

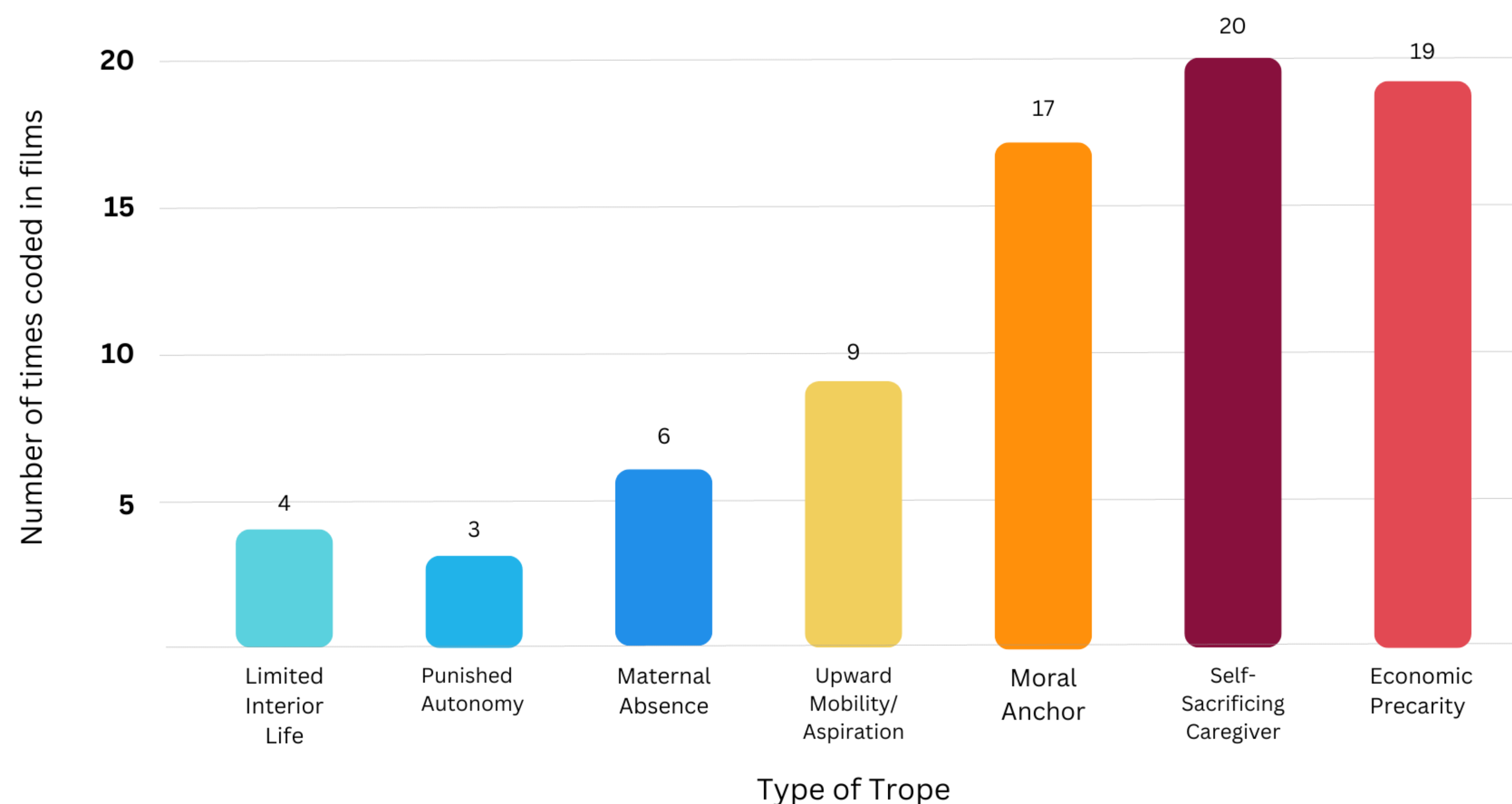
Introduction

- Existing research in media studies and Black feminist theory has long analyzed the presence of racialized tropes shaping portrayals of Black motherhood in film and television, including the “strong Black mother,” the self-sacrificing matriarch, the struggling caregiver, and the morally stabilizing figure who endures hardship for family survival.
- Research also shows that Black maternal characters are often depicted in narratives of economic vulnerability, domestic labor, or systematic disadvantage. This reinforces the sociohistorical associations between Black womanhood and survival under struggle. While these tropes have previously been identified, less work has examined how Black motherhood is consistently related to economic class, or how their status is reflected in reward and punishment.
- Few studies have examined the consistent link between Black motherhood and economic class. This study analyzes 25 films from 1950 to the present to explore how U.S. cinema constructs Black motherhood and economic class
- The purpose of this research is to determine whether contemporary representations challenge or reproduce longstanding commentaries that sketch Black motherhood as experiences of endurance, scarcity, and moral responsibility. This project aims to clarify how film reflects and shapes understandings of race, class, and motherhood.

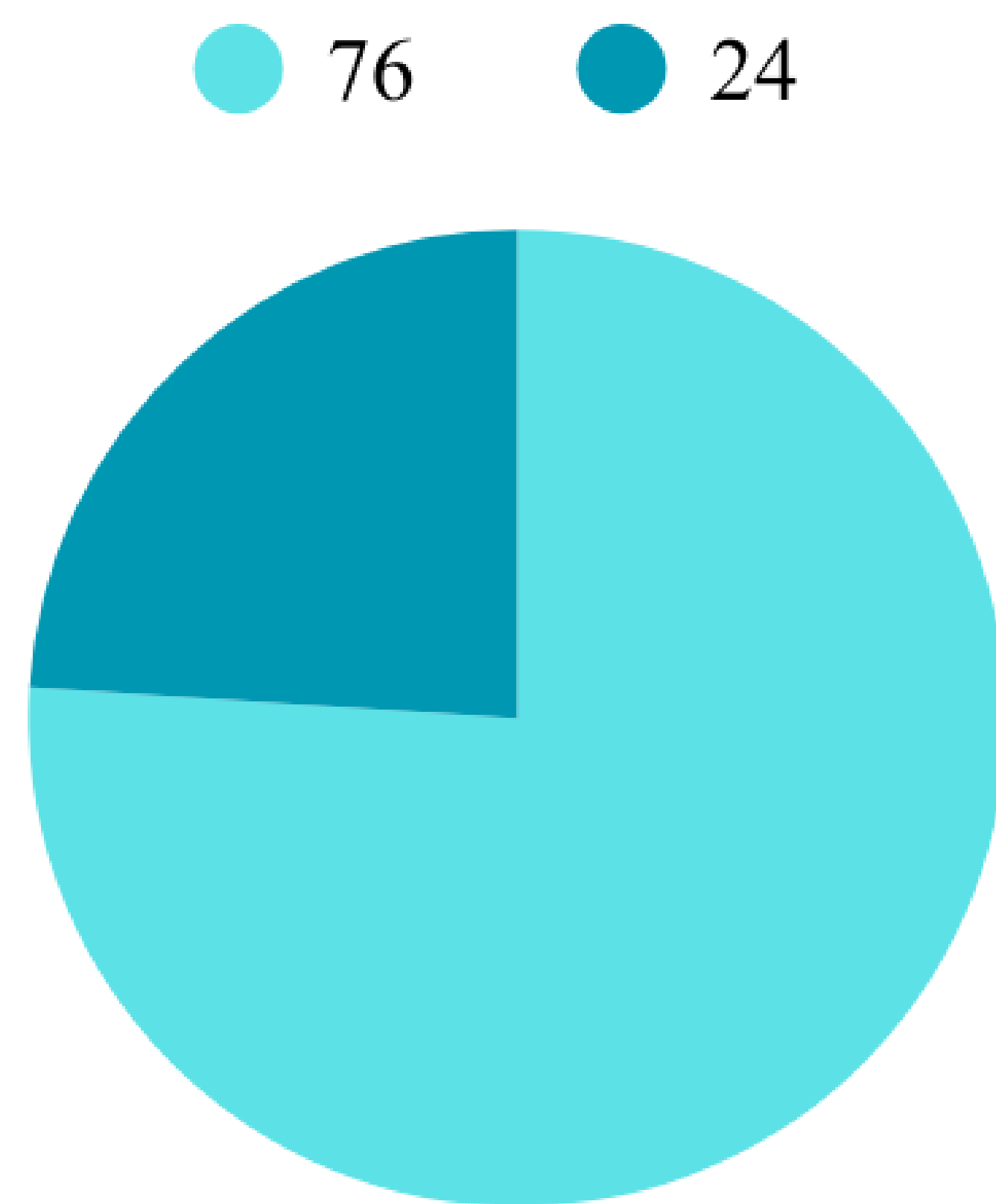
Methodology

- This study used various methods of media analysis to examine portrayals of Black motherhood and economic class in 25 U.S. films released between 1950 up until now. The primary measures included identifying narrative themes such as maternal sacrifice, economic status, autonomy, narrative reward or punishment, and emotional states. Screen time, character centrality, and socioeconomic context were also noted to assess visibility and framing.
- Films were selected based on the inclusion of at least one prominent Black maternal figure and representation across multiple genres and decades. Each film was viewed and coded using ethnographic note-taking to document recurring tropes and class indicators.
- Data analysis was conducted using the quantitative frequency of coded themes with qualitative analysis of themes. This allowed for the identification of strong patterns, shifts across historical periods, and links between economic class and narrative outcomes.

Frequency of Tropes Across Films



Films portraying Black maternal figures in conditions of economic hardship



Financial Precarity

Such as:

- Low-wage or domestic labor (*Claudine, The Help*)
- Housing instability or overcrowding (*A Raisin in the Sun, A Thousand and One*)
- State intervention tied to poverty (*Earth Mama*)

Financial Stability

Such as:

- Clearly stable or elite economic positioning without hardship (*Black Panther*)
- Middle-class stability without material precarity (*Love & Basketball*)

Results

- This study asked how U.S. films portray Black motherhood in relation to economic class. Content analysis of 25 films (1950–present) found that 19 films (76%) depicted Black maternal figures in positions of economic struggle.
- Twenty-one films portray mothers as self-sacrificing caregivers, and seventeen portray them as the moral anchors in their families or communities. Eight films include themes of upward mobility or class aspiration, while six depict maternal absence or separation linked to structural factors such as poverty or state intervention. Three films portray maternal autonomy followed by narrative consequence.
- The results show that economic hardship and self-sacrifice remain the most common narratives for Black mothers in film. The research question is therefore supported by measurable patterns connecting Black maternal representation to class struggle.
- The significance of these results is shown through the consistency of this relationship in U.S. film over time. Strengths of the study include its multi-decade span and coding approach.
- Limitations include the sample size and subjectivities in coding. Also, most of the films analyzed for this study used Black motherhood as a central theme, with few films not having it as the primary focus. Future research may expand the number of films analyzed, compare portrayals to those of non-Black mothers, or examine television and other media representations.

References

To view the references for this project, including the list of movies analyzed, please scan the QR Code:

