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*Dance Moms*: Depictions of Race and Gender in Lifetime's Hit Reality TV Show

**Abstract**

This study analyzes the depiction of Abby Lee Dance Company's black team members across eight seasons of LifeTime's reality television show, *Dance Moms*, focusing on the microaggressions and racial stereotypes that are often presented. Reality TV frequently curates negative narratives based on racial stereotypes and microaggressions, and *Dance Moms* is no exception. The original cast of the show highlights six dancers and their mothers. *Dance Moms*, in addition to other reality TV shows, falls victim to tokenizing their racially diverse cast members and using racial cliches to frame their identity. Throughout the course of this essay, we will take an intersectional approach to analyze how Nia and Holly, two black dancers, are treated, which will reveal the deeply rooted issue of racism within reality TV and how it misrepresents people of color. Specifically, this study will highlight how black team members are often typecast by being offered "ethnic" roles, how the black mothers are forced to circumvent being misrepresented as angry black women and identify the blatant racism and sexism present throughout the show's tenure on air. By studying this text, this paper will reveal how negative representation contributes to the larger conversation surrounding the entertainment industry's impact on marginalized communities.

## Introduction

Since the early 2000s, there has been a rise in the popularity of reality TV viewership due to its ability to captivate its audience with conflict and drama. Due to the low-cost and ability to mass produce, there was a surge in the production of reality TV shows in America (Moorti & Ross 203). Despite the premise of being unscripted and authentic, producers often create their own narrative to cater to the viewers who “crave conflict and resolution, heroes and villains” (Bell-Jordan 357). This desire is a catalyst for producers to manufacture false narratives that decide who will be the heroes and who will be the villains. Critics argue that these stereotypes are often linked to race, gender, and age to reinforce systemic issues.

Men are often shown in positions of leadership while women are often sexualized and presented in a domestic environment (Appel and Webber 153). When African-Americans are portrayed in the media, their role often falls into a racial stereotype. African Americans, as well as Latino Americans, are often represented as criminals and unintelligent individuals (Appel and Webber 153). These stereotypes shape how the viewers rationalize gender and race, which has the potential to create harmful problems in society. While many viewers recognize that reality TV shows are fabricated to an extent, scholars like Sears and Godderis argue that reality TV plays an important role in helping viewers understand real-world situations (Sears & Godderis 185). Viewers of reality television span across every corner of this country, including areas where citizens may live in predominantly homogeneous areas. If audience members that have limited experiences with people unlike themselves and their only representation is limited to fabricated stereotypes on television - it would reinforce harmful archetypes and exacerbate the negative image of racial minorities.

*Dance Moms* is the perfect case to analyze how these stereotypes are presented within reality TV and how it misrepresents the black experience. This show follows a predominantly white competition dance team in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and their highly demanding dance instructor, Abby Lee Miller. Abby is a well-known dance instructor and has years of experience teaching adolescent women. Abby begins each week by going over the pyramid, a system in which Abby ranks each girl's performance from the week before from best to worst in front of the rest of the team and their mothers. She does this by taping headshots of the girls in a pyramid formation on the studio mirror. Abby uses this as a method to hold power over the team and create an unnecessary air of competition between the teammates. Nia and Holly are the only two consistent racially diverse characters on the show and they spent countless seasons dodging stereotypes such as the angry black women. By analyzing the stereotypes often applied to black women, we can reveal how production teams decided to purposefully create narratives that would enhance those stereotypes.

## **Literature Review**

### **Race Theory in Reality Television**

Race is a significant theme throughout reality television as a whole. Racial stereotypes can stem from the number of TV programs an individual has watched and the positive or negative attributes attributed to minorities in those programs (Fujioka 53). Television plays a major role in reinforcing many of the negative labels that ethnic minorities face. Bell-Jordan looks at many of the ways producers work to push these adverse narratives. Producers will promote social conflicts surrounding race, however rarely do we see those conflicts end with a resolution (Bell- Jordan 357). A common theme we see is White Americans being insensitive to the struggles of being a Black American. Allowing these conflicts to be shown unresolved are

problematic and allow ethnic minorities to be labeled as angry and divided (Bell-Jordan 357). Black contestants are often seen as loud, angry, and overly aggressive. African Americans are often linked to violence and anger. Asian contestants are seen as shy and incredibly intelligent.

Looking at African Americans in particular, there are several different stereotypes that they get forced into. One is the mammy: this woman is obese, independent, and caters to a white family (Boylorn 417). Next, is Jezebel: who is a young and hypersexual girl (417). Then there is the deadbeat stereotype, this person relies on government assistance and is lazy. More stereotypes include the angry black woman and the Oreo (physically black but acts like a white person). People who have little interaction with Black Americans might begin to believe the stereotypes and create a mental image of how they think they should act. Studies have been done looking at reality TV shows and out of the ten shows that Tybee surveyed, every single one had an African American character fit into these roles (Tyree 399). African Americans are also portrayed as more aggressive. Reality TV has been a way for racial stereotypes to be shared with others at large. Towns argues that television aids the spreading of racial stereotypes:

I argue medium theory aids studies of blackness by showing the ways in which the technologies we use transform the environments we inhabit in ways that further racialization processes beyond depictions of music lyrics or reality TV. (Towns 474)

Media and technology directly aid in the spreading of racial biases and ideas throughout society. This allows for music and television to have a great influence on people's beliefs.

### **Gender Theory in Reality Television**

Gender is another significant theme in reality television. Women are often seen as the caregivers that cater to the family needs, while men are usually the breadwinners whose role is to provide for their families. They are seen as overly emotional and way too concerned with their appearance. Sink and Mastro found that men are seen as more confident and aggressive than women. When these roles are flipped, and women prioritize their careers, they are labeled as unloving and selfish (Medved 238). Some findings indicated that women are seen as less dominant than male characters in television (Sink & Mastro 7). These labels are quite unrealistic and unfair as you take a deeper look into gender theory. Gender theory says gender is socially constructed and works to challenge the norms society has tied to each gender. Women are often underrepresented in television. Past studies show that women are represented as major characters at around thirty to forty percent in the past few decades. (Glaslock 431)

Hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity are often paired together to reinforce gender roles. Hyperfemininity is submission to men and over-sexualization, while hypermasculinity is extreme male dominance and power. This creates a negative image of women in the media (Sink & Mastro 7). There is also an apparent difference in the types of occupational roles women versus men obtain in television. If women are depicted as having a role outside the home, they often serve as secretaries, nurses, and teachers. Men are often depicted as CEOs, doctors, and labor workers. Men are also seen as more aggressive than women on television (Scharrer 731). Society expects women to take on the role of being the primary caregiver and reality TV is constantly reinforcing these gender roles.

### **Intersectionality in Reality Television**

Gender and race are just two identities of many that can crossover to affect how people are treated. For example, depictions of black women in the media often fall into a few categories.

Intersectionality looks at how different identities all work together to affect how a person goes through society (Boylorn 417). Boylorn explains that these stereotypes create this idea that Black women can only fall within one category or the other, limiting their opportunities:

Black women are either extremely educated or a high school drop out, ambitious or listless, sexy or ugly. Her relationships with men are always daunting, because either she is too educated and independent to need or want a man or she is desperate and lost without him, incapable of going on and willing to fight, cheat, or lie to get or keep him.

These false representations of what it might mean to be Black and female on television leave limited opportunities and possibilities for a Black woman to be presented outside of the expected boundaries. (Boylorn 418)

These depictions of black women in the media are tropes they are constantly having to fight and dodge.

Black women are misunderstood in the media. They do not have many opportunities to shine in the media and when they do, they must fit into these predetermined categories. The producers decide before the show even begins who they want them to be. These two intersections of race and gender have created the idea that black women are verbally aggressive and are difficult to work with (Scharrer 732). The trope of the angry black woman is one of the most common stereotypes. It is evident in shows like *Real Housewives* and *Bad Girls Club*. While these shows are more diverse, these women are told to be verbally aggressive with each other to add to the appeal and “success” of the show. This intersection hurts black women at a higher rate than it does men. Black men have a wider range of representations as African Americans than black women do (Brooks & Hébert 300). Carey puts it well, “black women remain visible yet silenced; their bodies become written by other texts, yet they remain powerless to speak for

themselves” (Carey 144). Carwile has found when black women are in the minority, their portrayals were typically negative:

In the shows with Black women as minority cast members, 78% of the portrayals were derogatory. The opposite was proven in the shows with Black women as the cast majority. In this case, 64% of the portrayals using this label were positive or used “bitch” as a term of endearment” (Carwile 624).

This data clearly notes that when Black women are present alone in shows, they are more likely to be depicted negatively.

By doing a textual analysis of *Dance Moms*, we can see how the black females in this show were labeled and stereotyped. In addition, some characters were trailblazers, they worked to go against these stereotypes and tropes. Unfortunately, in doing so, these characters are still ridiculed and picked apart. By applying gender and critical race theory to this text, we can explore why black women are held to a higher standard than others. More research is necessary to fully understand the impact of reality TV on viewers and create strategies for reducing the power that these stereotypes have.

## **Methods**

For this research, a textual analysis has been chosen to look at selected scenes of the hit reality TV show *Dance Moms*, to analyze the racial and gendered stereotypes. The scenes were selected from the eight seasons of *Dance Moms*. This textual analysis surveyed their behaviors and dialogue in addition to how the producers portrayed them.

There was a primary focus on how Holly and Nia worked to avoid being labeled with various racial stereotypes. This methodology examined how Holly responded to conflict with Abby as opposed to the other white moms. In doing this, I looked at times when the moms would raise their voices, become physical, or storm around. In addition, the research surveyed each role given to Nia and if it could be categorized as typecasting. Any racist microaggressive comments made throughout various scenes of *Dance Moms* were also noted.

*Dance Moms* is an optimal choice for this analysis due to the clear evidence of racial stereotyping within the show. Connecting this analysis to both gender and race theory revealed how reality TV shows contribute to the misrepresentation of marginalized communities. Gender theory is the idea that socially constructed gender roles tell people how they should navigate life and make decisions. Race theory is the idea that racism exists and that there are powerful systems in place to uphold these ideas. *Dance Moms* is a clear example of how race theory works as Abby, a white woman in a position of power, can uphold racism.

To analyze these episodes, I selected scenes from eight different episodes of *Dance Moms*. I chose Season 1 Episode 7 “She’s a Fighter,” Episode 8 “Love on the Dance Floor,” Season 3 Episode 12 “The Apple of Her Eye,” and Season 7 Episode 7 “The Fresno Curse” to examine how Abby typecasts her students of color with predominantly racial roles. I also chose Season 3 Episode 9 “Bye Bye Baby” to examine how the show portrays Black Patsy and labels her as an angry black woman. I selected Season 6 Episode 6 “Abby’s New Favorite,” Season 2 Episode 20 “Guess Who’s Back,” and Season 2 Episode 1 “Everyone’s Replaceable” to analyze instances of racism and sexism within the show. These categories allowed me to survey how *Dance Moms* as a text includes both racism and sexism.



The analysis was conducted by analyzing the interactions between Holly, Abby, and the rest of the mothers and taking note of the dialogue, non-verbal cues, and physical interactions. In addition, confessionals throughout the show were key in revealing feelings from the cast. An inventory of each role given to Nia throughout her eight seasons was noted and which of those are tied to a racial identity.

Lastly, this research analyzed and interpreted the data to identify themes surrounding race and gender. The findings were summarized and showed how the producers worked to create narratives that stereotyped and under-appreciated black team members in *Dance Moms*. Connections and gaps in the data were examined to better understand the issues within the text. Overall, this research on *Dance Moms* and the connection to these two theories allowed for a better understanding of the ways media reinforces these negative stereotypes and hurts minorities.

## **Textual Analysis**

### **Ethnic Roles and Typecasting**

Throughout the eight seasons of *Dance Moms*, Nia was only allowed to perform thirty-eight solos. For reference, Maddie Ziegler, one of the white team members, was given sixty-four solos in only six seasons. While only surveying the six original cast members, the white team members averaged seven solos per season while Nia was averaging five solos a season. One could argue that the disparity in the number of given solos was solely related to skill level, however, Nia's treatment became the blueprint for a pattern that would continue in seasons to come. Nia was given her first solo in episode seven of season one. Abby gives Nia a solo titled "Laquifa," a performance inspired by the black drag queen named Shangela Laquifa Wadley. Abby presents Nia her cheetah print costume and requests that her mother Holly buys her a black

Afro wig. Holly's frustration is noticeable when she says "All the other girls get feminine whimsical costumes that aren't casting them" (She's a Fighter 16:43). While this dance was supposed to allow Nia to embrace her culture and heritage, this solo failed to do just that because it was based on a white person's view of black culture, upholding a system of white power. Throughout the episode, Abby invalidates Holly's apprehension about the role by telling her that this is an advantage for Nia because she can represent any ethnic group. Abby does not call upon any of the other girls to represent an entire racial group, especially one other than their own. Abby, as the dance instructor, has the control and power to dictate how these young women are portrayed on the show, which continues to feed consumers their negative preconceived notions about what it means to be black. Nia does not get the opportunity to tell viewers who she is because Abby does it for her. This situation has a direct correlation to critical race theory in the way that racism is embedded within all social systems. Abby, a white woman, is upholding a system that disproportionately affects people of other races and promotes whiteness in her studio by favoring white students. This was hurtful to Holly because this representation was far from Nia's black experience.

Nia is not only called upon to represent her ethnicity but many other ethnic groups as well. This is apparent in episode eight of season one when Nia is called upon to perform a Bollywood solo immediately after the Laquifa solo. Holly communicated with Abby that there is a theme every time Nia is given a solo. Holly said "All of her routines it seems as if there is a jungle theme. It's like there's a little undertone or nuance that's like a little bit of negativity" (She's a Fighter 38:23). Holly continuously expresses her disappointment in the roles that Nia receives and is continuously met with dismissals of overreaction.

In season three, episode twelve, Abby decided to do a tribute to Rosa Parks for the group routine. In this specific episode, Nia was placed on the top of the pyramid for her stellar performance the week before. Abby tends to give the lead role or a solo to the dancer who is on top of the pyramid for that week. Instead of giving Nia the lead, she says she has not yet decided who would be taking the lead role of Rosa Parks. Abby loves to typecast Nia and give the roles that negatively stereotype her, but the one time she has the opportunity to give Nia a role that paints blackness in a powerful light, she considers passing Nia up for the role. Abby then contradicts herself by saying Nia needs to earn this role and that it won't be given to her just because she is black. This makes it evident that Abby has no problem giving Nia the roles that stereotype black people but when it is a positive role, she is hesitant.

In episode seven of season seven, Abby decides to do a group routine based on the novel and movie titled *The Help*. This story is about black, indentured servants and their struggles during the Civil War in the South. These women were fighting against segregation and the unfair treatment of African Americans. After announcing the group routine, Abby comments that "We have maids, we have socialites. Leave the story up to me" (The Fresno Curse 5:35). This makes Holly and Camille extremely worried because Abby isn't known for being sensitive when choreographing pieces regarding complex issues. Holly notes she feared Abby would make a mockery of this dance, because she, a white woman, is telling the story of black struggle. When choosing roles for this dance Abby tells Holly "I know I typecast" (5:50). The white mothers then question why Holly and Camille are so worked up about the routine. This sparks the conversation surrounding racism, Holly notes that every time Abby chooses a routine concerning race relations, it feels like grade school again when all the students would stare at her while the teacher covered the history of slavery. Jill even notes that she thought it was funny. This

frustrated Holly and Camille because their experiences as black Americans are being belittled and overlooked. Without explicitly saying it, Jill and Ashlee reject critical race theory by saying most people are not racist and that segregation no longer exists. Holly then notes that they will never have to go into a store and be followed because the owner thinks they are stealing solely because they are a black individual. Holly explains that she has to raise her kids to know that systems are not in place to support them because America is built on racist legislation.

### **Fighting the Angry Black Woman Trope and Producer Bias**

The angry black woman trope is one that portrays black women as loud, angry, and malicious. Television shows often rely on this trope to help create drama and typecast their black female characters. This is a trope we see the producers and Abby actively tries to apply to their black characters. Holly would often refrain from arguing with Abby because she didn't want the producer to be given the bait to paint her as an angry black woman. They then brought Nicaya Wiley and her mother Kaya Wiley, and Abby admitted in interviews that the producers only brought them in to create drama. They had no issue manipulating the public perceptions of the show's black characters. Kaya Wiley, "Black Patsy," a black mother who was framed to be mean and angry all the time and said in an interview that rather than including the entire situation, producers would cut parts where Abby made racially insensitive comments but still include clips of Black Patsy angry and upset. Kaya was able to successfully be pinned as the angry black woman because of her frequent arguments with Abby. Abby would call Kaya, "ghetto and evil." Nicaya was often put up against Abby's favorite dancers to compete, setting her up for failure.

Holly is a highly educated principal of a school with a doctorate degree. In disagreements with Abby, Holly would often try to contain her frustration while the other mothers would often get into screaming matches with Abby. It was a lose-lose situation for Holly, if she spoke up she

was the angry black woman whose feelings weren't justified. If she stayed quiet she was labeled as passive, weak, and lacking the confidence to speak up.

When comparing Holly's disagreements with Abby versus the other mothers, Holly was by far one of the classiest. She rarely raised her voice because she knew the second she did the producers were going to stereotype her as a wild angry black woman. Because of this, Abby would often egg Holly on to get a reaction out of her. She would frame herself as the victim despite being the instigator. For instance, in the Rosa Parks episode, Abby made it clear that Nia had to earn the lead role in the group routine. Right after announcing the routine, Abby immediately insulted Holly's attire and accessories, noting that it is not cute. Abby admitted in a confessional that she used this time as an opportunity to spruce up Holly's attire because she knew she was able to dangle the Rosa Parks role over her head (The Apple of Her Eye). This is reinforcing a system of white power because Abby is aware that she has power over Holly in this situation and uses it to silence her. Instead of becoming upset and defending herself, she becomes quiet and submits to Abby.

### **Blatant Racism & Sexism**

In episode five of season six, Kalani and Nia were given an African-style duet. They were both dressed in African costumes with traditional African dance choreography. In the next episode titled "Abby's New Favorites," Abby starts the episode by revealing the pyramid per usual. Abby makes it a point to highlight Kalani is placed above Nia on the pyramid because she performed the duet better than Nia. Abby then tells Kalani that she was a bit more African than Nia (Abby's New Favorite 6:11). Abby is constantly invalidating the blackness of her students by constantly making racially insensitive comments such as the fact that Nia should be better at an African style dance because of the fact that she is African American.

Another example is that, throughout the majority of the seasons Nia had to wear her hair straight to match the other girls in the group. Sometimes, straightening ethnic hair too much can be dangerous and cause heat damage. It is important for black women to switch up and put in a heat-protective hairstyle, for Nia this was often braids. Abby told Nia that she needed to fix her hair and that it looked horrible. This can be hurtful to women of color as many of them are already insecure about their hair (Guess Who's Back).

In season two episode one, Abby begins pyramid time by questioning where Holly is. When she asks Nia, she responds by saying her mom is at work. Abby then responds by saying "Not gonna happen. Yes, she needs to leave work, leave the job, forget it, and be here with you. That's what is important (Everyone's Replaceable 0:39)". She continues to mention Holly's absence throughout the episode and criticize her. On the contrary, in episode eleven of season one, Melissa, a white mother, went on vacation with her boyfriend for a week and Abby never once critiqued her absence. This is a direct link to the consequences of intersectionality, Holly is scolded for having a career that allows her to provide for the family while Melissa goes on vacation with her boyfriend without any repercussions. Abby's comments are sexist and contribute to the conversation that women's only role should be raising their children.

## **Discussion**

As presented in the reality TV show, *Dance Moms*, there are issues of ethical solos and typecasting in addition to producer bias. These issues present a clear manifestation of the racial inequalities that exist in the entertainment industry. People of color in these shows are often stereotyped and marginalized. The producers tokenized Nia and Holly by having them be the only diverse characters in the original cast.

Nia was given fewer opportunities to perform solos compared to her white teammates. The solos that Abby gave Nia often relied on negative depictions of black culture and racial stereotypes. For example, the first solo Nia was given was titled “Laquifa,” which had her wear a cheetah print costume with a black Afro wig. While Abby thought this solo was helping Nia embrace her identity, it was not a true representation of the black experience and relied heavily on stereotypes. Abby, the dance teacher who was in control, upheld an inherently white institution that disproportionately affected students of races other than white. In addition, Nia was called upon to represent not only her race but other ethnic groups as well. This pattern became clear when Abby gave Nia a Bollywood solo the week after she performed her Laquifa solo. Nia fell victim to this typecasting and Holly communicated her disappointment in Abby's decisions.

Another issue prevalent in *Dance Moms* and in many reality TV shows is the way producers work to apply predetermined tropes to the characters in the show. Television shows often rely on certain narratives and tropes to help progress the show. In *Dance Moms*, and many other shows they rely on the angry black woman trope. Abby along with the producers actively tried to label the black cast members as angry black women. Holly, Nia’s mother would often disengage with Abby because she didn’t want the producers to label her with this. Therefore, the producers decided to bring in Nicaya Wiley and her mother Kaya Wiley to create conflict. Abby had admitted during interviews that these two were brought onto the show for the purpose of creating drama. Kaya Wiley, known as “Black Patsy” on the show, was framed to be an angry black woman as the producers would often cut parts of Abby making racially insensitive comments but leave in the clips of Kaya’s blow-ups.

While the other mothers would often partake in screaming matches with Abby, Holly would refrain. She would work to contain her frustration because she didn't have the same luxury as the other moms. She knew that if she acted out, she would be stereotyped. Abby would often be an instigator and provoke Holly just to see how she would react.

In conclusion, *Dance Moms* is intrinsically racist and upholds systems of white power and privilege. There are issues within the show that highlight racial inequities and how the entertainment industry often hurts people of color. It is imperative that these issues are addressed and these companies are held accountable for their actions. We have seen change come as the reboot for *Dance Moms* was canceled due to Abby's long list of racial comments. These issues need to be confronted so that the entertainment industry is creating an environment that is more diverse and inclusive while uplifting the voices of all those involved.



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