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# Roxanne Asare

## 'The Shonda Gaze': The Effects of Television and Black Female Identity in the UK.

*This research paper looks into how modern-day representations of black women in the media, specifically television, impact the way in which young black women in the UK shape their identity. While there is extensive literature on the implications of historical stereotypes on black women, there is a lack of understanding and academic attention towards the impact modern representations have on this social group within the UK. However, through audience perception theory alongside a conceptual framework based on a Black Feminist perspective, this research uncovers that despite the influx of 'positive' representation in TV, young black women in the UK have maintained and developed a negative discourse of self-perception that stems to judgement of those similar to them based on gender and racial bias in society.*

Keywords: Black women, feminism, sexuality, representation, race.

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### INTRODUCTION

“Stereotypes used to characterize Black womanhood have their roots in negative anti-woman mythology. Yet they form the basis of most critical inquiry into the nature of Black female experience. Many people have difficulty appreciating Black women as we are because of eagerness to impose an identity upon us based on any number of negative stereotypes.”

Hooks (1982, p.86)

Within today's society, socialization through the media has become a powerful tool in shaping how individuals perceive themselves, potentially impacting the identity of a collective group of people (Bess 2015). Hooks (1982) states that negative stereotypes and perceptions of Black women have penetrated all aspects of life, including the media that influences and drives self-perception, therefore influencing constant discrimination against Black females. Bordalo et al (2016) explain that stereotypes are societal beliefs that generalize common characteristics of a group of people such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, etc.

Schug et al (2017) further highlight that the voices of Black women are frequently invisible. However, contemporary social issues such as feminism and Black womanhood are more openly discussed and considered through the influence of the media (Stoffel 2016). With the increase in Black female representation in television shows such as *How To Get Away With Murder (HTGAWM)* and *Scandal*, consideration

of feminism, stereotypes, and society's racial divide is a common topic of discussion. Yet, literature fails to understand the direct influence these shows have on the identities of their young Black female audiences, particularly within the UK.

This research looked into the self-perceptions of Black female undergraduates within the UK and their social group, through the evaluation of two Black female lead characters – Annalise Keating (*HTGAWM*) and Olivia Pope (*Scandal*). Through particular consideration into literature - surrounding historic representation, sexuality, and societal positioning – of Black feminist scholars such as Bell Hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill-Collins, the research also looked into how perceptions of the characters, Black women, and themselves impact their identities within society. The research was conducted through a grounded theory approach that used both a focus group and in-depth interviews to uncover key themes and issues concerning identity shaping within the selected sample group. Evaluation of literature and findings from both research methods uncovered that despite developments in Black female representation in society, negative stereotypes, connotations and associations of Black women historically have translated into modern day society, causing young Black women in the UK to have an unexpected negative perception of themselves and other Black women around them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Feminism and Intersectionality

Hooks (2000) argues that feminism is “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”, enforcing a centralized goal of liberalisation. Despite sexism being considered in regards to gender, Stoffel (2016) highlights that within Hooks' (2000) definition there is no mention of gender. However, within today's society labels of feminism are justified as believing in social, political, and economic equality between all genders (Stoffel 2016). This separates feminism into two categories: Feminism-as-equality and Feminism-as-liberation (Stoffel 2016).

Beginning in the 1960s, the Women's Liberation movement worked and continuously works to shine a light on the hardships of women aiming to fight against gender discrimination (Class-Peters 2016), supporting Stoffel's (2016) segmentation of Feminism-as-equality. Although feminism focuses on advocating for women, Smith (2016) states that “All too often, "Black" was equated with Black men and "woman" was equated with White women” (p.1). As a result, Black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored”, as the Women's Liberation movement highlighted the White experience (Class-Peters 2016, p.1). From this the Black Feminist Movement was birthed, aiming to end sexism, and fight against institutional and structural racism (Class-Peters 2016), supporting Stoffel's (2016) Feminism-as-liberation segmentation.

Amongst different variations of feminism, the notion of 'feminism' being split into racial categories highlights issues within American and British society where race and equality are still pressure points despite 'societal development'. In spite of this, it is important to understand the difference between 'White feminism' and 'Black feminism'. According to Young (2014):

"White feminism" does not mean every White woman, everywhere, who happens to identify as feminist.... [it is] a specific set of single-issue, non-intersectional, superficial feminist practices. It is the feminism we understand as mainstream; the feminism obsessed with body hair, and high heels and makeup, and changing your married name. It is the feminism you probably first learned. "White feminism" is the feminism that doesn't understand western privilege, or cultural context. It is the feminism that doesn't consider race as a factor in the struggle for equality." (p.1)

Whilst Young (2014) underlines White feminism as being the most 'traditional' form of feminism, where gender equality is the sole issue, Spelman (1988) recognises a misrepresentation within the concept of 'feminism' as the situations of White feminists have been taken as 'conditions of women' overall, therefore drawing attention to a 'problem of difference' in which racial privilege is paramount among White feminists. Congruently, the lack of acknowledgement of the issues faced by Women of Colour (WoC) cause White women to arrogate them, according to Lugones (2003). She explains that:

"White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us as crazy. All of this while we are in their midst" (p.83)

The term 'White feminist' has been used to criticize those who are deemed to disregard issues of intersectionality (Blay and Gray 2015). This view of WoC has caused a new wave of feminism in which WoC are beginning to openly divulge their experiences, challenges, and societal issues as Ortega (2006) highlights that "knowledge about the experience of women of color cannot simply be attained by reading their writings or the writings of White feminists" (p.67). Historical and new voices of WoC push the idea of intersectionality to the forefront, highlighting issues faced by WoC and people of colour (PoC) in general.

### Intersectionality

Coined by, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) the term 'intersectionality' provided a basis on which communities were able to understand the depth of injustice and discrimination within society. The term turns away from discrimination only being regarded as gender and racial bias and highlights intertwining factors that impact profiling, stereotyping and oppression (Crenshaw 1989). Hankivsky (2014) states that:

"Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g., 'race'/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion)" (p.2)

Hankivsky (2014) explains that these human interactions function within structural systems of power that generate 'privilege' and 'oppression', through which colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia and patriarchy are exercised. The formation of these systems of power such as racial discrimination within the Women's Liberation movement, and sexism within the Black Liberation movement led to the development of the Black Feminist movement (Smith 2016). With White feminism recognised as a more traditional or equality focused form of feminism, it is important to understand, that "Black feminism is not White feminism in Blackface"

(Lorde and Clarke 2007, p.60), but rather a way of “embracing [...] intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, [...and] Black women’s individual and collective agency within them... understanding the connections between knowledge and empowerment” (Collins 2000, p.273). This understanding of intersectionality, the role Black feminism plays within it, and the way societal issues are spoken about has an effect on the way the identity of Black women are shaped.

### Identity and Representation of Black Women

Fearon (1999) argues that ‘identity’ is used presently in two varying but somewhat linked senses. He states that ‘social identity’ connotes a social category in which a set of persons are distinguished by a set of rules according to specific characteristics or attributes (Fearon 1999). Secondly, Fearon (1999, p.2) defines ‘personal identity’ as “some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable”. This paper will look at identity in both the personal sense, regarding the effects of media representations of Black women on Black undergraduate females in the UK, and the social sense by looking at perceptions of the Black female community as a whole.

Today, with intersectionality bringing societal issues to the forefront (Stoffel 2016), Russell (2015, p.1) states that “it is imperative to study Black girls in various social and academic contexts to fully understand the complexity of the axis of oppression, class, race and gender, they experience”. Defining and taking ownership of identity within the Black female community is of high importance, as Lorde and Clarke (2007) state that “for Black women [...] it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others - for their use and to our detriment” (p.45), supporting Ortega’s (2006) explanation of the inability to understand WoC from second hand perspectives. However, this process can also present challenges specifically for Black girls who are positioned in society to distinguish between ideals of self when they are continuously shown false and incomplete representations of Black girlhood (Muhammad and McArthur 2015). Muhammad and McArthur (2015, p.133) explain that “researchers have found distorted images of Black femininity derived from history, including the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, are still pervasive in contemporary media outlets that are often viewed by adolescent girls”. Stemming from slavery, Collins (2002) states that these controlling images of aid the suppression of Black women and impact external perceptions of WoC, as well as the way WoC view each other. With these racist and sexist ideologies permeating social structures, they have become hegemonic as these developed representations are now deemed as natural, normal and inevitable (Collins 2002).

### Stereotypes and Sexuality of Black Women

Deriving from periods of slavery (Townsend et al 2010), the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel formed three main depictions of the African-American woman that have evolved over time. Stephens and Phillips (2003) argue that the over-sexualization of these stereotypes of Black women have shaped perceptions of Black sexuality in women. This impacts and influences the way others see, value and interact with

them (Stephens and Phillips 2005), and their self-perception (Sinclair, Hardin and Lowery 2006).

Traditionally perceived as the most overtly sexualized image of the Black woman, the Jezebel is often presented to be light-skinned with long hair (Collins 1998), and a seducer/manipulator that obtains sexual drives that are uncontrollable (Mitchell and Herring 1998; West 1995). Acting as a parallel, the Mammy, considered to be the domestic servant, was portrayed to be subservient and family orientated (Stephens & Phillips 2003; Quinlan 2012; Meyers 2013), however she would traditionally be overweight, dark skinned with typically 'African looking features' such as kinky, 'messy' hair - therefore posing less of a threat to her White superiors (West 1995; Hooks 1984; Stephens & Phillips 2003). Finally, the Sapphire, originally a 1940s and 1950s character from the "Amos 'n' Andy" radio and television show, took pleasure in emasculating men by being loud, argumentative, crude and callous (Mitchell and Herring 1998; West 1995). More recent interpretations of this stereotype can be seen through the conceptualisation of the "angry Black woman" that characterizes these women as aggressive, ill tempered, hostile, and ignorant without provocation (Ashley 2013). Harris and Hill (1998) state that women of African descent were ascribed the role of primitive sex object in order to justify the sexual violation and enslavement of these women, resulting in Black women as being seen as savage, animal-like, and highly sexual beings. Russell (2015) cites Tolman and Higgins (1996) who say that now Black adolescent girls are viewed from a particular 'gaze' of the larger culture that see them as promiscuous and deviant. Despite Tolman and Higgins (1996) sharing this view, a number of scholars have stated that Black women's bodies indicate sexual deviancy, and are regularly presented as exotic and abnormal within society (Collins 2000). Hooks (1981) explains that this causes the sexual identities of Black women to be seen as less feminine and more animalistic.

Combatting historical stereotypes, Townsend et al (2010) justify the development of the 'Superwoman' that has emerged in more recent times. According to Mitchell and Herring (1998) this new image presents Black women as being capable of doing anything and having it all, shown through role models such as Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey (Townsend et al 2010), which can be seen to be acting as a replacement of the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire. However Collins (1991) and Stephens (2003, 2005) highlight that modern variations of these historical stereotypes are still presently used. This is evident with the Jezebel being seen in today's music videos as the 'sexual freak', gold diggers, divas, and 'baby mamas' (Stephens and Phillips 2003, 2005). With this in mind, the issue arises of whether Black women will ever be able to avoid these associations or whether these stereotypes are inevitably embedded in current and future societies.

#### Sexuality as Power and the Objectification of Black Women

Lorde and Clarke (2007) state that as Black women "we have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society" (Lorde and Clarke 2007, p.53), muting any beliefs of sexual ownership as a form of empowerment. The devaluing sexuality as empowerment can be linked to Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory that gives an insight into how women negatively internalise the views of their sexuality due to their physical

appearances being presented as objects of desire within the media that “are frequently the target of men’s sexist comments” (Szymanski et al 2011, p.10). Similarly, The Male Gaze theory is also used to describe the way in which male audiences view images of women, resulting in sexual objectification of the female body (Mulvey 1989). Faluyi (2016, p.449) says “the media’s sexual objectification and stereotypical portrayals of Black women’s sexuality has negative social implications for Black womanhood.”

Lorde and Clarke (2007) also state that “Black women are programmed to define ourselves within this male attention and to compete with each other for it rather than to recognize and move upon our common interests” (p.48). This idea of Black women competing with and judging others raises the question of how contemporary media representation of Black women in popular TV shows, such as *HTGAWM* and *Scandal*, are accepted or rejected by Black female audiences.

## METHODOLOGY

With television disseminating messages and being a major agent in socialising for audiences (Jacobs, Claes and Hooghe 2015), the aim of the research was to find out how representation of Black women in popular television shows, specifically *HTGAWM* and *Scandal*, impact Black female undergraduates in the United Kingdom when either reflecting or informing the shaping of their identity. With there being numerous amounts of literature discussing each show’s impact on societal issues such as race, homosexuality, stereotypes, etc, there is a lack of literature that delves into the actual perceptions that this selected social group have on the representations of the protagonists. This stemmed from three initial research questions:

1. What modern representations of Black women are there in TV?
2. What associations are made when viewing Black female characters in popular TV shows?
3. How do these associations impact the identities of young Black women in the UK?

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Black Feminist Thought as it acknowledges that “oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group” (Collins 1990, p. viii). This then causes the meanings behind the ideas of Black women to be diluted or and be misconstrued (Collins 1990). Using a Black feminist perspective for analysis aids the promotions of the Black female voice, particularly in the UK, in this research paper when considering perceptions in society - shifting conclusions from external views to actual thoughts and opinions of Black women.

## Research Methods

A grounded theory approach was conducted in order to develop theories based on qualitative data systematically collected (Glaser and Strauss 1967) from a focus group and in-depth interviews. A lack of audience theory literature on millennial Black-British females and their identity perceptions proved this approach ideal as it

permits exploration of behaviours, attitudes, and relationships within social groups that have had little exploration into factors that effect on their lives (Crooks 2001). Due to commonly having an inflexible design (Sincero 2016), which was not suitable for this research, surveys and ethnographies were ruled out. A mixed method approach was chosen in order to avoid limitations of a single design approach and to be able to address the research questions at different levels for a wider basis on which developed theory could be based on.

A two-and-a-half-hour intimate focus group took place as the primary source of data collection, consisting of four Black female undergraduates within the UK between the ages of 18-25. Focus groups not only promote authenticity through participant exchanges, but also promote further study into how and why those individuals think the way they do, rather than simply finding out what they think about alone (Kitzinger 1995). Secondary individual in-depth interviews were carried out lasting between 35 – 60 minutes that were used to grasp the point of view of each interviewee more deeply (Burgess 1982).

#### Data Collection and Analysis

With the prime target audience of each show being 18 - 49-year olds (John 2016), four Black females between the ages of 18-25 were sourced through the Bournemouth University Afro-Caribbean Society Facebook page, and were emailed an invitation to both the focus group and in-depth interviews (See Appendix A). They were selected based on their ability to take part in both research methods to ensure cohesiveness of the obtained data. The focus group took place in a seminar room in Bournemouth University, whilst the in-depth interviews were carried out via telephone the following week due to the scheduled term break. To ensure ethical validity, an ethics checklist was created (See Appendix K), participants were asked to complete a participation consent form prior to the data collection process (See Appendix B), and all members were made aware of their ability to withdraw from the research at any given point if necessary. Both the focus group and each in-depth interview were voice recorded for transcribing purposes solely in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (See Appendix D and H).

Using a guide consisting of scholarly quotes and short clips from both HTGAWM and *Scandal* referencing Black feminism, Identity, Sexuality, and The Male Gaze (See Appendix C), this enabled a relatively structured focus group that however also had high moderator involvement (Morgan, 1996), as the researcher became immersed in the focus group to encourage voluntary conversation and understand what was significant to the participants and the research (methodsMcr 2014). Open ended questions were explored allowing different and unexpected topics to be discussed (Kitzinger 1995).

Inductive thematic data analysis (Thomas 2006) of the focus group transcript took place to pinpoint the key themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967) such as Stereotypes, Racial bias, Sexuality, Physical appearance and perceptions, Work and careers (See Appendix E). From this a set of twenty-five structured, closed and open, questions were used to conduct the in-depth interviews with the same participants (See Appendix G). The interviews focused on key categories stemming from the final thematic codes highlighted in the focus group: Work and Futures, Hair and Self

Perception, and Contemporary Black Female Sexuality (See Appendix F). The interviews were then thematically coded (Thomas 2006) according to the key categories mentioned above (See Appendix F and I).

### Research Limitations

Literature acknowledges that focus groups and interviews may be less authentic due to participants attempting to live up to expectations of the researcher (Desai 2002). In order to avoid inauthentic responses, both forms of data collection were conducted through the use of open-ended questions on broad topics, fuelling conversations of carefully considered and varying answers. In addition, the sample size for both the focus group and in-depth interviews consisted of four Black female undergraduates within the UK. A smaller sample size was chosen as Wolcott (2008) highlights that large groups of participants give breadth over depth or quantity rather than quality of responses, which could result in generalisations, causing questions of validity to arise.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Hair and Self-Perception

The outward appearance of Black women has been a frequently researched topic within society through media representations. The analysis of Annalise and Olivia led to the exploration of the upbringing of Black females. The inward and outward perceptions of Black womanhood that they experienced led to discussions on Black female hair. This stemmed from participants reflecting on a popular scene in *HTGAWM* that displays the protagonist removing her wig, revealing her natural (chemically untreated) hair.

Bankhead and Johnson (2014) highlight the increase of Black female representation in various media outlets such as premiere fashion magazines and popular network TV series' such as *Scandal* during the post-Obama period - showing the progressive societal acceptance of 'Black beauty'. Killbourne (2010) supports this realisation by suggesting that the increased representation of Black women in press and the media aims to legitimise Black women as rival beauties to White women. However, Bankhead and Johnson (2014) state that even though there are more nuanced representations of Black women the media is still biased towards women who approach a "White standard" of beauty.

This could be problematic when evaluating how far society has progressed from the historical degradation of Black women, and whether levels of acceptance when referencing Black female wholeness exists. Such questions arise due to a history of Black women constantly being compared to White women, with the latter being traditionally considered as the ideal standard of beauty ((King and Niabaly (2014)). With this, King and Niabaly (2014) pinpoint hair as being a significant basis for the standards of beauty ideals as "it can have implications beyond the aesthetic level" (p.4). The authors argue that hair is of high importance to Black women, dating back to pre-slavery times in Africa ((King and Niabaly 2014), where it showed one's status, identity, religion and ancestry (Byrd and Tharps 2001). Transitioning into

slavery times, the concept of hair determining status became more apparent as Black women with a kinky hair texture were deemed less desirable or presentable and were made to work in the fields, while women with a more Caucasian-like hair texture were appointed slave roles within the household of their slave masters (Robinson 2011). Patton (2006) argues that this evaluation then translated into Black women wanting or needing to emulate Caucasian standards of beauty in order to increase their status, be freed from slavery, or just to survive. As a result, Caucasian hair became the 'good hair' ideal while Black women's' natural hair was viewed as 'bad' and may have influenced the decision/perception of some Black women who felt the need to alter their natural hair to match that of a White woman's texture (King and Niabaly 2014). Robinson (2011) further states that the connection between hair and beauty ideals and gender and race inequality has placed a significant burden on Black women whose natural kinky hair are low on society's accepted beauty standards.

In order to contextualise this, participants within the focus group shared their initial thoughts of Annalise removing her wig and makeup and the significance of the writer deciding to share this on a popular TV show. When asked what this action meant for the character herself, Jessica responded by saying:

"...she's aggressively removing it [her makeup] off her face and the way she's looking at herself in the mirror, she's not happy, almost as though she's not happy with how she looks or how she perceives herself."

To which Leanne added:

"I think also her taking of the wig and like showing her actual hair, and her Black-self, maybe she's angry at the White parts of her?"

From the responses shared, an observation can be made regarding the notion that Black women succumb to this burden by adopting the same 'face' described by Robinson (2011) that Annalise shows the viewer with the removal of her wig and makeup, pieces used to reflect a more socially acceptable White ideal. This action serves to reinforce the idea that Black women feel a sense of anger or sadness with the façade that is required to be accepted by those around them. In light of this view, participants were also asked to evaluate a scene like this being presented on TV to a wide demographic, to which Jessica stated:

"I think it's good and it's bad, I think it's good in that it's good for people to be aware that this is not my natural hair [...] I think it's a good thing for people to know that. [...] But what we're used to is what she has before she removes her wig, that's the representation that we see every day...we know this, but to someone who's not exposed to this or who's not a Black person or who has never been exposed to that, this is like a revelation. This is like "oh wow, so do Black women all wear wigs or is that how their natural hair is like?", like a lot of people are unaware and oblivious."

The idea of Black women trying to fit in society based on White standards of beauty, can result in stereotypes of Black women and their hair by non WoC especially if they have not been surrounded by Black women who consciously celebrate their natural hair texture. This therefore creates a level of ignorance within communities where Black women are a minority or not represented at all, which may cause a level of discomfort in majority social groups that are more accustomed to White beauty

standards such as long straight hair of a soft texture that is traditionally achieved through the chemical treatment process of 'relaxing' a Black woman's hair (King and Niabaly 2014). This is supported by a comment made by interviewee Paul Mooney in Chris Rock's 2009 "Good Hair" documentary, who stated that "if your hair is relaxed, White people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy (kinky), they're not happy" (Good Hair 2009).

Whilst Jessica expressed her thoughts of the scene as a good way for non-PoC to see what 'lies beneath', Robinson (2011) claims that Black women's efforts to 'keep up appearances' by having more socially acceptable hair stems from pressure circulating within the Black female community in addition to the external pressures and ideals of non-Black people. The author explains that the conditioning of White beauty standards amongst Black women causes them to elevate White beauty standards and devalue hair textures commonly seen among Black women (Robinson 2011). Hannah proved this concept true by expressing her discomfort with the state of the character's natural hair in the scene:

"...for some reason [...] the fact that her hair underneath was not done, it wasn't neat, it just really irked me a bit, only because at the end of the day it could be empowering to us Black females, but [...] it reminded me of, you know all the slave films that we've seen over time like "12 Years a Slave", their hair always looks rough and unkempt, and it just made me feel like because there is so much ignorance in the world when it comes to Black women it could reinforcing the idea of "oh you know, this is how they really look". I get that it's real life, I wear wigs [...] so i get it, but I don't know if others will."

This potentially negative perspective of other viewers watching this scene proved to be a common concern within the group as Leanne stated:

"I think her hair being like that sort of suggests that, to others that no matter what, you're like a slave, [a] Black woman, [...] no matter how much you have your life together you're still struggling [...] no matter how classy you are or what class you're in, as a Black woman if your hair is like that, you're still sort of looked down upon"

Shared responses imply an attitude of self-depreciation or devaluation within the Black female community that is projected onto young Black females, as both Leanne and Hannah associated kinky hair with slavery, indicating a subconscious thought of natural hair equating to someone with lower beauty standards or social class. This is supported by the thoughts of King and Niabaly (2014) and Robinson (2011) who share the view that the judgement of Black women's hair from White or non-Black people becoming the norm has caused Black women themselves to adopt this role of judgement either by internalising or directly judging fellow Black women around them. With historical stereotypes and specifically the Mammy, projecting Black women as undesirable or less of a threat to White females in terms of beauty (West 1995) has caused a negative social norm where Black women perceive themselves as vulnerable when revealing their natural hair as it represents them in their rawest form. This was highlighted in the focus group as Hannah explained how the representation of Annalise removing her wig shows a different side to the strong and commanding character that the audiences are familiar with. She commented:

"... the vulnerability came in when she took off her wig... I know that a lot of Black girls have a complex about their natural hair, so the fact she did that was quite vulnerable, it was like showing the real her."

Sheila Bridges in the 'Good Hair' documentary comments "I think the reason hair is so important is our self-esteem is so wrapped up in it. [The] standards are completely unrealistic and unattainable, especially for Black women" (Good Hair 2009). Living according to these unrealistic standards raises the question of whether a true understanding of Black hair within the Black female community exists as according to Tracie Thoms in the same documentary "If you don't understand Black hair, you're afraid of it" (Good Hair 2009), which along with Caucasian standards of beauty may be an explanation for the vulnerability experienced by Black women. The idea of being in a space of vulnerability rather than empowerment when revealing the 'real' versions of themselves pinpoints a major issue within today's society, that has impacted generations of Black women, resulting in a malleable community that must mould themselves to the ideals of the surrounding environment to be part of the social norm. Subsequently, the extent to which this cultural adaptation to White standards of beauty have veiled the understanding of Black females within the UK of Black hair, the essence of having natural hair and embracing the true and 'most vulnerable' versions of themselves remains to be seen and should be questioned.

#### Contemporary Black Female Sexuality

The bodies of Black women have routinely been projected to be inhuman and unattractive, whilst simultaneously utilized for the sexual needs of powerful White men (Ani 1994; Hooks 1984). The degradation and depreciation of the Black female body by those perceived as more dominant has resulted in a negative view of Black sexuality, embodied in the form of modern day stereotypes. Simmonds (1994, p. 141) speaks on the role Black female sexuality has played within society by stating that historically:

"Black sexuality has been defined by White racism to justify its perception of the inferiority of Black people. [...] Blacks, considered lower on the evolutionary ladder have always been considered more sexually active than Whites."

Knight (2011) emphasises that Black female sexuality was initially controlled and owned by men who endeavoured to tip scales of gender in their favour through systems of patriarchy, giving the inferior social group no choice in the matter. According to Stephens (2010), the sexuality of historical stereotypes was degraded and viewed negatively with the Jezebel being used to satisfy the sexual desires of White men whilst the Mammy was presented as an unattractive asexual being. Stephens (2010) explains how the Welfare Mama's (seen as useless to White cultural needs) sexuality was capitalised solely by breeding with Black men, while the Matriarch's (said to be the cause of African American problems) sexuality emasculated and controlled men. The establishment of negative and damaging references to Black female sexuality, forced Black women into a state of vulnerability when expressing their sexuality to the extent that they became voiceless in society. According Morrison (1992) the sexuality of Black women is one of the "unspeakable things unspoken" (p. 445) in the history of the African American experience.

Nonetheless, in contemporary media the likes of Shonda Rhimes have created a voice for Black females in contemporary media. Rhimes actively highlights their ability to express their sexuality freely through Olivia and Annalise. In order to understand the effects historic and modern representations of Black female sexuality has had on young Black women in the UK, each participant took part in an in-depth interview in which sexuality was discussed. When asked about her thoughts on Black female sexuality, Hannah stated:

"I think it's exclusive and unique to every Black girl, but I feel like, because there's so many things in society [that are] placed upon us [...] like you know this jezebel stereotype, or being angry - it can be suppressed."

As highlighted by Hannah, the concept of historical stereotypes associated with Black female sexuality and the meanings behind them are still relevant in modern society. It is a persistent issue faced by this community and in turn influences the way in which young Black women view themselves and others in terms of sexuality.

The focus group confirmed this after discussing scenes in *Scandal* and *HTGAWM*, focused on Olivia's relationship with Fitz and Annalise's relationships with Nate and Eve. Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts on the roles each protagonist represented in these scenes which depicted interracial, same sex, and same race relationships. When discussing Olivia's role in her relationship with Fitz, participants used terms such as "mug", "jezzy (jezebel)" and a "high class/upper class side-chick (mistress)" - all reflecting similar connotations to the historical references and negative portrayals of Black women's sexuality. The use of these demeaning terms amongst the participants emphasises the Black woman's inability to see other Black women who may be deemed as being sexually liberated, in a positive light. This indicates a social issue with the condemning role Black women have assumed initially associated with White authoritarian figures who endeavour to suppress Black female sexuality. This shows the constant scrutiny placed on Black females and how they choose to express their sexuality, whether it is being suppressed or embraced through increased representation in the media.

In further discussions within the focus group, participants shared their thoughts on Olivia and highlighted her character depicting a common 'type' of Black woman in modern day society - one who is caught between maintaining a respected societal perception and freely expressing her sexual and emotional self:

"Leanne: It's like she's in a battle between the two - her Black identity but wanting to be just a woman in her feelings

Hannah: But obviously because she's Black... there's negative connotations

[...]

Jessica: Well with her character [...] in her mind she's trying to be a strong, independent Black woman but then she's in her feelings as well."

Discussions on the internal pressure Black women face with accepting their sexuality, drew parallels with the way in which historical relations between Black females and their slave masters have influenced views on interracial relationships and the role of the Black woman in them. When considering the relationship between Olivia and Fitz and Annalise's late husband, Sam (a middle-upper class psychology professor), Leanne commented:

"Both are powerful women...both in one way or another are controlled by a White man or are a victim because of a White man's actions - so affairs - she (Olivia) is the mistress whilst she (Annalise) is the side-tiring (mistress), so...White men just control them...it's like the slave master and how they raped the slaves, it's like that..."

Hammonds (1999) reinforces this, explaining that Black female sexuality is often described within metaphors as a 'void' or as an empty space that is simultaneously exposed yet invisible "where Black women's bodies are always already colonized" (p.94). This 'colonization' of the Black female body is reflected through Olivia and Annalise who are often seen as inferior to the dominance of their White male counterpart, exotified, and sexually objectified by them. Fitz and Sam are the epitome of dominance and power and some may interpret Rhimes' use of these characters' relationships as promoting interracial relationships in modern society. Yet, young Black women are critical of the 'sexual liberation' presented within these relationships due to the parallels with relations in slavery. As a result, Knight (2011, p. 3) suggests that these associations,

"may have led to the breakdown of any notion of independence or authority Black women may have had regarding their sexuality as it became a commodity that was bought or sold for profit and by men."

The focus group and in-depth interviews, have provided insights into the impact negative stereotypes and connotations can have on Black women's' attitude towards sexuality within society and portrayals in the media. This brings into question whether these popular TV shows are presenting the right messages for Black women, or whether they are causing them to question and scrutinise Black sexuality through the White male gaze, thus causing Black women to look down on any representation of their sexuality. This also generates questions as to whether Rhimes is encouraging the male gaze in her audiences, in which viewers see both Olivia and Annalise as modern day sexual objects; or whether she is developing a new female gaze, in which Black female audiences are forced to view each character through a new lens, as empowering depictions of the societal period we are currently in.

### Work and Futures

Through both methods of data collection, each participant's 'future' and work prospects became recurring themes on which participants within the focus group were asked to analyse how Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope's careers are represented in each show and comment on their positive or negative impacts on Black women in society.

A study carried conducted by Atkin (1992) explored the ways in which occupational positions are presented in TV. It was found that the roles given to Black women in TV were frequently of lower ranking or position within any given occupation. More

recent shows like *HTGAWM* and *Scandal*, centre around the careers of two leading Black female roles (Annalise and Olivia) at the top of their career ladders. This disputes Atkin's (1992) findings, by counteracting the concept of Black females holding lower positions, with Annalise being a successful criminal lawyer and Olivia being a crisis manager and the White House's communications director. This modern portrayal of successful Black women by Shonda Rhimes supports Townsend et al.'s (2010) concept of the newly emerging 'Superwoman' stereotype, with both lead characters representing women who can 'do and have anything'. Their occupational positions allow them to be influentially superior and respected whilst possessing enough wealth to maintain their lavish lifestyles.

Despite a more frequent representation of this new stereotype, questions arise as to how easily the success of both characters is achieved. Within the focus group, this concept was discussed after viewing a clip from *Scandal* Season 3 Episode 1 titled "*It's Handled*". The scene showed Olivia's father reminding her how he believes she should view her position (or her route to success) as a Black woman in a predominantly White workplace. After watching this scene, participants engaged in conversation concerning the racial bias they may experience now or in future. From this Jessica, a 20-year-old Media Communications student stated:

"...that's something that my dad has told me... [he] said to me the same thing, that even in the mask of all this diversity [...] I still have to work twice as hard to get half as much, and that's just the way life is."

This statement reiterates the fact that Black female inferiority within the workplace is frequently highlighted within literature (Signorelli 2009; Jacob, Claes and Hooghe 2015). Despite WoC becoming increasingly visible within the workplace, they still face obstacles and barriers that hinder or stunt their professional growth (Reynolds-Dobbs et al 2008). The 'glass ceiling' is frequently discussed as barriers faced by White women within the workplace however, a study carried out by Catalyst (2004) found that 56% of the Black women sampled reported that many negative racial stereotypes exist in the workplace, forming a 'concrete ceiling' that is more difficult to breakthrough. Reynolds-Dobbs et al (2008) state that both historical, and modern stereotypes such as the "unstable Crazy Black Bitch" (p.130) or the angry Black woman, can negatively impact Black women's professional goals, relationships and experiences.

Discussions within the focus group, revealed that contrasting negative stereotypes, such as the Mammy and the Jezebel, causes Black women to do one of two things: 1) Suppress any internal displays of the negative stereotypes present in the workplace, thus causing them to either conform to what is considered acceptable, or 2) Combat stereotypes directly which can lead to them being seen as 'just another angry Black woman'. Collins (1990, p.91) explains how over time Black women have learned to conceal their 'behavioural conformity' behind a mask whilst also showing acts of resistance towards forms of dominant force. This was highlighted during the topic of overt and covert racial discrimination by Leanne, a 23-year-old Public Relations student:

"Yeah, with covert they're looking down on you behind your back and it's like you're giving them your true self and they're still like "well you're just a Black girl.""

Whilst discussing the idea of the 'angry Black woman' and representations of Annalise and Olivia, Deborah, a 22-year-old Public Relations student, commented:

"I think it's just wrongly represented it's not that Olivia Pope is angry, it's not that Viola is angry, they are internalising, that's what Black women do, they're internalising and they put on a hard front because they have to get through life at the end of the day. As she (Olivia) said, she's got a business to run...I feel like it's relatable for us [...] even watching my mum, my mum will come home and just do life, like she's not going to sit there and cry about it. But then from a White perspective, they might not have that understanding and just think "oh yeah, she's just angry", they might not have that perspective of she is just trying to get life done at the end of the day, because that's what she's been told all her life that she's has to work harder than everyone else."

The presence of these negative stereotypes in the workplace prompted further questions concerning ongoing discussions within the communications industry that highlight the need for more cultural diversity within the workplace. According to the 2016 PRCA census 91% of people who were surveyed categorised themselves as 'White British' or 'other White', whilst only 2% identified themselves as Black (Griggs 2017). Jessica shared her thoughts on these discussions stating:

"the conversation is quite tokenistic... the reality is that I still have to work hard, if not harder than anyone else to get to the same place, but that's something that I've grown up knowing."

The concept of being the 'token Black woman' within an organisation, when considering their careers, proved to be a common concern of the participants, with Deborah highlighting in the one-to-one interview that:

"When I apply for jobs, the thought that actually genuinely does go through my head is that am I going to get this job because I need to meet minority specifications, when employers need to have a certain amount of minorities, like am I actually qualified or am I going to get this job based on the fact that they need a person of colour?"

Although both characters are reflections of the 'Superwoman' stereotype and can be inspirational and empowering to young Black women through direct Rhimes' demonstrates how these successful women still experience occupational racial and gender bias. This could be seen as true representations of the everyday Black woman, as Rhimes' presentation of these characters highlights similar insecurities that young Black women in the UK have of racial and gender discrimination in the workplace, causing them to learn to reject or accept the need to put on a mask in order for career and societal progression.

## CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this research was to understand the impact of the representations of Black women in popular TV shows on Black females in the UK, through the evaluation of Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating's characters in *Scandal* and *HTGAWM*. This research paper argued that media representations of Black women have a significant impact on young Black females in the UK, in developing self-image, identity, and perceptions of other Black women. Despite an increase of Black female representation in the media, specifically in popular TV series', that try to veer away from historical representations and stereotypes, there are still negative

connotations that have persisted throughout history, altering the way Black females view themselves through their hair and outward appearance, sexuality, and working futures in modern day society.

This paper further uncovered the societal pressures young Black women in the UK face concerning their position in society, inflicting the need to base their outward appearance, sexual morality, and career progression on social norms accepted by their White counterparts or those that consider themselves as superior to them. Whilst highlighting the positive developments and increase of more empowering representations of Black women in western society and the media through writers such as Shonda Rhimes, the data produced in this research indicates the presence of a mental conditioning process that developing young Black women in the UK undergo when considering their racial and gender position in both the workplace and personal lives. This causes them to present the most 'acceptable' versions of themselves, shunning their 'true' characters to limit the likelihood of negative associations and stereotypes being attached to them. With literature outlined in the literature review suggesting the ongoing development of Black female representation, the research carried out however highlights that there is a current lack of positive self-perception due to the relationship between contemporary media representations and historical images, causing questions to arise as to whether these projections of Black women are working as sources of empowerment or reinforcing racial and gender inequality within society. As a result, media outlets need to work on developing ways in which representations of Black women are in arms reach to limit the distance between the projections and actuality.

For further research, an area for recommendation would be to generate a larger and more diverse sample size as the term 'Black woman' encompasses vast amounts of ethnicities which may impose different cultural opinions. Similarly, the amount of data methods carried out in terms of focus groups and interviews can be increased to develop identified themes in this research paper, and/or curate new themes and opinions of participants such as the representation of education or family in each the media. Additionally, material analysed in this research is of American origin and whilst the majority of the literature frequently speaks from an American point of view, all concepts are inferential and can be applied to Black women living in the UK. For further research into more diverse data, investigations into literature from a British point of view can be used to pinpoint concepts shared on Black British women.

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