

## Research Article

**“Make Sure That Our Culture and Color is Known:” Maternal Perceptions of Using Media in the Ethnic-Racial Socialization of Young Black Children**Sierra Coffey <sup>1</sup>, Kaela Farrise Beauvoir <sup>2</sup>, Erica E. Coates <sup>3,\*</sup>

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doi:10.21926/obm.icm.2601011**Received:** October 10, 2025**Accepted:** March 02, 2026**Published:** March 13, 2026**Abstract**

Although methods of ethnic-racial socialization have been studied in the past, welcoming in a new digital age has affected how parents engage with their children on topics such as race and culture. While media can be an engaging way to expose young children to race and culture, the underrepresentation of Black youth in media in the United States has posed a dilemma for Black parents about the best way of using media to socialize their young children. To understand how Black mothers expose their children to ideas about race and culture through media, we analyzed five focus groups conducted with Black mothers ( $n = 26$ ) with children enrolled in early learning centers in the mid-Atlantic metropolitan area. Using reflexive thematic analysis, researchers generated the following three themes: building knowledge of



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racial/ethnic groups through media, building racial esteem through Black media, and concerns regarding ethnic-racial socialization through media. Guided by Cultivation Theory and Garcia Coll's Integrative Model, our study contributes to the current literature by highlighting the role of digital media in Black parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices.

### **Keywords**

Ethnic-racial socialization; early childhood; Black mothers; digital media

## **1. Introduction**

While many people believe that young children are unable to understand a topic as complex as race, this is far from the truth. Research shows that infants as young as three-months old can recognize differences in skin color, children younger than two years old show preferences for playmates of the same race, and preschoolers demonstrate biases about others based on their racial affiliations [1-4]. Even children of color in kindergarten are aware of, and negatively impacted by, racial stereotypes [5].

Black children face a number of specific anti-Black racial stereotypes including negative messages related to their skin (e.g., colorism), hair (e.g., texturism), behaviors (e.g., inherently dangerous), and connections between Blackness and criminality and hypersexuality [6-8]. These messages come from many sources including peers and adults who may view Black children as older than they are and thus, more deserving of punishment and sexual advances, and less deserving of protection and care [9-12]. Without intervention, these negative anti-Black messages can become intrinsic, decreasing feelings of self-worth and leading to a number of negative outcomes [13, 14].

Anti-Black racism and messaging also have an impact on Black parents' own psychological well-being and on their parenting practices [15, 16]. In light of these negative impacts, scholars have explored how Black parents and caregivers use parenting as racial protectionism to inoculate their children against the harms of anti-Black racism [17-19]. One way that many Black parents engage in this protectionism is to transmit messages associated with the positive aspects of their ethnic/racial group to their children [20]. Given the increase in media use for young children, as well as the increasing diversity of characters, we sought to investigate the ways that Black parents use digital media to socialize their young children about race.

### **1.1 Children's Media Consumption**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, screentime for children of all ages increased dramatically [21]. According to a study surveying changes from before and during the pandemic, screen time among children under 18 increased by 52% compared with baseline estimates [21]. For example, YouTube is now a very popular media platform for children of all ages [22]. According to a poll by Pew Research, when asked about screen time usage for their children, over 80% of parents with children ages 3 to 11 said their children watched YouTube videos. Additionally, 57% of parents with children under two years old endorsed YouTube screentime for their kids [22]. Many of these children are watching YouTube videos every day or even several times per day [22].

Media sources are also a key reinforcer of anti-Black stereotypes and tropes across the lifespan. For instance, an analysis of 97 Disney movies showed that protagonists were significantly lighter skinned than antagonists across the collection, and that this significant difference held steady over time [8]. However, media can also be a powerful mechanism for positive identity development, particularly media curated for Black children. For example, a study found that listening to a story about a Black hero caused young Black children to change their selection preference from White cartoon characters to Black characters [23]. Thus, it is especially important to understand how media is currently playing a role in parents' socialization practices given the regularity of young children, including infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, watching television and videos [22, 24].

### **1.2 Theoretical Frameworks**

Cultivation Theory and Garcia Coll et al.'s Integrative Model provide insight into how exposure to media influences minoritized children's unique developmental experiences and beliefs [25, 26]. Cultivation Theory describes the influence that long-term exposure to mass media exerts on an individual's perception of themselves and the world around them [25]. Research building on Cultivation Theory has found that Black peoples' increased exposure to media that lacks representation, or includes negative portrayals, can adversely affect their self-concept and increase their sense of others' negative thoughts about Black people [27-29]. On the other hand, viewing Black media has been shown to positively impact Black peoples' self-view and sense of empowerment [30-32]. The Integrative Model was developed in response to how early mainstream theories of child development failed to center race, ethnicity, culture and social class. The model shows how processes such as racism, discrimination, and prejudice affect minoritized children's experiences through social interactions in differing environments [26]. Within this framework, race and class are characterized as central forces that shape children's developmental processes [26]. Consequently, the expanded role that family and kin networks play in minoritized children's development, specifically through messaging related to race and culture, may serve to protect them from social and psychological sources of oppression derived from their relative position in society [33].

Taking both frameworks into consideration, the media that Black children are exposed to may play an important role in the development of their world view regarding their own and others' racial groups. For instance, parental exposure and conversation with children about race and media can be important sources of protection for children directly affected by racism and prejudice. Many Black parents consider teaching children about race to be a critical part of rearing Black children and tend to socialize their children about race starting at a young age in various ways, including using media [34-36].

### **1.3 Ethnic-Racial Socialization**

Socialization broadly refers to the process through which children acquire values, beliefs, and attitudes through ongoing interaction with parents and other socializing agents, both through deliberate instruction and indirect modeling [37]. Ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) is a parenting practice that Black parents use more than other ethnic/racial groups to teach their children about race and ethnicity [20]. Parents are often recognized as primary socialization agents, and teaching their children about the current racial landscape is a conscious explicit process [38]. Parental

influence is also recognized as particularly durable, as children are consistently shaped by their parents' teachings [39]. By teaching their children about race, Black parents have the goal of passing down strategies to navigate racism while also emphasizing resilience and empowerment [38].

Per Hughes et al., four types of ERS practices have been most widely identified and supported in the literature including cultural socialization, preparation for bias, egalitarianism, and promotion of mistrust [20]. Cultural socialization refers to caregivers' practices of teaching children about the history, customs, and traditions of their ethnic/racial heritage to instill ethnic/racial pride. Caregivers use preparation for bias to prepare their children to experience and cope with being the recipients of negatively biased thinking and acts of discrimination. Promotion of mistrust is used to instill caution in children when interacting with those of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Egalitarian practices emphasize a focus on one's shared qualities over perceived racial and ethnic differences, either through socialization about other groups or through caregivers' silence about race. Of the four practices, the most common form of ERS Black parents use with young children is cultural socialization [20]. Cultural socialization practices have been associated with myriad positive youth outcomes, including better cognitive outcomes like higher pre-academic and receptive language scores at 3.5 years old, fewer externalizing and internalizing behaviors, less physical conflict, better emotion regulation skills, and more positive self-view [35, 40].

Oral communication is one of the main methods for cultural socialization wherein parents talk about racial and cultural pride with their children [36]. Other methods include modeling, role playing, and exposure, which is where parents show children positive aspects of their history and culture through art, stories, visits to historical sites and museums, or interacting with other culturally relevant tokens and artifacts [20]. More recently, digital media has become an increasingly important tool of socialization.

The media landscape has changed dramatically in the last 50 years with Black people's representation in media increasing from 3.8% to being presently parallel to the percentage of Black people in the U.S. [41, 42]. With this increase in media representation, Black parents are also using television and other media sources as tools for exposure in empowering their children via cultural socialization practices at higher rates [43].

#### **1.4 Media as a Tool for ERS**

Prior researchers have argued that media is an underexplored, yet highly relevant, tool of socialization and racial identity development for Black children [29, 44]. The role of media is especially pertinent to study among Black children due to their high rates of media consumption [45, 46] and the prevalence of stereotypes of Black people across media sources [47, 48]. Research on Black people and media shows a link between exposure to negative anti-Black stereotypes (e.g., Black women as hypersexual or antagonists being darker-skinned) and negative psychological outcomes [6]. However, research also shows that Black youth with higher levels of racial pride, perhaps due to successful ERS from their parents, report less exposure to negative Black media portrayals overall, and are less likely to agree with negative messaging about Black media portrayals when they do encounter them [49].

Researchers have expanded upon the seminal ERS framework [20] to further conceptualize media as a tool Black parents use for ERS, referring to this collection of strategies as media-based ERS [50]. When it comes to Black parents' role in mediating media exposure for Black children, Black

parents tend to use parental media mediation strategies more with young children, including more encouragement of positive content [50]. Black parents also have been found to do the most restricting of media portraying negative anti-Black stereotypes with three- to five-year-old children versus older children, and introduce more preparation for bias messaging as children get older [50]. In another study, researchers retrospectively surveyed Black and White parents' mediation styles, conversation content, media literacy, and enjoyment levels after watching *The Black Panther* film [51] with their 7- to 12-year-old children [52]. They found that Black parents were significantly more likely than White parents to have conversations about race after the film. While there has been some research on whether parents use media as a form of ERS, limited research exists on Black parents' thought processes and choices regarding media-based ERS, especially with young children.

### **1.5 Current Study**

While there has been previous research exploring the role of television on children's development [28] and on how parents racially and culturally socialize their children [20, 36], questions remain as to the intersection of these two processes in exposing children to ideas and messaging on race and culture. In addition, not only do existing studies tend to focus on older children, due to the widespread expansion of media, the current literature has become outdated and is not the best representation of how modern parents are practicing ERS through media. The goal of our current study is to fill this gap and shed light on how Black mothers are using digital media to culturally socialize their children, and their concerns about using media as a tool. Through focus groups with Black mothers of young children attending two early childhood centers in the Washington DC metropolitan area, our initial exploratory study aims to contribute knowledge on Black mothers' perceptions and practices of incorporating media into their ERS practices. Guided by Cultivation Theory, the Integrative Model, and past research on media-based ERS, we sought to understand Black mothers' perceptions and experience of incorporating digital media into their ERS practices with their young children. Specifically, we sought to explore how mothers (1) use media to bolster their children's knowledge about race and culture, (2) use media to promote positive racial self-esteem and identity, and (3) navigate concerns about potentially harmful messages.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Study Design**

We used a phenomenological approach as our study design to capture the voices and experiences of Black mothers' utilization of digital media as part of their ERS practices with young children. This approach has the goal of understanding the context, perspectives, and experiences of particular groups via the use of open-ended questions regarding the phenomenon (e.g., Black parents' use and perspective of using media-based ERS practices) and the reflective interpretation of the responses by researchers [53]. We conducted a secondary analysis using data from five focus groups with Black mothers who had children enrolled in early childhood education centers in the Washington, DC metropolitan area during the 2022-2023 academic year.

## 2.2 Participants

The sample comprised 26 mothers, all of whom identified as Black or African American, that participated in a focus group; each focus group ranged in size from 4 to 6 mothers per group. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 51 years ( $Mage = 32.4$ ,  $SD = 6.4$ ). Just over half (51.8%) of participants were either divorced or never married, and the remaining 48.2% of participants were either married or in a committed relationship. Over half of the participants were employed full- or part-time (55.5%). The majority of participants made \$50,000 per year or less (81.5%) with 44.5% of participants reporting annual family incomes under \$20,000. Just over half of the participants' children attending the early childhood education centers were female (53.8%), with ages of the children ranging from 1 to 5 years old ( $Mage = 2.7$ ). See Table 1 for detailed sample characteristics.

**Table 1** Characteristics of Study Sample (N = 26).

| Baseline Characteristics                    | Sample Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Parent Race/Ethnicity                       |                       |
| Black or African American                   | 100                   |
| Parent Gender                               |                       |
| Female                                      | 100                   |
| Parent Age                                  |                       |
| Young Adult (18-35 years)                   | 80.8                  |
| Middle Age (36-55 years)                    | 19.2                  |
| Child Race/Ethnicity                        |                       |
| Black or African American                   | 100                   |
| Child Gender                                |                       |
| Female                                      | 53.8                  |
| Male                                        | 46.2                  |
| Child Age                                   |                       |
| Toddler (1-2 years)                         | 46.2                  |
| Preschool (3-5 years)                       | 53.8                  |
| Parent Education                            |                       |
| High school diploma or GED                  | 18.5                  |
| Some Technical School or College            | 44.5                  |
| Associate's Degree or Technical Certificate | 14.8                  |
| Bachelor's of Science or Bachelor's of Arts | 14.8                  |
| Master's Degree                             | 7.4                   |
| Parent Relationship Status                  |                       |
| Committed Relationship                      | 29.7                  |
| Never Married and Not in a Relationship     | 44.4                  |
| Married                                     | 18.5                  |
| Divorced                                    | 7.4                   |
| Parent Employment Status                    |                       |
| Employed (full-time)                        | 40.7                  |
| Employed (part-time)                        | 14.8                  |
| Unemployed                                  | 44.5                  |
| Total Family Income                         |                       |
| Under \$20,000                              | 44.5                  |
| Between \$20,000 and \$50,000               | 37.0                  |
| Over \$50,000                               | 18.5                  |

### **2.3 Focus Groups and Procedures**

Mothers provided informed consent and willingly participated in the focus groups, receiving \$100 in compensation for their time. We recruited participants via convenience sampling from two early childhood education centers in the DC metropolitan area using various methods. We disseminated information through emails and posted fliers on the centers' Remind app, which were distributed by the center staff. Additionally, our research team engaged in face-to-face interactions with caregivers during pick-up and drop-off times.

Individuals who expressed interest either contacted us to undergo a preliminary eligibility screening through a Qualtrics survey confirming their racial background and their child's enrollment in one of the two early childhood education centers. Alternatively, interested participants completed the screener and registered for a focus group session during our in-person outreach at the centers. Each participant had the flexibility to choose from five available dates for their focus group participation and secured their spot via Eventbrite. The five focus group sessions were conducted throughout a 3-week period in November 2022 and scheduled at various days and times to accommodate participants' varied availability. We concluded data collection after five focus groups given research that three to six focus groups produce 90% of discoverable themes with all of the most prevalent themes being found within three focus groups [54]. Focus groups were conducted over Zoom and typically lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. On average, each focus group comprised approximately five participants. Each focus group was moderated by two Black female research assistants.

The data collected from these focus groups is a part of a more extensive study aimed at understanding and evaluating how Black mothers engage in ERS practices with their young children. To increase understanding of Black mothers' use of digital media in the ERS process, we conducted a secondary analysis on the following focus group questions:

1. How do you talk to your young children about race?
2. What are ways that you ensure that your child sees or hears affirming or positive images or messages related to their race or Black culture?

To join the focus group, the mothers logged onto the Zoom link they received after registering for the session via Eventbrite. Each participant completed an entry ticket upon joining the focus group which consisted of the informed consent as well as a brief demographic survey assessing information including parent's age, race, sex, educational status, marital status, family income, and child's age and sex. The moderators encouraged participants to have their video on to increase their engagement during the focus group. After the overview of the focus group was provided to the participants, the moderators asked the focus group questions and encouraged mothers to share their responses based on their own experiences and perceptions.

### **2.4 Ethics Statement**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Georgetown University (Protocol #: STUDY00005322) on July 6, 2022. The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines set forth by APA and the Institutional Review Board.

## **2.5 Research Positionality**

The authorship team is composed of a professional, graduate, and undergraduate scholar; one scholar identifies as biracial (Black and White), and two scholars identify as Black. All authors on this paper are cisgender women and heterosexual. Focus group facilitators (two facilitators per focus group) included three Black-identifying, cisgender women who have direct experiences with, knowledge of, and shared interests in Black families' cultural strengths and wellbeing. Study recruitment, screening, focus groups, and data analysis were conducted under the guidance of the senior author, a Biracial, cisgender female clinical psychologist and director of a research collaborative that partners with Black families with young children to gain an understanding of the numerous culturally specific protective factors that families use to support their children's development.

## **2.6 Data Analysis**

Zoom was used to record and transcribe the focus groups. The research team then ensured the transcription accuracy of the five Zoom transcripts in Word. After reviewing the focus group transcripts, the first author led a theory-driven approach to investigate the perceptions Black mothers held on using media to socialize their young children. The first and senior author conducted reflexive thematic analysis [55] to analyze and interpret the data specific to media-related responses shared by the participants. Reflexive thematic analysis incorporates how personal experiences, social positionings, and theoretical assumptions may influence data interpretation and theme development [55]. Thus, the first author and the senior author met to discuss their perceptions of their analysis as influenced by their subjective experiences throughout the coding and analytic process.

Theme development included an iterative process in which coders refined initial themes and categories through multiple rounds of review throughout the six steps of reflexive thematic analysis: data familiarization, generation of initial codes, development of initial themes, review of themes, defining and labeling themes, and writing a coherent narrative [55]. In attending to the first step of immersion in the data, the first author initially put all five transcripts on a Google Document to review all the responses to the specific questions under study. In step two, initial codes were generated by color-coding quotes from the mothers to identify patterns. The initial codes generated reflect the first author's interpretation of the sentiments Black mothers shared about racially socializing their children using media. Next, during step three, the first author created a table of preliminary themes and subthemes based on the color-coding and initial analysis. During steps four and five, the first author and senior author met regularly to iteratively discuss the themes and subthemes regarding thematic clarity, interpretative strength, and alignment with the research question. Finally in step six, authors expanded on agreed upon themes and subthemes to develop a coherent response to the study's research questions. All recordings, transcripts, and theme drafts were stored in Box, which is HIPAA-compliant, and only shared with the research team for data management and security.



### 3. Results

Using reflexive thematic analysis, the researchers generated the following themes to summarize the information shared in the focus groups: building knowledge of racial/ethnic groups through media, building racial esteem through Black media, and concerns regarding ERS through media. Results are detailed below using pseudonyms in place of participants' real names. See Table 2 for themes and illustrative quotes and Table 3 for demographics for quoted participants.

**Table 2** Overview of Themes, Subthemes, and Supporting Quotes.

| Master Themes                                                | Subthemes                                                | Supporting Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Building Knowledge of Racial/Ethnic Groups Through Media     | Exposing child to Black culture                          | "Make sure that our culture and our color is known in a way that she can understand it, and also repeat it as well."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                                              | Exposing child to different racial groups                | "He does still watch shows that have other races in it, so that he sees [different] people, and it's not like a shock to him"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Building Racial Esteem Through Black Media                   | Prioritizing Black representation                        | "I thoroughly make sure that my son is watching shows, specifically shows that have characters that look like him. That is my biggest thing. I don't like him watching certain shows, books as well"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                                              | Attention to representation of child's specific features | "My son loves Disney and we watch <i>Encanto</i> a lot because he thinks he looks like the little boy Antonio. They have the same texture hair and skin color"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                                              | Hair Love                                                | "I like to hear her being confident in herself and know that it's okay for your hair to be curly. Okay, it doesn't matter. You should be confident with who you are, and also embracing it, because that is a characteristic of us being Black. That is something that you know we have. We have kinkier hair, so don't be ashamed of it"                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Concerns Regarding Ethnic-Racial Socialization Through Media | Exposure to harsh histories of racism                    | "I generally avoid certain things concerning our culture as far as slavery until she's a little older to really understand that concept and grasp it because I feel like a lot of things that I was introduced to at a younger age veered my perception of things"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                                              | Exposure to Whiteness as the Norm                        | "Even though you talk to your child over and over again, they still are going to be influenced, no matter what. So, my guess was that from watching YouTube and watching other little girls play with dolls, the majority of the shows that are on YouTube are White girls playing with probably White dolls. So, I'm assuming that's where the influence came from. It was just a really tough moment for me, and to hear my daughter say, 'Well, this doll is dark. I don't like her face. She's dark. I don't want it.'" |

**Table 3** Demographics of Quoted Caregivers.

| Caregiver Pseudonym | Caregiver Gender | Caregiver Age | Gender of Child | Age of Child |
|---------------------|------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Jasmine             | Female           | 34            | Female          | 6            |
| Alyssa              | Female           | 19            | Male            | 4            |
| Yvette              | Female           | 28            | Female          | 2            |
| Tamera              | Female           | 25            | Male            | 1            |
| Shonda              | Female           | 22            | Male            | 2            |
| Bobbi               | Female           | 30            | Male            | 3            |
| Danika              | Female           | 32            | Female          | 2            |
| Simone              | Female           | 32            | Female          | 4            |

### 3.1 Building Knowledge of Racial/Ethnic Groups Through Media

#### 3.1.1 Exposing Child to Black Culture

Some of the mothers in the focus groups ( $n = 5$ ) use children's media as a way to showcase Black culture to their children. Mothers chose media whose intended audience is children to emphasize the positive aspects of Black culture such as Black empowerment and beauty without exposing young children to the negative realities including systemic racism and police brutality. Jasmine, a 34-year-old mother with a 6-year-old girl, expressed the importance of her child understanding and consuming media that will uplift her by saying she hopes to "Make sure that our culture and our color is known in a way that she can understand it, and also repeat it as well." Additionally, Alyssa, a 19-year-old mom to a 4-year-old son, commented on how she uses Black YouTube channels and Netflix shows that star Black children to ask her son basic questions about race: "I think he understands it. He was answering the questions. I tried to answer it up to his level and not go over too deep in it." Mothers showcased examples of using media as a form of cultural socialization. They further highlighted the ways they integrate multiple methods with media exposure being the foundation on which active parental mediation via oral communication is built.

#### 3.1.2 Exposing Child to Different Racial Groups

Not only do mothers use Black media to expose children to their own culture, some mothers ( $n = 3$ ) expressed that they also use media to expose their children to other cultures as well. Tamera, a 25-year-old mother to a 1-year-old boy, shared that seeing characters that are different races from her child will prepare her child "so that [when] he sees [people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds], it's not like a shock." In an effort to raise culturally knowledgeable children, some mothers emphasized the importance of children seeing multiple perspectives and using media to achieve their goals. Yvette, a 28-year-old mother to a 2-year-old daughter, explained how she used media to expose her child to Black culture and other racial groups:

I definitely try to add different dynamics into their viewing just so they can see and understand, like who they are, what they look like, other people that look like them, and then just being more comfortable with just seeing other races as well.

### **3.2 Building Racial Esteem Through Black Media**

#### **3.2.1 Prioritizing Black Representation**

Some mothers ( $n = 4$ ) expressed a belief that their preschool children should primarily be exposed to Black media. A couple mothers even said that their children respond better to Black characters than to characters of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Yvette noted that she not only feels that Black media is more exciting for her children, her children seem to be more engaged when viewing Black media as well. She shared that “They [her children] definitely respond to those shows [Black based shows/YouTube Channels] a lot better than regular shows or Caucasian shows or anything like that.” Shonda, a 22-year-old mother to a 2-year-old son, described her efforts to ensure her child consumes Black media, “I thoroughly make sure that my son is watching shows, specifically shows that have characters that look like him. That is my biggest thing. I don’t like him watching certain shows, books as well.” Mothers emphasized intentionally showing their children Black-specific media for a variety of reasons including better engagement and desire to build racial esteem in young children by exposing them to Black representation in media.

#### **3.2.2 Attention to Representation of Children’s Specific Features**

Not only did mothers express appreciation for Black culture being represented through media, additionally some mothers ( $n = 4$ ) discussed the importance of finding characters that have their children’s specific features on screen, in books, or on dolls. Features can include hair color or texture, skin color, etc. Bobbi, a 30-year-old mother to a 3-year-old son, described her son’s experience finding a character with whom he shared a resemblance, “My son loves Disney, and we watch *Encanto* a lot because he thinks he looks like the little boy, Antonio. They have the same texture hair and skin color.” Danika, a 32-year-old mother to her 2-year-old daughter, spoke about how YouTube has been a place where her daughter can see people and characters that look similar to her, “She [daughter] watches DV Kids, and that is all Black family. The kids are Black, and they have similar features to her.” Not only do mothers want their children to have a familiarity with their culture—including traditions or rituals—through media exposure, showing the different phenotypes among the Black diaspora seems to be important as well. Because of the accessibility of YouTube, people with various physical features are able to upload content, and people are easily able to view the content. Seeing Black characters with different features in media emphasizes the diversity of the Black diaspora which mothers, and seemingly their children, appreciate. Here again, this theme shows how media is used as a way to promote racial pride and build self-esteem through exposure-based cultural socialization practices.

#### **3.2.3 Hair Love**

While skin color is often a characteristic that differentiates Black people from other races, hair often does as well. Mothers ( $n = 4$ ) expressed wanting their children to be confident in their hair. Different hair styles such as afros, afropuffs, cornrows, and braids were discussed between mothers in the focus groups. Danika described her motivation for playing a song entitled “I Love My Hair” from the popular children’s YouTube show “Gracie’s Corner” [56] for her daughter:

I like to hear her being confident in herself and know that it's okay for your hair to be curly... You should be confident with who you are, and also embracing it, because that is a characteristic of us being Black. That is something that you know we have. We have kinkier hair, so don't be ashamed of it.

In addition to mothers using media to instill confidence in their children about their hair, Simone, a 32-year-old mother to a 4-year-old girl, discussed a time when she used a Netflix show entitled "Karma's World" [57] to teach her daughter about how people of other races should respect her hair and personal space. In the episode the mother is describing, Karma, the main character who is a Black girl, is putting on her bonnet before she goes to bed at a sleepover. However, the other non-Black characters wanted to touch her hair and asked her intrusive questions, which caused Karma to cry. The mother described her discussion with her daughter about the episode:

My daughter basically was asking why she was crying and things of that nature, and I had to have a conversation with her as far as her basically explaining that her hair is an extension of her body, and that people are not supposed to touch anything on your person or your body without your permission.

Simone further expressed that Black children should be taught to be proud of their hair, and further need to be taught how to set boundaries with their peers to be afforded personal space and respect.

### **3.3 Concerns Regarding ERS Through Media**

#### **3.3.1 Exposure to Harsh Histories**

For multiple mothers ( $n = 4$ ), it was imperative that the media they show their children did not prematurely expose their children to the harsh realities of Black history such as slavery and even the more complicated parts of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Malcolm X's foundational philosophy. Simone, a 32-year-old mother to a 4-year-old girl, expressed her belief that introducing these concepts at the right time is especially important due to her own experience of learning about these parts of Black history too early:

I generally avoid certain things concerning our culture as far as slavery until she's a little older to really understand that concept and grasp it because I feel like a lot of things that I was introduced to at a younger age veered my perception of things.

Two mothers described the fear of introducing topics through media such as slavery too early to their children, potentially creating a sense of distrust of other races and causing a warped perception about race. With this theme, mothers expressed specific caveats about their media-based ERS practices with *young* children who may not be prepared to learn about certain historical occurrences or the complexities of key figures.

#### **3.3.2 Exposure to Whiteness as the Norm**

One mother in particular, Jasmine, a 34-year-old mother with a 6-year-old girl, expressed worry that her child's consumption of media would result in her believing that Whiteness is the cultural norm. Jasmine worried the lack of representation would affect her child psychologically as well as

her daughter's racial esteem. Furthermore, she expressed her concern that her daughter is going to unavoidably be influenced by media and the beauty standards they push by sharing a recent conversation with her daughter:

Even though you talk to your child over and over again, they still are going to be influenced, no matter what. So, my guess was that from watching YouTube and watching other little girls play with dolls, the majority of the shows that are on YouTube are White girls playing with probably White dolls. So, I'm assuming that's where the influence came from. It was just a really tough moment for me, and to hear my daughter say, 'Well, this doll is dark. I don't like her face. She's dark. I don't want it.'

Although only one mother explicitly voiced concerns regarding the effect of majority White media on their children, a couple mothers ( $n = 2$ ) described their desire to provide their children opportunities to watch Black shows and discussed it as a strategy for building racial esteem.

#### **4. Discussion**

Because of the impact of long-term media exposure on one's perception of themselves and others, coupled with the increase in media consumption among young children [21, 25], we examined the experiences of Black mothers with young children incorporating media in their cultural socialization practices. The following themes were generated as a result of reflexive thematic analysis: building knowledge of racial/ethnic groups through media, building racial esteem through Black media, and concerns regarding ERS through media. Our study builds on Cultivation Theory and Garcia Coll et al.'s Integrative Model by contributing findings regarding how Black mothers use various types of media to teach their young children about race and culture and build Black children's self-esteem [25, 26]. Our project also expands on cultural socialization literature by investigating current resources (i.e., digital media) parents use to build children's knowledge of culture and cultural pride.

Our findings highlight Black mothers' perceptions that digital media can empower young children about their cultural background and be an effective tool to learn about other cultural groups. Black mothers indicated that digital media can contribute to the development of children's racial self-esteem. As Cultivation Theory originally described associations with television because of its accessibility and consistency [25], our project expands the breadth of mass media platforms due to the increase in accessibility and consistency through social media platforms including YouTube, and streaming services, such as Netflix. Given the recent increase in various media platforms and young children's engagement with those platforms [21, 22], our project also contributes to the Integrative Model [26] by increasing our understanding of the varied forms and supplements Black mothers use to provide culturally specific socialization to their children in the context of raising children within a racialized society. Specifically, mothers' media practices can be understood as adaptive family processes that respond to children's early exposure to racialized environments. Prior research suggests that children begin to make judgments about race and social categories in early childhood, and that racism and discrimination shape children's experiences through everyday social interactions [26]. In this context, Black mothers' intentional use of media reflects an effort to buffer their children from negative societal messaging and to create promoting environments that foster racial pride and self-esteem.

Although this study focuses on Black mothers employing ERS with their children, prior research indicates that mothers of all races utilize ERS, although to varying amounts [58]. For example, the ERS of other families of color, such as Latinx and Asian-American families, consists of preparation for bias messaging which enable children to be prepared for and respond to discrimination [59-61]. In contrast, White families are less likely to have explicit discussions about race and ethnic heritage with their children, opting for a more “colorblind” approach [38, 62]. Situating the results of our study into the broader literature highlights the relevance and the specific perspectives Black mothers have regarding the use of media as a pro-Black socialization tool.

#### **4.1 Benefits of Media and ERS**

In our study, mothers discussed the importance of familiarizing children with their culture early in life. Media provides an engaging and educational avenue for mothers and their children to learn about identity. Mothers placed an emphasis on showing their children media that discusses themes such as confidence and racial pride. The mothers’ focus on Black media as a form of cultural socialization is in line with other studies wherein researchers have found that this ERS practice promotes the building of racial ideology, and racial and ethnic affirmation [63]. Existing research has shown a negative relationship between the time Black children spend engaging with media and their self-worth [28, 64, 65]. However, now that shows featuring Black children are more accessible [22], mothers have more resources that help instill their children with pride and confidence. For example, popular YouTube channels mentioned by several of the mothers include “Circle Time with Miss Monica,” “Mister B,” “Omo Berry,” and “Gracie’s Corner.” Importantly, the YouTube channels referenced by mothers represent independent, creator-driven media that allow for culturally specific and counter-hegemonic representations outside of traditional commercial children’s programming. Each of the shows also include themes of celebrating diversity, cultural acceptance, and cultural pride. From the perspective of Cultivation Theory, mothers’ intentional selection of Black-centered and affirming media can be understood as an effort to counter dominant media narratives and disrupt the effects of repeated exposure to racially stereotypical content. Therefore, Cultivation Theory in conjunction with Garcia Coll et al.’s Integrative Model [26], shows how exposure to media with positive representation can moderate the social and psychological effects of oppression and racism for children in society, boosting their self-esteem and confidence.

Additionally, mothers discussed how media can be used to expose children to other racial groups and cultures. In alignment with the mothers’ practice, Garcia Coll et al.’s [26] Integrative Model posits that certain environmental conditions and socialization patterns, such as de-emphasizing in-group/out-group distinctions, providing positive models, and reducing social distance, can contribute to reducing the development of prejudicial attitudes in children. For the mothers in this study, digital media provided a mode for young children to learn about other racial groups and accomplish the socialization goals described in the Integrative Model. Developing increased familiarity and comfort with other racial groups and cultures is critically important given that children demonstrate same-race preference as young as three-months old and begin to participate in racially biased social practices in toddlerhood [1, 2, 4, 66].

In service of diverse socialization experiences and developing broad world views, mothers described exposing their children to other races and cultures via media because they did not want their children to have pre-determined judgements about others, aligning with egalitarianism

processes. Egalitarianism, one of the four classic dimensions of ERS [20], emphasizes equal treatment of individuals and cross-group understanding. Especially for younger children, caregivers tailor ERS to focus on egalitarianism rather than preparation for bias [20]. This is evidence that ERS extends beyond instilling pro-Black pride and can transmit messages and values about inter-group relations. Mothers in our study describing intentionally selecting media that showcased racial diversity to promote normalization of other ethnicities and cultures is in alignment with previous research. Other studies, like Banks-Wallace & Parks, have also shown Black mothers exposing their children to multicultural environments, like multicultural events and community gatherings, to encourage egalitarianism [67]. This suggests that, alongside fostering racial pride through cultural socialization, mothers also used media to promote egalitarian values of inclusivity, mutual respect, and similarities [20].

#### **4.2 Concerns about Media and ERS**

Although almost all mothers indicated that they use media to educate their children about race and culture, some of the mothers also expressed the downside of using digital media to discuss a delicate topic such as race with their young children. Specifically, mothers in the study were worried about their children internalizing harsh information about race, whether that be related to racial discrimination, police brutality, or slavery. This worry regarding the emotional toll of media is supported by research showing a negative correlation between the amount of media exposure and Black children's self-esteem [28, 68]. Additionally, for older children who are consuming media of police brutality and racism, one study reported that mothers often use "behavioral coaching" to encourage their children to be vigilant of their surroundings and to prepare their children to encounter potential danger [69].

While mothers with children of all age groups may have concerns about how their children are consuming and interpreting difficult topics related to race and culture, our study specifically focuses on young children's exposure to racial messaging and how it can taint the teaching of cultural socialization and egalitarianism mothers are trying to transmit. Mothers in our study also discussed the risk of their children being unable to understand more complicated messages about race introduced through media, and thus feared their children's misinterpretations would turn into aversions toward themselves, their race, or other races. Furthermore, mothers' comments also allude to their desire to avoid practices that would facilitate promotion of mistrust, which is aligned with other research suggesting that parents avoid using promotion of mistrust with young children [20, 70].

Another concern expressed by a mother was that children engaging in media without adequate Black representation would start to perceive Whiteness as the cultural norm. The concern highlights the way that Black mothers are intentionally and thoughtfully using media as a tool for cultural socialization, and thus, critically examining opportunities to convey the desired messaging to their young children. Exploring the potential negative ramifications of certain types of media exposure aligns with the research furthering Cultivation Theory in showing media's disparate impacts on self-esteem based on children's race wherein Black children showed negative impacts on self-esteem with increased media exposure [28]. The mothers' concerns emphasize Cultivation Theory's claim that consistent patterns of representation can normalize social hierarchies and shape children's assumptions about race and belonging over time [28]. Their concern is magnified by a report

showing that the majority of characters on television are White [71]. Given that the majority of television content tends to reinforce racial and gender stereotypes [28], stereotypical portrayals of Black people may lead children to internalize these negative portrayals. Therefore, Black children's frequent exposure to predominantly White and racially stereotypical media negatively impacts their self-esteem [28].

### **4.3 Implications**

There are several implications from our study that can be used in practice and research. Foremost, mothers used digital media such as television and YouTube as ERS tools. It is important for mothers to select age-appropriate media that can inform children about race and culture in an engaging and meaningful way. Not only did mothers discuss using media as an educational tool, but also as a means of uplifting and instilling their children with racial and cultural pride. Mothers emphasized using media to show their children characters with similar physical features, including hair texture and skin color. Our findings indicate the importance of varied representation of Black children in media to parents' ERS of their children for optimal familiarity and self-esteem. This has potential widespread implications for content produced that is marketed to Black families including images, materials, and content in places that children attend (e.g., schools, pediatrician and dental offices, libraries, community centers, mental health centers and hospitals, etc.) as well as interventions that target ERS specifically.

Increasingly, interventions exist that assist in guiding parents in discussing race and culture with children in middle and high school (e.g., [64, 72]). For example, Anderson et al.'s Engaging, Managing and Bonding through Race (EMBRace) intervention helps parents with ERS practices by providing them tools to develop parental confidence when discussing race with older children [64]. Another intervention used with preadolescents is Murry's [72] Pathways to African American Success (PAAS) which promotes technology-based services as a means to enroll rural African American families in education-based programs and includes ERS. Interventions like these have shown beneficial results including improved ERS practices and ameliorated mental health among preadolescents and teenagers [72]. However, further interventions providing guidance on effective use of media for teaching young Black children about race are needed.

Research is also needed on the impact of using media as an ERS tool for young Black children. Mothers expressed fear of children internalizing the Eurocentric beauty standards that are reinforced by White media. Because media is saturated with White characters and storylines, high consumption of media for Black children can lead to lower self-esteem [28]. Based on current and previous research findings, future research is needed on the impact of Black media consumption on young Black children's self-esteem and racial esteem.

### **4.4 Limitations**

There are several strengths to our study and some notable limitations. Because our sample was a homogeneous group of mothers that were predominantly from the same geographic region, had similar backgrounds, and whose children attended the same early childhood education centers, parents with differing backgrounds and child demographics may bring other perspectives. Additionally, parents with young children who are not enrolled in an early childhood program may have different views.



Further, due to rapidly changing technology and media fads, the experiences that current parents of young children are having in socializing their children may be very different than parents of older children because of access to different technological resources and media portrayals based on what was popular at the time their children were very young. Parents also discussed choosing digital media content based on developmental appropriateness, therefore findings may differ for parents of older children. For example, mothers in the sample did not discuss user-generated media such as TikTok or Afrocentric podcasts, which may have been mentioned with mothers of older children. Participatory digital media is an important area for future research.

Moreover, there are multiple issues related to selection bias. First, our findings on young children's perspectives are limited to maternal reports. As mothers provided their perspectives on how media affects their children, children may have different perspectives. Additionally, paternal perspectives may differ given previous research on gendered ERS practices [73]. Finally, it is possible that mothers who elected to participate in this study held greater interest in, or awareness of, ERS than those who did not, thereby potentially limiting the relevance of findings to Black mothers more broadly. However, mothers in this sample provided rich insight into the perspectives of mothers who are actively engaging with media as a socialization tool.

Lastly, certain focus group questions, such as asking the ways that mothers ensure that their child sees or hears affirming or positive images or messages related to their race, may have been leading and introduced bias. Especially in a group setting, the phrasing of the question may have discouraged mothers to disagree or express that they did not racially socialize their children. Notwithstanding, our findings contribute to advancing the literature on mothers' use of media to culturally socialize their young children.

## **5. Conclusions**

Ultimately, this study illuminates how digital media, particularly television and YouTube, can be used as a tool to teach young children about race and culture. However, mothers also expressed concerns about their children's exposure to mature themes such as racial injustice, slavery, and discrimination at an age where there is a high chance of misinterpretation of the material. This study uses the foundations of Cultivation Theory [25] and the Integrative Model [26] to illustrate how influential media and representation can be on children's self-concept and racial identity development, and more specifically extending The Integrative Model's framework by illustrating how media functions as a modern adaptive resource within family socialization processes. This study contributes to the literature by exemplifying how mothers are using media to counteract misrepresentations of Black people and foster racial pride thus exploring the new ways mothers are racially-socializing their children in a media-rich world. Despite apprehensions about increased media exposure among children leading to negative outcomes such as normalizing Whiteness, the overwhelming majority of mothers believe that media can be used as an ERS tool to instill self-esteem in Black children's appearance and culture, prepare them for racial bias, and expose them to other cultures.

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## **Author Contributions**

Sierra Coffey: Conceptualization, writing – original draft, formal analysis, writing – review and editing. Kaela Farrise Beauvoir: writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. Erica E. Coates: Conceptualization, funding, Methodology, formal analysis, writing – review and editing. All authors have read and approved the published version of the manuscript.

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## **Competing Interests**

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## **Data Availability Statement**

Data are available upon reasonable request due to confidentiality restrictions.

## **AI-Assisted Technologies Statement**

Grammarly was used to check for grammar, spelling, and tone. The authors reviewed all suggestions and take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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