

Women's Leisure as Political Practice: A Feminist Analysis of *Orange Is the New Black*

Janet K. L. McKeown and Diana C. Parry

Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine representations of women's leisure portrayed on the popular Netflix television series *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB). Using a feminist lens rooted in the notion of interconnectivity, we draw on four television tropes proposed by Pozner (2010) that are commonly used to depict women characters on television to analyze representations of women's leisure in the first three seasons of OITNB. Our analysis reveals the complex and messy ways representations of women's leisure on OITNB can be used to discipline, reproduce, but also challenge power relations associated with common media tropes, acting as a form of political practice. We conclude by considering the implications of how these representations can influence the lives of women consuming this media content as part of their leisure.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 October 2015
Accepted 15 June 2016

KEYWORDS

feminism; media production and consumption; pop culture; power; women's leisure

Women are commonly represented through media in narrow and restricted ways that are based on stereotypes tied to gender, race, class, and sexuality (Trier-Bienik, 2015). Pozner (2010) has referred to these types of media representations of women as promoting ideological persuasions that convince consumers "certain behaviours are 'innate' for different groups of people, and present culturally constructed norms of gender, race, class, and sexuality as 'natural,' rather than performances we've learned to adopt through societal education and expectation" (p. 98). In this way, media content can reinforce what people consider to be normative (Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014), working to convince consumers what "real" womanhood means, including what "real" women should do, say, act, and the ways "real" women should behave in their everyday lives, including their leisure (Pozner).

The feminist leisure literature has brought attention to the ways power operates in women's leisure and the ways women's leisure can be a form of political practice. However, there remains limited feminist leisure literature examining the ways women's leisure, as represented through media, can be used to discipline, reproduce, and challenge power relations tied to gender, race, sexuality, class, and so forth. As such, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, we conduct an analysis of representations of women's leisure portrayed on the popular Netflix drama *Orange is the New Black* (OITNB), an American television series created by Jenji Kohan based on a memoir (with the same name) written by Piper Kerman about the time she spent in a minimum security women's prison. To frame our analysis, we describe four television tropes proposed by Pozner (2010) commonly used to depict women characters on television.

CONTACT Janet K. L. McKeown  j2mckeow@uwaterloo.ca 

© 2017 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

Then, using a feminist lens rooted in the notion of interconnectivity (Hesse-Biber, 2012), we draw on conceptualizations of power to analyze the complex and messy ways representations of women's leisure on *OITNB* (looking specifically at the first three seasons) can work to disrupt, reproduce, and perpetuate power relations (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, class) associated with these media tropes. We then consider how these representations can influence the lives of women consuming the show as part of their leisure. To set the context for our analysis, we provide a brief description of the plot of *OITNB* followed by an overview of research on women in prison and feminist work on power, both early and contemporary contributions, that inform our analysis.

Women in prison

OITNB Plot: *Piper Chapman is living a quiet, law-abiding life in middle-upper class New York with her fiancé, family, and friends when her past with ex-girlfriend Alex Vause, who worked as an international drug smuggler, catches up with her. In a complete disruption to her daily life and future plans, thirtysomething Piper is convicted of criminal conspiracy for transporting a suitcase full of drug money across international borders for Alex 10 years previously. Piper is sentenced to 15 months in a minimum security federal prison for women. Reunited in prison, Alex and Piper rekindle their relationship, but are on and off again as secrets are exposed (e.g., Alex named Piper in her trial leading to her arrest) and they negotiate life inside with the other prisoners. The lives of inmates and their guards are revealed through flashbacks tracing significant moments that lead to their current situation.*

Since its debut, *OITNB* has received critical and popular attention because many fans identify with the diverse representations of women portrayed on the show (Trier-Bieniek, 2015). The diverse representations of women characters on *OITNB* is highlighted in the opening credits that streams quickly through a series of women's faces, up close, in what can be interpreted as an effort to capture and appreciate women's uniqueness and diversity. Indeed, *OITNB* invites viewers into life on the inside of prison and sheds light on the day-to-day interactions of incarcerated women, including their leisure. While *OITNB* is one of only a handful of television shows to delve into prison life for women, there is a fairly large body of academic literature that has explored the experiences of incarcerated women. The literature spans many disciplines and topics including the prevalence of psychiatric disorders amongst incarcerated women (Jordan, Schlenger, Fairbank, & Caddell, 1996), the challenges incarcerated women face as they return to their communities (Richie, 2001), the rates of childhood abuse among women serving time (Zlotnick, 1997), and addiction issues (Zlotnick, Najavits, Rohsenow, & Johnson, 2003). There are also offshoots of this literature exploring, for example, the experiences of children whose mothers are incarcerated (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993).

In comparison, a relatively small amount of leisure research has explored the experiences of incarcerated women. The leisure literature that does exist includes work by Stumbo and Little (1991), who examined the importance of programs to help facilitate contact between incarcerated mothers and their children. Robertson (2001) noted the importance of leisure education for youth (not just women) who had criminal experiences. Williams (2006) advanced a forensic leisure science to explore patterns between leisure, crime, and rehabilitation.

More recently, a group of scholars have focused specifically on the experiences of incarcerated women through a feminist, leisure lens (Pedlar, Yuen, & Fortune, 2008; Pedlar, Arai, & Yuen, 2007; Yuen & Pedlar, 2009). Their research highlighted how incarcerated women are

among the most marginalized of populations and that the common perception of women in prison is that they are either “mad” or “bad” (Pedlar et al., 2008, p. 24). The reality is that many incarcerated women come from a life of poverty, suffer from various mental health issues, deal with substance abuse, suffer physical and sexual abuse, and have had few opportunities to pursue education or training (Pedlar et al., 2008). The situation for incarcerated women of color and Aboriginal women is even worse as they face additional cultural discrimination and racism (Hannah-Moffat, 2000).

The stigmatization and marginalization of incarcerated women influences the social and cultural impact of television shows such as *OITNB*, given that *OITNB* is not just a show about women, it is about women in prison. Thus, we contend *OITNB* offers an important context in which to examine the complex ways power relations permeate representations of women’s leisure on the show. We turn next to outlining the different ways power has been conceptualized in the feminist literature, drawing on both early and more contemporary conceptualizations of power that inform our analysis.

Examining power in women’s leisure lives

Early feminist literature examining power in women’s leisure focused on the concept of leisure as resistance. Leisure, when conceptualized as resistance, is seen as a site for women, either individually or in groups, to challenge ideologies, expectations, and stereotypes that perpetuate unequal power distributions and the ways power is implemented within patriarchal society (Shaw, 2001). Under this premise, leisure becomes one arena where women’s power is gained, maintained, reinforced, diminished, or lost. According to Shaw (2001), “leisure as resistance implies that leisure behaviours, settings and interactions can challenge the way in which power is exercised, making leisure a form of political practice” (p. 186). In this way, leisure, when considered in relation to resistance, moves discussions of leisure past simply the benefits of leisure and opens discussions to include political processes involved in leisure (Shaw).

Feminist leisure scholarship focused on early conceptualizations of leisure as resistance has usefully documented the ways leisure can be resistant (leading to empowerment for women) or reproductive (leading to a loss of power and control for women). First-time mothers, for example, can use leisure as a form of resistance to socialized gender roles by seeking experiences based on a need for increased sense of autonomy and self-value unexpected of mothers in a patriarchal society (Wearing, 1990). Henderson and Bialeschki (1991) determined women gained a sense of empowerment by feeling entitled to leisure of their own as opposed to facilitating it for others. Similarly, a study conducted by Harrington, Dawson, and Bolla (1992) found women who resisted an ethic of care (which encouraged them to put the leisure needs of others before their own) felt empowered as a result of their decision-making process. Moreover, Green (1998) explored women’s friendships in relationship to resistance. She stated women-only leisure pursuits facilitated feelings of empowerment and resistance to stereotyped gender roles.

Building off of this early work, contemporary feminist research has complicated the relationship between leisure and reproduction and resistance by illustrating the dynamic and often intricate interplay between reproduction and resistance in women’s leisure. For example, Parry’s (2016) research explored women’s use of sexuality as a resource in flat track roller derby. She demonstrated how roller girls intentionally play up and reproduce gendered stereotypes of women’s sexuality in an eroticized performance through their clothing, derby names, derby plays, and derby language, but in a resistant, intentional manner. In so doing, the derby

girls take reproduction and make it resistant, thereby complicating the binary that has been the focus of much previous leisure research.

Similarly, McKeown (2015a) used a feminist, autoethnographic approach to explore her own experiences navigating single life, dating, and leisure as a single, adult woman. She noted how at times when dating she would adhere to more passive roles (e.g., refusing to initiate dates) because, by doing so, she gained a sense of power and control over the dating process. Ultimately, she noted how she found a sense of empowerment in her reproduction of certain gendered roles when dating, again troubling the resistance/reproduction binary.

McKeown (2015b) also considered the ways power influences women's leisure lives in messy ways in her conceptual paper on women's performances of gossip. More specifically, she brought attention to the importance of feminist leisure scholars looking more closely at the ways women use talk together as part of their leisure, given that women's performances of gossip can shape their gendered subjectivities, often in messy ways that involve elements of labor, reproduction, and resistance. Berbari (2012) also examined the ways women use talk as part of their leisure in her ethnographic study on women's sororities. In her study, she presented complex understandings of sorority women's gendered subjectivities by showing the ways overt and covert forms of girl talk can discipline women's gendered performances within the sorority context. Yet she argued that by illuminating the ways women are disciplined in sorority contexts "simultaneously shows the possibilities of transformation through 'seeing' how we are disciplined, challenging the discipline, and promoting new possibilities for our own gendered selves" (p. 624).

Contemporary feminist leisure research is complicating the relationship between reproduction and resistance. Taken together, this body of feminist leisure scholarship crosses many substantive areas, and advances our understandings of the ways power is imbued in women's leisure. However, one key area where further research is needed is popular culture, including media, and its ties to leisure more specifically (Spencer & Paisley, 2013).

Media representations of women

From the broader feminist literature, researchers have spent more time and attention considering the influence of media representations on women's lives (Douglas, 2010; Pozner, 2010). These researchers have illustrated the ways media representations are complex, layered, and multifaceted and, as such, cannot solely be praised for "challenging stereotypical ideals of how gender and culture are consumed" (Trier-Bieniek, 2015, p. xii) or critiqued for reproducing stereotypes. For instance, Howard (2015) illustrated in her analysis of gendered roles and perceptions of the reality television show *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, gendered stereotypes are often simultaneously reproduced and resisted through media representations. She noted the ways *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* challenges gendered stereotypes of women who are housewives who stay at home to care for their children and husbands by depicting broader representations of housewives, including women who are divorced, women without children, and women who manage their role in the home with a successful career outside the home. However, Howard elaborated that gendered stereotypes are also reinforced through the show and its storylines. For example, gendered stereotypes are reproduced by the show through its depiction of African American women as "divas." Pozner (2010) also used the example of *The Real Housewives* franchise to illustrate the ways racial and ethnic stereotypes are represented by different series that are part of the franchise. For instance, on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, black women are often represented as being verbally and at times

physically intimidating, whereas on *The Real Housewives of Orange County* white women are often portrayed as rich, snobby, and disloyal.

Moreover, Herman (2003) explored representations of gender and sexuality depicted in the British television series *Bad Girls*, a primetime drama that like *OITNB* is based on the lives of women in prison. In particular, Herman noted how lesbian characters are typically positioned within a heteronormative context when portrayed on mainstream television. However, *Bad Girls* resists this heteronormative context along with traditional representations of gender and sexuality, by re-positioning women's sexuality within a homonormative context, where lesbian romantic and sexual relationships are viewed as normative and desired.

With these ideas in mind, we contend there is value in considering more closely (and critically) the complex ways power relations operate through leisure representations of women's leisure on *OITNB*. To do so, our analysis uses a feminist lens rooted in the notion of interconnectivity. Moving beyond the concept of intersectionality, interconnectivity embraces "more movement and fluidity than lies in the metaphor of intersection, as well as offering a way of thinking about how not only race and gender, but also nation, sexuality, and wealth all interconnect, configure, and reshape each other" (Bhavnani & Talcott, 2012, p. 137).

Through this feminist lens, we turn next to our analysis of women's leisure on *OITNB*. To do so, we first provide a description of the main characters from *OITNB* that inform our analysis. We then draw on four tropes that Pozner (2010) argued are commonly used to represent women characters on television: 1) women cannot be trusted, 2) women are gold diggers, 3) women are stupid, and 4) women are incompetent. These tropes are rooted in the notion of gender essentialism, meaning they work to make the characteristics of each trope appear common to all women (Pozner). We describe each of these tropes and analyze how they are represented through women's leisure on *OITNB* in complicated ways.

Analyzing women's leisure on *OITNB*

Cast of Characters

Inmates:

Piper Chapman – thirtysomething-year-old bisexual Caucasian woman from middle-upper class background convicted of criminal conspiracy.

Alex Vause – thirtysomething-year-old lesbian Caucasian woman from lower-middle class background convicted of drug trafficking.

Galina "Red" Reznikova – fiftysomething-year-old heterosexual woman from lower-middle class background and has ties to the Russian mob (although her exact offense has not been made clear at this point).

Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren – thirtysomething-year-old lesbian African American woman who struggles with mental health issues. Her conviction has not yet been revealed.

Tasha "Taystee" Jefferson – twentysomething-year-old heterosexual African American woman from lower class background convicted of drug trafficking.

Nicky Nicholas – twentysomething-year-old lesbian Caucasian woman from upper class background convicted of theft and later sent to maximum prison for a drug-related charge.

Aleida Diaz – fortysomething-year-old heterosexual Spanish woman from lower class background serving time for narcotics.

Dayanara "Daya" Diaz – twentysomething-year-old heterosexual Spanish woman from lower class background serving time for a drug-related crime.

Tiffany "Pennsatucky" Doggett – twentysomething-year-old heterosexual Caucasian woman from lower class background convicted of murder.

Gloria Mendoza – fortysomething-year-old heterosexual Spanish woman from lower-middle class background convicted of fraud.

Cindy "Black Cindy" Hayes – twentysomething-year-old heterosexual African American woman from lower-middle class background convicted of theft.

Lorna Morello – twentysomething-year-old bisexual Caucasian woman from lower-middle class background convicted of harassment and attempted murder.

(Continued on next page)

(Continued)

Cast of Characters

Pousse Washington – twentysomething-year-old lesbian African American woman from middle class background. Her conviction has not been made clear.

Carrie “Big Boo” Black – fortysomething-year-old lesbian Caucasian woman from middle class background. Her conviction has not been made clear.

Sister Jane Ingalls – fiftysomething-year-old Caucasian nun. Her class background is not revealed. She is serving time for politically protesting/trespassing.

Norma Romano – fortysomething-year-old heterosexual Caucasian woman from middle class background. She is serving time for murder.

Leanne Taylor – twentysomething-year-old heterosexual Caucasian woman. She lived in an Amish community before serving time for drug trafficking.

Brook Soso – twentysomething-year-old heterosexual Asian woman from upper class background. She is convicted of unlawful political activism.

Yvonne “Vee” Parker – fiftysomething-year-old heterosexual African American woman from lower class background. Her conviction has not been made clear, but is likely tied to her involvement in a drug ring.

Sophia Burset – fortysomething-year-old African American transgender woman from middle class background serving time for fraud.

Stella Carlen – twentysomething-year-old lesbian Caucasian woman. Details about her background and her conviction have not been revealed.

Angie Rice – twentysomething-year-old heterosexual Caucasian woman. Details about her background and her conviction have not been revealed.

Prison Guard:

Sam Healy – fiftysomething-year-old heterosexual Caucasian man who is overtly heteronormative. Mr. Healy is both a correctional officer and inmate counselor.

Trope 1: Women cannot be trusted

The first trope Pozner (2010) identified is that women are commonly depicted through media as being malicious, catty, manipulative, jealous, insecure, and, at times, even vicious. The basis of this trope is rooted in the assumption that women are constantly competing with one another for romance, love, careers, and success. Media depictions work to reaffirm this trope, by illustrating how women’s competitive edge often leads them to “back stab” other women. In this way, women are positioned as stopping at nothing to get what they want. The notion that women are in constant competition with each other reinforces the idea that women cannot be trusted, particularly when it comes to their relationships with other women. Pozner explained how this trope portrays “women’s antagonism toward one another ... as innate” (p. 101) and women are often pitted against each other as rivals, enemies, or so-called “friendemies” (friend-enemies) through media representations (Pozner).

This stereotype is foreshadowed in the first season of *OITNB* when Piper (the main character of the show, meets with her prison counselor, Mr. Healy, who is overtly homophobic. Mr. Healy gives her advice about making it through her prison sentence, by advising her not to make any friends while she is there. He makes a point to emphasize how she should stay away from the “lesbians.” Indeed, in the episodes that follow there are a number of instances where women’s antagonism towards one another is highlighted in *OITNB*, particularly as it relates to women’s leisure contexts.

For instance, one of the most notable examples reinforcing this trope is the rivalry that emerges between Leanne and Soso in the third season. Leanne, who previously lived in an Amish community on the outside, is angered by Soso’s countering views of Norma’s spiritual following and outcasts her from the spiritual group. Leanne and Soso continue to feud throughout the season with Leanne even going so far as to cut off Soso’s long, black hair while she is sleeping. While this feud was grounded in Leanne’s dislike for Soso’s take on Norma’s spiritual following, it also reflects the class differences that exist among the two characters.

Pozner (2010) has pointed out that when the “women cannot be trusted” trope is reproduced through media, it represents a “broader media attack against women’s solidarity” (p. 105), where the importance of women connecting with one another, finding common ground, and the meaning of women’s friendships is challenged and diminished. Indeed, this trope focuses on what makes women different — class, race, age, and spiritual views — rather than on what commonalities exist.

However, feminist leisure researchers have illustrated the ways women’s friendships, as a context for leisure, can be used by women to cope with negative or stressful life events and in turn, can be an important context for support (Hutchinson, Yarnal, Staffordson, & Kerstetter, 2008; Hutchinson, 2013; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; Glover & Parry, 2008). Indeed, considering the ways women’s friendships can act as sources of support for women offers a useful lens to build understanding of the lives of women in prison and their friendships with one another. One of the most memorable examples on *OITNB* that illustrates the value of women coming together in a leisure context takes place in the final episode of the third season. The women at the prison, one after another, escape through an opening in the fence to enjoy time at the lake and beach nearby. This representation shows the characters putting their differences aside to enjoy the moment and to reconnect with friends and family members. For example, Daya and her mom Aleida, who have fought continuously throughout the show (e.g., Daya’s arrest, Aleida’s poor parenting, Daya’s relationship with the prison guard John Bennett and her subsequent pregnancy), put their anger aside and embrace in the sun on the beach. Similarly, Red and Norma find themselves on the beach rekindling their deep friendship. Viewers get an initial glimpse into their friendship in the first season. At that point, Red runs the kitchen and is the head of a small family of Caucasian inmates that includes Norma. Norma, who does not speak and communicates with body language and notes, is often portrayed silently attending to each of Red’s wishes and demands. In the following seasons, Red and Norma fall out, and Norma finds her own power as a spiritual leader to a small group of inmates and no longer wants, or needs, to be under Red’s control.

In addition to the examples of women’s friendships from this leisure context, there are several notable friendships that have surfaced on *OITNB* over the three seasons of the show, including Taystee and Poussey. As most prison relationships are governed by racial politics, these two characters are united by their mutual race (both are African American), but through their prison assignment of working in the library, their friendship grows deep surviving Poussey (who is gay) hitting on Taystee (who is straight). In addition, it is Taystee who notices when Poussey develops a drinking problem and actively works to cut her off from her homemade supply of alcohol and help her get sober. Another important friendship on *OITNB* is between Gloria and Aleida, two lower to middle class, heterosexual Spanish women who are mothers with kids on the outside. They support each other through the challenges of being separated from their kids and work closely together when Gloria takes over the kitchen from Red. Another example of an unlikely, but important friendship on *OITNB* is the friendship that emerges between Big Boo and Doggett in the third season of the show. Big Boo, known for her tough demeanor, usually only befriends inmates that she is sexually attracted to or that have something she wants. Doggett, who is vehemently anti-gay, which is grounded in her strong religious views, is not well liked by any inmates other than her loyal followers, Leanne and Angie. Despite their differences, Big Boo supports Doggett after she is brutally raped by Coates, a new prison guard. These representations of women’s friendships support the notion of homophily, wherein friendship connections between people are strengthened when people share similar aspects of their identities (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

However, *OITNB* also highlights a broader array of friendships that defy the racial lines governed by the prison system. One notable example is the friendship that emerges between Sophia and Sister Ingalls in the show's first season. They become friends because they are both viewed as outcasts in the prison context, as Sister Ingalls is the only nun in the prison and Sophia is the only transgender woman. Another example of the diversity of friendships portrayed on *OITNB* includes the friendship that begins to bloom at the end of the third season between Poussey and Soso after Poussy finds Soso unconscious in the library from of an overdose and helps cover it up so Soso will not be sent to the psych ward. Poussey, who is fully accepted among the African American prisoners, seeks out and befriends Soso, who struggles as one of the few Asian and upper class prisoners to find a friendship group. These examples challenge this trope, demonstrating the importance of women's friendships and the joy and meaning such connections, including diverse connections, can bring to women's lives.

Trope 2: Women are gold diggers

This trope bases women's primary motivation and interest in forming romantic and sexual relationships on their desire for money, security, and so forth. It paints women as mercenary, particularly as it relates to their relationships with men, with women stopping at nothing to get what they want (Pozner, 2010). On *OITNB*, this trope is reproduced by portraying characters who find enjoyment in manipulating men for money or extra privileges within the prison system. For example, in the show's third season Morello, who is known for her good looks and positive personality, begins to write to men who have written to her in prison as a hobby. She then meets the men to manipulate them into giving her money. This "gold digger" trope is strongly rooted in heteronormative understandings of womanhood, wherein, women are encouraged to position men at the center their lives, given that heterosexual relationships for women are traditionally viewed as the most important type of relationship in a woman's life (Taylor, 2012). This trope is particularly reflected in Morello's actions as she only writes and engages men, despite having an intimate relationship with Nicky in the first season of the show.

Moreover, this trope associates women's greed for men's money with women's willingness to be "sluts" and "whores" and posits "women as inherently calculating and unfeeling about sex" (Pozner, 2010, p. 130). An example of how this trope is reproduced on *OITNB* can be seen when Leanne accepts drugs from one of the prison guards, George, in return for sexual favors in season one. Another example of when this trope is reinforced is when Piper, in season three, is about to follow through on a sexual favor she promised one of the prison guards to solidify his role in her online panty business, before being stopped by Stella, another inmate, who joins the prison later in the series and whose good looks captivate many of the inmates, including Piper. This trope seems to defy class boundaries; that is, Leanne is a lower class inmate but Piper is not.

However, representations of women's leisure on *OITNB* also present a challenge to this trope in several ways by presenting images of women pursuing sex based on desire, connection, and enjoyment. For example, in season three, Suzanne writes a sci-fi erotica book called *The Time Hump Chronicles* that is read by many of the women inmates. Normally ostracized by many of the other prisoners due to her mental health issues, Suzanne enjoys a moment of celebrity status within the prison for her sexually explicit book. Without any shame about the nature of the book or their sexual desires, many of the inmates pester and pressure Suzanne to keep producing more chapters for their consumption. The book is

such a success that Suzanne even finds a chapter of the story that was written by another inmate as fan fiction. This representation subverts traditional expectations tied to women's sexuality that position women as passive when it comes to fulfilling their own sexual desires.

Moreover, *OITNB* resists heteronormative understandings tied to this trope, by highlighting lesbian romantic and sexual relationships on the show. For example, Morello and Nicky's steamy intimate relationship is highly profiled in season one of the show. In fact, part of Piper's initiation into the prison involves her first shower in which she sees Nicky and Morello having sex in one of the stalls. In addition, Piper's on and off relationship with Alex, her former intimate partner, runs throughout all three seasons. Lastly, in season two, Big Boo and Nicky hold a competition to see who can have sex with the most women. In this story line, the two characters develop ground rules and then set out to canvas all inmates with whom they can have sex with and keep score along the way. These representations reflect the work of Herman (2003), whereby women's sexuality is repositioned within a homonormative context that views lesbian relationships as normative.

Trope 3: Women are stupid

The third media trope that Pozner (2010) identified is the "women are stupid" trope. This trope reinforces understandings of women as ignorant, naïve, ditzzy, and intellectually inferior to men. Given that most media representations of women are often white women, common depictions of this trope tie women's appearance to their intellect (e.g., the dumb blonde). Although representations of white women are more common in the media, Pozner noted that women's stupidity related to media representations is not defined by racial boundaries. For instance, women of color are often depicted as loud and ignorant on television (Pozner). In turn, one of the most common ways women are represented as stupid through media depictions is through their use of talk together (Pozner).

Looking more closely at the ways characters on *OITNB* engage in talk, it is clear there are a number of representations of women's talk that reinforce this trope. For example, in season two, Leanne and Angie, two inmates who struggle with drug addictions, steal nutmeg from the kitchen when the prison floods as a way to get high. The characters are then shown having a nonsensical conversation with each other. The fact that both of these characters are from lower class backgrounds reads as pertinent to this representation. This trope is also reinforced in season three when Cindy (who is not Jewish) tries to learn about Judaism by watching *Annie Hall* so that she can continue eating kosher meals. Later, when she is asked questions about her Jewish belief system, she is unable to correctly answer any of the questions asked of her by the Rabbi. Finally, Suzanne, who struggles with mental health issues, is seen repeatedly calling herself stupid and hitting herself in the head over the course of the first three seasons of the show. As these examples illustrate, this trope is reproduced on *OITNB* through women's talk, including women's use of self-talk. Pozner (2010) explained, "When pop culture underscores ... women's mental inferiority to millions of Americans every week, continued efforts towards gender equity take a hit ... as do young women growing up in a culture that would prefer they shut up and look pretty" (p. 117).

However, representations of women's talk on *OITNB* also subvert this trope. For example, in season three, Piper's monologue about why the other inmates should get involved in her panty business, although highly theatrical, is also highly articulate and persuasive and rooted in a strong resistance to patriarchal society that defies the "dumb blonde" element of this trope. Another example of the ways women's intelligence is portrayed by *OITNB* through

women's talk, is when Big Boo, in season three, learns passages from the bible from Sister Ingalls to manipulate members of an anti-abortion group into giving her money. This trope is also subverted through women's use of talk in season three, during a memorial service for the books that were destroyed as a result of a bad bed bug outbreak at the prison. At the service, Poussey reads out names of authors that women put forward that should be honored (e.g., Swift, Letham, Kellerman), thereby demonstrating her knowledge of literature and thus, her intelligence.

Trope 4: Women are incompetent

A fourth trope that is commonly used to depict women on television is the trope that positions women as incompetent in multiple avenues of life (Pozner, 2010). Media representations often focus on depicting women's failures in the private sphere or home, the sphere that has traditionally been associated with women's work (Pozner). This trope is reproduced by representations of women's leisure on *OITNB*, most notably, in the third season, when the prison hosts a Mother's Day Fair and the women's children come to visit the prison to attend the fair. However, this event takes a turn when Aleida loses track of her daughter Lucy and the prison goes into lockdown, ultimately resulting in the event being cancelled. Throughout the show, but in this representation in particular, Aleida is depicted as an uncaring, irresponsible, and incompetent mother, a message that is reinforced throughout the series by highlighting Aleida's strained relationship with her daughter Daya, who is also incarcerated.

Pozner (2010) pointed out that television representations reinforcing this trope do not often take into consideration the ways cultural and social influences shape women's lives. Rather, women's failures are positioned by media as being caused by their poor choices and overall incompetence in their daily roles (Pozner). Yet one of the most compelling ways *OITNB* resists this trope is by sharing the women's backstories in a series of flashbacks throughout each of the episodes. The flashbacks help to build context and understanding as to why each of the women are in prison and to shed light on the systemic power disparities that contribute to why women break the law and turn to crime. For example, we learn that Sophia lived most of her life as man, but always felt like she should have been born a woman. We learn the daily struggles she faced living a life in which she did not feel true to her sense of self and the ways she tried to make it work, such as wearing lingerie under her fire fighter uniform. We glean a sense of the enormous risks — personally, professionally, and economically — Sophia takes when she decides to transition, including her marriage, her relationship with her son, and encounters with her co-workers after she is living as a woman. It is made clear by these flashbacks, why Sophia engaged in credit card theft to pay for sex reassignment surgery. This representation brings awareness to the day-to-day challenges and social oppression transgender people face, particularly in a prison context (Leavy & Trier-Bieniek, 2014).

Representations on *OITNB* also resist this trope by illustrating the ways women can take on caring, maternal roles in the prison context. For example, at the end of the third season, Taystee realizes that she is the "mom" of the African American group of inmates. Her competence in her maternal role is reaffirmed on a number of occasions throughout season three, in particular, when Taystee comforts Suzanne over Vee's death (the previous leader of the African American group) and when Taystee confronts Poussey about her alcohol addiction. In this regard, these representations of women's leisure on *OITNB* help to expose the social and cultural contexts that shape women's choices.

It is important to note this trope does not just position women as incompetent in domestic life but also in professional life (Pozner, 2010). Media depictions of women commonly position women as incompetent when they pursue careers in the public sphere, with women being portrayed as needing to use their looks to get ahead in the professional world. In this way, women's looks are portrayed as their primary asset (Pozner, 2010). This trope is reproduced on *OITNB* in season two, when a number of women participate in a mock job fair and are given direction on how to "dress for success" and the clothes the women choose are described as "too racy," "unprofessional," and their choices imply "poor judgment." However, this trope is also subverted when Taystee participates in the mock job fair. She shows her knowledge of the prospective company and answers the questions asked of her with competence and composure, resulting in her winning the mock job fair. Another example subverting women's incompetence in professional life illustrated on *OITNB* is portrayed in season three, when Piper and Alex decide to start a business venture selling underwear worn by women in the prison to men on the internet. The idea starts off as a fun distraction, but then quickly takes off as more and more women prisoners get involved in the business. Ultimately this results in Piper needing to make some tough business decisions to ensure the business continues to be profitable, by cutting certain women out of the business and punishing Stella for stealing money from the business.

As our feminist analysis illustrates, when analyzing media representations of women's leisure, it is important to consider the ways these representations can be used to discipline, reproduce, and challenge power relations tied to gender, race, sexuality, class, and so forth, sometimes simultaneously, and almost always in complex and messy ways. In turn, we contend there is a need for feminist leisure researchers to consider more closely and critically media representations of women's leisure from a feminist lens rooted in interconnectivity, given that a focus on interconnectivity opens spaces (both intellectual and emotional) that can bring a deeper awareness and understanding to the ways women live their leisure lives and the ways women connect and relate to one another (Hesse-Biber, 2012). While examining media representations of women's leisure can ultimately raise a "feminist consciousness ... where the personal transforms into the political" (Hesse-Biber, p. 2), we also recognize the need for feminist researchers to consider the ways media texts of women's leisure are being consumed by women as part of their leisure. We shift next to look at the impact media representations can have on consumers of *OITNB*.

Impact of media representations on consumers of *OITNB*

The influence media has on our everyday lives is not surprising, given that "mass media is our prime purveyor of ... cultural hegemony – by which I mean that media is largely responsible for how we know what we know. In other words, media shape what we think of as 'the truth' and 'the way things are'" (Pozner, 2010, p. 97). As Parry and Penny Light (2013) noted, gendered ideologies, expectations, and stereotypes represented through media influence how these texts are consumed and taken up by women as part of their everyday lives, including their leisure. Take for instance the genre of reality television. Pozner (2010) noted a number of reasons as to why consumers watch reality television including entertainment, escapism, *schadenfreude* (i.e., enjoying or reveling in the misfortune of others), and perceiving reality television to be harmless, superficial television not actually based in reality. In this way, media representations are often considered by consumers to be fun, superficial, and harmless and in turn the gendered ideologies, expectations, and stereotypes reproduced by these representations can be further perpetuated by consumers.

For example, Levy (2005) explored the impact of gendered ideologies represented in media culture on women's lives in her book *Female Chauvinist Pig: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Levy unpacked how cultural representations of women on television are inextricably linked to women's lived experiences. In her words,

I would turn on the television and find strippers in pasties explaining how best to lap dance a man to orgasm. I would flip the channel and see babes in tight, tiny uniforms bouncing up and down on trampolines...this didn't end when I switched off the radio or the television or closed the magazines. I'd walk down the street and see teens and young women- and the occasional wild fifty-year-old - wearing jeans cut so low they exposed what came to be known as butt cleavage paired with miniature tops that showed off breast implants and pierced navels alike. (pp. 1-2)

Arguing women have been sold empowerment under the guise of objectification and sexism, Levy posits "raunch" media images of women lead to "raunch" practices by women that can have negative implications for individual women, but also women as a social group.

Indeed, there is a need for consumers of media to look more critically at the ways ideologies, expectations, and stereotypes tied to gender, race, sexuality, and class shape their own lives (Pozner, 2010). For instance, Parry and Penny Light (2013) discussed how women's consumption of media, including sexually explicit material (e.g., pornography and erotica) as part of their leisure, can be used by women to subvert gendered ideologies, expectations, and stereotypes, affirming the ways woman can engage in sex for pleasure as active agents of their own bodies.

From the feminist leisure literature, Spencer and Paisley (2013) critiqued their own responses to consuming the reality television show, *The Bachelor*. They argued that linking empowerment with resistance, and reproduction with oppression, forwards a narrow understanding of how a "real-world" empowerment manifests for consumers of reality television. Drawing upon their personal experiences, Spencer and Paisley revealed a complicated relationship between resistance and reproduction in their leisure experiences of watching the *The Bachelor* and how empowerment is messy and cannot easily be split into a binary of resistance or reproduction.

Skeggs and Wood (2012) in their study examining women's reactions to makeover and personal transformation television shows found there was an element of ambiguity in women's reactions to these shows. They explained how audience reactions to representations on reality television is tied to worth and value. They shared, "It is often no necessarily a case of either care for participants or the moral judgment of them, but that viewers move in and out of care for participants, even often occupying both modes simultaneously" (p. 152). As such, they noted it is important not to draw assumptions about how television intervenes in women's lives because it can intervene in complicated ways. Rather, those moments of ambiguity need to be considered more closely, given that they offer important opportunities for women to reproduce, discipline, and challenge power relations tied to media representations.

All told, notions of empowerment are complex, especially when linked to popular culture, including media. To fully understand the social and personal impact of media representations of women's leisure, there is a need to conduct analyses (like we have done in this article), but discussions of media influence cannot stop there. The feminist leisure literature needs to also consider more closely how women are actually consuming media content as part of their leisure lives to understand the ties between media and empowerment more fully.

Conclusion

Trier-Bieniek (2015) explained that “when a phenomenon like *OITNB* hits...it reminds those who study fan and popular culture that more examination needs to be focused on how gender and media consumption are related” (p. xiii). As a result, a feminist analysis of media culture and in particular, *OITNB*, is a timely and important area of leisure research. Yet, media culture is complex and must be treated carefully by scholars in general, but feminists in particular. Our analysis of *OITNB* provides additional support for women’s leisure as an arena where power is gained, maintained, reinforced, diminished or lost, often in complex and messy ways. This line of leisure research is important, given that challenging ideologies, expectations, and stereotypes ultimately results in a challenge to underlying power relations, which affords an understanding of women’s leisure as political practice. As media culture takes on an increasing focal point of importance in our everyday lives, women’s leisure as political practice becomes a progressively important lens to understand media culture, including the ways representations of women’s leisure are produced by the media, and then consumed by women as part of their leisure.

References

- Berbary, L. A. (2012). “Don’t be a whore, That’s not ladylike”: Discursive discipline and sorority women’s gendered subjectivity. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18, 606–625.
- Bhavnani, K., & Talcott, M. (2012). Feminist research. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *The handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 135–153). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bloom, B., & Steinhart, D. (1993). *Why punish the children?: A reappraisal of the children of incarcerated mothers in America*. San Francisco, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.
- Douglas, S. J. (2010). *Enlightened sexism: The seductive message that feminism’s work is done*. New York, NY: Times Books.
- Glover, T. D., & Parry, D. C. (2008). Friendships developed subsequent to a stressful life event: Links with leisure, social capital, and health. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 40(2), 208–230.
- Green, E. (1998). Women doing friendship: An analysis of women’s leisure as a site of identity construction, empowerment, and resistance. *Leisure Studies*, 17(3), 171–185.
- Hannah-Moffat, K. (2000). Prisons that empower. *British Journal of Criminology*, 40(3), 510–531.
- Harrington, M., Dawson, D., & Bolla, P. (1992). Objective and subjective constraints on women’s enjoyment of leisure. *Loisir et Societe*, 15(1), 203–222.
- Henderson, K. A., & Bialeschki, M. D. (1991). A sense of entitlement to leisure as constraint and empowerment for women. *Leisure Sciences*, 13(1), 51–65.
- Herman, D. (2003). “Bad Girls changed my life”: Homonormativity in a women’s prison drama. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20(2), 141–159.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2012). Feminist research. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *The handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed., pp. 2–26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Howard, N. (2015). The new housewife: Gender roles and perceptions of *the real housewives of Atlanta*. In A. Trier-Bieniek (Ed.), *Fan girls and the media: Creating characters, consuming culture* (pp. 101–117). London, England: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hutchinson, S. L. (2013). A reader’s reflection on women’s friendships. In V. J. Freysinger, S. M. Shaw, K. A. Henderson, & M. D. Bialeschki (Eds.), *Leisure, women, and gender* (pp. 203–214). State College, PA: Venture.
- Hutchinson, S. L., Yarnal, C. M., Staffordson, J., & Kerstetter, D. L. (2008). Beyond fun and friendship: The Red Hat Society as a copy resource for older women. *Ageing & Society*, 28, 979–999.
- Jordan, B. K., Schlenger, W. E., Fairbank, J. A., & Caddell, J. M. (1996). Prevalence of psychiatric disorders among incarcerated women: II. Convicted felons entering prison. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 53(6), 513–519.

- Kleiber, D. A., Hutchinson, S. L., & Williams, R. (2002). Leisure as a resource in transcending negative life events: Self-protection, self-restoration, and personal transformation. *Leisure Sciences*, 24, 219–235.
- Levy, A. (2005). *Female chauvinist pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Leavy, P., & Trier-Bieniek, A. (2014). Introduction to gender and pop culture. In A. Trier-Bieniek & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Gender and pop culture: A text reader* (pp. 1–25). Boston, MA: Sense Publishers.
- McKeown, J. K. L. (2015a). “I will not be wearing heels tonight!”: A feminist exploration of singlehood, dating and leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 47(4), 485–500.
- McKeown, J. K. L. (2015b). The hens are clucking: Women performing gossip in their leisure lives. *Leisure Sciences*, 37(5), 447–457.
- McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 415–444.
- Parry, D.C. (2016). Skankalicious: Erotic capital in women’s flat track roller derby. *Leisure Sciences*, 38(4), 295–314.
- Parry, D. C., & Penny Light, T. (2013). Fifty shades of complexity: Exploring technologically mediated leisure and women’s sexuality. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 46(1), 38–57.
- Pedlar, A. M., Arai, S. M., & Yuen, F. (2007). Media representation of federally sentenced women and leisure opportunities: Ramifications for social inclusion. *Leisure/Loisir*, 31(1), 255–276.
- Pedlar, A., Yuen, F., & Fortune, D. (2008). Incarcerated women and leisure: Making good girls out of bad? *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 42(1), 24.
- Pozner, J. L. (2010). *Reality bites back: The troubling truth about guilty pleasure TV*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.
- Richie, B. E. (2001). Challenges incarcerated women face as they return to their communities: Findings from life history interviews. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47(3), 368–389.
- Robertson, B. J. (2001). The leisure education of incarcerated youth. *World Leisure Journal*, 43(1), 20–29.
- Shaw, S. M. (2001). Conceptualizing resistance: Women’s leisure as political practice. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 33, 186–201.
- Skeggs, B., & Wood, J. (2012). *Reacting to reality television: Performance, audience and value*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Spencer, C., & Paisley, K. (2013). Two women, a bottle of wine, and the bachelor: Duoethnography as a means to explore experiences of femininity in leisure settings. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 45(5), 695–716.
- Stumbo, N. J., & Little, S. L. (1991). Implications for leisure services with incarcerated women. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 25(2), 49–62.
- Taylor, A. (2012). *Single women in popular culture: The limits of postfeminism*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Trier-Bieniek, A. (2015). Introduction: Finding feminist fandom in *orange is the new black*. In A. Trier-Bieniek (Ed.), *Fan girls and the media: Creating characters, consuming culture* (pp. xi–xix). London, England: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wearing, B. (1990). Beyond the ideology of motherhood: Leisure as resistance. *Journal of Sociology*, 26(1), 36–58.
- Williams, D. J. (2006). Forensic leisure science: A new frontier for leisure scholars. *Leisure Sciences*, 28(1), 91–95.
- Yuen, F., & Pedlar, A. (2009). Leisure as a context for justice: Experiences of ceremony for Aboriginal women in prison. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 41(4), 547.
- Zlotnick, C. (1997). Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), PTSD comorbidity, and childhood abuse among incarcerated women. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 185(12), 761–763.
- Zlotnick, C., Najavits, L. M., Rohsenow, D. J., & Johnson, D. M. (2003). A cognitive-behavioral treatment for incarcerated women with substance abuse disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder: Findings from a pilot study. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 25(2), 99–105.

Copyright of Leisure Sciences is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.