Media Representations and Perceptions of Black “Mama’s Boys”: A Creative Ethnography

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in Communication Studies

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December 2015
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Acknowledgement

First, I will like to start with giving glory, honor and thanks to my Lord and Savior. Without God this completion wouldn’t have been possible. This has been a long journey and I have had extraordinary individuals to help and support me in my path to completion of this creative thesis project. Thank you to my advisor and Chair of my committee, Dr. Sakile K. Camara, for her continuous support and her patience, motivation and immense knowledge. I will also, like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Rebecca Litke and Dr. Darlene K. Drummond, for their insightful comments and encouragement, but also for the challenging questions which motivated me to dig deeper and provide a much stronger research project. I am so deeply grateful to the committee for their help, professionalism, valuable guidance and the great passion they had in helping me complete my creative thesis project.

Thank you to all of the Department faculty members and staff members for their help and support through my time at CSUN. Thank you to Lawah Dawah and Rich Visions for their generous support and providing video equipment, which helped with the data collection and analysis for this thesis project. I also want to sincerely thank the 10 men who shared their perceptions and experiences with me. They invited me into their lives and in the process made me a better person.

Finally, I want to thank my family: my parents (Mommy and Daddy), my siblings (LaMarra, Aaron and Brian), my nephew (CaMarr), my aunties (Irene Bailey Middleton and Rosie Kennedy) and many more family members and friends for the love, support and words of encouragement. Their words of encouragement inspired me to finish the race I started.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature Page</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant Findings</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and Conclusion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Research</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Media Representations and Perceptions of Black “Mama’s Boys”: A Creative Ethnography

By
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Master of Arts in Communication Studies

In this ethnographic study, 10 black males were interviewed for 40 minutes each about their perceptions of and status as “Mama’s Boys.” Additionally, four films and sitcoms from *Raisin in the Sun* to *The Haves and the Have Nots* were screened for portrayals of Black “Mama’s Boys” representations and integrated into the creative product. Rather than examining representations that simply reflected reality, representations were examined to explore how representations of “Mama’s Boys,” are presented and creatively connected to the narratives of participants in the study. Narratives revealed that “Mama’s Boys” within media text are ascribed similarly to “non-Mama’s Boys,” but differently from self-avowed “Mama’s Boys.”
Introduction

Masculinity is a gendered process whereby men are socialized to act toward and think about others. It is often associated with a number of identities and “Mama’s Boy” is one of them. As a by product of this gendered process, the male’s identity flows out of his experiences with others (Jackson, 1997; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2002; Medinger, 2000) including his mother. However, Black masculinity is laced with a set of experiences that influences his identity differently than other non-Black males (Akbar, 1991; Majors & Gordon, 1994). How he gets there—to masculinity, is further perpetuated by society’s misconceptions, myths and stereotypes about Black males.

For example, many scholars note that research, literature, and media have negatively portrayed (Brooker, 2000; Hall, 1997; Guerrero, 1995; King & Mitchell, 1990; 1991) and socially located Black males as being the root causes of crime, homicide, family abandonment, poor education, unemployment, and polyamorism, in American culture (Horton & Horton, 1999; Sommerville, 1999). In other words, Black males are seen as useless, unfit, and powerless, irresponsible boys who have not developed into responsible men or productive citizens who are capable of making contributions to the American society and therefore, the world. Thus, there is no balance in the spectrum of Black masculinity; Black males are either hyper aggressive or feminine (aberration of a gay male). In this study, one aspect of Black masculinity is explored that establishes what Medinger (1999) describes as a “tentative identity” (p. 29), and one of the phases that demonstrates a lack of growth in manhood is a “Mama’s Boy.”

There are three reasons why an investigation of Black men’s perceptions of the phrase “Mama’s Boy” is important. First, an examination of Black male experiences
may reveal deeper meaning of the popular “Mama’s Boy” expression. This type of inquiry makes it possible to understand the different ways the phrase “Mama’s Boy” functions in society to construct Black masculinity. Second, the media portrayals (films such as *A Raisin in the Sun, Boyz in the Hood, Baby Boy, Think Like a Man* and television series *The Game* and *The Haves and The Haves Nots*) of “Mama’s Boys” and Black masculinity, whether presented through big or low-budgeted films, communicates profiles and influences perceptions of Black male masculinity. Third, presenting the voices of Black males, who perceived themselves as a “Mama’s Boy,” and those who do not, make it possible to clarify the dueling images of Black “Mama’s Boys.” Thus, this creative project will discover and describe in a visual way, to a wider audience, the concerns with the perceptions of the phrase “Mama’s Boy,” and the way the phrase constructs Black male masculinity through personal experiences layered on film representations.

Existing research, in and outside the field of communication, has studied Black masculinity, but there has been very little research that addresses “Mama’s Boys.” Therefore, the purpose of this creative research project is to examine, in part, Black male perceptions of the phrase “Mama’s Boy,” and to demonstrate the historical representation of Black “Mama’s Boys” in the media through media displays of Black “Mama’s Boys.” This creative research project will assist in unveiling the voices of Black males on the topic of “Mama’s Boy” and how Black masculinity is constructed through direct and indirect experiences with the label “Mama’s Boy.” This creative research project will also contribute to a much-needed discourse within the field of Communication Studies on Black male’s representation in media, Black male and female relationships and Black
males’ perceptions of masculinity; this research will aid in the development of a broader spectrum of Black males representation in the media and society. My hope with this project is to ignite a conversation between scholars in the field of Communication Studies on Black “Mama’s Boys” and how the phrase constructs masculinity, personal relationships, and media portrayals.
Literature Review

Boy and Mama’s Boy Meanings

The word *boy* ultimately contributes to the cultural models that layer male and “human” experience. The etymology of modern English *boy* suggests that the term’s denotation of male youth has been emancipated from an archaic one, that of “servant.” The term continued to be used in a derogatory way, especially in the context of slavery and the Jim Crow era (Dean, 2000; Morrell, 1998). Black men were derogatorily called *boy* to denigrate and emasculate them of their manhood. Black men were not thought to be equal to White men, thus, Black males were never called man to imply that they could never take on the responsibility of a man. This master-slave dynamic further impacted how Black men defined their masculinity and manhood (Majors & Gordon, 1994; Morrell, 1998). “Mama’s Boy” is defined and shown in the media as having a negative stigma in the Black community. When you deconstruct the phrase “Mama’s Boy,” the word *boy* is associated with the painful historical emasculation of Black men in America.

Akbar (1991) defines the word *boy* as the next stage of transformation from the biologically bound definition of “male.” He clearly describes *boy* as male who is self-centered and focused on himself. The boyhood stage is also marked by “discipline” and “learning to exercise control over one’s self” (p. 12). Akbar (1991) uses the servant and slave analogy to explain the complicated patterns of a boyish man. As a *boy*, he is a “servant” even though he may not be a slave like a “male,” but similar to the “male,” the *boy* still struggles on his own to complete the task at hand. He explains, although the *boy* may get compensation for his efforts, he is still incapable of controlling the compensation given to him. This is what makes a boyish man dependent on someone else’s information.
for his advancement. As a “Mama’s Boy,” he is unable to fully depend on his own decision making skills, but rather seeks the approval of his mother to lead and guide him.

“Mama’s Boy” is a controversial phrase that not only creates disputes within the Black community because of the negative stigma associated with the phrase, but it further perpetuates the misinterpretation, misperceptions and incompleteness of the media’s representations of Black men as “Mama’s Boys.” According to Gordon & Meth (1990) men whom are too close to their mothers are seen as “Mama’s Boy,” which is threatening to their masculinity. The meaning of the phrase “Mama’s Boy” is often use to indicate homosexual tendency, boys who are too close to their mothers, causes gender nonconformity (Holden, 1998).

Although, “Mama’s Boys” is often described as a man or boy who is a weak link, sissy, wimp, and maladjusted, Lombardi (2012) redefine the term “Mama’s Boy.” She argues that “Mama’s Boys” are strong, very appealing and healthy because of their strong bond with their mothers. By placing value on mother-son communication, the strong bond provides boys with strategies for overcoming adversities, connecting with others, and expressing emotions positively; which makes these all tools that are needed to form modern men (Lombardi, 2012). Therefore, “Mama’s boy” can be seen as a type of masculinity.

**General Notions of Masculinity**

Multiple masculinities of different cultures and periods in history create different gender system ideas. Masculinity can be defined as individual’s internalization of what one’s belief and attitude towards masculinity and the role of a man (Levant & Richmond, 2007). Multiple definitions of masculinity can be found within a single culture (Baron &
Kotthoff, 2001). Therefore, masculinity is not a fixed characteristic of men, but is socially created and changes over time (Connell, 1995; 2002). Different masculinities do not just sit side-by-side as alternative lifestyles; rather they exist in relationship to other masculinities of hierarchy and exclusion. In a given culture or institution, there is a continuum of dominant or hegemonic and subordinate or hyper forms of masculinity (Walker, 2006; Connell, 2002; Morrell, 1998).

Lemelle (2010) reveals that hegemonic masculinity serves to dominate everyone outside the ideal; this is an ideal that almost no one can attain. Lemelle also asserts that although some Black men have bought into the idea of hegemonic masculinity, they do not fully benefit in areas related to cost of living, employment and humane treatment. Lemelle notes that criticism of hegemonic masculinity does not fall exclusively into the laps of White men, but he acknowledges the “spontaneous” consent of some Black men who assume that consent may afford them privileges associated with White maleness. Lemelle (2010) also suggests that these privileges almost exclusively belong to the dominant culture generally and White males specifically. He builds this argument on the substantial dutiful theory, which suggests that individual’s social roles are well defined, with everyone being very clear about his or her duties. Black males and hegemonic masculinity in combination does not exist; therefore, Black men have created an acceptable ideal of masculinity and how a Black man should behave in society.

However, maleness, especially Black maleness, is constrained by hyper-masculinity (Spates & Slatton, 2014). Hyper-masculinity is considered the center for sociopathic behavior that condemns and denies a sense of male normalcy that becomes a part of his social and genetic makeup. Therefore, hyper-masculinity becomes an
oppressive force that dominates masculinity. For those who are already oppressed, whether it is based on race/culture, sexuality, or age, the idea of hyper-masculinity is identified (Akbar, 1991; Spates & Slatton, 2014) with greater intensity, thus it is important to discuss Black masculinity distinctly.

**Defining Black Masculinity**

Black masculinity has multiple definitions; there is no universal definition. However, the term Black masculinity in America has been shaped by the Black male’s experience since arriving in America as a slave. Black masculinity as constructed and formed by the underlining of the historical and social attitudes toward race reveals a power relationships between dominant and marginalized groups. For example, Sibley (1995) explained how European colonialism formed a distinct set of social characteristics and power relationships that justified the enslavement of Africans. In other words, White became associated with positive meanings and Black with negative meanings.

Therefore, in this research, Black masculinity is defined as the Black male’s experience of his manhood (Majors & Gordon, 1994). This manhood is often juxtaposed to the common experience of being raised by a single mother (Bush, 2004). Therefore, the phrase “Mama’s boy,” as it relates to Black masculinity, proposes a distinction between being a strong, independent, masculine boy, male, and man, (Akbar, 1991; Madhubuti, 1990), with responsibilities to himself and others not orchestrated or guided by his mother. Akbar (1991) conceptualizes the notion of what Black masculinity proposes. He categorizes three stages of Black masculinity: male, boy and man. In other words, a male is biologically determined, a boy is developmentally transitioned and a man is psychologically understood. Akbar (1991) explains the distinctions best:
A male is a biological entity…. One need not look beyond the observable anatomical characteristics to determine that he is a male…Maleness is also a mentality that operates with the same principles as biology. It is a mentality dictated by appetite and physical determinants. This mentality is one guided by instincts, urges, desires, and feelings. He is in this mentality a whining, crying, hungry, and dependent little leech…. The next stage in the transformation from the biologically bound definition of “male” is the development of the “boy.” The movement is determined by the development of discipline. Once the mind has become disciplined, the boy is in a position to grow into reasoning…When the primary use of your reason is for the purpose of scheming or lying then you are fixated in the boyish mentality…The thing that transforms a boy into becoming a man is knowledge (p. 3-12).

Akbar’s (1991) conceptualization of Black masculinity points out the stark contrast of the developmental stages of Black masculinity in manhood. In the first stage, which is male, he describes a man who does not think past his physical desires or needs. A male is a man who profits or sponges from others. The next stage is boy; in this stage a man is learning discipline. Discipline is a key component because it leads to his growth in reasoning and knowledge. Discipline allows the man to think independently and transition out of the boyish mentality. However, if he stunts his growth by using reasoning to lie or conspire with ill intent, then he remains as a boy. In the final stage, the man is fully developed and using the knowledge acquired during his transitional stages; he makes solid decisions that are a positive contribution to his community. The final stage in Akbar (1991) notion of Black masculinity is exemplified as an empty space in
media representation of Black masculinity. All of these images (A Raisin in the Sun, Boyz in the Hood, Baby Boy, Think like a Man, The Game and The Haves and the Haves Nots), whether aggressive, violent, animalistic, or emasculated, point to the dehumanization of Black men in society (hooks, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Jones, 1993). Together, these films create a Black masculinity that is defined by an inner-city aesthetic, rebellious attitude, and aggressive posturing (Chan, 1998; Henry, 2002). In turn, these negative images have shaped attitudes and perceptions of Black men that constitute one of several sociohistorical methods by which Black men have been collectively emasculated (Bush, 1999). These negative stereotypes have also disseminated constructions of Black masculinity, which is not void of mother and son relationships.

The Mother and Son Relationship

For generations in the black community, mothers have received the same message in regards to their sons: “Be careful about keeping them ‘too close’ because you might raise a ‘Mama’s Boy’.” A mother and son bond is one of a kind; in fact, mother-son relationship is a man’s first and most important female connection. Mothers, whether married or single, play a vital role in raising a male child (Bush, 2000). Some studies have shown that women are more invested than men in the family relationship (Buss, 1999; Salmon & Daly, 1996).

However, the mother-son relationship, compared to other parent-child dyads, is the least studied. Kerig, Cowan and Cowan (1993) argue that sons learn either positive or negative levels of emotional reciprocity from their mothers. Prior research focused on conflicts and the problematic interaction between mothers and sons (Matthews, Woodall, Kenyon, & Jacob, 1996). After examining the literature, it became strikingly evident that
there are a minimal number of studies on mother-son relationships. Most of the research that has been done on mother–son relationship, is study from the psychological perspective. Scholars from psychology have studied attachment, separation, autonomy and lack of closeness of the mother-son relationship (Greenson, 1968; Olesker, 1990; Lidz, 1992).

Throughout the 1980s, White feminists (Arcana, 1983; Forcey, 1987) began to study how mothers contributed in the reproduction of xenophobic and sexist paradigms with respect to raising their sons. There was a concern of whether mothers were capable of raising their sons to be good decent men with manly responsibilities. Looking at mother-son relationships from this perspective also continued to be the work of White feminists (O'Reilly, 2001; Smith, 1995).

However, largely left out of this discourse were the unique dynamics of Black mother-son relationships. In Black mother-son relationships and White mother-son relationships, there are overlapping aspects and issues, but there are some salient differences such as single parenthood, education and economical inadequacy (Bush, 2004; Madyun & Lee, 2010). Having to create and maintain a relationship in the context of White supremacy is the major factor that differentiates the mothering of Blacks and Whites (Bush, 1996). The underlying question is “Can mothers truly raise and teach their sons how to become men?”

In Black communities, it is the norm for Black mothers to raise their sons in a single parent home or have extended family support. Historically, mostly in the southern area of the United States, Black people had houses near each other. Clusters of households headed by single women could be found and this family dynamic provided
opportunity for collective child caring and financial support (Sudarkasa, 1993). The idea was many single mothers had support rooted in these collective communities and household structures. Forcey, King and Mitchell (1987; 1990; & 1991) explains, black mothers have a difficult time in determining the correct balance between protecting and smothering their sons. The findings revealed that Black mothers who raise their black boys are often caught in a Catch-22 dilemma of preparing their sons to coexist in an anti-black society and at the same time protecting their sons from the threats of the same anti-black society that is specifically targeted towards Black males. This could have a significant effect in shaping a “Mama’s boy.”

The phrase “Mama’s boy” has historically provoked controversy between Black and White communities. This controversy derives from the meaning behind both words in the phrase “Mama’s boy.” The word “mama” has great significance and represents a territory of matriarchal dominance within Black communities (Bush, 2004). Nearly 50% of Black households are headed by mothers, while fathers have left or abandoned the black family unit (Bush, 2004; Madyun & Lee, 2010). Thus, mothers, along with other community members, are the sole providers of financial and emotional support for their children. The word “boy,” on the other hand, has ties to slavery and post-slavery Jim Crow era (Akbar, 1984). Black men were called boy to denigrate and emasculate them. Black men were not thought to be equal to White men, thus, Black males were not called men to imply that they could never take on the responsibility of a man. Thus, black men were relegated to dual status: child-like and dangerous. There is little research on Black “Mama’s boy,” other than what one may find of the phrase “Mama’s boy” in novels, movies and magazines and reality TV.
Film Representation of Black “Mama’s Boys”

The construction of Black masculinity is more than micro articulations of the Black male experience, but is reinforced by popular representations of Black male masculinity and embodies through historical and contemporary constructions. Mainstream media has produced and disseminated consistent portrayals of Black masculinity through film as hyper-masculine, aggressive, violent, and effeminate (Dantley, 2011; Lemelle, 2010; Porter, 2012; Wood, 2012) marking the Black body as dichotomized. In other words, Black men are considered untamable and controlling, and too immature to be responsible for day-to-day happenings. These contradictions further impact Black male identities and his role in US American society.

Black masculinity research has mainly focused on stereotyped portrayals of Black men in media (Guerrero, 1995; Henry, 2002; Tyree, 2011). Guerrero (1995) addresses the struggle to define and contextualize Black manhood in broader terms and against the grain of Hollywood’s flattened out, negative-positive binary. Henry (2002) addresses the representations in these films (e.g. Raisin in A Sun, Boyz in the Hood, Baby Boy, Think Like A Man and television series The Game and The Haves and The Haves Nots) with the report’s centering the problem of Black masculinity and the dominant paradigm for discussion about problems of race and racism in the post-civil rights era. This paradigm has extended to popular culture representations of Black life, both fictional and journalistic, wherein Black mothers are commonly represented as domineering, loud, and excessive in their consumption and love of Black men and their sons (Harris, 2006).

Simultaneously, Black men are stereotypically represented as either sexual threats or emasculated; these are representations that Black Cinema takes much care to counter
in its panoply of interesting, complex Black male characters. According to Majors and Gordon (1994), Black men in America have also had a hand in constructing symbolic postures for Black masculinity. The Black man did not have the same access to the benefits of America because of racism and other forms of discrimination by the dominant White culture. In order to cope with the oppression and disappointment of the substantial dutiful theory, the “Cool Pose” phenomenon was manifested. The “Cool Pose” is a symbolic coping mechanism used to display inter strength, self-assuredness, and longevity regardless of his low social status in society. These various postures have become firmly entrenched in the psyche of Black males as established performances and rituals that seek social competence as their goal (Majors & Gordon, 1994, p. 247).

On the one hand, research has included scholarship exploring healthcare inequities and life expectancies (Ornelas et al., 2011; Rich, 2001), gender and sexual identity development, and sexual relations (Bowleg, 2004; Lemelle, 2010; Lemelle & Battle, 2004). In addition to Black contribution to the dialogue of Black masculinity validation, it is key to completing the exploration of scholarship research (Jackson, 1997). On the other hand, research has excluded the Black mother-son relationship that perhaps organizes these images and outcomes through “Mama’s Boys” stereotypes.

The media portrays Black “Mama’s Boys” as grown men living with their mamas and as irresponsible or troublemakers in the society. Jackson (2006) claims that the media’s depiction and scripting of Black males, excludes the Black male’s ontological perception. That is Black male masculinity has traditionally been depicted in mainstream Hollywood cinema as representing an archetypal type that has evolved over time. It is a noticeable cast of controversial and colorful characters, both fictional and factual, to
become the composite stereotypical criminal, the thug, the gangsta, the drug dealer, the addict and now the “Mama’s boy.”

Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) depicts Walter Younger as man struggling to break free from always needing his mother to take care of him and his responsibilities. Walter and his wife and son, live with Walter’s mother and sister in poverty in a two-bedroom apartment. The death of Walter’s father left the family with an insurance check for $10,000. The matriarch of the family, Walter’s mother, wants to buy a house to fulfill a dream that she and her husband shared. She keeps $3,500 as a down payment on a house and gives the remaining $6,500 to Walter with instructions. Walter is instructed to set aside $3,000 for his sister’s college fund, and the remainder, he has full control of when and how it is spent. However, Walter is irresponsible with the money, does not follow his mother’s instructions, and loses all the money to his friend Willy Harris who has persuaded him to invest in a liquor store and then runs off with Walter’s cash. Walter’s actions support Akbar’s (1990) definition of a boy, which is the second stage of manhood, which include pursuing actions that are self-satisfying regardless of whether the actions are right or wrong.

Films and sitcoms (*A Raisin in the Sun, Boyz in the Hood, Baby Boy, Think Like a Man, The Game and The Haves and the Have Nots*), have depicted the Black male as “Mama’s Boys.” The Black males in these films and sitcoms have close physical ties to their mothers, which impacts their decision-making skills and ability to fully realize their independence and proper place in manhood. The representation is that these Black males can’t make decisions without their mother’s approval or needing their mother to take care of them.
The creation of John Singleton’s *Boyz N The Hood* (1991) and *Baby Boy* (2001), sparks a conversation on the different ways a “Mama’s Boy” is depicted. In *Boyz N The Hood* (1991) the relationship between the boys, Doughboy (Ice Cube) and Ricky (Morris Chestnut) and their mother Brenda (Tyra Ferrell), draws a focus on a mother favoring one son over the other and how the brothers interact with each. In a pivotal scene in *Boys In The Hood*, Doughboy reveals his deep-rooted resentment towards his brother Ricky because he believes Ricky is his mother’s favored son. The scene begins with the mother Brenda requesting Ricky to go to the store to make a purchase to complete the evening's meal. As Ricky exits the home his brother Doughboy confronts him, and an argument erupts into a physical altercation. During the scuffle, Doughboy shouts at his brother "you just a Mama's Boy"; this declaration is spewed from Doughboy not only to inflict mental pain on his brother Ricky, but also to justify his perceived biased treatment from his mother.

The film *Baby Boy* (2001) begins with an image of the main character Jody as a full-grown man inside of his mother’s womb. Jody is curled up in a fetal position and imagines that he is about to be aborted. The scene is intensified by a voiceover quoting Dr. Frances Cress Welsing. She asserts, under-developed African-American men behave selfishly and believe they deserve to be treated with the indulgences accorded an infant. To support the claim that racism has made Black men think of themselves as babies, *Baby Boy* (2001) states, “What does a Black man call his girlfriends? –Momma.” Jody, who lives with his mother, Juanita, has some unspecified trouble with the law in his past. He has fathered a boy and a girl by two different women. While his environment influences some specific obstacles to his maturation, his mother’s enabling contributions
are a stabilizing, rectifying force that retards his evolutionary process into manhood.

The box office hit movie, Think Like A Man (2012), written by Steve Harvey, provides a clear distinct definition of the media representation of the meaning of “Mama’s Boy.” In the beginning of the movie, Michael Hanover (Terrence J) is seen as an independent professional man who seems to have it all together. However, as the movie progresses, viewers learn Michael has been identified and labeled as the “Mama’s Boy” in this film. There are many examples in the movie wherein Michael seeks the approval of his mother regarding the decisions he makes. For example, Michael decides to allow his mother to chaperone him and his Valentine’s Day sweetheart on a romantic dinner date. Unwilling to be a part of a threesome, his date leaves him and his mother at the restaurant to enjoy each other because it looks like she is the third wheel on the date. As the movie progresses Michael’s boyish attributes are revealed. For example, he attempts to conceal his mother’s phone calls from his newfound girlfriend, by covering up his mother’s constant phone calls with the name “Work” on his cell phone. Here we see him playing the game of not being caught in his actions and not willing to be responsible for his action

The Game is a television series sitcom about the life styles and romantic relationships of professional football players. Malik Wright (Hosea Chanchez) is the team captain and lead quarterback of the fictional football team San Diego Sabers. His overindulgent mother manages Malik’s professional career. Malik Wright is the only child of a single teenage mother Tasha Mack (Wendy Raquel Robinson) who struggled to raise him on her own. As a successful professional football player, Malik can find no other person better to manage his career than his own mother. Malik’s close relationship
with his mother is questioned by his girlfriend who believes he is a "Mama's Boy" and feels that he doesn't make any decisions independent of what his mother tells him. In one episode, his girlfriend is challenging him to break the relationship with his mother and stand on his own two feet or she can no longer be in a relationship with him.

Scripting the Black body has identified the emasculation of the Black masculinity (Jackson, 2006). Jackson suggests that scripting systematically perpetuates the xenophobic culture of US America commercial cinema. In other words Black males are depicted in negative ways, polarizing them from other males in America. In the above mentioned films/sitcom, Black males are labeled “Mama’s Boys” with no power or ability to direct his own life without the sanction and approval of his mother. For example, in A Raisin in the Sun, the mother instructs Walter Younger how to spend the money she has given him. In the film Baby Boy, Jody is scolded and told to be a man and move out of his mother’s home. Jackson (2006) further explains this notion of scripting the Black body by indicating the media as the scripter that controls the intellectual acuity of Black “Mama’s Boys.” Jackson (2006) points out “Popular media agencies participate in designing bodies, particularly Black bodies, that are already constructed, and this subconscious and sometimes purposeful super-imposition is a systematic endeavor to construct images of cultural Others that reflect the scripting agency’s own xenophobic tendencies” (p. 55)

The subjective understandings of “Mama’s Boys,” and its ascription by others are components of identity development and construction (Hecht, 1993; Horowitz, 1975). The theory of identity includes research from different perspectives (e.g. psychological, sociological, and anthropological). However, for this study, the Communication Theory
of Identity is used as a theoretical framework for understanding “Mama’s Boys.”

**Identity as a Theoretical Framework**

Research on the construction of identity is widespread across all academic disciplines. The concept is complex and multilayered. Horowitz (1975) argues that identity “embraces multiple levels or tiers, and it changes with the environment” (p. 119). Identity formation is an ever-evolving process (Kellner 1992). Moreover defining identity implicates a plethora of ideas evoking individual, relational, and communal perspectives. Each perspective contributes to the development of identity formation; no one perspective presents a comprehensive picture.

However, identity is innately a communicative process; which means, an individual’s sense of self is created and merged through communication (Collier and Thomas 1988). Therefore, Hecht (1993) and Hecht, Collier and Ribeau (1993) suggests the Communication Theory of Identity; which assimilates the different levels of analysis to better understand the means behind identity and identity formation. The Communication Theory of Identity is developed on four frames, or loci, of identity which are: (1) personal, (2) enacted, (3) relational, and (4) communal (Hecht 1993; Hecht et al. 1993). These four frames are interconnected and interdependent on each other.

*Personal identity frame.* The personal identity frame focuses on how one sees him or her self or how one evaluate him or her self. This definition includes people’s “self-cognitions, feelings about self, and/or a spiritual sense of self-being... and provides understanding of how individuals define themselves in general as well as in particular situations” (Hecht 1993, p. 79).

*Enacted identity frame.* The enacted identity frame relates to how individuals
manifest their identity to themselves and others (Hecht et al. 1993). The Communication Theory of Identity points out that identity “is formed, maintained, and modified in a communicative process and thus reflects communication” (Hecht, Warren, Jung & Krieger, 2005, p. 262). Individuals communicate their identity through interaction with those around them, meaning that identity is often framed in terms of enactments. Hecht et al. (2005) argue that while not all communications are about identity, identity is a part of all communications.

*Relational identity frame.* The relational identity frame consists of four components. The first relates to individuals’ insight of how others perceive them, this called ascribed relational identity. Second, individuals identify themselves by their connections to others (i.e., husband/wife, parent/child, employer/employee). Third, relational identity can be multifaceted. Lastly, relationships can have their own identities. Hecht (1993) illustrates this concept with the dating couple, which shares an identity as a unit.

*Communal identity frame.* People’s identities are also developed through the communal frame. Identity is based on group affiliation, rather than individual or social interaction. Hecht (1993) and Hecht et al. (1993) argue that the individual, social, and communal aspects of identity are interrelated and mutually construct each other. In contrast Jung and Hecht (2004) argues that identity is development through the negotiation process. Through individual interaction and communication with each other, identity formation is co-created from the relationship. Hecht (1993) and Hecht et al. (1993) argue that the individual and society, as well as communication, play a significant role in identity development.
RQ1: In what ways do film representations of Black “Mama’s Boys” match the ways Black males perceive their “Mama’s Boy” status?
Methodology

Participants

Ten Black males were interviewed in the study. Interviews lasted from 30-40 minutes in length. The age of participants ranged from ages 21 to 65 years old. Half of the participants indicated that both parents in the household raised them. The other half of the participants indicated that the mother raised them. Participants were recruited for the study using a snowball sample. Eight of the males self-identified as “Mama’s Boys” and two did not consider themselves “Mama’s Boys.” The recruiting process included passing out flyers at local colleges and universities, phone calls requesting participation and social media was used to enlist volunteers. This group was targeted for this study because they all have close relationships with their mothers and have experienced the phrase “Mama’s Boy.” The semi-structured interview format allowed participants to respond freely to questions and discuss relevant topics.

Method of Inquiry

The methodology used for this study is a creative ethnography, which is an expansion of ethnography. Ethnography is the formal research approach used to acquire the cultural knowledge of a social group. Ethnography practices the process of observing, discovering and describing a group of people and conveying the information about the culture; whether it is written, visually or orally to a wider audience. Ethnography provides a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life experiences. In ethnography, culture plays a significant role because it is the knowledge a group of people uses to generate behavior and interpret experiences (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). Ethnography also integrates with creative ethnography.
On the other hand, a creative ethnography goes beyond observation to producing fiction or non-fiction interpretive products or exhibition materials that has created a paradigm shift in ethnographic work (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). The process is referred to as creative analytical practice (CAP; Richardson, 2004). Creative ethnography is made up of non-fiction narratives that bare the mark of creativity. It is weaving factual narratives in an entertaining creative, and a scientific way; taking the most useful parts of the story to draw a picture that details particular circumstances that is connected with a creative tool (i.e., film, poetry, parody, and etc.).

According to Richardson (2000; 2004), there are three components in producing a creative ethnography: (1) contrasting between fact and fiction; (2) merging fact and fiction through a creative technique; and (3) treating the phenomena scientifically. The social scientific component focuses on organizing rich descriptions of the data. Once the rich descriptions are organized, aspects of the narrative and film text are fused to make the product entertaining, thus creative. To treat the project phenomena scientifically, a thematic analysis was conducted. Data was coded based on the frequency with which a certain phrase was reveal across narratives. Once themes were identified, they were graphically displayed across narratives and then film texts (Maxwell 1996; Jones 2001). This process draws connections and links beyond the narratives spoken and images viewed, while maintaining authenticity of the situation being represented. It is at this level where the creative aspects of ethnography can differ across studies.

**Procedures**

Out of twenty primetime functional television shows spanning ten years of television history, nine episodes were the only episodes depicting “Mama’s Boys.” To
select these files each series from 1995 to 2015, I chose 3 seasons from each series and then selected depictions of “Mama’s Boys”. The episodes were coded for “Mama’s Boy”-level issues, such as references to “Mama’s Boy”, masculinity or questions of manhood. As well as episode-level issues, such as conversations around “Mama’s Boys.” Out of these episodes, over two characters were able to be organized into “Mama’s Boy” categories who portrayed positively or negatively. All other characters were determined to be non-“Mama’s Boys.”

Out of 10 Black cinema popular films spanning from 1990s to 2000s, 7 films were the only films depicting “Mama’s Boy.” To select these films I watched for depiction of “Mama’s Boys” and the 7 films that were selected were coded for “Mama’s Boy”-level issues such as references to “Mama’s Boy”, masculinity or questions of manhood. As well as scene-level issues, such as conversations around “Mama’s Boys.” Out of these films, over 5 characters were identified and placed within “Mama’s Boy” categories. All other characters were determined to be non-“Mama’s Boys. The second phase of data collection was the video recording of the interviews and combing through the data for relevant themes that support or demonstrate difference in “Mama’s Boy” experience and media representation.

A reduction of the transcripts generated six themes that displayed affirmation and disconfirmation of being a “Mama’s Boy.” After screening all the films three themes consistently reappeared throughout all films: lack of control, hyper-masculinity and financial ineptitude. Second, themes are often described in dichotomous terminology to represent the perceptions of all views. Three themes emerged throughout the transcript and film analysis: (1) lack of control and fear of obligation; (2) financial ineptitude; (3)
old and new “Mama’s Boys.”

To make this current project a creative ethnography, recorded interviews were interlaced with archive footage from feature length movies and television sitcoms. Within the qualitative methodology, the method used to collect data was one-on-one interviews of Black males. The first phase of data collection in this study, was screening and selecting archive footage of films that have representation of a Black “Mama’s Boy.” This part of the project opens the audience up to a popular platform (e.g. media) used to reach mass audience. In reviewing the responses of the questions asked during the video –recorded interviews, the creative project was produced through archive films and video interviews. These clips were edited together to contrast the difference between the archive films and Black males’ perceptions of the phrase “Mama’s Boy.” Final Cut Pro, editing software was used to integrate the everyday narrative with specific scenes in film texts. The core of this analysis focuses on the how “Mama’s Boys” are affirmed and disconfirmed in both talk and media representations.
Relevant Findings

The meanings associated with men who go above and beyond the call or duty for their mothers or who love their mothers by following their advice—fondly known as “Mama’s Boy,” provided much insight into the perceived realities of men who perceive themselves to be “Mama’s Boys” and men who did not. Although there were similarities in how the media represented “Mama’s Boys” in film and television characters and the non-fiction narrative of Black “Mama’s Boys” participants in the study, there was also an obvious difference in much the same way that Black “Mama’s Boys” are ascribed by “non-Mama’s Boys”. The majority of these descriptions came from men who self-identified as “Mama’s Boys” and a few who did not.

Lack of Control and Fear of Obligation

The lack of control was extremely visible across all the films. In these films Black men were depicted as second in command to their mothers and not the head of their household (e.g. bread winner, protector, provider, decision – maker and household authority). The men demonstrated through their actions and attitudes, their reliance on their mothers’ financial and emotional enablement. Baby Boy, A Raisin in the Sun, Think Like a Man and The Game depicted the lack of control the most.

The characters Jody, Walter, Michael and Malik looked to their mothers for approval, guidance and pep talks concerning the choices they were making in their lives. These choices were based on their limited or non-exist experience in manhood. In other words, physiologically they are men, however they have not transitioned mentally by possessing the knowledge and characteristics of manhood; opting to remain and maintain in the boyish mentality (Akbar, 1990; Medinger, 2000). Taking a closer look at the
depiction of “Mama’s Boys,” narrative evidence suggests a deeper level of meaning. Men remain “Mama’s Boys” out of fear of life changes.

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In a scene from the film Baby Boy, his mother’s new boyfriend has moved into the home against Jody’s objections. Jody and his mother are arguing about Jody taking control of his life and living on his own. Jody feels threaten that his mother is going to kick him out because of her new boyfriend living at the house. Jody questions his mother “are you going to kick me out” and she replies “Can you surprise me and move out” “You are not a baby no more Jody. You need to grow up. You got your own family. Why don’t you and Yvette go out and get your own place together. Why are you so afraid to be a man, leave the nest.” Jody replies, “I am a man” Then his mother laughs and walks away.

Although the films depiction of “Mama’s Boys” ascribe an identity cannot be controlled by the viewer, the avowed identity of “Mama’s Boys” shows up as fear rather than lack of control. One 28 year old male says this:

In want to be able to have my mom and be independent when I want to be. I want to have the best of both worlds. Despite being a 28 year old male, a Black male who is graduating from college, I’m scared…I’m scared of the world. I am scared of doing the wrong thing. I am scared of not doing the right thing. When I get lost
and confused I go back to my mom to see if I’m doing the right thing…It’s tough, but I do my best.

Fear of being on one’s own seems to be heightened for “Mama’s Boys” who do not fully trust themselves in making decisions or entering new situations. Thus, the way of overcoming the fear is to seek out or rely on mom as a consistent and constant support system and resource. Mom becomes the place where the “Mama’s Boy” seeks safety and by all accounts, mom in return reassures his fear directly (non-fiction narrative) and indirectly (fiction narrative), which leads to his continued attachment.

**Financial Ineptitude**

Another theme discovered throughout these films was Black “Mama’s Boys” were being financially inept, which about his incompetence and lack of responsibility in handling financial resources, obtained by them. The films depicted the Black “Mama’s Boys” making irrational, impulsive and irresponsible self-centered decisions pertaining to spending the money they earned or received. Their decisions would only serve to benefit their narcissistic ideas or desires and their misguided belief, the way they spent their money would prove they were “real” men in the world. Notably the Black “Mama’s Boys” did not consider the long-term detrimental effects their financial irresponsibility would have on their families. Even when they were aware of the possible negative outcomes of their decisions, they chose to ignore rational contemplation and go forward with their self-satisfying actions.

For example in the film, *A Raisin in The Sun*, Walter is given money, from his father’s life insurance check, to save for his sister’s college tuition by his mother. However he decides to give the money to one of his partners of an ill-advised liquor
store investment plan, which was adamantly opposed by his mother. When Walter’s investing partner steals the money, Walter is left to explain this devastating consequence to his family.

Another example of financially ineptness is found in the film, *Baby Boy*. His ineptness is motivated by his unemployment and a lack of cash. Eventually, Jody has a financial awakening as he discovers he can parlay his womanizing charm into make money by selling women’s apparel to women. As he begins to prosper financially, he spends the money frivolously. Although, Jody borrowed money from his mother to pay for his girlfriend’s abortion, he did not see as a responsibility to pay his mother back when received his money. He also tints the windows and buys chrome hubcaps for his girlfriend Yvette’s car without her permission. He doesn’t consider helping Yvette and his son financially by paying their rent or buying food for them. He is depicted relishing in the joy of his newly acquired purchases for his girlfriend’s car, which he frequently drives around town.

When one 23 year old male who lives with his mom, discuss his own financial situation, it tends to mirror how “Mama’s Boys” are ascribed and depicted in the media. He recounts this conversation with his mom:

I remember yesterday I was making sandwiches for work the next day, because I had a field trip with my job and my mom said, “OK I see you don't have money but you're making lunch for yourself… I struggle all the time and you just sit here and you're just being selfish.” There was a conversation about me not taking out the trash; which jumped to a conversation about me not giving enough money to the house or me not spending enough time with the family. It will start off with
something small then it will get to how she really feels sad. At this moment we’re just like really tense with each other because of my mom's financial situation.

**Old and New “Mama’s Boys”**

The final theme found throughout these films and non-fictive narratives was the question of manhood. For film text stereotypical behavior of “Mama’s Boys” and their physical strength, aggression and sexuality were ascribed. In film text, Black “Mama’s Boys” are seen displaying the elements of hyper masculinity (e.g. temper-tantrums, bullying, machismo and being a ladies man –player). The relationship between the “Mama’s Boy” and his mother in these films was reinforced by enabling, soothing, counseling and excusing his boyish behavior.

For example, in a scene from *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter is having a discussion with his mother about how to spend the money from his father’s life insurance check. Walter wants to take the money and invest in a liquor store. He brings home the plans of the liquor store investment for his mother to review and approve, but she rejects his plan without reviewing the documents. Walter then shows his frustration by having a temper-tantrum when he slams his hands on the table; throws his coat across the room, barges in to his mother’s bedroom asking her to reconsider her decision. After Walter throws his temper-tantrum, his mother attempts to sooth and reassure him by affirming how good his life is without going into the liquor store business.

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Another example of hyper masculinity in Black “Mama’s Boys” is depicted in the television series called *The Game*. Malik Wright, a self-proclaimed “Mama’s Boy” is a ladies man – Player. His numerous sexual conquests serve to acknowledge publicly and to himself that he is a real man. His mother enables his behavior by allowing him to have sexual relations in their home. She believes this behavior is acceptable as long as he is happy. Case in point, in a scene of season two, episode three, Malik and his female friend are having sex in his bedroom. His mother and two-house guest abruptly interrupt them. After his mother and the two-house guests leaves, his female friend is clearly upset and wants to stop, but Malik wants to continue. In an attempt to reassure her that everything is okay, he opens his door and shouts to his mother to confirm they have her permission to have sex in the home and she replies “It’s cool.”

There was much agreement between how media depicted “Mama’s Boys” and the narratives of “non-Mama’s Boys.” A 47 year old male, who lives with his mother but does not consider himself a mama’s boy had this to say:

A guy who is like a mama’s boy need to be validated by their mother. Even talking about dating someone they’re looking for someone just like their mother and there’s nothing wrong with that, but when you continue to live your day in and day out to be validated by your mother…I have an uncle who is like that to this day. He needs to be helped by his mother now that my grandmother just passed away he’s lost without her so he grabs hold of his sisters because his
sisters look like their mom so he’s confused by that at times. Like he’s holding on to the loss. They prepare meals for him, they’re there for their brother. They clean for their brother, they allow him to maintain his innocence. You know, you’re 65 years old, get it together. Their brother is lost and I don’t like it.

Although “non-Mama’s Boys” found “Mama’s Boys” objectionable and did not identify themselves as a “Mama’s boy,” they established independent thought and lifestyle to distance themselves from the shame associated with the phrase “Mama’s boy.”

However, “Mama’s Boys” who avowed their “Mama’s Boys” identity as just the opposite. Describing their status as having power, control and authority dispelled the myth of how “Mama’s Boys” are often perceived in contrast to a new “Mama’s Boy” description. These men believe that “Mama’s Boys” can be independent, responsible and sustain a close relationship with their mom’s where communication is open, productive and non-judging. A 64 year old self-labeled “Mama’s Boy” says, “I am independent and I was not really depending on my mom. I am was there with her to help and do everything… whatever I wanted to do I try to achieve or whatever I need to do, work, or whatever, I did it.”

For others the word “Mama’s Boy” is not necessarily negative. A 28 year old respondent redefines mama’s boy this way:

I think for me the phrase “Mama’s Boy” has taken on a negative connotation in society, which is unfortunate because I really don’t think it’s that negative. It shouldn’t have a negative stigma. It just means a man who has a very strong relationship with his mom. I am here to define a new kind of “Mama's Boy.” A “Mama's Boy” that doesn't stifle ones development, because a lot of people think
being a “Mama's Boy” is negative because it stifles or stunts your growth as a man in this world... And I'm here to say that you can be a mama's boy but still develop as a male adult in this world. There is a balance and you can achieve that balance.

Although films depict and ascribe “Mama’s Boys” in very specific ways, these representations are challenged with avowed identities of “Mama’s Boys.” Film depictions are characterizations that communities of people have no control over. However, personal and avowed identities of “Mama’s Boys,” much more flexible. Film show “Mama’s Boys” acting a particular that often similar and different from the way “Mama’s Boys” view themselves behaving.
Discussion and Conclusion

When I began this research, I was interested in knowing how many Black men perceived themselves as “Mama’s Boys.” I also wanted to know their thoughts behind the phrase “Mama’s boy” and if they believed the media representation of a “Mama’s Boy” was correct. Lastly, I wanted to know the type of impact this phrase had on the Black males’ life. Using a creative ethnographic methodology, I was able to enter into a dialogue with Black males regarding their thoughts and experiences with the use of the phrase “Mama’s Boy.”

The research sought to find the answer to the question: In what ways do film representations of Black “Mama’s Boys” match the ways Black males perceive their “Mama’s Boy” status? The intent of the study was to represent a collective interpretation of the perception of the phrase “Mama’s Boy,” which encompassed both commonalities and differences between Black men’s experiences. The most significant difference was what Black males perceive the phrase “Mama’s Boy” to mean compared to the social norm and media representation of the phrase “Mama’s Boy.”

The research determines Black males do perceive the phrase “Mama’s Boy” differently. When called a “Mama’s Boy,” Black men have varying responses that sometimes converge with and diverge from media representations of “Mama’s Boys.” Some Black men wear the phrase as a badge of honor, proving their love, respect and loyalty to their mothers. Others detest this phrase and any comparison of it to themselves. The Black men who do perceive themselves as “Mama’s Boys” are embarking upon establishing a more positive perception of the phrase “Mama’s Boy.” These men expressed that a “Mama’s Boy” can still be close to his mother and also have
independence. In establishing a different meaning for the phrase “Mama's Boy,” the men who perceived themselves as a “Mama’s boy” reestablish their identity as “Mama’s Boy” as an enactment of self-reliant responsible men. Their relationship with their mother was positive and they only wanted to continue a mutual respectable and loving interaction with their mothers. Because of the desire to maintain this relationship with their mother they believe that being a “Mama's Boy” was normal, natural, and honorable.

On the other hand, the men who consider themselves not to be a “Mama’s Boy” agreed with the film representations and found the phrase to be more stigmatizing. The relational frame from Communication Theory of Identity points out, because of the social disapproval non-“Mama’s Boys” reject the identity of being a “Mama’s Boy.” These men believe the only kind of “Mama’s Boy” is a man who is undeveloped irresponsible and unwilling to stand on his own two feet without the assistance of his mother. These men agree with the stigma and did not want any part the notion of the being a “Mama’s Boy.” Although these Black men did not perceive themselves as “Mama’s Boys”, these men still lived with their mothers.

Media representations of Black “Mama’s Boy” are often negative. Black men are depicted as dependent, underdeveloped selfish boys, who look to their mothers for stability and resolutions of their self inflicted painful circumstances. The media does not provide a balanced representation of Black men, who are gainfully employed, independent, or self-sufficient. In addition, the media does not account for the Black men who consider themselves to be “Mama’s Boys” but are not dependent on their mothers for validation, direction, and approval.
The media as the scripter need to reduce the subjectivity in how they convey Black masculinity to the mass audience. The full spectrum of Black masculinity has not been depicted to the mass audience. The media is a powerful communication source and it must realize its influence and contribution to our society. The history of negative portrayal of Black men in media has contaminated society’s perceptions and beliefs. This can only be remedy by closing the gaps by presenting the full spectrum of Black masculinity.

In conclusion, this research should ignite a meaningful dialogue of the phrase “Mama’s Boy.” The research has determined that there is a different meaning from the negative connotation of the phrase. More specifically a “Mama's Boy” can be a positive role model, provider, protector, and a fully developed mature man.
Limitations and Future Research

While interviews were conducted, it was important to note that there were three limitations in this study. First, being a woman limited how much information Black male participants recruited for the study was willing to reveal about their perceptions and experiences. Second, the truthfulness of some Black men may have not exposed themselves as “Mama’s Boys,” based on the many negative interpretations of the phrase. Finally, I chose only to interview Black men who had experiences with the phrase “Mama’s Boy.”

Although, other research trajectories exist to be expanded upon in future studies (e.g. perception of Black females, Black “non- Mama’s Boys,” and Black mothers), the perception of Black “Mama’s Boys” will be valuable to this creative project because there is limited research focusing on this issue. Because this study is limited to Black masculinity and “Mama’s Boys,” further research may inquire into other ethnic group conceptions of “Mama’s Boys.”

The phrase “Mama’s Boy,” is a well-known and used expression in the Black community. It is imperative that researchers come to understand how members of this community are impacted by these expressions. This study will shed light on an area that is not often studied by communication scholars. Furthermore, generalizations about how people perceive and experience the phrase “Mama’s Boy” will allow communication scholars to develop a framework for Black males and their relational interactions.

This study has clarified the phrase “Mama Boys.” The phrase can be positive as well as negative, depending on the perception of the Black man’s experiences. For scholars interested in pursuing this topic further, future research should look into the
perspective of Black women and their relationships with “Mama’s Boys” or compare “Mama’s Boys” across cultures.
References


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Appendix

Sample of interview questions included:

1. My first question is about masculinity. What does masculinity mean to you?

   Probe: Do you consider yourself masculine? Why?
   Probe: Where did your masculinity come from: In other words, how did you learn it?

   Okay we’re going to shift gears now…

2. Let’s talk about your relationship with your parents?

   Let’s start with your father….

   Probe: What is/was your relationship like with your father?
   Probe: Tell me more?

   Okay, now that we have talked about your father, let’s get talk about your mother.

   Probe: What is/was your relationship like with your mother?

3. What does the phrase “Mama’s boy” mean to you?

   Probe: What is it about your relationship with your mom, that makes you a “Mama’s boy?”

4. Have you ever been called a Mama’s Boy by someone other than your mother?

   Probe: When was the first time you were called a “Mama’s boy?”
   Probe: Who called you a “Mama’s boy”?
   Probe: What is your relationship to them?
   Probe: What happened or was happening that they called you a “Mama’s boy?”
   Probe: How did it make you feel or how were you affected when they called you a “Mama’s boy?”

5. In what ways has this phrase “Mama’s boy” impacted your life?

   I wanted look at your relationship with your mother and being a Mama’s boy, how has it impacted other relationship? Let’s talk about your romantic relationship.
   Probe: How has being a “Mama’s boy” impacted your relationships with other women romantically?
Probe: How has being a “Mama’s boy” impacted your relationships with your women friends?

Probe: How has being a “Mama’s boy” impacted your relationships with other Men? Friends or male siblings/ or other male family member?

6. Do you think there is a stigma attached to the phrase “Mama’s Boy? What I mean by stigma is shame, disgrace or humiliation?”

Probe: What are some of those stigmas?
Probe: Why do you think the stigma(s) exist?
Probe: How do these stigmas make you feel or affect you? Why or why not?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your relationship with your mother or the phrase “Mama’s Boy”?