

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF MINORITY GROUP REPRESENTATION IN
VARYING TELEVISION SHOW GENRES ON SOCIETAL PERCEPTION

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
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to the Office of Graduate and Extended Studies
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ABSTRACT

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Title: The Potential Impact of Minority Group Representation in Varying Television Show Genres on Societal Perception

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Abstract

Throughout all media, elements of culture are broadcast and absorbed for entire societies to create their own perceptions regarding race. Within certain television genres, there are many instances of stereotyping that are being portrayed that will inevitably influence how society perceives and treats certain groups of people. By analyzing two television series from two separate genres, the impact of particular representations can be predicted using several communication theories. After the analysis, it was determined that society might benefit from a balance of oppressed fictional representations, even if there is no way to depict a completely accurate representation of an entire minority group. Even with this balance, it is unclear if it is possible to fully eliminate the oppression in our society that is partly influenced by the media we consume.

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CHAPTER I

THESIS OVERVIEW

Throughout U.S. history, societies and cultures worldwide, such as Africa, Europe, and Spain, have converged to create the diverse nation that exists today. While the U.S. has several positive aspects such as freedom and diversity that make its culture appealing to other countries that still experience dictatorship and severe inequality, it has its share of deep-rooted issues that people constantly try to eradicate. One of these issues is discrimination and how certain people are treated poorly simply because of their appearance, background, and other identifiable elements. For instance, African Americans were enslaved on plantations, being viewed as less than human (Owens). As society developed, African Americans legally gained more rights and freedom to enable them to vote, own land, and receive equal pay. However, racism is still a very common and dangerous thing that we are still fighting against, resulting in hate crimes, job discrimination, and death due to health discrimination.

Along with inequality based on race, there is also discrimination based on gender. Sexism is present in several cultures, as women are expected to fulfill the role and image of a dependent housewife that takes care of her husband and children. The concept of sexism is stereotyping or discriminating against individuals based on their gender, and women are treated like fragile beings who are beneath men. After women started to fight for their rights, laws were created that made it illegal to deny anyone the right to vote based on their gender, such as the 19th Amendment, which brought them closer to equality than ever before (National Women's History Alliance). However, they still are mistreated and looked down upon by men. Furthermore, there are individuals who belong to multiple minority groups, such as African American women, and they endured twice the amount of mistreatment as they were enslaved on plantations and dealt with constant sexual assault from plantation owners. This oversexualizing nature occurred targeting African American women both while they were enslaved and when they were properly integrated into traditional society (Owens).

As the United States continues to change its perception of race and gender, its growth is documented and broadcast by the media we create to represent different groups of individuals. Since it is impossible for anyone to fully experience every aspect of American culture, the media allows people to see a glimpse of life inside America. Looking at past representations of African Americans and women within the media, they were mainly inaccurate and often emphasized stereotypes that developed over time. Keeping in mind that all representations are inaccurate in some way, African Americans and women tend to be presented differently based on the genre of media. Comedies tend to emphasize African Americans and their struggles more often to make jokes about

common stereotypes, while more serious and dramatic genres have more examples of television shows that try to avoid emphasizing race, placing their focus on whatever issue they are trying to solve (Squires). Looking specifically at television, the comedy show *Orange Is the New Black* and the drama show *How to Get Away with Murder* takes a different approach to how they present minority groups such as African Americans and women, which impacts how the audience interprets it. Oftentimes, the media is seen as our own reality, and people will tend to believe that what they see on television is what happens within our real society (Mitu). Through analyzing the television shows *Orange Is the New Black* and *How to Get Away with Murder* that include both African American characters and female characters using media criticism theories, we can identify the contrast of how these minority groups are being represented in different genres, which is important because it could potentially have a lasting impact on how we perceive African Americans and women within our society.

The Ingrained Oppression of African Americans throughout U.S. History

Chattel Slavery in America began in 1619, where Africans were first brought to Virginia as the main source of free labor. The enslaved Africans would be contained mostly on plantations, first working with physical labor related to the production of tobacco and rice. As slavery began to spread rapidly, the U.S. Constitution decided to recognize slavery as a social institution and deemed each enslaved individual as 3/5ths of a citizen. This was known as the three-fifths compromise, which was passed in 1787 to allow 3/5 of the enslaved population to be counted for tax purposes (“Constitution of the United States,” Art. I, Sec. 4). Eventually, the cotton gin was created in 1793 that removed the cotton seeds, and enslaved African Americans were forced to grow and pick

cotton from the fields. While slavery could be found throughout the U.S., it was more commonly found in the South, where the land remained mostly rural, and the South wanted to keep slavery around for the benefits of free labor for business owners (Coclanis). Americans had their first interactions with Africans as buying them as property, and once this perspective was created, it has been proven difficult to tear down (Glass). There is no moment in U.S. history where African Americans are fully free of discrimination; since their first encounter and existence in America, they were instantly dehumanized as people.

Slavery was a debilitating system made to keep enslaved African Americans trapped forever, unable to escape. Aside from being confined to labor fields, they were not allowed to receive any form of education. Keeping them from learning how to read and write was a tactic so that enslaved African Americans would not function on their own in society. Several slave rebellions eventually led to the abolitionist movement, which lasted until the 1860s. The abolitionist movement was led by a combination of freed African Americans and white activists who demanded an end to slavery. “Never the structured web of ‘stationmasters’ and safe houses portrayed in late 19th-century abolitionist historiography, the Railroad did shelter and direct northbound runaways, who generally had white help until they traveled well into free territory” (Goldstein 43). The abolitionist movement caused events such as the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which dealt with the creation of free states. Eventually, the Civil War began in 1861 that later adapted the end goal of abolishing slavery. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln officially granted enslaved African Americans their freedom, but this would not be the end of the struggle for rights. Despite this official grant of freedom

for African Americans, many individuals remained enslaved until June 19, 1865. This date is known as Juneteenth, which marked the official end of slavery (Jeffries).

Although slavery was abolished, African Americans were thrown into society with little to no rights. Despite the end of slavery, racism and hatred towards African Americans were still a constant problem, and many freed enslaved African Americans were unable to accomplish a stable living. This led to the introduction of black codes, which governed which jobs freed African Americans could get (Wallenstein). While these codes allowed them to work for money, their wages were extremely low, and it impacted where these individuals lived in terms of affordable housing. The Black Codes was the first legal system established to control African Americans post-abolition, and it was working to maintain control over their lives. Once African Americans started to move into bigger cities, more laws were created to degrade and control them continuously. The Jim Crow laws started in 1877 and forced African Americans to remain separate from white people in public areas, and it was advertised as “separate but equal” (Tischauer). Despite this claim, the public properties reserved for African Americans were of lower quality and not taken care of regularly. The Jim Crow laws acted as a tool to keep African Americans legally oppressed post-slavery. “Northern cities became more susceptible to spatially segregated ‘ghettos,’ while southern cities became more likely to evidence a street-front pattern of segregation, in which black residents lived in dispersed clusters around alleyways and backyards and near railroad lines” (Ruef 818). Slowly, African Americans started to protest against these laws, hosting several peaceful sit-ins and sitting in the white-only section on a public bus.

These protests were among the many elements that started the civil rights movement, as African Americans demanded to be treated equally (Clabough).

With certain laws in place during the 1800s, lawmakers could oppress African Americans by restricting their rights. The 15th Amendment made it so African American men could not be denied the right to vote based on their race or color, but they were given literacy tests that were impossible for them to pass. While they could exist within society, they remained segregated from decent quality public areas, forced to use poorly built bathrooms and drink out of rusty water fountains (Tischauer). These laws were implemented in Southern states, but African Americans still faced racism and discrimination throughout America that made it difficult for them to live an enjoyable life. One significant event that occurred towards the beginning of the civil rights movement was Rosa Parks getting arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama (Clabough 320). There was also the case of Little Rock Nine, where African American students attempted to attend an integrated public school in 1957. All of the constant protests and boycotts led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ended segregation and banned discrimination in the workplace based on race, religion, or gender. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a huge stepping stone for African Americans being viewed as equal by the rest of the country, there are still many issues in our current society that threaten their lives daily (Hall).

While it is now possible for some African Americans to live a comfortable and successful life of wealth and stability in our current society, there are still events that occur that emphasize the racist roots that remain in America. The Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013 and began after George Zimmerman was acquitted of a crime

that involved killing an unarmed African American teenager named Trayvon Martin Borysovyeh). After Zimmerman's acquittal was revealed to the public, the movement began on social media as a hashtag that rapidly became viral. There is a website dedicated to the organization associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. It has expressed that the main goal of the movement is to eliminate white supremacy within America and to take action against all of the violence that has occurred across many black communities (BlackLivesMatter). The Black Lives Matter movement mainly focuses on police brutality and attempts to get justice for the innocent lives lost due to police brutality against the black community. While there have been hundreds of protests since the Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013, it returned to the spotlight in 2020 after George Floyd, an unarmed African American male, was killed by a police officer during an arrest. A viral video circulated the internet showing a white police officer kneeling on Floyd's neck for eight minutes before he passed out (McCoy). The protests in response to this tragic murder reached a global scale, and for several months' protests occurred in many countries, including Japan, Denmark, United Kingdom, and dozens more (McCoy). Protests and demonstrations often turned violent as police sprayed protesters with mace and rubber bullets (National Lawyers Guild Review). This display of police brutality being broadcast on all social media platforms increased the overall demand for action against these crimes (Zhang). The Black Lives Matter movement's constant activity demonstrates how African Americans continue to be oppressed and discriminated against in our current society (Bates).

The Sexist and Degrading Treatment of Women in American Culture

While there is little to no disagreement that African Americans suffered and fought for their rights within America, they were not the only minority group that existed and challenged societal norms. Before white women began to fight for more rights, they were seen as individuals slightly above the status of African Americans. White women were expected to fit into the role of the dutiful housewife that obeyed her husband and took care of the house and children. While white men married white women, they viewed them more as housemaids than as wives in the early 1800s. White women did not receive the right to vote, and their education was not a top priority (Quanquin). The official mark of the start of the Women's Rights movement was in 1848 when a group of white women, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony began to question why they had limited rights despite contributing to society as much as men did. For example, during the American Revolution, women were at the same battleground, risking their lives to tend to the wounds of injured soldiers. After this initial meeting, a Declaration of Sentiments was created, which pointed out how white women were treated unequally to men (Stanton 1848). This document included how married white women were considered legally dead by the law and how married white women had no rights to own property. In essence, men had complete power over white women, and the only roles that were guaranteed for them were in the household. As white women began to hold conventions to discuss these inequalities, men shamed them for trying to fight for equality. When the 15th Amendment was passed in 1870, white women were outraged that they were

excluded from gaining the right to vote (National Women's History Alliance). This disregard for women's voting rights contributed to their attempt to connect the Women's Suffrage Movement with Civil Rights since their movement lost traction due to the majority of the public focusing on African American rights.

The early Women's Rights Movement was solely focused on the rights of white women, and during this time period, African American women were focused on gaining rights for both their race and gender, despite not being accepted by the white women in the Women's Rights Movement. While white women started to fight for a universal suffrage amendment, this was not received well by some who were part of the civil rights movement. During this time, white women fighting for their rights were racist towards African Americans, which demonstrated how white women were not striving for equality for all women. "Too often, the well-known episodes of turmoil of the 1860s - 1870s from which an independent woman suffrage movement emerged have been reduced largely to a story about the role of racist white women in the woman suffrage movement. Yes, there were racist white women in the movement and certainly among the leadership, and yes, that had a large impact on the history of the movement" (Sapiro 1559). After fighting for the right to vote for years, the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, and white women were finally allowed to vote (National Women's History Alliance).

This was only the beginning, as women strived for more rights to attempt to close the gender gap. Women traditionally received a lower salary compared to men within the same job position. Still, once men started to join the military during World War II in 1939, women started to take over civilian jobs. In 1945, the first mention of equal pay was the Women's Equal Pay Act, which determined equal pay for various jobs within a

single workplace based on difficulty. After bills failed to gain traction in the 1950s regarding equal pay, The Equal Pay Act was eventually passed. In 1963, The Equal Pay Act was passed that required jobs to give equal pay for equal work, regardless of the gender performing the task (Equal Pay Act of 1963).

Even after fighting for their rights during the women's suffrage movement, women are still limited in some aspects of our current society. Along with discrimination, being viewed as sexual objects, and still being underpaid, women are still fighting for reproductive rights. Despite the case of *Roe V. Wade* in 1973 declaring that pregnant women have the right to choose if they wanted an abortion, this topic is still regularly debated and critiqued. "Abortion rights are controversial; on this we can all agree. Emotions and opinions aside, constitutionally protected rights must be on those rights. A woman has a constitutional right to an abortion. In 2012, the Arizona legislature attempted to limit that right" (Breslin 53). Several states like Florida, Mississippi, and Utah are currently trying to regulate women's bodies in terms of what procedures they are allowed to get done (Ellmann). By taking away these affordable abortion options such as Planned Parenthood, women will have no choice but to seek treatment elsewhere. Women deserve to be in full control of their bodies, but misogyny and sexism are still deeply rooted in American tradition. There are many reasons women may decide to get an abortion, but that should not concern anyone else except the pregnant woman. These laws are attempting to call a fetus a living being, which would classify an abortion procedure as murder. However, many pieces of evidence suggest that a woman must be pregnant for a particular amount of time before her fetus is deemed "alive" (Ellmann). "In other words, the state may not interfere with a woman in accessing and obtaining an

abortion from a licensed physician. The point at which the state may interfere is viability, when the fetus can survive outside the mother's body" (Breslin 58).

While women have worked relentlessly to gain rights in our society, they are still at a high risk during their daily lives dealing with sexual assault and harassment. Even though sexual assault is not isolated to just women, a majority of the time, this crime is targeted at women committed by men (Clancy et al.). Sexual harassment is a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but it is fairly common to experience some form of sexual harassment at some point in life. Since sexual assault is already against the law, women started the #MeToo movement in 2017 to raise awareness about the severity of the sexual harassment that occurs on a daily basis (Kessler). Even though both women and African Americans have gained legal rights, their fight is far from over. By having the context of the history of African Americans and women in the United States, media criticism can be utilized in discovering the impact television show portrayals have on our society.

RQ: How do portrayals of race and gender in television programs reveal societal views of women/African American women? What can be revealed about society through the creation of these media representations?

Justification of Thesis

The Potential Impact of Minority Group Representation in Varying Television Show Genres on Societal Perception focuses on cultural and feminist analysis to interpret African American and female representations found in *Orange Is the New Black* and *How to Get Away with Murder*. Specific scenes will be examined to determine how current

society perceives the minority groups of African Americans and women. This thesis takes instances where oppression and sexism are shown to predict the potential impact these media representations can have on the future of our society.

With a detailed history of African Americans and women combined with media criticism, it can show how media is a large factor in how society perceives African Americans and women as our culture continues to change. The analysis of television shows like *Orange Is the New Black*, and *How to Get Away with Murder* highlights elements such as stereotypes and sexism in an effort to predict the impact this media could have on our future. This study seeks to answer the following research question: What do media representations of African American men and women reveal about U.S. ideologies of race and gender? The first step to answering this question is understanding how to analyze television shows using media criticism. For the African American stereotypes and oppression found within television shows, a cultural analysis will focus on how the ideologies that exist can be further integrated through media and how the media we consume shapes our culture. In terms of gender oppression, a feminist analysis gives more insight into sexist ideologies that our culture traditionally accepts.

Focusing first on the comedy series of *Orange Is the New Black*, the series portrays dozens of instances of racism, violence, sexism, and various forms of oppression used towards African Americans and women. I analyze two episodes within the series to have a narrowed focus on subtle interactions and dialogue that could have a lasting impact on the treatment of African Americans and women within our reality. The next analysis is conducted on the drama series *How to Get Away with Murder* to gather how oppression is represented within this different genre. By comparing and contrasting two

different genres and their methods of representation, it can help determine how these various portrayals influence and mold how American culture will perceive the minority groups of African Americans and women that exist in our reality.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW ON MINORITY PORTRAYALS IN TELEVISION

Media comes in various mediums like radio, television, and films that broadcast across cultures to create collective knowledge. There is first the category of non-fictional media, which spreads and documents facts and events that occur both inside and outside of a particular culture. Popular news channels like CNN and FOX offer daily updates of significant events that happen like celebrity deaths, crimes committed, and global crises. The category of fictional media focuses on content that either has been altered or created through imaginary thinking. Examples of fictional media include books and films that depict the existence of fairy tales or the creation of a reality that mirrors real life but is not entirely factual (Mitu). Through the creation of these media artifacts, there also needs to be a structure used to analyze and critique media to determine how it might impact culture. “A.P. Korochensky notes that media criticism is a new, rapidly developing area of modern journalism, carrying out critical knowledge and assessment of socially significant, relevant cultural, creative, professional, ethical, legal, economic and technological aspects of the social functioning of the media” (Hazanov 647).

When looking at the media that exists throughout the world, it contains all society elements in terms of how it is viewed and perceived. A major part of basic human life is to create meaning out of everything, so there are certain tools and concepts that exist in order to analyze culture and its elements properly. For looking at how African Americans are portrayed in the media and what that means for our society as a whole, cultural analysis can be used to look at the ideas that exist in America and how it is reflected in the media. Cultural analysis allows us to identify the techniques behind developing societal norms and how these norms reflect us as people. In terms of looking at how women are portrayed in media representations, feminist analysis can be utilized to look at how sexism is embedded into our society both in our daily lives and in the media being broadcasted. Overall, both cultural and feminist analysis belong to media criticism, which is utilized to have a guide in terms of finding connections and hidden meaning across all media platforms (Ott & Mack).

Representations Found at the Start of Television

Among all media formats, television is a powerful element that could influence an entire society with what it chooses to portray. Television has unique powers that, when combined, can shape and shift how individuals perceive their own reality. Television's first power is how it can be classified as entertainment, bringing people a new method to enjoy a fictional world instead of stressing about their lives. "Television is a prolific provider of diversion, escape, and entertainment that requires no literacy, no mobility, and no direct purchase" (R., Vande Berg Leah, et al. 4). The entertainment that television

provides requires no effort, and watching a sitcom can easily lift someone's mood. Apart from being entertaining, television is also used to socialize and educate others geared towards kids and adults. Shows like *Sesame Street* and episodes on the History channel present knowledge in a way where we are able to have fun while learning about various facts and ideas.

On top of teaching us facts, television also shows us how we should react to certain symbols mean within television (R., Vande Berg Leah, et al.). "We learn to read musical soundtracks as signaling danger, suspense, humor, discovery, romance, or grief; and we learn from laugh tracks what we are supposed to regard as funny and to anticipate when something humorous is about to happen" (R., Vande Berg Leah, et al. 5). While certain elements of television can sometimes be dangerous and misleading such as the spread of inaccurate information, television also teaches society about the generally accepted norms. Television has the power to create community and consensus by showing us the history of certain elements within society. Lastly, television has the power to inform society about the events occurring on a daily basis around the world (R., Vande Berg Leah, et al.).

The earliest portrayals of African Americans in television shows reflect the racial power dynamics that existed during that time. *Amos 'n' Andy* was the second television show to have African American leads in the 1920s, and it did not receive positive feedback from the African Americans that watched the show. Despite the show hiring African American lead actors, the writers and producers were all white individuals. The actors were told how to dress and act to portray common stereotypes regarding African Americans during that time. "Alvin Childress, the actor who played Amos, was told that

his skin tone was not dark enough and that he needed make-up to look ‘more distinctly Negro.’ Childress told an interviewer that he protested this move to ‘black him up,’ and eventually won the right to present his natural skin tone on camera” (Squires 213). While the first problem with this was how white individuals believe that the darker the skin tone, the blacker the individual, the terms used to label African Americans were also inherently racist. “Black viewers did not have a positive response to the TV version of the show. The NAACP declared that the show was rife with stereotypes and drafted a resolution against it” (Squires 213).

Gender and race as identity categories are not mutually exclusive. As a result, African American women dealt with intense racism and sexism from white audiences in the early 1900s. African American women were not portrayed to have prominent feminine or masculine qualities, and they fell into their own subcategory. “Negro women are shown as cackling, screaming shrews, in big-mouth close-ups using street slang, just short of vulgarity” (Smith-Shomade 11). The portrayal of the angry black woman is a common stereotype where they are viewed as pure savages that are unable to be integrated into society. Humor surrounding ethnicity is common, and the angry black women stereotype became a common foundation for jokes within television. Early black sitcoms were male-dominated such as *Amos ’n’ Andy*, and African American women ended up receiving less significant roles that were overlooked. Eventually, African American women had their narratives shift in the television shows like *Scandal* and *Insecure*, as networks are attempting to portray them as strong independent women who do not require a man (Smith-Shomade).

Along with shows that portrayed African Americans within society during the mid-1900s, the Civil Rights Movement within the United States was also being broadcast for the world to see. While the broadcasts did not alter the footage, the movement was presented to showcase the bad and ignore the good. “However, in the process, the media also framed their activities in ways that ignored or distorted many of the Panther’s goals. Much attention was paid to their credo of armed self-defense, but little coverage of their educational and nutrition programs for poor children ever surfaced” (Squires 216). The Black Panthers was a political organization founded in 1966 to represent Black Power, but the media chose to broadcast their violent events while simultaneously ignoring all of the positive activities the Black Panthers were responsible for conducting (Squires).

It was typical for networks to take the safe route in limiting African American characters’ appearance in television shows, having them have isolated appearances as characters that provided comedic relief (Squires). The world of television changed in the 1980s when African American actors were given a chance to land more significant roles. A new representation of African Americans emerged in the 1980s with *The Cosby Show*, which showed a successful African American family with multiple positive aspects such as being recognized as an upper-class family with the father being a doctor and the mother as a lawyer. This positive portrayal was vital because it went against African Americans’ mainstream media depiction and created a believable reality for a society where the African American characters were not always poor or criminals. While it was a nice change of pace to portray positive aspects, this did not mean that they were accurate. “Many critics felt that the Huxtables were too much like all the other middle-class White families on TV; the Huxtables seemed to live in a race-free bubble, untouched by

prejudice or inequality” (Squires 229). Overall, the depiction of African Americans further embedded these positive and negative stereotypes into society.

While feminism has been a steady movement for decades, female representations in comedy television portrayed sexist stereotypes. With men dominating society, most humor for them will often poke fun at individuals of lower social statuses. “Those who hold the power in a culture develop a preference for humor that victimizes the powerless, while the powerless develop a preference for self-victimizing humor” (Bressler 50). It has been normalized for women to be the main focus of humor, making fun of the stereotypes that society created, like depicting women to be submissive, dependent, and overly emotional. Even when individuals try to redirect the humor against men, they are still being oppressed. “Bing remarked that humor that targets men ignores women and particularly conceals their lived experiences. By focusing on men, they are still at the forefront of the argument. Therefore, when women use men as the source of their humor, they are conforming to societal norms” (Bressler 50).

While there have been many past television shows that have cast women in roles that frame them as useless, helpless, and clumsy, the shows produced in the early 2000s show that women were slowly attempting to reverse the ingrained system of sexism and patriarchy. A show titled *Two Broke Girls* stars two female leads named Max and Caroline that try to have successful and stable lives with their diner business. While these characters attempt to represent female empowerment by becoming independent business owners, the execution goes against the postfeminist goal of preventing any group from being discriminated against within society. “Rather than presenting women to

emulate and characters who demonstrate female empowerment, the show disparages the characters that surround the two women in an effort to make Max and Caroline seem superior. Their individual empowerment comes from the denigration of those around them” (Bressler 51). Past sitcoms did not reach a level of understanding that elevated women without degrading other groups or cultures.

Along with the discrimination found in situational comedies, there was a similar experience occurring within drama shows where African Americans were mainly portrayed by stereotypes. Drama shows were the first to give African Americans more significant roles that were not all about dehumanizing them. Even though our society has deemed racism as a negative and unacceptable concept, recently broadcasted television series suggest that there are still struggles that minority groups must strive to resolve (Smith-Shomade).

Cultural Analysis Overview

Cultural analysis theory looks at the different aspects of culture and how certain elements reveal what we consider to be our reality. First, looking at what the concept of culture is, there are various definitions that can begin to explain its meaning. “Culture is simply what human beings produce and the means by which we preserve what we have produced” (Ott & Mack 135).

The first element of culture is purely physical, regarding the artifacts that are created that have a shared meaning within society. Television shows would fall into this category, along with books, cars, maps, and other objects that we have created. The next element of culture is the social aspect, related to how we look at these created artifacts in

search of some type of meaning. This is needed during the creation of social norms and traditions, as the social aspect forms a structure that we are all able to recognize, such as movies that are regarded as timeless classics. The last element of culture is attitudinal, which explains the traditions and customs that are adapted by our society. This relates to how it is known in American culture to always be early to job interviews. This element lets people within our society understand which topics are controversial or what is considered acceptable behavior to function on a daily basis.

Culture involves a collective experience. “While individuals may be a part of a particular culture, they can never inhabit a culture on their own. Culture must be shared among a group of people” (Ott & Mack 136). We share culture by having conversations, spreading knowledge, and absorbing the same type of content. Culture is also rhetorical, meaning that since culture is a symbolic concept, society should be able to share meanings, interpretations, and perspectives with each other. Culture is historical as it evolves and changes over time as each generation alters and modifies the common social norms. The last major quality of culture is that it is ideological, which is a key factor influencing how each individual perceives the world they live in.

Looking more in-depth at the qualities of ideology, it is an important factor and contributes to how elements such as minority groups are perceived and portrayed in the media. “Ideology is a system of ideas that unconsciously shapes and constrains both our beliefs and behaviors” (Ott & Mack 138). Our ideology allows us to create our own version of reality, and it can both expand and limit how we experience life. The limits of an ideology are that it restricts the range of ideas that are socially acceptable, only giving individuals a few options to choose from. One example could be the traditional social

view regarding gender and how there are only two genders that can exist. Staying within the boundaries of this ideology excludes all of the individuals that consider themselves a part of the LGBTQ+ community in some way. Along with creating these restrictions, ideology continues to normalize these social norms and taboo topics so that it becomes embedded into society.

There is the concept of interpellation, which is another function of ideology related to a scholar named Louis Althusser. “He claims that ideology is so infused into the social structure that it actually serves as the force to interpellate us, or the force that calls us into existence as social objects” (Ott & Mack 140). For further explanation, doxa and hegemony center on how ideologies fit into our culture. Doxa is another process that creates and maintains any social conventions that exist in a culture. “In other words, doxa refers to any constructed aspects of a culture that its members do not really challenge or critically reflect upon” (Ott & Mack 141). These social conventions are viewed as ideas that should be recognized and followed without hesitation or resistance. An example of doxa would be regarding the collective opinion that a public figure is racist as a permanent fact. Lastly, hegemony involves one ideology dominating other ideologies. While there are many different claims and arguments about one idea, a majority of society will generally accept one idea over the rest. This concept can be seen in television news, where certain networks will only broadcast specific news stories that align with their dominating ideology.

For scholars that focus on cultural studies, ideologies and representations related to race and ethnicity are key. “Through media representations, social organizations, and even everyday objects, ‘white’ becomes an overarching norm, a privileged non-race

against which all other races are measured and compared” (Ott & Mack 151). This explains the dominance of white individuals seen throughout history and how the success of other ethnicities and races are determined the standard for white individuals. The first major concept related to race and ethnicity is exclusion or under-representation in society. This could be seen in earlier television shows and films, as media content lacked diversity and inclusion of other cultures. Even if a cultural group is prominent with a large population in society, exclusion can occur when documenting and representing an entire culture through media. The concept of stereotyping is extremely common within the media, as it simplifies the representation of minority groups by only a few characteristics. This is dangerous since it allows people to perceive an entire group of people with a few characteristics that are both inaccurate and do not represent the group as a whole. A common example of this is the constant portrayal of African American males as dangerous criminals in television shows like *Empire* or *Power*. Because this representation is being broadcast across the culture, it is typical to see people of other races automatically assume that African American males are scary and dangerous in real life (Tukachinsky).

Cultural assimilation is a concept where media outlets portray a particular minority group in a positive way while removing their cultural identities at the same time. “These groups are often shown to possess equal or better socio-economic standings than their white counterparts, but issues of past or continued political struggles for that equality are virtually absent” (Ott & Mack 153). The concept of assimilation is a negative type of stereotype, where minority groups like African Americans and women are stripped of their identities and struggles. Assimilation is the product of white privilege,

where all other cultures are reconstructed to follow the standard format of a white middle-class lifestyle (Ott & Matt).

The concept of cultural identity is another major aspect of Cultural Studies since it examines how our culture influences how we identify ourselves. “Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (Hall 223). The societal norms of each culture contribute to how we view ourselves as individuals, and the media that we absorb contains these shared cultural codes that we all accept and adapt. While cultural identity contains the elements that our culture shares, it also contains the unique traits that make people different within one culture. “This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we have become’” (Hall 225). The emphasis on these differences is one of the many contributing factors that lead to the imbalance of power for African Americans and women.

Cultural studies are constantly evolving, and what is important or socially acceptable changes on a daily basis. "For cultural studies has no guarantees about what questions are important to ask within given contexts or how to answer them; hence no methodology can be privileged or even temporarily employed with total security and confidence, yet none can be eliminated out of hand" (Nelson 2).

Feminist Analysis Overview

The concept of feminism looks at the power dynamics between men and women within society and the media. “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks). The basic definition of sexism is to discriminate against someone solely based on their gender (Ott & Mack 194). A large factor of sexism in our society stems from the concept of patriarchy, which defines the power dynamics between men and women that prioritizes men’s interests over women’s. “More recently, DeKeserdey and Schwatz differentiate between social patriarchy involving men’s domination at the societal level and familial patriarchy which refers to men’s control of women in domestic settings” (Pease 50). While society may believe that this patriarchal system negatively impacts only women, several scholars disagree. “The gendered expectations that patriarchy places on women also exert pressure on men, often demanding that men show little emotions, avoid certain occupations, or act as the breadwinner for their families” (Ott & Mack 195).

There are specific gendered stereotypes that exist within our media that reflect the nation's sexist roots. These are portrayed as binaries, splitting men and women into two opposing categories to show how different they are represented in the media. “Men” and “women,” we now know, are not simple descriptions of biological persons, but representations that secure their meanings through interdependent contrasts: strong/weak, active/passive, reasonable/emotional, public/private, political/domestic, mind/body” (Scott 5) The stereotypical binary of logical vs. emotional is present in various aspects of society, where the belief is that men use logic to create solutions while women think with

their feelings. As seen in television shows and films, men typically approach their problems void of any emotion and oftentimes cannot react with emotion even if they tried to. On the other hand, women are portrayed as overly emotional beings, where their feelings cloud their judgment and logic while making decisions. The last stereotypical binary is sexual subject vs. sexual object, where men are seen as the pursuers while women are submissive objects. "To be feminine is to be available, responsive, and open to male sexual advances" (Ott & Mack 202). This binary is so common that instead of trying to suppress this sexist idea, it is used to promote media to each sex. While these examples are portrayed by various media platforms, this could influence the opportunities men and women are presented with by their society.

While it is a misconception that feminism has the goal to lower the social status of men, its actual goal is to eliminate this embedded concept of sexism so that no one is discriminated against within society. While sex is the biological difference of men and women based on organs and anatomy, gender contains all of the cultural differences that fall both within and outside of the two sexes. While not every woman shares the exact same gendered qualities, essentialism asserts that each woman is naturally born with these characteristics (Martin). For example, Ott & Mack argue that "It is a biological fact that only women can give birth to children, but the tendency to view women as nurturing and mothering is a gendered quality" (194). However, the claim that only women can give birth is inaccurate as it is possible for transgender men to give birth as well. There was a specific instance where a transgender man named Evan gave birth to a healthy baby boy in 2016, which is one of several examples that demonstrates how the definition of gender is always changing (Hempel).

The goals of mainstream feminism have evolved throughout the history of the United States. During the first three waves of feminism, the main goals were to achieve voting, workplace, and reproductive rights for women. The first wave of feminism started with the fight for voting and workplace rights that started with the ideas of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s that focused on gained reproductive rights and social equality, with the third wave attempted to redefine the social constructs of womanhood (Haaken). Now that women have these rights in some way due to the creation of the 19th Amendment, the Equal Rights Amendment and the Equal Pay Act, the movement has shifted to eliminate the deep-rooted problem of patriarchy that started these issues in the first place. “Although difficult to clearly define, post feminism broadly refers to a conceptual shift within the popular understanding of feminism: an evolution in feminist emphasis from the systemic oppression of all women to the empowerment of individual women” (Ott & Mack 206). This lack of clarity could cause potential problems with how feminism is interpreted since everyone in society needs to be involved in the elimination of sexism. If men feel as though feminism means that they will lose their higher status and power, it would be unlikely for men to gain the desire for change. “There is no inclusiveness without exclusion, no universal without a rejected particular, no neutrality that doesn’t privilege an interested point of view, and power is always at issue in the articulation of these relationships” (Scott 6) Since this patriarchy mainly benefits men in terms of the collective definition of success, men may not want to stop the oppression of women (Ott & Mack).

By studying modern television shows like *Orange Is the New Black* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, modern shows can portray new realities with some traditional

forms of stereotypes that remain ingrained in our society. African Americans are still portrayed as criminals, and women are presented as overly emotional within these modern television shows, suggesting that the real forms of oppression, sexism and discrimination still exist in our reality. *Orange Is the New Black* reveals life inside of an all-female prison, where women make impulsive decisions with their emotions while being oppressed by a corrupt prison system. The show *How to Get Away with Murder* creates a reality where a powerful African American woman uses her logic and intelligence to dominate her career as a defense attorney. While both television series depict different situations of oppression and power, they contain elements that could influence how we continue to treat African Americans and women within our society.

CHAPTER III

MODERN TELEVISION SERIES ANALYSIS

Using the depictions found within *Orange Is the New Black* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, media criticism theories are utilized to examine how specific portrayals contribute to the oppression of African Americans and women in the United States. This qualitative approach can help predict the future behavior of our culture based on the artifacts that are currently being created. Two episodes from each series will be scrutinized to highlight (1) situational examples of oppression and (2) situational examples of sexism. The main purpose of gathering all instances of oppression is to connect them with media criticism theories to predict the impact of these representations on our culture.

Each genre of television portrays African Americans in different ways, where comedies may use their stereotypes to make a joke, while thrillers have multiple television series that try not to emphasize them at all. Within *Orange Is the New Black*, the guards regularly use race as the center of the jokes made during the series, while *How to Get Away with Murder* only discusses race based on the situation, and it is typically

a serious conversation. Starting the focus on a comedy television series, a Netflix show titled *Orange Is the New Black* became an extremely popular comedy after the premiere of its first season, and the series lasted until its season finale in 2019. This show portrays life inside of a women's prison, and it mainly follows the life of Piper Chapman, a woman who has to serve time because of being involved in a drug-smuggling incident when she was younger. She lives a normal upper-class life and feels unprepared as she is thrown into an environment full of female prisoners that she has to adjust to quickly. The show introduces the structure of Litchfield Penitentiary and how each residential section is divided and labeled by race, which includes Hispanics, African Americans, and white women. Piper eventually gets used to prison life by making friends and staying busy, and she regularly experiences violence, drug abuse, misconduct, and riots during her time at Litchfield. She eventually finds herself indulging in the majority of the criminal activity and ends up getting in trouble throughout the series (Kohan).

The main focus on *Orange Is the New Black* as a whole is the corruption found within the prison system and how easily it can be overlooked and disregarded. There are several instances where guards abuse their power, serious situations are ignored, and neglect of all prisoners is seen. While this current television show tries to be progressive in terms of exposing the corrupt prison system within America, it also portrays stereotypes surrounding African Americans and women that may impact how certain they are viewed in real life (Kohan).

Representations Embedded in *Orange Is the New Black*

Orange Is the New Black was created by Jenji Kohan based on the real-life memoir of Piper Kerman, a woman who wrote about her experience in prison. The series was produced by Neri Kyle Tannenbaum and is comprised of seven seasons in total that stream only on Netflix (Kohan). The main character Piper Chapman is played by actress Taylor Schilling, who is the series' primary focus at the beginning of the first season. Her prison sentence is mainly due to her ex-girlfriend Alex Vause, played by Laura Prepon, who introduced Piper to the drug smuggling business. There are various characters introduced within Litchfield Penitentiary, including Red, the cook played by Kate Mulgrew, the Spanish Harlem leader Gloria played by Selenis Leyva, and Vee played by Lorraine Toussaint (Kohan). The prison system is already corrupt on its own as it is full of neglect and misconduct, but this series shows what life is like for a female prisoner and how they are dominated and overly sexualized by prison guards ("F**ksgiving").

In conjunction with the constant race wars and tension between cell blocks, there are numerous examples of sexism found inside the prison and the prison administration. Since the main prison is all-female, there are only a few instances of sexism between prisoners, and a majority of their problems focus on race, drugs, or power. Despite this, the correctional officers are mainly male, which is where a majority of the abuse of power occurs. "There are also several scenes where Piper and other inmates are forced to shower and/or urinate in front of male officers. These are just a few of the many reported inappropriate comments and behaviors displayed by the prison staff in *OITNB*" (Terry).

While the correctional officers are shown throughout the season to accept sexual favors from prisoners, the ninth episode in the first season shows how easy it is for them to overpower the women. During the start of the episode, the Russian kitchen cook named Red discovers drugs inside of the food shipment and flushes them down the toilet. It is soon revealed that the drug smuggling business belongs to Officer Mendez, and he has been using the delivery supply to sell drugs to prisoners. Since he is unable to report her for flushing the drugs that are connected to his illegal drug smuggling business, he decides to punish her in other ways. He messes up her kitchen, urinates in the dinner gravy, and threatens to kill her if she messes with his drugs again. Red has no choice but to be complicit, and she visibly looks scared, which goes against her normally brave and tough character (“F**ksgiving”).

Later in the same episode, F**kingving, Piper and her ex-girlfriend Alex are dancing at a party when the male prisoner counselor named Healy announces that Piper is attempting to rape Alex and sends her to an isolation cell. This is just one of the multiple instances where the female prisoners are overly sexualized while doing activities like dancing. Healy visits Piper in isolation and reveals that he put her in isolation to think about what she has done. Piper states that she should not be punished because of him having a “weird lesbian obsession” (“F**ksgiving”). Even after she stands up for herself, she soon realizes that Healy is responsible for her life, and it is his decision if she is released from isolation. To be released from her room, she promises to herself that she will be on her best behavior, to do as the guards say, and serve her time quietly. This is a prime example of a female being submissive because of a system that constantly allows

her to have no power.

There are also moments that happen outside of the prison that show the progress of women's rights in regard to what women are able to do with their own bodies. There is one prisoner who receives constant abortions before prison life, and there is always a crowd of people outside of the clinics demanding to end the right to have an abortion. The concept of abortion is normalized and regularly mentioned within the series, and it might be an attempt to show the audience why women should always have the right to an abortion in real life ("Fool Me Once").

It is also worthy to point out the lack of instances where African American women are sexualized within the show, which could be related to the common stereotype that African American women have savage and unattractive features. They are not seen as delicate and fragile beings, and in return, they often receive harsher treatment by the correctional officers. Within the episode titled Fool Me Once, an elderly white prisoner is given special treatment from a correctional officer when she asks to take food outside of the cafeteria. Even though taking food into the cell blocks is against the rules, the correctional officer feels sympathy for the prisoner and gives her permission. Later in this episode, the same correctional officer aggressively targets an elderly African American prisoner, continuing to agitate her for wearing unregulated nail polish before an altercation begins ("Fool Me Once"). There are several progressive elements like the exposure of our corrupt prison system, but there are stereotypes such as the poor, uneducated African American characters that come from broken homes. At the end of F**kinging, an African American prisoner named Taystee is released from jail after serving her sentence.

It is soon revealed that she has no family to return to and that her only option is to stay in a stranger's house, forced to sleep in a corner on the floor. (F**kinging).

Orange Is the New Black deals with the topic of race early in the first season when Piper is sent to prison. The three main sections of the prison are named after the ethnicity of the inmates, and Piper first gets placed in "The Suburbs" with other white prisoners. Other sections of the prison are "Spanish Harlem" for the Hispanic and Spanish speaking prisoners, while "The Ghetto" houses all African American prisoners ("Low Self Esteem City"). One episode that includes elements regarding the race dynamics is the fifth episode in the second season titled "Low Self Esteem City." At the beginning of the episode, the showers in Spanish Harlem start to overflow with backup drainage, and the women quickly leave the dirty showers. Gloria, the current leader of Spanish Harlem due to her seniority, makes the decision to take over The Ghetto showers. This instance is the start of the conflict between these two prison blocks, and it escalates throughout the episode. The African American cell block agrees to give up their showers, but their leader Vee has alternate motives in order to get revenge for having their showers controlled by Spanish Harlem. Vee decides to start a side business within the prison that makes them dominate the custodial department ("Low Self Esteem City").

Vee wants to begin a side business of selling contraband such as cigarettes by forcing prisoners in the Ghetto cell block to all acquire jobs in the custodial department, which is located in an isolated area in Litchfield Penitentiary. Vee quickly runs into an issue when two prisoners from Spanish Harlem are still assigned to custodial duties. Once Vee sees an opportunity when dealing with Gloria trying to negotiate the showers, she gives up The Ghetto showers so Gloria can reassign the Hispanic prisoners out of

custodial. Once there are only African Americans working in the custodial department, Vee is able to collect and sell contraband without other cell blocks interfering to gain more power at Litchfield (“Low Self Esteem City”).

This episode highlights the segregation within the prison and how opposed these different cell blocks are. While Red, a prisoner who previously had a friendship with Vee, sees that Vee is trying to take advantage of Gloria and her cell block, Gloria does nothing and enjoys some of the perks she is given after being put in charge of the kitchen. It was a common theme that the cell block in charge of the kitchen is put in a leadership position because they control the food supply (“Low Self Esteem City”). For example, when Piper first arrives at the prison, she insults the cook by calling the food disgusting. Since Red is the main cook during this episode, Red starves Piper until she apologizes and gives a peace offering of medicated lotion to Red (“I Wasn’t Ready”). This perception of Gloria being tricked by Vee and her cell block can be seen as insulting to both African Americans and Hispanic individuals since African Americans are seen as sneaky and manipulative, whereas Hispanics are being portrayed as naive.

Throughout the episode, The Ghetto cell block pranks and inconveniences the Hispanic women by tying their shoelaces together, while Gloria sabotages their food. After Gloria tries to confront Vee by slamming her against the bathroom wall physically, she is quickly manipulated as Vee starts to cry and asks for the African American girls that work for Gloria to be sent to custodial. This tactic is to allow “The Ghetto” cell block to gain full control of custodial so they can fully operate their illegal trading business. (“Low Self Esteem City”).

Focusing on these examples found in *Orange Is the New Black*, the show portrays different races that are typically oppressed in real life living in a fictional prison. While this basic portrayal might seem harmless, constantly broadcasting these images can further normalize these representations, and it may influence people to see these races as criminals naturally. “Such an attitude, however, protects an ongoing system of racial inequality and stands in contrast to the insidiousness of white micro-aggressions that continue to associate negative characteristics with people of color” (Enck and Morrissey 306). By portraying both African American stereotypes and white privilege through scenes found in *Orange Is the New Black*, it aligns and maintains the inequalities that African Americans and women deal with in U.S. culture.

The series shows several African American prisoners being trapped inside of the prison system, while the main focus generally remains on the white female prisoners. This scenario is the result of white privilege dominating American culture and how African Americans tend to be overlooked. Despite other races and ethnicities being featured throughout the series, their roles are always centered around white privilege. “Rather than merely reaffirming middle-class whiteness, though, the series interrogates this subject position, making its presumed centrality and internalized privilege visible, through encounters with other characters” (Schwan) Even with a series full of racial stereotypes about African Americans, these instances are used to serve the dominating white presence both in the show and in our society.

Another characteristic of culture is collective meaning and how there are some ideas that are spread and accepted by a majority of society. By the series showing how normal it is to separate the race groups in prison, it could normalize the segregation of

racial groups in our own reality. While this is not an idea held up with laws, there are actual neighborhoods that are nicknamed “the ghetto,” which holds communities that are predominantly African American. “Some viewers might read the show’s tribes as support for naturalized racial divisions that deny social constructions of race and systemic racism. However, because viewers *see race* on the bodies of the various groups/tribes, veiled color blind remarks demonstrate how the structural inequities embedded in racial divisions are often willfully ignored in society” (Enck and Morrissey 309).

The concept of doxa is shown since several of the stereotypes and ideologies in the show were not challenged by a majority of viewers who watched the show. Instead, there have been mainly positive reviews on how it exposes the corrupt prison system. “Much of the response to *OITNB* has been favorable, with critics applauding the show’s representation of incarcerated women from a wide range of life’s paths. As one critic notes, ‘The buzz has been increasing about the show’s varied portrayals on-screen, ranging from racial and sexual diversity to trans characters and beyond’” (Enck and Morrissey 304). It is common for comedies to be seen as harmless fun, but most of the humor is created through the oppression of others. Even though the public audience mainly enjoyed the series with the exception of a few critics, these depictions could potentially have a negative impact on how society treats African Americans and women.

Feminist Analysis in Relation to Orange Is the New Black

Focusing on the examples that can be examined with feminist analysis gives a glimpse of how our society regularly perceives women. Within *Orange Is the New Black*,

there are several examples of sexism that occurred within the prison. The noticeably frequent instances are the over-sexualization of women by the male guards and how this sometimes leads to male guards taking advantage. With the scene where Piper was thrown into isolation for dancing with another woman, this was mainly due to the male officer perceiving the dance as sexual where Alex and Piper were hugging and dancing close to each other. While to most women, the dancing is just two girls having fun together, the male officer only saw the sexual nature based on how he normally views women.

After Piper is thrown into isolation, Piper attempts to stand up to the male officer but quickly realizes that he determines her life while she remains in prison. She decides to listen to what he says to get through her sentence, but this is a common dynamic between men and women. Even as women try to stand up against the advances of men, the rigid sexist system is not easy to erase. With the male guards like Officer Mendez taking advantage of Red for his own selfish gain, Officer Mendez is using the benefits of the sexism they know exists.

The binary of logical vs. emotional is a more frequent occurrence, where the women in prison make impulsive and sometimes dangerous decisions based on their emotions. When Piper is in isolation after dancing with Alex, she becomes overwhelmed with anger once Officer Healy comes to talk to her about the incident. Piper begins to yell, scream, and curse at Officer Healy, not realizing the more logical solution to her dilemma after she has calmed down. Due to her outburst, she is given additional time in isolation before she is allowed to return to her cell block (F**kinging). Another scene within the episode titled Low Self Esteem City shows Vee take advantage of being overly

emotional to secure her illegal side business. Since being emotional ties into being illogical, Gloria automatically assumes that Vee is making a rash decision that she will regret in the future (“Low Self Esteem City”).

The binary of sexual subject vs. sexual object is mainly seen with the relationships between the male guards and the women prisoners. Other than the occasions where male guards would ask for sexual favors from the prisoners, like Officer Mendez allowing prisoners to have drugs for oral sex, there have been multiple occasions where women are mistreated due to the over-sexualization of situations. “Viewed in the context of the season and series as a whole, then, sexualized scenes emerge as one way in which the show generates a critical meta-commentary on what is regarded as salable to the media and popular audiences, although the series’ creators, of course, remain implicated in this process of commercialization” (Schwan).

Based on past studies conducted on television shows, it is common for comedies to use minority groups to make jokes, and factors like race and gender are emphasized more frequently. The first genre to introduce integrated television was drama, which was the first step to normalizing minority groups within the media. A recent popular drama television show is *How to Get Away with Murder*, which is a series that follows a small but powerful law firm that encounters various challenges involving murder (Nowalk).

Character Portrayals in *How to Get Away with Murder*

How to Get Away with Murder was written by Peter Nowalk and produced by Shonda Rhimes on the ABC Studios network. The series contains six seasons, and the

main character of Annalise Keating is played by Viola Davis. The series features the law firm run by Keating, where she hires five college students to help her with some high-profile cases as a defense attorney. Wes Gibbins is played by Alfred Enoch, Connor Walsh is played by Jack Falahee, Michaela Pratt is played by Aja Naomi King, and Asher Millstone is played by Matt McGorry. This cast of the Keating 5 quickly become involved with Annalise and the many complications of her life (Nowalk).

The story centers around Annalise Keating, who is a criminal defense attorney and professor at a Philadelphia university. Throughout the duration of the series, she encounters various legal and personal problems that she attempts to solve using unorthodox methods. The series is full of twists and turns, where Annalise and a group of her university students narrowly solve the various issues they encounter while handling high-profile legal cases.

There are numerous LGBTQ characters, characters of various ethnicities, but these elements are not emphasized or mentioned. The few occasions where issues related to minority groups are discussed are with particular cases, pointing out the corrupt justice system. When Nate gets arrested, Michela becomes increasingly doubtful of his release due to how African Americans are treated within the criminal justice system. Since the characters believe that the criminal justice system is inherently racist, Nate being arrested reveals how much an innocent man can be in danger due to his race.

Almost all of the main female characters portray themselves as strong, capable, and possess the ability to make decisions without emotion getting in the way. In episode twelve in the first season is when the police find the body of Annalise's husband, and she is quickly accused of murder. Instead of letting her emotions overwhelm her to the point

of tears from the news, she powers through her feelings and continues to go to work, focusing on doing what it takes to be perceived as innocent. Annalise does her best to protect her students, but at the end of the episode, she is overwhelmed with emotion and decides to call her mother for help. This episode depicts the stereotype of a strong black woman, and it shows how Annalise can push aside her emotions to logically solve her issues before focusing on her suppressed emotions by herself when the job is done (“She’s a Murderer”).

The thirteen episode in the first season portrays one of the first instances where racial inequality is recognized by the main characters. During this time, the police are looking for suspects in the murder of Annalise Keating’s husband, who was killed by a group of students. One suspect named Rebecca, who is involved in another murder, lies and tells police that an African American police officer named Nate threatened to hurt her. Along with placing Nate’s fingerprints on the deceased husband's belongings, this was enough to have Nate arrested for his murder. Even though the law group has various other problems, they express their concerns for Nate, saying how difficult it will be for him since he is African American. Even as Nate is found innocent and released from prison, there is mention of how problematic it is for African American males to exist within the justice system (“Mama’s Here Now”).

Another instance in the series that demonstrates how there are numerous powerful women in the law field is within the thirteenth episode of the fourth season when Annalise is bringing one case to the Supreme Court with the help of a powerful female government aid from another popular drama show titled *Scandal*. The purpose of this hearing is for Annalise to attempt to reform the criminal justice system, trying to

highlight cases that deserve a mistrial. It is also notable to point out that the main argument in Annalise's case is how race influences the mistreatment of individuals in several civil cases and how racism needs to be removed from the criminal justice system ("Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania"). In terms of looking at instances where African American women are emphasized, there are little to no examples of the common racial and sexist stereotypes within this show. The women of color are portrayed as intelligent, brave, logical, and powerful, all without having to constantly mention their struggles related to their race or gender.

One specific, powerful moment in the series that focuses on race is in the last episode, where Annalise reveals all of the struggles that she has endured throughout her life. She mentions being called racial slurs as a kid at school, and how despite all of her struggles, she is a fierce, strong black woman with countless accomplishments. While there are few depictions of racial stereotypes besides the strong Black woman, this television series offers a break from the constant broadcasted media that overemphasizes the struggles of African Americans and gender. There is no constant emphasis on their race, but they still suffer from discrimination in ways that may not always be publicly announced ("Stay").

With the application of cultural analysis on *How to Get Away with Murder*, the elements and ideologies paint an entirely different reality. The show goes against most common societal norms, where there are several examples of typically oppressed individuals having powerful and dominating roles. There were new and challenging portrayals within the series, such as Annalise being married to a white male, which was illegal until 1967 with the case *Loving v. Virginia* ("Loving v. Virginia). This could show

how there is some assimilation in this series, where there is little to no mention of the racial struggles that the characters experience. There are a few instances that mention struggles related to African Americans, but the main focus of the show remains on the legal cases.

One possible ideology would be related to the justice system and how it can be manipulated by both the prosecutors and the defense. Within the episode titled *She's a Murderer*, Annalise is handed a case involving the mob having a shipment of drugs being confiscated after an anonymous tip was given to the police. After Annalise was able to track down the man that found the shipment, he reveals that the prosecutor on this case paid him to find the drugs for the police. This specific example portrays how a prosecutor can manipulate a case to their advantage by gathering the right kinds of evidence needed for a conviction ("*She's a Murderer*"). With the depiction of this example within this episode, it points out how society is aware that these types of deception exist within our legal system and how often it is overlooked.

In terms of the concept of doxa, almost everything and everyone is challenged in the show to the point where it does not seem realistic, even in regard to taboo topics at times. Within the episode titled *Mama's Here Now*, both the featured legal case and Annalise's childhood deals with sexual assault; Annalise reveals to her mother that she was sexually assaulted by a family member when she was a child, leaving her with a lifetime of trauma. While this sensitive topic is difficult to discuss, the series does an effective job at raising awareness for this topic and creating an open discussion.

There is some exclusion in terms of culture since the show chooses not to focus on the background of all races depicted. While this may seem like a negative aspect, it is

refreshing to see a show that does not emphasize race to integrate it into the plot. With the characters featured in *How to Get Away with Murder*, it is structured in a way that any character can be replaced without the plot being damaged. Each character is defined by their personalities, their power dynamic, and everything else exclusive of race, gender, or even sexual orientation. If Connor is replaced by a woman, the only potential changes would be sexual orientation while being able to maintain Connor's characteristics of having anxiety, a snarky attitude, and emotional outbreaks. Almost all of the characters in *Orange Is the New Black* are defined by their race, and each character is exposed to different privileges or abuse based on their ethnic background. The main character Piper has to be a white individual since, at some point during the season, she finds herself at the head of a white power organization. The same can be said about other characters, such as Taystee or Gloria, as there are major events that are connected to them solely due to their race.

As the examples found in *Orange Is the New Black* mirror the existing stereotypes and sexist qualities in our society, *How to Get Away with Murder* goes against some of our existing ideologies regarding race and gender. Many of the main characters are women who hold powerful positions that dominate their fields, such as Wendy Parks, Emily Sinclair, and Tegan Price. Annalise is the leader of the law group and is in a powerful role that involves trying to solve everyone's problems.

There are some cases where men say sexist remarks against the women characters, but with each instance, the women quickly stand their ground and end up on top. Whenever Asher or Connor would try to overpower Michaela at gaining evidence, she manages to contribute important discoveries directly to Annalise. Even with the

overall society depicted, some of the top lawyers that are tough competition for Annalise are also women. With the remarkably powerful positions being occupied by women, the lower assistant roles are populated by men, which shows how it is possible for women to hold roles in careers that are typically dominated by men.

In terms of logical vs. emotional, it is proven multiple times throughout the series that women have the capacity to control their emotions in order to solve their problems logically. After Annalise finds out that her law students murdered her husband, she quickly creates a solution without letting her love for her husband get in the way. Annalise dealt with constant accusations in public and in private, and she is able to remain calm and fully utilize her intelligence at all times. There were even situations where Michaela forces herself to remain calm in stressful instances to ensure that she remains fully in control.

Finally, with the binary of sexual subject vs. sexual object, there are little to no examples where the men in the series sexualize the women. Connor is only interested in men, and Asher and Wes are often too focused on their issues to have time to sexualize the women. In actuality, both Asher and Wes took their time building a romantic relationship with their partners. The women were mainly seen for the power they have, their intelligence, and their many accomplishments. Annalise is a well-known powerful defense attorney, and her reputation overshadows everything else she is known for within her field.

Based on the analysis on *Orange Is the New Black* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, there are both positive and negative stereotypes found in several episodes that could have a lasting impact on how African Americans and women are perceived and

treated within our society. Taking everything into consideration, predictions and precautions can be made regarding how television shows should represent minority groups in the future. The various examples of sexism and oppression suggest that perceptions reflect real-life attitudes towards African Americans and women.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The application of communication theories can show how these portrayals can influence our society and what these portrayals mean regarding the current state of our society. In general, all television shows are the artifacts of our society, and social norms and traditions are spread through the media to integrate into society. While it is common to have family norms and traditions, the media is the main way that practically all individuals are exposed to what is considered socially acceptable. This study focused on the following research question: What do media representations of African American men and women reveal about U.S. ideologies of race and gender? The portrayal of race and gender in television programs has potentially positive and negative impacts on how society views these groups in real life. First, looking at the positive aspects of these portrayals of oppression could help bring awareness to other cultures about what minority groups encounter on a daily basis (Enck and Morrissey).

When African Americans were first portrayed in television shows, it only showed the stereotypes of them, leaving out the struggles that they endured during those time

like constant discrimination and a lack of civil rights. African Americans still deal with discrimination, and television shows try to show these struggles to validate the constant oppression minority groups deal with in our U.S. culture. While it does help raise awareness about these issues, the frequent portrayals of stereotypes and sexism could normalize these issues even further. If our society consumes these portrayals across various forms of media, there is the potential that people may view this as how minority groups normally act, which could impact how minority groups are perceived in real life.

These constant portrayals also offer a glimpse of how we currently function as a society in terms of how we collectively view certain groups of people. If television show creators always include and point out the differences and stereotypes, this could represent that this is all society perceives when looking at minority groups. Our U.S. society was created through oppression, so it is already a concept that is fully integrated into our culture. By creating various television shows that use oppression as the plot or the center of jokes, it shows how society has already accepted these representations as some version of our reality.

While this overuse of portrayal of oppression within television shows comes with some negative impacts on society, there needs to be a balance with media representations. Looking at *How to Get Away with Murder*, there were only a few examples of oppression tied to race and gender, which meant few stereotypes or generalizations. While this is initially interpreted as a positive, there was also the negative concept of assimilation within the show, where any cultural struggles were not included. With less emphasis on the oppression found in our society being portrayed in fictional television, there is the added risk of underrepresentation. There should always be a balance of representations

within fictional shows, where oppression is shown due to its existence in our society, but it should not be the main element that makes up the characters.

Both television shows analyzed are on opposite ends of a spectrum, where *Orange Is the New Black* overuses common racist and sexist stereotypes, whereas *How to Get Away with Murder* hardly mentions race and gender at all. A balance should be established where oppression is validated without impacting how society views certain minority groups. This dilemma relates to the issue of general equality and if our society has ever experienced true equality. If our society has always had an imbalance of power between race and gender, then it may not even be possible to eliminate oppression fully. While it remains unclear if these minority groups will ever be able to escape societal oppression, the next steps the media can take is to find a balance to represent these inequalities properly.

Looking solely at *Orange Is the New Black*, the overused scenarios of racist and sexist stereotypes could imply that our society naturally perceives African Americans and women as non-dominant groups, which could imprint this idea in later generations. Our media becomes part of our history and will be used as a guide to the societal norms that exist in current American society. While the depiction of the struggles certain individuals have to endure is educational and validating, the constant storyline of the oppressed African American could potentially alter the perception of certain minority groups by the public. The more media we consume that involve these storylines, the more likely it is for society to normalize and accept these ideas in their own reality. While *Orange Is the New Black* might have been effective in exposing the harsh reality of the corrupt prison system, it was ineffective at creating representations that work towards eliminating the

oppression of African Americans and women. The series normalizes portraying certain minority characters in a negative light, which could lead to this perception spreading throughout the culture.

In terms of *How to Get Away with Murder*, while there is a lack of stereotypes regarding race and gender, it simultaneously invalidates the struggles these minority groups have to face on a daily basis. In the context of the overuse of stereotypes regarding African Americans and women in the media, this series offers its audience a chance to be entertained by the plot without including racial or sexist elements. Despite this aspect, this series is still ineffective at portraying the most accurate portrayal of African Americans and women. There needs to be a balance of portrayals, where the forms of oppression are mentioned without becoming the core foundations of a particular character. If all media were to adopt this assimilation format, the existing oppression within our culture would only be further invalidated. This series is the first step at creating media not centered around oppression, but oppression does need to be accurately acknowledged in some way.

This study was an opportunity to explore modern television series to analyze how new depictions impact society. There has been in-depth research conducted on the first television broadcasts when American society was more accepting of hateful depictions of African Americans and women. In recent years, our society has attempted to be more inclusive and open-minded in terms of what we deem to be respectful. With our societal norms changing, media must learn how to adapt to the shift of cultural perspectives and how we view African Americans and women. Our media is full of representations containing oppression, so moving forward, our creators should focus more on the traits

and characteristics that are not directly connected to oppression. For future studies, there will need to be more studies conducted on the new emerging forms of media like streaming networks and social media television shows and how it is a reflection of this new generation. By reviewing recent events and movements related to African Americans and women, future media will enter new territory in terms of how these forms of media can influence our society. Now that individuals can access almost all forms of media at all hours of the day, this increase of absorption might indicate a bigger influence on how societal norms develop.

With every study, there are multiple limitations that impact the validity of a proper analysis. The first major limitation would be the classification of genres and how many television shows belong to two different genres. *Orange Is the New Black* is classified as a comedy-drama since there are many serious episodes that focus on intense topics. With shows that fit into two genre categories, there would need to be methods that focus on the different components of genres to understand how differently they influence society. There is also the limitation related to where we access television shows since there has been an increase in streaming series. *Orange Is the New Black* is available on the streaming service Netflix, while *How to Get Away with Murder* is available on cable television. Since each platform has different forms of access, it impacts how each television show circulates through society. The availability of each television show should be accounted for with its own specific analysis method.

Through the analysis of the comedy show *Orange Is the New Black* and the drama series *How to Get Away with Murder*, it can be concluded that the stereotypes related to African Americans and women have a potential strong connection to how society

perceives these minority groups in our own reality. Although these different genres have two approaches to depicting African Americans and women, a balance needs to be established in order to validate oppression without overusing it. As the societal norms within American culture continue to change, our depictions of African Americans and women within media need to evolve to contribute to the goal of ending oppression.

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