
RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Pop the Balloon or Find Love': A New Black Popular Culture? Exploring its Potential Social Influence and Implications for the Global Image of Nigerians

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ABSTRACT

The "Pop the Balloon or Find Love" show has rapidly captured global attention, establishing itself as a notable expression of contemporary popular culture. This article critically examines the emergence of "Pop the Balloon or Find Love" as a contemporary Black popular culture, highlighting its dual role as both a platform for affirming Black love and self-expression, and a problematic reinforcement of social norms, particularly as depicted in Nons Miraj's "Hunt Game Show: Pop the Balloon to Find Love," which serves as the central focus of this analysis. Drawing upon cultivation theory and social learning theory, the study assesses the show's potential social influences and considers its broader implications for the global image of Nigerians. While recognizing the show's ability to foster meaningful cultural exchanges and genuine interpersonal connections, the article critically engages with its promotion of harmful behaviors such as body consumption, verbal aggression, and materialism. In response, this study offers carefully considered recommendations for reform, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes ethical representation alongside entertainment. Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about the intersections of media, identity formation, cultural representation, and social responsibility.

KEYWORDS

Pop the balloon or find love; Nons Miraj hunt game show; Black popular culture; stereotypes; media representation of Nigerians

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1. Introduction

In this modern day, the rise of digital platforms has revolutionized how people meet and build relationships, creating new opportunities for love that extend far beyond the traditional ways of the past. For those who struggle to meet new people or are simply curious about a different approach to dating, reality shows offer an exciting alternative. *Pop the Balloon or Find Love*, a popular YouTube show, captures this mix of fun, modern romance, and the thrill of connecting in a public space. Whether participants are genuinely searching for love, hoping to expand their social circle, chasing a brief moment of internet fame, or promoting their personal brand, the show provides an inviting and accessible platform for them to put themselves out there. While the show does bring joyful moments of romantic discovery to life, its impact stretches far beyond the fun of holding and popping balloons and matchmaking. It functions as a stage where cultural representations, such as that of Nigerians, which is the focus of this study, are put on display, inviting celebration, critique, and debate over how Nigerian identity is projected to the world.

This study aims to move beyond surface-level entertainment and position *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* as a potential Black cultural trend; an emerging social and romance movement within the evolving narrative of Black love and relationships. Given that the show's underlying themes raise critical questions about representation, stereotypes, and societal values, this study

investigates the potential broader implications of *Pop the Balloon or Find Love*, particularly how it may shape the global perception of Nigerians. There are several reasons why we have chosen to focus on Nigerians in this study. First, Nigerians represent a culturally rich and globally significant population within the broader framework of Black popular culture. From their central role in the proliferation of African creativity to their influence in shaping global perceptions through music, film, and digital media, Nigerians have become a cornerstone of African contributions to global cultural narratives, and their vibrant creativity continues to inspire and reshape the way African identities are perceived worldwide (Faidi, 2024; Ofochebe, 2020). Second, like many other Africans and members of the Black diaspora, Nigerians are often burdened with stereotypes that simplify and distort their diverse identities (Jack-Vickers, 2024; Acheme, 2021; Banjo & Umunna, 2022; Harth, 2012). These stereotypes not only reduce the complexity of Nigerian culture but also perpetuate harmful narratives about Nigerians. Lastly, the primary focus of this study—Nons Miraj's *Hunt Game Show*—largely involves Nigerian participants. This naturally aligns the study with a Nigerian cultural lens, making it more meaningful and relevant to analyze the interplay between local cultural expressions and their global implications.

While studies have explored the impact of popular reality shows such as *Love Island* (Porter & Standing, 2020; Hill 2023), *The Bachelor* (Boschee, 2013) and their impacts generally on body image (Supplee, 2014), on adolescents (Ferguson, Salmond, & Modi, 2013; Rivadeneyraa & Lebo, 2018), their portrayals of women in marginalized communities (Martinez-Shepherd, 2006), on youths (Milmine, 2013; Suri and Sansanwal, 2022) perceptions of dating (Ferris, 2004), there is scant scholarship focusing on reality shows emanating from or prominently featuring African contexts. Existing works, such as those by Oiyee (2015) and Sarpong (2017), touch on African media's cultural resonance but do not interrogate the global implications of African-inspired or Black-centric reality shows like *Pop the Balloon*. This is particularly understandable, given that the trend arguably began in 2023 with Nons Miraj herself. Nonetheless, it presents a significant opportunity for scholars in media studies, cultural sociology, and cultural policy to engage critically and interdisciplinarily with the rich terrain it offers.

This study seeks to bridge that gap by critically examining the representation of Nigerians on *Pop the Balloon and Find Love* and its potential impact on global perceptions of the country and its people. To investigate this, the study draws upon cultivation theory, which argues that prolonged exposure to media content can significantly shape audiences' perceptions and interpretations of social realities (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Reality TV shows, such as *Pop the Balloon or Find Love*,¹ often portray specific relationship dynamics and societal values that, through repeated viewing, may become internalized by audiences. Over time, viewers may come to see these portrayals as authentic or ideal, integrating them into their understanding of romance, identity, and cultural norms. In addition to cultivation theory, this research draws on social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of media as an agent of social modeling. Social learning theory posits that individuals often learn behaviors, attitudes, and norms by observing others, particularly in influential media platforms (Bandura, 1977).

2. Black Popular Culture

Popular culture, or culture in general, encompasses a wide range of definitions and interpretations, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. Given its broad nature, it is important to first provide a general overview of the term "popular culture" before digging into how *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* emerges as a distinct phenomenon within Black popular culture. Culture is commonly defined as the entirety of the ways people live, interact, and find meaning in their existence (Effeovottu, 2019). Grazian (2010) defines popular culture as the aesthetic products crafted and marketed by profit-driven companies within the global entertainment industry. Similarly, McGaha (2015) describes popular culture as the collective perspectives, images, ideas, attitudes, and other phenomena that are prevalent in the mainstream of a particular society.

According to Parker (2011), popular culture comprises products that demand minimal cultural capital for both their creation and consumption. Identically, Crossman (2017) defines popular culture as the collection of cultural products—including radio, fashion, television, film, cyberculture, and music, cyberculture—that are widely consumed by the majority within society. Thus, one can position that popular culture refers to the "culture of the people," which dominates a specific society at a given time. It emerges from the interactions and shared experiences of people in their daily lives. Examples of popular culture include music, television programs, fashion, food, and clothing styles. A defining feature of popular culture is its accessibility and availability to the majority of the population (Effeovottu, 2019).

¹ 'Pop the Balloon or Find Love' has become the widely recognized name for the various iterations of the show across different contexts and platforms. This common reference stems from the central theme and structure that defines the genre. In this article, which we later mention, we focus specifically on Nons Miraj's 'Hunt Game Show,' particularly her main segment she titled 'Pop the Balloon to Find Love.' For clarity and ease of reference, we use 'Pop the Balloon or Find Love' interchangeably with 'Hunt Game Show,' as the former represents the most prominent and frequently featured segment within her broader series of shows. See https://www.youtube.com/@nons_miraj/videos for more details.

However, it is noteworthy to mention that the definition of popular culture has always been of interest to scholars. In his renowned work and tenth edition of *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, Storey (2024) acknowledged that popular culture can be defined in various ways and highlights six definitions of popular culture. Before sketching out these definitions, he noted that one must first understand what the term 'popular' itself means and how it aligns with culture. Citing Williams' (1983) definition of the word popular as 'culture actually made by the people for themselves'; 'work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people'; 'inferior kinds of work'; 'well liked by many people' (237), he emphasized that defining popular culture inevitably involves considering the nuanced interplay between the various interpretations of the term 'culture' and the diverse meanings of the term 'popular.' He then proceeds to outline six definitions of popular culture:

An obvious starting point in any attempt to define popular culture is to say that popular culture is simply culture that is widely favoured or well liked by many people... A second way of defining popular culture is to suggest that it is the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture. Popular culture, in this definition, is a residual category, there to accommodate texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture... A third way of defining popular culture is as 'mass culture'... A fourth definition contends that popular culture is the culture that originates from 'the people'... a culture of the people for the people... A fifth definition of popular culture, then, is one that draws on the political analysis of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, particularly on his development of the concept of hegemony... Those using this approach see popular culture as a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups... A sixth definition of popular culture is one informed by recent thinking around the debate on postmodernism... The main point to insist on here is the claim that postmodern culture is a culture that no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture... Finally, what all these definitions have in common is the insistence that whatever else popular culture is, it is definitely a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization. (pp. 5-12)

Hall (1993) is also reputed for having largely contributed to the discourse on popular culture. Advocating for the deconstruction of the popular, he argued that the base of popular culture lies in the people's traditions, memories, pleasures, and experiences, which is also associated with "local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies, and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and the everyday experiences of ordinary folks" (pp. 107-108). He noted that popular culture is "a site of alternative traditions," given that it has consistently been contrasted with high or elite culture, and has earned monikers like the grotesque, the underside, the informal, and the vulgar (108). Building on his assertion, he positioned that the nature of Black popular culture is not so different from other popular cultures in the modern world, and defines it as:

By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus unauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization... However deformed, incorporated, and unauthentic are the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see, in the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them. In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different — other forms of life, other traditions of representation. (pp. 108-109)

3. An Era of "Pop the Balloon or Find Love"

The *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* game show has emerged as a significant cultural trend, especially within Black communities around the world. This show, which traces its origins to Nons Miraj's *Hunt Game Show: Pop the Balloon to Find Love*, has gone beyond being a mere entertainment format. It has grown into a global cultural movement, echoing across the Black diaspora in various countries and becoming a popular medium for expressing Black identity, love, and social dynamics. Despite the lack of solid data on its exact origins, it is clear that Nons Miraj's version, which dates further back than the more widely known versions, has been a key influence in the proliferation of similar shows in different parts of the world. In many ways, Nons Miraj may very well be the trendsetter of this emerging cultural phenomenon.

The show reimagines blind dating by introducing a playful yet dramatic twist: participants line up while a "contestant" enters and determines compatibility. Disinterest is signaled by popping a balloon, which can be done by either the contestant or one of the participants awaiting a match. Though lighthearted on the surface, the series has captured widespread attention for its emotionally charged and sometimes awkward exchanges. Moments of public rejection and raw, unfiltered comments often stir up controversy, yet they also seem to fuel the show's popularity, making it all the more complex. The show's format has spread rapidly and taken on new forms, with numerous adaptations appearing across different regions. In the United States, for instance, a variety of editions have popped up in different states, from the *Pop the Balloon or Find Love Connecticut Edition* to the *Pop the Balloon or Find Love New Jersey Edition*, *Pop the balloon or find love NYC edition*, *Pop the balloon or find love Indianapolis*

Edition, *Pop the balloon or find love St. Louis*, and the renowned *Pop the Balloon or Find Love with Arlette Amuli* in Arizona that has become one of the most recognized versions in the country and has as well inspired more content creators to develop their own local adaptations.

Similarly, in Canada, the *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* format has taken root in cities like Toronto and Montreal, while in the Caribbean, *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* has grown a substantial presence in countries such as Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana. Internationally, the show has expanded its reach to Australia and the UK, where versions of the format are now part of the cultural conversation. In Africa, alongside Nons Miraj's *Hunt Game Show*, a variety of other editions have emerged, such as the *Pop the Balloon or Find Your Sugar Daddy/Sugar Mummy* version on the *Sugar Show*, and the *Pop the Balloon or Find Love South Africa Edition*. There is even a Yoruba version of the show, *Finding Love in Ibadan*, hosted by Nigerian actor Funmi Awelewa, which uses the Yoruba language, further connecting the cultural heritage of the Black diaspora.

The diverse adaptations of the show also highlight its growing inclusivity, with versions specifically designed for the LGBTQ+ community, including the *Pop the Balloon or Find Love Gay Edition* and *Pop the Balloon or Find Love Queer Edition*. There are even variations like *A Real One*, which replaces the traditional balloon with a heart-shaped one, and the *Pop the Balloon or Find Love Churchy Edition*, catering to different religious tastes and sensibilities. This surge in popularity is not just intriguing, but it reflects the fluid nature of Black cultural identity and the way it adapts and thrives in various global contexts. This expansion of *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* also speaks to the complex interplay between cultural retention, adaptation, and reinvention in the Black communities worldwide.

From an academic standpoint, the phenomenon of *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* can be analyzed through Stuart Hall's insights into Black popular culture. Hall (1993) argued that Black culture exists in a constant tension between resisting dominant cultural narratives while also being incorporated into mainstream media. This tension is perhaps evident in the proliferation of *Pop the Balloon or Find Love*, which both aligns with global reality TV trends while subverting them by centering Black love and relationships—often not so appreciated in mainstream media (LaBon, 2021). The show becomes a form of entertainment that also acts as a subtle yet powerful cultural resistance. It provides a space where Black people, irrespective of geography, can reclaim the narrative around love, their language, relationships, and identity. This subversion of dominant cultural norms provides a platform for self-representation, allowing Black participants to assert their own agencies and experiences of love, humor, and individuality.

Though there have been some non-Black participants in various editions, the core identity of *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* remains firmly entrenched in Black culture, a seemingly continuous cultural revolution of "Black is beautiful" that has its roots in Negritude that seeks to reclaim the shared Pan-African racial identity connecting individuals of African descent across the globe, and the dismantling of the beauty standard of Whiteness (Leslie, 1995; Ibrahim, 2016; Jacques, 2010; National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d). The show, thus, serves as a meeting point where different aspects of Black identity converge, creating a shared cultural experience that fosters solidarity and unity across global Black communities. The show as well contributes to our understanding of space and power dynamics within relationships. The balloon, as a symbol, transcends its simple material form to represent something much more profound. It is not just an object to be popped; it is a vehicle for connection. The contestants must navigate this maze of balloons, each one symbolizing a potential match, and each time someone's balloon is popped, they are eliminated from the race for love.

The focus of this study is the *Hunt Game Show* by Nons Miraj, the show that set the stage for the *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* phenomenon. Through a critical examination of this show, we seek to interrogate its potential social influence and the impact it may have on the global image of Nigerians. This includes exploring the ways in which the contestants' representations shape or contribute to the stereotypes of Nigerian identity, particularly in a globalized world where popular culture plays such a significant role in shaping perceptions.

4. Theoretical Underpinnings

Both cultivation theory and social learning theory help us understand the potential impact of reality TV shows like *Pop the Balloon or Find Love*. Cultivation theory suggests that television plays a powerful role in shaping how people perceive social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The influence of media is neither uniform nor automatic, but it tends to be most significant when three factors align: (a) there is a high consistency with media portrayals, (b) audiences are exposed to significant amounts of media, and (c) individuals have limited personal experience to compare with what they hear and see (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994). By adopting cultivation theory, I can make a prediction that greater exposure to *Pop the Balloon or Find Love*

will shape viewers' perceptions of dating and relationships. This, in turn, may influence how Nigerians are viewed on a global scale.

Given that many viewers in and out of the country may not encounter the situations depicted on television in their own lives, this leaves them to rely on the narratives and portrayals presented in the media. Social cognitive theory suggests that we learn behaviors by observing others and modeling their actions and are often influenced by positive reinforcement (Aubrey, 2007). Building on his social learning theory, Albert Bandura (1986) formulated the social cognitive theory. Per this theory, viewers may watch the show, perceive the portrayed "reality," and interpret the behaviors they observe as social norms. Building on social learning theory, I propose that greater exposure to *Pop the Balloon* or *Find Love* could lead individuals to view these behaviors as typical or accepted social norms. Cultivation theory has become increasingly relevant with the growing popularity of reality shows.

In a survey conducted by Clark and Nabi (2007) that included 400 college women to explore whether televised sexual content influences sexual attitudes and behaviors, the researchers discovered that while the consumption of television does not directly correlate with personal sexual behaviors attitudes, it is associated with how individuals perceive the sexual behaviors and attitudes of their peers. The study further revealed that watching dating television programs, whether real or fictional, is linked to certain sexual expectations—both personally and regarding peers. It also found associations with more permissive sexual attitudes in relationships and a tendency to engage in sexual activities earlier in a relationship. Clark and Nabi connected their findings to cultivation theory, which suggests that viewers' attitudes can be influenced by repeated exposure to television content that may not align with real-life experiences.

As a result, if audience members perceive shows like *Pop the Balloon* or *Find Love* as genuine representations of reality, they are more likely to accept the actions and narratives portrayed as authentic. Ifeanyi et al. (2021) also utilized cultivation theory in their study, sampling 396 students from Imo State University in Nigeria to examine the influence of the *Big Brother Naija* show. They concluded that "an extended exposure to the several episodes therefore could lead to instances where the students will try to cultivate what they see on television" (p. 19). Similarly, Effanga (2023) applied cultivation theory in a study involving 388 randomly sampled residents of Uyo Metropolis in Nigeria and revealed that "the reality television programmes have serious influences on the respondents as a majority of them desire to be like the people they watch in the programmes" (p. 109).

It is also pertinent to mention that social learning theory has also served as the foundation for numerous studies. Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) explored how reality dating programs influence attitudes toward sex and sexual behavior. In their study, 334 undergraduates completed questionnaires assessing their viewing habits (entertainment-focused or educational) and their attitudes about relationships, dating, and sex. The researchers found that higher levels of viewing were positively associated with adversarial sexual beliefs, endorsement of a sexual double standard, and perceptions that men are sex-driven, appearance is crucial in dating, and dating is a game. Irele and Oderanti (2023), in their study on Nigerian popular culture, applied social learning theory and conducted a content analysis of selected Nollywood movies and Afrobeat artists. They argue that the materialistic displays by Nigerian artists and the ritualistic themes present in certain Nollywood films have influenced some Nigerian youths to adopt negative attitudes. These findings align with social learning theory, showing how viewers observe these beliefs and then incorporate them into their own lives.

5. Analysis and Discussion

"Pop the Balloon or Find Love" has rapidly emerged as one of the internet's most chaotic dating shows, where love is just one balloon pop away from rejection. The premise is simple yet ruthless: a group of strangers meet, and if someone isn't feeling the "vibe," they pop their balloon to eliminate the person on the spot. Popularized by Nons Miraj's *Hunt Game Show* edition in Nigeria, the show thrives on dramatic matchmaking, emotional intensity, and brutal balloon-popping energy that captivates its massive online audience. Beyond its appeal as viral entertainment, the show warrants deeper scholarly critique. This study focuses specifically on Nons Miraj's version, which has played a foundational role in evolving the trend. Her *Hunt Game Show* umbrella includes several variations, including *Pop the Balloon to Find Love*, *Smash or Pass to Find Love*, *Swipe to Find Love*, *Matchmake Your Child*, and the TikTok-based *Tap to Find Love*. Among these, *Pop the Balloon to Find Love* stands as the flagship series, with over a hundred episodes and a strong following.

Known for its humor, emotional exchanges, and often controversial moments, the show is tightly associated with its host; Nons Miraj (born Chinonso Ukah), a Nigerian comedian and media personality celebrated for her bold, charismatic on-screen presence. This analysis examines the potential of the show's pursuit of spectacle to influence viewers. Key issues include the role of the host in manufacturing conflict, patterns of gender objectification and materialism, the normalization of verbal

aggression, and the reinforcement of stereotypes. We will also highlight moments of counterpoints and contrast Nons Miraj's contentious approach with the more respectful version by creators BM and Arlette Amuli. Finally, recommendations will be offered for ethical media production and reform, situating the critique within broader discussions of reality TV, performative culture, gender representation, commodification of relationships, and viewer influence through cultivation and social learning theories.

To begin with, Nons's *Hunt Game Show* operates on a unique but contentious formula, which is creating a high-energy, tension-filled environment that demands participants demonstrate resilience or risk public humiliation. Central to sustaining this atmosphere is Nons Miraj, the host herself, whose commanding presence and frequent calls for participants to "give me energy" function less as genuine requests for audibility and meaningful interaction, and more as catalysts for intensified spectacle. Her hosting style, which often favors provocation over mediation, appears intentionally designed to maintain a charged ambiance. Rather than de-escalating conflicts, she sometimes stimulates verbal sparring, even when it escalates into personal insults or outright bullying. This emphasis on entertainment through conflict foregrounds spectacle at the expense of empathy and constructive dialogue, aligning the show more closely with reality television formats that prize controversy as a primary vehicle for audience engagement.

Another striking and deeply troubling feature of the show is its systematic objectification of participants, particularly women, who are often routinely reduced to physical appraisals in a performative public setting. In fact, the show's very structure, which is consistent with other versions of *Pop the Balloon*, actively encourages this dynamic. Contestants stand in lines and are evaluated almost exclusively based on physical appearance and initial "vibe," with episode titles in Nons's edition often bluntly referring to the elimination of the "least attractive" person. This aesthetic-first format constructs a mini economy of desirability, where women, in particular, are pressured to present highly curated versions of beauty. Whether arriving fully glammed or not, female participants tailor their appearances to appeal to a male gaze shaped by pop culture and social media aesthetics.

One recurring and particularly problematic ritual is the request that women perform a "360" turn, making them to rotate before the cameras and contestants to showcase their bodies for consumption. These scenes accompanied by verbal commentary and suggestive reactions, transform women's bodies into objects of scrutiny, reducing them to measurable parts. In one egregious example, a male contestant evaluates a woman by saying, "The waist is there, but the breast is not there," then adds, "How can you have this (gesturing to her lower body) and not have that (gesturing to her upper body)?" He concludes by ridiculing her head shape as "non-structured," eliciting laughter from both the audience and fellow participants. While such remarks are not outliers but representative of a pattern that consistently prioritizes physical attributes over personality, intellect, or emotional depth, the camera itself participates in this objectification. Strategic panning, slow zooms, and audience reactions amplify the spectacle of bodily judgment. Female participants, aware of this visual economy, often preen or behave flirtatiously, engaging in what scholars term self-objectification—where women internalize an observer's perspective and learn to evaluate themselves through the lens of others (Kahalon et al., 2018; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2017; Wang et al., 2024).

Academic research has shown that consistent exposure to such media portrayals can lead women to adopt objectifying self-perspectives, which in turn negatively impact their self-esteem, body image, and psychological health (Merino et al., 2024). The show also pits women against one another in romantic competition, often reinforcing the harmful trope that a woman's value lies in outshining other women in attractiveness. Personality traits are rarely foregrounded until after physical judgments have been made. This dynamic reflects a broader cultural script in which women's worth is equated with their ability to perform desirability according to rigid, often Eurocentric, and heteronormative standards. This harm is multifaceted, one, it narrows the representation of womanhood and pressures contestants to conform to limited beauty ideals, and two, it invites viewers to adopt similar frameworks of judgment in their everyday lives.

Compounding the issue is the show's promotion of performative affluence, both among men and women. Participants are frequently asked to disclose the cost of their outfits, wigs, or accessories, with many citing exaggerated, even implausible figures. This practice reinforces the narrative that physical appearance must be augmented by conspicuous consumption to be considered worthy. Such displays construct a "fake life" aesthetic that equates self-worth with material wealth, encouraging aspirational lifestyles that are neither authentic nor sustainable. This is especially damaging for younger audiences, who may internalize these values and learn to associate desirability with luxury, rather than character or connection. Another disturbing hallmark of *Pop the Balloon or Find Love* is its normalization of verbal aggression and public humiliation, which are presented as integral to the show's entertainment value. While reality television is often critiqued for encouraging conflict, this show intensifies that trend by wrapping verbal cruelty in the guise of "honest feedback" or "banter."

The format itself sanctions snap judgments in front of a live audience, often demanding contestants justify their rejection of others through pointed critique, frequently of physical appearance, socio-economic background, or personal demeanor, and this structure creates fertile ground for verbal bullying. In Episode 15, for example, a female participant is mocked by a male contestant who likens her height to “a bottle of Amstel Malt,” prompting uproarious laughter from fellow contestants and the audience. In another case, a 22-year-old woman is brought to tears after being derisively labeled “poor,” an “Agric chicken,”² and “Kung Fu Panda.” What is troubling is not solely the insults themselves but the atmosphere that enables and even encourages them. Despite the participant’s visible distress, there was no intervention or redirection, and the mockery continued unabated until it reached its peak. The absence of compassion or accountability from fellow contestants and the host points to an underlying culture that rewards cruelty over kindness.

The impact of these portrayals is not limited to the show’s participants. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) warns that repeated exposure to rewarded aggression in media environments can lead viewers, particularly young or impressionable ones, to model these behaviors in real life. The rise of cyberbullying linked to reality TV fandoms is a troubling case in point—audiences now take to social media to insult contestants they disliked on the show, continuing the cycle of harm. Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) further suggests that persistent exposure to such interpersonal cruelty can desensitize viewers, subtly altering their perceptions of normal social behavior and reducing empathy over time. What is perhaps most alarming is the show’s lack of emotional accountability. Rarely do we see apologies for hurtful comments and the host’s interventions to correct offensive behavior are too sparing and, in most cases, selective.

By presenting verbal abuse as part of the “game,” the show tends to minimize emotional trauma and trivializes psychological harm. For a society engaged in public discourse around anti-bullying, toxic gendering, and mental health, the show unfortunately, represents a regressive step. Viewer commentary reactions to some of the episodes further highlight the emotional toll these dynamics exert. One viewer criticized the episode as exhibiting “absolute disgraceful behaviour,” lamenting the absence of basic kindness and respect. Another wrote of their emotional reaction to a particular contestant’s public breakdown in episode 15: “She probably spent her last dime on her dress and paid transportation to the venue... only to be humiliated like that. Is this a love show or a roast?” These critiques evidently present the ethical implications of commodifying human emotions and vulnerabilities for the sake of engagement and virality.

Additionally, the show’s structure reinforces deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, particularly regarding masculinity and femininity, presenting a stylized but regressive version of gender performance. Men are predominantly evaluated by their financial standing or perceived future earning potential, while women are judged almost exclusively by physical appearance and conformity to idealized beauty standards. This performative imbalance mirrors long-standing patriarchal norms that frame men as providers and women as objects of desire, repackaging these outdated roles within a flashy, social media-savvy dating format (Ashraf & Jepsen, 2024; Gupta et al., 2023). In multiple episodes, male contestants who do not project economic dominance are summarily dismissed.

In Episode 87, a man is ridiculed for admitting financial struggles and told outrightly that he “doesn’t deserve” to find love. Similarly, in Episode 40, a 23-year-old is labeled “too young” and “not yet a man” because he has not achieved a visible level of financial success. These interactions reflect cultural scripts that equate masculinity with material provision and social status. Such portrayals are particularly harmful in societies like Nigeria, where high youth unemployment and economic precarity persist (Nwaonuma & Ebubechima, 2023). They risk exacerbating what Jemiluyi (2022) and Smith (2020) describe as a growing masculinity crisis, in which young men feel trapped between societal expectations and their limited means to fulfill them, ultimately reinforcing what Jemiluyi (2025) terms the “original sufferhead” syndrome.

The show, thus, perpetuates what some scholars call a “beauty-for-status exchange,” a transactional model where male economic power is traded for female attractiveness (McClintock, 2014; Gouda-Vossos, 2019). It is a model that reflects, but also amplifies, traditional relationship dynamics, especially in contexts influenced by both African patriarchal traditions and Western consumerism. However, the double standards in behavioral expectations are stark. Men who dominate conversation or boast are frequently framed as confident or even chivalrous, particularly when defending a woman’s “honor.” Women who do the same by speaking assertively, challenging comments, or expressing displeasure are quickly labeled as “dramatic,” “rude,” or “mean,” reflecting what scholars identify as gendered media tropes (Chandi & Trehan, 2022; Ward & Grower, 2020). Thus, rather than challenging outdated narratives, the show often repackages them in glitter and virality. It performs gender through drama rather than depth, offering contestants and viewers alike a spectacle that teaches old lessons under the pretense of modern

² The term ‘an Agric Chicken’ is a derogatory expression in the Nigerian context, often used to describe someone perceived as weak or lacking strength. The phrase draws its origins from the contrast between agriculturally raised chickens, which are considered less hardy, and their free-range counterparts, which are seen as tougher and more resilient

matchmaking. Any meaningful evolution of the show would need to dismantle these entrenched dynamics by elevating empathy over performance, substance over status, and individuality over stereotype.

Another element of the show is the "love for sale" narrative, where romantic interest is often framed in terms of monetary exchange. In one episode, a woman asserts that her ideal partner must give her a monthly allowance of 300,000 naira.³ Such interactions, which is uncommon in the show and evident in almost all the episodes, reinforce a commodified view of love, transforming relationships into transactions defined by material exchange rather than emotional connection. This framing can be especially dangerous for impressionable audiences who may internalize these values and replicate them in their personal lives. The theoretical frameworks of cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) help illustrate the broader societal implications of these portrayals. Repeated exposure to aggression, objectification, and materialism can shape viewers' perceptions of reality, normalizing behaviors that are ultimately detrimental to healthy social relationships.

In the Nigerian context, where young people already face cultural and economic pressures around relationships, success, and identity (Onyibor, 2016; Edet, 2013), the stakes are even higher. Additionally, for Nigerians in the diaspora, these portrayals risk becoming definitive representations of Nigerian culture. In the 95th Atlanta edition, stereotypes about "Atlanta men" were generalized based on a few participants' behavior. Similarly, the sexualized introduction of an African-American woman with exaggerated commentary about her body perpetuated problematic representations of Black womanhood. The 94th Houston edition saw Yoruba men labeled as "Yoruba demons," a damaging trope that paints a broad group of people as inherently deceitful or untrustworthy. Such moments raise serious concerns about the ethics of media representation, especially on platforms with global reach. While many composed and thoughtful individuals could be invited to participate, the show often appears to favor contestants likely to generate controversy, hence, maximizing entertainment value at the cost of dignity and fair representation.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that the show has occasionally offered glimpses of its more constructive potential. In several episodes, Nons Miraj has stepped in when tensions flared, attempting to mediate and deescalate conflict. Her actions, though inconsistent, suggest an awareness of the line between entertainment and harm. Additionally, she has demonstrated genuine generosity by offering gifts and financial assistance to contestants who express need. These gestures, while admirable, are too rare to counterbalance the overarching ethos of spectacle that dominates the show. It is worth noting that some participants appear to genuinely seek meaningful connections on the platform. However, their efforts are often drowned out by the more sensationalist elements of the show. These moments of sincerity hint at what the show could be—a space that champions Black love, connection, and representation—if it were to adopt a more balanced, empathetic approach.

A compelling contrast can be drawn with BM and Arlette's version of *Pop the Balloon or Find Love*, produced in Phoenix. Though it has seen its share of drama—with contestants nicknamed "Ninja Turtle," "Dr Elom," and "Dr Des" making the show's moments occasionally veer off course—the program remains comparatively grounded. Insults, such as mocking someone's appearance, outfit, or financial standing, do surface (e.g., a participant being mocked for a "Willy Wonka" hat or a "Shien dress"), but they are handled with greater restraint. Arlette, as host, sets a clear tone of respect, and both she and her husband (the show's producer) have repeatedly emphasized their goal of fostering genuine romantic connections. Their version of the show has received acclaim for its class and cultural sensitivity, including a Netflix deal and partnership with Creative Artists Agency (CAA) (Germain, 2025; Grobar, 2024). This model demonstrates that it is possible to maintain entertainment value while also safeguarding dignity, empathy, and cultural pride.

Given these dynamics, the analysis calls for more conscientious media production and cultural policy development that prioritize representation with integrity. While the *Hunt Game Show* version of the viral *Pop the Balloon to Find Love* has undeniably demonstrated significant cultural reach and offers agency to Black love and screen representation, it simultaneously reinforces troubling narratives. And it is noteworthy to mention that our aim is not to knock down the show in its entirety, but to critically examine its more problematic elements that risk being internalized by viewers and potentially reinforcing harmful stereotypes, particularly about Nigerians, both at home and abroad. In a global media ecosystem where representation is often the first point of encounter with cultural identity, such portrayals carry weight. If left unchecked, they may serve as cultural exports that shape distorted perceptions of Nigerian identity or become internalized norms for audiences seeking relational and aspirational cues. With thoughtful recalibration, the show could evolve into a transformative platform, one that not only

³ As of November 2024, 300,000 naira, roughly converts to about \$186. However, this amount should not be judged solely through its converted value, as it reflects local socio-economic dynamics. Notably, the ladies on the show often state significantly higher demands, with some asking for up to 2 million naira for monthly upkeep, a figure that converts to approximately \$1,240.

entertains, but also uplifts, educates, and empowers. This leads us to the final section, where we conclude the study by offering a set of recommendations for reform.

6. Recommendations for Reform

Given the concerns raised throughout this analysis, there is a clear and urgent need for ethical reform in how *Pop the Balloon* or *Find Love*, especially in the *Hunt Game Show* edition, is produced and presented. If the show intends to sustain its popularity while preserving its cultural relevance and protecting both its participants and audiences, certain interventions must be adopted. Drawing from media ethics principles, insights from media and communication theory, and contrasts with more respectful adaptations, the following recommendations are proposed:

- a) **Implement Robust Participant Welfare Protocols:** Respect for participants should be foundational. Pre-show briefings should emphasize zero tolerance for hate speech or excessive personal attacks. As seen in many international reality TV productions, having an on-site or on-call counselor or psychologist is now standard best practice, particularly for shows involving public judgment and potential humiliation. While Nons Miraj has occasionally shown support to a few participants, whether by offering consoling words or through physical gestures of reassurance, such interventions often appear selective and informal, which presents the need for a more structured and professional system of emotional care. Post-show check-ins and optional counseling, especially for those who experience bullying or distress, would further reinforce this culture of care.
- b) **Reframe the Role of the Host:** The host's function should be redefined through a lens of ethical moderation. While charisma and energy are vital, the encouragement of personal conflict should not be central. The host should serve as a tone-setter, redirecting heated exchanges, discouraging cruelty, and promoting respectful interaction. Training in conflict mediation and empathy could enhance the host's ability to balance entertainment with responsibility. A host who intervenes when verbal attacks escalate or offers support to distressed participants contributes to a healthier and more inclusive viewing experience.
- c) **Edit with Integrity:** Reality TV is shaped significantly in post-production. Producers wield immense narrative power through editing and must commit to an ethic of accuracy, honesty, and fairness. Sensational or demeaning clips, especially those that rely on bullying or humiliation, can be minimized or excluded altogether. Instead, editors should spotlight moments of genuine connection, humor, vulnerability, or personal growth. Conflicts, when shown, should be balanced by resolutions, apologies, or host interventions, avoiding one-sided portrayals that manufacture and glorify villains. Ethical editing builds trust with viewers and protects participants from disproportionate public backlash.
- d) **Establish a Culture of Respect Among Contestants:** The production should enforce clear behavioral expectations. Contestants must understand that while honesty and preference expression are part of the format, disrespect is not. This can be communicated through off-camera briefings and on-screen statements. For instance: "You are free to say why you're not feeling a connection, but avoid personal insults." When lines are crossed, the host or editing team should mitigate the impact by cutting the footage or gently correcting the behavior in real time. A respectful environment would likely encourage contestants to show more of their authentic selves, which will, in fact, enhance the emotional and entertainment value of the show.
- e) **Engage Stereotypes Thoughtfully:** Given its diverse cast, the show has a responsibility to challenge, not perpetuate, stereotypes related to gender, nationality, and race. Cultural briefings prior to filming could sensitize contestants to avoid derogatory comments or assumptions. When stereotypes do arise as they inevitably might, the host could fact-check or redirect the moment toward insight rather than insult. Encouraging brief, humorous, or educational exchanges across cultures could also add depth to the show without sacrificing entertainment. Furthermore, producers should avoid editing that reinforces monolithic or negative portrayals of identity groups, instead emphasizing individuality and diversity of experience.
- f) **Commit to Transparency and Authenticity:** Viewers today are media-savvy and increasingly skeptical of overly scripted drama. If there are elements of manipulation or producer-driven conflict, it is advisable to minimize these and embrace authenticity. Awkward silences, quiet connections, or unscripted kindness can be just as compelling as dramatics. If the show truly fosters real romantic connections, producers could include follow-up episodes or "where are they now" segments to honor the genuine outcomes of the format. Although the host has recently introduced such a follow-up section, it still has considerable room for development, particularly in helping audiences see that the show is not solely created for spectacle, drama, or tense verbal exchanges, but can in fact be a space where meaningful bonds

are formed. These segments could also offer a valuable window into the emotional aftermath of participation, as contestants share their reflections, outcomes, and lessons learned. Done well, they could shift the narrative toward one of authenticity, emotional depth, and long-term cultural relevance.

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