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A Good Girl, A Graduate, A Gynecologist, And A Gladiator: A Qualitative Analysis of Representations of Women in Four Television Shows

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**A Good Girl, A Graduate, A Gynecologist, And A
Gladiator: A Qualitative Analysis of Representations
of Women in Four Television Shows**

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines women's representations on television (TV) for three reasons: because television is pervasive, powerful, and also a cultural artifact. The role of the television in American life has transitioned from being "a 'status symbol' in the early 1950's to a commonplace 'household appliance' in the 1990's" (Signorielli and Baccue 1999:527). Increasingly, televisions have been featured in public places outside of the home, including restaurants, bars and office waiting rooms. Advances in technology such as mobile cellphone applications and streaming websites like Hulu and Netflix have made it possible to watch TV shows without televisions on smartphones, computers and tablets. Nowadays, it is almost harder to avoid television than it is to watch it.

Television's authority, in part, is caused by its cult-like following. Americans devote a significant amount of their time to watching television. It is estimated that Americans watch more than five hours of television per day (Hinckley 2014). However, television is more than just a pastime that many people indulge in. Television serves a role in society as a storyteller, as described by Signorielli et al.:

“[Television] is the mainstream of our popular culture. Its world shows and tells us about life – the people, places, striving, power and fate. It lets us know who is good and who is bad, who wins and who loses, what works and what doesn't” (1999:528).

As a very powerful agent of socialization, TV programs – whether fictional or true – teach us cultural norms and behaviors. In a study of the effects of television on children in Canada, psychologist Meredith M. Kimball found that children had more egalitarian gender norm attitudes before they had access to television than did children who regularly watched television, demonstrating TV's powerful influence as an agent of socialization and its ability to shape peoples' attitudes and beliefs (Kimball 1986:279).

Television also derives power in the effect it has over people. Those who watch television regularly get emotionally involved in and attached to the shows they watch, and popular characters become cultural touchstones. Because the typical TV series runs once a week over the course of several months and can last for many years, viewers are able to feel as though they are living in the same world as the characters they are watching on screen. An audience emotional attachment is achieved by TV networks adopting the episodic telefilm model for filming shows. In television's Golden Age in the 1950s, most shows were shot in the anthology format where TV show plotlines and characters varied each episode. The anthology format preceded live teleplay, where shows were tele-broadcast live. When networks realized the economic advantages of shooting series with a regular cast and standing sets, a new phase of episodic telefilm began (Sconce 2004:96).

Another advantage of episodic telefilm was that it made it easier for a show to attract an audience following. These viewers tuned into a show each week to follow the plotlines and watch the characters with whom they had become familiarized with, thus maintaining steady viewership (Sconce 2004:97). This model has proven to be effective, as it gets viewers to become very loyal to the programs they watch. For instance, in 2013 a Kickstarter campaign was launched to raise money to produce the *Veronica Mars* movie, a film based on the television series of the same name that aired on The CW for three seasons. Although it had been seven years since the *Veronica Mars* series had ended, within one month fans of the show donated \$5.7 million and the movie was produced and then released in 2014 (Donaghy 2014). Dedication to a TV series can transcend watching the show itself. The hit-series *I Love Lucy* is a testament to a show's longevity and ability to engage the viewer beyond the television screen. Not only do

reruns of the show still air to this day, but there are also *I Love Lucy* fan conventions, websites, collectibles, merchandise and books (Landay 1999:26).

Most importantly, television is a cultural artifact. As cultural artifacts, television shows “embody, reflect and mediate the views of the society from which they emerge” (Leavy 2000). Sociological media scholars have been proponents of reflection theory, “the idea that culture is a projection of social structures and relationships into the public sphere, a screen onto which the film of the underlying reality or social structures of our society is projected” (Conley 2013:92). According to reflection theory, TV series are a product of American culture, replicating its norms, ideologies and values. However, reflection theory has its limitations because it does not acknowledge culture’s role in socialization. It is more accurate to say that culture produces norms and beliefs while simultaneously reproducing norms and beliefs. Since television is culture, watching television can be an informative way to examine how women are valued and treated in American society.

When I decided to study women’s representations on television, I was interested in analyzing their depictions to see if they had changed from the early years of television. Women have achieved an increasing number of rights since the early half of the twentieth century when televisions were first becoming popular, some of these civil, political, educational and reproductive rights being legal access to abortions through the passing of *Roe v Wade*, the criminalization of domestic violence, legal access to contraceptives and the passing of the Title IX law prohibiting sex discrimination. Social attitudes regarding women have changed as well, with a greater acceptance of women entering the public sphere, women making up almost half of the workforce, and a blurring of the distinctions between the socially prescribed gender norms

for men and women. Through a qualitative analysis of some of television's most popular and distinctive shows, this project aims to evaluate the progressivity of women's TV representations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Television, Commercialization and Women's Representations

American media is another major institution in society in which women are underrepresented. According to the 2013-14 "Boxed In: Employment of Behind-the-Scenes and On-Screen Women in 2013-14 Prime-time Television" report conducted by Martha Lauzen, women comprised 42% of all speaking characters and 42% of all major characters on television programs produced by broadcast networks (2014:2). This number is down one percent from findings for the 2012-13 TV season, however is consistent with a slow but steady uptick in the number of female characters featured on television. Elasmr, Hasegawa and Brain tracked studies on women's share of primetime television characters from 1971 through 1987 and found that in 1971 women made up 18.3% of characters, and by 1987 the number reached 35% (Elasmr et al. 1999:23). To collect that data Elasmr et al. read studies conducted by different researchers which may have resulted in discrepancies caused by different methodologies, however it does represent the trend of women's increasing visibility on the television screen. The increase of women on television may be explained by changes in societal gender norms for women. For example, Elasmr et al. hypothesize that because women are now more accepted in the workforce than in the past, more female actresses have been hired for television roles (1999:24). As societal norms and values evolve, the media undergoes changes as well. In the television industry these changes have affected networks by shaping how they cast their shows. Networks understand that attitudes toward women have changed, and their programs have to reflect and acknowledge these changes in order to satisfy their audiences (Glascok 2001:660).

Yet, television is ultimately an extremely lucrative for-profit industry; therefore an increase in the number of women on television cannot solely be the result of a conscious decision to end gender disparity. Financial incentives also fueled this change. Television is financed by advertisers, and as women became a growing number of consumers, advertisers wanted to tap into that market (Knowlton 2014). Creating television shows with women in the cast was a way to satisfy both networks and the advertisers. Female casts attracted female viewers, which allowed advertisers to market their products to a new audience of consumers, thus providing networks with their needed funding. In an attempt to attract female viewers networks began producing shows catered to women that were a combination of traditionally male genre shows, such as action and legal shows, with melodramatic elements (Press 2009:143). This gave rise to programs such as *Cagney and Lacey*, *Spenser for Hire*, *China Beach*, and *L.A. Law* in the 1980s through the early 1990s. Non-cable networks began to cater to the female audience as well, most notably with the creation of Lifetime in the 1980s, “which was marketed as ‘television for women’” (Press 2009:143). According to Jack Glascock, author of the article “Gender Roles on Prime-Time Network Television: Demographics and Behaviors,” during the 1995-96 television season half of all comedies featured a female as a main character (2001:659). This influx can be explained in part by the growing popularity of the internet, which was stealing the time and attention that male viewers had devoted to watching primetime television (Glascock 2001:659).

Not only are women underrepresented on television, but they are also misrepresented and depicted in narrow ways that reflect gender stereotypes that have been deeply imbedded into American society. In many ways, women’s representations on television over the years have changed very little. The predominant image of women on television is white, heterosexual, middle-class, and meets the Hollywood standard of beauty – which is how women were depicted

during television's Golden Age. During the 1950s the commercialization of television required programs to depict the middle-class "in association with the nature of the products that formed its commercial basis" (Press 2009:141). This gave rise to a proliferation of programs revolving around white, middle-class families living in suburban bliss, or in other words "happy people with happy problems" (Press 2009:141). The women in these shows did not have jobs outside of the home and were typically shown partaking in domestic activities associated with their roles as wives and mothers, and had little independence. Perhaps the most classic example of this is *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966) which portrayed the life and mundane problems of suburban housewife Donna Stone, her physician husband and two children. The idyllic middle-class suburban life that dominated primetime television was not an accurate portrayal of American life, as it appeared on television more than it did in real life during that time period (Press 2009:141). However, the fact that there were so many shows depicting middle-class suburbia denotes that American culture values that lifestyle over others.

Today's television still portrays the careers of female characters similarly to the way that they were presented during the Golden Age. Modern day television still prioritizes men's occupations over women's and reflects the widely held stereotype that women are less career-oriented than men. Many female characters are still portrayed without careers. In their content analysis of primetime television during 1992 through 1993, Elasmir et al. found that 15.7% of female characters were unemployed (1999:28). When female characters do have careers, they typically occupy a lesser status than their male counterparts. Elasmir et al. found that only 9.9% of female characters held professional, white collar jobs (1999:28). In Glascock's study, male characters were twice as likely to be a boss than female characters, and were more likely to have higher paying jobs (2001:664). Another common trend is the high prevalence of female

characters having indeterminate occupations. Lauzen's "Boxed In" report for 2013-14 found that on broadcast networks 35% of female characters had an unknown occupational status as compared to 21% for male characters (2014:3).

Greater emphasis is again placed on men's careers over women's by the amount of screen time devoted to their careers, as 58% of male characters were shown working in their occupations as compared to 43% of female characters on TV shows on broadcast networks, cable and Netflix (Lauzen 2014:5). Characters' attitudes toward their careers are another reflection of gender stereotypes. On programs produced by broadcast networks, cable and Netflix, 52% of male characters had career-related goals while this was only true for 35% of female characters (Lauzen 2014:5). Representations of female characters' careers reflect the notion that women have to choose between pursuing a career or having a family. Elasmr et al. found that twice as many unmarried female characters as married female characters were shown having a professional white collar occupation (1999:29). If art imitates life, from watching American television we might inaccurately conclude that men are more devoted to their careers than women and that women occupy positions of lesser power within their careers than do men.

The women shown on television reflect the American standard of beauty for women. American culture equates whiteness, youth and thinness with beauty, and most modern-day television actresses satisfy those criterion. White women made up 77% of female television characters on broadcast networks, cable and Netflix for the 2013-14 year, while only 13% of female characters were African-American, 4% Latina, 4% Asian and 2% of another race (Lauzen 2014:4). Because youth is tied with beauty, it is rare for female characters to age on screen. On broadcast networks, cable and Netflix, 59% of female characters were in their twenties and thirties, with only 18% in their forties (Lauzen 2014:5). On broadcast networks, only 3% of

female characters were age sixty or above, solidifying the idea that women are only beautiful – and thus worthy of being watched on television – when they are young (Lauzen 2014:3).

Women's beauty and sexuality are objectified not only on television but across all forms of media, ranging from advertisements to music. On television, women's objectification is shown in their dress. Female characters are nearly ten times more likely to be dressed provocatively in tight, revealing clothing than male characters, comparing 10.9% to 1.4% (Glascok 2001:664). This phenomenon translates to children's television as well. A study conducted by media scholars Stacy Smith and Crystal Allene Cook found that in television programming for children under eleven years old, 20.7% of female characters were shown in sexually revealing attire, 25.6% of female characters had extremely small waist lines, and 13.9% of female characters had unrealistic body types (2008:19). The bodies of the women shown on TV are misrepresentative of women's bodies in reality. An estimated 76% of female characters have a body that is of below average weight (Fouts and Burggraf 2000:929)

What is troubling about the standard of beauty shown on television is that it has very negative effects on female viewers. When girls and women see distorted images of the female body they can internalize these images and try to measure themselves against an unattainable standard, resulting in lowered self-esteem and eating disorders (Fouts et al. 2000:926). On television, female characters' bodies are evaluated by not only viewers but by other characters. It is common for male characters to comment on the bodies of their female peers, as a study on American television airing in the Calgary area found that 14% of female main characters on a situation comedy show received comments on their weight or body from male characters (Fouts et al. 2000:929). Not all female characters experience this equally. The heavier a female character is, the more likely she is subjected to negative comments (Fouts et al. 2000:930). As

an agent of socialization, television also teaches the audience how to evaluate the body of a female character. On situation comedies with “laugh tracks,” the prerecorded sound of audience laughter often found in TV comedies, 80% of negative body comments made by a male were followed by the laugh track (Fouts et al. 2000:930). The laugh track indicates that the expected reaction from viewers is laughter, implying that degrading comments about a woman’s body are somehow acceptable and even comical.

Even when television strays from stereotypical portrayals of women in terms of character development and plotlines, the standard of beauty for the characters remains. For instance, in recent years there has been an increase in television programs that show women in non-normative ways, such as *The L-Word* (2004-2009), *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012). *The L-Word* received attention for creating a show about the lives of lesbian women. While this show was progressive for giving visibility to lesbian characters that represent a population that is very much marginalized in the media, the characters were shown

“as though they were heterosexual glamour girls. While at one level, it is transgressive to portray a group of lesbians openly at all on television; at another level, it should be noted that every woman featured in the show could be considered...thin and beautiful in conventional terms” (Press 2009:146).

Weeds was a series about single mother turned drug dealer Nancy Botwin, which was considered to be a revolutionary role for a woman to play. However, what was not so groundbreaking was that Nancy’s character was played by a “thin, conventionally beautiful woman” (Press 2009:147). Similarly, *Desperate Housewives* honestly portrayed the struggles many working mothers face with the character Lynette Scavo, but she and her fellow cast mates all matched the standard of beauty and glorified the predominantly white, middle-class suburban life depicted in the Golden Age (Press 2009:147). This begs the question, why do networks only offer these non-normative, groundbreaking roles to be played by classically beautiful actresses? However,

this does not mean that actresses who do embody the standard of beauty should not be hired for television roles, but rather that they should not be the sole image of women that we see on TV. These traditionally beautiful actresses along with women of differing races, body types, ages, weights and appearances should all be depicted equally on television, and the characters portrayed by traditionally beautiful actresses should not be privileged over those of others.

Television reflects stereotypes about the differences between the sexes, such as the idea that women and men are innately different from each other. For example, broadcast networks, cable and Netflix TV shows depict women as nurturing, reflected by the statistic that 15% of female characters had the goal of helping others compared to 9% of male characters (Lauzen 2014:5). This is also reflected in Glascock's study as he found that in dramas, female characters were more likely to be depicted as affectionate while male characters were more likely to be shown as physically aggressive and threatening (2001:665). The notion that marriage and family are what is most important to women, and more so than for men, is another cultural assumption that is depicted on television. Women are more likely to be depicted as married than men, 19% compared to 11% (Glascock 2001:662), and it is more common for a man to have an unknown marital status than a woman, 49% compared to 36% (Lauzen 2014:3). While 19% of female characters were perceived as parents, this was only true for 10% of male characters (Glascock 2001:662).

A Push for Progressive Representations

While a majority of television programs have failed to properly include women in their casts or have portrayed them in regressive ways, there are cases of television shows that have truly made an effort in creating "diverse, complicated [female characters] who initiate and/or actively participate in their destinies" (Smith et al. 2008:12). Lucy Ricardo, the main character

of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) challenged the utopia of domestic life that was so glorified in the Golden Age. Unlike other female characters on TV at the time, Lucy was strong and independent. Even though she was a wife and mother she did not give up her aspirations of entering show business and finding a job outside of the home (Press 2009:140). After the proliferation of middle-class housewives during the Golden Age, the show *That Girl* (1966-1971) starring Marlo Thomas helped reshape the portrayal of women on television. Not only did Thomas star in the show as the lead character Ann Marie but she also played a significant role in the production end by contributing to its creation and production on ABC. When she was conceptualizing the show, Thomas wanted to portray a woman “who’s college educated and wants to be independent, who doesn’t want to get married, who wants to find out who she is,” which was a stark contrast against the female characters in sitcoms at the time (Knowlton 2014). *That Girl* was the first sitcom to center around the life of a single young woman living on her own (Press 2009:142). One of the most significant things about *That Girl* was its nod to the liberal feminist movement, which was in its second wave during time that the show was on air. While the staff of the show wanted to end the series with Ann Marie marrying her boyfriend Donald, Thomas pushed for the series finale to conclude with Ann Marie bringing Donald to a women’s liberation meeting (Knowlton 2014). This controversial ending was Thomas’ way of saying that marriage is not the only happy ending that a woman can have.

While today there are many shows starring young unmarried women, in the 1960s a show like *That Girl* was totally unprecedented. Its success opened doors for other shows featuring independent working women. A few years after *That Girl*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) took a similar approach in starring an unmarried woman. Mary Richards, the lead character, was one of the first female career-women on television (Press 2009:142). Another

significant program during that time was *Julia* (1968-1971), the first show to portray a middle-class black woman as the lead character. Diahann Carroll, the actress who played the title character Julia, said that in creating the show she and the staff “wanted to walk away from all the clichés and all the caricatures of what black people are supposed to be” (Knowlton 2014). As a middle-class woman with a career, the character of Julia defied racist stereotypes.

Racial Diversity (Or Lack Thereof)

While it may seem counterintuitive because we typically associate time with progress, the early days of television in the 1940s and 50s featured “images of ethnic and socioeconomic difference” that were later dropped in exchange for the mass depiction of the white middle class during the height of the Golden Age (Press 2009:140). For example, *The Goldbergs* (1949-1952) featured a Jewish family. As previously mentioned, people of color – particularly women of color – are extremely underrepresented on television. While it is important to be aware of the rates at which characters of color appear on television, it is equally necessary to be aware of the ways in which they are represented. A frequent problem with the representations of racial and ethnic minorities is that those characters are often based on stereotypes. Sterling A. Brown’s study “The Negro in American Fiction” pinpointed several common caricatures for black characters in literature, such as the contented slave, tragic mulatto, comic negro and the wretched freed man (Dates and Mascaro 2005:51). While those tropes emerged in the nineteenth century, they have transcended both time and medium to be produced in modern day media. Nina Cartier, author of “Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations,” notes that black female characters are “trapped by the deviant sexuality of the past (always a whore or strangely asexual)...[and] lives in [their] own present in contention with current conventions of both black and white female beauty (or lack thereof)” (2014:152).

Cultural tropes also exist for Latinos, who are regularly pigeonholed into roles portraying drug dealers, domestic workers, and non-English speaking immigrants (Dates et al. 2005:51).

Relying on stereotypes for the development of characters of color is problematic in many ways. American media is an extremely powerful social institution that influences and shapes the lives of millions. Because of television's dominance, perpetuating racial stereotypes on TV leads to the perpetuation of racism on one of the most influential and popular media platforms. When networks continue to portray racial and ethnic minority characters in such narrow ways, gender, racial and socioeconomic inequalities are legitimated and normalized (Dates et al. 2005:51). Employing stereotypes also negatively affects the development of the character. Stereotypes limit characters and make them less nuanced than their white counterparts are able to be. Dates et al. argue that black characters modeled on racial stereotypes are "incapable of growth, change, innovation, or transformation" (2005:52). Essentially, a character of color is limited by the number of existing tropes for them to fill, and then once the character fits a trope they are stuck in that representation. In many cases, that representation does not accurately present the realities of the lives of people of color (Dates et al. 2005:52).

Equally troubling is the treatment of race and racism on television. Dates et al. state the importance of networks creating shows with people of color for people of color to watch because minorities comprise of a significant percentage of the population (2005:53). This makes them a potentially lucrative client base for advertisers who fund the television industry with their commercials. However, despite the fact that racial and ethnic minorities contribute to a large percentage of the American public, television still caters to white viewers – even with shows that portray people of color. Alvin F. Poussaint, who was a script production assistant for the black sitcom *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) was quoted in Gazelle Emami's article "How To Make It

As A Black Sitcom: Be Careful How You Talk About Race” in saying that black sitcoms cannot discuss race too often or else “[a] lot of people will turn it off if you’re trying to send them a message” (2014). Poussaint’s quote demonstrates a catering to white audiences, as it echoes an idea suggested later in the article that white viewers cannot feel attacked by the conversation of race and racism on the show (Emami 2014). A major problem with shying away from race and racism on television is that it thwarts an opportunity for those topics to be communicated to a large audience. Dates et al. go as far as to call television a “potentially...powerful agent for change” (2005:50). Television shows with plotlines that include in-depth discussions on race could be a way to initiate new norms regarding race and racism that promote equality and work to put an end to racial disparity.

Existing racial inequality has been the major cause for on-screen stereotypical racial television programming. The television industry is primarily controlled and operated by white people of the upper-class. Similarly to how women working behind the scenes affects the on-screen representation of women on television, having people of color work behind the scenes affects the ways that characters of color are depicted. Brown’s study found that white authors portrayed African American characters differently from black authors, who were less likely to create characters based on stereotypes (Dates et al. 2005:51). While Brown’s study focused on literature, his findings apply to studies of black characters – and all characters of color in general – on television. People of racial and ethnic minorities do not have the same access to behind the scenes “media decision-making” positions as do white people, which can in part explain the prevalence of stereotypical non-white characters (Dates et al. 2005:51). Additionally, racism affects the reasoning behind which shows are produced and which get canceled, often prematurely canceling non-white television shows before said shows are able to garner the

sponsorship that white television receives (Dates et al. 2005:52). This is demonstrated by the fact that over half of 111 black sitcoms featured on network television ended after their first season (Emami 2014). Not only do minority shows struggle to find economic support, but also social support. Non-white programs are judged in a way that white programs are exempt from. According to television critic Pilot Viruet, black shows – and all other non-white shows in general – have the pressure of being “representative of minorities in general: [the show] has to work harder than your average sitcom just to be seen as good. It has to continue to prove itself” (Emami 2014).

Women and “Postfeminist” Television

As cable began to surpass network television, TV saw a “postfeminist proliferation of women’s television images” (Press 2009:143). In her article “Ally McBeal to Desperate Housewives: A Brief History of the Postfeminist Heroine,” Elizabeth Kaufer Busch also discusses this idea – or as she calls it, “the feminist mystique”:

“The women depicted in these series are deeply discontented and utterly confused about why – despite their designer-clad, well-proportioned bodies, meaningful careers, and fat checkbooks – they experience something much like Friedan’s eloquent description of a ‘strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, [and] a yearning’” (2009:87).

Press and Busch both note how several series in the 1990s and early 2000s – such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* – undercut feminism by featuring female protagonists who are “single...distressed, lonely, and miserable” (Busch 2009:87). Instead of praising the achievements of feminist activists they are portrayed in a way that uses feminism as a scapegoat for their problems. Despite the fact that Ally, the main character on *Ally McBeal*, “came to be labeled as ‘the postergirl for postmodern feminism,’” both authors criticize how Ally is depicted as a successful attorney whose main preoccupation is with her love life and her quest to find a husband (Leavy 2000). Both articles argue that it is not enough for Ally to be considered a

feminist simply because of her status as an unmarried Harvard graduate and lawyer. Ally is often shown as feeling caught between wanting to be sexually desirable or successful and asexual – as if sexual agency and success are mutually exclusive – and wishing she could leave her career to return to a more traditional role. Busch even goes as far as to say that *Ally McBeal* portrays “feminists as bitter, frigid, masculine, and unerotic” (2009:92). Busch and Press have similar critiques for *Sex and the City*:

“While all [the characters] have successful careers, the show combines an acknowledgement of the importance of women’s independence with a very traditionalist focus on ‘the search for Mr. Right. This emphasis is so strong that it undercuts the way the women’s careers might be seen to underscore their (and the show’s) support for second-wave feminist values” (Press 2009:144).

A major theme of television in the 1980s and 90s was women making choices between work or family. Press sites *LA Law* (1986–1994) and *Thirty-Something* (1987–1991) as portraying the concept of women successfully fulfilling both roles as an impossible defeat (2009:144). The narrative of only being able to have a career or a family is shown in the series finale of *Ally McBeal* when Ally leaves the law firm she works for to care for her biological child, who is the product of Ally’s egg donation. Busch criticizes Ally’s path to motherhood for not featuring Ally juggling work and parenthood, and for insinuating that the only way a career-woman can have children is through assisted reproductive technology and without a partner (2009:92). Ally’s choice is also significant because she gives up her career as she is about to make partner, thus implying that her desire for motherhood trumps her career goals. Ultimately, *Ally McBeal* left viewers with the message that “women’s competing desires cannot be naturally satisfied in [the] postfeminist world” (Busch 2009:92).

In my research, there were two female characters in the postfeminist television era who were cited as progressive: Murphy of *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) and Buffy of *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer (1997-2003). Murphy was a journalist who was very much a nuanced character in that she was “selfish, stubborn, extremely hot-tempered but also talented, resourceful, clever and caring” (IMDb). In 1992, *Murphy Brown* became a breaking news story when Murphy had an unplanned pregnancy and decided to raise the baby as a single mother, sparking a national debate about morality and single-parenthood. Though the show was extremely criticized for this narrative, Murphy’s pregnancy ultimately pioneered the unplanned pregnancy narrative on television (Spigel 2004:1217). When *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was being created, executive producer Marti Noxon said that they wanted to make Buffy a character who was “a real girl, with vulnerabilities, who makes mistakes, who wants to be liked, and who can rise to the occasion” (Knowlton 2014). In the television industry where traits for female character are very polarized, the character of Buffy was groundbreaking. Female characters typically fall into archetypes where they can only be successful, independent, frigid and strong, or emotional, loving and passive, and Buffy defied those tropes by being a blend of traits traditionally assigned to masculinity and femininity. Of the character of Buffy, TV producer Shonda Rhimes said “she was doing things that normally you saw boys doing. She was the strong one who was doing the fighting, she was saving...the boys’ lives on a regular basis. She was also really flawed” (Knowlton 2014).

“Postfeminist” Television and Women’s Sexuality

In recent years, television has begun showing female characters having sex outside of marriage and monogamous relationships, and also expressing their sexual desires. The growth of premium cable channels such as HBO and Showtime has allowed for more sexual content on TV because they are exempt from a stamp of approval for acceptable content from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (Knowlton 2014). Because talking about sex on TV –

particularly female sexuality – was once such a taboo subject, people often think that it is progressive to see a woman on television engaging in or talking about sex. I challenge that notion, and do not think that merely showing a female character’s sexuality and sex life on a television program means that the show is progressive or feminist. Sometimes a female character’s sexual expression is less about her own desires and more about reinforcing gender norms. Postfeminist culture encourages women to adopt a sexual persona and have sexual agency, but only if it reflects a sexuality that satisfies the heterosexual male fantasy (Berridge 2013:337). This section of my paper explores television’s shortcomings in portraying healthy female sexuality.

The ways in which female sexuality have been portrayed on television has varied, however there are some general overarching sexual narratives, one of which being the dangers of female sex. One of the reasons *Sex and the City* was heralded as being such a feminist show was because of the show’s treatment of female sexuality. The characters were thought of as embodying the sexual liberation fought for during feminism’s second wave through their frequent and casual sexual relationships. However, as Busch points out, their so-called liberated sexuality is met with many consequences:

“Carrie is mistaken for a prostitute after a meaningless romp with a wealthy foreigner. Miranda’s frequent sexploits earn her an STD, an embarrassingly lengthy list of former sex partners that she must inform about her chlamydia, as well as an unwanted pregnancy. Samantha’s innumerable sexual excursions lead to a...concern that she has contracted AIDS...Charlotte’s uneasiness with her own indiscriminant sex leads to ‘vulvodinia’, described as depression of the female genitalia” (2009:93).

Female sexuality being linked to dangerous misfortunes has also been a theme in television for teenagers, particularly in terms of virginity. Susan Berridge, author of the article “Glances, dances, romances: An overview of gendered sexual narratives in teen drama series,” analyzes the ways in which television shows illustrate teenage sexuality. She found that unlike teenage boys,

when teenage girl characters lose their virginity there is emphasis on being psychologically prepared to have sex, choosing the “right” partner to “give” their virginity to, and having sex for the “right” reasons (2013:335). These criteria were not found to be important for the male teenage characters engaging in sex for the first time. She also found that when teenage girl characters had sex without the aforementioned conditions being met that they are shown suffering from psychological damage, thus perpetuating stereotypes that girls are innocent and asexual and that boys naturally have an uncontrollable, wild sexual desire (2013:335). It also implies that girls only have sex for emotional reasons whereas boys have sex to seek physical pleasure.

Emphasis on virginity has even been applied to representations of female characters that are sexually active. While Ally McBeal is not a virgin, she is depicted as having angelic and innocent – thus, virginal – qualities. She is often shown with “soft lighting, beautiful music, halos over her head, and walking on air” (Patton 2001:237). Being shown in these ways reinforces stereotypes of traditional values of white womanhood (Patton 2001:237). The other sexually active female characters on *Ally McBeal* do not get portrayed in the same way, particularly the sexually active women of color. Ally’s black roommate Renee Radick is, like Ally, a single, sexually active lawyer. However instead of being shown as innocent and angelic, Renee is depicted as the Jezebel stereotype of a black woman who is shameless, seductive and tempts white men (Patton 2001:244). For example, Ally and Renee are shown as having an inflatable doll of a white man, which they use to sleep with when they are alone. While Ally is shown cuddling the doll, as though she is using it for companionship and emotional intimacy, Renee is shown looking at the size of the doll’s penis, insinuating that Renee is hypersexual (Patton 2001:245). Ling Woo, an Asian female character who works in the same law firm as

Ally, embodies the sexualized dragon lady stereotype of an Asian woman who is deceitful and mysterious (Patton 2001:251). Like Renee, Ling's sexuality is framed as being hypersexual. Patton sites examples of Ling displaying "a number of unknown sexual tricks [such as] sexual finger sucking...that she uses to keep her boyfriend interested" (2001:250).

While many TV shows do feature female characters with active sex lives, many of these shows also carry a not-so-subtle message that women's sex is supposed to be monogamous and procreation-oriented. Berridge found that teen drama series often frame a female character's one night stand as a mistake she makes when she is in a bad mental state, such as feeling sad or lonely, or because she is drunk (2013:336). This reinforces the stereotype of repressed female sexuality and that when women have non-monogamous, casual sex it is something regrettable. Another common reason for a teenage girl character having a one night stand is because the character is under the wrong impression that the encounter will lead to "something more," meaning a monogamous romantic relationship (Berridge 2013:336). Again, this perpetuates the assumption that women are less sexual than men, and that they view casual sex as a means for securing a romantic partner. Berridge did not find teenage female characters having one night stands out of sexual desire, which was the reasoning behind teenage male characters engaging in the same behavior.

Privileging monogamous, procreation-oriented sex for women is also depicted in the character Samantha Jones on *Sex and the City*. Samantha tries to have as many sex partners as possible, "has unabashed sex for the sake of orgasm after orgasm...and speaks of marriage and monogamy as diseases" (Busch 2009:93). Samantha's free spirited sexuality and belief that sex is for pleasure and not for procreating is mostly portrayed as fun and carefree – excluding her one AIDS scare – until she learns that she has breast cancer. In the episode where she receives

her diagnosis, Samantha's doctor tells her that not having children may have caused her cancer (Busch 2009:93). This insinuates that a woman's body is meant to have children, and not doing so goes against nature.

Undermining Women's Rights.

There have been a disturbing number of instances where television programs have featured storylines that undermine the rights that second and third wave feminists so adamantly advocated for. The passing of Roe v Wade in 1973 has been considered one of the greatest accomplishments of the second wave. Unfortunately, women's TV shows, even so-called progressive ones, have failed at depicting abortions as an acceptable solution for dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. On *Sex and the City*, the character Miranda Hobbes deals with having an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy. Miranda plans on having an abortion, and the discussion of abortions becomes the central theme of that episode. Press finds this episode to undermine abortion rights, because Miranda's consideration of having an abortion causes Carrie to

“reflect with extreme sadness and regret on her own abortion when she was younger...Carrie [is] unwilling to admit to her current boyfriend that she had the abortion, changing the details so that she seemed to be younger at the time (and thus perhaps less responsible)” (Press 2009:145).

Ultimately Miranda decides against having the abortion, opting instead to be a single working mother. Press' critique of this episode is that HBO, the show's network, assumed that the audience would not be able to “sympathize with a character who obtains an abortion without regret, or even without much second-guessing” (2009:145). Framing abortion as a painful decision that a woman must mull over strengthens the stigma surrounding the procedure which still exists to this day. The episode makes abortion seem less like a right and more like a last resort that women turn to when they are out of options.

Second wave feminists also advocated for protection against sexual assault. In many cases, television's depiction of this crime has not treated it with the gravity that it warrants. Berridge found that the teen drama series in her study portrayed sexual violence as a girl's personal problem instead of as part of a "broader gendered social structure that enable and permit male sexual violence against women" (2013:338). Instead of linking sexual assault to patriarchy or hegemonic masculine culture, Berridge found that shows tied it to the vulnerability of young women and a consequence of teenagers being in adult spheres. She found examples of this in the series *My So-Called Life* when the character Rayanne is sexually assaulted after lying to her parents and sneaking to a nightclub and drinking alcohol, and on the show *One Tree Hill* when the character Peyton is nearly raped when she attends a college party as a highschooler (Berridge 2013:338). Sexual coercion has had an equally troubling depiction. While exploring narratives surrounding teenage virginity, Berridge found that teenage boy characters were often found pressuring their girlfriends into having sex for the first time. This pressuring was not treated as sexual coercion or violence (Berridge 2013:334). The danger of these portrayals of sexual assault is that they frame women and girls as responsible for any sexual abuse or coercion that they endure, make these issues seem like isolated events as opposed to national and international phenomena, and reinforce the idea that male sexuality is untamable (Berridge 2013:334, 338).

During the third wave of feminism, a major concern for feminists was the work-home balance. Earlier I mentioned *Ally McBeal*'s failure of portraying the possibility of the work-home balance by concluding the series with Ally selecting one over the other. However, another problem with the depiction of the work-home balance is depicting it as though it is not challenging to manage. Press sites *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* (1982-1989) as showing women's fulfilment of professional and domestic roles as "a given" (2009:144). Before making

her choice to quit her job, Ally is shown as being unsympathetic to working mothers in an episode where she defends a woman who sues a company for providing women with children more time-off and more flexible hours than to women without children. Ally's argument is "women now have the 'choice' to have children, and when they do, they should be forced to bear the consequences for this" (Press 2009:144). Her attitude against working mothers dismisses the women's movement's advocacy for the workplace being more accommodating to women and the notion that women should not have to choose between their career and their family.

After reading extensively on the subject of women's representations on television, I can conclude that while the TV industry has made significant advances in creating new portrayals of women, it has also struggled with creating female characters who do not uphold oppressive gender stereotypes. This has led me to ask the question: To what extent are representations of women on television progressive?

RESEARCH METHODS

In sociology, studies on representations of women on television are primarily quantitative; however, because this study's research question cannot be assessed numerically, it calls for qualitative methods. This project uses a methodology rooted in Nancy Signorielli and Aaron Bacue's 1999 content analysis "Recognition and Respect: A Content Analysis of Primetime Television Characters Across Three Decades." In their study, Signorielli et al. analyzed television representations of women based on recognition and respect, recognition referring to "the quantity and /or frequency of appearances" of women on television and respect referring to "the types and breadth of roles in which" women on television are afforded (1999:529). Because a great deal of sociological research exists on women's recognition in the

media, I chose to study the respect of women's representations as I thought it was the best way to answer my research question, as progressivity does not have a numerical value.

Sociologist Matthew Hughey argues that qualitative methods are appropriate for content analyses as “numerical values do not necessarily capture the meanings encoded in a given image or narrative” (2014:175). Women appearing on television in higher numbers does not necessarily signify progress or gender equality if their roles reinforce stereotypes or normalize women's subordination, therefore it is vital to think critically about the content of the characters they play. Joshua Gamson, a sociologist who studied daytime talk shows' portrayals of gender and sexuality nonconformists, argues that “[j]ust because people are talking back does not mean we are witnessing democratic impulses and effects” (1998:14). By this Gamson means that media visibility of marginalized groups is not necessarily progressive or creating equality, as their media exposure often times sensationalizes and exoticizes their images.

While random sampling is commonly employed in sociological media research, this project is an in-depth case study, using the four shows in the sample as individual cases. Although case study methodology does not allow for a survey of a wide range of programs, it yields a more in-depth analysis than allowed by random sampling. Using random sampling to analyze television can be problematic because a few episodes of a show cannot be representative of an entire series – especially a series that is on the air for many years. Additionally, the shows in the random sample may not provide the researcher with enough data and context to draw conclusions about the characters in the episodes. Many studies analyze the careers, marital statuses and parental roles of characters, but those statuses are not always clear to the researcher by watching a few episodes which often leads to many inconclusive results. With a smaller quantitative data sample this study is able to track characters' progressions and get a better idea

of how they are generally portrayed, and make note of any changes to the main cast, which will ultimately result in a richer analysis. Sociologist Howard Becker argues that “[e]mpirical cases, studied in-depth, lead us...to important social processes and the details of social organization that produce them,” therefore I feel that this research will not only yield results that provide an understanding of representations of women on television but also patterns in representations of women across all forms of media (2014:5).

Sample selection posed a great challenge because of my sampling rationale and advances in television. In recent years there have been many changes in the television industry, as broadcast networks are competing with cable and premium channels for viewership, and web television providers such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon – which used to solely be sites for streaming television – have begun producing their own TV series. In addition, there are more women on television than ever before. According to actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus,

“[t]elevision is more fertile ground for women right now, and that’s why television is so fucking good right now...Because there are shows on television with women in starring roles, and supporting roles, that aren’t just ‘the woman’” (Knowlton 2014).

There are an overwhelming number of programs with female leads, however I ultimately chose to examine ABC’s *Scandal*, FOX’s *The Mindy Project*, HBO’s *Girls* and Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)*. Feasibility constraints meant that I was limited to study a sample of four shows. This sampling method can be classified as progressive theoretical sampling, as the shows were selected “based on emerging understanding of the topic under investigation” (Altheide 1996:33). These programs were chosen for the sample because not only do they feature female leads, but also because each show has garnered significant media attention for being progressive and non-normative in comparison to other women-centered shows that are currently on television. Also, each show has women working behind the scenes as executive producers,

producers, directors and writers, which is especially significant because women are extremely underrepresented in the production end of the television industry. The goal of progressive theoretical sampling is to “select materials for conceptual or theoretically relevant reasons” (Altheide 1996:34). The television series that I selected are relevant to the topic under investigation because they are considered to be progressive and this research is, in part, an evaluation of the extent to which images of women on television are progressive. According to qualitative research methods and progressive theoretical sampling, it is required to “include the widest range of relevant messages in [the] sample,” therefore I viewed and took notes on all of the episodes of the shows in the sample¹ (Altheide 1996:33). A total of eleven seasons, 172 episodes and approximately 98.88 hours of television were watched, coded and analyzed (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of selected sample of television shows and viewing hours of data collection

Name of Show	Number of Seasons	Number of Episodes across all show seasons	Number of Television Hours watched
Girls	3	32	15.6
Orange is the New Black	2	26	25
Scandal	3	47	33.78
The Mindy Project	3	67	24.5
Total	11	172	98.88

Coding Methods

I practiced provisional coding by generating the coding list prior to data collection and based on “anticipated categories or types of responses/actions that may arise in the data yet to be

¹ The fourth/most recent season of *Scandal* has been excluded from the sample because the season had not concluded before the end of my data collection period. The fourth/most recent season of *Girls* was also excluded due to time constraints.

collected” (Saldaña 2009:120). Prior to watching the shows, I generated a list of themes for which I would later code for in first cycle coding: sexuality, body (self-perception and the perception of others), career (type, status within that career, dedication to that career), gender violence, relationships with other female characters, romantic narratives, race, class, identity and agency. These codes were based on the research completed on each show during the creation of the sample and also from having seen some of the episodes prior to this project. Researching for the literature review aided in the conceptualization of these codes. Through reading analyses of women’s representations on television I was able to identify the themes most salient in this topic. Writing analytic memos while coding allowed for reflection on my data while also tracking developing themes.

Qualitative research scholar Johnny Saldaña notes that a limitation of provisional coding is that by beginning the study with a ready-made list of codes the researcher’s “preconceptions of what to expect in the field may distort [the] objective and even interpretive observations of what is ‘really’ happening there” (2009:122). To avoid skewing the data, I modified the list of codes during the data collection and added new codes to the original list. For instance, the original intent was to code “body” based on a female character’s self-perception of her body image and how her body is viewed by male characters. However, in watching *OITNB* I realized that many of the evaluations of female characters’ bodies were coming from other female characters, so that code was changed to perception of others. Additionally, agency was added into the code list during the data collection as I thought that it would be a good marker of a woman’s modern day television representation since in the past female characters had little or no agency.

In qualitative research, reflexivity is the quality assurance equivalent of reliability, validity and generalizability in quantitative research. While this research inherently has some

level of validity because it is a study of a non-interactive subject, reflexivity was used to uphold that validity throughout the research process (Leavy 2000). For example, I was educated in rebellious feminism, and I realize that has influenced the way I conceptualized this project, the make-up of the sample and my data analysis. I understand gender as a social construction and a performance as opposed to a biological difference between the sexes. According to this perspective, the sex female is not equated with femininity, nor is the sex male equated with masculinity. Gender is not something one is born with, but rather something one is socialized into. I also acknowledge that there is not one woman experience, but rather a woman's life can be privileged or disadvantaged by her race, class and sexual orientation. Because of my training in rebellious feminism, a show will be considered progressive if the portrayals of female characters are not limited by cultural, racial, gender and sexual tropes; do not normalize patriarchy; and do not portray women as the opposite sex from men.

Sample Description

Scandal (2012 – present) is a political drama starring Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope, a lawyer who has her own crisis management firm, Pope and Associates, in Washington, DC. The show is produced by Shondaland, the production company founded by critically acclaimed screenwriter, director and producer Shonda Rimes. *Scandal* has received considerable media attention, as it is “the first network TV drama with a black female lead character since 1974” (Nussbaum 2012). Professionally, Olivia Pope is powerful and well respected, which is shown by the high demand of her services and her reputation as “the fixer.” She is a workaholic who prioritizes her career at the expense of her social and love life, and can be found at her office at any time of day or night. Prior to creating her own firm, she was the White House Communications Director, a position she quit in part because of her on-going affair with the

married President of the United States Fitzgerald “Fitz” Grant. I chose this show for my sample because not only is it created by an African-American woman, but also because it depicts a black woman in a high level profession on a television genre typically reserved for white men and women. *Scandal* also has a huge following and is very popular, as shown by its air time (at the time of this project) on Thursday nights, which is the most coveted time slot on primetime.

The Mindy Project (2012 – present) is a sitcom about New York City obstetrician and gynecologist Mindy Lahiri and her coworkers. Mindy Lahiri is played by actress and writer Mindy Kaling, who created, produced and writes for the series, making “Kaling one of the only women of color to be both the face of and the creative force behind a network TV show” (Yuan 2012). Mindy is quirky, obsessed with popular culture, and her sense of humor is both self-absorbed and self-deprecating. She is close friends with the other doctors with whom she works with at the practice Shulman & Associates, and the show largely takes place in the office. In an industry dominated by white women, *The Mindy Project* challenges what it means to be a female lead on primetime. As an Indian-American woman, Kaling’s starring in a primetime television program is groundbreaking, and is in part why I selected *The Mindy Project* for my sample. In addition, Kaling’s body defies the Hollywood Beauty standard as she is heavier than the typical size-0 star we are so accustomed to seeing on TV. The careers of female characters are typically much less focused on than those of male characters, and starring a woman working in a science-related field – a field focused on women’s reproductive health, nonetheless – who is shown at work in almost every episode makes the show’s portrayal of Mindy significant.

Lena Dunham produces, directs and writes for the dramedy *Girls* (2012 – present). She also stars in the series as Hannah Horvath, one of the show’s four female friends leads. Hannah, and her three friends Marnie Michaels, Jessa Johansson, and Shoshanna Shapiro, are

twentysomethings living and coming of age in Brooklyn, New York. Hannah, Marnie, and Jessa studied at Oberlin College, though Jessa did not graduate, and Shoshana studies at New York University. The characters on *Girls* depict what is often called extended adolescence, as they are legal adults who are not yet settled into permanent careers and are not fully financially independent. Since its debut *Girls* has become very popular, and ranks as number 15 on Vulture's list of 18 "Most Watched Seasons of HBO Original Series Since 2004" (Gaffney 2013). Dunham's intensive role behind the scenes of the show is noteworthy, considering that men dominate television production and also because she was only twenty-six years old when the show debuted. The show frequently shows Dunham naked, which challenges the Hollywood beauty standard as Dunham's body is larger than the average female TV star. Television and film producer Paula Weinstein has called Dunham's nudity

"groundbreaking in a way that makes me so happy, where you see a woman comfortable in her body who doesn't have that...Vogue model body. Just that alone is a life changing moment for young girls to see the confidence she has" (Knowlton 2014).

Aside from Dunham's body and nudity, the show is also considered progressive because of its portrayals of female sexuality, mental illness, female friendships and the struggles young women face in navigating adulthood.

Orange is the New Black debuted on Netflix in 2013, and since then it has become a hit series. It is estimated that 44% of Netflix's 44 million subscribers have watched the show (Spangler 2014). The show chronicles the life of Piper Chapman, a middle-class, thirtysomething woman who receives a fifteen-month federal prison sentence for smuggling a suitcase of drug money on an international flight. Piper committed this crime eight years ago while in a lesbian relationship with Alex Vause, a member of an international drug ring. *OITNB* depicts Piper's transition into the fictional all-female Litchfield Federal Prison and the many

challenges she faces there. Since the main setting of the show is a female prison, the main cast is made up of women. Women have a significant role on the production end of the show as well. The series has gained attention for its portrayal of the injustices and inequalities that women experience in the prison system, and also for its portrayal of same-sex relationships. While many shows that feature same-sex couples dilute or trivialize those relationships, *OITNB* explores these relationships in great depth, often featuring very graphic lesbian sex scenes. Additionally, *OITNB* features a male-to-female transgender woman as a main character, who is played by real-life transgender actress Laverne Cox. This is significant, since LGBT people are marginalized on television as well as all forms of media. The series has also gained attention for having a diverse cast of women of varying races, social classes and ages, contrasting against the predominantly young, white and middle-class female characters who are typically featured on television. Despite the fact that the show is extremely unorthodox it has had great success, shown by its nomination and winning of many awards, including Emmy's, SAGs, GLAAD Media, National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Image, and People's Choice awards. In many ways, *OITNB* is unlike any other female-centered show on television, making it an obvious choice for my study.

The shows in the sample have several elements that make them non-normative and progressive in their representations of women – from the people who produce the shows, the bodies shown on-screen, the careers of the female characters, and the type of relationships the female character are in. However, just because these shows have many progressive qualities does not mean that they do not hold onto regressive, stereotypical representations of women as well. It cannot be assumed that all non-normative TV programs depict characters in nuanced ways. As said by Gamson, when marginalized people are featured in the media they are “written

by somebody else, or heavily edited” meaning that their portrayal is not necessarily an accurate, authentic depiction of their lived experience but rather how the mainstream culture imagines their lives (1998:4). I hypothesize that while these shows have many progressive elements in terms of their diverse representations of women, they still depict women in regressive ways that reflect gender stereotypes.

THEORY

My research draws on both macro- and micro-level sociological theories. Because the characters in my sample represent a diverse group of races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, body types, ages, gender identities and social classes, it is important to ground my analysis in a theory that encompasses all of those differing statuses, and that challenges the idea that there is one universal lived experience for all women. Marginalized women had very different needs from those of the second wavers who were the forefront of the women’s rights movement, calling for more inclusive feminist theories. Sociologist and radical feminist Patricia Hill Collins uses the concept of interlocking systems of oppression to understand systems of penalty and privilege that women experience. According to Hill Collins,

“[t]he significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity” (1990:225).

According to this framework, gender cannot be studied without considering other social and political factors that shape a woman’s experience and affect her social status. This is called the matrix of domination, the concept that “all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system” (Hill Collins 1990:225).

The matrix of domination explains the ways in which some women are more privileged than others while also disrupting the simplistic model of a social hierarchy in which groups are

assigned to static, ranked positions on a totem pole. Instead, the matrix of domination complicates a system of social hierarchy by positing that “[d]epending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed” (Hill Collins 1990:225). When applied to my research, the matrix of domination explains the ways in which characters in my sample are more or less privileged depending on the setting, circumstance they are in, and who they are with. It also explains why characters are portrayed in certain ways depending on their race, class, sexual orientation, etc.

R.W. Connell’s theory of emphasized femininity will also be utilized in my analysis. Emphasized femininity is “the global subordination of women to men that provides an essential basis for differentiation” (Connell 1987:183). In this perspective, women uphold their subordination through compliance and in “accommodating [to] the interests and desire of men” (Connell 1987:183). Emphasized femininity occurs at both the micro- and macro-level. At the micro-level, emphasized femininity can manifest in women’s relationships with men by being passive in romantic relationships, the stroking of men’s egos, and prioritizing their male partner’s sexual pleasure over their own (Connell 1987:186). Looking at a larger scale level, emphasized femininity can be seen in women’s underrepresentation and holding positions of lesser status in every major institution. Most relevant to my research, emphasized femininity is broadcasted across every media platform. American media reproduces images of a particular type of femininity that is aesthetically pleasing to heterosexual men, which explains why most female celebrities are thin and classically beautiful. The media not only depicts women performing this type of femininity, but it also teaches women “how to sustain [that] performance” (Connell 1987:188). Emphasized femininity can be applied to my research in

interpreting the romantic relationships female characters have with men, the representations of women's bodies and their passivity/agency.

My analysis is also informed by Charles Horton Cooley's theory of The Looking-Glass Self. In this perspective, the ways in which a person develops their self-concept is viewed as a social process that one engages in with another, or in other words, "[t]here is no sense of 'I'...without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they" (Cooley 1983:126). Cooley theorizes that people perceive themselves based on how they believe they are perceived by others. Cooley sees this as a three-part process in which an individual imagines how their appearance is perceived by the other person, imagines how the other person evaluates or judges their appearance, and then ultimately the individual's "self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Cooley 1983:126). In this study, the Looking-Glass Self theory will be used in analyzing how characters in my data sample construct their identities and evaluate themselves, especially in terms of their bodies and reputations.

Lastly, this research draws on Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's concept of doing gender. West and Zimmerman posit that gender is not something biological that one is born with, but rather is learned through socialization. They see the process of doing gender as three part process through which a person's assumed sex is determined. An individual assumes another person's sex – the biological criteria used for labeling a person male or female – by reading their sex category. Since determining someone's sex does not involve nudity and exposing genitalia, sex category is used as a stand-in for sex. Identifying a person's sex category is achieved through evaluating their gender. West and Zimmerman define gender as "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (1987:127). Performing a gender can include how one

manages their appearance, tone of voice, dress, mannerisms, etc. Doing gender will be applied to my analysis of a transgender character in my sample.

FINDINGS

Embodiment

Women's bodies.

The following section elaborates on findings. These results are conceptualized on an individual-society continuum ranging from embodiment, relationships and social contexts, concluding with an evaluation of women's agency. My findings regarding representations of women's bodies support those of Fouts et al. 2000 study on representations of female weight on television. I found that across all shows there was a clear distinction in how the bodies of thin and heavier female characters were portrayed, both in terms of how these heavier character perceived their own bodies and how their bodies were perceived by other characters. There were no overweight female characters in the main cast of *Scandal*, therefore my analysis on bodies on that program will be limited to thin bodies. As sociologist Abigail Saguy notes in her book *What's Wrong with Fat?*, "[g]iven to the extent to which fatness has been condemned and pathologized over the past century, it is impossible to choose a truly neutral word for 'fat'" which posed a challenge for me in describing the bodies of the characters in my sample (2013:7). Following in Saguy's suit, I use the words "fat," "heavysset," "heavy," "full figure" and "large" as neutral terms to describe the characters in my sample whose body types are bigger than the traditional thin female bodies that predominate television and essentially every other form of media. I do not use "thin" or "skinny" as terms of flattery but instead to refer to women's bodies that do reflect the television beauty standard, and by extension society's beauty standards.

Though it is progressive to feature characters with body sizes larger than the standard size-0 figure that is associated with Hollywood, drawbacks are that thinner characters' bodies are privileged over those of larger characters. One commonality I found in *OITNB*, *Girls* and *The Mindy Project* was the difference in portrayals of the diets and eating habits of heavier female characters compared to those of thinner female characters. For larger characters, their diets and eating habits are typically shown as unhealthy, are used as jokes, portrayed as abnormal and judged by other characters, whereas the diets and eating habits of thinner characters are portrayed as healthy and are free of judgment. For example, in the *OITNB* episode "Tit Punch," heavysset character Tasha "Taystee" Jefferson gets into a physical fight with inmate Marisol "Flaca" Gonzalez when Flaca throws out Taystee's ice cream cone (Trim, McCarthy, and Abraham 2013). Not only is Flaca thin, but the word "flaca" means skinny in Spanish. This is a stark contrast against Piper, who in that same episode is shown attempting a juice cleanse in a flashback of her life before her sentence. In that same flashback, Piper's fiancé Larry Bloom mentions how Piper only buys "locally-grown, grass-fed, conflict-free" food, further reinforcing Piper's healthiness (Trim et al. 2013). In this episode we see how Piper, who is thin, has a healthy diet whereas Taystee, who is overweight, is so desperate for ice cream that she physically attacks another inmate. Thinness is equated with a healthy diet and heaviness is equated with eating junk food.

Taystee's almost barbaric behavior regarding her ice cream leads to the point that when heavy characters are shown eating it is often portrayed as gluttonous and animalistic. The opening line of the pilot episode of *Girls* is Hannah's mother Loreen Horvath telling Hannah to slow down as she is eating. Hannah's eating habits are again shown as excessive in the episode "The Return" where she is shown raiding the refrigerator for a midnight snack and eating snack

after snack. Similarly, on *The Mindy Project* Mindy eats food rapidly and in large quantities. In the episode “What About Peter,” her boyfriend and colleague Danny Castellano prepares her a steak which she consumes in a matter of seconds. It is important to note that Hannah and Mindy’s thinner counterparts are never shown eating as quickly or excessively. If thinness, eating in moderation and in politely manner – thus, slowly – are equated with femininity, Mindy and Hannah are considered unfeminine because of the way they eat. Their eating habits reinforce stereotypes of fatness as crude, dirty and unsophisticated, and that women with larger bodies are less feminine and composed than women with thin bodies.

Thin bodies were also portrayed as more capable and active than heavy bodies. Piper and Janae Watson, both thin characters, are shown having active lifestyles on *OITNB*. Through flashbacks of her life before her sentence, it is revealed that Watson was a star athlete who excelled in track and fields. At Litchfield she exercises in her room by doing calisthenics workouts, and when the prison’s track is finally reopened she begins running again. Piper also runs on the track with Watson, and she is also shown attending Litchfield’s yoga class led by inmate Erica “Yoga” Jones, who unsurprisingly is also thin. Though *Scandal* lacks body diversity with an entirely thin female main cast, Olivia’s thinness is portrayed as active when she is shown swimming laps to relieve stress. In contrast, heavy bodies are depicted as un-athletic and uncoordinated. On *The Mindy Project*, Mindy being out of shape is repeatedly made the punchline of jokes. In the episode “Mindy’s Brother” she is shown struggling to keep up in an exercise dance class and her dancing is off cue with everyone else in the class. Mindy’s un-athleticism is highlighted when her friend and colleague Peter Prentice reminds her of when she was airlifted at a 5k run after she suggests they take the stairs instead of the elevator. Peter’s line was intended as a joke for viewers, reinforcing the idea that overweight female bodies are

comical. Similarly, in the *Girls* episode “Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too,” Hannah is shown jogging alongside her athletic boyfriend Adam Sackler and struggling to keep up. Eventually she lies down in the street and throws her sneakers at him. Hannah’s athletic inabilities are meant to be funny with her dramatic reaction of lying on the street and throwing her shoes at Adam, again highlighting the connections between heaviness, physical inactivity and humor. The thin, athletic bodies of Piper, Watson and Olivia are never used as comical devices. Instead they are shown as healthy and fit, privileging their bodies over larger ones.

Female characters with larger bodies are subjected to mockery and insult from fellow characters in ways that thin female characters never experience. Excluding *Scandal*, each show in my sample features an overweight character being laughed at for her body. On *OITNB*, the character Dayanara “Daya” Diaz’s body is laughed at by her own mother, Aleida. When Daya asks Aleida if she has a pair of uniform pants that she can borrow, Aleida says, “Not in your size” and then laughs about her comment with fellow Latina inmate Maritza Ramos (Trim 2013). Here, Aleida not only shames Daya’s overweight body as a joke but she compares it to her thinner body, bragging that her body is smaller and therefore superior to Daya’s. Aleida makes this joke in front of Maritza, using a fat joke as a way to entertain a friend at the expense of Daya and her body image. In the episode “Beach House” Hannah wears a bikini in public and overhears a group of men laughing at her and making fun of her body with hateful comments such as, “That makes me sick” (Dunham, Peretz, and Shepard 2014). In laughing at Hannah’s body the men reinforce the standard of beauty for women. A bikini is meant for an attractive body, which according to the American beauty standard is a thin body. Their laughter implies that when a woman who does not meet that beauty standard wears a bikini it is unnatural and disgusting in a funny way. When a video of Mindy goes viral, Mindy’s coworker Morgan

Tookers tells her the video was featured on the website Tosh.0 as the “fat loser of the week” (Spiller, Weaver, and Rogers 2012). Tosh.0 is the website of the comedian Daniel Tosh who exists in the real world outside of the show. Saying that Mindy’s video was fat loser of the week on a comedy website further reinforces the linkage between larger bodies and humor. The ridicule that these three characters endure is never experienced by their thin female counterparts, which upholds norms of small female bodies being superior to larger ones.

I also found that body size is used as an insult. Going into this project, I assumed that men would primarily be the ones insulting women’s weight, but my findings show that women also fat-shame each other. In the episode “Imaginary Enemies” of *OITNB*, lesbian inmates Carrie “Big Boo” Black and Tricia Miller fight over Big Boo’s ex-girlfriend Mercy Valduto who is now dating Tricia. After Big Boo tells Tricia that Mercy does not love her, Tricia responds with “Yeah? Well, you’re fat” (Trim, et al. 2013). Big Boo’s weight is not relevant to their conversation, yet Tricia references it to hurt her. This is because in American society a woman must be thin in order to be considered beautiful, making fatness the opposite of beauty. Additionally fatness is associated with negative traits such as shame, grotesque and savagery, which makes calling someone fat a hateful, hurtful comment. It is also important to note that Tricia is skinny, so this comment asserts her body’s superiority over Big Boo’s. Fatness is also hurled as an insult in the pilot episode of *The Mindy Project*, when Danny tells Mindy, “You know what would look really great?...If you lost 15 pounds” after she insults him by making fun of his divorce (Spiller et al. 2012). Telling Mindy that she is fifteen pounds overweight is meant to hurt Mindy and her self-esteem because it indicates that her body is abnormal for not being the weight it should be. In both of these scenes, the weight of the larger female character is used against her to try to insult her, and they are both reminded that their bodies do not satisfy the

American beauty ideal. I found that thin female characters were never insulted for their weight or called fat, further suggesting that television honors thin women over heavy women.

Not only are heavyset female character called fat by others, but they also call and label themselves fat. In the pilot episode of *The Mindy Project*, Mindy says, “Do you know how difficult it is for a chubby thirty-one year old woman to go on a legit date?” (Spiller et al.2012). Mindy’s comment shows that she perceives her body as unattractive by calling it “chubby” and believes it to be a hindrance on her love life, implying that in order to find a romantic partner a woman must be thin. Hannah labels herself as fat in the pilot episode of *Girls* after Marnie’s boyfriend, Charlie Dattolo, says that she and Marnie looked like angels sleeping together: “Victoria’s Secret angel *points to Marnie*, fat baby angel *points to self*” (Dunham et al. 2012). Not only is Hannah calling herself fat but she is calling herself fat in relation to a thin woman. Because Marnie is thin and classically beautiful, she gets compared to a Victoria’s Secret model which can be considered as the epitome of female beauty and sexuality in America. In contrast, because Hannah’s beauty does not match the American beauty standard and she is overweight, she is compared to an asexual figure. Other than Piper once referring to herself as fat after stress eating because of her prison sentence, I did not find other cases of thin characters labeling their body as fat. It is important to note that Piper was not overweight when she called herself fat.

Another common theme I found in portrayals of women’s bodies is that heavyset women express self-consciousness of their figure. In the episode “Lesbian Request Denied” Daya tells Correctional Officer (CO) John Bennett, “Don’t look at my belly” when he sees her changing (Trim et al. 2013). Daya’s comment expresses her insecurity of her body because it is not thin. In this episode the romance that later develops between Daya and Bennett is in its early stages,

which means that Daya's self-consciousness about her stomach could also be caused by wanting to impress her love interest with her body. Similarly to Daya, Mindy also expresses insecurity about how her body will be perceived by the male gaze. Sometimes Mindy is more subtle about her insecurity, such as in the episode "Danny Castellano is my Gynecologist" when she is apprehensive about being weighed by Danny. Other times Mindy is more explicit with feeling embarrassed by her body. In the episode "Danny Castellano is my Personal Trainer," Mindy tells her colleagues that she is nervous about her then-boyfriend Cliff seeing her in a bathing suit and naked for the first time:

"Cliff is the first guy since [my ex-fiancé] Casey that I could see a real future with...and [I] only have one opportunity to make [my] first naked impression. I don't want him to see my naked body and then decide he doesn't like me" (Spiller et al. 2012).

I did not find thin characters to express body insecurities, suggesting that a thin woman's body is perfect and does not need to be worried about while overweight bodies are something to be ashamed of.

Although most of my findings for body were regressive representations of women, there were also some progressive findings. Even though Hannah and Mindy both consider themselves fat and are called fat by others, they do not hide their bodies. Hannah is frequently shown topless, exposing both her breasts and her stomach. Her nudity does not always take place in a sexual context. She is shown topless while bathing, dressing herself and even playing ping pong in the episode "One Man's Trash." Hannah's nudity challenges the idea that only a certain type of female nudity should be on television and that female nudity is always for the heterosexual male gaze. Aside from Hannah, other characters are shown nude who, like Hannah, have bodies that do not meet the beauty standard. For example, Loreen, who is middle-aged and has a heavyset body, is shown topless in the episode "The Return" when she is having sex in the

shower with her husband. Loreen's partial nudity is significant considering that the media only shows the bodies of young, thin women naked. While Mindy is never shown nude, she does showcase her body in how she dresses herself. Mindy's wardrobe consists of pieces in bright colors and bold prints. In episodes where Mindy dresses up for more formal occasions, she wears form-fitting bodycon dresses. Her flamboyant style contests the norm that full figured women should be covered in loose, homely clothing that divert attention away from their bodies. It is progressive for both *Girls* and *The Mindy Project* to draw attention to these bodies that are marginalized on TV instead of concealing them.

Mindy's style is a manifestation of her confidence in her appearance. Though Mindy does often make negative and self-deprecating comments and jokes about herself, she is also shown speaking positively – almost boastfully – about her body and appearance. Mindy refers to herself as “a young hot woman” and having “flawless chocolate skin [and a] banging body” (Spiller et al. 2013, 2014). In a society that deems larger bodies and women of color as less attractive than thin, white women, it is progressive for Mindy to state her self-confidence and call herself attractive. However, Mindy's comments regarding her appearance are not always so progressive. Characters on *The Mindy Project* frequently comment on Mindy's breast size, specifically referring to them as being small. After hearing these remarks, Mindy typically argues that her breasts are not small, with responses such as, “I have huge cans, everybody knows that” (Spiller et al. 2012). It is regressive for Mindy to call her breasts large instead of defending herself by criticizing her peers for commenting on her body. In arguing that she has big breasts, Mindy upholds the standard of beauty which frames large busts as more sexually desirable than small ones.

Though the heavier characters receive negative comments on their bodies, they are also shown as attractive and desirable. Hannah, Daya and Mindy receive positive comments about their appearances, such as being told that they are beautiful and pretty, by their love interests, sex partners, male characters and/or female characters. Additionally, attraction to the heavysset characters is displayed in their romantic and sexual narratives. Daya, Mindy, Hannah and Taystee have at least one character who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to them. The stereotypical connection between fatness and asexuality is challenged as Daya, Mindy and Hannah are all shown having sex. The only heavy character who received negative comments on her body to not receive compliments on her appearance and is not shown as another character's romantic or sexual interest is Big Boo. However, it is revealed through dialogue and plotlines that Big Boo was in a romantic and sexual relationship with Mercy and that she has sex with other inmates.

Embodiment and identity.

One element that makes *OITNB* particularly progressive is the character Sophia Buset, who is a black transgender woman serving a sentence for credit card fraud. Sophia is played by transgender actress Laverne Cox. Not only is it progressive for a television show to feature a transgender character, but it is particularly groundbreaking that Sophia is played by an actress who herself is transgender. It is a rarity for a television show or movie to feature a transgender character, and often times these limited roles are played by cisgender actors and actresses, a phenomenon known as “transface” (Reynolds 2015). Transgender activists have spoken out about the inequality that transgender actors and actresses face. The casting of Jared Leto as a transgender woman in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), Hilary Swank as a transgender man in *Boys Don't Cry* and Elle Fanning as transgender man in *Three Generations* (2015) have garnered

significant attention from activists who felt that those roles should have been played by actors and actresses who are transgender. In casting Cox to play Sophia, *OITNB* has broken from the norm of Hollywood transface in offering viewers a narrative of the lived experience of a transgender person played by a woman who has lived it and understands it in a way that a cis-actress would not. *OITNB* has very progressively moved transgender characters and transgender actors out of the margins.

The character Sophia is both progressive and regressive by simultaneously challenging and upholding norms for sex and gender. Sophia challenges the idea of a biological connection between sex and gender, the assumption that people are born gendered, and she also embodies West and Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender" by showing that gender truly is a social process. In a flashback in the episode "Lesbian Request Denied" Sophia is shown before her sex reassignment surgery as a man named Marcus. Marcus' wife, Crystal, helps her pick out a feminine outfit and says "I'll teach you all of it. You'll be a pro" (Trim et al. 2013). Sophia learning how to perform femininity while still anatomically male shows that there is no innate linkage between gender and sex. Crystal's comment "I'll teach you" depicts gender as a process that is learned through socialization that even an anatomical male can learn and perform. "You'll be a pro" indicates that although Sophia was born male, through socialization and learning how to perform femininity she can take on a feminine gender identity that will allow others to read her sex category as woman.

Additionally, Sophia illustrates doing gender in how she convincingly performs femininity. Sophia is arguably the most feminine character on the show and puts more effort into her appearance than any other female character. She has long hair that is dyed blonde which she always styles to perfection and she has an extensive makeup regimen. Not only does Sophia

demonstrate performing gender but she also understands what it means to be female.

Interestingly enough, Sophia is the only inmate who has a comprehensive understanding of female genitalia. In the episode “A Whole Other Hole” Sophia teaches her fellow inmates the anatomy of the vagina. Sophia cites being a transwoman as why she is so knowledgeable, as she had to design her own vagina before her surgery (Trim et al. 2014). What is interesting about this episode is that by having a better understanding of a vagina than her peers who were born anatomically female – and thus, with vaginas – Sophia’s transgender identity is almost more female than those of ciswomen.

Sophia’s performance of femininity even while in prison relates to a case mentioned in the article “Doing Gender” of Agnes, a transgender woman who underwent sex reassignment surgery. The article cites that Agnes “attempted to be ‘120%’ female” by being feminine at all times (West et al. 1987:134). To pass as a woman, especially before her surgery, Agnes styled her hair and dressed femininely (West et al. 1987:133). Agnes’s experience is very similar to Sophia’s, as she too strives to be as feminine as possible in attempt for her sex category to be consistently read as woman, and therefore female.

OITNB also depicts the discrimination and challenges that a transgender person faces even after having sex reassignment surgery. Her fellow inmates sometimes question her status as a woman and imply that she is less female than they are. Inmate Anita DeMarco tells her cellmates “I wouldn’t let that he-she touch my hair with a 10-foot pole,” a statement that suggests that as a transgender woman Sophia is some sort of concoction of the sexes without a defined sex (Trim et al. 2013). By calling Sophia a “he-she,” Anita rejects Sophia’s sex as female despite the fact that she underwent reassignment surgery and has female genitalia, feminine facial features, breasts, and performs femininity to a tee. The naturalness of Sophia’s

genitals is again doubted and also mocked when CO George “Pornstache” Mendez refers to Sophia as having a “cyborg pussy,” suggesting that her vagina is not natural (Trim et al. 2013). When Taystee and Sophia run against each other for a position in the Women’s Advisory Council (WAC), Taystee tells her peers that they should vote for her instead of the “man” – meaning Sophia (Trim et al. 2013). Taystee’s comment implies that because she was born female – unlike Sophia – she will better represent the needs of her fellow female inmates. Sophia is also shown facing the challenge of maintaining her feminine and female identities. When the prison doctor will not prescribe Sophia her hormones, she panics and tells the doctor, “I’ve given up five years, \$80,000, and my freedom for this. I’m finally who I’m supposed to be...I can’t go back” (Trim et al. 2013). Not having estrogen poses the threat of Sophia’s body developing masculine features and losing her feminine ones, which would create a challenge for Sophia performing femininity “120%” which Agnes believes necessary for a transwoman to pass.

While Sophia is a very progressive character she is also regressive in upholding the connection between sex and gender. Sophia transitioned because as an anatomical male she identified with femininity more than masculinity. This is shown in a flashback before Sophia had permanently adopted a feminine gender identity and as a firefighter wearing a pink lace bra underneath her clothing (Trim et al. 2013). Later she starts wearing women’s clothing while she is still anatomically male. Sophia’s feelings that her true identity is a female woman reinforce stereotypical, traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. Because as a man she wanted to dress as a woman, this meant to her that she had to become female. This upholds the assumption that femininity is reserved for females and masculinity is reserved for males. Additionally, it is important to consider how Sophia’s appearance reinforces the beauty standard.

Her long hair, full lips, thin eyebrows and large breasts are all features that are considered beautiful in American culture. This begs the question, would Cox have been cast to play Sophia if she was not a traditionally pretty transwoman?

Identity

Thinking psychologically, the characters in my sample are very complex in that they do not fit into neat little boxes or categories. Instead, they are full of contradictions and are multidimensional. Inmate Galina “Red” Reznikov is powerful in Litchfield, but through flashbacks it is shown that prior to her incarceration she was insecure and even socially awkward. Red has a reputation as being one of the toughest inmates but she is also very maternal and is a surrogate mother to many inmates. Olivia handles her job with relative ease and remains calm and collected under pressure, however she shows vulnerability with her feelings for Fitz. Even rational Olivia who makes “cold calculations about difficult situations” in her career cannot stay away from her relationship with Fitz even though she knows it is not logical and she should move on (Verica, Zisk, and Liddi-Brown 2012). Meek Shoshana who for the most part is uncontroversial and follows along with her friends’ antics stands up for herself and tells her friends, “You treat me like I’m a fucking cabdriver. Seriously, you guys have entire conversations in front of me like I am invisible” (Dunham et al. 2014). Throughout the series Mindy says that her goal is to find the perfect man and get married, but she is willing to be away from Danny for several months to attend a fellowship at Stanford University. The characters in my sample prove that female characters do not always have to be one-dimensional or exist in relationship to a man. They are also very diverse and different from another, shattering the media stereotype of the token female character or that there is only one way to portray women on television.

On a sociological level, characters in my sample identify with women similar to themselves. This was most prevalent on the two shows in my sample with predominantly female casts: *Girls* and *OITNB*. Though each character on *Girls* is unique, they do have similarities that bring them together as members of the same group. They share a race, class background and are in the same life stage. Even though Shoshana is still in college, she is still coming of age, learning how to be an adult and grappling with her identity like her college graduate friends. On *OITNB*, group membership is defined by race. Inmates tend to spend most of their time with women of their same race. Even if they have completely different personalities and backgrounds, race is the common thread that connects inmates to their friends. For instance, WASPy Piper spends her time with hippie Yoga Jones, former drug addict and party girl Nicky Nichols, rebellious Alex, and ultra-feminine Lorna Morello. Each woman in the group is very different from each other, but their whiteness is their common denominator.

One of the most interesting and significant findings regarding identity was Piper's identity transformation. When Piper first enters Litchfield she sees herself as a victim. She does not believe that she is truly guilty of her charges and that she should not be punished for such a minimal role in the drug smuggling ring. Most significantly is that she blames Alex for everything – her money smuggling, her lesbian desires, and her incarceration. However, the more time Piper spends at Litchfield the more her identity changes. Instead of viewing her time dating Alex as a period of post-graduation self-discovery, she realizes that it was an important part of her life. She tells Alex, "I'm not some cool story at a yuppie fucking cocktail party... Those things we did, you and me, that wasn't adventure or a romp. That was my life" (Trim et al. 2013). Instead of seeing herself as a tragic victim of circumstance, Piper gradually begins to hold herself accountable for her crime. She tells her mother, "I am in [prison] because

I am no different from anybody else in here. I made bad choices. I committed a crime. And being in here is no one's fault but my own" (Trim et al. 2013).

By the second season Piper begins to strongly identify with the other inmates. As Piper assimilates to prison life the other inmates begin to view her and treat her like one of their own. As explained by The Looking-Glass Self, she acknowledges that her peers view her as similar to them and she internalizes it. When Piper's father tells her that he does not visit her because "I just can't see you like that... You're my little girl. That woman in there, that's not who you are" she challenges him and tells him, "That's exactly who I am" (Trim et al. 2014). Piper's identity transformation is significant because it speaks to the complexities of incarcerated women. The incarcerated are seen as society's deviants, but Piper shows that even someone who is the prototype of a "good" woman is not perfect and perhaps has a little deviant in her, too. In being incarcerated, Piper learns that her fellow inmates are not very different from the "good" people in society.

Relationships

Relationships with women.

This section analyzes the relationships of female characters, ranging from relationships with other women, romantic relationships, and then sexual relationships and gender violence. In 1986, cartoonist Alison Bechdel unintentionally coined a feminist framework used for analyzing portrayals of women on film called the Bechdel Test. This popular media analysis technique was inspired by a cartoon in Bechdel's comic book *Dykes to Watch Out For* "The Rule," in which a character tells her friend that she has "a rule" that she will watch a movie only "if it satisfies three basic requirements. One, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man" (Bechdel 1986). The Bechdel Test has become so

popular that there is a website (not affiliated with Bechdel herself) that lists movies that do and do not pass the test. I utilized the Bechdel Test as a framework for analyzing relationships between female characters. In my modified version, for a show to pass the “test” female characters had to have meaningful conversations about topics other than their romantic lives and that do not reinforce gender stereotypes.

I found that *The Mindy Project* has the least amount of conversations and interactions between female characters. Mindy is most commonly shown at work where her colleagues are predominantly male. The other doctors in the practice are men, and the only female characters are a nurse and the receptionists with whom Mindy does not interact with often. In the first season of *The Mindy Project*, Mindy is often shown spending time with her female friends Gwen, Alex and Maggie who she does not work with, however most of their conversations revolve around Mindy’s love life. Gwen, Alex and Maggie mysteriously disappear towards the end of the first season and are never shown or mentioned again in seasons two and three. Female employees at Shulman and Associates leave the show without any explanation. Shauna, a receptionist is gone after the twelfth episode of the first season. Betsy, who is also a receptionist, disappears after season two. In the third season of *The Mindy Project*, the only female characters employed at Shulman and Associates are Mindy, Beverly and Tamra who are a receptionist and a nurse. When Mindy interacts with the women who work at the practice, the conversation is either small talk or Mindy talking about the men she dates. Mindy’s most meaningful conversations about her aspirations and desires primarily take place with her male colleagues.

I found that *OITNB* and *Girls* have the most developed conversations between female characters. On *OITNB*, female characters do talk about their love and sex lives with each other and also talk about stereotypically feminine topics such as weddings and beauty. However, there

are also very intimate conversations in which women share their innermost hopes and fears, and discuss their experiences in prison. Alex confesses to Nicky that she has been depressed ever since her incarceration; when Taystee is nervous about being released from prison and not being able to find a job, fellow inmate Ms. Claudette offers words of encouragement and tells Taystee that she is intelligent and capable. As a young woman myself not too much younger than the women on the cast of *Girls*, I found the interactions and friendships between the four main characters to be very authentic, believable and relatable. They express their career goals to each other, discuss troubles in their romantic relationships, voice insecurities, point out each other's flaws, and also support each other through difficult situations. Marnie listens to Hannah talk about her dream of becoming a writer and encourages her to attend the Iowa Writer's Workshop after Hannah learns that she was accepted into the program. After relapsing on drugs after a brief stint in rehab, Jessa tells Shoshana that she is determined to get her life in order. Female friendships are complicated, and I found that *Girls* does an excellent job in portraying these friendships in a nuanced, non-stereotypical way.

Scandal, *The Mindy Project* and *Girls* each have "the other woman" plotlines in which a woman's husband or boyfriend has an affair with another woman. In each instance, the woman places more blame on the mistress/other woman character than on the man. On *Scandal*, Fitz's wife Mellie sees Olivia as more responsible for the affair than Fitz. In Mellie's eyes, Olivia is a "whore who has [Fitz] on a leash," implying that Fitz is incapable of resisting sex with Olivia, making Olivia accountable for the affair (Verica et al. 2012). Mellie is very much threatened by Olivia and feels that her marriage to Fitz would not have problems if Olivia was not around to tempt him, because Olivia has her "claws" in him (Verica et al. 2012). In the first season of *The Mindy Project*, Mindy learns that her boyfriend Josh has another girlfriend named Heather.

Mindy and Heather are both upset by Josh's infidelity, however they turn their anger towards each other instead of toward him. Heather calls Mindy "some chubby Indian girl" and Mindy calls Heather a "psychotic monster bitch" (Spiller et al. 2012). Their argument escalates and they begin to throw things at each other and get into a physical fight. On *Girls*, Marnie confesses to Shoshana that she has been having sex with Ray, Shoshana's ex-boyfriend. After Marnie breaks the news to Shoshana, Shoshana jumps on Marnie and screams "I hate you!" (Dunham et al. 2014). Instead of yelling at Ray, Shoshana tells him that she wants to get back together. Blaming the other woman instead of the man can be explained by emphasized femininity, as women are socialized into seeing each other as competitors for male attention. Also, the social construction of masculinity frames male sexuality as untamable, rendering a man irresponsible for his sexual transgressions. Women, on the other hand, are supposed to be modest with their sexuality and should "know better" than to have sex with a man who is in a relationship or somehow linked to another woman.

Olivia is never shown socializing with female friends, as she is constantly working and does not have an active social life. However, she does have a very interesting relationship with Abby, one of the associates at her firm. Abby is an investigator at Pope and Associates, and she has a special relationship with Olivia because she saved Abby from her abusive husband by breaking his kneecap and providing her with the best divorce lawyer in the state. Although Abby expresses her gratitude to Olivia for helping her escape her abusive marriage, there is also a power struggle between the two characters. Olivia often makes decisions at work about which clients the firm will represent without consulting her associates. Abby is the only character to openly question Olivia about the choices she makes and tells Olivia that she needs to involve the entire team in making decisions. Although Olivia is very stubborn, once Abby stands up to her

and tells Olivia, “You made the wrong call” about one of their cases, Olivia begins to allow her employees to have more of a voice at the office (Verica et al. 2012).

Romantic relationships.

I found that in both *The Mindy Project* and *Girls* that Mindy and Hannah are subjected to disrespectful treatment from their boyfriends, but then later forgive and view him as a hero after a romantic gesture. Before entering a serious relationship with Mindy, Danny called her fat, judged the men she dated, implied to her that her dedication to her career would prevent her from getting married and having children, and underestimated her career dedication and abilities. However, Mindy overlooks all of these faults by seeing him as her hero in the episode “Danny and Mindy” when he meets her at the Empire State Building – her favorite place in the city – and professes his love for her. Hannah has a similar experience with Adam. For the first two seasons of *Girls*, Adam ignored Hannah’s text messages, shamed her for insisting on wearing a condom during sex, subjected her to degrading sexual role plays, urinated on her in the shower, and broke into her apartment. In the season two finale episode “Together,” Hannah is shown suffering from debilitating obsessive compulsive disorder and she calls Adam. Adam runs to her apartment, breaks down the door, picks her up, and tells her, “I was always here” (Dunham et al. 2013). The next season begins with Hannah and Adam as a couple with Adam as her caretaker making sure she takes her medication. What is troubling about these knight in shining armor narratives is that both women had been hurt and treated poorly by these men and had decided that they did not want to date them. They allow one grand gesture to eclipse the man’s previous questionable actions.

The characters Mindy and Marnie from *The Mindy Project* and *Girls* both define themselves and measure their success by their relationship status. For both characters, finding a

boyfriend was one of their main goals in each of their respective shows. Mindy views being single as a personal failure, which she expresses by calling herself a “pathetic spinster with no [romantic] prospects” (Spiller et al. 2012). Even though Mindy has friends, a nice apartment and a successful career, she does not see those as valid measures of her success if she is not in a romantic relationship. Marnie is very similar. At the start of the first season of *Girls*, Marnie is in a relationship with her college boyfriend of four years, Charlie. Marnie is growing restless in the relationship and finds herself increasingly annoyed by Charlie’s presence. When he ends their relationship Marnie immediately tries to get him back. During times on the show when Marnie is single she is typically actively pursuing a man or complaining about being single. After experiencing a career setback and suffering from a breakup, Marnie begins a sexual relationship with Ray, which she describes as using “sex for validation” (Dunham et al. 2014). Both Mindy and Marnie’s incessant need to be in a relationship can be explained by The Looking-Glass Self theory. Women are expected to want to be in romantic relationships, causing Marnie and Mindy to question their identities if they are single. Also, according to traditional gender norms, a woman is supposed to aspire to marriage and motherhood.

On both *OITNB* and *Scandal* female characters are shown in romantic relationships with a male partner in a higher position of power. On *OITNB* Daya and Bennett’s flirtation turns into a serious romantic and sexual relationship by the sixth episode of the first season. As a CO, Bennett is hesitant about his relationship with Daya because he knows that it is inappropriate and more importantly illegal, however Daya initially does not seem to mind the power inequality in their relationship. She is the one to initiate their first kiss and also to turn their relationship sexual by performing oral sex on Bennett (Trim et al. 2013). It is not until the second season when Daya is pregnant with Bennett’s baby that she begins to question their relationship and

their differing statuses, and tells him, “I don’t know how we ever are gonna be normal” (Trim et al. 2014). By this, Daya means that she is unsure of whether she and Bennett will be like a normal couple because she is incarcerated and he is not, and because she is an inmate and he is a CO. In both ways, Daya is in the subordinate position. Race, class and gender play a role in the power dynamic as Daya is a Latina of a low socioeconomic-status and Bennett is a white man. Daya becomes even more aware of their power imbalance when Bennett unwarrantedly sends Maritza to solitary confinement when she threatens to tell the administration that Bennett impregnated Daya. This is a clear abuse of his power, and leads to a heated conversation between Bennett and Daya:

“**Daya:** [Maritza] wasn’t gonna say nothing... **Bennett:** That’s not a risk I can take. ... **Daya:** Fuck you. I just used obscenity. You gonna write me a [citation]?... **Bennett:** I’m not writing you a [citation]. **Daya:** But you could if you wanted to, right? Because you have a choice. You have the power. I’m an inmate. I have nothing” (Trim et al. 2014).

This is a very powerful scene, as Daya shows that she is aware of the inequality that exists in her relationship with Bennett. Instead of complying with her subordination, which is expected of her according to emphasized femininity, she tells Bennett that she is aware of their inequality. I found this to be progressive as she is expressing her agency by questioning a man who has more power than she does and resisting her compliance in maintaining her subservience.

The relationship between Olivia and Fitz has a clear power imbalance as Fitz is white, male and the President of the United States, giving him more privilege in society at large. Their relationship was unbalanced from the start, as they began their affair when Olivia was running his campaign when he was running for his first term. After his election, Fitz uses his presidential power to his advantage with his relationship with Olivia by having his secret service staff bring her to see him, even when she does not want to. This typically upsets Olivia, and in the episode “A Woman Scorned” she challenges his manipulative ways: “I am busy. I have a job...I don’t

have time to come running down to the White House at your beck and call... You do not summon me” (Verica et al. 2012).

However, the power dynamic between Fitz and Olivia is not so simple. The relationship between Fitz and Olivia is one of the most intense romantic relationships in my sample and it is clear that they share an unshakeable bond. In terms of power, they each claim that the other one has more control in the relationship. In a flashback to Fitz’s early days in his presidency, Fitz and Olivia fight over who is truly the subordinated partner:

“**Olivia:** I wait for you. I watch for you. My whole life is you... You own me. You control me. I belong to you. **Fitz:** *yells* You own *me!* *You* control me. I belong *to you*... I love you. I’m in love with you. You’re the love of my life. My every feeling is controlled by the look on your face. I can’t breathe without you. I can’t sleep without you. I wait for you. I watch for you. I exist for you.” (Verica et al. 2012)

This passage highlights the effect that their relationship has on their lives, and their feelings of not being able to resist their affair. Throughout seasons two and three season, Olivia finds it nearly impossible to resist phone calls from Fitz. When she is estranged from Fitz in middle of the second season she is sad and lonely. Without Olivia, Fitz is constantly in a surly mood and drinks scotch at almost every hour of the day. While Olivia is clearly very invested in her relationship with Fitz, I found that emotionally, Olivia has more control in the relationship. In the three seasons of *Scandal* that I viewed, Fitz was willing to abandon his presidency three times to be with Olivia. In the episode “Vermont is for Lovers, Too” Olivia learns that Fitz had a house built for them in Vermont where he wanted them to live together. Also, Fitz is the one who fell in love first and initiated the emotional aspect of their affair. So, despite the fact that Fitz has a career of a much higher status than Olivia and is in a higher position in society, emotionally within the relationship she has more power.

Aside from her emotional control over Fitz, she does have political control over him as well. Flashbacks in the episode “The Trail” reveal that when Fitz was running for his first term he was down in the polls with low public approval. Once Olivia took over his campaign, his numbers rose in the polls and he became a legitimate candidate. Fitz’s political success is frequently attributed to Olivia’s work on his campaign. A client tells Olivia, “He was a diamond in the rough before you started working for him...You made him” (Verica et al. 2012). Cyrus Beene, the White House Chief of Staff, who worked closely alongside Olivia during Fitz’s campaign echoes those sentiments in telling Olivia, “We made a president together” (Verica et al. 2012). It was because of Olivia’s work that Fitz became liked by the American public. During his first term when Olivia works as a Communications Director at the White House she is still heavily involved in his politics and plays a significant role in writing his first State of the Union speech. Fitz is well aware that Olivia is the foundation of his political career, and when he runs for a second term he tells her, “I won’t win without you” when she considers quitting his campaign (Verica et al. 2013). Though Olivia works for Fitz, she does have the power to leave which can seriously jeopardize his career, further complicating the matrix of domination within their relationship. In this sense, Fitz is only superordinate to Olivia *because* of Olivia, making her the partner with more control.

Aside from being a complicated power balance, Fitz and Olivia’s relationship is interesting in that it complicates the common affair narrative that is popular on TV and film. In most affair plotlines, the mistress character is portrayed as sexual and flirtatious which is ultimately what allures the man to engage in an affair with her. Affairs often get framed as the woman as the predator and the married man her prey. Olivia complicates the mistress trope as she is not overtly sexual and in no way does she seduce Fitz. He falls in love with Olivia before

they have any type of sexual encounter; her intelligence and character seem to be what causes him to take a romantic interest in her as opposed to her beauty and sexuality, which is common in affair plotlines. While mistresses are commonly depicted as home-wreckers, Olivia does not want to pursue a relationship with Fitz because of his marriage and is very hesitant about having a relationship with a married man. Their affair is more than a sexual tryst and Olivia is more than a plaything to Fitz, which he makes clear by frequently telling her, “Don’t you ever call yourself a mistress. We both know better” (Verica et al. 2012). Despite the fact that Olivia defies the mistress stereotype in the affair narrative, Mellie does fit the trope for the married wife. Mellie is older than Olivia, and she is portrayed as cold, shrew, unsexual and manipulative. While Olivia’s role in the affair can be considered as being relatively progressive because it resists the mistress trope, the affair’s portrayal is also regressive because of Mellie’s character who almost justifies the infidelity due to her bitterness.

Piper and Alex’s relationship is one of the most significant romantic relationships on *OITNB* because it is by far the most developed same-sex relationship on the show. The other lesbian relationships and sexual encounters are less prominent plotlines and are not portrayed as seriously as Piper and Alex’s. Their relationship is complicated, passionate and loving, which is noteworthy since same-sex relationships are often trivialized on television. Many shows that feature same-sex couples portray those relationships as less serious and less intimate than those of their heterosexual counterparts. I found that Piper and Alex’s relationship was valued as much as heterosexual relationships on *OITNB* along with the other heterosexual couples on the shows in my sample. *OITNB* depicts the ups and downs, sex, intimacy and romance in Piper and Alex’s relationship that would be found in any couple – heterosexual or homosexual. As a viewer, I got a sense that as a partner, Alex knows and understands Piper better than Larry does.

While Larry sees Piper on a pedestal, Alex knows that Piper is not innocent and perfect. Alex recognizes Piper's flaws and is not afraid to point them out to her. There is also the sense that Piper and Larry's relationship is safe and predictable while Piper's relationship with Alex is challenging and exciting.

While it is progressive for *OITNB* to depict Piper and Alex's relationship with the same respect and legitimacy that same-sex couples receive in television portrayals, it is worth noting that these two characters are replicas of the beauty ideal. Piper meets the criteria for the stereotype of the "lipstick lesbian" as she is white, classically attractive, thin and feminine. Alex's character, who has tattoos and always dons black eyeliner, is not as feminine as Piper but still upholds the societal standard of beauty by being attractive, white and thin. While there are many other instances of lesbian relationships and sex on the show, Piper and Alex's relationship and sexual intimacy are obviously privileged over others as their relationship receives more screen time and comprises a more significant plotline. This poses the question, would Alex and Piper's relationship receive as much screen time and have as many graphic sex scenes if they were less attractive and fit the "butch/femme" lesbian relationship trope? Pornography featuring sex between two stereotypically attractive women, known as "girl-on-girl," has become a trend in the pornography industry. The girl-on-girl phenomenon has transcended into other forms of media consumed by a heterosexual male audience by featuring sexually-appealing women touch each other flirtatiously and kiss. The women in girl-on-girl pornography, advertisements, television shows, etc. are not participating in this same-sex sexually charged behavior out of lesbian desire but rather to arouse men. One wonders if the creators of *OITNB* were attempting to appeal to an audience of heterosexual men when they casted Laura Preppon and Taylor Schilling to play Alex and Piper.

One thing that I found particularly significant was the patriarchy found in lesbian relationships in *OITNB*. This is shown through women's possessiveness and control over their same-sex partners that mirrors patriarchal ideologies that women are the properties of their husbands. For example, Tricia shows her possessiveness when she plants drugs in Mercy's cell to prevent her from being released (Trim et al. 2013). Tricia does because she fears that once Mercy is released she will abandon her. This shows that Tricia prioritizes her control of Mercy over her freedom and the great lengths to which she will go to in order to guarantee that Mercy does not leave her for another woman. Patriarchy is also shown through coercion. During a flashback, Piper is shown dressed in a disguise to go undercover and smuggle a suitcase of drug money while in Europe with Alex. Piper nervously tells Alex, "Alex, I don't know if I can [do this]" (Trim et al. 2013). Alex kisses and caresses Piper, which convinces her to reluctantly go through with the undercover operation. The coercion may be subtle, but it is important to consider that before their trip Alex had told Piper that she would not have to be involved in any of the illegal drug dealing business. Alex uses her sexuality to convince Piper to be a part of her operation even though Piper does not want to. Patriarchal lesbian relationships can be interpreted as both progressive and regressive. It is progressive to create awareness of women's subordination in romantic relationships because it is a topic that is consistently glossed over in the media, but it is regressive to portray lesbian relationships as merely a replication of patriarchal heterosexual relationships.

Sexuality.

Common throughout all shows are progressive portrayals of sexuality in which emphasized femininity was challenged. Female characters are shown having sexual agency by engaging in, initiating, and enjoying sex. This sexually agency is progressive because women's

sexuality and sexual desires have been taboo subjects in the media and in society at large due to gender norms and stereotypes for women that frame female sexuality as unladylike and immoral behavior. These norms also assume a degree of passivity, because as explained by emphasized femininity, women are expected to accommodate to men's sexual needs and satisfy their partner's desires. Each program in the sample either shows or alludes to female characters being recipients of oral sex. This is progressive because oral sex is still a taboo subject in the media, and on the rare occasions when it is shown it typically depicts a woman performing fellatio on a man. Also significant is that *OITNB* depicts lesbian sex with the same respect as sex between heterosexual couples. This is progressive because not only is same-sex sexuality is marginalized in the media but it is often shown as less intimate and/or graphic as sex between heterosexual couples. By showing women expressing sexual agency and desire, having and initiating sex, engaging in same-sex sex, and receiving oral sex, each program in my sample has shown that women's sexuality exists and matters.

Significantly, *Girls* and *OITNB* both feature abortion plotlines, which are both progressive and regressive. In the *Girls* episode "Vagina Panic," Jessa has an unwanted pregnancy which she wants to terminate. It is progressive for *Girls* to show a character wanting to have an abortion, especially on the second episode of the series, considering that there is a great social stigma surrounding abortion. By having an abortion episode at the start of the show's first season before it had an established and consistent following, HBO and the creators of *Girls* must assume that to some extent their target audience will be mostly supportive of abortions. Jessa's friends are shown as being in support of her choice to end her pregnancy. Shoshana, Marnie and Hannah make plans to accompany Jessa to her abortion appointment,

which is progressive in that it demonstrates their support and acceptance. Shoshana even tells Jessa, “I could not be more proud of you for getting this abortion” (Dunham et al. 2012).

However, the attitudes of Marnie and Hannah are less supportive than they originally appear. Hannah, in telling Adam about Jessa’s abortion, says, “I have very little sympathy for people who do not use condoms, because that is how you get pregnant and that is how you get diseases” (Dunham et al. 2012). Hannah’s lack of sympathy reinforces the stigma of abortions with the idea that the unplanned pregnancy is the woman’s fault. Marnie reinforces the stereotype that abortions cause women emotional distress by referring to abortions as “about the most traumatic thing that can ever happen to a woman,” instead of a potentially liberating procedure (Dunham et al. 2012). Marnie’s comment relates to Press’ 2009 article when she analyzed the portrayal of abortions on *Sex and the City* in which Press found that the episode depicted abortions as a sad, shameful experience. Interestingly enough, both *Sex and the City* and *Girls* are produced by HBO. Jessa ultimately does not have an abortion as planned because at the time of the appointment she realizes that she is bleeding – possibly a sign of menstruation or a miscarriage. This surprise ending undermines the progressivity of an abortion plotline because it is another example of HBO assuming that the audience will react negatively to seeing a character actually go through with an abortion.

The abortions in these two shows perpetuate stereotypes about the type of women who terminate their pregnancies, suggesting that only irresponsible women have abortions. Jessa is portrayed as the free-spirited bohemian character on the show who is as unreliable as she is glamorous. She has had many boyfriends, traveled the world, dropped out of college, does not have a career, and is a former heroin addict. Because of Jessa’s unpredictable lifestyle, her unplanned pregnancy is seen as a product of her irresponsibility. It is not a coincidence that

Jessa is the character with an unplanned, unwanted pregnancy instead of Marnie, who at the start of the first season is in a long-term, monogamous relationship, has a reputation for being uptight, and is employed. This upholds the stereotype that women like Marnie, who are organized and responsible, do not find themselves with unplanned pregnancies. On *OITNB*, it is revealed in a flashback that inmate Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Dogget had an abortion before her prison sentence. She had the abortion to avoid arrest because of her drug use, which would be discovered if she were to be drug-tested after giving birth. It is also revealed that it is her fifth abortion. As a clearly low-income, crystal meth addict, Pennsatucky’s abortion not only reinforces stereotypes of drug-addicted, poor women as the primary demographic of women who have abortions, but it also upholds the stereotype of abortions as irresponsible. She chooses to continue abusing crystal meth instead of having a baby, and she is so reckless with her reproductive health that she has had five abortions. These abortions are not shown as women expressing agency over their reproductive health but rather the consequences of making poor life choices.

Female characters in my sample were shown as having casual sex outside of relationships; however it was sometimes portrayed more as problematic and less as liberating. Nonconformist Jessa who has non-monogamous sex is revealed to have multiple strains of HPV. Again, this further highlights Jessa’s sexual and reproductive irresponsibility. When Mindy attempts to have casual sex the situation typically ends poorly. In the episode “Pretty Man” Mindy learns that the man she met at a bar and had sex with is a male prostitute who was under the impression that Mindy was soliciting his services, causing Mindy to feel shame and disgust. After being rejected by a man that she had a one night stand with, Mindy believes that the rejection is her fault: “I’m not good enough for this guy” (Spiller et al. 2012). These negative experiences with casual sex carry the message that one night stands cause emotional upset for

women. On *Girls*, Shoshana's casual sex is portrayed as unsatisfying. At the start of season three, Shoshana proclaims that her last year of college will be "the beginning of a somewhat sexually adventurous time for me. I'm alternating nights of freedom with nights of academic focus," a plan that she appears to be proud of (Dunham et al. 2014). By the end of the year, Shoshana regrets her year of sexual adventures by calling it "fucking stupid" (Dunham et al. 2014). The non-monogamous, casual sex of Jessa, Mindy and Shoshana reinforce norms surrounding women's sexuality – specifically that women should not have sex outside of a relationship. Each narrative shows casual sex as being either physically or emotionally unhealthy.

Sexuality and identity.

OITNB challenges the identity politics associated with sexuality by blurring the hetero/homo binary. Instead of a rigid binary of gay or straight, women's sexuality is portrayed as fluid through the characters of Morello and Piper. Morello identifies as heterosexual and believes that she is engaged to a man named Christopher – although in the second season the plot reveals that he is a man who went on one date with her, not her fiancé. Although she is self-identified as straight she is in a sexual relationship with Nicky, who is lesbian, at the start of the series' first season. Morello is shown enjoying sex with Nicky, suggesting that a woman can be straight but also satisfied by same-sex sex. Piper had identified as straight her whole life up until meeting Alex. Although she originally minimizes her relationship with Alex by calling it "my lost-soul, post-college adventure phase" she does come to realize the legitimacy of her lesbian relationship throughout the series. She disputes the hetero/homo binary by saying, "[Y]ou don't just turn gay. You fall somewhere on a spectrum. Like, on a Kinsey scale" (Trim et al. 2013).

American culture incessantly labels sexualities and creates identities based on sexual behaviors, making it progressive for *OITNB* to suggest that sexually cannot be easily categorized.

Girls and *The Mindy Project* do not challenge the sexual binary, but instead uphold it. On both shows, sexual acts that fall outside of the binary are seen as experimentation as opposed to a legitimate sexuality. After being encouraged by Jessa to be less uptight, Marnie kisses Jessa. Later, Marnie says, “I’m not gay...I was just trying to be free,” implying that experimenting with lesbian sexuality is a way for straight women to be rebellious (Dunham et al. 2012). Because Marnie is known as the stiff, level-headed character on the show, her comment carries the connotation that lesbian women are somehow less inhibited and more free-spirited than straight women. Lesbianism as a straight woman’s wild adventure is shown on *The Mindy Project* when Shauna, the receptionist at Mindy’s practice, says, “Look I’m very flattered by your lesbian overture but I’m not in an adventurous mood” to a woman she believes to be hitting on her in a nightclub (Spiller et al. 2012). Suggesting that sexual encounters between two women is “adventurous” is only maintaining the rigidity of the hetero/homo binary by affirming that when women transcend the binary it is an act of rebellion and adventure as opposed to a true sexual desire.

Aside from the stereotype about women’s casual sex being upheld, I also found that *Girls* and *The Mindy Project* perpetuate the assumption that women use sex for intimacy. Season one of *Girls* begins with Shoshana as a virgin eager to have sex for the first time. When she tries to initiate sex with an old friend, he tells her that he will not have sex with her because she is a virgin: “[I]t’s just really not my thing...no offense, okay. I’ll totally have sex with you once you’ve like, already had sex...[V]irgins get attached or they bleed” (Dunham et al. 2012). His comment not only implies that women get emotionally attached to their sex partners, but it also

suggests that women get particularly invested in the man that they have sex with for the first time. This feeds into norms surrounding virginity – that a woman’s “first time” is a rite of passage and that her first sexual experience is meant to be shared with someone whom she cares about. Mindy reinforces that stereotype when she begins a casual sexual relationship with Brendan Deslaurier, a midwife who works in the same building as she does. Both Mindy and Brendan enter the relationship knowing that it is purely sexual and not romantic. In fact, Mindy is the one who initiates their fling. However, when Mindy sees Brendan on a date with another woman the night after they had sex, she feels hurt and betrayed:

“**Mindy:** Brendan, how can you be intimate with so many different people? **Brendan:** You’re confusing intimacy with sex. **Mindy:** What is more intimate than having sex with somebody? ... **Brendan:** I am sorry if I’ve done anything to make you think that I am your boyfriend, but I am not” (Spiller et al. 2012).

Despite the fact that Mindy had sought Brendan to be a casual sex partner, she somehow conflates sex with emotional intimacy. Overall, these two narratives imply that for women, sex is more of an emotional experience than a sexual one.

Gender violence.

Rape was trivialized in all four shows. The ways in which rape was belittled varied. On *Girls* and *The Mindy Project* the word “rape” was used casually, such as Hannah telling Adam that he committed “space rape” by breaking into her apartment (Dunham et al. 2013). *The Mindy Project* referred to rape casually and used it as a joke for the viewer, as shown in the episode “Be Cool” when Mindy’s colleague Jeremy Reed says that the last time he scheduled Mindy to work on a Friday night “she wrote that Jezebel article about how I raped her weekend” (Spiller et al. 2013). Rape is also trivialized with narratives of women faking rape. This happens twice on *Scandal*. The first fake-rape plotline occurs in season one when Pope and Associates defends Travis, the son of one of Olivia’s clients, who is facing rape charges. As the episode progresses

it is revealed that Helen, the woman who claimed to have been raped, was not actually raped. She made up the charges to receive a multi-million dollar settlement and also because her best friend had been raped by Travis and committed suicide due to depression caused by her assault. A rape is again faked in season two when a governor shoots a man he sees having sex with his wife when she calls out that she is being raped. The governor's wife was not actually being raped but was actually having sex with her lover, and she and her husband had come up with the rape rouse to revive his political career. Narratives with faked rapes are problematic in a culture where allegations of rape are so often dismissed as lies. These two fake rapes feed into the phenomenon of victim blaming that women experience when they report their sexual assaults. There is a misconception that most rape charges are fabricated, and creating episodes where women fake their sexual assault perpetuates this myth while undermining the emotional trauma that rape victims experience.

Daya fakes a rape on *OITNB*, raising questions about statutory rape. After Daya learns that she is pregnant she and Bennett panic, because if the administration learns that he had sex with an inmate he could be arrested as a sex offender. Aleida joins forces with inmates Red and Gloria Mendoza to concoct a plan to protect both Daya and Bennett, and tell Daya to have sex with Pornstache and then tell the administration that he raped and impregnated her. They see this as the only solution for Daya to keep the baby without Bennett being arrested. Daya reluctantly complies and has sex with Pornstache. Although Pornstache did not force himself on Daya, it is still considered sexual assault because it constitutes as statutory rape since he is a CO and she is an inmate. Technically, Daya's sex with Bennett is statutory rape as well, posing the question, is *OITNB* romanticizing rape? In thinking about this, I did not consider the sex between Daya and Bennett as statutory rape. Daya and Bennett have arguably one of the better romantic

relationships on *OITNB*. It is clear that Bennett loves Daya and that he did not use his superior status over her to pressure or coerce her into sex. As previously mentioned, Daya very much initiated the sexual aspect of their relationship. While I acknowledge that statutory rape is very real and that women are sexually coerced by men in higher positions of power, I believe that Daya's consent to sex with Bennett was unfettered by Bennett's higher status. The relationship between Daya and Bennett is open for interpretation, which I think the creators of *OITNB* did intentionally.

The aftermath of Daya's fake rape is both progressive and regressive. Joe Caputo, the assistant to the warden, has a progressive response as he takes Daya's rape allegations very seriously. Natalie Figueroa, Caputo's supervisor, refuses to acknowledge the incident as rape: "We are not talking about a rape here...Did she scream? Was she crying? These girls [throw] themselves at COs thinking they can get out of here and snag a government pension" (Trim et al. 2013). Natalie's reaction to the rape report is horrifying for three reasons. For one, she immediately doubts its legitimacy and refuses to recognize the act as statutory rape. Secondly, she implies that rape is only proven if the victim cries or yells during the attack. Lastly, Natalie practices victim blaming in saying that inmates seduce guards for money, as though there are "benefits" for being raped. Later when Natalie meets with Daya to discuss her pregnancy, she assumes that the rape was consensual sex. After pressuring Daya into admitting that she "encouraged" the sex, Natalie tells Daya, "I thought as much...[D]o me a favor sweetheart, from now on, keep your legs closed. Congratulations. You've officially destroyed a man's life" (Trim et al. 2013). In this conversation, Natalie slut-shames and victim-blames Daya, and also casts Pornstache as the victim because of the legal charges he is facing. Though disturbing and upsetting, Natalie's attitude towards Daya's rape allegations is indicative of how the real life

legal system treats rape victims. This can be explained by emphasized femininity, as women are socialized into maintaining men's power, which in this case means removing men's responsibility in sexual assault.

While *Scandal* does feature two faked rapes, there is one rape that is very real. Flashbacks during the episode "Everything's Coming Up Mellie" recount Mellie's rape committed by Fitz's father, Big Jerry. The assault leaves Mellie unsettled, and when she learns that she is pregnant, she fears that the baby was not conceived with Fitz and is instead a product of her rape. The unknown paternity of her unborn child causes her to attempt suicide. While I commend this plotline for being the only episode in my entire sample to portray a rape victim's suffering, I also found it questionable. As mentioned earlier, Mellie's character is bitter to the point where she seems unlovable. She can be ruthless and manipulative to get what she wants, such as when she lies about having a miscarriage during a press conference during Fitz's first campaign to garner support from women voters and when she induces her labor four weeks before her due date when Fitz tells her he wants a divorce. As a character, Mellie was often hard for me to sympathize with, which I do not think this is an uncommon experience for a *Scandal* viewer. More often than not she is painted as the villain, which makes me question the intentions of her rape backstory. Was Mellie's rape used to try to humanize her and perhaps justify or forgive some of her harsh behavior? If that is the case, it is regressive to take advantage of sexual assault to use it as some type of band aid for her character's flaws.

The most disturbing instance of rape trivialization is when Alex threatens to sexually assault Pennsatucky to stop her from complaining about Piper being elected to the WAC. When Pennsatucky challenges Alex by asking how she will get her to stop, Alex tells her,

"I will fuck you. Literally. I will sneak into your bunk in the middle of the night and I'll lick your pussy. And I will do it so good and so soft that you're going to be on the verge of

coming when you wake up, and then I'll stop. And you'll be half asleep and you'll beg for it.
chuckles Oh, you will beg for it" (Trim et al. 2013).

Alex's threat is both patriarchal and misogynistic. Her motivation behind this threat is to defend Piper. Although Piper and Alex are not in a relationship when this confrontation occurs, it is clear that Alex has feelings for Piper and is protective of her. Threatening rape is a way for Alex to demonstrate her dominance over Piper to Pennsatucky. Telling Pennsatucky that she will enjoy the sexual assault is extremely misogynistic and also minimizes the severity of rape by suggesting that forced sex is pleasurable. Though Alex threatens to perform oral sex on Pennsatucky against her will, she believes that Pennsatucky will enjoy it to the point of encouraging it.

Girls and *The Mindy Project* both feature sexual narratives in which the woman does not consent to anal sex to their male partners. Both of these narratives are troubling because they frame this unconsented sex as a normal part of a romantic and sexual relationship and the women do not acknowledge that they have been violated. Before Adam and Hannah officially become a romantic couple and are casual sex partners, Adam anally penetrates Hannah without asking for her consent. After telling Adam that she is uncomfortable they continue having vaginal sex, and she tells him, "I'm sorry about the wrong hole thing. I just...don't want to do it now, and if we did, I'd just wanted to talk about it" (Dunham et al. 2012). While it is progressive for Hannah to show some agency in telling Adam that she does not want to have anal sex without discussing it first, it is regressive for Hannah to apologize for the unconsented penetration. Apologizing implies that it is her fault, when really Adam is the one at fault. On *The Mindy Project* episode "It Slipped," Danny has anal sex with Mindy without asking for her consent. When Mindy confronts Danny, he makes up false excuses and tells her that it was an accident and that he could not see with the lights off. When Danny finally confesses to Mindy that he penetrated her

anally on purpose, he tells Mindy, “you’re always bragging about how you’re so crazy in the sack. I just assumed you’d done it before, with your *long list of companions*” (Spiller et al. 2014). Danny’s comment slut-shames Mindy and implies that because she was sexually active before they dated that she is expected to perform in a certain way sexually, and also that her sexual history means consent is not necessary.

Instead of challenging Danny’s misogynistic behavior, Mindy begins to feel self-conscious about her sexual prowess. She tells Peter, “I’m worried I’m boring in bed” (Spiller et al. 2014). Peter teaches Mindy new sexual positions that she can try with Danny, but Mindy does not think that she will feel comfortable performing them. She decides that she will let Danny have anal sex with her because “Danny is an amazing boyfriend and I don’t want to lose him” (Spiller et al. 2014). Mindy’s comment is a perfect example of emphasized femininity. She is willing to engage in a sexual act that she is not comfortable with to satisfy her boyfriend, because she fears that if she does not comply with his sexual desires that he will break up with her. Even though Danny violated her and made her uncomfortable, Mindy sees herself at fault instead of Danny. Later Mindy and Danny have a conversation about his actions and consent. Instead of realizing that he technically raped Mindy, he says,

“I just tried something, alright? That’s it. Because America was built on trying things...When the pioneers went out west on the wagon train, they didn’t know what they were gonna find...but they just tried it out...In America, you just go for it. You just go for it, and yeah, sometimes you pay the price, but other times...jackpot... [S]ometimes a guy just has to try something” (Spiller et al. 2014).

Nowhere in Danny’s explanation of why he had anal sex without consent does he acknowledge that he violated Mindy. He implies that her body, like the American west, is an unclaimed territory that he is entitled to explore. Sex without consent is likened to being an American right, which is an incredibly dangerous statement in a country with a strong rape culture. Danny

suggests that trying different sexual acts without asking for consent can yield a positive sexual experience, which undermines the gravity of rape. Adam and Danny's feelings of entitlement over the bodies of their female sex partners feed into patriarchy and rape culture. Hannah and Mindy's apologetic responses reinforce emphasized femininity and legitimate victim blaming.

OITNB exposes the sexual harassment that female inmates are subjected to at the hands of the prison administration. Pornstache sexually harasses the inmates on a nearly daily basis by peering into their cells when they are getting dressed and saying sexually suggestive comments. He also sexually harasses women by taking advantage of the inmates' desperation for things outside of prison. Inmate Leanne Taylor is a drug addict, and Pornstache takes advantage of her addiction by providing her with drugs in exchange for oral sex. When Sophia does not have access to her hormones he offers to smuggle her estrogen if she provides him with sexual favors, however Sophia declines the offer. Pornstache also abuses his power over the inmates to violate them sexually. When a screw driver is missing from the electrical unit, all of the inmates who work there are frisked. Pornstache takes advantage of the situation by using it as an opportunity to touch the inmates in a sexual way by fondling Piper's breasts and groping Nicky. Although these scenes where Pornstache sexually violates the inmates are disturbing and upsetting to watch, they do serve a purpose in shedding light on the maltreatment that incarcerated women experience. Sexual violence against women is a topic that the media typically shies away from, making it progressive for *OITNB* to create an awareness of these issues by portraying them on the show.

Women proved that sexual misogyny is not just a man's crime on *OITNB*. There were many instances of female inmates sexually harassing and objectifying other women. Within the first two minutes of the pilot episode, Piper is sexually harassed by Taystee in the shower.

Taystee pulls on Piper's towel to expose her breasts, and tells Piper, "Damn, you got some nice titties... You got them TV titties," and then she tries to touch her breasts (Trim et al. 2014). In doing this, Taystee not only invades Piper's privacy but she also judges her by her breasts. Attempting to touch Piper's breasts is not only an act of sexual harassment but also a display of patriarchal entitlement over Piper's body. Big Boo and Nicky also partake in misogynistic behavior by being territorial over women and talking about them in degrading ways. This is shown in a conversation they have when Big Boo confronts Nicky about having sex with an inmate she had been interested in. Big Boo is upset because the woman will not have sex with her after having had sex with Nicky:

“Big Boo: [S]he feels used and doesn't wanna sleep around because you got there first. **Nicky:** Ah. Used, eh? She wasn't exactly new when I rode in her, eh? A little dented actually... The upholstery was worn. **Big Boo:** You knew I was after that... Lay off my marks” (Trim et al. 2014).

Big Boo sees herself as entitled to the inmate she was sexually interested in and talks about her like she is her property by referring to her as “my mark.” By telling Nicky to stay away from the women she wants to have sex with Big Boo assumes that these women have no sexual agency. Instead, women are talked about as though they are passive and selected for sex. Nicky's language degrades the woman she had sex with by slut-shaming her by implying that she is promiscuous by saying “she wasn't exactly new.” Additionally, Nicky objectifies her by comparing her to a car, further implying a lack of agency and Nicky's ownership of her sex partner.

Misogyny again is shown when Nicky and Big Boo initiate a sex competition which they call a “Bang-Off.” Chang, a fellow inmate, officiates the rules for the competition in which Nicky and Big Boo earn points for their sexual encounters. In the competition, women are ranked on a ten-point scale, with women who are considered to be “easy” –as in promiscuous –

worth fewer points than a woman who is not promiscuous and harder to seduce. Before the competition even begins, misogyny is shown by ranking women based on their sexuality and implying that sexually active women are worth less than chaste women. As the competition takes off, they judge each other's sex partners. Nicky scoffs at Big Boo for pursuing easy women, and refers to these women as "nickel slots in Low Self Esteem City" (Trim et al. 2014). Referring to the women that Big Boo has sex with as being in "Low Self Esteem City" presumes that only women little self-respect are easy to seduce. Although they are women, these characters prove that the misogyny found in patriarchy is not limited to relationships between men and women.

Social Contexts

Careers.

The following section is an analysis of the social contexts that shape the lives of women in my sample, beginning with careers and social class, and finishing with race. The female characters in my sample represent a diverse assortment of careers, ranging from white collar professions to unpaid interns. *Scandal's* female leads are all white collar professionals. Olivia owns Pope and Associates, and her two female employees, Abby and Quinn, are an investigator and a lawyer. Mellie is the First Lady, but before Fitz's political career she was partner at a law firm. At the beginning of the first season of *Girls*, Hannah is working as an unpaid intern at a publishing company. She later finds employment at a coffee shop and then at GQ Magazine as an advertorial writer. Hannah also works as a freelance writer and has her big break when she is offered an e-book deal, however when her publisher dies the publishing company drops her project. Marnie works at an art gallery, but gets laid off at the beginning of *Girls'* second season. She then works as a hostess and then decides to pursue a career as a singer. Jessa never

has an actual career. Throughout the three seasons she works as a nanny and then at a children's clothing store. Shoshana, who is a student during the three seasons, does not have a paying job.

Mindy, as an obstetrician and gynecologist, is the regular female cast member on *The Mindy Project* with the highest career status. The other female characters on the show are nurses and receptionists. *OITNB* had the widest array of career types. Piper, Red and Gloria are small business owners – Piper is the co-owner of a soap company, Red co-owned a restaurant with her husband, and Gloria owned a small bodega. Alex and inmates Yvonne "Vee" Parker and Taystee were drug dealers before their incarcerations, although Vee begins a secret drug dealing business within Litchfield. Prior to drug dealing, Taystee worked at a fast food restaurant but began dealing for Vee to make more money. Inmate Cindy "Black Cindy" Hayes worked for TSA at an airport, and inmate Jane "Sister" Ingalls was a nun. *OITNB* also focuses a significant amount of attention to Natalie, the assistant to the warden at Litchfield.

Within my sample there is also a significant diversity of career statuses. As the owner of a reputable crisis management firm, Olivia is the character in my sample with the career of highest status. Mindy also has significant status within her career, as she is a senior partner at Shulman and Associates. *Girls* portrays the struggles that young people face after graduation in trying to forge their career paths. In the first episode of *Girls*, Hannah had been working as an unpaid intern for two years hoping that it would eventually turn into a paying job. When she can no longer afford to work without a salary, she is forced to work at a coffee shop and then at GQ in positions that she is not passionate about. Marnie had dreamt of being an art gallery curator, but when she is laid off at her gallery job and then told that she does not belong in the art world she begins to worry about what her future holds. I found it to be progressive for *Girls* to depict

this post-graduate life struggle that is usually not depicted on television along with showing women like Mindy and Olivia who occupy statuses that are typically held by men.

While the literature I read found that female characters are typically not portrayed as dedicated to their careers, I found that the women within my sample show a strong commitment to their jobs. Even though they are incarcerated, Red and Piper want to remain invested in their businesses. Piper asks her business partner to keep her updated on how their company is running and even suggests that they organize a conference call so that Piper can speak with a representative from Barney's who was interested in selling their line at the store. When Piper is granted furlough and leaves the prison for forty-eight hours, Red asks Piper to visit her restaurant to let her know if it is getting business. In Litchfield, Red manages the kitchen and is responsible for cooking for and feeding the inmates. It is a job she takes very seriously, and when she is let go from the position she is devastated. Mindy also shows that she is dedicated to her career. When Mindy is offered a position at an upscale gynecology practice she turns down the offer when she learns that the practice does not accept insurance and she knows that her patients cannot afford to pay out of pocket. To further enhance her skills, Mindy applies for a fellowship at Stanford University that her supervisor at the hospital recommended her for. She is accepted to the program, and her professor Rob Gurgler asks her to open up a fertility clinic with him. After a disagreement with Rob, Mindy decides to open up a fertility clinic on her own – a job she takes on while pregnant, nonetheless.

In my sample, the character who proves the strongest dedication to her career is Olivia. She works all day and often into the night, and makes her career her number one priority. Olivia is willing to do whatever it takes to help her clients and refuses to give up when she encounters challenges; she tells her associates "We're never done...Because whatever happens, there's

always another move. Whatever happens, we do not give up” (Verica et al. 2012). Because of her fight to the finish work ethic, Olivia calls herself and her associate gladiators in suits, because “[g]ladiators don’t run [from challenges], they fight” (Verica et al. 2013). Olivia’s dedication to her job and her success has made her very well-known in her field and has attracted high profile clients such as a dictator, CEOs of large corporations, politicians and of course, the President of the United States. Also noteworthy is that Olivia knows that she is successful and that her talent is second to none, as she often makes comments such as, “I am very good at what I do. I am better at it than anybody else. That’s not arrogance, that’s fact” (Verica et al. 2012).

Although Mindy shows agency and commitment in her career by opening her own fertility clinic and remaining loyal to her patients, there have also been instances where her dedication has wavered. Because the hospital where the Shulman and Associates doctors perform surgeries and deliveries is a teaching hospital, the doctors are required to teach medical school residents. Although she is required to oversee the residents, Mindy has Peter and Tamra fill in for her shifts so that she can spend time with Danny. When Mindy is first recommended for the fellowship application, Mindy is hesitant to apply because she thinks that Danny is going to propose to her soon. Mindy only applies for the fellowship when she learns that Danny is not proposing. These two examples reinforce the stereotype that women prioritize their personal and romantic lives over their careers.

Social class.

In my sample there are female characters from each social class. *OITNB* is the only show in my sample with female characters from low socioeconomic statuses, which is not surprising because the show takes place in a prison and the poor are disproportionately incarcerated compared to people from the middle and upper social classes. Most of the inmates are from

either the lowest social class or the working class. Piper, however, is very much from an upper-middle class background, which sometimes makes it hard for her to connect with the other inmates. Social class is rarely mentioned on *Scandal* or *The Mindy Project*, however because Olivia has a high-profile, professional career it can be assumed that she is middle class along with Abby and Quinn, the other two women who work at Pope and Associates. It can also be assumed that Mindy is middle class because she is a doctor in Manhattan. The wealthiest female character in my sample is Mellie. Her class status is revealed when Fitz tells Mellie that his father set him up with her because she came from a blue blooded family with old money.

The characters on *Girls* straddle two different social classes. Their parents are middle class; however, they themselves are in entry level jobs with low salaries. This makes them both privileged and also oppressed. They are privileged because their parents are able to help support them financially. On the pilot episode of *Girls*, Hannah's parents tell her that they are cutting her off financially because they had been supporting her for the two years since she graduated college while she interned. This shows that Hannah is very privileged, because a woman from a lower socioeconomic status could not afford to work an unpaid position with all of her expenses covered by her family. Although Marnie is employed throughout the first season of *Girls*, her parents pay her phone bill. Shoshana's class privilege is evident as well, as she says that her rent is \$2,100 a month which she calls "amaze" for an apartment in the Nolita neighborhood (Dunham et al. 2012). Because she is a student and does not work, it is assumed that Shoshana's parents are paying her expensive rent.

On the other hand, the characters do face economic hardships. After being cut off, Hannah fears that she will have to move out of the apartment she shares with Marnie because she cannot afford the rent. Hannah begins working at a coffee shop owned by Ray, a position she

does not want but is forced to take in order to remain in her apartment. When she gets hired by GQ, Hannah feels conflicted because although she makes a decent salary it is a job that she is not passionate about and feels that advertorial writing is a waste of her talent. Marnie works as a hostess and then later at a coffee shop after she is laid off from her position at the gallery. As graduates from a prestigious college, Hannah and Marnie exemplify the struggle that young adults face today in the workforce. To make ends meet they have to work low skilled jobs such as baristas and hostesses – positions that they are overqualified for and that do not utilize their skills or their potential.

Class privilege is most clearly seen in Piper. Because of her social class background, Piper has had many privileges that her fellow inmates never had, and never will have. Before her sentence, Piper read a book about life in prison as preparation for her incarceration. This shows both class and race privilege because she does not know anyone who has been to jail, and white, affluent people are the demographic with the lowest incarceration rates. Piper is a college graduate, whereas most of the women in Litchfield could have never afforded to have gone to college – let alone a private school. At the start of *OITNB*, it is clear that she takes her class status for granted. She does this by making references that would only be recognized by someone as affluent as she is. For example, she mentions that her soap company is going to be sold at Barney's. Because Barney's is a high-end department store catered to the upper class, the inmates and even the Litchfield administration could not afford to shop there and do not even know what Barney's is.

Though she may not mean to, Piper represents the entitlement associated with the upper-middle class. When the ceiling in the chapel collapses and inmates have to clean up the debris, Piper asks if they can have masks to wear while they clean. This comment makes the other

inmates laugh, because they know better than to expect to be treated well by the administration and they see Piper's question as an outlandish request. Later Nicky tells Piper that by asking to wear masks that she is being "uppity" (Trim et al. 2013). Piper is accustomed to getting what she wants and for advocating for herself, which is shown when she attends her first WAC meeting. Mr. Sam Healy, who is a counselor at Litchfield and oversees WAC, asks the WAC members to voice their concerns at the meeting. While the other members ask for relatively pointless requests such as better hot sauce at commissary and more pillows, Piper treats the meeting very seriously. She suggests that Litchfield implement a preventative healthcare program, reopening the track, providing legal counseling for inmates, and finding a new location for the GED program. Piper expects these suggestions to be seriously considered by Mr. Healy and for her demands to be met, and is disappointed to learn that she cannot make a difference on WAC. The other members are from low socioeconomic statuses and are not expecting their appointment to WAC to make a difference in improving life at Litchfield. They are accustomed to their voices being unheard and for their advocacy to yield no results.

Race.

There were many progressive portrayals of women of color and race on the shows in my sample. On *Scandal* and *The Mindy Project*, the lead character is a woman of color in a high status career. Olivia wields a great deal of power and is well-known as a force to be reckoned with. Though the subject of race is rarely mentioned on *Scandal*, there is a scene that shows the hegemonic nature of racism and how it is so deeply internalized. Olivia and Abby meet with a client who is a white CEO facing allegations of having an affair that are compromising her job. When she meets Olivia and Abby, she shakes Abby's hand and assumes that Abby – who is white – is Olivia (Verica et al. 2012). Although the racism in this scene is subtle, it highlights

societal assumptions surrounding race, specifically that a successful woman who owns her own business is most likely white with a black assistant as opposed to the other way around. In a very poignant scene between Olivia and her father, he reminds her that she has to be “[t]wice as good as them to get half of what they have,” meaning that because she is a black woman she has to work harder to prove herself in order to succeed in a society that privileges whiteness above all (Verica et al. 2013). Mindy is a woman of color in a field that is dominated by white men. She has a high status position within Shulman and Associates and is also the owner of her own fertility clinic. While those two characters are significant and progressive, I found the most progressive representations of race to be on *OITNB*.

OITNB is the show in my sample with the most racial diversity and also the only show to address the topic of racism comprehensively. While most TV shows with people of color in the main cast avoid discussing racism or avoid discussing it in-depth to avoid deterring a white audience, *OITNB* makes it a main subject on the show. Racism is depicted in the institutional level and also on the individual level. The Litchfield administration treats inmates differently based on their race by privileging white inmates over inmates of color. For example, COs are more likely to send an inmate of color to solitary confinement for arbitrary reasons than a white inmate. This is seen with Watson, who is black, and gets sent to solitary confinement for refusing to be frisked by a male CO in the electrical unit when a screwdriver is missing. However, when white inmate Pennsatucky tries to hang a giant crucifix on the ceiling of the chapel which causes significant damage she is not punished. Inmates of color are also subjected to racist comments. Joel Lushek, who is a white CO, calls Watson a monkey and makes monkey noises at her (Trim et al. 2013). Mendez, who is also white, makes a racist comment to inmate Brook Soso who is half-Japanese. He tells her, “Bet those slits make it hard for you to

see, huh?” (Trim et al. 2014). It is progressive to expose this racism because in doing so *OITNB* is acknowledging that racism exists in this day and age and also that there is a matrix of domination where whiteness is privileged above all other races.

On the individual level, racism is shown in the de jure and de facto racial segregation that exist in Litchfield. Inmates are assigned to their bunks based on their race, grouping women together with other members of their own race into areas known as the ghetto, the suburbs and Spanish Harlem. Aside from living with members of their own race, inmates primarily socialize in racially segregated groups. Inmates sit with women of their same race in the cafeteria, and when new inmates arrive at Litchfield an older inmate of the same race will provide her with essentials such as a toothbrush and shampoo. Racial tensions exist between the different groups and each group has stereotypical views of the other races. Morello, who is white, says that Latino/as are greasy and have too many kids; Aleida refers to black people as “smelly, stupid and lazy”; black inmates Poussey Washington and Taystee parody the frivolity and rigidity associated with WASP culture (Trim et al. 2012). By displaying the existing racism and racial tensions in Litchfield, *OITNB* is not only showing the complexities of racism but also providing an accurate depiction of prison life. Racial divides are a fact of life in prison, and to portray the inmates as fraternizing in mixed race groups would be inaccurate. While there are obvious racial boundaries between the different groups of inmates, *OITNB* also shows times when these barriers come down. When white inmate Tricia dies, all of her friends in the community of white inmates are devastated. Latina and black inmates offer Tricia’s friends food and drinks as condolences and say kind words about Tricia. In the second season when Piper organizes an inmate-run newspaper, Latina inmates Flaca and Daya along with white inmate Morello all work together as assistant editors. Also noteworthy is that Sophia develops a close friendship with

Sister Ingalls who is white, and their relationship is one of the most intimate bonds between inmates on the show.

While white privilege is often seen as a myth made up by people of color, *OITNB* shows that it is very real. Piper is privileged by both her whiteness and class status, favoring her over both inmates of color and her white peers of low socioeconomic backgrounds. Mr. Healy shows a clear favoritism to Piper because he identifies with her due to her race and social class. He often tells her that “[the other inmates] aren’t like you and me. They’re less reasonable. Less educated” (Trim et al. 2013). During the WAC elections Mr. Healy asks Piper to run for a position because he feels that the two of them work well together and he would prefer to work with her over some of the other inmates. Despite the fact that Piper tells him that she does not want to run for WAC, Mr. Healy alters the election results and announces that Piper won one of the positions. He does this to keep other inmates out of the WAC because he feels that they are less civilized because of their race and class.

Race was also portrayed regressively. Though *OITNB* has a racially diverse cast, the show underrepresents Asian women. On the first season the only Asian character is Chang. She makes sporadic appearances throughout the series and is never a part of a significant plotline. Soso is not added to the cast until season two. It is important to note that she looks very white and associates with the other white inmates. She is privileged by only being biracial and half white because she gets to reap the same benefits that the other white inmates receive. For instance, when Soso first comes to Litchfield, Morello gives her soap and a toothbrush and tells her, “I don’t normally bend the rules like this but you don’t look full *pause* Asia” (Trim et al. 2013). *Scandal* stars Olivia as the lead character, but she is the only woman of color in the main cast. The only interactions she has with women of color are with clients and her estranged

mother in a few episodes in season three. *Girls* has the least racially diverse cast as the four main characters are white women. When women of color are on the show, they exist within relationship to the white main cast in secondary roles such as coworkers or the new girlfriend of an ex-boyfriend.

Race is consistently portrayed regressively on *The Mindy Project*, where race is a joke and racial discrimination is advantageous. Mindy, who is Indian-American, has dark skin which is often the punchline of jokes. A comedian calls her “J Lo,” referring to Puerto Rican singer and actress Jennifer Lopez, and Mindy says that when she was hired to work at Shulman and Associates her boss thought she was an effeminate black man (Spiller et al. 2013, 2014). Both instances are meant as jokes for the viewer. Mindy also leverages her status as a racial minority by doing what is called playing the race card. During situations where Mindy feels she is being treated unfairly or is not provided with quality service she often blames it on her race, even though her race is not pertinent to the situation. For example, when Mindy is trying to order a drink at a very crowded bar on a Friday night, she tells the bartender, “Okay, don’t make me call you racist” when she feels that he is purposefully ignoring her (Spiller et al. 2014). By playing the race card, Mindy makes her membership of the subordinated group seem beneficial and like a privilege. This perpetuates stereotypes that racism no longer exists and is only a cry wolf tactic that people of color use for their own benefit. It undermines racism and the racial inequality that people of color experience every day.

Scandal is predominantly colorblind by ignoring Olivia’s race. When her race is mentioned, it is usually brought up in passing and not explored in-depth, which causes the viewer “to think that her success is in spite of race” which is problematic because it makes her blackness appear to be “something she just has without negative effect in her social life [which]

is a dangerous presumption in a society where race remains a problem for everyone” (McKnight 187:2014). Olivia first calls attention to her race in the eighth episode of the second season “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” when she tells Fitz that she feels as though the relationship between them is similar to the one between President Thomas Jefferson and his slave and mistress Sally Hemings. Her comment upsets Fitz and he tells her, “You’re playing the race card on the fact that I’m in love with you? Come on. Don’t belittle us. It’s insulting and beneath you...There’s no Sally or Thomas here. You’re nobody’s victim, Liv” (Verica et al. 2012). Again, the race card is used to make racial oppression seem as though it somehow benefits people of color.

In watching and analyzing *Scandal* I never felt that Fitz was ever outwardly racist to Olivia, but in telling her that she is playing the race card he is perpetuating colorblind racism. As a white man, he needs to acknowledge the system of penalty and privilege and that he is more advantaged than Olivia, and that she can very easily be the target of racism. In an interview with *Vulture*, Kerry Washington said that this was her favorite episode of *Scandal*’s second season. About Olivia’s Sally Hemings comment, Washington said, “[Olivia] uses race as a weapon to hurt [Fitz] when she’s feeling unworthy and unloved,” further undermining racism by the belief of the race card (Martin 2013).

OITNB and *Scandal* both highlight the regressive connection between race and morality. Mr. Healy assumes that because Piper is white and from an affluent background that she must be heterosexual. In their first conversation when Piper first arrives at Litchfield, Mr. Healy tells her that in prison “there are lesbians...Just stay away from them... [Y]ou do not have to have lesbian sex” (Trim et al. 2013). Piper’s assumed heterosexuality also contributes to Mr. Healy’s reasoning for why he identifies with Piper and privileges over the other inmates. To Mr. Healy,

the other inmates are of color, poor and lesbian, and are therefore inferior to Piper and himself. Mr. Healy's assumption of Piper's sexuality is an internalization of what is known as the cult of true womanhood, which was the prevailing set of norms for white upper and middle class women in the United States during the nineteenth century. According to these ideals, a woman was supposed to follow the "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 1966:152). The cult of true womanhood required a woman to be chaste, and by default heterosexual. According to Mr. Healy, a proper white, middle class woman like Piper is not supposed to be lesbian.

The cult of true womanhood is shown in a confrontation between Mellie and Olivia on *Scandal*. When Olivia suspects that some type of flirtation is developing between Mellie and Fitz's potential new vice president Andrew Nichols, Olivia confronts Mellie:

“Olivia: [I]t has to stop. I know how hard this is, Mellie. Believe me. I know. ... **Mellie:** You know how hard this is for me because you somehow think that you screwing my husband is equal to [my situation]? *chuckles* You actually think that we are the same...[W]hen I was faced with the chance to cheat, I kept my knees together, and I said no. We are not the same” (Verica et al. 2013).

In this conversation, Mellie hints at the cult of true womanhood and that she has stronger morals than Olivia. Though their conversation is about sex, it is inflected with race because women of color were excluded from the cult of true womanhood in the nineteenth century because they were not viewed as women. Mellie, who is white, wealthy and chaste sees herself as more virtuous and therefore more woman than Olivia who is black and romantically involved with a married man.

The reliance on racial tropes was another regressive portrayal of race. On *The Mindy Project*, Tamra fits the trope of the sassy black woman. Tamra is a secondary character on the show and receives little airtime, however when she is featured she almost always is behaving in a

way that perpetuates black stereotypes. She speaks in what is sometimes referred to as a blackcent and can be described as Mindy's "sassy, smart mouthed, neck rolling ghetto assistant" (naturallyunapologetic 2014). Aside from Mindy, Tamra is the only woman of color on the show. Mindy is never portrayed in a stereotypical racial way, which shows a clear privileging of Asians over blackness. It also reflects that Asians are now considered the "model minority" have the highest status within racial minorities, making Asians somewhat similar to white people.

Although *OITNB* explores racism in-depth and has the most racially diverse cast of the shows in my sample, some of the women of color reinforce racial stereotypes. Aleida fits the trope of the hypersexual Latina. In flashbacks of her life before her incarceration Aleida is shown in tight revealing clothing and in a very blatantly sexual relationship with her boyfriend Cesar. Aleida's five children were each conceived with different fathers, furthering emphasizing her sexuality and promiscuity and the stereotype that Latinas have too many children. Aleida also reinforces the welfare queen trope typically associated with black women. The welfare queen stereotype is one of a lazy black woman who is "content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring" (Hill Collins 1990:77). She portrays this trope when Daya expresses concerns about her pregnancy:

"Aleida: Oh, Jesus girl, didn't I teach you nothing? You get raped by a guard, you get to sue the government. Plus, even better, you got a baby, which means child support from Mendez and extortion money from [Bennett]. I'm telling you, this rape is the best thing that ever happened to you" (Trim et al. 2014).

Like the caricature of the welfare queen, Aleida views children as a guaranteed source of income, thus perpetuating stereotypes of women of color as a burden on the state with less of a work ethic than white people.

Olivia simultaneously fits three black tropes of the mammy, the Jezebel and the magical Negro. As both an employee of the White House and the president's mistress, Olivia is a hybrid

of the mammy and Jezebel. Like the mammy figure, Olivia is the nexus of the White House as she is the one who has been running Fitz's campaigns and assisting him with his presidency. Often Olivia is the only person who Fitz will listen to, much to the frustration of Cyrus and Mellie. The Grant's reliance on Fitz is first solidified in a flashback of Fitz's first campaign when Mellie tells Olivia "I don't know what [Fitz would] do without you. I don't know what I'd do without you" (Verica et al. 2012). Olivia shows her mammy-like obedience and faithfulness by going above and beyond in her work to help Fitz succeed. Because the mammy caricature is of an asexual woman, Olivia complicates the trope by also having characteristics of the Jezebel. Mellie clearly views Olivia as being sexually aggressive like the Jezebel caricature as shown by the way she talks about the affair. As previously mentioned, Mellie considers Olivia to be the culprit of Fitz's affair by calling Olivia a whore and suggesting that Olivia has a sexual power over Fitz that causes his infidelity. Mellie's attitude toward Olivia reflects the stereotype that the Jezebel is a danger to white men because of her wild sexuality. Both of these stereotypes are dangerous because they have been used for centuries to justify the oppression of black women in the United States. Though these stereotypes were developed during the days of slavery, they clearly still persist to this day.

Lastly, Olivia also embodies the magical negro trope that is commonly portrayed in movies, television and literature. Author James Hannaham describes this character as a black person who "has incredible abilities and has been through some kind of hardship but it's usually a little vague" (Cornish 2015). For the first two seasons of *Scandal* little information is offered about Olivia's personal life. It is known that she went to Georgetown Law School and was once engaged before she began working on Fitz's first presidential campaign, but no information is offered about her family or upbringing. Olivia is primarily portrayed working, and if she is not

working she is with Fitz. She is never shown with friends outside of Pope and Associates or the White House. Olivia truly does have incredible abilities but it is never explained how a lawyer learned how to be so successful in crisis management. Olivia begins to break outside of the magical negro stereotype in the third season, when it is revealed that when she was twelve years old she was told that her mother died which caused her to be closed-off emotionally as an adult, and that she has always had a strained relationship with her father. While that is important information, most of Olivia's life is still a mystery. The magical negro persists because it is assumed that the audience does not care about the backstory of this character or that the backstory does not matter. Olivia's personal does matter because she is not a secondary character.

While it is regressive for *Scandal* to rely on these tropes for Olivia, there are progressive moments where she resists the stereotypes. Olivia first becomes aware of the possibility of her mammy status when her mother tells her, “[You’re] [c]leaning up those people’s messes, fixing up their lives. You think you’re family, but you’re nothing but the help. And you don’t even know it” (Verica et al. 2013). This moment serves as a catalyst for Olivia in questioning her status and how much power she actually wields in the White House. Afterwards she voices her concern to Cyrus: “Tell me we’re not just the help, Cyrus, that I am not some maid with a mop in my hand cleaning up messes whenever they ring the bell” (Verica et al. 2013). Though Olivia does not say the word mammy, in that comment she is referring to the mammy figure’s role as a domestic servant in the home of a white family. Olivia then begins to resist her role as a mammy in the White House. In the following episode she sheds her mamminess by being less obedient to Fitz. At this point in the series she is working on his reelection campaign, and to step out of

her role as the help Olivia sends Abby to the White House to be her proxy while she works on another job. Later she tells Fitz,

“What else do you need? What service can I render for you today? Am I here to stroke your ego? Am I your cheerleader? Am I here to wipe your tears? Am I your nanny? Am I here to fight the bullies? Am I your bodyguard today? Maybe I’m here to make you feel good...Or maybe I’m here to make you feel hot and manly...Is that it? Am I your fluffer today, Fitz?”
(Verica et al.2013).

Here Olivia shows agency and also highlights the existing inequality in their relationship. Olivia also points out Fitz’s reliance on her and the resentment she feels for feeling like his servant and his Jezebel.

Though it is progressive for *OITNB* to acknowledge white privilege, there are moments when the show privileges whiteness without the intent of creating awareness. First and foremost, *OITNB* itself is a testament to white privilege. The series is based off of Piper Kerman’s memoir of the same title about her sentence in a women’s prison in Connecticut, and the fictional character Piper Chapman is loosely based on Kerman. The book *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women’s Prison* became popular because Kerman was an atypical inmate as she is a WASP from a privileged background. Had this book been written by a woman who represents the demographic that is most incarcerated – a lower income woman and/or a woman of color – it likely would not have been published let alone become the basis for a television series. Kerman’s experience, thus Piper Chapman’s experience, is special and worth reading about and watching on TV because of white privilege.

OITNB seeks to expose white privilege, however there is a scene where Piper almost feels victimized because of her privileges. Piper submits a request for furlough to see her dying grandmother. Mr. Healy uses his connections to have her request read quickly and she is granted forty-eight hours of furlough. Piper’s furlough upsets the other inmates because furlough requests are essentially never granted. Sophia requested furlough when her father was dying and

Anita requested furlough when her husband had surgery and again when her first grandchild was born, but their requests were not approved. Poussey tells Piper, “Man, I tried for six months to get furlough. Clearly a dead black mom ain’t no competition for a sick, old white granny” (Trim et al. 2014). After hearing countless complaints from other inmates voicing their jealousy of her furlough, Piper gets frustrated and makes an announcement to all of the inmates in the cafeteria:

“Yes I am white! We have established that. And I got furlough, too. I guess white privilege wins again. And as a speaker for the entire white race, I would like to say I am sorry that you guys got the raw deal, but I love my fucking grandmother. And yeah, she may be a whitey, too, but she’s a fucking person and she’s sick and she needs me. So shut the fuck up” (Trim et al. 2014).

Here Piper almost mocks her white privilege and feels oppressed by it. Telling the other inmates that they got the “raw deal” is not only unsympathetic but also makes this instance of white privilege seem like an isolated incident. Piper portrays herself as the victim of white privilege instead of the beneficiary. Suffering the complaints of other inmates who applied for furlough and were denied it is not a legitimate burden. In casting herself as the victim Piper only reinforces the idea that white privilege is a myth.

The two competing narratives on drug dealing on *OITNB* perpetuate racial stereotypes and also favor whiteness over blackness. The character Vee is introduced in the second season when she is re-incarcerated in Litchfield for drug offenses. Vee lives and deals heroin in a low income, predominantly black neighborhood; she herself is both black and of a low socioeconomic status. She is portrayed as dangerous and evil, which is shown by her preying on black youth to recruit them to deal for her. Vee’s drug dealing is a dead end job. In a flashback of Vee and Taystee working together before their incarcerations, Taystee tells Vee that “[dealing heroin] is not my forever career. **Vee:** Girl, you from this hood, you don’t get a career, you get a job” (Trim et al. 2014). Contrast Vee’s narrative with Alex, who is also in prison on charges for

dealing heroin. While Vee's drug dealing is a dead end job, Alex's dealing is portrayed as a high-end lifestyle. Alex is wealthy and lives in an upscale apartment, and her job as a drug dealer allows her to travel the world. Though Alex has drug mules who work under her she is not portrayed as a predator the way Vee is. Alex tells Nicky that she targeted rebellious rich women in their early twenties to be mules, which is a demographic that is very privileged – especially in comparison to the low-income black children that Vee turned into dealers. Racial privilege is very evident with these competing narratives, because although Vee and Alex both dealt heroin it is only Vee who is framed as evil and truly dangerous.

Agency

Overall, the women in my sample proved themselves to be agentic. I did not find any of the characters to fit the stereotype of woman as the perfect victim or a damsel in distress in need of rescuing. Agency was expressed in numerous ways. There was clear sexual agency where women resisted emphasized femininity's stress on women's subordination and catering to men's desires. Instead, female characters made their sexual needs priorities and were active agents in their sex lives. I also saw characters show agency in their romantic relationships in challenging their significant others and resisting subordination in the relationship. Lastly, women were agentic in their careers by demonstrating a strong work ethic, taking on challenging work and showing determination. This is not to say that characters in my sample were never helpless. For instance, Mindy relies on men to do odd-jobs in her apartment, and Marnie sees the male gaze as a form of validation. However, I do think that overall women proved themselves to be more proactive than passive. This is progressive, because since the Golden Age of television women's independence has been undermined.

CONCLUSION

After reviewing my findings, I conclude that each show in my sample has both progressive and regressive elements. I do not think that it is feasible for a television show to have perfectly progressive representations of women without having any regressive traits. However, I do deem *OITNB* as the most progressive show in my sample because it addresses issues of race and class disparities, and violence against women; features lesbian characters along with characters who transgress the binary as well as a transgender character; has the most diverse cast in terms of race, age, body type and social class; and also has complex interactions between female characters.

A study conducted by Martha Lauzen, David Dozier and Nora Huran found that when TV series employ women to work on the production end as writers and/or creators that this affects how female characters are depicted (2008:211). Each show in my sample has women working in significant roles behind the scenes, however regressive stereotypes in female characters were found in each series. I posit that the existing systems of oppression in society are the root cause for regressive portrayals. In a system where women are penalized and privileged there is always a subordinated person. The reasons for subordination have become so legitimated that they are internalized. Racism, sexism, fat-shaming and acts of gender violence are so commonplace in American society that they often go without being questioned and are assumed to be a natural, normal part of life. For instance, Kaling's response to the criticism she received for the "It Slipped" episode of *The Mindy Project* was "I think that Danny is a wonderful character...and he loves Mindy...It was not an issue of sexual unsafety. I understand people felt that way, and I disagree...There was no sexual peril in there" (Gilbert 2014). Kaling's defense of Danny's actions can be explained by the unfortunate normalcy of sexual

violence and coercion in romantic relationships, and because it has become so prevalent Kaling views it as normal. While I agree that yes, there is a need to recruit more women to work behind the scenes, I do not see that as a guaranteed way to solve problems regarding regressive representations of women on television. TV producers need to think more critically about the characters they create and acknowledge these systems of oppression in order to avoid depicting sexist gender norms and stereotypes.

I do recognize that this is not an easy feat because breaking from stereotypes is often met with opposition. There is a pressure for female television writers to create female characters who are stereotypically feminine. Often times this can even lead to writers who remain within the confines of stereotypes to be rewarded by the network while punishing the women who attempt to create more complex female characters (Lauzen et al. 2008:212). Because television is a male-dominated industry, men are not always aware of the stereotypes that female characters perpetuate and are hesitant about featuring non-normative characters. Before having success with *Scandal*, Rhimes was met with great opposition from her male coworkers over the pilot episode of her hit series *Grey's Anatomy*. In the pilot episode, a female character was scripted to have had a one night stand with a man she had just met the night before her first day of work. Men on the *Greys's Anatomy* production team thought that the audience would be disgusted by this plotline and that female viewers would not be able to connect with this character (Knowlton 2014). Rhimes was eventually able to persuade her peers to allow this plotline to happen in the pilot, but convincing them was not easy. Dunham has faced similar challenges. In *Makers: Women In Hollywood*, Dunham mentions that because of the explicit sexuality in her show she is often questioned if the characters on *Girls* are good role models, which is a question that is not

asked of similar shows with all-male casts (Knowlton 2014). These two cases can explain why it has taken so long for Hollywood to produce shows like the ones in my sample.

The shows in my sample may not be perfect, however I think that overall these programs are making progress in the television industry by giving voice and visibility to women who are not normally seen on TV. These representations offer viewers who do not identify with the prototypical thin, white, conventionally attractive, heterosexual, middle class female character a way to see women like themselves reflected in the media. While each show in my sample is unconventional, they have all had success. The programs in my sample have won a combined total of seventy-five awards, including Emmy's, SAG Awards and Critic's Choice Awards. Also significant is that *OITNB* and *Scandal*, the two programs that I found to be most progressive, had the highest number of awards within my sample. This is clearly a sign that the American television audience is ready for more complex female characters in positions of power, who show agency and who do not necessarily look like the standard Hollywood actress. Viewers are ready to see more good girls gone bad, struggling college graduates, quirky gynecologists and gladiators in suits.

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