Black women as “hypersexual.” (Edwards, 2016).

What was initially a space for the exploration of Blackness and Black culture, had quickly become a space that seemed to reinforce harmful presumptions of Blackness and the Black community as a whole. Although it may be evident that on one side of the spectrum Black reality television infamously incorporates stereotypical tropes, on the other hand the shows themselves and the discourse that follows might also allow Black viewers to engage in viewing these reality shows as exemplifications and inspirations of operating within of Black joy. Black reality television has left Black viewers with transformational ways to experience Black joy, and this is oftentimes overlooked by dominating conversations on stereotypical portrayals. In this sense, Black individuals presume agency to reclaim and create positive meanings of identity from Black reality television that allow them to explore new outlooks on Blackness. The spectrum of criticism and joy of Black reality television is what I have set out to explore by understanding Black audience reception of the premiere of *College Hill* in 2004, as the first Black reality television show. This is because it is imperative to understand its place in the genre and its impact on Black audiences at the time. In doing so, one can trace back the initial releases of Black reality television shows to understand the way in which the genre has been situated in our contemporary age. In this chapter, I will employ a historical analysis of the premiere of *College Hill* in 2004 using archival sources of press coverage and student media to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: How did Black audiences experience the premiere episodes of College Hill?

RQ2: How might the premiere of College Hill function to create a space for Blackness and Black joy?

In answering these particular research questions, I sought to uncover the feelings of Black audiences as they watched the premiere of *College Hill*. Audience voice and feedback are both imperative, because this is the first moment that Black audiences are experiencing portrayals of themselves on the television screen. While other reality television shows may have had a Black cast member or even conversed about issues surrounding race and Blackness, this show was the first to do so with an all-Black cast. *College Hill*, knowingly or not, would set the stage for Black reality television to come.

College Hill: First Black Reality Television Series

As the focus of the study is on the first Black reality television series, *College Hill*, it is important to first understand the context of this show. The show premiered on January 28, 2004 on Black Entertainment Network (BET). Executive producers of the show, Babyface and Tracey Edmonds noted to audiences that the premiere docuseries amplified the experiences of Black students at historically Black colleges and universities throughout the country. During the initial season of the show cast members: Kinda Andrews, Shalondrea Davis, Gabriel Langley, Delano Mitchell, Nina Moch, and Jabari Roberts were chosen.

The first season had a total of thirteen episodes ranging from twenty minutes to half an hour premiering weeknights on BET. The final episode of the first season premiered in April of 2004, and the series was seemingly well on its way to continue with a second season. In each season, the lives of students at historically Black colleges are shown to audiences. The first season of *College Hill* followed cast members at Southern University during their “everyday”

lives as students. *College Hill* insisted on its overarching commitment to portraying the lives of HBCU students, but during the show, the students are moved to a different sector of campus and into one house—sharing and living under the same roof during the academic school year. For this reason, the show did not depict students in a traditional dormitory setting as one may think. During the premiere of the first season, it was evident that the show became an important marker in television, specifically for Black audiences. As the first Black reality television series, this show would ultimately provide many individuals a look into specifically Black student life at HBCUs. The emergence of the show also marked a significant milestone for audiences who had not previously experienced Blackness or Black culture. Prior to the airing of this program, reality television was deemed as an exclusively predominately white genre. Hence, with the creation of the series meant a hopeful insight for showcasing the diversity and complexity of Black experiences as Hall urges viewers to do when thinking about ‘Blackness’ in Black popular culture—how well *College Hill* seemed to represent the diversities of Blackness is left to be judged by the Black viewers of the series.

Research Design

Methodology and Primary Sources

This chapter uses historical analysis as its primary methodology. Specifically, I have chosen the dates of January 2004 to April 2004, because those are the dates that revolve around the initial premiere and first season of *College Hill*. During this time, there was much discussion surrounding the show itself, but also the implications that the show had created for the Black community. The primary sources that will be used in this study are in the form of archival

sources surrounding Black press coverage (Black entertainment and news outlets) and student media that have been derived from HBCUs student media archive in order to gauge audience responses of the show. The archival student news media resources are in the forms of digital articles that provide information on the social and cultural implications of how the show was produced, but most importantly how it was received by its audiences.

Although the show's first season aired from January 2004 to April 2004, some of the primary sources collected for this study are outside of this date range. The reasoning behind this instance is that audiences who were following the series often discussed the premiere prior to its release on BET—perhaps channeling the initial excitement or concerns before the show had started to cast predictions. Similarly, student news media and press coverage referencing time after the end of the season in order to discuss the series for its entirety but also casting predictions for the *future* of the series. However, it is important to note that regardless of the exact date of the primary sources, those mentioned in this study must have referred to or spoke explicitly about the premiere of season one of the show. Furthermore, being able to collect data from a wider data range has allowed my analysis to strengthen in understanding the “bigger picture” of what Black audiences felt during this time—specifically, the students.

Press Coverage of *College Hill* : Critics

In the days leading up to the premiere of *College Hill*, many audiences had been patiently waiting to see if the series had led up to what it seemed to be. Much of the press coverage at the time of the show's release was concerned with the show's label as, “the first” of many for Black entertainment. How would *College Hill* live up to the standard as being the first Black reality television show, and to what standard are viewers comparing the series to? For Black news

outlets, this seemed to be the question they grappled with the most. Melanie McFarland, known for her reviews and writing around Black television for many outlets, but specifically wrote an article for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* to address her initial concerns for the premiere of the show. In her first initial sentences of the article, McFarland writes, “College Hill isn’t so much a groundbreaking entry as it is a chocolate-dipped version of “Fraternity Life” or “Sorority Life” or, more precisely, “The Real World” seen through sepia-colored glasses” (2004). McFarland is not impressed with the series and compares the show to earlier reality television shows, but with the introduction of a predominantly Black cast. It is important to note that McFarland wrote this review two days before the first episode of the show, but contends that she has already been exposed to viewing the episodes. Because this article was written before the actual release of the show, it is possible that audiences who intended to watch the show had also read this review—charging viewers to form a conception of the show without watching it first. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the initial reactions to the new series were not overly supportive. It is evident that McFarland’s most prominent conflict with the series is its recreation of “typical” reality television shows in the past. She writes, “As it is, the genre is so saturated that the show’s derivative, formulaic characteristics outweigh the qualities that actually make it stand out...For instance, “College Hill” includes a pregnant student in the cast, an elementary education major. She’s the kind of girl not usually seen in the reality realm...Her story isn’t what sells a show like this. That’s why the first co-ed “College Hill ” spotlights is the bubble-brained Kinda, the resident skeezer who refuses to wear underwear and has a “freak bag” stuffed in her room (McFarland, 2004). McFarland sheds light on the cast members’ stories that are typically not included with the reality television realm, but also implies that these “nontraditional” stories are not presented at the forefront of the show and cast members with those are deemed noteworthy

have the spotlight—much like other reality television shows before *College Hill* according to McFarland.

Much like McFarland, other Black television review critics did not have much appreciation for *College Hill* even after the first full season had aired. Fastforwarding to 2007, almost three years after the first season, Aslin Leger of Black the Wire, shared her review on the first season. After a radio show aired the discontent over the way students portrayed themselves in the season four of *College Hill* premiering in 2007, it became clear that according to Leger, the show had not made any adequate progress from its first season in regards to negative images and negative portrayals of Blackness. It appeared that viewers were consistently grappling with the portrayals of Black individuals that had not lessened since the first season of the show, but had only consistently persisted (Leger, 2007). Leger interviewed multiple sources at University of Virgin Islands to gain a better grasp on the actual reception of the show from individuals who were aware of the show wanting to continue shooting at this specific school after season 4. She concluded at the end of the review that most of the discontent generated within the first minutes of the show, “which was not unexpected in a small community not used to having itself portrayed in any way on national TV” (Leger, 2007). She stated that, “Members of the university’s Board of Trustees expressed their outrage over the cast members’ behavior and distanced themselves from the decision to allow the show to be filmed at UVI,” indicating that the college did not wish to be involved in the filming any longer (Leger, 2007). Interestingly, Leger states that, “BET represents the merchandising and exploitation of stereotypical and oftentimes destructive behavior of Black people for the benefit of the profit... The show isn’t about HBCUs, it’s about eight students who live in a house... There needs to be some sort of balanced approach in their programming, to include positives along with the negative. Right

now, they seem to be only interested in the bottom line (Leger, 2007). Leger seems to be concerned about the over commodification of Black identities within the series, and pointing to other officials and leaders at the university who have been involved with the production of the show only seems to strengthen this critique. However, her critique consistently ties back to the initial premiere of *College Hill*—implying that the producers of the show were not committed to making changes or producing different storylines.

Although written at two different points from the initial release of the series to coverage surrounding the initial release, it seems that Black television critics gain consistency with one another in their opinions about the harmful stereotypes that have been depicted on *College Hill*. Looking into 2007, it seems that McFarlands' initial concerns about the first season of the show were still being addressed years after the release. If television critics were portraying similar critiques within their reviews, years apart, one may question *College Hill* and its responses to its audience's reception of the series. However, it seems that even with years apart *College Hill* had not changed the content of its series, or perhaps did not choose to branch out by including “different” or the “unusual” storyline. In this instance, “unusual” may consist of story lines that do not portray Blackness as a stereotypical and monolithic entity. Hence, it is clear that television critics were displeased with the content of the series as well as addressing the minimal positive instances of Blackness within the show. Nonetheless, it is imperative to move this conversation to coexist alongside the student media from HBCUs at the time. This is because, although television critics are deemed reliable because of their formal and professional context, it is important to include the actual viewers whom this series seems to be portraying.

Student Media

Many HBCUs at the time of *College Hill's* premiere were interviewing a number of students to shed light on their opinions of the programming. Southern University acquired an ample number of student articles produced about the release of the first season and how the show held up with portraying the lives of students at Southern University in the initial and ending episodes. Similar to television critics, the student media organization at Southern University, *Southern Digest*, also published an article before the actual release date of the show, but the student media were able to interview and grasp the perspective of cast members that would be featured on the show. In one article, "Meet the Cast of College Hill," a student from Southern University, Kayla Perkins, attempted to share initial concerns about the start of the show, but also gathered information from cast members on what could be expected with the new series. Perkins writes that during an interview with the corporate communications director the individual stated, "We chose Southern University mainly because the school is so well rounded, it's an excellent example and prototype of the HBCU experience and we wanted to capture that" (2004). Although Perkins insists on recognizing the hopeful tone of the corporate communications direction, other students at Southern University seemed weary about the show's airing so close to home. In the same article, an unnamed student stated, "It seems like the show follows students as they go about their everyday lives and deal with day to day issues, but the parties and sex scenes that I've heard about are going to damage our image" (2004).

However, even though some students at the university were suspicious of the show's intentions and portrayals, cast members who were interviewed during this time insisted on the authenticity of the show. Kinda Andrews of the show told Perkins, "When the show was being taped, I was 100 percent myself and if people don't like it then too bad. I know my parents will probably not like it but I had to be myself." In a similar vein, cast member Nina Moch stated,

“Because I did it off a dare, I didn’t care if I was chosen. What you see is what you get from me. It wasn’t until I made it to the finals that I’d hoped I’d make it,” noting that her real personality not only shined through in the selection process, but on the show as well. After the first two weeks of the episode airing, the students at Southern University wrote to their student media organizations about their opinions. Within “Revisiting College Hill,” Perkins takes a second look at students' concerns, and it appeared to be a unanimous conflict presented on the show that students were already starting to grow tired of (2004). One student in the article stated, “This is an embarrassment to our school, and it’s sad to think that the rest of the world will know about Southern University by this show” (Perkins, 2004). In a similar vein Perkins illustrated within this article that the students were finding “everything wrong” and “nothing right” with the show, and it is concerning, because the show is not only a portrayal of Black individuals, but specifically, HBCUs (2004).

Louisiana State University’s student media, *The Reville* had a strong and visible presence about the premiere of *College Hill*’s first season. Since Louisiana State University is not a historically Black college the school was not initially considered for the show, but student media of the school remain engaged because of BET’s promise to possibly expand to this school because of its diverse and vibrant presence of Black student life. (Green, 2004). On the day that the show premiered, *The Reville*, published, “Reality Show Features Southern Students,” an article that highlights the overarching themes of fun and the drama of college life. Monique Green, writer of the article starts by stating, “Cameras captured cast members pledging greek organizations, dealing with pregnancy and sexual encounters” (2004). However, although Green attests to the *reality* of the premiere, she also states that many students at Louisiana State University were happy that their school was not chosen to be the center of the show, because of

its backlash from Southern University students. Green states that, “Some Southern students said they are worried that cameras captured too much of the social atmosphere at Southern and not the academic struggles. The students also said the choice of cast members might leave viewers with a negative view of Southern and other Historically Black Colleges and Universities” (2004). In this sense, students at LSU seemed to be relieved of their passing on the show, because students at Southern University were not having a positive experience during the premiere, and the school itself seemed to be facing immense backlash for the portrayal of their students.

During the second season’s premiere of *College Hill*, students at Howard University weighed in on the content—ultimately reverting back to the comparison of *College Hill*’s first season. Howard University’s *New Service* published a piece that shares the opinions of students at their school. One student at the time, Sakira Cook’ stated, “I kept seeing the exact same things over and over as I did in the first season. It seems like the show will always be scripted and unrealistic. Last season threw me because they lived in a house with an R.A. power tip. This year, the show takes place off campus but nothing interesting ever happens off campus. When you’re in college you’re a student first and *College Hill* does not show students engaging in any type of scholastic activity. I’d much rather watch CSI Thursday’s at 9 p.m” (2005). However, other students at the time seemed to have mixed feelings about the new season in comparison to the first. A student by the name of Ellis stated in the article, “I like the drama. The characters do stereotype our race but they are only intended to increase the ratings. In reality, you can find those types of people at any black colleges” (2005). Hence, even with the second season of the premiere, students continued to compare the show to its first season and lack of change in stereotypical portrayals of Black individuals all while neglecting the ‘college’ and academic aspect that was supposed to appear in the show.

Analysis

The premiere of *College Hill* in 2004 seemed to do everything besides leaving Black audiences speechless. In an effort to gain a picture of the reception of the show's initial premiere, I conducted a historical analysis with multiple archival sources of press coverage and student media during the time of the show. It is evident that in both cases of the press coverage of the show offered by television critics *and* student media from historically Black colleges grappled with a similar notion as Hall when witnessing portrayals of "Blackness" within "popular media." There were a minimal number of positive comments that both sources created about the show, because it seemed to them as if the show consistently portrayed Blackness in the context or in conversation with stereotypical images. The critics at the time of the premiere mentioned in the paper, especially expressed their concerns with having Black individuals being commodified for producing stereotypical images. Here, it is concerning for television critics that the show labeled, 'the first Black reality television show' has fallen short to the same concerns that played out during primarily white-casting reality shows. The critics expected more, because of the title, but it was proven that the show did not hold up to its promises and consistently portrayed Blackness as a monolithic entity—only capable of being "noteworthy" on television because of its destructive, yet consistent portrayals.

To back the opinions of the television critics, student news organizations were also left with sour opinions of the premiere of the show—also noting that the portrayals of the students were harmful. Not only did student news understand the portrayals as having a negative impact on themselves, the students also found that the show did not do much to help the reputation of their schools and those alike. Thus, students discussed the harmful images along with their own

personal experiences of how the show impacted their communities. It is clear that students who experienced the premiere of *College Hill* conducted the exercise of “activating the negative ” just as Gates urged viewers of Black reality television to do. Students were able to recognize the harmful portrayals of Black students at HBCUs, and insisted that these portrayals were very one-sided. Going on to highlight a more authentic version of Black student life at HBCUs, students insisted that these schools and universities were nothing like the consistent partying and drama that the show enlisted in its premiere, and urged producers to focus on aspects of students life such as scholarly activities or simply doing anything *other than* spending the day in a house and spending the night partying. Hence, one can see that students were definitely displeased with the content of *College Hill*, but also insisted on explaining *why* these depictions were not true and even expressing their ideas surrounding creating a better future for the show. However, even when student news media organizations revisited their opinions of *College Hill* in reaction to the seasons aired after the initial premiere, it became evident that not much had changed. Students, again, began displacing their concern with the content and its repetitive tendencies that were presented in season one. Hence, although the majority of students who viewed the show were not happy, it is important to recognize their efforts in making change. Even with the efforts of students and backlash from television critics, *College Hill* seemed to continue its regular programming during the premiere of the first season and for the seasons after—stereotypical portrayals of Black students and minimal attention to aspects of student life that students from HBCUs urged producers to consider.

Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter looked to answer the following historical questions: *How did Black audiences experience the premiere episodes of College Hill? How might the premiere of College Hill function to create a space for Blackness and Black joy?* In conducting a historical analysis of audience reception to the premiere of *College Hill* in 2004, this chapter found that the majority of Black audiences, through the use of student news and press coverage, found the show to do more harm than actual good for Black identity portrayals and portrayals at Black student life at HBCUs. However, even when undergoing extreme backlash, producers of the show seemed to make little effort to change the content. Hence, it is imperative to point out that it seemed as if Black audiences did not, in fact, experience Black joy during the initial premiere of the show, but were able to discuss the complexities and diversity of Blackness as an identity. In this event, the show did not please Black audiences, but Black audiences ensured to note why this instance was. One of the limitations of this study is that I only focused on the dates surrounding the initial premiere of the series. Hence, it is a possibility that after the premiere of the show, much of the content that was portrayed could have changed for the better—in the name of representations and transparency with audiences. Future research on this topic should continue to look at the seasons after the first, and compare audience opinions to those that were present when the series first started. In this instance, one might be able to understand the implications of Black audience's agency in imagining conversations surrounding Black portrayals and if producers are able to take these conversations into consideration as news seasons continue to air.

Similarly, future research could conduct a historical analysis to perhaps understand how the initial premiere of the series as the first Black reality television series shaped or influenced future show's within the genre. How might these shows have learned from the backlash of *College Hill* or maybe did not? Although the next chapter of this thesis does not use historical

analysis as its primary methodology, it grapples with this question. As our television content becomes more widely accessible to broader audiences, streaming platforms play a significant role in understanding Black audience reception as it relates to Black reality television. How might this content look differently on streaming networks, and if the content is different what makes it notable for Black audiences? Nonetheless, the premiere of *College Hill* seemed to fall short when in the eye of Black audiences. Audience members attempted to share their opinions and thoughts in the hopes of something new to come from the series. Yet, instead of the show providing a space for Black joy for audiences, it served as a space of discursive reclamation of Blackness, Black student life, and HBCUs.

Chapter 2: There's a New Sheriff in Town: Zeus Network & *Baddies*

Incoming : Zeus Network

For many years, reality television has made its infamous promise of upholding and portraying raw and uncut images to its viewers. In the early 1990s, this genre began to capture the attention of American audiences with shows such as *The Real World*, in which young adults are chosen to live in a new city together while showcasing their lives to their viewers. As the genre began to grow, fastforwarding almost fifteen years later, reality television became a mainstay and certainly the format of choice for many networks and cable stations (Tyree, 2011). Although reality television grew popular during its start, the genre made it seemingly harder for minority groups, specifically Black folk, to connect with the so-called depictions of reality. Viewers especially began to notice this during the early rise of majority Black-casting in reality television during the early 2000s. In the case of *College Hill* as we previously saw in the first chapter, audiences quickly noticed the stereotypical nature of the show and did not appreciate the portrayal of Blackness within the series. No matter the reasoning behind the depictions, we must understand that these depictions are consistently thrown out to Black audiences with the hopes of becoming a sensation. With new services and platforms on the rise that allow for a broader access of visual content, the options for streaming content are endless. In the case of Black reality television, the introduction of streaming content might just be what the genre needed.

As streaming platforms continue to steadily increase in their size and options for content, many individuals like myself have been on the search for 'what's next.' As I mentioned briefly in the introduction, my initial search across streaming platforms was motivated by the lack of Black reality television content that was available at the time. Thankfully, my search led to the

discovery of Zeus Network. In 2018, Black-owned streaming platform Zeus Network launched its video on demand subscription service—starting at \$5.99 monthly and \$59.99 annually. Lemuel Plummer, owner of the network, described its launch as a new commitment to real Black entertainment—throwing a direct shot to previous networks showcasing majority Black-casting reality shows that, who Plummer alleged, made an effort to control the cast and the outcomes of the shows (Hoskin, 2022). Plummer asserted that Zeus Network would be a streaming platform surrounded with Black reality content created by Black content creators for the Black community (Hoskin, 2022). Though it is not explicitly stated anywhere, to my knowledge, that the majority of subscribers are Black individuals, the platform network, however, does explicitly note that the content is for Black audiences. This *can* give weight to the notion that the majority of the subscribers of the network are Black. Since its launch, Zeus Network has premiered a vast selection of reality content such as *Bad Boys Texas*, *Bobby I Love You Purrrr*, and *Baddies South*.

Zeus Network’s Three Elements

Zeus Network is particularly related to *College Hill*, because although it is not the first Black-owned streaming service displaying Black reality content, the network has become one of the first to have such *sensational* success. To be frank, there is no particular research that points to the reasoning behind the success of the network. Nonetheless, in my own time of watching my favorite “guilty-pleasure” content, I can point to three elements that could attest to the effortless success of the network. In my own understanding of these elements, I will label them as “the big three” for the purpose of this chapter. First, in my own time of being a subscriber of the network I found that Zeus Network does not use an advertising model within their platform. Many streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, or YouTube TV are explicitly using advertisements as

a means to create revenue. In the same vein, there are also options on the platforms to purchase an “ad-free” subscription. However, as mentioned before, Zeus Network only offers two subscription-based plans—without the hassle of advertisements. Carroni and Paolini (2020) offer their discussion of “freemium” based subscription plans that streaming platforms are infamous for offering: “On top of that, real streaming markets show different subscribing solutions, which prove to be different ways to account for these cross-group interactions. For instance, consider the cases of Spotify, Youtube and Deezer. Their free-of-charge solution, the so-called basic subscription, entails frequent commercial interruptions after a few songs. Somehow, users are compensated for the nuisance of ads with free access to music. Contextually, users are given the opportunity to upgrade to a paying solution with quality improvements and absence of commercial interruptions. This business model is commonly called Freemium” (3).

Understanding the implications of the freemium business model is imperative to the Zeus Network, because while most streaming networks operate in this way in relation to advertising, this platform does not. Hence, this allows Zeus to stand out as unique from its competitors.

Secondly, an additional element that can attest to the success of the Zeus Network is their aggressive social media presence. Many of the cast members that become part of the network are known first and foremost for their social media presence. That is, one could label them as a “content creator.” Mahapatra (2023) states, “Social media influences of varying fields open up an entirely new audience category. They have a substantial fan following across different social media platforms, so by featuring them on reality TV shows, the network can tap into the influencer’s existing fan base, potentially bringing in new viewers interested in seeing their favorite influencer in a different context.” By Zeus Network allowing the majority of their content to be accompanied by social media influencers, this allows for a more expansive

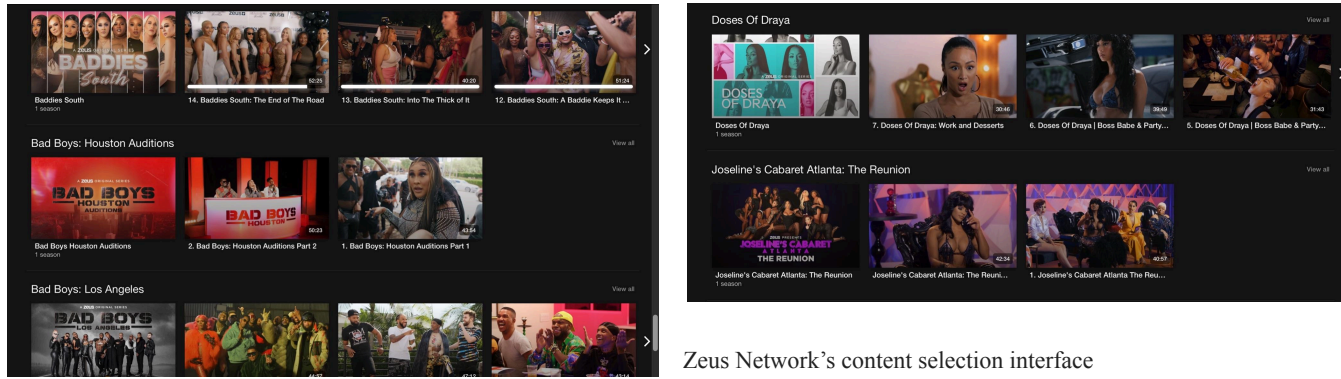
audience which in return allows for a broader audience. The network's ability to cast social media influencers is also helpful to the network in terms of its longevity. In order to maintain an interested audience, Zeus cast members must participate in the process of self-disclosure. Mahapatra (2023) explains, "During this period, [of self-disclosure] attempts to shorten the wide gap between the influences and celebrities and their audience have emphasized keeping the content consumers invested for more extended periods of time. This self-disclosure, among other practices, entices the audience and gives birth to parasocial relationships that persuade viewers to believe they have a close and personal relationship with their social media idols." Notably, a portion of the *Baddies* series involves cast members, old and new, interviewing potential castmates that could be asked to be on the next season. Hence, instances of paranormal relationships are inevitable. Fans and those who are interested in becoming part of the cast are given a list of dates in which they can audition for the show. In order to have a chance at being on the show, the individuals who wish to audition must impress recent cast members of the show. Throughout my time watching the audition episodes of the *Baddies* series, the rise of parasocial relationships becomes clear. Those auditioning many times already have a way in which they believe their audition will play out because of how they already feel about past cast members. Many times, those auditioning will express their gratitude for being able to meet their favorite content creator (turned reality television star) and do not have time left for their *actual* audition. Nonetheless, it is almost as if the fans auditioning are simply just happy to be present. Hence, those auditioning are not only auditioning for the potential to be casted, but they are also there to essentially meet and greet with their favorite cast member.

Finally, the network offers different content surrounding Black reality television genre, engaging with different identities and backgrounds. The infamous series known as *Baddies* and

Joseline's Cabaret extensively center who one might label as “girl bosses” of their industry. Both of the series focus extensively on the lives of Black women and the way in which they are able to create a life for themselves. Topics ranging from sex work to graduate school—incorporating a variety of serious topics surrounding the many intersectionalities of Black women. Not only does the network extensively focus on conversations that put Black women at the forefront, it also does the same for Black men and Black individuals that identify as gender fluid. The *Bad Boys* reality series on the network showcases the lives of Black men and those who are gender fluid. While the “plotline” of *Bad Boys* is not headed in a particular direction, those who are casted are able to travel to different cities and showcase different instances of expressing Blackness. The importance here lies in the fact that the network is able to, at the very least, give light to different forms of Blackness and Black expression. Ultimately, the network allows Blackness to be presented within a counternarrative space.

The notion that Black individuals oftentimes create various forms of counter spaces when experiencing underrepresentation or misrepresentation is not a new phenomena. In her text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) discusses the critical social theory of Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought as a critical social theory, provides Black women with the tools to counteract and resist intersecting tools of oppression or oppressive forces (Collins, 1991). The theory plays a key role in explaining the various reasons as to why Black women specifically are able to form different viewpoints and interpretations about a given subject. As Black women, there is a certain makeup, identity, and experiences that Black women are subject to and because of these factors, Black women will ultimately consistently keep an ‘outsider-within’ perspective (Collins, 1991). Collins' concept of the ‘outsider-within’ perspective plays a key role in the discussion of Zeus

Network and the content that it produces. Because the Network is Black-owned and shows a variety of Black reality content, Black cast members are able to represent a more diverse Black experience.



Zeus Network's content selection interface

In producing these three elements, it is my hope to unravel the reasoning behind the success of Zeus Network. Similarly, I am interested in understanding better the nature of element three: content. The content that Zeus provides is unlike any I have ever watched before. Nonetheless, one of the main reasons for the lack of support behind the reality series, *College Hill*, is because of the type of content that was displayed. Black audiences quickly became unimpressed with the amount of stereotypical content that was displayed on the first Black reality television show. As the first chapter of this thesis concluded, audiences were able to express their reasoning for their distaste and even mentioned portrayals that would have been a realistic representation of Blackness. Fastforwarding to the age of streaming platforms, the content is limitless. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the content that Zeus Network places on its network. After understanding the initial Black audience reception of *College Hill*, it is imperative to understand how and if Black reality television content has changed for the better or the worst. In order to investigate this notion, this chapter will ask the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant themes or narratives that explore Blackness in the episodes of Baddies?

RQ2: What are the implications of the dominant themes presented in Baddies South?

Data Collection and Variables Under Observation

In order to answer the proposed research questions of this chapter, I will be conducting a content analysis on episodes of *Baddies South*. I chose to conduct a content analysis, because this method allows me to understand the content of the episodes along with the presence of certain themes surrounding Blackness. Drew (2011) conducted a systematic content analysis when arguing for the understanding of how “race wars” seasons of *Survivor* attempted to “reinforce a “postracial” narrative that race no longer matters in contemporary U.S. society while simultaneously perpetuating the familiar representations that produce racial ideology” (327). By the author being able to analyze the thematic content surrounding race in this season of *Survivors*, it became evident that the season was meant to produce a “racial contract” rather than an unscripted season surrounding a post-racial society (Drew, 2011). The author also is able to address the potential—and pitfalls—for addressing race in reality television. My chapter will take on a similar structure.

My content analysis conducts a close examination of four episodes from *Baddies South*. I chose to collect data from the series *Baddies South*, because at the time of this study, it was the series that I was the most familiar with. Furthermore, this season of *Baddies* was the first that featured content creators at the forefront of the show. The summary of the series presented by the network is as follows: “The Baddies are back, but this time with some new ladies looking to take

the entire Dirty South by storm—in a big ass, decked-out tour bus. Along the way, the ladies will crash in luxurious homes, host and perform at the hottest clubs and parties, tap into the wild and dark side of southern culture and prove why they are the baddest girls around.” Hence, many newcomers were introduced during this season—giving the fans of the network to form fresh opinions about their new favorite “Baddies.” The four-minute trailer presented for this season presented the cast in what seemed to be three different settings. The first setting depicted the cast as being able to have fun not only with one another, but the fans that also appeared within the season. Secondly, the trailer presented viewers with a glimpse of what seems like potential fighting between castmates. In the last setting, the cast appears to be emotional about scenarios that are unknown to the viewer within the limitations of a trailer. At the very end of the trailer the following phrases are displayed: “NEW CRAZY, NEW CITIES, NEW TEA, NEW SISTERHOOD, NEW TURN UP, SAME DRAMA.” Analyzing the particular content of Zeus Network is dependent on the amount of episodes that are within each season of a series. During *Baddies South*, there were a total of fourteen episodes with the addition of three reunion episodes. Each episode’s total time ranged from 41:13-52:25. The four episodes that will be included in this study are: “Ep 1. Baddies South: Out With the Old, In With the New,” “Ep 4. Baddies South: Looking Like Luther Vandross,” “Ep 10. Baddies South: Girls Gone Wild,” and “Ep 14. Baddies South: The End of The Road.” I chose these four episodes, because I felt as though their particular order in the series did a well-rounded job of being representative of what the entirety of the series covers.

For the purpose of this content analysis, I have compiled a list of categories in which the frequency they are presented in the episodes will be under close analysis. The list of categories are: Performances/Hostings, Foul Play, Sisterhood, and Entrepreneurship. These categories were

chosen, because they were representative of the written summary and trailer that I reviewed initially before starting the season. Performances/Hostings account for the times in which the cast performs or completes a hosting at a club for their fans. This category is imperative to illustrate the frequency in which it appears, because viewers are able to see the relationship between the cast and their fans. I included the category of “foul play” to note the number of times there are fights or vulgar language exchanged in a derogatory manner between castmates. Shockingly, there were many arguments and potentially tussles presented in the trailer, so it is imperative that study encompasses this category. This is also particularly important in comparing the frequency of “foul play” displayed in relation to the other categories that may connote a more positive setting throughout the episodes. On the other hand, the categories of “sisterhood” and “entrepreneurship” were hinted at in the written summary and presented in the trailer as well but only to a minimal extent.

Coding : Process and Phases

Each episode in this study was viewed a total of three times. The first time in which the episodes were viewed were in the form of what I will describe as free watching and free writing. In this first phase, I was able to watch the episodes with a bird’s-eye view. In doing so, I made sure to take note of certain scenes in which I could potentially see a category of this content analysis presented. During the second phase of coding, the episodes were watched once again with the addition of a coding spreadsheet. In this spreadsheet, the categories were listed and each time a category was presented there was an “X” marked in the box underneath along with the total number of tallies for each category. The final phase included essentially a repeat of phase two to ensure that category tallies were consistent throughout the viewing of the episodes.

Findings

In the first episode of the series titled, “Baddies South: Out With the Old, In With the New” the cast of the season is introduced to the viewers. Executive producer and cast member, Natalie Nun, introduces the cast members one-by-one focusing on their social media personas and what makes them unique personalities. During this episode there were eight coded instances of entrepreneurship either displayed or discussed between cast members. An example of a display or discussion surrounding entrepreneurship could point to the time frame of 19:21-21:02 in this episode. Cast members Bri and Ann Moore are discussing their own experiences with being involved in sex work. At the start of this conversation, it seems as though Ann Moore asked Bri about her involvement in sex work in a hostile manner, because Bri was hesitant to answer the question. However, during the ending of the scene both cast members speak about their active involvement in sex work and the financial stability that it has brought into their lives. The scene comes to an end as Ann Moore shouts, “THE LINK IS IN MY BIO,” pointing to her celebratory feelings surrounding her work and the advertisement for new clients or fans that may be watching. Nonetheless, as the ladies are getting to know one another, they are shown in the kitchen with one another conversing about their plans to “get a bag and take over the city” with one another, explicitly showcasing discussions surrounding sisterhood while initiating a group toast. For viewers, this may initiate feelings of a new beginning of success for the castmates, because they are openly discussing not only their plans for themselves, but how they will embark on this journey together as an entire group. Unfortunately, despite this episode showing positive categories such as entrepreneurship and sisterhood, there was an instance of foul play coded also. Shortly after the toast, the episode turns to a sharp downward spiral as animosity begins to occur

between two castmates. At the end of the episode castmates Persuasion and Chrisean Rock were shown in a serious physical altercation that required security to step into the scene.

During episode four, “Looking Like Luther Vandross,” there were not frequent instances in which the categories in this content analysis appeared. There were three instances in which behaviors portrayed on screen were coded: two instances of foul play, one instance of entrepreneurship, and one instance of sisterhood. The two instances of foul play included a physical altercation between Rollie and Ann Moore as well as a verbal altercation between Jayla, Chrisean Rock, and (once again) Ann Moore. Both of these instances seemed to take up the majority of the episode, because they were seemingly dragged out conflicts between castmates. At the beginning of the episode viewers are shown Rollie and Ann Moore in a physical altercation for approximately the first fifteen minutes of the episode. As security steps in to de-escalate the situation, Rollie and Ann Moore continue their altercation in a verbal manner for another ten minutes of the episode. After the altercation fades out, during 15:00-17:49 Rollie and Slim can be seen having a moment of forgiveness and sisterhood after both ladies fell victim to a misunderstanding between one another. However, after speaking about the misunderstanding with one another, both ladies agreed that their friendship and sisterly bond were far too close to be broken by a small misunderstanding—ending this scene with both embracing a hug from one another.



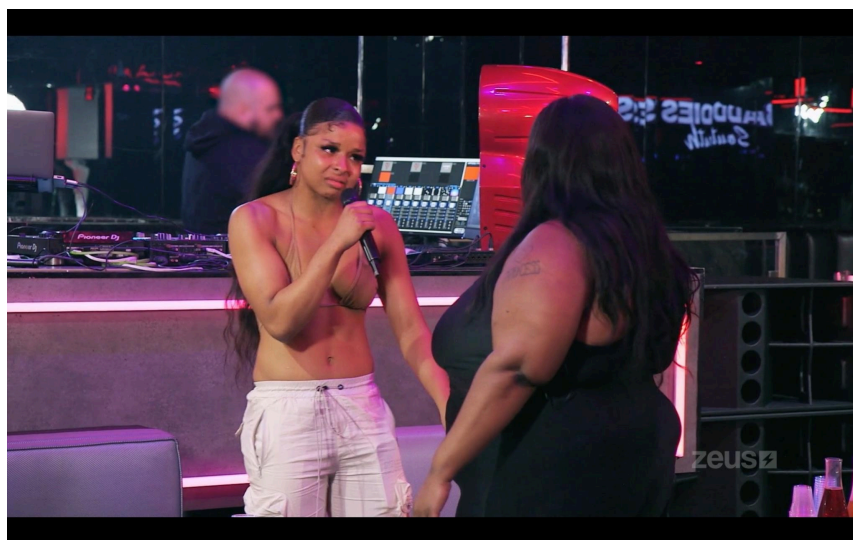
Left to Right : Rollie and Slim embracing one another (Zeus Network, *Baddies South*)

In the case of Jayla, Chrisean Rock, and Ann Moore there was approximately nine to ten minutes spent on the three cast members going back and forth with one another. At the end of the episode a new cast member who Natalie Nun referred to as, “Scotty with the body.” Despite the lingering animosity in the house between cast members, Scotty appears to come into the house with a bright and energetic energy insisting that she is an asset who will be a catalyst for the cast, “getting to the bag.”

The tenth episode of the season is what my findings would label as perhaps the “most dramatic” of the season due to the presence of foul play instances that were portrayed during this episode. Besides the three consecutive instances of foul play, there was one category displayed that had not yet been coded in the study. In the first minutes of the episode, the cast is seen in the midst of a hosting at a club. The cast members seem to be enjoying their time with one another, but not even five minutes later, the episode pans to an instance of foul play. Sydney Starr, who calls herself the “transgender diva” is shown at the club alongside the rest of the cast. However, it seems that through a heated exchange between Sydney Starr and many cast members from the season began to engage in what was coded as foul play—either through a verbal altercation or an

attempted physical altercation between cast members and Sydney Starr. From then on, starting at the 10:21 mark began a mix of verbal and physical altercations between Rollie and Natalie Nun. The last instance of foul play between Rollie and Natalie Nun was displayed at the ending of the episode—ultimately, seemingly continuing into the next episode.

The last episode of the season, I am happy to find, ended on a more than positive note—showcasing wonderful performances and talent from the cast while also displaying relationships of compassion and sisterhood. There were eight scenes that displayed sisterhood with the addition of four scenes showcasing the ladies’ performances. In the scenes displaying sisterhood, cast members were shown displaying support and compassion for one another in various ways such as: rehearsing emotional performances in front of one another, displaying forgiveness for one another and agreeing to work on aspects of friendships, and also reflecting on the friendships that were built and created throughout the season.



Left to Right: Chrisean Rock and Rollie sharing an emotional moment during performance rehearsals (Zeus Network, *Baddies South*).

Throughout the display of sisterhood, there were also performances by four cast members. Hence, although there seemed to be numerous cases in which foul play were coded from the

episodes, the last episode of the season portrayed a positive ending for the season of *Baddies South*.

Analysis & Discussion : *Baddies & Ratchetness*

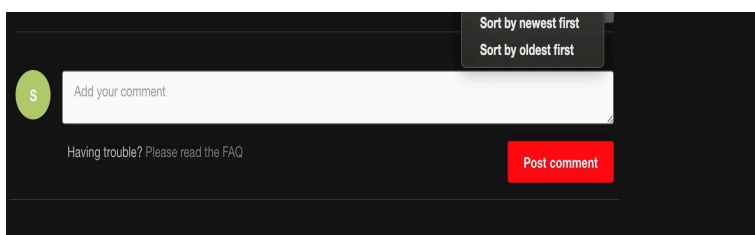
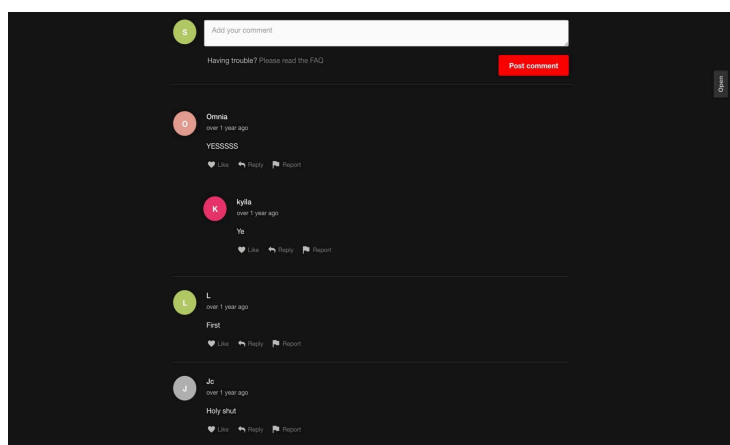
After completing the content analysis of four episodes from *Baddies South* my study concluded with: five total instances in these episodes that displayed performances/hostings, six total instances of foul play, nine total instances of entrepreneurship, and ten total instances of sisterhood. Therefore, it is evident that there were more instances in which the cast were representing positive and meaningful discussions and portrayals of the different ways in which Blackness can exist. Although there were six total instances of foul play, the way in which cast members were able to represent themselves as entrepreneurs, entertainers, and creators of sisterhood seemingly triumphed over the scenes containing foul play. What are the implications of this type of content produced by Zeus Network?

In order to understand the findings of my content analysis, I want to bring in the concept of “ratchetness” to aid in my own analysis. Warner (2015) explains, “One thing is clear from the ways in which “ratchet” is both described and used: it is difficult to define and articulate, and yet it fulfills a powerful and necessary function linguistically and socially” (130). Warner (2015) continues discussing ratchetness and its functionality for Black women stating, “If ratchetness is modality characterized by how it reflexively exceeds normative bounds of acceptability, understanding how it creates an interstitial space for black female communities to work out issues and to share in affectively resonant moments should be a vital aspect of scholarship and provides a way for black women to challenge a much more insidious demon in the community: respectability” (140). Here, Warner’s discussion of the ratchetness of opening spaces for black

women while exceeding normative bounds is presented clearly in the four episodes under observation in this study. Cast members were able to discuss a wide variety of entrepreneurial ventures that they were able to embark on and create a living for themselves that would most likely be considered different from a normative viewpoint. Cast members discussed their time as sex workers, content creators on OnlyFans, as well as being exotic dancers. However, the openness and acceptance presented through sisterhood allowed for a community centered around Black female support. Similarly, in the case of instances of foul play, although those conflicts happened, the season was able to end on a great note surrounding cast members showcasing their talent through their performances and being able to promote the imperative nature of hard conversations surrounding forgiveness and compassion for one another—no matter the past. Without the presence of ratchetness as a tool for community-building and meaning-making, the content in these episodes may appear as similar misrepresentations and stereotypical depictions that were presented in *College Hill*, because this term has oftentimes been diminished to adjectives such as “hood” and “ghetto” (Warner, 2015, p.133). Black women throughout these episodes were able to engage in a more extensive and affective way of ratchetness due to their “outsider-within” perspective—detailing the ways in which Black women are able to create new meanings of the world because of their unique experiences (Collins, 1991). The next step in understanding Zeus Network as a platform for Black reality television content in comparison to early content like *College Hill* is to understand the audience reception of this content. In the first chapter, much of the audience reception surrounding *College Hill's* initial release presented negative reactions and reception from Black audiences. Hence, while this content analysis deemed *Baddies South* as portraying ratchetness as a tool of community-building, it is imperative to understand if Black audiences received the season in the same manner.

Chapter 3: *Baddies* do it Best? Black-Owned Streaming Networks Enable Black Audiences

Aside from its selection of content, the platform network also has certain affordances that allow viewers to communicate with one another. Here, it is important to note that this chapter will specifically engage with the chat box function as a key affordance for viewers of Zeus Network. The “chat box/comment” feature allows users to comment underneath each episode of a show. Viewers who are subscribed and signed in are able to view, comment, and tag specific users. Viewers watching the same episode are able to converse with each other while watching the show. Viewers are also able to “like” comments (which appear as red hearts) and delete their own comments if needed. The personalized content and affordances that Zeus offers its users allows users to create discourse surrounding any elements within the show—giving viewers the agency to discuss whatever, however, and whenever.



Zeus Network comment/chat box interface

This chapter seeks to uncover and illustrate discourse between the language used by Black viewers on Black-owned streaming networks, such as Zeues, when discussing the same show or episode. The focus of my study will be the Black-reality television series, *Baddies South : The Reunion* which premiered in 2022 exclusively on Zeus Network.

This chapter specifically aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the affordances of Black-owned streaming platforms networks, such as Zeus, aid Black audiences in creating discourse surrounding the content on the network?

RQ2: How are conversations surrounding Blackness and Baddies South produced through the chat/comment box that Zeus Network provides?

Looking Back Before Moving Forward

After the success of *College Hill*, the Black reality television genre began to emerge—ranging from reality dating game shows like *Flavor of Love* (2006) to watching the professional lives of successful Black women like *Married to Medicine* (2013). Soon after the Black community seemingly claimed their space in the realm of reality television, reactions to the presumed repetitive tropes and stereotypes were brought forth. Specifically, these reactions were mostly witnessed and communicated through social media platforms (Edwards, 2016). Black communities were growing weary of Black reality television portraying Black men as “volatile,” “pimps,” and “womazing liars.” On the other hand, Black women were often portrayed as “violent,” “immoral,” and “hyper-sexualized” (Edwards, 2016). Although *College Hill* audiences may not have been exposed to stereotypes to such harmful extents, the feelings were definitely mutual. Although it is evident through discourse on social media platforms that Black reality television infamously incorporates stereotypical tropes, the shows themselves and the discourse that follows also allow Black viewers to engage in viewing these reality shows as exemplifications and inspirations operating within of Black joy. Black reality television has left

Black viewers with transformational ways to experience Black joy, and this is oftentimes overlooked by dominating conversations on stereotypical portrayals. Yet, Black individuals are consistently able to reclaim and create positive meanings of identity from Black reality television that allow them to explore new outlooks on Blackness.

This chapter, specifically, is influenced by the variations of critical discourse analysis as a method to inform this research. Critical discourse analysis lends itself to scholars as a useful methodology for studying conversations online. However, I find that because of Zeus' uniqueness as a Black-owned streaming network, it is imperative that this chapter uses critical technocultural discourse analysis as its primary method. This methodology allows for a critical analysis of the chat box comments paired with a focal point placed on the affordances of Zeus as a streaming platform and what this means for subscribers.

Blackness Online and CTDA

Brock (2020) provides the tool of critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA). This methodology interrogates culture-as-technology and culture-of-technology and provides researchers with a chance to investigate information technologies alongside the discourses about them (8). My research wishes to implement critical technocultural discourse analysis, because it affords me the opportunity to understand what Zeus Network allows subscribers to do on their platform and the tools that the platform gives them to do certain these specific elements. As streaming technologies expand, it is important to fully understand the interface and affordances of them along with using a critical theory to explore the actions happening—which CTDA affords the possibility to do both. Brock explains that CTDA, “was designed to counter the epistemological drawbacks of normative, instrumental, and theoretical approaches to studying

information technology. [. . .] CTDA does this by operationalizing the computational object as discourse (technology as a “text”) to be read for the mediation of the discursive actions enacted as digital interfaces and associated practices. As such, CTDA analysis “reads” graphical user interfaces (GUI) design, narrative, and context of use against the discourse of its users” (2020, p.9). In my own case, employing CTDA will shed light on Zeus Network’s graphical user interface and also understanding its interface in terms of Black reality television and Black feminist literature.

In “Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis,” debunks the notion of technodeterministic premises that access to the ‘digital’ improves the lives of underrepresented groups (Brock, 2018). In order to exemplify his methodology, Brock constructs research on Black Twitter and found that by using CTDA, one can find that Black discursive identity interpellated Twitter’s mechanics to produce explicit cultural technocultural digital practices (Brock, 2018). Those who are familiar with Black Twitter (but are not participants in this space) viewed the community as a form of “play.” However, in the case of CTDA, it reveals that Black Twitter participants saw the space as a legitimate source of Black technocultural discourse and political action (Brock, 2018). Brock formulated CTDA to understand and formulate technology as cultural representations and social structures—illuminating the importance of viewing technology and culture as concepts that do and should be intertwined with one another when understanding how Black individuals are reclaiming space within a digital media landscape (Brock, 2018).

Catherine Knight Steele’s, “Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online” illustrates Brock’s CTDA to explore Black discourse online. In doing so, her study focused on the importance of exploring the affordances and constraints of

blogs in creating alternate publics. Steele acknowledges that through her study of using CTDA she found that, Black bloggers are able to use spaces technically accessible to the masses, yet keep discourse hidden (Steele, 2018). As Black bloggers are choosing to engage in this ‘private’ discourse, those users are essentially choosing to operate in a state of Black joy (Steele, 2018). Although Steele’s work does not explicitly show a relationship between Black reality television and online discourse, her work can be applied to the effects of the genre on Black audiences. Steele’s finding of “‘hidden discourse’” by African Americans can be applied to the discourse that happens around Black reality television and Black joy. Viewers who choose to watch Black reality television are often focusing their conversations surrounding the shows in a sense of Black joy through signifying practices that are unknown to the “out group.” Yet, because of the affordances of signifying, Black users can essentially speak freely and comfortably, within a community whom they are familiar with and this itself is operating in Black joy.

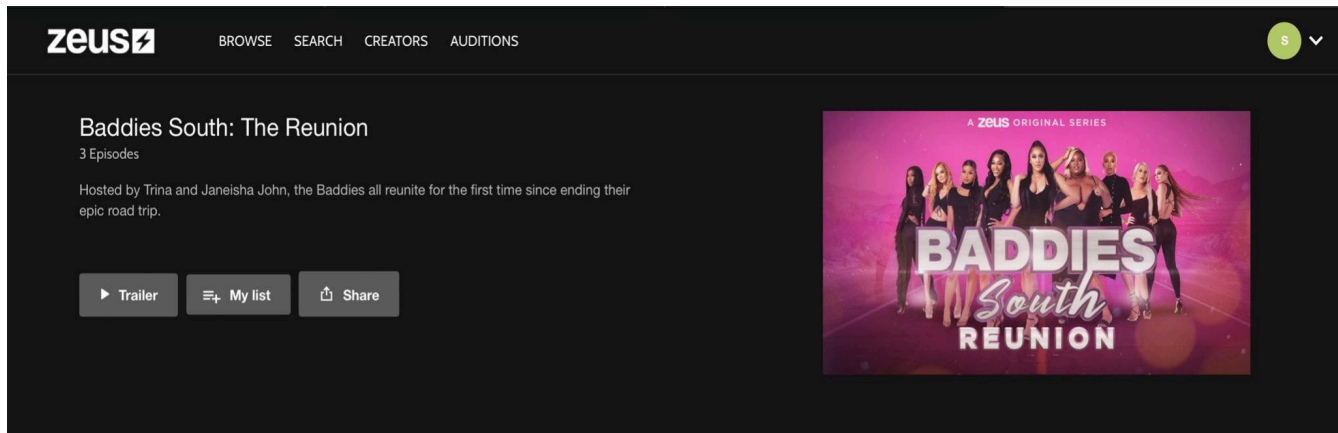
Data Collection and Variables Under Observation

For my study, I have collected a series of text/comments that appeared under the *Baddies South: The Reunion Pt. 3*, appearing as the season finale in 2022. Hosted by Janeisha John and Trina, the reunion served to be a place of confession and discussion, but most importantly reconciliation between cast members. Since this is the season finale, viewers who have been keeping up with *Baddies South*, have been able to watch the cast of ladies on a journey of what executive producer of the show Natalie Nun would call, “getting to the bag.” Throughout the season, the “baddies” of the show appeared promoting their individual brands through a vast number of events, parties, and networking opportunities with other well-known individuals. According to Parrot Analytics, a comprehensive audience-attention measuring system, *Baddies*

South: The Reunion, ranks at the “73.th percentile in the Reality genre.” This means *Baddies South: The Reunion* has higher demand than 73.7% of all Reality Titles in the United States" (2023). Hence, the “reunion” portion of the season was very well anticipated and consequently became widely popular for Zeus audiences. *Baddies South* itself became the most popular series on Zeus Network shortly after the time of its release. Despite gaining attention for its virality surrounding the cast members fighting or catch phrases such as, “Baddie Baddie Shot O-Clock,” the show introduced viewers to some of its most infamous, yet favorable cast members such as, Chrisean Rock, Scotlyn Ryan (famously known as, “Scotty with the body”), and received much attention for its rawness surrounding Black female friendships and Black female success. When thinking about my data collection for this study, it was my intention that by focusing on the reunion, I would have access to comments by viewers who had familiarized themselves with the cast and formed their opinions based on the entirety of the season.

Subscribers of Zeus Network are able to watch whichever program they may choose as well as view and participate in the commenting as long as they are logged in with an update subscription. Within the earlier time frame of Zeus’ launch as a platform, comments were previously able to be viewed by users without a subscription but Zeus Network has now limited this feature, to only showing a select few comments to available for unsubscribed viewers, and is seemingly transitioning to a “subscription-only” viewership of content and comments within the network. Noting this, it is important to my study, because my data collection will only include viewers who are paying subscribers of the network—meaning, these viewers will likely be especially familiar with the network itself and the other content that is presented.

Baddies South: The Reunion Pt. 3 had gained 31515 comments by the time of this study. While this amount of comments is not unusual for *Baddies South*, the *Baddies South Reunion Part 3*, had one of the highest number of comments than other episodes in the season.



Baddies South : The Reunion Banner (Zeus Network)

For the purpose of this study, I collected 1,000 comments. Within these comments, I have organized them in a chronological format. As mentioned, the comments are not clearly available in the “time marker,” how viewers subscribed to the network have the option to sort comments by “newest first” or “oldest first.” During my data collection, I used the “oldest first” filter to sort through the comments. The comments were kept in a spreadsheet with the following categories: date, user, comment text, likes, and replies. The likes of the comments were noted numerically, and if there were no likes on the comment it was labeled as “N/A.” The replies to the comments are initially filled in with “Y/N.” If the comment has replies, the text of the replies is recorded along with the number of users that followed this thread. The comments then undergo multiple readings and are put into “themes” according to their discourse surrounding Blackness

or lack thereof. The categories that comments are then moved to are: Black Womanhood, Everyday Black Life, Specific Scene in the Show, Does Not Surround Blackness.

Analysis

Following the themes that I have compiled for this study: 560 of the total comments were labeled as 'Everyday Black Life,' 270 of the comments were labeled as 'Black Womanhood,' 100 of the comments were labeled as 'Specific Scene in the Show,' and the remaining comments were cast under the 'Does Not Surround Blackness' label. It is important to note that this study did not exclusively employ an analysis of the content; however, the text of the comments were analyzed under analysis according to their discourse surrounding Blackness. Furthermore, it is also important to note that while other categories were named in the spreadsheet of the text, these categories only served for organizational purposes and not complimenting the analysis of this study. For example, the name of each individual who commented is taken down, but this is not important to note for the analysis, because a user is only identifiable through their username—and one's user name is not relevant to this study.

Those placed in the category of 'Black Womanhood' tended to use signifying language that alluded to friendship and support for financial wellbeing. Comments in this category included text such as, "thaass my bitch" while others included language like, "She knows how to get to her bag." Comments in the "Everyday Black Life" theme included text such as: "What's her skincare routine tho?" or "But can I get the Fenty match?" Comments such as these indicated that users were engaged with the content of the show, but also wanted to know more about the everyday life information such as beauty, skincare, hairstyles, etc. Catherine Knight Steele uses digital Black feminism and the concept of the viral Black beauty shop in her work to understand how Black women are participating in digital spaces (2021). Although viewers in this study are

not bloggers or explicitly speaking about the specific hair techniques that Black women have employed, Steele's concept of the Black beauty shop as being a space for Black women to speak about specific practices of Black cosmetology shines through in the comments under 'Everyday Black Life.' These users are not only creating these comments from watching the show, but they are doing so in a way that allows other users to engage with this conversation and learn more about 'everyday' Black beauty (i.e. hair, skincare, makeup, etc.). As Steele makes clear in her work, these beauty shops served as a space for Black women to converse about the intricacies and intimacies of Black beauty, and this holds true in my own study as well. In many of the comments, users referenced "'Fenty Beauty'" when asked about anything revolving around a makeup shade or makeup product. Fenty Beauty has made a positive stamp on the Black Beauty community, because it became one of the first brands that launched an extensive and inclusive shade range. Hence, these comments are able to show their support of the brand that has positively impacted the Black Beauty community.

Comments in both the 'Everyday Black Life' and 'Black Womanhood' themes correspond with Brock's notion of the libidinal and its use (2020). Brock describes the use of the libidinal in relation to Black Twitter users, but this notion applies well to the viewers within these labels. Out of the comments within these two labels, none of them explicitly stated 'political' language. Brock notes that when individuals start seeing groups of African Americans (on social media) isolating themselves from "the public," one may automatically assume that Black individuals are doing this in response to oppressive circumstances (2020). However, in the case of Black Twitter and the viewers of this episode, it is evident that these individuals are simply interested in creating conversations that surround Black joy. While Gates (2015) indicates that the negative images of Black reality television can serve as useful images for

viewers directly addressing these oppressive images, the viewers of *Baddies South: The Reunion Part 3* seem to do the complete opposite. These viewers are more interested in discussing the glamor and lavish lifestyles of the cast, rather than focusing on the oppressive circumstances that the cast may have gone through to get to where they are. In this sense, these viewers are using the libidinal nature to converse with one another. Brock defines the libidinal as being different from affect, because the libidinal dives deeper than emotion (2020). However, it is the libidinal that guides Black users on Black Twitter when they decide to signify and joke with one another (Brock, 2020).

Less than half of the comments in this study referenced a specific scene in the show or did not surround Blackness. Those indicating that they did not surround Blackness were labeled as such, because the text of these comments were usually in the form of emojis. Those referencing specific scenes included time markers in their text and did not have any replies, but more likes than any other comments not referencing a specific scene in the show (i.e. 😊😭, or “Did yall see Chrisean? Go to 43:21). While these comments took up limited space within my study, this may also be an indication that users are more inclined to discuss or comment on Blackness as they see fit within the episode. Since these comments did not involve Blackness at the forefront of this conversation, it is plausible that these viewers were simply more interested in certain scenes within the show.

Users were seemingly taking it upon themselves to include a time-marker within their own comment—noting a specific minute and second to spotlight a scene from the episode. Something that should also be considered here is the idea that users are watching Zeus on various devices. It should be a concern that a key affordance of the platform has been taken away for many, if not all viewers. Because of the screen size of some devices, comments may not appear

all in one area and so the time marker plays a crucial role in viewers being able to see comments as the episode progresses. Without this affordance, viewers will not be able to gain the same experience of ‘live commenting’-- that is they will not be able to get the pleasure of watching the show and being able to engage with the discourse presented by the comments.

Through my analysis of this study, it is evident that the interface of Zeus Network itself offers important affordances to its users. Because of the comment/chat box function, viewers are able to express their concerns and opinions. I am arguing then, that without this affordance, users' sense of community would diminish and would consequently need to look to other spaces online or perhaps in person to converse with one another about different aspects of the show. Comments, in this sense, are able to create a sense of community and inwardness. Only subscribers to Zeus are able to actively interact with one another through the chat/comment box and those who are not subscribed are only able to view a limited number of comments. However, users seem to create threads of conversations with one another showing that an active audience is present.

With the comment/chat box, users are also enabled to “like” or even delete comments. Comments that have been deleted by users for any apparent reason are labeled as, “This comment has been deleted.” There are no other indicators depicting which user deleted their comment or what the gist of their comment could have been. However, out of the 1,000 comments that were sampled for this study, there were only sixty instances in which it appeared to be a deleted comment. All sixty of these deleted comments however, were not “standalone” texts--meaning that it appeared that these comments were responding to a specific user, because the deleted comments were embedded in the strands of conversations. Perhaps, this could be an indication that users are not likely to delete their initial standalone comments, but users are more

inclined to delete their comment if they were in direct response to another user. Because there is no indication of the specific user that deleted their comment, the network affords users the ability to erase their comment without being visible to others, but this feature also informs users who are participating in these conversations that someone has deleted their comment—making the deletion itself visible. Other affordances of the network allow users to like and reply to other specific users. Many of the comments in this study did not receive likes unless they were indicating a specific reaction or time in the episode. Users who reply to other users are able to click on their comment and respond directly below the original text. Although it is not clear from my research if the original commenter receives a notification when someone specifically replies to their comment, this affordance is an indication that users are able to create niche conversation threads that are embedded into the entirety of the comment/chat box. In this way, users are able to move around to different conversations if they would like or they can stay in the “wider” conversation and converse with users in that way. Nonetheless, Zeus affords this feature as a way for users to join in on specific conversations while keeping them in an organized and accessible manner.

Conclusion

This study aimed to uncover the affordances that Zeus Network gives its subscribers and how conversations surrounding Blackness are formed when conversing about a specific episode. Zeus Network affords its subscribers the ability to converse with one another under specific episodes of a series. In the case of *Baddies South: The Reunion Part 3*, many users were inclined to comment and take advantage of the specific conversations that are able to be embedded within the chat/comment box. Although some of the features of the comment/chat box appear to be

glitchy and inaccessible to some users, this did not hold many viewers back. Viewers were able to freely comment, delete, and tag specific users in their text. Not only does this allow users to converse, but it holds weight as an organizational discourse as well. Comments are specifically under episodes of the series, and users are able to converse as they are watching the show in real-time of the premiere. Hence, users are enabled to not only jump from one comment to the next under a specific episode, but they are also able to jump to another episode and start conversing there.

Many of the comments in this study illustrated that viewers were engaging with one another in conversation surrounding Blackness. More than half of these comments were surrounding libidinal practices of everyday Black life and financial wellness in the Black community. Hence, it is imperative to note that these users were not only engaging with Blackness, but they were doing so in a way that felt natural to themselves. This is not to say that if users spoke politically underneath the episode, that this would not be “natural” to them. However, it is an indication that since the episode did not entail anything explicitly politically, most of the viewers kept it this way and formed these conversations surrounding Black joy and support.

Future research surrounding the Zeus Network would be to transition this study to not changing the research design, but employing a bigger data collection along with following other aspects of the network besides the comment/' chat box. Because the cast of these shows are content creators and more than likely gaining an extreme following across social media platforms, it would be interesting to look at their personas on other social media platforms and compare them to their appearance and presumed identity on the show. Many of the creators, both producers and cast members, use Twitter/X to converse with their viewers and also hold

auditions for the new season. Hence, there would be an ample number of parallels between Black Twitter along with Zeus and its content creators. It is apparent that Zeus holds as a positive starting point surrounding Black reality television and conversations surrounding Blackness.

Conclusion

Admittedly, my love for what some might call “trashy reality television” has been prevalent for as long as I could remember. However, in my own time of engaging with the genre, I find this type of content to be one word: interesting. Perhaps it is not appropriate to call the genre itself entertaining, because how can one truly be entertained by the lack of representation and correctness in the name of Blackness? Growing up on all of the mainstream reality television series were entertaining at times without a doubt, but after many seasons of watching shows within the genre, I began noticing that there were almost no Black people being represented. Most importantly, even in the case of Blackness being presented on the television, these depictions were more often than not stereotypical and derogatory. Tyree (2011) found that out of ten reality television shows from 2005-2008, all ten of the reality shows had at least one participant that would unfortunately be casted to play into stereotypical roles of Blackness. These roles included but were not limited to: angry black woman, homo thug, coon, and hoochie. In this sense, it did not good to portray Blackness through a stereotypical lens, because these depictions were hardly representative of what it meant to be Black and to carry differentiation identities of Blackness, especially as it relates to Black women.

After coming to the realization of the lack thereof or the incorrectness in portrayal of Black folk in the realm of reality television, I started to see out alternative options that would allow for more authentic depictions of reality. Hence, I came across *College Hill*, the first Black reality television show—premiering on Black Entertainment Network (BET) in 2004. After my discovery of *College Hill* and only being able to watch it through BET’s streaming services, I grew curious about the other options that may be out there that label themselves as placing a spotlight on primarily Black casts and Black content. Consequently, Zeus Network arrived to

feed my appetite of wanting more reality television geared towards an abundance of Blackness. Because Zeus Network had cast members that I was already familiar with because of other reality appearances. In discovering Zeus Network, I found myself seemingly enjoying myself more than I had with other reality content. It appeared to be that Zeus Network had what I liked to call the three elements. These three elements ultimately serve as enhancements and enablers of Zeus Networks' success and how this success ultimately leads to richer Black content as well as more meaningful discussions between Black audience members. *College Hill* seemingly had Black audiences' hopes very high as it was the first Black reality show. However, through analysis it seemed as though Black audiences were not happy with the content portrayed on the new reality series. Noticing this feeling of unfulfillment from Black audiences, but seemingly myself receiving fulfillment from the content presented on Zeus Network inspired my research in better understanding the proposed value that Black-owned streaming networks can bring to the realm of Black reality television content. Rather than my work presenting research questions to better understand this dynamic, my thesis proposes an argument. I argue that the introduction of Black reality television through the medium of Black-owned streaming platforms lends itself to the creation of a more diverse Black experience through viewing and representation of Black through content. I further argue that Zeus Network, through its affordances, enables subscribers to engage more actively in dialogue with one another that is celebratory in nature of Black joy and empowering representations of Black women.

In order to find credibility in my argument, my thesis employed a mixed methods approach. In doing so, a mixed methods approach allowed me to investigate more extensively the reception of the premiere of *College Hill* from Black audiences as well as content presented on Zeus and the affordances of the platform that make for enabled Black audience discussions. In

the first chapter of this thesis, I conducted a historical analysis surrounding the premiere of *College Hill* and the way that Black audiences were in perceiving the start of the series. Through the usage of archival material such as press coverage and student media at the time, it became evident that *College Hill* did not “wow” Black audiences as it was aimed to. Much of the reception of the premiere left Black audiences with a sour taste in their mouth, because of the incorrectness and absurdity of the portrayals of Blackness presented in the series. In the following chapter, the main purpose was to understand the content that Zeus is bringing to its viewers through a content analysis of episodes within the season of, *Baddies South*. One of the main reasons behind the audience's disgust was because of the content portrayed on *College Hill*. Nonetheless, although there were instances in which the content during *Baddies South* engaged with what I deemed as “foul play,” there was an influx of diverse images that represented a variety of Blackness and the way in which it can be experienced for Black women. Moreover, the show provided diverse conversations surrounding occupations, hobbies, and other ways in which Black women are able to step out of the realm of normativity and engage with a new perspective of “ratchetness.” The final chapter of this thesis cracks down on the affordances of Zeus Network and the way in which these affordances enable viewers to have discussions about the content within the platform. Since Zeus has enabled its users to chat with one another through their embedded chat box function, it makes for a better understanding of not only the content, but Black audience reception of that content.

Limitations & Further Research

In making my argument, I understand instances in which my research may present itself with limitations. The limitations of this thesis are presented in the specific chapters. However, it is imperative to revisit these limitations as they give light to future directions of research that could take place from the presentation of this thesis. First, I acknowledge that doing a content analysis on select episodes only makes for a glimpse of the content presented by the network. In understanding this aspect of limitations, I know that future research will allow me to take a more hefty sample of content—making for a bigger sample of content to analyze. Moreover, I know that in understanding the reception of *College Hill*, future research could look through the lens of other individuals and not only press coverage and student-based newspapers. Perhaps those with a different identity, status, or background could have found an overwhelming liking to the show which makes for a more complex analysis of the content. Nonetheless, with the proliferation of streaming platform services, this research could head in the direction of exploring other Black-content based streaming platforms and their own instances of Black audience reception. Although there were limitations and much more research to consider in understanding the complexities of Black reality television and how the introduction of streaming platforms complicate or enhance this genre, there is one thing that can be made clear: Zeus Network should be seen as a positive effort to not only allow for the expansion of Black reality television, but it has also enabled its viewers to gain agency in their own interpretations and understandings of different forms of Blackness.

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