

OLIVIA POPE:

HANDLING MASCULINITY OR FEMININITY?

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Introduction

Media can either reinforce or redefine how we view gender roles in society by the use of stereotypes. Women are outnumbered by men in television, so representation of them is more limited. According to Erving Goffman, when a man and a woman interact in society, the man is more likely to take on the executive role and this is displayed through media. By taking in media and these norms that are portrayed, we are socializing ourselves to believe these gender roles. Scandal, an ABC primetime television show, defies these traditional roles by the lead character of the show being a single, powerful woman in the political world of men. I wanted to examine whether a woman being in this lead position would possess more masculine or feminine traits.

Method

I used the sex role perspective to analyze the main character, Olivia Pope, of Scandal. I watched 20 episodes of season 2. I picked this season because it has 22 episodes, and it was at the beginning of the show, but it was also good timing that allowed enough context to get to know Olivia Pope's character. Sex role perspective looks at the gender of the main character, the setting and the product when involved with advertising. However, I used it to examine what it means to be a man or a woman according to society and how the media portrays that. I gathered stereotypical traits, mostly from the Bem Sex-Role Scale. Stereotypical masculine traits used in my study included; assertive, risk-taking, competitive, powerful, easily makes decisions, aggressive, leadership abilities, strong-willed, dominant, athletic, and forceful. Stereotypical feminine traits used were loyal, caring, affectionate, nurturing, sympathetic, yielding, encouraging (or use of soft words.) Then, I took notes after each episode assessing what traits I thought Olivia exemplified in that episode and why.

Results

Olivia Pope exemplified mostly masculine traits throughout season two. In episodes; 7, 9, 10, 15, 17, 18, and 20, Olivia only portrayed masculine traits. There were no episodes of her portraying only feminine traits. In episodes; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 16, Olivia portrayed both feminine and masculine traits with masculine traits either tying or outnumbering feminine traits. In episode 19, Olivia portrayed both masculine and feminine traits, but feminine traits outnumbered masculine traits significantly. Aside from traits, Olivia's body language also stuck out while watching. When in the room with men, she would make direct eye contact, speak directly to them in an assertive tone almost always. She displayed confidence in her professional life. When she was portrayed with femininity, the majority of the time it was during scenes involving her love life.

Conclusion

Scholars argue that seeing women in unconventional careers in the media can change societal structures. Others make the argument that by the media portraying this role they are essentially creating a "new woman," one who appears to be able to do it all, the successful career, successful love life, and successful social circle. Olivia Pope is a woman with a very powerful position in Washington D.C. She is surrounded by men in the political world, but she has an assertive voice and demands respect and is given it. Gomez & MacFarlane and Lambert argue that although Scandal does a good job at breaking the standard roles of femininity, her race often gets ignored. Olivia is not portrayed as a stereotypical woman, but she is portrayed with stereotypical black woman traits. However, McKnight counters this and acknowledges that young, black women may see Olivia Pope's character and feel influenced and powered to follow this path of success. Olivia Pope is undoubtedly powerful in a political world full of people unlike her. In today's society, we are all heavy viewers of media whether the type may differ. It is important to be able to understand gender roles, stereotypes and be able to analyze and critique media. Research similar to mine is important because by being literate in media, we can be cautious about what we take in and how we apply it to the real world.

SCANDAL



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