Scandal: How Olivia Pope Breaks Social and Political Boundaries

A scandal is defined as an action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong that causes general public outrage, therefore, it is no wonder that Shonda Rhimes’ hit television show is titled as such, Scandal. This television series, based on Judy Smith, President Bush’s Deputy Press Secretary, is centered around Olivia Pope, the former White House Communications director who left the White House to focus on her personal law firm, Oliva Pope and Associates. But there is a catch, Oliva Pope also left the White House due to the fear of numerous scandals being exposed and having her reputation exposed. Shonda Rhimes created Scandal with the purpose of drawing attention to subjects that aren’t normally seen or talked about, such as African American women in power and immorality that goes on within the government. To bridge the gap between Scandal and reality, the question that is being raised is, “How accurate is Olivia Pope’s portrayal of a black woman in a position of power in the government/law and are the actions that she commits, moral?”

First, women have always been viewed as less than men and incapable of holding positions of leadership. More specifically, African American women have been valued as even lower than white women and labeled with unpleasant characteristics. Because of this, it has been harder for all women of color to advance into leadership positions in our society. Therefore, Shonda Rhimes characterized Olivia Pope specifically to impact the way that people view black
women. Olivia Pope represents the few, not only African-American, but all women in a position of power, and her representation of a black woman is specifically interesting, because she breaks the status-quo.

For example, in article titled, “Trope and Associates: Olivia Pope’s Scandalous Blackness,” by Tara Lynne Pixley, she states “Central to this idea of representational diversity is Pope’s navigation of life as if her blackness and womanhood were ancillary characters to her ambition and integrity” (28). In the journal, Pixley stressed that even though the first thing that people see is the color of one’s skin, Shonda Rhimes characterized Olivia Pope where her determination and leadership ability proved to be the first thing that viewers noticed - not her race. Similarly, an article by Janie Filoteo titled, “ABC’s Scandal,” highlights the way “the mass media have systematically portrayed a cultural image of African American women, based on myths and stereotypes, that justifies the limited access that African American women have to societal resources and institutions” (213). As stated before, society has a view that black women are not equip to be leaders, and in response to that, Filoteo identifies that, again, Rhimes’ strategic depiction of characters based on their abilities and skills, not their race, allows the characters to not be constrained to their minority status.

Furthermore, three articles explain how Olivia Pope represents black women in the legal and government field. First, in Cheryl Ann Lambert’s article, “Post-racial public relations on primetime television: How Scandal represents Olivia Pope,” she discussed how Olivia Pope is represented as a black woman in the public relations profession and how it is not the norm to see a black woman in such a highly respected position, which is why Scandal is such an iconic television series. Lambert said, “An African American female boss is a relatively new phenomenon in U.S. network television. African Americans cast in leadership occupations
usually have secondary roles” (750). This point is clarified through a stereotype that Lambert identifies. Essentially, black women are stereotyped as either incapable of handling power, or “the superwoman who [is] high achieving [and] selfless” (750). Shonda Rhimes makes sure to classify Olivia Pope in the category of hardworking and intelligent, so that the proper version of African American women is represented.

Continually, the second article that answers how Olivia Pope exemplifies black women is written by Utz McKnight. “The Fantastic Olivia Pope: The Construction of a Black Feminist Subject” explains the importance of Olivia Pope as an African American woman in politics. McKnight states, “What makes Scandal unique is that in the character of Olivia Pope it has established as central to the show what is a rare image on television, that of an African American woman as the successful manager of a firm, one that employs a racially diverse group of people” (184). Because Pope was the White House Communications Director for President Fitzgerald Grant, she was held to a higher standard. Olivia Pope became even more of a spectacle because of her race and her affair with President Grant. This article also highlights how Oliva Pope’s new “fixing” firm is made up of employees from all different racial backgrounds. It also touches on how Pope reflects the stigma that black women cannot be extremely successful, but then breaks the status-quo.

Third, in an article by Mikušová and Čopíková, titled, “What Business Owners Expect from a Crisis Manager? A Competency Model: Survey Results from Czech Businesses,” the authors highlight the traits that companies look for when finding a crisis manager. The journal says, “the objective of this research is to determine what skills and abilities, that is competencies enterprise owners and managers require of crisis managers and use the findings to create a model of crisis manager competencies” (163). A crisis manager must have leadership skills, strategic
thinking, focus on results, time management, resilience, problem solving, and communication - just to name a few. All of these characteristics, which Olivia Pope does have, are vital for creating elasticity against crises, therefore she reflects an actual crisis management lawyer.

Each of these ideas that were captured in the articles backs the assumption that Olivia Pope is presumed to be the uncommon African American woman who Shonda Rhimes created in order to represent Black women in a different light than they are normally viewed. Also, the journal by Mikušová and Čopíková states that character traits that are expected in a crisis manager, and Olivia Pope embodies those characteristics. This evidence applies to the research questions, because Black women are rarely seen holding positions of authority, like Olivia Pope, so when Shonda Rhimes created such a powerful character, her intentions were to create an image in viewers’ head that black women can be leaders and have that proper characteristics needed to be a successful crisis manager and leader, in general. Overall, as seen in these articles, Olivia Pope represents that black women are powerful, independent, and classy, and she represents them well.

Moreover, the second question asked regarding *Scandal* is, “Are Olivia Pope’s actions moral and ethical?” In an article, “Scandal: Olivia Pope, Pope Francis, and Catholic Social Thought,” the author, Meghan J. Clark, gives a religious perspective on the question of morality. A question asked in the journal is, “What is a scandal?” then it is answered both objectively and subjectively. Clark says, “In popular culture, scandal involves something morally or legally wrong coupled with public outrage. In contrast, as a theological category scandal is that which impedes the community’s relationship with God” (495). The main idea is the three types of scandal that are featured in the Bible: “hypocrisy, impurity, and dehumanization” (495). Clark
goes on to define each instance that these issues are discussed in the Bible, then links it to Abc’s, *Scandal*.

First, Clark explains how Christian pastors use Oliva Pope as a guide for someone that you should not want to be. “Some use *Scandal* to focus on adultery, the quintessential scandal of impurity… women are told you do not want to end up like Olivia Pope, who, for all her accomplishments, is reduced to her role as the president’s mistress” (Clark 497). Pastors warn against being involved in unethical acts, not because of the act itself, but because of the negative consequences that follow. Second, the other way that *Scandal* and Olivia Pope are discussed in churches is by speaking about the underlying factor, temptation, instead of directly addressing the immoral acts. In her article, Clark says, “rather than focusing solely on the extramarital affair at the show’s core … Impact Church’s series discusses temptation, accountability and redemption” (497). By breaking down the underlying reasons why the unethical acts were committed, the understanding that Olivia Pope’s actions are immoral is easier to grasp.

Another way that Olivia Pope’s depraved actions are identified is through Ahmad’s article, titled “Role of Types of Electoral Rigging, Socio-economic Status, Politics and Voting Behavior in the Formation of Attitudes and Electoral Integrity.” In this journal, the authors describe election rigging and how it affects society and politics. In *Scandal*, one of the biggest outrages that happens in the show is when Olivia rigs the election with Cyrus, Mellie, Verna, and Hollis in order to make President Fitzgerald win. The journal states that “democratic values and maintaining integrity in electoral process” is infringed upon when people commit electoral fraud (195). This source does not relate to the other sources, because it is the first source that directly talks about election rigging and how the fictional show Scandal, relates to the real world and election-rigging that takes place in real governments today.
Furthermore, another big question about the ethicalness of Olivia Pope’s actions is raised regarding B613, the government agency that employs previous military personnel to kill civilians who are a threat to the republic. An article titled, “Delegating Death: Military Intervention and Government Killing,” is by Jacqueline H.R. DeMeritt. She explains that there is government killing that is similar to the killing that takes place in *Scandal’s* B613. DeMeritt says, “one particular brutal policy [governments and bureaucrats administer] is the decision to murder civilians” (430). The real-life process that happens is almost exact to the election to kill a civilian in *Scandal*. “The logic of government killing maps readily onto the canonical P-A story: there is one principal, a government, and one agent, a set of perpetrators” (DeMeritt 430). Much like B613, the head “principal,” according to DeMeritt, chooses who to kill and an agent does the killing. In *Scandal*, first, someone in power, like the President or a White House staff member, requests for a civilian’s death. Then “Command,” the leader of B613 selects an agent from B613 to do the killing. Finally, the agent can accept or decline, however, the agent never declines because that usually results in his or her own death. Because of the way that DeMeritt describes actual government killing, she helps to identify the accuracy of the events in the television show, “Scandal.”

The next article by Basinger and Rottinghaus is titled, “Skeletons in White House Closets: A Discussion of Modern Presidential Scandals.” It describes how Olivia Pope’s immorality relates to previous White House scandals. When it comes to discussing scandals in the White House, the media immediately gravitates toward blowing up the administration. Shonda Rhimes is no stranger to creating fictional scandals, which is why the main character, Olivia Pope, life’s is centered around it. Basinger and Rottinghaus discuss numerous scandals that have taken place in different White House administrations. The authors said, “scandals have
also been present since the nation’s founding; two members of George Washington’s cabinet, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, were involved in notorious sex scandals that were the basis of political attacks” (214). Basinger and Rottinghaus also make it clear that scandals lower a president’s political popularity and people begin trusting the government less after the scandal proves true (215). This is proven in Scandal, because in the short term, President Fitzgerald was shown as a depraved adulterer who could not be trusted emotionally or politically.

Each of these articles refers to the negative acts that Olivia Pope committed and compares them to other acts that have happened in real life, such as Biblical scandals, election rigging, the killing of civilians, and White House scandals. These journals answer the question “Are Olivia Pope’s actions immoral?” Each journal documents real life instances when someone performed activities that were exactly like what Olivia Pope’s scandals. In real life, these people were criticized, which means that Olivia Pope should be criticized for her actions as well. Therefore, it proves that things that Olivia Pope has done are immoral and unethical.

Contrastingly, although Olivia Pope’s actions are immoral, she provided more media attention to President Fitzgerald and increased his popularity. This situation draws a similarity to the Clinton Administration and the Lewinsky campaign. In the final source of this research paper, “Monica Lewinsky’s Contribution to Political Science,” Zaller describes how the Monica Lewinsky scandal increased President Clinton’s rating, although the public thought that the opposite would happen. The Lewinsky and Clinton Scandal is very much like the Pope and Fitzgerald Scandal. First, Monica Lewinsky worked in the White House with President Clinton, similar to Olivia working with Fitz, which made the issue even more immoral. Also, the legality
of the affairs was an issue, because the security of the United States was at stake after the women left the White House.

Zaller stated, “Clinton’s State of the Union address occurred on Tuesday evening, the end of the seventh day since the Lewinsky story broke. Two national surveys were taken immediately after the speech. From baselines on the day before the speech … one survey showed no change and the other showed a gain of five points, for an average gain of 2.5%” (184). Contrary to popular belief, although scandals bring negative attention, they also bring positive attention, because it is sometimes believed that any attention at all is good attention. This gain in favor during the Clinton campaign proves that even though there was a scandal involving a mistress, President Clinton gained support, because of Monica. This counterclaim proves that not all of Oliva Pope’s actions were negative, because in reality, President Clinton’s ratings increased after the Lewinsky Scandal. In the same way, President Fitzgerald, in Scandal, never lost supporters due to his affair with Oliva Pope, because she was such a well-respected woman in her field.

Finally, when engaging in illegal activity, consequences are sure to follow. Olivia Pope rigged elections, killed innocent civilians, killed a Supreme Court Justice, and had an affair with the President of the United States. All of these actions are immoral and in the real world, they all have consequences like prison. However, because Scandal is fiction, Oliva Pope never faces any consequences. The point is that Olivia Pope has done terrible things like murder and election rigging, however, she does not let that overshadow the powerful leader that she is. Olivia Pope embodies a strong black woman who never dares back down to anyone, which makes her such a strong leader. Shonda Rhimes carefully constructed Olivia’s character so that the audience would have a different mindset toward black women and women in positions of power.
Works Cited


