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# Statistical Plight of Black Women

Professional and Black Don't Marry

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to examine how television shows and their portrayals of professional Black women impact the interpretation of marriage rates by race and perpetuate ideologies about the angry, unlovable Black woman. Using a content analysis of cable and network television shows with Black professional women as lead characters, this study connects an analysis of the characters' lived experiences to normative expectations of Black women in relationships to call into question the prevailing narrative that Black women are in part personally responsible for their statistical plight. I will closely study how the two stereotypes, the Jezebel and the Sapphire, are still used in the narratives for Black women today. The goal of examining these three shows is to show that their portrayals of professional Black woman perpetuate the idea that Black women don't have the time for relationships because they're too focused on their job, and that the low marriage statistics allow portrayals of Black women that perpetuate the idea that they are not cut out for, or interested in, marriage and family. Marquita Marie Gammage in her book "Representations of Black Women in Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood" says that society, rather than placing the blame of low marriage rates on factors such as social or economic problems, put the blame on the black woman instead. The issue lies with the blame being put on the individual rather than the social system as a whole.

## Introduction

Marriage and Black women are not synonymous. At least, that is what many (Black women included) are led to believe. How could they not? When there is propaganda and rhetoric circulating in pop culture and media on how *single* the Black women is. Sources like Oprah, CNN, ABC News, the Washington Post that 70% of Black women are single and 42% are unmarried (J.J. Smith). Black women as a community have been socialized to believe that they, as a group, are undesirable and unfit for marriage. This belief is born from stereotypes classifying Black women as aggressive, emasculating, and hypersexual. These traits are seen as damning to Black men and Black women's partners as a whole.

Marriage in the world of Professional Black women, in particular, is seemingly nonexistent. Having an education and being financially stable is seen as problematic for professional Black women. There are currently more Black women in higher education, receiving their degrees than there are Black men. Black women hold currently hold two-thirds of all African American bachelor's degree awards, 70% of masters and 60% of all doctorates (JBHE 2006). The dating pool for Black women in the higher education feel to meet Black men is very small, considering about 25% of Black men in the United States are in prison (Vega 2013). Yet, when talking about marriage and professional Black women the problem is never addressed: how can we fix this? Instead, a lot of the blame is placed on the *individual*. Professional Black women are seen as the problem for the declining rates of marriage in the Black community. The focus is not placed on societal conflicts like shifting ideas of the importance of marriage, economic and educational status, and the percentage of Black men

currently under the incarceration system which creates a lack of potential mates within their race for Black women to choose. Instead, the blame gets shifted to *Black women themselves*.

This blame comes directly from the stereotypes that are ridden within the Black women narrative. The same narrative retold and reimagined by popular culture and television that Black women are Jezebels always looking for sex or Sapphires that are constantly emasculating the men around them. These narratives are at the forefronts of everyone's television, hidden under the guise of the revolution that is the Black women starring in a lead role.

### **The Damaging Effect of Media Portrayals of Professional Black Women**

This idea that professional Black women do not get married is only further perpetuated in 21<sup>st</sup> century media. Through television portrayals of professional Black women, the misconception that Black women, and professional Black women in particular, are getting married at lower rates in America compared to any other group of women in the country continues to be perpetuated. There are television dramas like *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder* (HTGAWM), and *Being Mary Jane* (BMJ) that are all written and produced by Black female authors. Having Black women write about the experience of Black women is important as these Black women playing leading roles become the representation of the group they identify as. Olivia Pope (OP), Annalise Keating (AK), and Mary Jane (MJ) are all professional, successful Black women. They excel at their professions and are great at what they do. They are all single. They are all powerful, headstrong, dominant women. Most importantly, they are all Black.

However, the inevitable downfall comes when their characters are analyzed more in-depth. These characters are still written in the narratives used to negatively portray Black women since the beginning of slavery. Behavioral traits of the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotype are written into their characters. Olivia Pope, Annalise Keating, and Mary Jane all exhibit behavioral traits of the Jezebel and Sapphire. They are aggressive, emasculating, and hypersexual. There are many instances in their shows where they use sex to get ahead or aggression to emphasize their dominance. Since there is a startling lack of social science literature written about Black women, these character portrayals become problematic. The social science literature currently available are all written by White social scientists. This is an issue because White, *male*, social scientists cannot possibly be able to understand the complexity of the Black women experience.

Additionally, these three characters become the spokeswomen to a group of women who do not get enough attention in mainstream media. Therefore, the *narrative* of professional Black women will be defined by these three women and there has been no indication that OP, AK, or MJ have broken the damaging narrative that continues to plague Black women and force them into undesirable stereotypes unfit for marriage. With these images of professional Black women at the forefront of everyone's minds the misconception that Black women are not getting married, and are the ones to blame for their low marriage rates because they choose to pursue higher education or embody specific traits of the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotype, continues to be perpetuated.

More research needs to be done on this topic because there is a great lack of social science literature dedicated to the Black women experience. More attention should be brought upon how powerful media perceptions of professional Black women are and its effects on the

interpretation of the professional Black women experience. Television is a powerful cultural tool. What is show on TV has a great influence on people's perceptions of Black women. Especially if those watching these television shows have never interacted with a Black woman before. These media portrayals coupled by preconceived beliefs of how Black women behave perpetuate stereotypes of Black women being unfit for marriage.

By studying these three shows and in particular their main characters, this research hopes to prove how media portrayals of Professional black women continue to perpetuate the "Black women don't marry" narrative.

### **The Problem with Statistics**

There is a statistic that says 42% of Black women in America are unmarried. The myth stems from a study done at Yale. Yale conducted research in 2009 that revealed only 42% of women involved in their study were married (Nittle 2016). That statistic was proven false by researchers Ivory A. Toldson of Howard University and Bryant Marks of Morehouse College (Nittle 2016). They concluded that the major flaw with Yale's research was that women ages 18 and older participated in the study. In addition, Toldson and Marks found that in actuality: 75% of Black women were getting married before the age of 35 (Nittle 2016).

The inclusion of women 18 and older seriously skewed the results which led to this "42%" statistic appearing (Nittle 2016). Realistically speaking, 18 year olds are not getting married *regardless* of race or class. The average age for women getting married in the U.S. is 27 (Cohn, Passel, Wang, Livingston 2011). If anything, people in the U.S. are getting married *later* in life, not sooner. For men, the average age for getting married is 29 (Cohn, Passel, Wang,

Livingston 2011). Black women are especially getting married later on in life. An article reported how research had come up to debunk the myth that Black women are not getting married. Instead, they were getting married at older ages than other races. By age 55 most Black women had married (Taylor Gordon 2015).

Furthermore, Riché J. Daniel Barnes quotes law professor Ralph Richard Banks's book *Is Marriage for White People?* who suggests in their book that "Black women, even professional Black women, are responsible for the decline of marriage rates because there are more college-educated Black women than Black men; therefore, Black men assert more power over the dating and marriage relationship than Black women, and Black women must exercise their power to date and marry outside the race to regain Black men's attention" (Barnes 34). The responsibility for the decline of Black marriage is placed solely on the shoulders of Black women. It becomes their burden to bear. Rather than searching for ways to resolve the issue or for the causes that create so much singleness in the Black community, the blame is shifted towards the Black women. This, in turn, creates layer of oppression as it then creates the ideology that it is the Black women's duty to change herself in order to fix the problem.

Winfrey Harris quotes Steve Harvey from his bestselling book *Act like a Lady, Think like a Man*: "If you've got your own money, your own car, your own house, a Brinks alarm system, a pistol, and a guard dog, you're probably shouting from the rooftops that you don't need a man to provide for you or protect you, then we'll see no need to keep coming around" (Harris 47). Being "successful" or "independent" as a professional Black women is immediately reprimanded. The narrative is told time and time again that being successful, being *better* than

your male counterpart is damaging to not only their manhood, but the black community as a whole.

The blame is never placed on societal issues such as the cultural shift in marriage or how now, more than ever, there are more single women from all races and backgrounds thriving in America. Men in the United States are never asked or criticized about why they are single. In fact, it is more believable for a man to be single in the United States than a woman because singleness is seen to be a more masculine trait. No, the problem for Black women's "undateable" so to speak, is continuously *placed on the Black woman herself*. She is to blame for her lack of a spouse. She is to blame for her loudness, her anger, her dominance, her ability to succeed and thrive on her own two feet.

This paper will discuss and analyze how 21st century media portrayals play into the perpetuation of the misconception that Black women, and professional Black women in particular, are getting married at lower rates in America compared to any other group of women in the country.

## **Lit Review**

### **The Existing Narrative on Emasculation, Aggression, and Hypersexuality that Paint the Black Women Experience**

To grasp a clearer comprehension of the narrative of the Black women experience, it is important to understand the stereotypes riddled within the narrative. In particular, this paper will be focusing on two stereotypes: the Jezebel and the Sapphire. The Jezebel is associated with hypersexuality. While the Sapphire is typically associated with the 'matriarch' figure. These

two stereotypes, as well as many others (like the Angry Black Women and the Mammy) are labels that have been placed on Black women since the beginning of slavery. The Jezebel and Sapphire images continue to be used in both social science literature and the media as imagery to represent the Black women (Jean and Feagin 7).

## **A History Lesson on the Jezebel and the Sapphire**

### ***The Jezebel***

The Jezebel is a very common portrayal used to describe the Black women. In this light, the Jezebel is defined as “the hot, exotic, and instable sexual player who is especially attracted to white men” (Jean and Feagin 8). This concept is in stark contrast to the European’s idea of *white* womanhood that is depicted as being both pure and modest (Jean and Feagin 8). Modern day Jezebel continues to exemplify European notions of Black women being overly sexual. The Jezebel stereotype has no moral compass. Gammage writes how the Black women “was believed to invite sexual encounters and thus was not subject to rape” (Gammage 25). This ideology encourages dehumanizing Black bodies, subjecting Black female to a level of oppression where they are lesser because of their gender *and* race. The Jezebel was a threat to White family structures due to her fascination with the White men. The Jezebel was believed to be a threat because of her perceived ability to lure White men into sexual escapades and away from their families. This negative idea of the Black women being hypersexual plays into the narrative that Black women, as a whole, are unfit for marriage as they are threats to societal structure, especially in America.

The Jezebel stereotype was created in the 1700s and 1800s, where Europeans described African American women and men as “naked and with exaggerated organs” (Jean and Feagin 8). Due to this purposeful differentiation between Black bodies and White bodies, the Europeans came to the conclusion that Africans were more savage and animalistic. This justified the idea that Africans were more overly sexual than their White counterparts due to their nudity and exaggerated organs. This damaging process of dehumanizing a human to nothing more than their sexual organs allows for heinous acts like violence and rape to occur. Furthermore, such negative descriptions of their bodies allowed Europeans to continue the notion that African Americans were sub-human at best. This idea holds particularly true for the African women during this time.

There was a special interest in the Africa female body. Due to this interest in their bodies, European traders would take and transport African women from the homeland into European societies. Their bodies were then used for nothing more than scientific and public examinations (Gammage 19). A prime example of this is Saartje Baartman, a Khosian woman born in the 1770s. Gammage in her book *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* explains how the women of the Khosian tribe were of particular interest to the Europeans because of their large buttocks (Gammage 19). The women of these tribe were forced into servitude and were seen as exotic. They were used mostly for display purposes (Gammage 19). Saartje Baartman was no different, but commands particular spotlight since from birth she was groomed to be nothing more than a display item.

She was sold to a European trader and placed into a zoo and renamed the Hottentot Venus. She was seen as nothing more than a sideshow. She was seen as different and exotic

and was dehumanized to nothing more than her sexual organs. For five years, Saartje Baartman was sexually violated and forced to perform song and dance for White audience. Her body was used for sexual experimentations. Her legs were spread and her body was touched and fondled by audience members. Due to her body being poorly treated, Saartje Baartman became sickly and frail. This did not stop her White counterparts from continuing using her body as a sideshow. Even in her death, when Saartje Baartman succumbed to her disease, her sexual organs were preserved and displayed in an enclosed glass for 100 years (Gammage 20). This act of continuing to exploit her body despite its rundown condition exemplifies how the Europeans thought of Africans, and African women in particular, as nothing more than bodies. They ripped away their humanity and reverted them to nothing more than animals. This thought process is dangerous as it allows the 'majority' or 'superior' group to continue its damage to the minority without any moral repercussions.

### ***The Sapphire***

The concept of Black women as "emasculating" or "domineering" comes from the Sapphire stereotype. The Sapphire is a common stereotype used to portray Black women. Feagin and Jean describe the Sapphire stereotype as a "domineering matriarch" and "an emasculator who is strong, unfeminine, and rebellious" (Jean and Feagin, 7). This narrative is dangerous. The notion of a woman being "dominant" contrasted with the European ideal of womanhood. The ideal European woman was meek, mild, and subservient to their male partners. The Sapphire, in contrast, takes hold of her household and fails to perform her womanly domestic duty (Harris, 6). The Sapphire upsets the familial household and has been blamed for the decline of progress in Black households.

Sapphires are not seen as desirable for marriage. They are not submissive to their male counterparts. Representations of Black women, and in particular professional Black women, continue to play into the narrative of Black women being emasculate, aggressive, and hypersexual. This narrative continues to promote the idea that Black women don't get married. Gammage argues in her book that these representations of Black women "are portrayed as unwilling or unworthy to marry Black men" (Gammage, 110). Professional Black women are portrayed as unwilling or unworthy to marry because they value their work before their romantic relationships. If they are in romantic or sexual relationships, more often than not it is to further advance their career.

A report titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965 can be to blame for the development of the Sapphire stereotype and the reason why it is viewed so negatively. Moynihan was a White social scientist who wrote how the Black women was the to blame for the "tangle of pathology in the Black community" (Jean and Feagin 6). Harris-Perry writes on the Moynihan Report and discusses how the report condemns Black women for the problems within the Black community. She writes that although Moynihan wrote that the Black women was to blame for the black community as a whole struggling to achieve equality in pre-Civil Rights Era, he did not identify "the structural barriers facing African American communities [...] and reported on the assumed deviance of Negro families. This deviance was clear and obvious because Black families were led by women who seemed to be their households' primary decision makers" (Harris-Perry 2011 93).

Describing Black women as the fault for all their problems has dire consequences on the perception of the Black women experience. Harris-Perry details the negative response to Black

women thanks to the Moynihan Report. She writes that because of the Moynihan Report two generations of conservative policy makers were granted them “permission to imagine poor Black women as domineering household managers whose unfeminine insistence on control both emasculated potential male partners and destroyed their children’s future opportunities” (Harris-Perry 2011 93). This rhetoric is damaging to Black women because the blame for the Black community as a whole is placed on the Black women’s shoulder. It does not come up with concrete solutions to solve the problems that go into the development of damaging statistics like 70% of Black women are single, or 42% of Black women are not married. Harris-Perry argues that literature like the Moynihan Report, written by a White male, allows for the dominant group to be devoid of all responsibility for the minority group’s problem (Harris-Perry 2011 94).

It is important to realize the harmful effects of the Sapphire stereotype. In the same way that the Jezebel allows for the dehumanizing of Black female bodies which allows for sexual exploitation to occur without remorse, the Sapphire stereotype invalidates the anger and feelings of Black women. Thanks to the Angry Black Women stereotype which can be placed under the same vein as the Sapphire, emotions such as anger and aggression are not seen as legitimate reactions. Her reactions are deemed irrational. Her anger is seen as a way to continue controlling the men around her, which looking back on the Moynihan Report, emasculation is a danger to the Black community. Invalidating the anger of Black women invalidates their experience as a whole, which continues the cycle of placing the blame on the *individual* rather than the societal issues that play a factor into their problems.

Sapphire and Jezebel have constantly changed and transformed throughout the years since their initial conception. These stereotypes are reused and recycled through mass media, as can be seen in various portrayals of Black women Sapphires or Jezebels on television (Jean and Feagin 8).

### **Black Writers under White Television Companies**

According to Gammage, television dramas of the 21st century give a flat and one-dimensional perspective of the Black woman. When Black women are put at the forefront they are generally portrayed as “single, career-minded, without children, and full of drama” (Gammage, 95). There’s been a serious lack of Black women representation in the media. bell hooks uses filmmaker Osumane Sebene to explain how the lack of media representation for a minority group leads the minority group to create their own models. She writes, “For people like us, there are no such things as models. We are called upon to constantly create our models. For African people, Africans in the diaspora, its pretty much the same. Colonialism means that we must always rethink everything” (hooks, 2). Gammage further argues that this lack of absence has given Black female writers and producers an opportunity to transform the narrative and imagery surrounding Black womanhood. Although it might be expected that with a Black woman at the reigns the ability to rewrite the negative imagery surrounding Black women would be easily accomplished, it is still important to note who truly has control. These television dramas starring Black women are produced and aired through white-run companies. The truth of the matter is, that at the end of the day these companies will continue to push their reflections of their views on Black women. This happens simply because it is the negative imagery of Black women that sells the ratings.

Gammage in her book *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* uses Entman and Rojecki's argument about racial imagines on television to back up their point. Entman and Rojecki argue that:

“Along with other media, it is both a barometer of race relations and a potential accelerator either to racial cohesion or to cultural separation and political conflict. Because Whites control mass media organizations, and because Whites' majority status makes their taste the most influential in audience-maximizing calculations, media productions offer a revealing indicator of the new forms of racial differentiation. Beyond providing a diagnostic tool, a measuring device for the state of race relations, the media also act as a causal agent: they help to reshape the culture” (Gammage, 95).

What they argue is that, although Black women are creating these Black female characters, their imagery is still a reflection of attitudes held by the majority: white Americans. Shows like *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* are both written by Shonda Rhimes, a Black female. However, the station they are aired on, ABC, is white-owned. In comparison, *Being Mary Jane* is on BET (Black Entertainment Television). The name alone signifies that the network is controlled by a person of color. However, the show still portrayed a Black women in a very one-dimensional fashion that failed to break away from the Jezebel or Sapphire stereotypes.

### **How does my project fit a whole in the literature?**

Jean and Feagin argue that there is a “relative neglect in social science scholarship” when dealing with the experiences of Black women throughout history (Jean and Feagin, 5). Due to this lack of social science scholarship, Black women are even more prone to

misinterpretation and mischaracterization “in public and private discourse” (Jean and Feagin, 5). The purpose of my project is to do a more in-depth study on how current media portrayals of professional Black women continue the negative perpetuation of the ‘anti-Black marriage’ propaganda. The three shows that I have studied: *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *Being Mary Jane* all feature Black women in leading character roles. While this is a groundbreaking feat in and of itself as there hasn’t been a show aired on television featuring a Black woman as the lead role since 1974, there are still problems that arise with the way these Black women are portrayed.

Olivia Pope, Annalise Keating, and Mary Jane are now the faces of professional Black women everywhere. They are what the mainstream culture will look to and refer to as their benchmark for professional Black women behavior. This burden most heavily falls on Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating as their shows are aired on ABC, a major television network that reaches to millions of viewers every night. These women are still written in a narrative that highlights parts of the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotype. On multiple occasions, these women are seen as aggressive forces of nature. They are seen emasculating the men around them, constantly in control or dominant of their surroundings, and not above using their sexuality to get their way. It is this narrative that, while it’s not overt, still paints a picture in the mind of the American public that professional Black women (1) do not want to get married and (2) are not as desirable for marriage because of the negative traits listed above.

My project will show these characters are still promoting the anti-Black marriage propaganda. The only difference is that Black women are starring in their own shows as the lead character. These characters carry the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes into their

narratives. They have been reshaped and reformed them to fit a more subtle image of Black women. This image continues panders to the dominant culture's understanding of the minority group. The problem of Black women viewed as undesirable or unfit for marriage continues. It is important that a Black women writes about these character portrayals. Their portrayals will affect how the rest of American society interprets the experiences of Black women, and in particular professional Black women.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this paper is to answer the following question: how 21st century media portrayals play into the perpetuation of the misconception that Black women, and professional Black women in particular, are getting married at lower rates in America compared to any other group of women in the country.

There were three methods used for this study: content analysis, Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought*, and the Grounded Theory Method. For the content analysis, I watched the first two seasons of *Scandal*, *HTGAWM*, and *BMJ*. I chose to only do the first two seasons as *HTGAWM* is only up to Season Two. Keeping everything standardized would make it easier to take notes and compare growth or changes in behavioral patterns between the pilot season and the second season. The first season of *Scandal* had seven episodes and its second season had twenty-two. *HTGAWM* had fifteen episodes in both seasons. Finally, *BMJ* had nine episodes in its first season and twelve episodes the second season. Each episode across all the shows ran an average of 40 minutes with the exception of the pilot for *BMJ* that ran for approximately an hour. All the shows were watched on Netflix, a video streaming site, within the span of two

weeks for each season. The main characters of each show (Olivia Pope, Annalise Keating, and Mary Jane) were studied using content analysis. Certain behavioral categories were created that highlighted certain aspects of the Jezebel or Sapphire stereotype. The behavioral traits are as followed:

Initiates Sex	Blocking
Other Party Initiate	Instances of emasculation
Dresses sexily ( cleavage, tight hugging )	Character removes make-up
Blamed for sexual activity on MC	Character appears to have on no make up
Character appears to be “made up”	“Lack of empathy”
Punishment (social & professional)	MC takes control
Suggestive phrasing	MC seems dominant / charge
Number of monogamous vs sexual contact	Instances of vocal aggression (paralanguage)
Number of failures	Instances of physical aggression

(NOTE: the left box is for Jezebel. The right box is for Sapphire).

Some behavioral patterns were removed when moving onto the Season Two if no instances came up in Season One, such as suggestive phrasing. Blocking was added for Sapphire as it was

apparent in Season One that the position and body language of the main character in relation to the supporting characters could be seen as emphasizing the main character's dominance. Some traits were combined under one heading, such as 'appears to be made up' became grouped together under 'dressing sexily'.

The second method used in this study was the *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins. Black feminist thought is defined as a way for Black female intellectuals to study and produce theories that will help to grasp a better understanding of the Black women's experience for black women. Collins argues that it is important for Black female intellectuals to do studies on other Black women because there is a shared identity that makes the researcher richer and more profound. Collins addresses the issue on about literature on Black women being written by *White* social scientists. White men are the ones doing research on mostly oppressed minority communities. They are doing this in a way that is true to the positivist approach to scientific research: trying to maintain objective distance between the researcher and the subjects. This is a power imbalance. Maintaining an objective distance means you never get a real sense of the environment the subjects are living in. This limits the completeness of your data. Due to this power distance between the researcher and the subjects, the likelihood that they are giving you all of the available information is unlikely, which limits the scope of your research. Collins is saying that your research can not possibly be the most useful set of information about this group of people because you are inherently unable to collect the rich data you need to get the complete picture of oppression in general.

This epistemological approach was incorporated into the research due to my shared identity with these three characters. As a Black women hoping to pursue higher education and

later on, join the working field. Sharing the identity of the research subjects allows me, as the researcher, to critique in greater detail the behaviors and characters portrayed in these three shows as I experience their problems day to day. The very idea that Collins mapped out in *Black Feminist Thought* is woven into the very fabric of the shows being studied. Shonda Rhimes and Mara Brock are writing and producing the lives and experiences of Black women. It is adapting this approach to mass media images of Black women.

The final research method employed in the Grounded Theory Method. The Grounded Theory (GT) is defined by “is a systematic methodology in the social sciences involving the construction of theory through the analysis of data” (Patricia Yancey Martin, Barry A. Turner). Grounded Theory compliments the Content Analysis method because it allowed for a very intuitive and creative process to ensue. As the study progressed, more themes and interpretations naturally began emerging from the process. It allowed me, as the researcher, to come up with creative and original findings by means of analysis from the data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

*Scandal* debuted on April 5th, 2012 and was created by Shonda Rhimes. It goes through the lifestyle of high-profile politicians and the teams that support them. Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington is a fixer. Her job is to fix the problems that arise in Washington. Many characters throughout the show seek her consultation and help with their problems. A majority of her clients are wealthy, white males and females. Her most powerful client, however, is the President of the United States, Fitzgerald Grant who she is also having an extramarital affair with. Throughout the show, we see Olivia tackling the scandals of both her clients, and her own.

*Being Mary Jane* put out its first show on BET on January 7, 2014 and was created by Mara Brock Akil. The main character, Mary Jane who is played by Gabrielle Union, is a very successful news anchor for SNC's show Talk Back. *Being Mary Jane* goes through Mary Jane's life as a well-educated, single black woman searching for love, happiness, and starting a family. However, it's not so easy. She balances both her job at the news station, and being the only breadwinner of her family as she helps them out with their issues, gives them advice, and offers them guidance. In the first two seasons we see Mary Jane entering various relationships, her most notable being with a married man, and how she handles those encounters. All with the goal of one day being able to find the right man to settle down and start a family with.

Finally, *How to Get Away with Murder* premiered on ABC on September 25, 2014. The show is also written by Shonda Rhimes. HTGAWM features Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) and her team of both students and lawyers as they work together to win cases. Annalise is married to Sam Keating, a White professor who works at her college. However, as the story unfolds, the viewers discover that Sam is having an affair with one of this students. Furthermore, Annalise is having an affair with a Black police officer, Nate Lahey. Throughout the show we see Annalise using Nate as a way to win cases.

### **Emasculation and Annalise Keating**

#### **Data for Emasculation**

Annalise Keating is a powerful defense lawyer. She demands respect in both her classroom and in the courtroom. Annalise is always giving orders for the Keating 5 to follow, as

well as to her two assistants: Bonnie and Frank. There are many times throughout Season One where Annalise is shown taking control of the situation. For example, when Wes comes back to the house after Sam was killed, Annalise is there waiting to give instructions for Wes to follow (Season 1, Episode 10). She is also seen going head to head with her husband, Sam, a White psychiatrist who works at the college. When engaged in a heated argument with Sam over Lyla, the girl he was having an affair with, Annalise shows no signs of backing down (Season 1, Episode 9).

In Season Two, it is Annalise's continuing emasculation of the men around her that leads to the ultimate downfall that occurs in Season One. In a flashback, it is revealed that Frank went to visit Annalise during her case, as she was not living at home at the time. When he goes to visit and check up on her, Annalise immediately deflects his questions about whether or not she is doing okay. Later, Annalise says to Frank in response to her detached behavior, "You call that abuse then you deserve whatever white trash future I saved you from" (Season 2, Episode 14). Due to her harsh, emasculating behavior, Annalise is "punished" with Frank backstabbing her and driving into her car as she is driving to meet a client. The events that occur after this down spiral and lead back into the events of Season One. Annalise emasculating Frank is alluded to be the reason as to why the events of Season One even occurred (the death of Lyla which also lead to the death of Sam). Black women cannot be emasculating or else they threaten the inner fabric of their smaller social communities, as we see with Annalise and her emasculation causing her social circle to crumble.

### **Emasculation Traits**

Trait: Emasculation	HTGAWM	SCANDAL	BMJ
Emasculation	135 total counts	219 counts in total	116 total counts
Lack of Empathy	89 total counts	61 counts in total	102 total counts
Control	290 total counts	296 counts in total	105 total counts
Dominance	116 total counts	136 counts in total	47 total counts

Table 1

### **Emasculation and Olivia Pope**

Olivia Pope always puts her career first. In the first episode of Season One in Scandal, Olivia says to her associate, Stephen, that “I’m not normal” and that she “doesn’t date” (Season 1, Episode 1). Many characters comment on how Olivia’s a “workaholic” whose only concern is getting the job done. Olivia’s biggest client is the President, Fitzgerald Grant (Fitz). Fitz is also the man she is having an affair with. Her influence on Grant is palpable. Cyrus, White House Chief of Staff, constantly tells Olivia that Grant is at a standstill because of her. His emotional and mental health are adversely or positively affected by her appearance. Cyrus, the White House Chief of Staff says to Olivia that Fitz is “Struggling. He’s suffering. And you’ll make it worse” (Season 1, Episode 4).

Olivia Pope is depicted as someone who earns and demand the respect of those around her. She is always seen in complete control of situations. There are many times throughout Season One (and Season Two) where Olivia makes the last decision no matter what the rest of her team may vote on. Furthermore, Olivia is portrayed as someone who does not open up about her feelings. Abby, her longtime friend, as has tried on numerous occasions to get Olivia to open up. However, time and time again, Olivia will avoid the discussion or deflect it back to

work matters. This is another important trait of emasculation, as Olivia is not open with her feelings. Being open and honest with one's feelings is a feminine trait, yet Olivia rarely displays this behavioral trait. This kind of portrayal can create the idea that, in a romantic relationship, Olivia will react the same way and not open up about her feelings, thus causing the relationship to be difficult. We see the effects of Olivia not opening up about her feelings or plans totally on her team, as members like Quinn and Abbey start to question Olivia's motives in Season Two.

During Season Two, Fitz and Olivia participate in nightly phone calls. Although Olivia tells him to stop calling her, she always picks up the phone whenever it rings. Most of these phone calls will end with Olivia giving advice to Fitz. This advice could be anywhere from legal action to important Presidential decisions. Fitz then puts this advice into action. Olivia is also seen emasculating the men around her. In Season Two when she's dating Edison, Olivia does not hold back her opinions. She is quick to debate with Edison on who made the better president. However, when things get more emotional, Olivia is always denying Edison. The job will always come first. For example, Edison asks if Olivia is asking for his help with her latest case as a fixer or a friend. Olivia replies with "I'm asking as a fixer." To which Edison replies, "Wrong answer, again." (Season 2, Episode 6). She is constantly deflecting emotional or relationship matters with work. She declines Edison's proposal to marry many times during Season Two, as her job is more important. Olivia embodies the emasculation aspect of the Sapphire in this instance as she has made Edison unworthy of love. She puts work above her relationships. This portrayal of the Sapphire trait reinforces the idea that professional Black women have no time to work on their romantic relationships and value work above all else.

### **Emasculation and Mary Jane**

With Mary Jane we see that her job is equally or more important than her relationships. During Season One, Mary Jane gets back together with one of her old exes, David. Their relationship seems purely sexual, with the potential of becoming something more. However, the night David proposes that they go out for a date, Mary Jane ends up cancelling because she had to stay later at work than planned. Due to this, David decides to end things with Mary Jane. He tells her that he's going to the game with someone else. The message sent in this moment is that professional Black women place their careers above their relationships. Having both a career and a relationship is impossible. Due to this, they fail to secure or maintain stable relationships with Black men as the Black women are too masculine and career-oriented.

Mary Jane is also the main breadwinner of her family. She has two brothers, her older brother Patrick and her younger brother Paul Jr. She makes more money than the both of them. In the first episode of Season One, Patrick goes to Mary Jane for money. Mary Jane gets angry and starts dragging her brother for not making enough money. She also says that Patrick is living in their parents' house for free, so there should be no need for him to not have enough money to pay off loans or rent (Season 1, Episode 1). In Season Two, however, Mary Jane is more agreeable to lending money to Patrick. This does not change the fact that Mary Jane is the one providing money for her brother, which exemplifies her emasculating her brother.

In addition, the first episode of Season Two shows Mary Jane verbally attacking her little brother Paul Jr. in front of her friends at a dinner party. The conversation is about how family is a burden to fully enjoying the benefit of one's labor. When Paul disagrees with Mary Jane, she insults him in front of her friends and attacks his masculinity. She says: "Let me be really, really, really real. I would have used your ass as an example but you're sitting here. Yeah, you sling

your penis to every miff in Virginia Highlands to push off a dime bag. You whack off in your parents’ house” (Being Mary Jane, Season 2, Episode 1). Her friends are shocked but her brother is quick to return an insult back. Then the party comes to an end. Once again, Mary Jane is shown emasculating the men of her family. She also emasculates the men in her relationships. When she starts dating Sheldon, he makes dinner for her. Yet, Mary Jane criticizes his attempts of making a meal and when confronted with her rudeness, is reluctant to admit she’s at fault. Characterizing Mary Jane in such a way reinforces the Sapphire stereotype and shows a portrayal of professional Black women as people who are difficult to handle, emasculating, aggressive, and harsh. Traits that are not suitable for a working, romantic relationship.

### **Aggression**

Trait: Aggression	HTGAWM	SCANDAL	BMJ
Vocal	42 total counts	35 total counts	19 total counts
Physical	9 total counts	6 total counts	10 total counts

Table 2

### **Aggression and Annalise Keating**

Annalise Keating is portrayed through both seasons as aggressive. Most of these instances are through vocal rather than physical. During Season One, Annalise lets Bonnie take control of their latest case: defending a woman accused of killing the family’s nanny during a pharmaceutical-fueled state of sleepwalking. Bonnie fails to figure out that one of their witnesses is withholding vital information, so Annalise verbally attacks her by saying: “You can’t do your one simple job — tell me what’s coming my way. That’s all I ask. And in return I tolerate

your pitiful, mousy, pathetic presence in my house!” (Season 1, Episode 8). There are also moments throughout both seasons where Annalise yells at her students to get it together, especially during times where emotions are running high. Season Two shows roughly the same amount of vocal aggression from Annalise. During Episode Seven of Season Two, Bonnie and Annalise get into an argument after Bonnie finds out that Annalise revealed her childhood to Asher. After a verbal sparring match, Bonnie says to Annalise, “You don’t know how to love anyone” (Season 2, Episode 7). Many characters have commented on Annalise’s lack of empathy. Even Annalise herself has said, “What have I ever nurtured? What have I ever protected, cared for or loved?” (Season 1, Episode 13). Phrases like these help to perpetuate the Sapphire stereotype that Black women are uncaring and aggressive, verbally insulting even friends and loved ones. These traits are not desirable for marriage, which in turn shows professional Black women as women who are *not* desirable for marriage by association.

### **Aggression and Olivia Pope**

Olivia Pope is also portrayed as more vocally aggressive than physically aggressive. She is not afraid to raise her voice at both coworkers and clients if the need arises. She uses vocal aggression to push people away when they try to pry too deep into her personal matters. The most iconic moment of Olivia using vocal aggression is her rant towards Fitz. Olivia yells at Fitz and says, “I am not a toy you can play with when you’re bored, or lonely, or horny. I am not the girl a guy gets at the end of the movie. I am not a fantasy. If you want me, earn me. Until then, we are done” (Season 2, Episode 20). This is a very powerful moment in the series, as Olivia stands up to Fitz and finally (for now) puts an end to being Fitz’s mistress. However, her yelling

out to Fitz (a White male) is another sign of aggression and emasculation, which plays back into the Sapphire stereotype of Black women being unappealing because of their aggression.

### **Aggression and Mary Jane**

The first episode of *BMJ* shows Mary Jane holding a bat as the doorbell rings (Season 1, Episode 1). When she finds out that the man she is sleeping with is married, she kicks him out, spraying him with a water hose, and throwing his clothes at him while yelling to get out (Season 1, Episode 1). In Season Two, the first scene that opens is Mary Jane throwing her fishbowl at her glass window, shattering the glass (Season 2, Episode 1). Carrying around a bat, yelling and throwing things at her partner, and throwing objects that result in damage all go back to the stereotype of Black women being aggressive. This constant play on the aggression narrative, which is one of the traits for Sapphire, portrayed in current Television shows perpetuates the idea that professional Black women are aggressive towards their partners. Being aggressive towards your partner is not an ideal trait, which leads to professional Black women being seen as undesirable once again.

### **Hypersexuality**

Trait: Hypersexual	HTGAWM	SCANDAL	BMJ
MC Initiates Sex	13 total counts	12 total counts	16 total counts
OP Initiates Sex	2 total counts	12 total counts	17 total counts
Blame for Sexuality Activity (MC)	10 total counts	33 total counts	18 total counts
Punishment (social or professional)	4 total counts	25 total counts	18 total counts

Table 3

### **Hypersexuality and Annalise Keating**

*In How to Get Away with Murder*, Annalise is having an affair with a Black police officer named Nate Lahey. Numerous times throughout the first season, the viewers see Annalise using Nate for both sex and career advancement. One notable example of this is in Season One where she frames her boyfriend for the murder of her husband. It is later revealed in the episode that she had seduced Nate into having sex with her so her assistant, Frank, can later go into his room to steal fingerprints off his tumbler. Annalise then used that night of sex as her alibi the night her husband was murdered (Season 1, Episode 12). Annalise has also noted many times throughout Season One that she has used her body to get ahead during her career.

During Season Two, Annalise tells Michaela Pratt, a Black student of the Keating Five, to prep their client Caleb Hapstill. Michaela is pleased to hear this, until Annalise says, "You've got boobs. Any brother screwing his sister should not respond to them" (Season 2, Episode 4). Portraying Annalise in this manner continues the notion that Black women are sexually immoral. This also paints the picture of professional Black women being seen as people who are not afraid to use their body to get what they want. Even if it means betraying their loved ones and using them to get ahead.

### **Hypersexuality and Olivia Pope**

Olivia and Fitz are in a sexual relationship despite him being married. Their relationship started back during his campaigning days, and continues onto the present (although it is very on and off). Although Olivia is confronted by her affair with the president by his wife, they continue. Although Olivia herself knows that this relationship is fruitless, she still goes back with Fitz throughout the two seasons. Olivia even says to Fitz, "I'm feeling a little Sally Hemmings,

Thomas Jefferson about this” (Season Two, Episode 8). The quote holds a heavy implication of her status as nothing more than his mistress. In Season Two, after Olivia and Fitz break off their relationship, Fitz is seen grabbing Olivia and pulling her into a supply closet to have sex. This occurs right after Cyrus’s child is christened. Olivia and Fitz proceed to have sex. When it is over, Fitz says “I may not be able to control my erections around you but that doesn’t mean I want you. We, are done” (Season 2, Episode 14). Once again, the narrative that professional Black women, and Black women in general, are seen as nothing more than bodies is reinforced through this scene.

### **Hypersexuality and Mary Jane**

Mary Jane’s hypersexuality is not hidden in the show. In Episode One, Mary Jane is seen masturbating before her date using a vibrator (Season One, Episode One). Throughout Season One she continues her affair with Andre who is married. Scenes depict her doing various sexual acts such like oral sex, masturbating, or having sex with different men. When she is with Andre, Mary Jane goes as far as to confront the wife in the store that she is sleeping with her husband (Season One, Episode One). In later episodes, Mary Jane meets the wife again and proceeds to give her oral sex tips and “throw shade” by saying that married men cheat because they are not getting satisfied in the sexual department of their relationship. In Season Two, Mary Jane is hooking up with Brandon, a football player she meets online. Although Mary Jane has the opportunity to settle down with someone and be in a stable relationship, she rejects it. Staying single at the end of each season.

The portrayals of these stereotypes continue to reinforce the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes written into the narrative of the professional Black women. Showing these women as emasculate, aggressive, and hypersexual contribute to the idea that professional Black women are unfit for marriage. These portrayals show that these women do not want to get married because their careers are more important. They are harsh and vocally aggressive to both their peers and romantic partners, which are unattractive traits to have in a partner. Someone who is vocally aggressive or harsh might be more unwilling to reach a compromise with their partners. Finally, being depicted as hypersexual is damaging as it shows that professional Black Women have loose morals and a lack of respect of other relationships. The continuation of this narrative is damaging to the professional Black women community as a whole as the decline in marriage rates then falls onto the Black women's shoulders and is believed to be the cause of their problems, thanks to these character traits.

### **Limitations & Further Research**

Some limitations to this project is as followed: only the first two seasons could be watched for each show due to *HTGAWM* being only two seasons long at the moment, so anymore growth or development was not taken down. Some behavioral traits mentioned above were not portrayed in the show. Also, some behavioral traits were revealed later on while watching but were not added into the behavioral traits. For future research, it would be good to get outsider opinion on these character portrayals and see how both Black and White women react to seeing these characters represent their group as a whole. It would also be interested to note how television portrayals of professional White women are done in comparison to portrayals of professional Black women.



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