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## Framing Female Leadership in a Television Drama

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Framing Female Leadership in a Television Drama

FRAMING FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN A TELEVISION DRAMA

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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### Abstract

Stereotypes play a vital role in the perception of gender roles in American society. This concept is illustrated through low representation of female leadership in the U.S. Women are overrepresented in roles that are communal, which causes backlash when they display agentic traits (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). Olivia Pope, the main character in the television series *Scandal*, was a leader who displayed an agentic leadership style and was revered for doing so. Agentic leadership traits are competitiveness, independence, and assertiveness (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). This study analyzes how Olivia Pope was framed and the potential impact of those frames. Using frame analysis, Olivia Pope's character in each episode of the television series *Scandal* was analyzed. The analysis revealed that Olivia Pope's character was framed using themes such as power, reverence, fixer, conflicted, sexualized and dysfunctional family dynamics. The framing of a character as rare as Olivia Pope is significant. Though Olivia Pope's character is based on the life of an African-American woman who owned her own crisis management firm, many viewers would have never known this type of woman existed without the development of this show. Olivia Pope is a complicated character whose role in American television is progressive and has the power to expand its viewers' perception of leadership.



The television series *Scandal* is a political drama that has been captivating a wide audience since its debut in the Spring of 2012 on the ABC Network. The series consisted of seven seasons, with the series finale airing on April 18, 2018. The series finale drew in 5.4 million viewers, and the viewers were adults between the ages 18 – 49 (Otterson, 2018). The creator, Shonda Rhimes, developed a riveting series that serves as a parallel to the scandalous events that occurred in Washington D.C. Rhimes was able to compile politics, social justice, salaciousness and suspense in one series. Rhimes made history with three television shows airing during primetime on Thursdays on ABC. *Grey's Anatomy* and *How to Get Away with Murder* were the other two shows created by Shonda Rhime's that had women as the lead characters. The common theme amongst Rhimes's work is women as the lead character. Interestingly, she did not portray these characters as superheroes or housewives; instead she illustrated the characters as complicated, capable and qualified. Vulnerability, emotion and strength were qualities that gave her characters edge and made them relatable.

The writers of the show found ways to incorporate social issues and current events that were plaguing American society. One of the most popular episodes highlighted a beloved author and college professor who sexually assaulted many of his female students. Another episode unfolded the scandal of a European princess who died in a car accident. One of the most socially conscious episodes included the murder of an unarmed African-American teenager, who was killed by a police officer. These episodes captured the essence of famous American scandals such as the sexual assault case against Bill Cosby, the death of Princess Diana, and the death of Mike Brown. These episodes shared stories that brought about insight into scandalous situations and served justice to the unjust. The *Scandal* series allowed the audience to see the perspective of people who made mistakes. The writers always gave the back story to how the scandal began,

and why specific decisions were made. Suspense was a major component of the *Scandal* series. The show incorporated murder, kidnapping, presidential assassination attempts, U.S. conspiracies and many other twists and turns that kept the audience captivated weekly. The show creatively incorporated deep state conspiracies, coup attempts and secret spies in the storylines. These controversial topics made the views question the validity of the claim that the stories were fictional. Specifically, the secret government intelligence agency portrayed in the series, known as B613, became a Twitter hashtag that was used in response to real government news that was occurring in real time.

TGIT, Thank God it's Thursday, became a trending hashtag on Thursday nights on the ABC network. *Scandal* was the first television series that created real-time dialogue with the fans and viewers via Twitter (Hamedy, 2014). That real-time engagement allowed fans to give praises and express criticism of each episode. Many of the cast members interacted with their fans, resulting in *Scandal* becoming one of the most tweeted, followed and liked TV drama in technology's modern history. The overwhelming real-time responses and reactions revealed the impact *Scandal* had on their audience. The Twitter feed debates and discussions served as proof that many of the topics were creating emotional responses and dialogue amongst viewers.

The series was an anomaly during its era. The predominately female cast, creators and directors was a rarity. Fewer than 20 percent of directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers and editors were women during this era (Women and Hollywood, 2012). That number is significantly decreased when the number of African-American women in leadership roles during this time is considered. Compared to all of the television dramas of this time, the Olivia Pope's character was a rarity. It is not traditional for female African-American characters to be portrayed as powerful leaders in the space of politics or communication. This

concept contributed to the diverse audience that was drawn to this series over the years. Though many viewers may not have seen a character like Olivia Pope played on television, Shonda Rhimes based the character off of a real-life political fixer. Judy Smith, the inspiration behind the character Olivia Pope, is a lawyer, crisis manager, and later became an author. During President George H.W. Bush's administration, Smith served as the Deputy Press Secretary to the President. After leaving the White House, Smith started her own crisis management firm, representing high profile clients such as Michael Vick, Monica Lewinsky, Wesley Snipes and Sony Pictures. She also served as the Vice President of Communication for NBC, then later became the co-executive producer for the self-inspired series, *Scandal* (Smith, 2012).

Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, owns a crisis management firm in Washington, D.C, and is well-known for being a prominent political fixer. The creator, Shonda Rhimes, announced that season seven would be the last season of the series. Rhimes received feedback from longtime fans via Twitter expressing their sadness of the show's departure. Many fans believe that the character Olivia Pope has been the face of feminism and women empowerment.

This thesis uses frame analysis to analyze Olivia Pope's leadership. The portrayal of an African-American female leader in a television series is rare. However, it is essential to expose how such images impacts modern society. It is essential to analyze how impactful modern media is in establishing stereotypes of female leadership. The analysis of Olivia Pope's character is intended to shed light on the intersections of identity and the power of representation. It is important to conclude whether Pope's actions and tactics are worthy of idolization or should be criticized for reinforcing negative stereotypes.

### **Literature Review**

In the United States, men occupy the vast majority of leadership roles in S&P 500 companies. The low representation of female leadership is a recurring imbalance in American society (Catalyst, 2016). A female's appearance, personality, and credibility tend to be more heavily scrutinized in comparison to a male. Men face scrutiny in the communication field, however, there is a vast difference in the male and female experience as a communication leader (Kern & Mishra, 2014). While men do face scrutiny and critique, some researchers argue that women who occupy positions that are perceived to be agentic face more scrutiny in that position. Agentic leadership traits include competitiveness, independence, and assertiveness (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). As portrayed in U.S. newsrooms or public relations firms, female characters with agentic leadership styles in television shows, books, articles, advertisements, and other forms of content face scrutiny as well (Kern & Mishra, 2014). The research reviewed for this section analyzes the societal impact of stereotypes, gender roles and framing.

### *Stereotypes*

Stereotypes play a significant role in the way society conceptualizes people, events and ideas (Simon, 2011). Stereotypes are characteristics that are assigned to a specific group and are attributed to its individual members because of their association to that group (Heilman, 1983, p. 271). This subconscious process allows individuals to rationalize the placement of various social groups, and form bias perceptions of individuals (Simon, 2011). Stereotypes become justifications to why a specific group behaved in a specific way, sometimes resulting in erroneous conclusions (Simon, 2011). The concept of gender roles serves as evidence to this theory. The reoccurrence of women in the role of the caretaker, mother, and wife created a societal consensus that this is role of a woman. Throughout history this stereotype has been challenged by social movements led by women. Pioneers of the suffrage movement, such as

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, fought to eradicate the perception that women are unfit to have the right to vote (Gordon, 2013). Women were amongst the audience that needed to be convinced. Though the reasoning is unknown, internalizing stereotypes may serve as an explanation. Stereotypes have the ability to influence an individual's thoughts attitudes and behaviors once they have been internalized (Simon, 2011).

### *Social Role Theory*

Though changemakers such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton believed women had the ability to be effective leaders, it was difficult to convince the nation that women were more than communal and domesticated. Social role theory suggests the way individuals experience a social group within a society shapes their perception of that specific social group (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Communal roles have been overrepresented by women, which contributes to the belief that women are not fit to lead positions (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). When one gender type has held a position, it creates the belief that this specific gender appears to be more qualified. In result, an individual's evaluation of success will be dependent upon how congruent the gender and the job are perceived to be (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). Babysitters, nurses and caretakers are framed to be congruent with women, and a woman in a leadership position is discrepant. A positive perception of fitness increases the belief that the individual will achieve success in a specific role. A gender-type that is underrepresented in a given role will likely be perceived as unfit, and the likelihood for success will be doubted prior to the individual obtaining the position (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). As a result, the individual's job evaluation will be influenced by their perceived fitness. Women who enact the same behaviors as men in leadership roles are often ridiculed and seen as less likeable (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

### *Role Congruity Theory*

It can be argued that in order for an individual to have a smooth transition into leadership, their social identity has to align with the perception of fitness for that role. The role congruity theory addresses the “prejudices that arise when stereotypic traits of a particular group are incongruent with the attributes believed to be necessary to be successful in the leader role” (Eagly & Karu, 2002, p. 97). This theory adds rationale to the lack of female leadership and the reoccurrence of male leadership. Only men have been President of the United States. Though women have run for President, America has consistently seen the male candidate as more fit for the position. Though female qualities are perceived as communal, there are leadership roles that are more congruent to women. Communal traits allow women to be perceived as compassionate, understanding and forgiving. Roles that require a leader who has to rectify an issue, be apologetic, or oversee people are more likely to be occupied by a woman. A leadership role that requires a moral compass is perceived to be more fitting for a woman. (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019, p. 99).

### *Framing Theory*

Frame analysis is based on the framing theory, which argues that content is organized to reflect centralized themes, or frames, that are meaningful to their intended audience. Wimmer and Dominick (2008) stated the capabilities of the frame analysis included three main steps: analyzing content, compare the content to real life, and explain the effect the content has on the viewers. Frame analysis is a common method of research used by researchers who have studied the portrayal of characters, leaders, and political candidates. Ervin Goffman is reported to be the first sociologist to coin the phrase “frame” in a social science context (Goffman, 1986). In his book, *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1986) described frames as conceptualizing verbal and non-verbal communication into meanings that are collectively understood by a culture. Researchers

who have studied the framing of female leadership in articles, television shows, movies and advertisements have made similar assumptions. The stereotypical portrayal of women through various media sources reinforces and emboldens the myths and fallacies regarding gender roles (Simon, 2011). Content that is framed and then fed to an audience is effective and impactful. Therefore, it is essential for researchers to analyze the messaging of content that has the potential to hinder the progression of a society and reinforce negative stereotypes.

The portrayal of the main character in *Scandal* is progressive. *Scandal* is a television series that centers around a woman who held a leadership role in the White House and owned her own crisis communication firm. Olivia Pope's framing was unique, and showed a woman who was fully capable of being an effective leader.

In order to successfully implement frames, researchers must tap into the cognitive process of their audience. Scholars reveal that framing is a device used in politics, entertainment and media (Zhongdang & Kosicki, 1993, p. 57). Goffman explains the sociological process of framing as an organization of ideas and messages that are presented through various verbal and non-verbal devices (Goffman, 1986). However, the psychological process of framing pertains to mental schema. Deeply embedded ideas, assumptions, and stereotypes that have been taught or experienced through an individual's life are subject to be triggered through framed ads, television shows or political campaigns. Political campaigns are often used as an example of how ads are created to directly trigger emotions and behaviors. Communicators use stereotypes and prejudices to their advantage when framing content.

Robert M. Entman's (1993) four location model of framing illustrates each step of the framing process. Entman identifies the first location as the communicator. The communicator formulates the frames based on their own function of schema and personal frames. The

communicator sets the tone for the content while curating messages based on his or her perspective. The content is the second location of this model. Content is a broad term that includes text, images, video, or audio. The third location of this model is the receiver. Receivers are the audience that consumes the content. The fourth location is this process of the receiver interpreting the messaging through their own mental maps, schema and personal frames (Graber, 1984; Patterson, 1993).

The second location, content, contains subtext that consist of symbols that establish frames. Communicators who create frames have the ability to evoke positive or negative emotions from their audience through the symbols they use in their frames. Researchers considers this process to be priming. Through verbal and visual stimulation, priming has the ability to trigger pre-existing memories (Parmelee, 2006, p. 56)

While deconstructing characters in a television series, it is useful to use tools such as the framing theory and frame analysis. Reasoning inherently is influenced by framing (Rathje, 2017). Researchers Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1986) challenged the scientific assumption that humans inherently behave rationally. During their research the two men concluded that people are “more consistently irrational, relying on a number of mental shortcuts to speed up our reasoning, which can make us remarkably sensitive to how things are framed,” (Rathje, 2017). Simple changes such as a metaphor or the rearrangement of words subconsciously influences the reasoning of the audience. Social cognition triggers emotion through and activates perceptions, stereotypes, motivation and fears (Bonnet & Croizer, 2007). Messages that illustrate a narrative, incorporate a metaphor and create emotion has the power to subconsciously cause individuals to think irrationally. The influence of framing stems from its ability to be covert, leaving the receiver unaware of the true influence of their decision. In result,

people tend to turn to numerical or substantiated evidence to justify their decision or viewpoints, while being oblivious to the impact of framing (Rathje, 2017).

Framing is a covert process that gives the messenger the ability to tailor their message to a specific audience. Journalists, political figures, screen writers and other content creators use framing to convey messages that influence a reaction or response (Rathje, 2017). Framing appears to be imbedded in the foundation of market segmentation. For instance, news networks are divided in this country due to the framing of messages (Mitchell, Matsa, Gottfried, Stocking, Grieco, 2017). Viewers who share conservative or right-wing political views are more likely to watch news networks that are framed in a way that appear to uphold Republican values. The same effect occurs amongst viewers that share liberal or left-wing political views who watch networks that uphold Democratic values (Mitchell, Matsa, Gottfried, Stocking, Grieco, 2017). Framing messages to be synonymous to views of an audience assist in the formulation of tribalism and brand loyalty. It can be argued that viewers find comfort in watching news and TV programming that appear to share their views.

### *Olivia Pope*

In *The Fantastic Olivia Pope: The Construction of a Black Feminist Subject*, author Utz McKnight (2014) perceives the portrayal of Olivia Pope as an indication of new political possibilities in the United States. She argues the portrayal of Olivia's character in the *Scandal* television series gives a glimpse into the evolution of popular culture and is resemblance of the progressive era. The author emphasizes that popular culture strongly defines democracy and may be the solution to racism. Olivia Pope is an African-American communications director who is an advisor to the President of the United States. At her firm, Pope and Associates, she employs a racially diverse group of men and women who pride themselves on loyalty to Olivia. Most

importantly, the author points out that Olivia does not use race as the foundation of her profession or existence, creating a “world where race is subordinate to class and gender” (McKnight, Utz, 2014, p.192). Olivia’s quality of work has built a high level of respectability in the Washington D.C. region, leading to an influx of clients. The author’s concept of an African-American woman in leadership amongst an elitist group of D.C. professionals is an image that is non-traditional and displays a new normal of racial dynamics.

In contrast, in the book *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*, author Adrienne M. Trier-Bieniek argues that Oliva Pope displays “controlling images” of hypersexuality and the Mammy (Collins, 2009, p. 76). While aspects of Olivia’s character portray qualities that promote “de-mammification” of her image, the author admits that her analysis of the character is paradoxical (Omolade, 1994, p. 37). The ideology of the term mammy is derived from a caricature of an African-American female who is consistently viewed as the overseer, caretaker, matriarch, nurturer and fixer (Trier-Bieniek, Adrienne M. 2015). An intricate aspect of Mammy is that she sacrifices her own self-fulfillment and care for her family, while she willingly cares for Caucasian people or Caucasian families (Anderson, 1997; Collins, 2009). The author explains that examples of this ideology are displayed through Olivia’s character traits, relationships and interactions (Trier-Bieniek, Adrienne M. 2015). The article suggest that negative portrayals of African-American female characters creates a lack of identity and reinforces negative stereotypes portrayed on script.

### *Cultivation Theory*

The influential impact of consuming framed content is explained through cultivation theory. Cultivation theory argues the consistent exposure to messages through mass media influences the perceptions and beliefs of individuals (Potter, 2014 p. 1016). This theory

“provides a clear conceptualization for how widespread patterns of meaning first shapes beliefs, then reinforce them over time,” (Potter, 2014 p. 1030). George Gerbner introduced the cultivation theory through his macrolevel analytical explanation of mass media and its effects. Gerbner foreshadowed the infectious impact of television programming, naming it the “new state religion” (Gerbner, 1977, p. 314). He understood that television had an influence that was synonymous to religion. A massive heterogenous audience repetitiously consuming strategic messaging was the formula that birthed a social control that was intended to create desired behaviors and outcomes. Those desired behaviors and outcomes were to send the heterogenous audience to advertisers (Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2015).

Gerbner (1977) expounded on the cultural disservice television was to the lives of the underserved. He noted that “minorities were forced to see their image reflected through the perspective of messages deigned by the majority,” (as quoted in Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2015, p. 676). The views of the majority could not accurately depict the lives of minorities due to their lack of experience as a minority. Therefore, the motives, desires and beliefs of the majority were fed to the audience as social order and social norms. The cultivation theory possesses the ability to expose the correlation between institutions within a society, the messages those institutions curate, and the effects of those messages (Potter, 2014 pg. 1030).

Researchers suggest “increasing gender representativeness and diversity improves organizational integrity,” (Choi, Hong, & Lee, 2018, p. 88). In order to maintain a diverse perspective and ensure there are positive portrayals of women and minority individuals, it is essential to incorporate diverse writers when creating content. However, women and minorities have to be welcomed into safe a working environment where their opinion is valued. Indira S. Somani, a former news producer who now teaches at Howard University, conducted in-depth

interviews with twenty-three news producers, anchors, assignment editors, and correspondents. "One of the people I talked to, a national correspondent, says she tried to make people she works with forget that she's black," Somani said (Abbady, 2017, p.1). The interviewee described suppressing certain ethnic traits in order to be seen as a human being. "I know there's a barrier there...but I don't want to draw attention to the barrier," (Abbady, 2017, p.1). The interviewees described receiving unwanted comments about their hairstyles and choice of clothing. They also described ambivalence about being confined to covering "the black story," (Abbady, 2017, p.1). This exchange between the interviewer and the participants supports the idea that the experiences of women and minorities are vastly different than the experience of Caucasian men in the communication industry.

The portrayal of Olivia Pope's character was developed by a diverse group of writers (Laporte, 2017). Research suggest increasing diversity in an organization increases an organization's integrity (Choi, et al 2018, p. 1). This approach could lead to more diverse writers, which would result in the development of diverse characters. Dismantling negative stereotypes about women in leadership begins with diversifying the people who tell these stories.

There are various components that make up Olivia Pope, and each of those components are frames that are considered communal or agentic. As described in role congruity theory, some of her leadership qualities are incongruent with the traditional portrayal of women on television. Stereotypes play an essential role in the portrayal of this character. The creator of this character find ways to make stereotypic traits of women appear admirable. Framing of Olivia Pope, a woman who is a non-traditional leader, is symbolic and has the potential to reshape its viewers idea of leadership. Cultivation theory supports this idea, and serves as evidence to the impact the portrayal of female leaders may have on its audience. Analyzing the portrayal of Olivia Pope will

help determine if her character reinforces stereotypes about women or weaken the idea that women are not fit to lead. The research questions are as follows:

- How is Olivia Pope framed in the television series, *Scandal*?
- What does the framing of Olivia Pope reveal about the portrayal of female leadership?

## Methods

### *Grounded Theory*

During the 1960's, Glaser and Strauss (1967) discovered a data collection approach that is systematic and allows for analysis, called grounded theory. Instead of placing the research focus on testing a hypothesis, grounded theory allows themes to emerge from the data. Two processes that are essential in grounded theory study are constant comparison and theoretical sampling. The constant comparison process allows the researcher to collect and analyze data simultaneously. The researcher then should compare each incident to determine differences or similarities. The process of determining what data to collect and where to collect it is theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 408-409).

Once the data sample has been determined, open and selective coding are used to develop themes that have emerged from the data. Open coding is the process of labeling single events or components until all of the data is coded and fits into an existing code. After reviewing the various codes, the researcher naturally begins to conceptualize the codes into broader ideas which is referred to as selective coding. Theoretical coding is the final coding process that bridges the gap between data and theory (Glaser, 1978).

A frame analysis, using the constant comparative method, was conducted to analyze 124 episodes of the television series *Scandal*. As each episode was examined, stereotyped images, phrases and keywords that were associated with the main character's persona, career and

relationships were notated. This process is referred to as open coding. This data was organized into descriptive labels with shared meanings, until full data saturation was reached. The numerous codes that were formed during the open coding process were then grouped into broader conceptual categories, also known as selective coding. These categories provided deeper insight into the data and set the stage for the theoretical coding process. Themes that were formulated were used as frames to conceptualize the portrayal of the main character, Olivia Pope. Further analysis was conducted on the character development and motivations behind the Olivia Pope character. To determine the potential impact of the exposure to these frames, the cultivation theory is used to generate a “proposition” from findings of the data (Whetten, 1989).. No negative cases were found.

### **Findings**

The portrayal of Olivia Pope’s character was unconventional and progressive. Her leadership style was agentic, illustrating strength and assertiveness throughout the series. Olivia’s character frames include power, reverence, fixer, sexualized, and dysfunctional family dynamics.

#### *Power*

Olivia is framed as a character who is powerful and seeks to have more power. The first season introduces Olivia Pope as the owner of her own crisis management firm, Olivia Pope and Associates, who had recently resigned from her White House position as the director of communication. Her clientele consists of elite D.C. professionals who rely on her resources and access in order to fix their crisis. Olivia has relationships with people in influential places that assist her in handling crisis that consists of cleaning murder scenes, swinging juror’s decisions, and getting politicians elected. She is the daughter of the head of a secret spy service that is

considered to be more powerful than the White House. Her father stated, “my goal is to raise an African-American girl to feel fully entitled to own the world as any white man.”

During season six of the series, Olivia agrees to be the presidential campaign manager for Mellie Grant, the former first lady for the sitting president. After the president-elect, Frankie Vargas, was murdered by Olivia Pope’s father, Olivia consistently stated the “oval is mine.” She dueled with the Vice president-elect and his chief of staff for the White House. She yells to her staff “I’m after the White House. I deserve it. I earned it.”

Olivia Pope dates powerful men throughout the series. Her initial relationship in the series is with a Democratic senator, Edison James. She later had an affair with the President of the United States that lasted for the duration of the series. Olivia’s connection to the President often gave her access and privilege when handling crisis for her clients. During a breakup with the President, Olivia began to date Jake Ballard, the director of the CIA.

The president, Fitzgerald Grant III, separated from his wife, Melody Grant, and turned to Olivia for companionship and counsel. Olivia began to assist the President with decisions he had to make for the country. There is a scene where Olivia is drinking scotch from a glass and standing on the presidential seal in the middle of the oval office advising the President on foreign policy. The president is sitting on the couch taking notes of what Olivia is saying. This scene was symbolic in showing who was truly running the White House. Once the President divorced his wife, Mellie Grant, Olivia moved into the White House as the President’s girlfriend. Olivia’s role was reduced from a decision maker to the role of the first lady. She was forced to complete tasks that were considered domesticated. These tasks consisted of sharing recipes, decorating and giving tours to the visitors of the White House. Olivia expressed her disdain for that role, and

later left the White House and returned to her business. When asked why she left the White House, Olivia replied “He tried to turn me into a first lady.”

After the Inaugural Ball for her candidate who recently won the presidential election, Olivia sat on the steps on the Lincoln Memorial with the Vice President-elect, Cyrus Beam. While gazing at Olivia with a look of amazement and defeat, Cyrus asked Olivia, “How does it feel to be the most powerful woman in the world?” Olivia’s response was “It feels right.” This scene was Olivia’s climax to power. She was responsible for getting the first female President elected in the United States of America and had become the chief of staff.

### *Reverence*

Olivia Pope is framed as the most respected character in the *Scandal* series. Many components contribute to this frame. Olivia’s physical appearance was conservative, and she dressed in business professional attire. She dressed in monotone tailored suits and coats. In a business setting, she was always polished and well-groomed. Scenes of the show often panned from her shoes up to her hair as she walked down a hallway. Many details of Olivia Pope’s outfit were shown more than other characters. The appearance of male leaders portrayed on television typically is not a point of focus. The outfit details of the male characters in the *Scandal* series were not highlighted. The emphasis placed on Olivia Pope’s appearance seemed to be the creator’s way of showing how professional she was. Her suits and sophisticated handbags could be viewed as symbols of power, professionalism and elitism.

The staff of Olivia Pope and Associates are called gladiators. Olivia had rescued each of her staff members from controversial and dangerous situations. As an illustration of gratitude, each person became Olivia’s employee. They often stated the phrase “over a cliff,” when reassuring their loyalty to Olivia. The phrase is insinuating that the gladiators are willing to go

over a cliff for Olivia, no matter the circumstance or consequence. It is a phrase that embodies loyalty and teamwork. When Olivia was working a controversial case that had the potential to face detrimental consequences, her team would quote this phrase.

The White House often needed Olivia's assistance when making decisions and running campaigns. During episode six of season three, Mellie, the first lady, Cyrus, the chief of staff, and the President loathed over Olivia because they believed she was needed in order for the President to win a second presidential term. She is respected for her skills and work ethic. Many other political figures and wealthy people turned to Olivia for her skills as well.

During episode two of season four, while Olivia was on vacation, Abby Weiland, the new chief of staff for the President and ex-employee of Olivia, used Olivia's strategies and ideas to handle difficult tasks in the White House. Abby was often trying to prove that she was just as influential in the White House as Olivia once was. After admittedly being drunk on power, Abby is forced to turn to Olivia for advice and guidance in leaving the White House.

Olivia's Ivy League education, extensive political career and success in her business was seen as respectable and was orchestrated by her father. Olivia helped Fitzgerald Grant III get elected twice, she helped Mellie become the first female President, she helped bring social justice to many controversial scandals, and became very influential in creating policies for the country.

### *The Fixer*

"Why are you fixing their problems? You are the help," Olivia's mom told Olivia in episode fifteen of season three. Olivia appeared to be shaken by this statement. She later shared this encounter with her mom to Cyrus, and then stated, "I am not the help," as reassurance to herself. Olivia Pope's character is framed as a fixer. As a crisis manager, it is Olivia's job to fix the

crisis of her clients. During season one of the series, Olivia accepts the President as a client. She was hired to make the President's affair with an intern disappear. Olivia successfully does so.

The frame of fixer extends past her clients. Whenever her staff or her peers at the White House appear to be in trouble, Olivia rushed to accommodate their needs. "Where is Olivia?" is a common question asked when someone needed help fixing a problem. Often times when mistakes were made, Olivia was requested to fix the issue. Though Olivia was the President's mistress, she often had to help the President and the First lady reconcile the issues that were occurring in their marriage. During episode two of season five, Olivia advised the President to listen to his wife's grievances regarding their divorce. While standing in the oval office, Olivia explains to the President that Mellie is a woman scorned, not because she wants revenge, but because she wants power. The First lady depended on Olivia to help her write her autobiography and campaign for her presidential run. When Mellie would make mistakes or overstep her boundaries, she would yell "Fix it, Olivia!"

The President often needed Olivia for moral and administrative advice. Episode five of season four showed Olivia writing the President's speeches and jokes for state dinners he attended. During the middle of the night, the President would call Olivia to get insight on political issues he was facing. These kinds of scenarios made Olivia put the needs of others above her own. She often sacrificed her own happiness to save others. During the first episode of season four, Olivia took her one and only vacation to an island. When she returned to D.C. for the funeral of one of her gladiators, Harrison, she is met with a lot of backlash and animosity. Her staff and peers in the White House blame her for all of the things that went wrong while she was away.

*Conflicted*

Though Olivia Pope claims to be a beacon for justice, she often used unethical practices to achieve it. When her clients hired her to fix illegal situations, she did not involve law enforcement. Her staff was trained to clean murder scenes, wipe out surveillance footage, bribe witnesses and use torture tactics to get information from suspects. Her main focus was to solve the scandal and control the narrative.

Olivia's family background was conflicted as well. Her father was the head of a spy agency that controlled the U.S. government, and her mother was a highly paid terrorist. Though Olivia tried to maintain a high moral compass, her parents often played a role in the problems she was trying to fix. Her father murdered the President's son, and her mother attempted to assassinate the President.

"The white hat" was a symbol often used to describe the good guy or a person of high morality. When Olivia had the option to be morally corrupt to solve a problem, she would state "I wear the white hat." This phrase revealed her desire to keep her integrity and do what she perceived to be the right thing. She kept a white hat in a safe in her office. When satisfied or proud of how she fixed a scandal, she would physically put on the white hat and sit behind her desk in relaxation.

During the first four seasons of the series, Olivia took a strong stance against murder. She stated multiple times "we don't kill people" to her staff and her peers. However, during episode seventeen of season five, Olivia murders the Vice President, Andrew Nichols; the who orchestrated her kidnapping and attempted to sell her for ransom by other nations. Her unethical tactics are framed as justifiable due to the circumstances of the scandal.

*Sexualized*

Olivia Pope is framed as a sexualized character. The ongoing scandal of the entire series was the affair between Olivia and the President, Fitzgerald Grant III. Their affair began on Fitzgerald's first campaign, while Olivia was his staffer. While having sexual relations in a hotel, Olivia and Fitzgerald was recorded and the tape was released to the public. The President's wife lied and stated that it was herself and Fitzgerald on the tape. Throughout the series, Olivia and the President shared numerous sexual scenes. Olivia was in a total of sixty-six sexual scenes throughout the entire series. She had sexual relations with a total of five men throughout the television series. Some of these occurred in public places, the oval office, hotels and her apartment.

During episode four of season five, Olivia was exposed as the President's mistress through leaked White House photos that were taken. Adjectives such as angry, conniving, and ghetto was used to describe Olivia. When discussing the affair with the President, a Republican senator stated, "Next time you go outside of your marital affairs, choose a girl that's more palatable for the base." Along with these adjectives used to describe Olivia, the press ran stories that insinuated Olivia "slept her way to the top." Her past of dating powerful men became the center of attention, and her achievements became irrelevant. Olivia began to be threatened to be raped and killed. In response to the threats, went into hiding, and attempted to avoid the press. Once she viewed her press coverage, the gravity of the allegation began to make her vulnerable. In disgust towards the racist and sexist public commentary online, Olivia states in private, "People are upset that I have the audacity to be a woman and black." Olivia expressed anger and vulnerability at the idea of people reducing her image to a sexualized figure.

*Dysfunctional Family Dynamics*

Though themes such as power, reverence and fixer were all used to conceptualize Olivia Pope's character, she often showed a weakness and vulnerability when she was in the company of her father. Eli Pope, Olivia's father, was framed as the most powerful character in the *Scandal* series and reminded Olivia of his capabilities when he saw fit. Throughout the series Eli used his power to help and hinder Olivia's career and personal life. Eli was Olivia's only family member until it was revealed that he was holding Olivia's mother captive in a prison. Olivia remained aware of her father's power and was fearful of his any-means-necessary approach. Multiple times during the series, Olivia tried to outthink her father and maneuver around his corrupt tactics. Yet, when Eli would find himself in difficult situations, Olivia would often plead with his adversaries to show her father mercy. When faced with difficult decisions, Olivia often stated "I go with my gut." However, she also stated "I can't trust my gut when it comes to my father." During episode four of season three, Olivia was visibly fearful after an exchange with her father. She stated, "I need to go back to being a good girl. I need to stay in my lane." This scene was the first time Olivia ever appeared fearful, which is contradictory to who she had presented herself to be in front of her peers. Towards the end of the series she became the chief of staff to first female President and gained a significant amount of power. This power came along with her taking over the same secret spy agency her father once ran. As a result, for the first time, Olivia began to show strength towards her father.

### **Discussion**

Each of the frames that were found could be interpreted as agentic or communal. However, Olivia's balance of assertiveness and compassion made her a flexible leader who was highly respected. Leadership traits should not be assigned to a specific gender. Instead, a leader should be allowed to be unique and express their own style of leadership.

*Power*

The imbalance of power amongst men and women is still drastic around the world. There are 195 independent countries in the world, yet only seventeen of them are led by women. Twenty percent of the seats in the global parliament are held by women (Sandberg, 2013). Literature from Sheryl Sandberg's *Leaning In* suggest that once women remove their internal barriers, they will begin to gain more leadership roles. Though Sandberg acknowledges there are structural variables that make the increase in female leadership more difficult, she argues that a significant amount of the responsibility falls on women (Sandberg, 2013). However, women face challenges when negotiating with their partners due to the uneven playing field of power (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). Arnold and Loughlin (2019) suggest the only way to combat the stereotypes that burden women in leadership roles is to "appoint more women into senior leadership" (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019, p. 95). Childcare or desire to have a family is a significant variable for women when competing for leadership roles (Dishman, 2016).

The imbalance of power between males and females within the American society adds rationale to Olivia Pope's consistent hunger for power throughout the television series. Pope played an influential role in getting two consecutive presidents elected. One of those presidents was the first female to be elected president. While influencing foreign and domestic policies, Olivia fixed the lives of elite civilians in Washington, D.C. The writers of the show included real world elements, and illustrated Olivia's consciousness of the imbalance of power amongst men and women. During the final season of the series, the role congruity theory was illustrated often. Mellie Grant was the President and Olivia Pope was her chief of staff. Olivia often reminded Mellie that "No man will come between us." She stated that an alliance between them was important. Olivia strongly expressed that the men in leadership were plotting to take their

positions, due to their lack of confidence in female leadership. A lack of confidence in female leadership is a prejudice against women. However, the series show that the male characters' prejudices was actually an excuse to hide their greed. It was not illustrated that men believed women were not fit for power, it was revealed that they wanted power for themselves. Olivia's claims were supported when multiple male leaders attempted to get Mellie impeached. The show consistently showed Olivia finding ways to maneuver around structural road blocks in order to take what she perceived as her rightful place as a leader. The structural road blocks were built through male domination.

Dishman's (2012) claim that motherhood and childcare stalls career development is illustrated in Olivia Pope's character. Olivia Pope is not married and does not have children. Though Olivia does get pregnant during the series, she decides to have an abortion. It is never disclosed why she chose to have an abortion, however, there is evidence to support possible reasons why she chose to terminate the pregnancy. Though Olivia had multiple love interests throughout the series, her career superseded her personal life. She often referred to the metaphor "standing in the sun". This metaphor described her desire to be happy and free of the burdens that came along with being Olivia Pope. However, when given the opportunity to leave D.C. and start a new life, she declined the offer multiple times. Olivia Pope's character appeared to be fulfilled only when she had power. These events serve as evidence that Olivia Pope's choice to have an abortion was due to her deeper desire to run the country. Olivia's choice to terminate her pregnancy is incongruent with the social role theory. Women are typically portrayed as mothers and wives with communal leadership styles. Yet, she chooses not to be a mother, and turns down multiple marriage proposals throughout the series.

*Reverence*

The term reverence refers to deep respect for someone or something. Framing Olivia Pope's character as a woman who is a revered leader is a vast contrast to the stereotypes of women leaders. Women are typically seen as kind, helpful and caring, which is also known as communal (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). "Women are associated with communal traits because they have tended to be overrepresented in roles requiring communal traits; men are associated with agentic traits because they have tended to be overrepresented in roles requiring agentic" (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019, p. 97). Stereotypes as such become social norms, and results in backlash when violated, also known as role congruity theory. Therefore, when women strive to become leaders, possess leadership qualities, or have reached a senior level of leadership, they are seen as less likable (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Despite their levels of high performance or competence, women are challenged when they achieve success in a traditionally male position (Heilman et al., 2004).

Olivia Pope's character was a role of leadership, and she was respected for her high-level performance. The greater she became at her job, the more clients she gained. Often times she was not well liked, forcing her to spar or threaten people who came up against her. Most people did not want to hire her; however, her efficiency superseded their opinions of her. In the setting of *Scandal*, Olivia did not have to be well liked. Her next client or case did not depend on her likeability. Her ability to get the job done efficiently and swiftly determined her success.

Olivia's character did not align with the communal leader stereotype. When she felt that her role was being reduced to more domesticated task while living in the White House, she decided to leave. Olivia ended her relationship with the President and returned home. When asked why she left, she stated, "He tried to turn me into a first lady." That statement revealed the role of a first lady is something she did not desire, and she did not find it flattering. In contrast,

Olivia's character illustrated more of an agentic leadership style. Her role consistently featured her negotiating, being competitive, assertive and strong. These traits are typically associated with male leadership and is hindering towards women who display these traits. However, Olivia Pope used these traits to her advantage, and in result was revered for it.

Olivia referring to her team as gladiators is an ironic concept. A gladiator is typically seem as a male figure who is trained to fight with weapons. This analogy seem to be a way for the creators to make Olivia appear to be strong and aggressive. Having a team of gladiators creates the imagery of going to war or facing an enemy. Referring to her team as gladiators seem to be an intentional detail implemented by the creators to make Olivia's leadership style appear more agentic.

#### *The Fixer*

As the owner of a crisis management firm, Olivia Pope is framed as a fixer, which is traditionally a woman's role (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). Research suggests, "when a company is in crisis or in need of a moral compass (Adams, 2016) to improve performance, women are more likely to be perceived as a good fit for leadership roles," (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019, p. 98). This theory is synonymous to Olivia's character. She prided herself on being one of the good guys, which is what she calls wearing the white hat. She believed her moral compass is what set her apart from her adversaries. It was Olivia's moral compass that often made solving issues more difficult and made her dig deeper into issues that did not involve her. She showed an unwavering determination to find justice in all of her cases.

In organizations that appear to be failing or facing challenges, women are seen as more suitable for leadership positions (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007). Women are viewed more suitable for jobs that requires managing people, passiveness, and accepting the blame. Though

Olivia was not seen as passive, she did often accept the blame for other people's mistakes and shortcomings. During a time period when Olivia left D.C. to take time for herself, she faced backlash amongst her return. She was blamed for the unraveling of her peers' lives.

Though a crisis communication manager is more suitable for a woman, it is portrayed as a position of strength for Olivia Pope. She influenced the outcome of U.S. policies, court rulings and high profiled scandals. Olivia helped elect Presidents and helped supreme court nominees get confirmed. There are scenes where men try to replace Olivia or attempt to steal her power, and are unsuccessful in doing so. Olivia's connections, experience, and influence gave her an advantage throughout her career. These qualities do not align with passiveness, and compassion. These qualities align with strength, aggressiveness and skill.

In an analysis of Olivia Pope's character, Adrienne M. Trier-Bieniek (2015) compares Olivia Pope to a historic caricature that goes by the name Mammy. There are many elements of Olivia Pope's character that are synonymous to Mammy. Olivia is seen as the matriarch of her staff, who she often calls family. She is responsible for rescuing and nurturing her staff through difficult times. The most significant comparison to Mammy is that Olivia sacrifices her own self-fulfillment and care for her own family, while she willingly cares for Caucasian people or Caucasian families. The claim is supported during the scene when Mya Pope calls Olivia "the help." "The help" phrase refers to African-American women who were maids to white families. It is also the title of an American film that narrates the stories of African-American maids. Though there is evidence to support this claim, Olivia also assisted a number of minority families on the show as well.

This analysis adds race as a layer of Olivia Pope's character. Olivia Pope is an African-American woman and is the only reoccurring female African-American character on the show.

As of 2016, only 4.6 percent of CEOs of the S&P 500 companies were women (Catalyst, 2016). As on 2018, only two fortune 500 CEOs were women of color, and neither of them were African-American (Fortune Magazine, 2018). This statistic reveals the significance and rarity of Olivia Pope's role in the *Scandal* series.

### *Conflicted*

Though Olivia attempts to maintain her moral compass, she finds herself in positions that leave her conflicted. Writers have the option to create flawless characters and stories that will show an alternative reality to issues that may occur daily. This is not the case of the writers who developed Olivia Pope. Olivia is framed as a woman who becomes more conflicted as the series progress. Her character illustrates the substantial amount of responsibility that is associated with power. In American culture, great leaders who are faced with difficult choices, experience backlash regardless of the decision they make. This element of Olivia's character makes her appear to be humane and relatable.

Women and men leaders inherently display the same behaviors at work, yet, men benefit from them and women do not (Heilman & Chen, 2005 p. 431). It has been proven that women who negotiate assertively and express emotion face penalties and backlash (Fischbach, Lichtenthaler & Horstmann, 2015). However, Olivia Pope's character is allowed to face challenges, make negotiations and work her way through issues. The audience is able to see a female leader go through common issues that a male leader may face.

### *Sexualized*

A controversial element to Olivia Pope's character was the affair with the U.S. President. There are numerous scenes where Olivia and Fitzgerald are being sexual. The affair was framed as a relationship between two people who are deeply in love, however, situational circumstances

forbid them from being in a monogamous relationship. Though their relationship was framed as an affair, it can be argued that this portrayal of an influential woman is objectifying and demeaning. In contrast, it can be argued that Olivia Pope's sexuality illustrates a woman having agency over her body by consciously making the choice to be sexual with whoever she chooses.

“When sexually objectified, a woman is treated as a mere sexual object deprived of individuality and personality, as if her body (or sexual body parts) could represent her entire person” (Guizzo, Cadinu, Galdi, Maass, & Latrofa, 2017, p. 352). The study, *Objecting to Objectification: Women's Collective Action against Sexual Objectification on Television*, suggests exposure to images that sexually objectify women may impact the manner in which women are perceived and treated. Women who internalize these images are more prone to suffer the effects of an eating disorder, self-objectification and body image concerns (Abramson & Valene 1991; Aubrey 2006, 2007; Hargreaves & Tiggemann 2004; Holmstrom 2004). A significant impact of exposure to sexual images of women is the disruption of gender equality (Calogero 2013).

Those who subscribe to the sexual liberation of women will view Olivia's sexuality as her given right. Sexual liberation is an idea that suggest women should own their sexuality, and not be ashamed of their choices (Stjerna, 2018). The portrayal of Olivia Pope's personal life fit within the concept of Gill's (2008) “media archetype of the midriff, a woman who finds pleasure and empowerment in self-objectification and sexual agency,” (Nash, & Grant, 2015, p. 982).

Olivia Pope's character displayed agentic and communal traits as a communication leader. Her agentic qualities are illustrated more frequent than her communal qualities. Power and reverence are clearly defined as agentic traits. However, conflicted, fixer and sexualized could be considered as communal traits. Male leaders experience conflicts, fix problems, and are

sexual beings, yet, these traits are more associated with women. The double standards of these stereotypes are what seem to be the more problematic. Stereotypes should not be gender specific. Instead, leaders, regardless of gender, should have the freedom to be authentic and effective. Leaders are individuals who are complex and unique. Therefore, each of them embodies communal and agentic leadership styles. Men are rewarded for displaying communal traits, but women are not. However, research suggest that communal traits are effective when compassion is needed (Arnold & Loughlin, 2019). This serves as evidence to the idea that the qualities of a leader should be more valued than the gender of the leader.

The impact of a television series such as *Scandal* should support the dismantling of negative stereotypes towards women leadership. Olivia was portrayed as a woman who was fully capable of leading a nation. She was competent, educated and qualified. In comparison to her male peers, Olivia was viewed as more intellectual and fit for leadership. According to the cultivation theory, more images of women as leaders may reduce the perception that women are unfit to lead. Two instances will have to occur in order for this idea to be manifest. Men must engage in the process of creating more leadership roles and images for women. Due to the imbalance of power, men must serve as allies to the progressive movement of women. Second, more women will have to be in the position of Shonda Rhimes, the creator of *Scandal*. Rhimes used her creative leadership to create a role that was culturally diverse, and non-traditional in American culture. Her vision created a character that allowed women to see themselves as powerful and fully capable of leading.

Research suggests “increasing gender representativeness and diversity improve organizational integrity” (Choi, et al 2018, p. 3). However, hiring more women and minorities does not dismantle the social norms that are embedded in the minds of Americans. The

underserved should not face the pressure of owning the responsibility of ensuring that the entire staff within their organization are creating diverse content. Creating culturally diverse content must be a dedicated commitment initiated by the organization as a whole. Minorities also must be given the opportunity to offer their perspective and cover stories through their lens as a minority.

Olivia's character is an illustration of the role congruity theory. She did not fit into the traditional role of female leadership. As a result, her power and position were constantly challenged by people who felt more entitled to be in her position. Her race, gender and social status were the antithesis to traditional qualities of leadership, and is what made her character unique. According to social role theory, Olivia should have been submissive to her career and her peers. She would also have been domesticated and nurturing. However, she is framed as a powerful individual.

### **Limitations**

Perception serves as a limitation to this study. Olivia Pope's character may be perceived differently by another researcher who analyzes her portrayal as the main character. Therefore, there is no substantial evidence to conclude that Olivia's character was a positive or negative portrayal of female leadership. In this study, Olivia's impact cannot be determined. Viewers of the series were not interviewed or consulted during this research. It is important to note this study was based on one character in one television series. Using one representation of a female character is not substantial enough to generalize the findings to all women leaders.

### **Recommendations**

To further this research, there should be more focus placed on the perspective of men. Researchers should determine which images impact men's perception and attitudes towards

women in leadership. A content analysis, with men as coders, would be able to pinpoint which aspects of Olivia's character are seen as agentic, communal, positive or negative. Changing the perspective of the majority may bring about change more effectively and rapidly. Analyzing other television shows that portray women as leaders could add more depth to the study, and provide more evidence to support or reject the findings. Another substantial study would be to determine if the portrayal of women who play traditionally male roles, such as detectives, attorneys and doctors, are more impactful than woman who are portrayed in traditionally female roles such as a crisis communications manager, nurses or teachers.

### **Conclusion**

Shonda Rhimes gave her audience a new perspective of leadership through the portrayal of Olivia Pope. Olivia's frames represented communal and agentic leadership traits, which ultimately displayed a balance of leadership. Her character revealed that leaders can be assertive, compassionate, and effective. Elements such as her appearance and her sexuality are traditionally shown as feminine traits. Yet, Shonda Rhimes attempts to make these traits represent power, strength and credibility. Though Olivia is framed as a sexual character, she appears to be in control of her sexual relationships, and often set the tone for those relationships. Her career choice, crisis communication, is typically seen as a role for a woman. However, Olivia is viewed as an expert who is powerful, highly respected and requested for her services.

Though Olivia never becomes the President, and never appear to be a leader in the eyes of the public within the show, the viewers of the series witnessed how powerful and influential Olivia Pope was. Shonda Rhimes gave the viewers a perspective that is not often seen in American society. The President and Vice President are not the most powerful people in the *Scandal* series. Olivia is more powerful than the President throughout most of the series.

Cultivation theory suggest these images of female leadership are significant in changing the attitudes towards female leaders. It is essential for more characters like Olivia Pope to be portrayed on television in order to create a balance of power in the U.S. The portrayal of more non-traditional female leaders could cultivate new attitudes regarding women in power.

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