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Vloggers and the “Black” Label: Audience Understandings of “Black” Media in the Digital Age

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Abstract:

Using YouTube vlogs, this paper analyzes the ways African Americans define, critique, and identify with media texts they describe as "black." Derived from notions of the “active,” now "hyperactive" audience and ever-shifting definitions of blackness, the function of “black” media — once considered indispensable — is interrogated in what some argue is today’s “multicultural” and/or “postracial” society. Overall, vloggers talked about “black” media in relation to three major themes: 1) the assignment of the “black” label — to black-owned, black-oriented, and black performative texts, 2) the perceived role of “black” media in society — as aligned with past understandings and present anxieties about covert racism, and 3) the relationship between the definitions of blackness promoted on screen (mostly “negative”) and their everyday lives. Vloggers expressed frustration with respect to available “black” media, often calling for better options and more diverse representations. Still, many openly admitted to consuming the content anyway.