

At the red table: how intergenerational Black women are using Facebook Watch to cultivate critical conversations on health, identity, and relationships

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Abstract:

Red Table Talk, a web series exclusively aired on Facebook Watch, represents the narrative of intergenerational Black women who tackle critical conversations. The show, developed by Jada Pinkett-Smith and featuring her daughter and mother, brings in special guests for discussions on race, gender identity, sexual and mental health, co-parenting, and relationships. This paper relies on both qualitative and quantitative data from an audience survey, supplemented by thematic analysis to explore these themes. We show how the alternative media model of Facebook Watch and the series itself act as rebellions against institutionalized narratives that perpetuate stereotypes against people of color. We examine how Black women creators reclaim agency and resist generational forms of silencing by authoring a counter-narrative at the intersection of their lived cultural experiences.

Keywords: gender | critical race theory | media | intersectionality | Facebook

Article:

Introduction

On 17 May 2018, Jada Pinkett-Smith premiered her *Red Table Talk (RTT)* series on Facebook Watch with a candid co-parenting episode featuring her husband's (Will Smith) ex-wife. The episode has been viewed more than 32 million times. The show frames current, cultural topics from the intergenerational perspectives of three Black women: Jada, her mother (Adrienne Banfield), and her daughter (Willow Smith). Each offers contrasting viewpoints from their own lived experiences. While there is a growing cultural push for women to be heard, these liberties are not often granted to Black women, who suffer a variety of microaggressions. On *RTT*, conversations are held at a physical round red table, which acts as an intersectional space where femininity, age, and color (i.e., Blackness) become the lens through which honest and vulnerable discussions about health, identity, and relationships are presented. Viewers engage with content

through comments, reactions (i.e., emoji-based icons), sub-groups, and sharing episodes within their own social network. This paper investigates how Black women's voices and vulnerabilities are expressed through an alternative media platform that disrupts longstanding systems meant to silence them. This paper utilizes Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black feminism to examine how the *RTT* series counteracts societal assumptions about Black women and employs an alternative media platform and counter-narrative storytelling to disrupt racialized media systems.

Literature

CRT and media positioning

Emerging from critical legal studies in the 1970s and 1980s, CRT reexamined societal and psychological impacts of law and policy decisions within unequal power structures that resulted in negative outcomes for people of color (Hunt, 1986). Legal scholars like Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Patricia Williams, and Kimberlé Crenshaw studied the historical treatment of people of color and the implications of systematic prejudice on society at large. CRT was eventually expanded to other fields, including education, media, and economics. With this expansion, CRT could be operationalized through lenses that interrogated historical practices towards people of color within established structures. Delgado (1984) revealed a circular approach of citation practices that allowed white male scholars to expand on each other's work and effectively position themselves prominently within civil rights literature. Combating biases that suggested minority writers produced poor quality work, he suggested that 'unconscious action and choice' led to citation decisions that ultimately centered control of progress in the hands of whites. He later (1989) introduced the method of narrative storytelling to provide counterstories to the dominant white lens and established wisdom.

At the same time, the Black feminist movement was gaining traction, framed in the Combahee River Collective Statement (CHRC, 2015) as 'the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face' (para 1). The convergence of sexual and racial identities provided for unique oppressive experiences that were, at times, exacerbated by the 'negative solidarity' white women imposed in their alignment with white men to gain progress through oppressive acts. 'Neoliberal feminism' further elevated white women by suggesting individual action is the key to women's liberation, ignoring collective efforts against systemic social injustice (Rottenberg, 2013).

Few (2007) argues that feminist CRT helps us understand how social inequities are reinforced by the institutions with which Black women interact daily. hooks (2015) explains that images of Black people in mass media frequently reinforce power structures of white supremacy. She explains,

There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people. (p. 2)

By expanding the use of CRT to understand how Black feminism operates within media processes, we reflect on multiple ways that *RTT* opposes Eurocentric practices that favor Western White hierarchical perspectives (Sobande & Osei, 2020). Critical topics are explored through a counter-narrative framing that centers Black, intergenerational women who also creatively control both access to and delivery of diverse cultural perspective. Pinkett-Smith's decision to tackle critical topics from the counter-narrative allows the audience to appreciate the context and humanity of experience rarely afforded to Black women. We approach the act of inquiry, data analysis, and interpretation from our experiences as women who reflect both sides (i.e., Black and White) of the feminist movements.

Media representation and intersections of Black women's experiences

Jada Pinkett-Smith is a notable figure in the entertainment industry, having played roles such as a doting mother turned adventurous friend in *Girls Trip*, a well-regarded leader in *The Matrix* series, an armed robber in *Set it Off*, and a fat-positive hippopotamus in *Madagascar*. Pinkett-Smith is conscious of how the media positions images of her and how this impacts her personal well-being, saying of her *Madagascar* role, 'Our images of ourselves are often based on how other people see us ... But the moment you understand your power and your beauty, your life changes' (Longsdorf, 2012, para 3). Centering Black characters and assigning control to Black creators pushes against persistent negative framing to normalize positive models of Black culture.

Black women have historically been stereotyped in media as mammies, matriarchs, sexual sirens, and welfare mothers or queens (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woodard & Mastin, 2005). They have been demonized, hypersexualized, hyper masculinized, criminalized, and depicted as sub-human or animalistic (Gammage, 2016). The on-screen presence of successful Black working mothers on *RTT* challenges assumptions surrounding race and class privilege that suggests that ideals of motherhood are intertwined with whiteness and staying at home (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). It is not Blackness *or* womanness that are centered in this series; it is the intersection and dual complexity of Black womanhood.

By shifting the angle with which stories are presented, media can gain a more holistic view of the lives and perspectives of women in the margin (hooks, 1984). Pinkett-Smith continues to rebel against the 'strategic ambiguity' (i.e., a more conciliatory approach) invoked by other Black female celebrities in what is considered a post-racial era (Joseph, 2019). Rather, Pinkett-Smith uses her celebrity status to push the boundaries of what are allowable topics surrounding race and gender. Speaking to forms of entertainment and popular culture depictions of Black women, such as television shows and media appearances, in a 'Michelle Obama era' Joseph suggests,

As media consumers, we watch our favorite (or most hated) celebrities negotiating microaggressive forms of post racial racism, and we see our own strategies of resistance mirrored or rejected, which enables us to form new strategies for everyday life that align or diverge from their performances. (p. 3)

During a social media uptick in #BlackLivesMatter and #OscarsSoWhite commentary, Black celebrities varied in their resistance. While Jada Pinkett Smith boycotted the 2016 Oscars, Kerry

Washington negotiated the need for a ‘seat at the table’. *RTT* extends Jada’s approach by providing media consumers with strategies to negotiate difficult issues beyond the use of strategic ambiguity, confronting difficult issues head on.

A central argument of CRT considers the intersection of varying identities that create additional layers of biases. Coined as intersectionality by Crenshaw (2018), it describes how Black women’s experiences are distorted or erased by segmenting sex and race, rather than recognizing the reality of simultaneously living both identities. This intersection of identities (i.e., being both Black and a woman), are not separate oppressions. Instead, they are entangled under multi-layered, increasingly detrimental forms of subjugation. This paper employs the concept of intersectionality by specifically focusing on Black women, as opposed to isolated discussions of Black people or women, where prominent themes of the larger group overshadow or further obfuscate Black women’s unique experiences.

According to Crenshaw, the discrimination of Black women has often been minimized or excluded unless it directly related to their distinct separation of identity (i.e., Blackness or womanness). The experiences of an intersectional lens expressed by Black women have been documented in various domains, yet the generational differences of these experiences are rarely discussed. Furthermore, advancements often occur that benefit only one part of the identity, generally women and most notably white women. Jada Pinkett-Smith, her mother, and daughter, give different historical perspectives on how they have navigated their experience through this lens when traditional media representations have excluded or misrepresented the full complexity of Black women’s lives. *RTT* addresses topics of sexuality, femininity, addiction, and racism and presents it from varying generational Black women’s perspectives. We aim to better understand what topics audiences choose to engage with and their sentiments about the series as it relates to the race and gender of its hosts.

Alternative media as a form of disruption

Head of Video, Fidgi Simo (2019), announced the much-anticipated success of Facebook Watch as place where people could not only view video content, but also build communities. He suggested it would be a place to create ‘deep bonds’ rather than previously passive viewing experiences to which consumers were accustomed. These alternative media platforms counter systemic issues of accessibility by offering shows led by creators of color and with lower gatekeeping barriers (Patel, 2017). The platform and streaming video content are freely open to anyone who joins the social media site.

This model acts as a disruptor to paid streaming options and the multi-layered production approvals of traditional media. It also allows for exclusive content to drive loyalists to the platform (McGee, 2017) and for Black creators to express joy as resilience and counter the negative depictions often ascribed to their community (Lu & Steele, 2019). Studies show that Black people, especially Black women, have long desired and engaged with this type of content (Fife, 1974).

Unlike traditional media, comments, shares, and emotion-based reactions on Facebook provide more nuanced information about viewers than other platforms. The unmediated role of social

media allows users to perform identity in new ways, which can often be liberated from traditional notions surrounding concepts of self (Albrechtslund & Albrechtslund, 2014). This is particularly crucial for Black women as previous research shows that social digital leisure can lead to increased social interaction, exchange, and support (Rojas de Francisco et al., 2016). Digital leisure includes activities undertaken during one's free time using internet or internet-based technologies such as computers, tablets, smartphones, video consoles (López-Sintas et al., 2017). This study, therefore, analyzes how the alternative platform of Facebook Watch allows women of color to address critical issues of race and gender under the pretext of digital leisure. Further, this study examines the *RTT* series as a model of media positioning that considers both cultural and intergenerational experiences within black communities and elevates the voices of Black Women to facilitate dialogue that systematically tackles issues related to identity, health, and relationships.

Methods

This study explored topics discussed on *RTT*, viewer perceptions of the series, and the relevancy of the platform as a tool to counter racist systems in America. Themes such as celebrity disclosures on mental health, challenges of navigating gender identity, and the impact of racism and colorism on the Black community, are analyzed as part of this study to indicate if they are dominant foci that resonate with viewers. This study used the lenses of CRT and intersectionality to better understand the role of media representation in viewer engagement with a Black, female-led talk show and to explore the role of Facebook Watch as a disrupter in media.

The research questions included:

- RQ1 – What themes are present in the *RTT* series and how do those themes within the model of Facebook Watch disrupt the positioning of Black women's voices and counteract institutional systems of oppression?
- RQ2 – What episodes resonate the most with viewers and why?
- RQ3 – How do viewers in the US engage with the *RTT* series and what are their perceptions of the series?

A Qualtrics survey was distributed between 21 March 2019 and 4 April 2019 using Mechanical Turk (Mturk). This covered a time period of increased viewership and helped to gauge early adopter reactions. Mturk provided an appropriate outlet for accessing a broad range of viewers. Previous research suggests that though the use of Mturk is generally not as representative of the US population as a probability sample, it is more representative than in-person convenience samples (Berinsky et al., 2012). The survey data was supplemented by analyses of social media comments, reactions, and shares to gain additional publicly available feedback related to specific episodes. The inclusion of early viewer reactions and supplemental data collection allowed for two important methodological considerations: (1) qualitative sentiments were able to be gathered independent of the platform in question (i.e., the anonymous survey) and (2) survey comments were able to be compared to overarching themes and social engagement over time available on the public platform.

Respondents were asked to only complete the survey if they had watched the series and could provide detailed feedback; those that provided false (i.e., referenced a different show or provided no context for *RTT*) or incomplete information were excluded from the results. Approximately 732 responses were gathered from across the world. Data quality of international responses was generally low (i.e., incomplete or included open-ended comments that seldom demonstrated respondents had viewed the series). Given that the research questions were related to US viewers' engagement with alternative media models and with themes related to systematic and institutional racism, responses were filtered to include only respondents in the US who (1) indicated that they had viewed the series and (2) provided an answer to at least one of the open-ended questions. This resulted in 182 complete responses. Previous research suggests that data saturation is generally achieved with a sample of 150 participants, fewer when multiple open-ended questions are included in web-based surveys (Tran et al., 2016).

A mixed-method approach was taken to data analysis. Summary statistics were performed for close-ended survey questions and episode views. Open-ended questions were manually coded, following Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory allows researchers to identify social and social psychological processes and understand the meanings people make of their actions and the situations they encounter in their daily lives (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). A constructivist approach was taken, in that researchers allowed the codes and themes to emerge from the data. The analysis included line-by-line or open-coding in Microsoft Excel employing a constant comparative method (e.g., comparing codes back and forth to ensure consistency and making necessary adjustments; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Each code was negotiated between the authors two to three times until consensus was reached. A similar process was applied to theoretical coding, where open codes were grouped into broader themes representing key ideas or thoughts. Respondent quotes are presented verbatim, without editing for content or grammar.

Additional thematic analysis was conducted on the episodes to uncover the frequency of topics discussed by the hosts and guests. Consistent with previous recommendations for thematic analysis of open-ended questions, the themes presented below represent a saturation in salience (Weller et al., 2018) of themes that emerged. A statistical count of views for each episode is provided to gauge the topics of greatest interest to the digital audience. Given that all previously aired episodes are freely available to Facebook users, viewers have complete autonomy on the episodes they choose to view and with which they interact. Categorizing the series by topic and exploring themes helped to recognize issues that might disrupt societal assumptions and provide a counter narrative for Black women. Using Crowdtangle, an aggregate database of Facebook pages, data from all three seasons of *RTT* were downloaded and analyzed on 8 February 2021. Comments, reactions, shares, and video views were included in this data pull, then sorted based on the date of airing. A subsection of the top six episodes in each season with the most views were further analyzed to gauge engagement. Three seasons, which included 67 episodes, were categorized for thematic analysis.

Reactions were viewed as a Likert scale of audience engagement to better understand the relationship between themes and sentiment. Kaur et al. (2019) extended sentiment classifications to include behavioral reactions, such as shares and comments, as more predictable forms of active participation. Sadler (2021) applied CRT to assess audience engagement of media posts on

Facebook regarding the topic of immigration. Likes, shares, and comments became extensions of engagement, with reactions viewed as Likert responses to posts. She also showed that there were shifts in how people engaged with critical topics, sharing more within personal, connected networks of interests that closely aligned to personal values and shared ethos, and commenting more frequently on posts. This shift is explored here via quantitative data of comments, shares, and reactions of *RTT* episodes.

Results

Survey respondents

Respondents to the survey came from across the US, with a few notable clusters in Chicago, IL, New York, NY/Philadelphia, PA, and Memphis, TN /Oxford, MS (Figure 1). More respondents were concentrated in urban centers, but many respondents were also from more rural areas. Few respondents came from the Great Plains states (e.g., Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming).



Figure 1. Red Table Talk viewers in the U.S. by location.

Respondents were asked several open-ended and closed-ended questions. A general analysis of the respondent's overall impression of the show was initially conducted. The overwhelming majority of respondents (89.01%) indicated that they had a positive impression of the series. Some (8.24%) indicated a neutral impression and fewer (2.75%) indicated a negative impression.

RTT episode themes

The thematic analysis of *RTT* episodes revealed five overarching themes throughout the three seasons analyzed (through February 8, 2021): relationships (32 episodes, 42% total), health (26 episodes, 34% total), identity (12 episodes, 15% total), race (11 episodes, 14% total), and parenting (6 episodes, 7% total). Some themes overlapped in episodes, such as the *Should White People Adopt Black Children* episode, which fell into both the race and parenting categories. Sub-themes found in *relationships* included *sisterhood* and *marriage*, whereas the *health* theme

included sub-themes of *addiction, mental/physical/sexual health, and updates on the coronavirus, or COVID-19, pandemic*. The top six episodes by viewership were pulled and analyzed, as seen in Table 1, alongside their corresponding themes and viewership numbers.

Table 1. Thematic coding of most viewed six episodes per season.

Show Title	Percent of respondents who viewed	Global Views (through 2/8/2021)	Overarching Theme
Season 1			
‘Motherhood’	49.45%	32.2M	Parenting
‘Girls Trippin’ with Gabrielle Union’	43.41%	27.5M	Relationships
‘Facing Addiction: Jada & Adrienne Share Their Family's Story’	32.42%	27.6M	Health
‘Becoming Mr. & Mrs. Smith (Part 1)’	40.11%	26.9M	Relationships
‘Our Unique Union (Part 2)’	32.42%	33.0M	Relationships
‘Jordyn Woods Shares the Truth’	44.51%	34.3M	Race/Identity
Season 2			
‘First Ladies of the NBA: Meet the Curry’s’	–	18.5M	Relationships
‘The Roadblocks Between You and Love’	–	14.0M	Relationships
‘Should White People Adopt Black Children’	–	15.0M	Race/Parenting
‘Will Smith's Emergency Family Meeting’	–	32.6M	Health
‘Demi Moore and Her Daughters’	–	16.1M	Relationships
‘Smith Family Medical Results Revealed’	–	14.3M	Health
Season 3			
‘What You Need to Know About Coronavirus’	–	114.2M	Health
‘Managing Our Anxiety & Fear During COVID-19’	–	45.8M	Health
‘Coping with Addiction During Coronavirus’	–	84.9M	Health
‘A Girls Trip Coronavirus Quarantine Reunion’	–	24.1M	Relationships
‘Jada and Will: Their First One-on-One Conversation’	–	40M	Relationships
‘Jada Brings Herself to the Table’	–	37.6M	Relationships

Themes presented here were led by the hosts and included diverse guests to guide the conversation. The counternarrative positioning of CRT frames topics within the creative control of Black women, engages audiences in a co-created breakdown of rooted systems that force a shift in perspective about otherwise taboo discussions.

How U.S. viewers engage with RTT

The two most prominent themes for episodes included relationships and health, with 88% of the series dedicated to either or both. Viewers primarily engaged with *RTT* via comments or shares (Figure 2) or reactions (Figure 3). More than 500,000 comments and over 1.5 million shares were recorded for episodes that resonated most with viewers. The shares are particularly important, as they indicate an alignment of values and a desire to introduce these topics and/or episodes to personal networks, as noted in previously mentioned research (Kaur et al., 2019; Sadler, 2021). The reactions, which are notably high for ‘likes’ and ‘loves’, confirm that audiences are generally affirmative of these episodes. This suggests that historical representations of Black women in media may have missed opportunities to better engage with audiences by employing an intersectional lens that considers critical, cultural and, importantly, positive depictions of relationships and health.

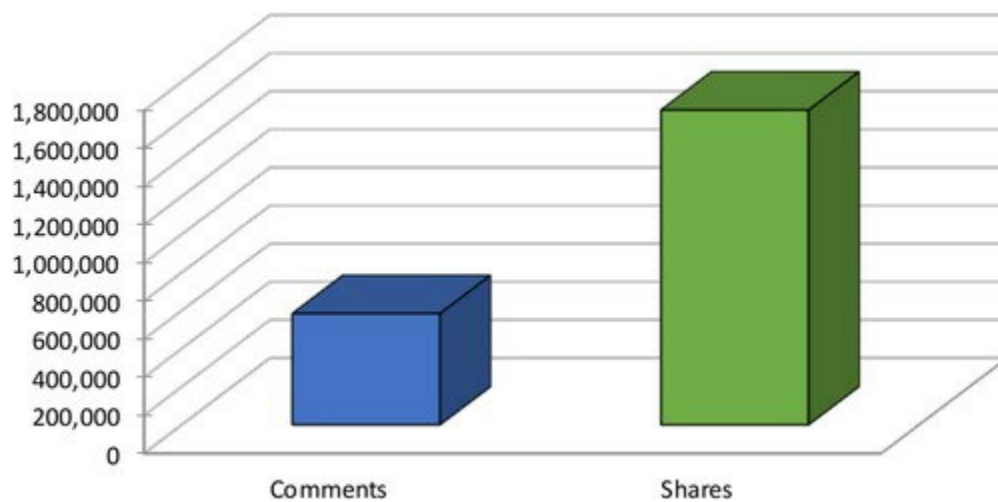


Figure 2. Episode themes: health & relationships (comments/shares).

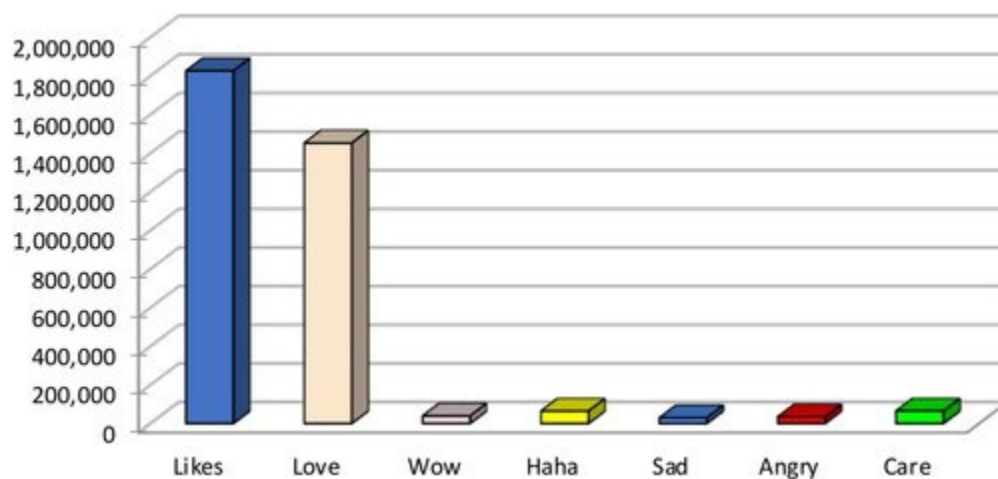


Figure 3. Themes: health & relationships (reactions).

Episodes that resonated the most with viewers

Survey respondents were more or less equally split regarding the number of episodes of *RTT* that they had viewed. The greatest percentage of respondents had viewed 6 or more episodes (36.26%), with one-third (32.97%) having viewed 3–5 episodes and 30.77% having viewed 1–2 episodes. The most frequently watched episode was the first episode that aired on Motherhood (49.45% of respondents; Table 1). This was followed by Episode 27 with guest Jordyn Woods (45.51%) and Episode 4 with guest Gabrielle Union (43.41%). Also popular were Episodes 2 on *Surviving Loss* (40.11%) and Episode 11 on *Becoming Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (40.11%). Less popular episodes included Episode 21 on *Red Table Workout* (10.99%) and Episode 20 featuring *Christmas with the Smiths* (12.64%). Respondents were asked, ‘Which episode(s) sticks out to you? Why?’. Responses indicate that while popular episodes were enhanced by the celebrity factor, the overall meaning of the show to respondents was most greatly influenced by the hosts confronting deep and meaningful topics.

Motherhood

Family dynamics are an important component of the show's appeal. In the premiere episode on motherhood, Jada Pinkett Smith sat down with her husband's ex-wife, Sheree Fletcher, to discuss co-parenting their blended family. This resonated with a number of respondents. One from Bronx, NY wrote, *'The first episodes about the three women growing up in-care of each other. It was awesome to see three generations of women talk about how the last one raising them impacted them, through a table conversation.'* Another in Stockton, CA added, *'Motherhood' definitely sticks out to me. Being a mother of two, I have never related to any episode of a series more.'* One survey respondent from Seattle, WA articulated,

They speak to many of my innermost feelings about life. At first, I assumed that the show would not resonate with me because I am not a Mom. How wrong I was! While many of the topics discussed have viewpoints from motherhood, it is to be expected due to the dynamic of the family who hosts the show. I look forward to The Red Table Talk Series.

Jordyn Woods

Many viewers were also interested in the Jordyn Woods episode because of the recent scandal involving Jordyn, a longtime friend of Kylie Jenner and Tristan Thompson, boyfriend of Khloe Kardashian (Kylie's sister) and the father of her child. Jordyn, a Black woman and family friend of the Smith family, was scrutinized in the media and positioned using harmful negative stereotypes. One respondent from Wilmet, IL wrote, *'The Jordan episode because it's a matter of not accepting false accusations and remaining silent. It's about sharing her truth with others in order to set herself free.'* Another in Philadelphia, PA explained, *'Jordyn Woods, it was very much anticipated and I follow her online.'* A respondent in Oxford, MS added,

It was particularly interesting because this young lady was getting torn apart by social media, and Jada provided a platform for her to tell her side (her truth). She may not have had an avenue to do this if it wasn't from this show.

The critical framing *RTT* afforded Jordyn directly counters longstanding media portrayals that fuel biases today. As she faced criticism from women employing the 'negative solidarity' of white feminism (CRCS, 2015), *RTT* hosts pushed back and interrogated the positionality Jordyn faced as a Black woman, initially welcomed and then outcasted from a predominantly white space.

Becoming Mr. & Mrs. Smith

Many respondents were particularly interested in the relationship of Will and Jada Smith, both as a topic they could relate to and as an intimate glance into a celebrity marriage. This two-part episode covered many private parts of the couple's relationship. One respondent from Brooklyn, NY wrote, *'The one about how Will Smith and Jada got married because they are my favorite celebrity couple.'* A respondent in Chicago, IL wrote,

The one where will and jada talk about their relationship and how they had to go through things in order for their relationship to be where it is today. Makes me reflect on my relationship and how we communicate with one another.

Another from Oxford, MS added,

Will and Jada's relationship is my favorite. Their truth and honesty concerning their relationship and self-growth was realistic and eye-opening. Also, the Gabrielle Union episode sticks out because I loved to see two black women admit their faults and move towards forgiveness. Black girl magic!!.

Another from Houston, TX answered, '*Becoming Mr. & Mrs. Smith (Part 1). Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith reveal the truth behind their relationship, from the day they met to the moments of crisis in their 20-plus year.*' Another from Buffalo, NY elaborated,

The episode that sticks out the most to me is the first part of the conversation with Will Smith. I think often times, we think certain celebrities are matches made in heaven when that could be the furthest from the truth. I like that Will was honest about how he tried to pressure Jada to be the wife that he wanted and not the wife that she is.

Facing addiction

Survey respondents were often moved by the difficult topics addressed in the series. Many respondents were moved by Episode 10 'Facing Addiction: Jada & Adrienne Share Their Family's Story' in which Adrienne Banfield discusses her 20-year battle with heroin addiction. One respondent from Wabash, WA wrote,

The episode regarding addiction was so important for me to watch. I am studying social work and plan on working with people who struggle with substance use, so it was good to learn more about the experiences people have from those who have lived with it.

Another in Union, CA, elaborated,

The show about addiction sticks out to me the most. This is primarily because I know a few people battling addiction. The episode gave me a better understanding of what those individuals go through. After watching the episode, I was educated with what one might be feeling when battling addiction.

While some respondents related personally, others were grateful to learn of a new perspective. A respondent from Macomb, IL explained,

The episode 'Facing Addiction' sticks out to me the most. I have never had a drug addiction personally, but there is a huge heroin epidemic in my area so I know of people that are currently drug addicts or have overdosed.

Another from Bluefield, WV added, *‘The addiction episode comes to mind. Just seeing the impact addiction can have on a child and the pain the parent lives even after they’ve recovered.’*

Viewer loyalty

Respondents were also asked ‘What makes you come back to watch episodes?’ Their answers echoed several of the themes that emerged previously. Many felt that the topics were relatable and appreciated the honesty and candor of the guests and hosts. One respondent from Memphis, TN answered, *‘The honesty, truth, and transparency of the hosts and guests. I also watch because I am left with a feeling as if I have just had a real and honest conversation with friends.’* Another respondent from Oxford, MS wrote, *‘The real and raw conversations that speak to the situations and feelings you may be going through or experiencing but probably wouldn’t share with your closest friend.’* Respondents also appreciated that they had the opportunity to learn about new things on a show that provided an alternative from current programming. A respondent from Arlington, VA explained, *‘I like being informed and having different points of view. I love the honesty, just the truth of it all.’* Another from Cheney, KS wrote,

Jada’s transparency, intellect, spiritual maturity, bravery and the fact that she’s real in a sea of fake and garbage reality shows that taint the soul, keep me coming back for more. Jada and her show are gems, and that kind of media is what the USA and the world needs- the right example.

In addition to the content of the show, other respondents appreciated the showcasing of Black women’s experiences that mirrored their own. One individual from Memphis, TN responded, *‘Hearing a different perspective. They look like me. Multi-generational and they have the pulse of certain circles. Also, their guests.’*

What RTT means to viewers

Survey respondents were asked, ‘What does this series mean to you (what types of feelings do you have about the show; how are the hosts speaking to your needs)?’ Respondents were drawn to the series for a variety of often overlapping reasons. Key themes that emerged were related to perceived authenticity, a sense of connection with the hosts, and the ability for the show to tackle difficult topics.

Authenticity

While quite a few viewers tune in for the sheer entertainment factor (mentioned in 28.57% of comments) a larger portion of respondent comments (31.32%; Table 2) expressed appreciation of the show’s authenticity. Codes that emerged were related to the hosts’ honesty, their authentic character, and the raw nature of the content. A respondent from Marion, IL articulated, *‘I think it’s an authentic way to have tough talks, real talks and bring forth a perspective that is often not showcased in mainstream media.’* Another from Columbus, GA wrote, *‘Its women being honest, open, and real. I enjoy the show because jada, willow, and grammy speak on issues that all women can relate to.’* A third respondent from Omaha, NE explained,

It shows real, raw emotion. I love the dynamic of three generations of family being able to honestly discuss real life experiences. It's a breath of fresh air to see the honest emotions, both good and bad, funny, and hurtful, devastating in some cases.

Table 2. Thematic coding of open-ended survey questions.

Theme	Code	Frequency	%
Authenticity (57; 31.32%)	Authentic	27	14.84%
	Honesty	25	13.74%
	Raw	5	2.75%
Entertainment (52; 28.57%)	Host dynamic	29	15.93%
	Entertainment	11	6.04%
	Alternative media	7	3.85%
	Quality of guests	3	1.65%
	Engaging	1	0.55%
	Endearing	1	0.55%
Sense of connection (45; 24.73%)	Sense of connection	5	2.75%
	Relatable	26	14.29%
	Bridging socioeconomic divide	6	3.30%
	Open dialogue	8	4.40%
Expanding one's viewpoints (43; 23.63%)	Exposure to new views	3	1.65%
	Diversity	4	2.20%
	Multi-generational	26	14.29%
	Multi-perspective	10	5.49%
Confronting difficult issues (41; 22.53%)	Normalizes difficult topics	39	21.43%
	Racism	2	1.10%
Empowering (32; 17.58%)	Female perspective	11	6.04%
	Presenting black women positively	10	5.49%
	Empowerment	2	1.10%
	Pride	2	1.10%
	Liberating	1	0.55%
	Representation of repressed voices	3	1.65%
	Inspiring	3	1.65%
	Safe space	3	1.65%
Safe space (20; 10.99%)	Non-judgmental	5	2.75%
	Vulnerability	4	2.20%
	Respectful	2	1.10%
	Caring	6	3.30%
Educational (16; 8.79%)	Informative	3	1.65%
	Thought provoking	3	1.65%
	Educational	1	0.55%
	Illuminating	1	0.55%
	Creates awareness	1	0.55%
	Insightful	3	1.65%
	Relevant	4	2.20%
Processing emotions (5; 2.75%)	Healing	1	0.55%
	Feeling relieved	1	0.55%
	Personal growth	1	0.55%
	Emotional	2	1.10%

Sense of connection

Nearly a quarter of comments (24.73%) mentioned that the show offered them a sense of connection, that they found the hosts or topics relatable, and that the topics opened dialogue for them among their acquaintances. Several respondents also expressed that they appreciated that they were able to relate to wealthy celebrities through the show's platform. A respondent from Ankeny, IA explained, *'It makes me feel that i am not alone, like maybe there isn't that big of a difference between the super-rich and a regular person.'* Another respondent from Chicago, IL added, *'It gives insight of interesting topics. Jada makes the viewer feel like they are at that table as well. It is different than what others are doing. It feels real and not some super scripted show.'*

Expanding one's viewpoints

While some respondents felt they could relate, a nearly equal number of comments (23.63%) were grateful to the show for expanding their viewpoint and exposing them to a diversity of perspectives, particularly across generations. One respondent from Bellawood, GA described,

It's like sitting quietly in on the tea party in the living room of my diverse friends. I appreciate the candor, honesty, and variety of topics. It also helps spark conversations with my friends by introducing me to well thought out yet different points of view.

A respondent from Clemson, SC elaborated, *'Generally, I think it's a great series and I appreciate having perspectives from various age groups and backgrounds.'*

Confronting difficult issues

More than one-fifth of comments (22.53%) mentioned an appreciation of the show for tackling difficult issues, specifically racism. One respondent from Covington, TN wrote, *'I love that they address topics that are typically viewed as taboo in such a transparent manner.'* A respondent from Chicago, IL explained, *'Jada discusses taboo subjects such as racism, colorism, jealousy that most avoid due to the fact that it makes people uncomfortable. The discussions bring awareness that is needed in this society.'* Another from Pittsburgh, PA added,

This series explores various topics people are too afraid to address, including racism, prejudice and various other topics. As an African American woman i finally get a chance to hear healthy discussions about issues people fear to bring to the table.

Empowering

Some respondent comments (17.58%) also expressed how they found the show empowering. This included showcasing a female perspective, presenting Black women positively, and representing repressed voices. Respondents expressed a feeling of empowerment and pride and found the content inspiring and liberating. A respondent from Lafayette, MS exclaimed, *'Empowerment! I feel a sense of strength when I see three black women being unapologetically honest and open about life.'* Another from Chicago, IL added, *'I enjoy seeing 3 generations of*

black women in a positive light. A third respondent from Louisville, KY elaborated, *'Loooooove the show. Love the dynamics of the 3 generations of perspectives about various life topics. They are speaking to my needs by being black opinionated women with meaningful insight about life.'*

Safe Space

Several (10.99%) comments also described how they found the series a safe space where information could be shared in a non-judgmental, caring, and respectful environment. They also appreciated the hosts and guests' vulnerability in creating such a space. One respondent from Chicago, IL explained,

I really enjoy the conversation, it provides a safe space for them and guest to be vulnerable and share their truth. They speak about topics that are real issues that we all are dealing with and making it okay to talk about.

Another from Wilmette, IL added, *'It's great to see a platform where people of color can share their narratives without judgment to exist. It's almost like sitting at the table with loved ones and having a conversation about the tough issues.'*

Processing emotions

A smaller subset of comments (2.75%) mentioned that the show helped them process their own emotions related to difficult topics. A respondent from Cheney, KS explained, *'The series mean personal growth through facing one's demons. The topics of forgiveness and co-parenting peacefully and respectfully have impacted me.'* Another from Chicago, IL wrote, *'Relatable, healing, spiritual. Seeing black women be vulnerable, be able to make mistakes and still be proud of who they are.'* Overall, respondents were drawn to the series for the entertainment factor, but frequently had more meaningful interactions with the content.

Facebook Watch as media disruptor

Facebook Watch presents itself as a media disruptor and viewers understood the alternative nature of the platform. One respondent from Chicago, IL wrote, *'As a young black woman, I think the show speak to issues that affect me. Issues that are often ignored in mass media.'* Another from Oxford, MS explained, *'It's a platform where Black women can relate to for everyday issues. It reflects on experiences that we live with and go through in our lives.'* One survey respondent from Seattle, WA articulated,

At one point, I considered closing my FB account as most of what I was reading outside of posts made friends and acquaintances seemed to be primarily negative. I did not feel as though I was growing from the site. News can be read anywhere. There is a myriad of social networking and news media sites to choose from. And quite frankly, FB was working my nerves as it seemed that my page was being hacked or hijacked no less than 3 to 4 times per month. The Red Table Talk program is what kept me around.

Discussion

It is well-established that mainstream media explicitly or implicitly reinforces white supremacy and bolsters stereotypes of Black women (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Cox, 2020; Logan & Mackey, 2021; Patterson et al., 2016a, 2016b; Savali, 2015). Yet, evidence is emerging that alternative media forms, including digital and social media, can break this cycle and create counter spaces for people of color (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Kelly, 2018; O'Byrne, 2019). This is a critical shift in digital leisure as different generations of Black women engage with content online. *RTT* is an example of one show that has moved beyond 'diversity programming' (Monk-Payton, 2017), where critical topics for communities of color are still presented by white people and are housed within the institutional context of mainstream media. Rather, the series uses an alternative platform to amplify voices of resistance as orchestrated by intergenerational Black women.

CRT, as applied to media strategy and execution, is as much about the power of distributing authentic stories as it is the impact of those counter-narratives on audiences. This study shows that *RTT* allows for a greater feeling of authenticity, a sense of connection, and a 'safe space' for engaging in dialogue around difficult or previously taboo topics. Viewers responded to the vulnerability expressed by the women and guests at the table. The public dialogue that occurred both on screen and in comment sections led to important emotional healing for some viewers. Safe spaces are often 'associated with keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment' (The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1346) and are critical for black women to engage in dialogue about key issues of importance to them (Kelly, 2018). They allow Black women to 'develop more fully human, less objectified selves' (Patterson et al., 2016a, p. 48). At the red table, Black women and Black experiences are centered, developed, and curated, reinterpreting Black femininity and demonstrating immense vulnerability. Longstanding beliefs are challenged, including that Black women's strength comes from their ability to forgo asking for help or acknowledging their struggles (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). This expression of a counter-narrative combats the consequences of decades of media influence on Black health, identity, and relationships.

The high level of viewer autonomy and engagement of *RTT* gives a sense of empowerment and allows audiences to perform identity and develop their sense of self through a digital leisure platform (Albrechtslund & Albrechtslund, 2014). The critical race lens is essential here to move beyond examining power structures to begin shifting practices and assessing societal impact. The Jordyn Woods episode, for example, confronts the commodification and sexualization of Black women's bodies that is rooted in slavery but practiced today (Crenshaw et al., 1995). The addiction episode explores the problem as a nuanced mental health issue, a lens often afforded to white celebrities and character archetypes, subsequently breaking stereotypes that are prevalent in popular media. Health, relationships, and cultural and sexual identity presented in the counter-narrative affords Black women expertise and humanity most often only afforded to the dominant culture. These critical endeavors can become the basis for shifting policy and perception.

Facebook Watch is an industry disruptor because it is freely accessible to all viewers via an Internet connection. Other streaming services (e.g., Hulu, Amazon Prime, and Netflix, Disney Plus) thrive on paid subscriptions, with some including commercial content as an additional

revenue model. The Facebook Watch model affords greater accessibility and engagement and provides a platform where people of color can amplify their voices break down institutional barriers. *RTT* represents free content that centers Black women via an easily accessible social platform. In a crowded media landscape of fragmented paid digital streaming services, this can change audience behavior, ultimately demanding similar content on paid services and disrupting media structures that silenced or erased Black women.

Nonetheless, Facebook Watch remains a closed network, as not all users are able to develop and launch a streaming series. It is also important to acknowledge that content promoted on Facebook is not free of bias. Viewers are subject to paid advertising. Indeed, the content a user sees is often influenced by their own preferences, the posting habits of their friends, as well as their digital activity outside Facebook (Thorson et al., 2021). Therefore, content on platforms such as Facebook Watch is likely promoted to individuals who are already engaged in like-minded content elsewhere and from whom advertisers are likely to make a profit. Furthermore, Facebook been subject to a variety of serious recent accusations, including contributing to the January 6, 2021 riot at the White House (Isaac, 2021).

Taking into account the increased social media usage of Black people to protest ongoing social injustices, Facebook's Watch platform creates an opportunity to center itself at the midpoint of accessibility, cultural relevance and inclusive framing. A ten-year study on Black consumers by Nielsen (2020) showed that 70% of Black households use streaming services, 56% of the top broadcast shows include a Black female lead, and Black buying power reached \$1.4 trillion in 2019. Many of the top shows for Netflix had diverse representation in casting, and culturally relevant movies, such as *Black Panther*, are streamed heavily during months that recognize Black history. The detriment of not recognizing cultural relevance is a costly endeavor. Furthermore, in order to counter assumptions in media that influence policies and practices of institutionalized racism, the industry can provide more opportunities for people of color to control the narrative. *RTT* positions Black women as the mediator, influencer, and expert in bringing critical conversations to the table, a space often regarded in homes as the point of intimate conversation and reconciliation.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how CRT can be applied to media strategy and framing, leveraging alternative and vastly accessible streaming platforms to curate Black experiences and shift perceptions. Black women can position their own narratives that frame critical, cultural conversations from their viewpoint, allowing viewers to gain more complexity in Black storytelling. This combats institutional structures of racism that systematically restrict access and rely on stereotypical depictions. Audiences show that they are receptive to Black women as leads in critical conversations, backed by both survey data and Nielsen reports of changing demographic preferences for media.

The research questions sought to better understand which topics resonate most with audiences, the perceptions of popular episodes, and whether Facebook Watch provides better access and engagement via an alternative model. Quantitative survey and engagement analyses allowed for a broad understanding of important episodes and thematic analyses permitted nuanced

understanding of emerging themes and viewpoints. The varied experiences of intergenerational Black women were cathartic for survey respondents, while the key topics of health, relationships and identity were most relevant to commenting audiences. Highlighting topics that resonate with viewers allows us to understand what needs are most prevalent for varying communities, especially Black women, and trace societal or policy impact back to red table discussions. The topic of health, for which Black communities have historically had less access to resources, was the most viewed and shared theme in this series. New access to this information not only disrupts intact power structures but also opens opportunities for policies that may fundamentally shift access to resources. This research ultimately advances the counter-narrative approach by applying CRT to mass media, showcasing how depictions framed and advanced by Black women are able to push against perceived stereotypes and effectively dismantle systems of white supremacy.

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