



**UNIVERSITY OF <sup>TM</sup>  
KWAZULU-NATAL**

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**INYUVESI  
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**Changes and continuities? Investigating the representations  
and readings of female characters in South African soap  
operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal!***

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Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

PhD. Cultural and Media Studies

In the

DISCIPLINE OF CENTRE FOR COMMUNICATION, MEDIA AND  
SOCIETY (CCMS)

School of Applied Human Sciences, College of Humanities, University  
of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College), Durban, South Africa.

February 2024

Supervised by

Prof. Lauren Dyll

# COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES DECLARATION

I, Janet Atinuke Onuh (215080588), declare that:

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Date: 6 February 2024

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My first and foremost gratitude goes to my Lord and Maker, who gave me the grace and strength to undergo this study; to Him be the glory and honour forever more.

A big thank you to my supervisor, Prof. Lauren Dyll, for her constant, meticulous and insightful supervision. Her understanding, support, and invaluable advice are on another level. To be honest, words will fail me to truly describe who you are and who you have been through the process of this study. THANK YOU, Prof, for all you do. I would also like to show appreciation to the CCMS staff for their encouragement and for providing opportunities by creating platforms like the weekly colloquia and the reading group. Those spaces have helped us interact with one another and helped me grow academically. To Shannon Landers, I sincerely appreciate you taking the time to go through a few of my chapters. Your straightforwardness, candor, and manner have been really helpful. The insightful contributions from staff and my colleagues helped improve this study's output. My appreciation also goes to Noah Kupeta; thank you for your support and friendship. I am glad our paths crossed in CCMS.

My profound gratitude goes to the participating production companies, Stained Glass House and Ochre Moving Pictures, for your swift response and agreement to participate in this study. To Mmamitse Thibedi (*Uzalo*) and Liesl Thomson (*Scandal*), I sincerely appreciate your assistances and swift responses towards the process of acquiring gatekeeper letters. Thank you to the production teams who served as the expert informants and availed themselves for the interviews despite their very tight schedules, Clive Madiya and Eric Mogale (*Uzalo*), Ameera Patel and Grace Mahlaba (*Scandal!*). I would also like to thank all the twenty-four University of KwaZulu-Natal students who served as participants in the focus group discussions.

To my husband and sweetheart, my number one support system, thank you for all your support and enormous sacrifices. You encouraged me to undergo this study and anytime I complained, you always said: “You are a Dr already, just try and push it to the finish line so that you can get the certificate”. THANK YOU for believing and seeing that strength in me. To my adorable kids Joseph (Enpe), Noble (Ekofu), and Joshua (Onra), and my princess, the icing on top of my PhD pursuits, Crystal (Ofuni), thank you for your understanding and for always praying for mummy

to "finish her studies so that her teacher will be happy with her and so that she can get a goo job".  
God bless you all.

Daddy and Mummy Fasanya, thank you for your constant support and prayers. Your encouragement in this study was amazing; you regularly followed up to know my progress and even designed a format for me to follow to meet up with my submission date. God bless you for all your labour of love. A big thank you to my brothers and their precious wives, Mr. Abimbola and Mrs. Richeal Fasanya, Engr. Tope and Mrs. Mariam Fasanya, and Mr. Dotun and Mrs. Ada Fasanya. I sincerely appreciate your support. To my lovelies, Desmond, Olamide, Einola, Oyindemola, and Omotola, thank you for praying for Aunty. You are loved and God bless you all. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to my in-laws, Mama, Aunty Mary, and family, Aunty Fatu, Aunty Christy and family, Uncle Tom, and family, and Uncle Agada and family; thank you for your love and support.

To my friends-turned-family, I am daily grateful for your gifts in my life: the Patricks' – Rhoda, Hosea, and my cutie Oreofe, the Femi Onis, Aunty Peju, Tola, Mama Shoike, Ebube, Kachi, Aunty Opeyemi, the Ajayis, the Mewomos – Sis Dara, Oluwadunsin, and Dabira, the Okpekus, the Adelekes, the Joels – Ayo, Daniel, John and Esther, Uncle Jackson, Aunty Priscilla and Pastor George. I would like to say thank you to you all for your love and support. To my provincial Pastor, Dr. Micheal Olusanya, his wife, and kids – Esther, Joshua, and John, your love and support are highly appreciated. May God bless you all and meet you all at the very point of your needs, and when you need a helping hand, may God raise thousands of men to come to your help. THANK YOU ALL.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the Holy One and Almighty God, the Alpha and Omega, my Saviour, Lord, and Helper. *For by Thee, I have run through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall* (Psalm 18:29).

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the construction and readings of female characters concerning their gender roles within localised South African soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Concerning the issue of female representation, it is not just crucial to have a significant presence of women in television, it is equally important that these characters represent women fairly. This is particularly important within a country like South Africa, where gender inequality is a problem and gender-based violence is declared a second pandemic as femicide remains prevalent. Since characterisation is one of the most important elements in any soap opera, this study investigates how female characters are represented. It explores the changes and continuities in how female characters are intentionally constructed in South African soap operas and if these representations support or subvert previous representations and dominant discourses in society. It is theoretically framed within feminist media theory, with a particular emphasis on intersectionality and the active audience theory guided by the circuit of culture model. Located within the interpretive paradigm, its qualitative methodology ascertains the perceptions of individual viewers (University of KwaZulu-Natal students) and *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* production staff. The data, gathered via interviews and focus group discussions, were organised through reflexive thematic analysis.

The study found that the representation of mistress, mother, and matriarch are some of the roles still prominent in soap opera depictions. However, a shift exists in that conventional characters such as the villainess and matriarch are still central but are represented differently, based on the South African context, particularly that of the township locale. Female characters are also included in the storylines, such as CEOs, businesswomen, and other prominent roles often associated with male characters and public domains. Contemporary and traditional-styled characters are aspirational depending on the preference of lifestyle values held by the viewer of the soap operas. Soap opera has the potential to educate audience members about socio-economic, socio-political, and other developmental issues that will enhance social change. The study contributed new knowledge to understanding the construction of female representations and the possible subversions these texts offer to normative societal representations. It is unique in that it considers both a production and viewer perspective, which is a gap within South African scholarship that typically includes one of these perspectives. Through this study, an analytical matrix combining the circuit of culture and intersectionality has been developed that could be used for further research.

Keywords: Changes, continuities, construction, discourse, gender roles, female representation, interpretation, soap opera, South Africa

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Map of South Africa showing the location of the two production sites

Figure 3.1: Lufuno Mulaudizi acted by Florence Masebe in *Republic*

Figure 3.2: Mladai Zungu acted by Thembi Nyandai in *Isibaya*

Figure 3.3: Mapitsi Magongwa acted by Mogau Mothatswi in *Skeem Saam*

Figure 3.4: The two *Uzalo* matriarchs (MaNzuza and MaNgcobo)

Figure 4.1: The circuit of culture

Figure 5.1: Characteristics of good qualitative research

Figure 5.2: Six-phase thematic analytic process

Figure 5.3: A 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis

Figure 6.1: The interconnected matrix of data analysis

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1: Key research questions

Table 1.2: Summary comparison of the selected soap operas: *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

Table 2.1: Summary table of legislation for women's rights post-1994

Table 3.1: Summary table collating the dominant representations of women in entertainment media, including soap operas, as well as study location.

Table 3.2: Primary representation of women in soap operas

Table 5.1: Key research questions

Table 5.2: Interview details

Table 5.3: Focus group stratification

Table 5.4: Trustworthiness in this qualitative study

Table 6.1: *Uzalo* female cast

Table 6.2 *Scandal!* female cast

Table 6.3: Specific themes to the encoding process

Tablet 7.1: Common themes to the encoding and decoding process

Table 7.2: Specific themes to the decoding process

## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ANCWL - African National Congress Women's League FSAW - Federation of South African Women

BRC - Broadcast Research Council

CCMS - Centre for Communication, Media and Society

CS – Cultural Studies

CSW - Commission on the Status of Women

CSVV - Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

DV – Domestic violence

DVAM – Domestic violence against men

EE - Entertainment Education

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

GBV - Gender-Based Violence

GEC - Gender Equality Commission

GIZ - Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

GPS - Gender Policy Statement

KZN - KwaZulu-Natal

IASC - Inter-Agency Standing Committee

IMF - International Monetary Fund

IPV - Intimate Partner Violence

INK - Inanda, Ntuzuma, and KwaMashu

NFH - Nyathi Family Holdings

NHRI - National Human Rights Institutions

OCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OFGD - Online Focus Group Discussions

PEP - Partnerships for Prevention

PMB - Pietermaritzburg

RTA - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SABC - South African Broadcasting Corporation

SAG - South African Government

SAMCO - South Africa Multi-Country Office

SDC - Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

SDGR - Sustainable Development Goals Report

TA - Thematic Analysis

UKZN - University of KwaZulu-Natal

UN - United Nations

UNHR - United Nations Human Rights

WDR - World Development Report

WIFP - Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press

# Table of Contents

Pages

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES DECLARATION.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS.....	x
<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Problem statement.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Problem in context.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Precise issue.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Relevance of the problem.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<b>Objectives of the study.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Questions to be answered in the research.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Background to the illustrative cases.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Uzalo.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Scandal!.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<b>Location of the study.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Theoretical framework.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Feminist media theory: An intersectional perspective.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Active Audience.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<b>Methodological approach.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Structure of the thesis.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Gender Issues in Policy, Society Entertainment Media – A Global to National Review</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Conceptualising gender.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Gender (in)equality: A global perspective.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<i>Global policies on gender issues.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<b>Gender (in)equality: A South African perspective.....</b>	<b>44</b>
<i>Gender-based violence (GBV).....</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>South African policies on gender issues.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<b>Relationship between gender issues and entertainment media.....</b>	<b>56</b>

Traditional roles of women in South African cultures.....	61
African language media.....	64
Conclusion.....	67
<b>Chapter Three: Reviewing Soap Opera Scholarship: Generic Codes and Producing/Consuming Representations and Discourses .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Global media production studies .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<i>Influence and reflection of society in television production.....</i>	<i>70</i>
<b>South African television production studies.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<i>Influence and reflection of society on television production: Influences and themes in storytelling...71</i>	
<b>Representation of women in media.....</b>	<b>74</b>
<i>Stereotypes in soap operas .....</i>	<i>75</i>
<b>Relationship between dominant discourses and representations of female characters in soap operas and shifts in feminist thoughts.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>A brief history of soap opera.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<i>A brief history of soap opera - Global shifts.....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>South African soap operas.....</i>	<i>90</i>
<b>Defining soap operas through generic codes and conventions.....</b>	<b>92</b>
<i>Global generic conventions with a local difference.....</i>	<i>93</i>
<b>Soap opera models.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<i>Dynastic soap.....</i>	<i>98</i>
<i>Community soap.....</i>	<i>99</i>
<i>Dyadic soap.....</i>	<i>100</i>
<b>Soap opera as a feminine genre: Restructure and reconstruct.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Soap opera realism .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Consumption/ decoding/ interpretation of female characters .....</b>	<b>107</b>
<i>Predominant characters &lt;&gt; discourses .....</i>	<i>105</i>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Cultural Studies (CS).....</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Feminist media theory.....</b>	<b>115</b>
<i>Early feminist media theory.....</i>	<i>118</i>
<i>Contemporary feminist media theory.....</i>	<i>122</i>

<b>Intersectionality theory</b> .....	124
<i>Importance of social categories</i> .....	127
<i>Media representations of Black women in terms of social categorisation</i> .....	128
<b>Active audience theory</b> .....	131
<i>Circuit of culture</i> .....	135
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	145
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: Research Methodology</b> .....	147
<b>Introduction</b> .....	147
<b>Interpretive research paradigm</b> .....	149
<i>Ontology</i> .....	150
Epistemology.....	151
<b>Qualitative feminist research approach</b> .....	151
<b>Case study research design</b> .....	154
<b>Sampling</b> .....	156
<i>Sample population and size</i> .....	157
<i>Sampling technique</i> .....	157
<i>Inclusion selection criteria</i> .....	161
<i>Exclusion criteria</i> .....	161
<b>Data collection</b> .....	162
<i>Interviews</i> .....	163
<i>Focus group discussions</i> .....	164
<b>Data transcription and analysis</b> .....	167
<i>Reflexive thematic analysis</i> .....	167
<i>Phases of analysis</i> .....	170
<b>Validity and reliability</b> .....	175
<b>Rigour</b> .....	176
<b>Ethical considerations</b> .....	178
Anonymity.....	179
Confidentiality .....	179
Beneficence and non-maleficence .....	180
<b>Limitations of the study</b> .....	180
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	181
<b>Chapter Six: Findings and Analysis - Themes generated from soap opera production and consumption Process</b> .....	183

<b>Introduction</b> .....	183
<b>Theme explanation and analytic process</b> .....	184
<b>Brief plot of the selected soap operas</b> .....	187
<i>Uzalo</i> .....	187
<i>Scandal!</i> .....	188
<b>Theme 1: Predominant gender roles represented in South African soap operas: <i>Uzalo</i> and <i>Scandal!</i></b> .....	189
<i>Businesswomen/troublemakers/mothers-matriarchs</i> .....	190
<i>Contemporary and Traditional Identities</i> .....	196
<i>Aspirational Roles</i> .....	200
<i>Expected social roles of women and their sources</i> .....	206
<i>Stereotypes in Gender Roles and Character Construction</i> .....	209
<b>Theme 2: Female Subordination and Female Power</b> .....	214
<i>Representation of Female Villain</i> .....	215
<b>Theme 3: Influences in the construction and readings of female characters and gender roles</b> .....	223
<i>Innovation</i> .....	215
<i>Education Entertainment</i> .....	224
<i>Production company and regulation in the construction of female characters</i> .....	230
<i>Social structure influence on construction and interpretation</i> .....	233
<b>Theme 4: Perceptions of realism and relatability</b> .....	237
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	248
<b>Chapter Seven: Conclusion</b> .....	250
<b>Introduction</b> .....	250
<b>Summary of Chapters</b> .....	250
<b>Relevance of findings</b> .....	254
<b>Predominant gender roles represented in South African soap operas: <i>Uzalo</i> and <i>Scandal!</i></b> .....	255
<i>Businesswomen/troublemakers/mothers</i> .....	256
<i>Contemporary and Traditional Identities</i> .....	257
<i>Aspirational roles</i> .....	244
<i>Stereotypes in Gender roles and character construction</i> .....	260
<b>Subordination and Female Power</b> .....	261
<b>Intentions and influences that determine the construction of female characters and their gender roles</b> .....	262
<i>Innovation</i> .....	262

<i>Entertainment Education (EE)</i> .....	263
<b>Perceptions of Realism and Relatability</b> .....	264
<b>Continuities and Changes in Soap Opera Constructions of Female Characters</b> .....	264
<b>Suggestions for further research</b> .....	267
<b>References</b> .....	<b>269</b>
<b>Appendixes</b> .....	<b>321</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Ethical clearance approval</b> .....	321
<b>Appendix 2: Gatekeeper letter from Stained Glass Production</b> .....	322
<b>Appendix 3: Gatekeeper letter from Ochre Moving Pictures</b>	323
<b>Appendix 4: Gatekeeper letter of the University of KwaZulu-Natal</b> .....	324
<b>Appendix 5: Informed consent form</b> .....	325
<b>Appendix 6: Production Interview Questions (<i>Scandal!</i> and <i>Uzalo</i>)</b> .....	330
<i>Scandal!</i> .....	317
<i>Uzalo</i> .....	333
<b>Appendix 7: Focus group discussion</b>	336
<b>Appendix 8: More details on <i>Uzalo</i> and <i>Scandal</i> cast</b>	<b>337</b>

## Chapter One: Introduction

Representation in media is a key component of empowering marginalised members of society (Letsoalo, 2019:1). Regarding the issue of female representation in media, it is not just important for there to be a significant presence of women in television shows, but it is equally important that these characters represent women fairly (Letsoalo, 2019:1). Generally, female representation by the media has been a space where women have been stereotypically portrayed as sex objects who are usually young, thin beautiful, passive, dependent on men, and often incompetent, dumb, and enmeshed in relationships or housework (Davis, 1990; Kamiri, 2017; Roderick, 2017:1; Wood, 1994:31). The media reiterate the cultural image of women as dependent, ornamental objects whose primary functions are to look good, please men, and stay quietly on the periphery of life (Kings, 2015).

The problem of women's underrepresentation and misrepresentation is associated with the idea that, since its inception, media has been a patriarchal field (Altay, 2018; Murthiningsih, Avenita, and Ikom, 2017). Women are marginalised, misrepresented, and underrepresented in media through a lack of inclusion of female experts across industries and news sources (Rodriguez, 2021:1). In all this, Rodriguez (2021) further explains that male experts are often prioritised while women's hard work and contributions are devalued, and they are robbed of the recognition and public acclaim they deserve. In agreement, Beard, Dunn, Huang, and Krivkovich (2019) noted that even though women were well represented in their career pipeline in media and entertainment, women are still the minority at the highest levels of media. Many entertainment media also project women as passive objects who are submissive, static, stagnant, sluggish, torpid, dull and acted upon rather than subjects (Mannan, 2018). Considering this wide range of presentations in media, this study is concerned with investigating the entertainment media representation of women in the soap opera genre through the illustrative cases of two soap operas, *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

Soap operas are commonly described as a female genre (Ahmed, 2012; Geraghty, 2006; Hobson, 2003; Marx, 2008). This is because soap operas are bound up with their address to and popularity among women viewers and are viewed as a progressive text because of their "raising of problems which are seen as relevant to their [women's] lives" (Hobson 1982:11). Character (or more specifically female characterisation) is one of the "most important elements in any soap opera" because it serves as a tool for attracting audiences to the genre (Hobson, 2003:81). Diverse and

multiple characters are involved in the genre with an emphasis on female roles including mothers, housewives, older women, divorcees, and widows with a range of social issues (Gledhill, 2003).

In these contemporary times, there has been a shift in both broadcasting and scholarly attention paid to male characterisation and representation (Ndayi and du Plooy, 2019; Nzimande, 2021; Nzimande and Dyll, 2024). This is mainly undertaken as a comparison to female representation (Hobson, 2003; Marx, 2008; Onuh, 2017). However, there is also a move to focus solely on men as audiences (Feasey, 2008; Van der Merwe, 2012; Nzimande and Dyll, 2024; Tager, 1997; 2010). The male is often represented as strong, powerful, and aggressive. Conversely, women are represented as submissive and sensitive and the domesticated nurturer or tempting jezebel<sup>1</sup> (Denson *et al.*, 2018; Grassi, 2018; Healey, 2011; Suggs, 2019).

This current study is not only interested in how female characters are represented but aims to explore if there are any existing changes or continuities in how female characters are intentionally constructed and represented in South African soap operas. This is enabled through interviews with soap opera producers and scriptwriters. To provide a holistic account of these similarities and /or differences, this study is also concerned with how South African soap opera viewers read and interpret these contemporary constructions and representations of female characters with an emphasis on gender roles. This investigation is grounded within the theoretical framework of feminist media theory, particularly the intersectional perspective (Carastathis, 2014; Collins, 1986; hooks, 2015) and the culturalist active audience theory (Fiske, 1987; Hall, 1995; Livingstone, 2000, 2008, 2013; Morley, 1992, 1980).

Further to the above broad-based contextualisation, the remainder of the chapter provides a summary of the study through the following subtopics: the objectives and the research questions, the problem statement along with possible research gaps that the study aims to address and its rationale to highlight its importance, a brief overview of the theories that underpin the study, a brief discussion of the methodological approach, and lastly the structure of the thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Jezebel is described as seductive, sexually irresponsible, promiscuous, and aggressive (Jean 2019: 8-9; West 2018).

## **Problem statement**

### *Problem in context*

Gender inequality is a global problem (Khachaturyan and Peterson, 2015) as much as it is a South African problem (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, 2012; Salahodjaev and Azam, 2015). Despite international conventions to support gender equality and growing national and international commitments to gender parity, gender disparities still prevail (Benavot *et al.*, 2016). Currently, South Africa has declared gender-based violence (GBV) as a second pandemic struggle in the country as femicide remains worryingly high (Ellis, 2020; Mashaba, 2020; Modise, 2020; Wood, 2020). In South Africa, women are still dominated by their male partners as “domestic violence, in particular, remains a pervasive problem” (Ngubane, 2010: iii). Across Africa, this pandemic is also prevalent and has been referred to as the “shadow pandemic” by the United Nations (Frohlich, 2020:1). Societal norms, standards of gender roles, and stereotypes are described as some of the contributing factors to this shadow pandemic (Frohlich, 2020). To address the scourge of GBV and unequal gender dynamics, the UN Women South Africa and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) – Partnerships for Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls programme (PFP) urges media and creative industry to promote gender equality and parity by signing the Statement of Commitment for Gender Equality in South African Media (South African Government (SAG), 2020). Anne Githuku Shongwe, UN Women Representative for UN Women's South Africa Multi-Country Office (SAMCO), explained that this call for help is because they believed that the media and creative industries have the power to influence how we view ourselves and society at large (SAG, 2020:1). Hence, this study investigates how female characters are constructed in relation to gender roles and stereotypes.

Supporting Shongwe’s plea, Khan and Zaheen (2011) and Llanos and Nina (2011) agree that popular media like television not only portrays dominant social values but also has a role in educating or guiding people regarding various social issues and problems. The ideology portrayed by media penetrates society and gradually becomes a part of it by people acting upon an ideology. Contrary to the potentially positive influence of media on gender roles and equality, many scholars argue that the media plays a significant role in sustaining gender discrimination (Carrasco, 1995; 1998; 2002; 2010; Gender Equality Commission (GEC), 2014; Morna, 2007; Sharda, 2014; Trolan, 2013).

### *Precise issue*

The issue of “gender roles and relationships vary across time and from society to society; however, gender inequality has usually been closely related as men typically claim more property, prestige, and power” (Healey, 2011:20). Gender stereotypes are culturally defined expectations/beliefs that people have about the characteristics of men and women, although the contents of stereotypes also vary over cultures and over time (Larson, 2013; Martin and Dinella, 2001).

Gender stereotypes are prescriptive, they are often justified with reference to higher communal values that reinforce a system of patriarchal authority favouring men (Connell, 1995; Rudman and Glick, 2002). Apart from hierarchy placement, gender stereotypes are considered a barrier to women’s advancement (Peus *et al.*, 2015). Gender stereotypes often are internalised and evident in self-characterisation (Hentschel, Heilman and Peus, 2019). As such, stereotypes influence how men and women are seen by others as well as how they see themselves. Stereotypes about women both result from and are the cause of deeply ingrained attitudes, values, norms, prejudices, and other related issues against women<sup>2</sup>.

Gender within South African traditions is described according to the role and functions in the society (Ngubane, 2010). In other words, what it means to be male or female in a specific society shapes the opportunities one is offered in life, the roles one may play, and the kinds of relationships one may have. Russell Luyt (2018), Viwe Ndayi and Blinda du Plooy (2019) observed that South African males are represented as dominant as they are often the primary focus and appear most frequently within the socially valued public work arena, occupying positions of greater social authority. On the other hand, females are represented as subordinate as they frequently appear in ‘supporting roles’, usually within the socially undervalued private-domestic arena (Ntshangase, 2018). These representations are linked to the South African culture, particularly the patriarchal Zulu and Xhosa cultures (Bradfield, 2010; Leech, 2000; Rustin, 2018).

The discourses of gender binary experienced in society are reflected in soap operas (de Almeida, 2003; Landers, 2016; Mostsaathebe, 2009; Blose, 2020; Czarniawskak *et al.*, 2013). Although the portrayal of men and women in soap operas is largely traditional and stereotypical, which

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/gender-stereotypes-and-sexism>. [Accessed on 23/02/2021].

assists in promoting the polarisation of gender roles (Ahmed, 2012; Bem, 1993; Ryle, 2012)<sup>3</sup>, moreover, the convention of the genre also dictates that it will have stronger female characteristics. Hence, this study needs to investigate if/how the system of gender polarisation plays out in the depiction of contemporary female characters, using two popular South African soap operas; *Uzalo* and *Scandal*, as two illustrative cases. In doing so, the study also investigates how the representations and their interpretations subvert, challenge, or accept popular and dominant societal discourses of South African women.

### *Relevance of the problem*

Presently, stereotypes are a regular feature of the mass media, which are readily predictable on television (Luther, Clark, and Lepre, 2024; Santoniccolo *et al.*, 2023). According to the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (BRC) (2017; 2018; 2019; 2023), television consistently maintains the highest views in the country, with 95%-98% viewership compared to 75% radio listeners. Television entertainment in South Africa is dominated by the soap opera genre (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020:142).

Femininity is often associated with traits such as emotionality, prudence, and compliance. Masculinity, however, tends to be associated with such traits as rationality, efficiency, competition, individualism, and ruthlessness (Nzimande and Dyll, 2024). 'Good' women are presented as submissive, sensitive, and domesticated (Ahmed 2012). This study will discuss how female characters are depicted in international soap operas (American, British, and South American), as earlier South African soap operas took on many of their generic codes and conventions (Grassi, 2018). More recently, South African soap operas have included representations of powerful, influential, and independent-minded Zulu female characters (Landers, 2016). For instance, my own Master's study (Onuh, 2017), albeit within certain patriarchal structures evident in the storyline. These characterisations appear to be part of contemporary efforts to indigenise the genre as social realism plays a key role (Feasey, 2008; Gibson, Dyll and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020; Nzimande and Dyll, 2024; Teer-Tomaselli, 2005; 2011). However, further analysis is vital to establish whether or not this is a significant shift. Television soap opera is thus a fruitful site of study to explore

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<sup>3</sup> Gender polarization describes the way in which behaviours and attitudes that are viewed as appropriate for men are described as inappropriate for women and vice versa (Bam, 1993; Ryle, 2012).

if and how today's South African soap opera continues stereotypes of female subordination and how it can serve as an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies.

Many studies have focused on soap operas and gender studies (Blöse, 2020; Czarniawska, Eriksson-Zetterquist, and Renemark, 2013; Geraghty, 1991; Hermes, 2007; Kruger, 2012; Marx, 2008; Muindi, 2019; Neophytou, 2012; Syed, 2011; Tager, 1997). However, none of these studies have investigated the representation and interpretation of female characters in selected contemporary South African soap operas, *Uzalo* and *Scandal*, when the industry is breaking away from the discourses around multiculturalism. This study will, therefore, add to the body of knowledge on South African soap opera scholarship in how it does or does not propagate characters that reflect local South African community cultural identities and stories (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020:142). Correspondingly, because this research is grounded in empirical data collection, the study will produce a rich qualitative analysis by adding to the somewhat limited but important body of empirical research in television research (Landers, 2018; Marx, 2008; Milton, 2015; Nzimande and Dyll, 2024; Roome, 1998; 1999; Tager, 1997; 2002). The importance of doing empirical work cannot be over-emphasised, as research that lacks this “refuses the evidentiary, experiential, empirical and observational, and belittles new paradigms that break with ‘the system’” (Tomaselli 2018: 67). Much previous empirical research is based on engagement with the audience through focus groups (Blöse, 2020; Qasmi, 2020; Roome, 1997; Tager, 1997). Speaking with the audience is crucial in understanding the meanings of certain representations. However, this study is unique in that it has access to soap opera production companies, namely, Stained Glass Production and Orche Moving Pictures, which allows for new empirical data on the intention behind these representations. This adds to the depth of studies on African television in a relatively under-researched area.

### **Objectives of the study**

Reflecting on my Master's study findings, the two matriarchs in *Uzalo*, Lindiwe MaNgcobo as the gangster's wife (played by Dawn King) and Zandile MaNzuzza as the pastor's wife were constructed to maintain some of the global conventions of strong individuals, mothers, and wives, whereby the love for their families drives their line of action and decision-making (Barker, 1997; Geraghty, 1991; Modleski, 1979). However, despite the premise of the matriarchs' strength, there

was still a strong aspect of subservience to their husbands, especially in the first season (Onuh, 2017). However, as the storylines progressed, what I coined ‘the township matriarchs’ evolved as they became independent of their husbands’ characters. These popular soap opera characters are indigenised, in a sense, based on cultural proximity to the Zulu culture. The story's setting is within KwaMashu, one of Durban’s first townships that emerged due to the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950. Sarah Gibson (2018: 97) explains the role of this setting in storylines and characterisation:

In locating the heart of the fictional soap opera community in KwaMashu, *Uzalo* places the township at the centre of its construction of cultural identity within post-apartheid South Africa. The township is a uniquely South African space that was initially created during apartheid as a ‘peculiar spatial institution scientifically planned for control’ (Mbembe 2003: 3). Unsurprisingly, given its controversial history, the township space is ‘deeply embedded in the nation’s social imaginary’ (Mbembe *et al.*, 2008: 239)

For my Honours research project, I was part of a group of students who interviewed *Uzalo* Production staff within the wider CCMS project entitled: “Representing and consuming the local: Exploring the production and reception of *Uzalo*, KwaMashu”. These interviews revealed that they also believe KwaMashu itself to be a character within *Uzalo* and that its specificity is woven into the story, making it unique. *Uzalo* Executive Producer, Mmamitse Thibedi (interview, 26 Aug 2015) explained KwaMashu as a vibrant and diverse geographic community, with very poor people and much wealthier people living in one township. The Director, Shaft Morapane (interview, 26 August 2015), acknowledges it for “being famous as one of the most violent townships at some point. [Stained Glass Productions] try to take it to that level where crime...the way we tell it and portray it, we go all out so that it’s real. We have an audience, and we need to take them through a journey”<sup>4</sup>.

The township matriarch is, therefore, part of the township “space that is characterised by the blending of the rural with the urban and subsequent hybridity and culture (from music to fashion) that emanates and resonates strongly throughout South Africa” (Ellapen, 2007: 127).

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<sup>4</sup> For a study on Audience interpretation of the representation of violence and gangsterism in *Uzalo* see Musa Mpanza (2018).

The shared cultural and local identity afforded by the space of the KwaMashu township is the space against which the township matriarchs complicate Levi-Strauss' (1968) binary model whereby the oppositions are not clear-cut of good vs evil, but are complex. The two matriarchs were constructed within the binary oppositions of crime-Christian values, tradition-modern, religion-secular, and good-bad. However, their portrayal is more complicated than a straightforward binary model, showing the complexity of the characters in their roles as mothers, wives, businesswomen/church leaders, and de-facto heads of their homes (Onuh, 2017).

Playing these binaries against and within each other provides complexity to the matriarch characters and their associated themes. In an interview I conducted with Thibedi (22 Aug 2016) for my Master's dissertation, she explained that "[i]t is important to the storyline because we have two total parallel stories that reflect the good and the bad in our society and how even in the good is some bad and how in the bad, there are some good". The nuances in these representations of South African soap opera matriarchs piqued my interest in expanding on a more in-depth study of the representation of female characters in two selected soap operas, *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

This PhD expands upon the Masters to provide new knowledge by including the decoded readings and interpretations of female representations through a reception analysis. It is an exploratory study as it aims to explore how discourses in relation to gender roles are constructed, the intentions behind such representations, and finally, how the audience views these soap operas in relation to what they viewed on television in the past and within contemporary society itself.

Much global and South African scholarship is text-bound (Brunsdone, 1994; Bernard, 2006; Feasey, 2013; Landers, 2018; Marx, 2008; among others). This study contributes to empirically-based soap opera scholarship as developed by Geraghty (2006) and Hobson (2004), as well as the rich tradition of reception analyses by South African scholars, many of whom are CCMS alumni (Kruger, 2012; Landers, 2016; Lynn, 2012; Roome, 1999; 2000; Tager, 1997; 2010 Teer-Tomaselli, 2020; Milton, 2008; Ven der Merwe, 2012; Mpanza, 2018; Nzimande and Dyll, 2024). This study's unique contribution to knowledge is through its rich qualitative study in understanding how soap operas (as a global genre) are being produced and read locally, with an emphasis on feminist discourses. This is significant because, recently (from 2015 till the date of the study), the industry has moved to indigenous/localised South African soap operas (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020). As a result, certain conventional characters are adapted to reflect local concerns

and characteristics. For example, the emergence of township matriarchs (Onuh, 2017) and complicated male characters (Nzimande and Dyll, 2024). This shift entrenches the centrality of social realism and indigenisation of South African soap operas. This study aims to unravel this complexity, focusing on the possible changes and continuities of female character representations and how the audience receives and interprets them.

The significance of this is to understand the relationship between the way soap opera characters may mirror the attributes, beliefs, lives, and aspirations of the audience through characters (see Liebes and Katz, 1990) and how the audience themselves read and are influenced by this characterisation. They use soap operas to make sense of the world in which they live because it is reflected to them as stories (King'ara 2013: 90). It is therefore hoped that this study can provide insight as to how the representations of women in soap operas have remained the same or changed. In so doing, this study aims to provide broader commentary on how discourses on South African female identity may or may not have changed and how audiences read them.

Andersson (2004) argues that “women in soaps, like *Isidingo's* Cherele, have more power than they do in real life.” The study is therefore also interested in establishing the difference between what is presented in soap operas and what the audience believes to be a reality and how this difference may or may not present a type of aspirational forecast for the role of women in South African society. Therefore, a major focus of this study is the glocalisation or indigenisation of South African soap operas with a particular emphasis on female character representation and readings associated with such representations.

The first three research objectives are structured to address the encoding aspect of the study and the last two focus on the decoding aspect. The first three objectives are concerned with the issue of production, while the last two are aimed at the consumption aspect (see the table below for more clarity). It is not a comparative study between the two soap operas and past soap operas; rather, the study aims to identify the previous dominant discourses in South African soap operas through published research. This study then focuses on identifying and analysing contemporary representations, using *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* as illustrative cases.

In summary, therefore, the study aims to:

- Investigate the ways in which female characters are represented in *Uzalo* and *Scandal* in terms of gender roles.
- Explore if any differences are revealed in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and or b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies.
- To appraise the changes and continuities of the way in which women are represented in South African soap operas.
- Explore how audiences read these representations in terms of possible differences between a) past South African soap operas and b) societal realities of gender dynamics.
- Investigate ways the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women.

**Questions to be answered in the research**

The key research questions addressed in the study are asked from two perspectives: the encoding aspect (producers/textual analysis) and the decoding aspect (audience interpretation).

<b>Key Research Questions</b>	
<b>Encoding (Producers/textual analysis)</b>	<b>Decoding (audience interpretation)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways are female characters represented in <i>Uzalo</i> and <i>Scandal</i> in terms of gender roles?</li> <li>• What do any differences reveal in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do the audience read these representations in terms of the possible differences between a) past South African soap operas and b) societal realities of gender dynamics?</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the changes and continuities of the way in which women are represented in South African soap operas?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women?</li> </ul>
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**Table 1.1:** Key research questions

### Background to the illustrative cases

The study has selected two popular South African soap operas as illustrative case studies for which four producers/scriptwriters (known as expert informants, two from *Uzalo* and two from *Scandal!*). The audience comprises 24 UKZN students who are voluntarily involved in the FGDs.

#### *Uzalo: Blood is Forever*

*Uzalo* is aired on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), a public service broadcaster. The SABC offers three free-to-air channels: SABC 1, 2, and 3. SABC 1 has the highest content of broadcasting in Nguni Languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, some Tshivenda, and isiNdebele), amounting to 80% of its content in these languages. It also broadcasts in English. SABC has the most extensive geographic coverage and audience (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020; Request for Proposal (RFP), 2014; Tager, 2010). SABC 1 aims to reflect the daily lives of Mzansi<sup>5b</sup> by delivering South African stories to its citizens (REF, 2014). Officially, SABC 1 is referred to as “the official storyteller of Mzansi” (SABC Vuka Sizwe, 2022:3) and currently, they are aiming to be the “authentic, original African storyteller in a globally competitive market”, this contributes to their highest progressive audience (SABC Vuka Sizwe, 2023:1).

*Uzalo* is a South African soap opera produced by Stained Glass Productions, co-owned by Kobedi "Pepsi" Pokane and Gugu Zuma-Ncube. It began airing in 2015, quickly becoming a hit due to its compelling narrative, writing, direction, and the performances of the relatively unknown casts<sup>6</sup>. It

<sup>5</sup> Mzansi is derived from the word Mzantsi, which means south in isiXhosa, an Nguni language. Mzansi is an informal name for South Africa. Available at: <http://foodformzansi.co.za/so-where-exactly-is-this-mzansi> [Accessed on 07/11/2023].

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://teeveetee.blogspot.com/2015/02/review-sabc1s-new-uzalo-telenovela-is.html>. [Accessed on 28/02/2022]

is a provocative, bold, and authentic narrative that initially tells the story of two-family dynasties, the Mdletshes and the Xulus, and the two young men who carry their hopes and legacies<sup>7</sup>. However, the storylines have dramatically changed, with interchanging characters contributing to many new story arcs. Currently, the storylines are based on the lives of people from local businesses (for example, *Gogos*<sup>8</sup> pursuing their dreams by establishing businesses, such as Shlobo's Tours, even in their old age), the church, politics, and gangsters who live in KwaMashu (Mpanza 2018:3). It is monolingual (isiZulu), representing a distinct cultural (Zulu) identity, but does provide English subtitles.

Concerning the case of the existence and presentation of females/women with regards to their gender roles, it follows that this identity may be depicted differently or similarly depending on the culture and its 'shared meaning' (du Gay *et al.*, 1997 and Hall, 2003). Hence, the concern of this study is to investigate how female characters in television entertainment within South African society, particularly the Zulu culture, are constructed and represented. Zulu society is structured strongly as a patriarchal and conservative society where men have authority and are dominant figures (Gumede, 2002; Mpungose, 2010). However, women, mothers, wives, and matriarch influences are respected and recognised within the patriarchal system (Gumede, 2002).

According to Zondi (1996), the role of women as prominent and powerful was already present in Zulu society prior to 1652. Princess Mnkabayi, for example, accepted responsibility for a small Zulu kingdom after her father lost his will to live due to his wife's death; her role was recognized and appreciated by all men, including the king's headmen (Zondi, 1996). Princess Mnkabayi's influence ensures that Zulu kings have female royal advisers. Women (matriarchs) with such characteristics are known as 'Usoqili' (the male trickster or father of tricks) because they wield authority in an unscrupulous, crafty, and cruel manner, just like males (Ndlovu, 2009; Zondi, 1996).

The Nguni, a bigger population that migrated to the Natal region in the 16th century, is the source of Zulu civilization and culture (The Big Myth, 2011). The people identified as "abakwaZulu," or "people of Zulu," because they believed they were descended from a chief named Zulu, whose name means "heaven" in the Nguni language. Following the chief's passing, the "abakwaZulu" gained their

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<sup>7</sup> Available at: <http://www.sabc1.co.za/sabc/home/sabc1/shows/details?id=506da553-f3b0-4a0b-9da4-1c0dbcd14acf&title=Uzalo>. Accessed on 1/02/2021.

<sup>8</sup> isiZulu word for Grandmother

formal name (The Big 38 Myth, 2011:1). According to Zulu culture, men play "dominant roles" in Zulu households. They oversee everything, including hut ownership, decision-making, and visitor reception, and are well-known as strong warriors, which is one of the most important characteristics of a Zulu man (warrior), whereas wives and mothers are "primarily responsible for their children" (The Big Myth, 2011: 2; Hassim, 1990). While they fought to conquer neighboring towns, the wives were left to occupy the front row of the family in the absence of the patriarch (Retele, 2012; Aidenbaum, 2014; Gumede, 2002). Polygamy is an accepted cultural practice among men (The Big Myth, 2011; Martens, 2009). This common practice of polygamy within the Zulu culture is a common norm across societies in Africa and the migration of men made children dependent on their mothers. Likewise, the social and economic conditions of the societies played a role in forcing women to assume leadership (Baynes, 1995).

*Uzalo* currently broadcasts from Monday to Friday at 20:30 on SABC 1. It is currently (as of June 2022) the most-watched television show in South Africa with over 6.1 million viewers (Nkabinde, 2022; Yomzansi, 2022). A rebroadcast of an episode is aired the following morning in the general production period and again back-to-back as an omnibus on Sunday afternoons on the same channel.

### *Scandal!*

*Scandal!* is aired on e-tv, a commercial free-to-air channel. After SABC (1, 2, and 3), e-tv is the second most watched channel in the country<sup>9</sup>, with a wide audience range as its content is mostly broadcast in English, Afrikaans, Nguni, and Sotho. *Scandal!* formerly known as *The Voice*, is a South African soap opera produced by Ochre Moving Pictures and has been broadcast on e.tv since 2008. It is one of the most-watched soap operas in South Africa (Maldonado, 2021). It is also broadcast across Africa on the eAfrica, e.tv Botswana and e.tv Ghana feed<sup>10</sup>. The narrative is set at the fictional media company Nyathi Family Holdings (NFH) based in Newtown, Johannesburg, which produces the newspaper *The Voice* and the gossip magazine, *Scandal! (The Voice)*. It follows the lives of the people and families working at NFH magazine. It also tells the story of

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<sup>9</sup> Available at: <http://www.philmphelablog.com/2013/05/etv-is-now-south-africas-second-most.html> [Accessed on 05/09/2021]

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/lifestyle/south-africas-most-watched-tv-shows-soapies-ratings/> [Accessed 1/02/2021].

socioeconomic divides set in a local township of Soweto and the Johannesburg suburb of New Town, where NFH is based - the private desires of the upper-class characters as well as how the poorer characters make ends meet. The soap's villains and heroes play out the complex twists and turns of their lives in their homes, business, and recreational environments<sup>11</sup>.

The inclusion of these soap operas aired on two popular yet distinct channels provides variation of both cultural and cosmopolitan settings. *Uzalo* is primarily set in the KwaMashu township but includes scenes from the greater Durban area (for example, the beachfront and various restaurants). *Scandal!* is set both in the Soweto township and the suburb of New Town (with included scenes in areas like classy hotels, bars, and tuck shops). Though both soap operas are within the South African context, their settings in townships and suburbs, to some extent, cover or raise how gender roles and stereotypes are reflected in the country at large.

Since this study focuses on gathering empirical and qualitative data on the changes or continuities of female representation and the readings thereof, the soap opera genre is selected as it is a popular form of media entertainment in South Africa (Chronis, 2013; Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2020; Marx, 2008; Mkhwanazi, 2015). Both soap operas are aired on free-to-air South African channels (eTv and SABC1). This, in a sense, makes it possible for any viewer to view without any challenge of cost and is thus motivation for their selection. Further motivation is based on the need to provide variety in what is encoded (production) and what is decoded (interpretation by audiences):

- In terms of encoding, *Uzalo* is set in the KwaMashu township and bases much of its storylines and characters on the Zulu culture. However, to provide varied representations, *Scandal!* is included as it is set in a mix of suburbia (Soweto and New Town).
- *Scandal!* has been airing since 2008, and *Uzalo* since 2015. Including both will, therefore, provide a wider basis for exploring the change or continuity of the stereotyped representation of contemporary female characters in the two soap operas. That is, *Uzalo* is relatively new compared to the more established and long-running *Scandal!*. Hence, the combination of the two soap operas provides a broad spectrum of narratives and representations to explore the possible changes or continuities in the construction and reading of female characters. Below is Table 1.2, which briefly shows the dynamics of the two soap operas:

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<sup>11</sup> Available at: <https://www.etv.co.za/shows/scandal>. [Accessed on 1/02/2021].

<b>Selected Soap for the Study</b>		
<b>Soap opera</b>	<i>Uzalo</i>	<i>Scandal!</i>
<b>Location/setting</b>	KwaMashu and greater Durban	Newtown and Soweto
<b>Position of rating by Yomzansi<sup>9</sup></b>	First	Second
<b>Viewership</b>	6,103,846 <sup>12</sup>	5,152,960 <sup>9</sup>
<b>Production Company</b>	Stained Glass Production	Ochre Moving Pictures
<b>Channel</b>	SABC1	e Tv
<b>Time (first broadcast)</b>	8:30 pm	7:30 pm
<b>Language</b>	Monolingual (isiZulu)	Multilingual
<b>Type of setting</b>	Male traditional patriarchy <sup>13</sup>	Contemporary (modern twist)
<b>Year of broadcast</b>	2015	2005
<b>Ideological standpoint</b>	The mandate by SABC for change in female portrayal and also the intention of the encoders to subvert the usual portrayal of women only in the private sphere.	The intention of the producers is to construct and portray strong aspirational women that exist the society.

**Table 1.2:** Summary comparison of the selected soap operas: *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

### **Location of the study**

The in-person focus group discussions were held in Durban and online interviews were held with producers based in Durban and Johannesburg.

Studies conducted around gender roles and stereotypes among viewers in Durban indicate that women in soap operas are misrepresented and undermined (Mahlatsi, 2018: iv). The depiction of

<sup>12</sup> Available at: <https://www.yomzansi.com/2022/07/13/most-watched-tv-shows-south-africa-june-2022/>. Accessed on 29/08/2022

<sup>13</sup> *Uzalo* is referred to as male traditional patriarchy because the storyline is focused on powerful families headed by patriarchy, and traditional issues like power, family values, and gender relations are portrayed (this is associated with dynastic soap operas). In instances where the male is absent, the construction and representation of female characters and strong independent women/matriarchs were influenced by a patriarchal ideology (Onuh, 2017). While *Scandal!* has more of a modern twist, there are still traditional trauancies (this emanated from the data) and will be elaborated on in Chapter six.

female characters in *Uzalo* (set and shot in Durban) imbue patriarchal values and myths, which challenges the notion that soap operas promote/construct a feminine discourse (Landers, 2018:vi), yet they also present new strong character types, such as the township Matriarch (Onuh, 2017).

Lastly, Nzimande and Dyll (2024), who interviewed Durban Zulu males, found that South African soap opera representations of masculinities uphold and subvert dominant discourses of Zulu masculinities. These previous findings support the need to further address some of these queries about the representation of women in the selected soap operas - *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* among viewers in Durban.

KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), formerly Natal, is a South African province in the country's southeast. The people of KwaZulu-Natal are of various ethnic groups (Francis, nd.). According to the population distribution by race of KwaZulu-Natal in 2018, people of Black African descent, primarily Zulus, account for more than four-fifths of the population at 87.6%, followed by the Indians at 7%, Whites at 4.1% and the Coloured at 1.4% (KZN Provincial Government, 2019/2020). The majority of people live along and behind the coast or in the province's center; the extreme west and northeast are sparsely populated. Many of the province's Black citizens have preserved a significant portion of their cultural identity through the use of the Zulu language and a rich heritage of folklore, ceremonies, and customs reflecting a variety of tribal allegiances. The capital of KZN is Durban, which covers a total area of more than 87 square miles (225 square kilometers), with a population of 3,720,953<sup>14</sup> people and a population density of 6,800 people per square mile (2,600 per square mile). Almost half of Durban's residents speak English as their first language. Zulu, Afrikaans, and Xhosa are some other languages spoken in this city. More than 51% of the residents are Black African, the Indian population is 24%, 15.3% is White, and 8.6% is Coloured. The Zulus are the most populous ethnic group.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal has campuses in both Pietermaritzburg and Durban, with five in total. Pietermaritzburg (PMB) campus is located in the centre of the scenic Natal Midlands and is close to numerous nature reserves and parks. The remaining four campuses are all located in

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<sup>14</sup> Available at: <https://population-hub.com/en/za/population-of-durban-5750.html> [Accessed on 28/10/2022]

Durban. This includes Howard, Medical School, Edgewood, and Westville campuses<sup>15</sup>. Advertising and recruitment were opened to all the students across the five campuses.

The shooting of *Uzalo* in a location like KwaMashu, which is described as “poor but vibrant” (Ferreia, 2015:1), makes *Uzalo* unique as it subverts the often-typical glamorous setting of many other South African soap operas which are typically shot and set in Johannesburg. As explained above, KwaMashu is a strong “invisible” character (Ferreia, 2015:1). It is a very specific place with its own type of feel and its own characters. *Uzalo* producers told a television critic, Thinus Ferreia (2015:1)<sup>16</sup>, that in the story, they “really try to weave in KwaMashu as its own character so it's not just a story that could be set anywhere” (Ferreia, 2015). Geographically, KwaMashu (*Uzalo* setting) is one of the townships located in KwaZulu-Natal province, precisely 32 kilometres north of Durban, South Africa. The township’s name is in admiration of Sir Marshall Campbell, which signifies the Place of Marshall<sup>17</sup>. KwaMashu has been grouped with its neighbouring townships, Inanda and Ntuzuma, and together, they are referred to as INK (Inanda, Ntuzuma, and KwaMashu) by the eThekweni Municipality (The dplg, nd)<sup>18</sup>. Collectively, the INK area is home to about 500,000 people. The *Uzalo* team has converted a massive warehouse in the Riverhorse Valley precinct (north of Durban) into a studio and set, much of which is based on actual properties in the KwaMashu, like the church interior and pastor’s home.

It is within the two settings of Soweto and Newtown that Ochre Moving Pictures, which are all located within Johannesburg, that *Scandal!* is set. The producer and production staff working for Ochre Moving Pictures are located in Johannesburg. This is part of why Johannesburg is identified as one of the locations of the study. Johannesburg is one of the largest cities in South Africa and the capital of Gauteng province, with a population of 6,065,000<sup>19</sup>. It is the country’s chief industrial and financial metropolis. It was founded in 1886 following the discovery of gold. Johannesburg has more than 500 suburbs and townships (examples are Newtown and Soweto), extending more

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<sup>15</sup> Available at: <http://teeveetee.blogspot.com/2015/02/review-sabc1s-new-uzalo-telenovela-is.html> [Accessed]

<sup>16</sup> Available at: <http://teeveetee.blogspot.com/2015/02/review-sabc1s-new-uzalo-telenovela-is.html> [Accessed]

<sup>17</sup> Available at <http://www.sahistory.org.za/place/kwamashu> [Accessed on 24/04/2016]

<sup>18</sup> Available at: <http://www.showme.co.za/durban/lifestyle/ink-inanda-ntuzuma-kwamashu-creative-centre> [Accessed on 07/04/2019]

<sup>19</sup> Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/22486/johannesburg/population> [Accessed 23/08/2022]

than 600 sq mi (1,600sqkm), and is a leading industrial and financial center<sup>20</sup>. Like Durban, Johannesburg is culturally and ethnically diverse. According to Stats SA (2022), Johannesburg Local Municipality has a total population of 4.4 million, of which Black Africans are 76.4%, White 12.3%, Coloured 5.6%, and Indian/Asian 4.9%. Newtown is a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa, located in the capital city of Gauteng Province. It was originally known as the Brickfields and Region F of the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality<sup>21</sup>. The suburb is described as a historical hub of progress or center of progress and arts in ‘the city of Gold,’ with new developments booming and several art galleries, museums, and theatres providing ample entertainment for visitors<sup>22</sup>. Working-class people of all races continue to live in the area. Soweto is an urban settlement or so-called township in South Africa, southwest of Johannesburg, with a population of approximately 1.3 million (2008, Joburg archive). Soweto was created in the 1930s when the apartheid government separated Black and White people. Soweto became one of the largest Black townships in South Africa<sup>23</sup> with the predominance of multilingualism (all the eleven official languages are spoken there)<sup>24</sup>

Johannesburg has been a location for the majority of past South African soap opera productions. For example, *Muvhango* is a Venda-based production that reflects township life, especially in Soweto, with two branches of the same family torn apart by the clash between urban and rural ways of life (Onuh, 2017). However, since the creation of *Uzalo* in 2015 and the entrance of Stained Glass Productions, Durban is fast becoming a popular and well-established production location for localised content, such as *Imbewu* and *Durban Gen*. It is within the locations of a long-standing production site (Johannesburg) and a new growing site (Durban) that the construction and reading of gender roles in South African soap opera will be investigated. Below is a South African map indicating the location of the study, particularly the two arrows.

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<sup>20</sup> Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Johannesburg-South-Africa> [Accessed on 23/08/2022]

<sup>21</sup> Available at: [https://www.joburg.org.za/play/\\_Pages/Play%20in%20Joburg/Culture%20and%20Heritage/Links/Newtown-your-guide.aspx](https://www.joburg.org.za/play/_Pages/Play%20in%20Joburg/Culture%20and%20Heritage/Links/Newtown-your-guide.aspx) [Access on 23/08/2022]

<sup>22</sup> Available at: <https://www.citysightseeing.co.za/en/joburg/visit-newtown-precinct-johannesburg-a-historical-hub-of-progress> [Accessed on 23/08/2022]

<sup>23</sup> Available at: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/soweto-johannesburg> [Accessed on 23/08/2022]

<sup>24</sup> Available at: <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/tourism-south-africa/travel/cities/soweto-heartbeat-of-the-nation> [Accessed on 29/10/2022]



**Figure 1.1:** Map of South Africa showing the location of the two production sites (Source: Google map<sup>25</sup>)

### Theoretical framework

This study is framed within two theoretical bodies of knowledge, namely, Feminist media theory (Betty Friedan, 1963; Donna Allen, 1972; Linda Steiner, 2014; MiniÉ, 2007) and active audience

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<sup>25</sup> Available at: <https://ontheworldmap.com/south-africa/> [Accessed on 28/10/202].

theory (Hall, 1980; Mensilang, 2009) which are explored from a cultural studies perspective (Hall, 2013; Pitout, 2007; Turner, 1996).

An interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary branch of study that examines the creation and inculcation of culture or meaning maps is known as cultural studies (Barkr, 2004). The cultural studies (CS) approach is interested in daily life activities, how they are constructed, and how individuals relate to these activities in their everyday lives (Turner, 1996). Hence, CS is an “important and contemporary way of engaging in the study of culture” (Longhurst *et al.*, 2015). Cultural studies can also be understood as a discursive formation, a collection of concepts, representations, and behaviors that offer methods for discussing and acting about a specific subject, social context, or institutional location (Barker, 2004). In other words, cultural studies are defined as a structured discourse about objects (which it highlights) centered on a few central concepts, ideas, and issues, such as articulation, culture, discourse, identity, popular culture, power, representation, and text. Creating this lexicon is a step in defining cultural studies as a field. Stuart Hall (2013:5) noted that “cultural studies has paid a tremendous amount of attention in one way or another to the centrality of representations and the practice of representation.” This study is grounded in CS, which assists in understanding the construction and interpretations of female characters in South African local soap operas within the theories that informed the study.

#### *Feminist media theory: An intersectional perspective*

Feminist media theory focuses on gender issues, specifically regarding the representation of women and its consequent impact. This leads to questioning and expanding our epistemologies, beliefs, values, and culture, resulting in a gendered perspective on how women are portrayed in the media and how gender roles are constructed. (Govender, Rawjee, and Govender, 2014:2280). It is, therefore, a suitable lens through which data was collected and analysed on the construction and interpretation of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal*.

Within feminist media theory, gender roles, stereotypes, and other related issues are taken seriously and are considered factors that aid in constructing identity and experiences without assuming permanent or static gender differences (Krijnan, 2017; Steiner, 2014; Volčič, 2008). Working from a social constructionist perspective, the study subscribes to the idea that gender interconnects with other forms of identity such as class, ethnicity, nationhood, race, ability, and sexual orientation, as well as the relations of subordination or domination that these categories carry along (Adib and

Guerrier, 2003; Anthias, 2014; Collins, 2015; Steiner, 2014; Veenstra, 2011). This is addressed through the intersectionality feminist approach. The reason for choosing this particular feminist lens is that it assists in conceptualising the relation between systems of oppression which construct multiple identities and social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege, often between race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989) and strive for gender equality (Carastathis, 2014).

Although the representation of African-American women in mainstream media is now being studied by many Black and Latino scholars (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; hooks, 1992; Lubiano, 1992; Bobo, 1997; McPhail, 1996; Collins, 2000, 2004; Manatu, 2003), most mainstream feminist media approaches are limited in accounting for the marginalisation of black women and women of colour (Gaines 1999: 294-295). Hence, there was a general dearth of these kinds of representations when Brunson (1994), Geraghty (2005), and Hobson (2003), among others as at the time they did their work, which is problematic in itself. In an instance where black women are represented, the media images of black women frequently perpetuate white ideologies (Hudson 1998; Collins 2000, 2004). According to bell hooks (1992:5), black female representation in the media determines how blackness and people of colour are seen and how other groups will respond to them based on their relation to these constructed images. In agreement with hooks, Hudson (1998:249) argues that these stereotypes simultaneously reflect and distort both how black women view themselves (individually and collectively) and how others view them. This indicates that such representations of black women have a more complex impact on black women, like identity-related issues, lower self-esteem, mood swings, and depression, among others (Cox, 2020). Therefore, the inclusion of intersectional feminist theory in this study assists in addressing these shortcomings of earlier feminist theorists as it challenges and constructs platforms for the recognition of the intersection of race and gender and how it creates space for power and privilege among marginalised women (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981).

### *Active Audience*

A text may have a preferred reading – the meaning intended by the person or group producing it - but that meaning can be undermined when decoded by the audience due to the polysemic nature of the text (Hall, 1980; Mensilang, 2009:3). This affordance of multiple meanings helps to reshape the role of the audience as more active and possibly counteracting linear accounts of media influence (Livingstone, 2015). Assuming a more visible role, the audience is understood to be

active not only in the aspect of reception and meaning-making but also in ‘the circuit of culture’ (see also du Gay *et al.*, 1997; Livingstone, 2015:442). It is, therefore, important to understand the role of audience readings in relation to how soap opera characters mirror (or possibly challenge) the attributes, beliefs, lives, and aspirations of the audience through characters (Liebes and Katz, 1990). This relationship between the text and audience is addressed in this study about how the study participants read gendered representations in terms of possible differences between a.) past South African soap operas and b.) societal realities of gender dynamics. This will further be addressed in the study by consulting previously published literature on audience reception and establishing the main themes of what were found to be the main constructions of female representations, to be presented in the following chapter (Chapter Two).

Furthermore, to indicate the relevance of the active audience approach, analyse and interpret the meanings the audience attaches to and derives from their reading of content depicted in the genre of soap operas regarding gender roles in this study, the circuit of culture model is included.

The ‘circuit of culture’ is a model of cultural analysis initially proposed by Richard Johnson in 1986 as an embryonic model but was later developed by du Gay *et al.*, in 1997 (du Gay *et al.*, 1997, 2013) and has remained a popular cultural analysis model with which to explore the interrelationship of power, politics, representations and identity (see Leve, 2012). Five concepts known as ‘moments’ are indicated in the model – representation, production, consumption, identity, and regulation – which provide answers to a) how meanings are produced [production], b) which meanings are shared within society, and by which groups [representation/consumption] c) what other counter-meanings are circulated [representation/consumption] d) those with contested meanings [identity], and v) how meanings are reflections of power and power resistance in the society [regulation] (du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 3, 12). This will help to provide a more holistic process of how female characters within a localised content are constructed, represented, and interpreted, alongside the social and cultural identity associated with such encoding and decoding. This study is aware that the model of encoding and decoding is also linked to the theory of semiotics; however, it is simplified and used in this study to further give clarity on the structure of the study as it is based on the production (encoding) and consumption (decoding).

The initial aim of this model was to study the Sony Walkman as a cultural phenomenon, its representation, the social identities that were associated with it, how it was produced and

consumed, and the mechanisms in place to regulate its use and distribution (du Gay *et al.*, 1997, 2013: 3). The adoption of this model in this study centralises gender roles in female characters as a phenomenon, how they are represented and consumed within the South African context, and how social identities are represented and reflected in soap opera content. Therefore, this study accounts for the interrelatedness of four moments (production, representation, consumption, and identity) as its primary focus, and to a lesser degree, that of regulation in that some of its conditions and the context it provides are addressed in the literature review and interviews. In line with the theoretical framework, findings from previous literature will be compared to those generated from the data collection on the current soap operas under study to establish the changes or continuities visible in today's South African soap operas.

### **Methodological approach**

This section succinctly introduces how the data was gathered and analysed for this study. However, the detailed methodological approach adopted for the study is discussed in Chapter Four. This study is located in an interpretive paradigm that is founded on the idea that reality is constructed through subjective perceptions and interpretations of reality (Croucher and Cronn-Millss, 2015: 51). It assumes a relativist ontology whereby a single phenomenon may have multiple interpretations rather than a truth that can be determined by a process of measurement (Creswell, 2007).

This study adopts a feminist qualitative approach. Broadly, qualitative research focuses on people's descriptions of lived experiences, the understanding of human phenomena, and the meaning that societies assign to these phenomena [which is the representation and reading of female characters within the context of this study] (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). It enables a study to understand the world or lived experiences from the perspective of the participants (Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey, 2016; Dieronitou, 2014: 7) and prioritises the process of "interpretation rather than quantification, putting emphasis on subjectivity" (Cassell and Symon 1994: 7) and is, therefore "essentially interpretive" (Creswell, 2007).

More specifically, feminist qualitative research centers on marginalised groups of society, such as women, radicalised groups, persons with a disability, and gender nonconforming persons (Olsen, 2005). Feminist qualitative research is also concerned with the question of voice and the text that

discusses how to make women's voices heard without manipulation (Olsen, 2005).

This study takes on a case study design. It is an appropriate design because it allows the researcher to "conduct an in-depth exploration of intricate phenomena within a specific context" (Rahid *et al.*, 2019:1). *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* were investigated as real-time soap operas within their naturally occurring context (South Africa), with an understanding of the influential role of context on meaning-making. This study's data were gathered between 2022 and the early part of 2023 and there was no specific episode considered for analysis, but the participants shared their experiences and views based on the time they became active viewers of the soap operas to the date of the FGDs and interviews.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and online as well as in-person focus group discussions. Conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with soap opera production staff allowed the researcher to explore the informed viewpoints on reasons for the specific ways in which the female characters are represented, as well as to gain knowledge of the creators' experiences (Blandford, 2013). Focus group discussions were included as a technique for assembling a group of individuals, in this case, student soap opera viewers, to discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction (Hayward, Simpson, and Wood, 2004; Mack *et al.*, 2005; Israel *et al.*, 1998; Morgan, 1998).

The study population was South African residents (citizens or non-citizens) within the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban) and Gauteng (Johannesburg), with a total of 28 participants. Of the total participants, four (4) participants from the production teams were interviewed - two expert informants (Producers and Head writers) from each soap opera to explore the value of their insights, which lie in their experience with the *Uzalo* and *Scandal* productions. The four expert interviews were conducted virtually using the online Zoom platform. These producer interviews provided this study with the encoder's perspectives and preferred messages of gender roles and stereotypes in their construction of female characters. This helped address the following research questions of the study: a) how female characters are represented in terms of gender roles and b) how these representations compare to previous representations in terms of a continuation of female

Subordination, or whether there has been a shift that includes an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies, or how the representation was intended by the producers. A total of 24 participants<sup>26</sup> were selected for the audience analysis with specific inclusion criteria. They comprised students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Durban. This provides relative ease of access to members of the audience who are viewers of the two soap operas. Research has shown that students are among the highest viewers of soap operas (Babrow, 1989; Aswasulasikin, Hadi and Pujiani, 2019; Mahlatsi, 2018). Though the study focuses on representations of women, the focus groups included male and female participants. This assisted in gathering varied and diverse data from their perceptions or experiences (Coenen *et al.*, 2012; McCombes, 2019). Therefore, both homogeneity and heterogeneity are considered in the UKZN group composition. Hence, the FGD were two groups for females and two groups for males, and the last two groups were mixed - including both women and men. Focus group discussions with students from the UKZN assisted in addressing the last two key research questions: a) In what ways do the audience read these representations in terms of the possible differences between i) past South African soap operas and ii) societal realities of gender dynamics? b) In what ways do the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women?

After the process of transcription (which is the first step in data analysis), data was organised and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2020). Reflexive thematic analysis is the modification of the initial method of thematic analysis (TA). The TA helps a study to “identify themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to research questions” (Braun and Clarke, 2013:175). Thematic analysis is also known as an inductive approach of analysis that involves immersion in data, considered perhaps the most common approach to analysing focus group data (Hennink, 2013). This approach generates themes to capture a phenomenon, which is then explained (Daly, Kellehear, and Gliksman, 1997; Ryan and Bernard, 2000). Hence, through this method, repeated themes both in what the experts identify as the encoded gender roles and what audiences decode in terms of gender roles as constructed in female characters were identified. Both theoretical/deductive methods and inductive methods were combined in this study (Schreier 2014:173, Braun and Clarke 2006). Themes that align with the study’s theoretical or analytic

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<sup>26</sup> The participants recruited during the data collection was according to the initial number stated, hence there was no need for amendment.

interest in female characters regarding gender roles are identified and are, therefore, more explicitly analyst-driven in being directly guided by the study's key research questions and the relevant literature that has previously identified themes. However, themes are also inductively formed from the data to identify new information from the participants, which will be analysed according to the study's theoretical framework in order to contribute original knowledge. This process of data analysis enables this study to classify and interpret statements and inferences about abstract or obvious structures of meaning-making in the data gathered and what they represent (Flick, 2014: 5).

After identifying and categorising themes, the scholarly interpretation is then mobilised through reference to the study's literature, along with theoretical concepts of the feminist media theory and intersectionality, as well as the circuit of culture model (du Gay *et al.*, 1997).

### **Structure of the thesis**

This study is structured into seven chapters:

#### *Chapter One: Introduction*

The first chapter of this thesis is the introductory chapter of the study. It provides insight into the aim of the study by identifying the problem statement and the inclusion of the problem in context, precise issues, and relevance of the problem. It summarises the main research objectives, the research questions, the location of the study, a brief description of the theoretical framework adopted in the study, the research methodology, and finally, the structure of the study.

*Chapter Two: Gender issues in policy and entertainment media – A global to national review* This chapter is the first of two literature review chapters. To provide a broader societal contextualisation for the study and further elucidate the problem statement, this chapter is dedicated to discussing gender-related issues globally and within the South African context by reviewing global and national policies that address gender issues. As the study focuses on entertainment media, this chapter further discusses the correlation between gender issues and entertainment media, followed by the traditional roles of women in South Africa. Lastly, the role of African Language Media is discussed because language is central to any narrative and language

can be used to construct people's views of reality.

*Chapter Three: Reviewing soap opera scholarship - Generic codes and producing/consuming representations and discourses*

The third chapter is a review of relevant soap opera scholarship that contextualises the study both globally (Pitout, 1996; Geraghty, 2005; Ang, 2007; Brunsdon, 1995) and locally (Marx, 2008; Milton, 2015; Tager, 1997, 2010; van der Merwe, 2012; Teer-Tomaselli, 2005, 2015). The chapter is arranged according to the following themes: Global media production studies, South African television production studies, representation of women in media, A brief history of soap operas, defining soap operas through generic codes and conventions, soap opera models, soap opera as a feminine genre (restructure and reconstruct), and consumption/decoding/interpretation.

*Chapter Four: Theoretical framework*

The theoretical framework chapter discusses the theories that guide this study, namely the feminist media theory in line with the intersectionality feminist perspective, which is not only about gender but also about how discourses and behaviours are interrelated with race, class, and sexuality. The active audience theory frames the investigation of how viewers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* interpret the construction of female characters with regard to gender roles. More specifically, the circuit of culture model is presented as the second conceptual tool that foregrounds interrelatedness. The model relates to the interacting moments of production, representation, consumption, identity, and regulation.

*Chapter Five: Research methodology*

The methodology adopted for data collection in the study is discussed in this chapter. This includes the interpretive research paradigm, the qualitative feminist approach, the case study design, and concomitant data collection of interviews and focus groups. The sampling techniques, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study are also discussed.

*Chapter Six: Findings and analysis - Themes generated from soap opera production and consumption.*

The chapter starts by presenting findings generated from the expert interviews and study participants. The process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020) is carefully

followed to organise and analyse the data to achieve a deeper and more structured interpretation. Interpretation is supported through integration with the literature and theoretical framework to pinpoint the areas of new knowledge, as well as confluence and disparity with previous studies.

### *Chapter Seven: Conclusion*

The chapter summarises the research findings of the thesis, drawing conclusions in response to each of the key research questions. It also suggests areas or aspects for further study.

## Chapter Two: Gender Issues in Policy, Society Entertainment Media – A Global to National Review

### Introduction

“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.” - Swami Vivekananda<sup>27</sup>

Chapter One provided an overview of how and what this study aims to address and achieve, providing a thesis structure. The above-cited quote by Swami Vivekananda (2019) highlights the need for a balance of power regarding gender issues. In terms of South African statistics for 2021, South Africa's female population is approximately 30.48 million, while the male population amounts to approximately 29.56 million inhabitants (O'Neill, 2022). Although women comprise more than 50% of the population, gender inequality remains a South African problem (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, 2012; Salahodjaev and Azam, 2015). It also remains a global problem (Khachaturyan and Peterson, 2015).

This chapter is the first of two literature review chapters. In order to provide a broader societal contextualisation for the study and to further elucidate the problem statement, this chapter is dedicated to discussing gender-related issues globally and then within the South African context by reviewing global and national policies that address gender issues<sup>28</sup> (USAID, n.d.; United Nation Women, 2015). As the focus of the study is entertainment media, this chapter further discusses the correlation that exists between gender issues and entertainment media (Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Edström and Facht, 2018; Kumari and Joshi, 2015; Lauzen, 2018; Rattan *et al.*, 2019; Wood, 1994) followed by the traditional roles of women in South Africa. Lastly, the role of African Language Media is discussed (Orao, 2009; Spitulnik, 1993; Tshabangu and Salawu, 2021). This is discussed because language is central to any narrative (Marx, 2007:116), and language can be used

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<sup>27</sup> Nari tu Narayani': Sitharaman quotes Swami Vivekananda for women empowerment. Available at: [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/70087641.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/70087641.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst) [Accessed on 16/11/2022]

<sup>28</sup> National Gender Policy Framework. Available at: [https://www.dffe.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/environment\\_sector\\_genderstrategy/policy\\_framework](https://www.dffe.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/environment_sector_genderstrategy/policy_framework) [Accessed on 13/04/2023]

to construct people's views of reality (Webb, 2005). "What people speak and how they speak reflect the entire social discourse and ongoing cultural and political struggles of our world" (Aiseng, 2022: 2). In line with the focus of this study (construction of female characters), language is said to assist in characterisation (Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2019:149). The second literature review chapter then narrows its focus on scholarly contextualisation by reviewing previous television and soap opera scholarship, including how it connects with this study, how this study may extend on it, and the gaps that this study aims to address in the contribution of new knowledge.

### **Conceptualising gender**

The term "gender" was originally used by John Money (1955) and intended to justify sex reassignment in the 1940s to refer to something separate from biological sex. According to Money (1955), the use of the word gender rather than sex enabled him to write about the psychology and behaviour of intersex people. Before Money's work, it was uncommon to use the word gender to refer to anything but grammatical categories (Richard, 1994). Following that, it was utilised in social sciences starting in the late 1960s (Cislaghi and Heise, 2020:410; Unger, 1979: 43). Since then, gender has remained a prominent and central discussion in political, social, and scholarly life (Turner, 2006: 228). Studies concluded that men and women have separate roles and are not equal (Mead, 1935; Rubin, 1984). However, this difference between men and women was discouraged and the notion of women and men being equal was propagated, leading to the first wave of feminism in 1851 in the USA), followed by the suffragette movement starting in 1928.

The second wave of feminism between the 1960s and 1980s brought attention to sexual divisions in society, as well as the patterns of social difference and inequality that emerged and are largely responsible for the actual formation of gender as a concept on its own. In reaction to the second-wave feminists' alleged shortcomings, the third-wave feminist movement emerged in the early 1990s. The Third Wave is bolstered by the expectation of greater possibilities and less sexism (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000:83). In addition to using "gender" as the primary discussion topic for the connection between women and men rather than "sex," feminist scholars started to formulate several hypotheses about how "woman" was established (Hameed and Shukri, 2014). Some feminists contend that a woman is constructed as nothing more than a "sexual object for men" and that this objectification is how one becomes a woman. As a result, many activists and academics sought to liberate "woman" and abolish the category (Cavalaro, 2003:46).

Subsequently, the use of the word "gender" has grown significantly and continuously in popularity since 1980 (Chrisler and Lamer, 2016; Haig, 2004). Moving away from biological explanations to a concept that refers to the “categories created by society so that what men and women are supposed to do, how they are supposed to behave, and what value is given to each can be separated according to one's gender” (Hameed and Shukri, 2014:2-3). This description, founded on the *creation* of categories, aligns with the constructivist idea of gender, to be further discussed in this study’s conceptual framework (Chapter Four) [*my emphasis*]. The following section briefly defines gender-related terms to which this study subscribes and for a better understanding of the concepts in the study:

*Gender roles* are different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society’s values and beliefs about gender (Blackstone, 2004:2). According to Richmond-Abott (1992:7), gender roles as “beliefs that men possess certain traits and should do certain things and that women possess other traits and should do other things”. In other words, there are distinct male jobs and female jobs.

*Gender norms* are one element of the gender system and are described as social rules and expectations that keep the gender system intact (Cislaghi and Heise, 2020:410). The concept of gender norms is referred to as informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour based on gender (Ukaid, 2015).

*Gender identity* is one's internal sense of self and gender, whether that is man, woman, neither, or both (Wamsley, 2021:1). as an individual’s subjective sense of oneself as a gendered person (e.g., male, female, or another gender entirely) (Price and Skolnik, 2017)

*Gender stereotype* is a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women (United Nations Human Rights (UNHR), 2014:1). Gender stereotypes can be both positive and negative for example, “women are nurturing” or “women are weak.”

To further understand the concept of gender, the five essential elements, including - relational, hierarchical, historical, contextual, and institutional<sup>29</sup>, are briefly explained.

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<sup>29</sup> Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/sex-and-gender> [Accessed on 04/08/2022]

### *Relational*

Gender is a relational term; it refers to women and men and their relationships. Gender relations are closely linked to the various rights defined by society, responsibilities, and the identities of women and men in their relationships<sup>30</sup>. People engage with and understand their gender differently depending on whether they are interacting with a man, a woman, or a gender-nonconforming person (Thomeer, Umberson, and Reczek, 2020). Multiple forms of masculinity and femininity are understood about each other, including power differentials (Connell, 2005; Ferree, 2010). Hence, gender relations are context-specific (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), 2003) and are hierarchical authority relations between women and men that tend to disadvantage women.

### *Hierarchical*

Most existing gender systems are deeply hierarchical, privileging that which is male or masculine over that which is female or feminine (Heise *et al.*, 2019; Weber, 2019). According to Hirdman (1990: 79), the principle of ‘hierarchy,’ which he also refers to as ‘the primacy of the male norm,’ means that in every instance, male/masculine takes precedence or rates higher than woman, female/feminine, especially regarding power and prestige. This is experienced in some societies more than others; for instance, the gender hierarchies are profoundly entrenched in Jewish beliefs and culture (Rickman, 2009; Yesufu, 2022). This is often rooted in history and an African context.

### *Historical*

Historicity means that gender varies over time and is susceptible to human agency; gender is not a transhistorical structure that remains the same across time because of the “sexual dichotomy of bodies” and is context-specific (Connell, 1987:64).

### *Contextual*

Every society, ethnic group, and culture has gender role expectations, but they can vary from group to group. Edley and Wetherell (1995:180) explain that “the main way women have been subordinated is through the organisation of society around a private world of domestic work (the

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<sup>30</sup> Gender relations. Available at: <https://conseilsdejournalistes.com/en/egalite-genre/06-la-relation-de-genre/> [Accessed on 21/04/2023]

province of women), and a public world is seen as the province of men.” Contexts have important implications for the study of gender (Mehta, 2015:7, Rantalaaho, Heiskanen, Korvajärvi, and Vehviläinen, 1997:4). Whether gender relations act to improve or aggravate other social inequalities depends largely on the context and are constituted by different institutions which could be private (e.g., family, marriage) and public spheres (e.g., legal systems, academic organisations, religions) (SDC, 2003).

### *Institutional*

Institutional can be described as resources that redefine the rules, norms, and practices that administrate social institutions. Institutions are important in gender issues because of their ability to maintain gender relations; however, any attempts to change them to improve gender equality are often perceived as threats to traditions and culture (SDC, 2003:1). Therefore, to achieve any change, it is important to understand the concept of gender and other gender-related issues.

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women created in our families, societies, and cultures (Rolleri, 2013), and thus the expectations held about femininity and masculinity. Gender roles and expectations are learned. Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon which viewed as a binary and opposite construct describing the characteristics, behaviours, and roles deemed appropriate and expected of men and women (and boys and girls) by a given society (Rolleri, 2012). As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. Gender inequalities intersect with other social and economic inequalities; a central idea in this thesis will be further explained in terms of the intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000) in Chapter Four.

According to Hameed and Shukri (2014), gender is an interdisciplinary concept that can be approached from different disciplines: biological approach (gender differences are ascribed to the differential biological roles played by males and females), sociology focuses on the institutional level (focus on the socio-structural determinants of gender-role development and functioning). And lastly, the psychology approach (focus on investigating gender roles on an individual level). This study subscribes to a sociological view on gender that is grounded on:

the distinction between biological sex and gender: sex is a property of the biological characteristics of an organism; gender is socially constructed... Hence, according to this view, gender is not biologically fixed at all but rather culturally learned and is something that can and often changes

over time as well as varies according to place. Over time, the role of women has changed dramatically across social life (Hameed and Shukri, 2014:11).

Supporting Hameed and Shukri's view, the World Development Report (WDR, 2012:1) of the World Bank noted that gender is defined as socially constructed norms and ideologies that determine the behaviour and actions of men and women.

The following discussion returns to the idea that gender is constructed and can be mobilised as an enculturating tool (Cavalaro, 2003:48). In her book *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler (1993), within a liberal feminist perspective, clarified the notion of 'gender performance' which holds that sexed bodies, like gender, are created and regulated by social norms. Thus, they are simultaneously engendered and racialised. Gender and sex are conceived as something one continually *does* (rather than 'has') (Butler, 1993:7).

Butler argued that sex (the physical body) is only visible to us because of gender. The concept of gender allows us to see sex in the first place (in that there is a physical difference between women and men). She added that not only gender but also sex is socially constructed. This is associated with how a society or culture describes the concept of gender/sex. That is, gender identities are the "product of socialisation" (Mascolo, 2019:1). This is because gender is interactional rather than individual; it is developed through social interactions (Blackstone, 2004; Butler, 1990). Butler further noted that gender is also described as omnirelevant, meaning that people always judge our behavior as male or female. Hence, explaining gender as a product of social relationships, however, this idea has been greeted by many with disbelief or skepticism (Bing and Bergvall, 1996:6). This implies that the two concepts are relatable because it is with the help of one concept (sex) that the other concept (gender) is established and vice versa. That is, through sex, acceptable, appropriate behaviour is learned from culture (cultural institutions – family, friends, and school), known as gender.

This is why sex and gender are often used interchangeably, even though they are different (Lips, 2022; Newman, 2021). As research developed, it was discovered that the word sex is not enough to describe the many ways in which "human beings express themselves, their behaviour in culture, and their social environment" (Hameed and Shukri, 2014:2). One of the first social scientists to distinguish the concept of gender from the concept of sex was Ann Oakley (1972). Sex is the physical differences between males, females, and intersex. The sex of a person is typically known at birth,

which is based on anatomical and physiological characteristics; including genitalia and chromosome composition (Newman, 2021). This assigned sex is called a person's "natal sex" (Newman, 2021:1). On the other hand, gender involves how a person is identified. According to Oakley (1972), gender parallels the biological division of sex into male and female, but it involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity. Unlike natal sex, gender is not made up of binary forms; gender is a broad spectrum (Newman, 2021). Gender norms are constructed around primary features present at birth and so much more (Wood and Eagly, 2010). This aligns with Bing and Bergvall's (1996) view above. Hameed and Shukri (2014:5) summarised that "sex refers to biological differences whereas gender refers to social differences" or "cultural exposure," which varies across cultures and contexts (Richardson and Wearing, 2014:24). Contrary to Roller (2021), a person may be identified at any point within this spectrum or outside of it entirely.

The description by the likes of Hameed and Shukri (2014) is in line with Judith Butler's (1999:2) view of gender performativity with a key emphasis on "reiterative and citational practice" and not a singular act. This perspective of gender description by Butler implies or might be seen as a habit suitable for being repeated. Since this is not the focus of this study, the performativity theory is not considered part of the theories underpinning this study but is connected to feminist thoughts. However, understanding that there are no universal expectations associated with masculinity or femininity, this study explores both statements (by Butler and Hameed and Shukri) to investigate gender expectations from audiences in their viewing of soap opera characters. Based on the study's cultural studies approach and varied sample of participants, this study is interested in whether and how the participants have different interpretations of gender expectations. Hence, it will provide a comprehensive understanding of gender within the context of this study, assisting in understanding how gender (in)equality is perceived.

### **Gender (in)equality: A global perspective**

Societies that have reduced the power gap between men and women experience better social, health, and economic outcomes compared to those that do not (United Nations, 1995). Gender equality is not only a "fundamental human right, [but] it is also a keystone of a prosperous, modern economy that provides sustainable, inclusive growth" (OECD, 2017:3). Gender equality is defined as a social condition whereby women and men share equal rights and a balance of power, status,

opportunities, and rewards which can materialise by men and women having - a) equitable access and use of resources, b) equitable participation in relationships, the household, the community, and political arenas, and c) safety or freedom from violence (Rolleri, 2012a).

Gender equality is achieved when the different behaviours, aspirations, and needs of women and men are equally valued and favoured and do not give rise to different consequences that reinforce inequalities<sup>31</sup>. However, according to Rolleri (2013:3), men possess more power to control decision-making in personal, community, and political arenas, and women's needs and interests are under-acknowledged or not adequately addressed. Gender inequality refers to women having a secondary position in social life, social, economic, and political fields, and having less place than men:

In the historical process, [the] place of women has been restricted to the private sphere (home) in all cultures, their presence in [the] public sphere has become possible as a result of the challenges which have lasted for many years, and which are still going on (Küçükşen, 2016:1286).

Van der Gaag's (2011) article *Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2011 – So, what about boys?* indicates that gender equality is far from being an issue just for women and girls but also for boys and men and that this needs to be better understood for a positive impact. However, this study focuses on women, so most of the discourse will be in line with women, in this case, female characters. Rolleri (2013) also stressed that gender equality does not mean that women and men should become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities, and opportunities will not depend on whether or not they are born male or female. Hence it becomes significant to understand how gender equality works because this will help shed more light on how the concept of equality is/or not referenced in the construction and interpretation of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

Without equity, people do not have fair access to resources and opportunities that allow them to operate in society as equals. Gender equity is “the process of being fair” to people of different genders (Gilles, 2015:3). Gender equitable practices are applications and the use of ideas, beliefs,

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<sup>31</sup> Available at: [https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/GenderToolkit1\\_2\\_GenderDefinitionsandMandates.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/GenderToolkit1_2_GenderDefinitionsandMandates.pdf) [Accessed on 2/11/2022]

or methods to achieve or improve gender equality. According to the United Nations Human Rights (UNHR) (2020), the commitment of other agencies like States, national human rights institutions (NHRIs), civil society, and other stakeholders worldwide put some practices in place to achieve gender equality as they noted:

Reform discriminatory laws and policies [that] allow gender-based discrimination and bring them in line with international human rights law; Transform discriminatory social norms and harmful gender stereotypes into more equal social structures and power relations for all genders; Eliminate gender-based violence; Guarantee the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights by all; Protect and expand the civic space of women human rights defenders and feminist movements; Facilitate equal participation of women, men, and people of diverse gender identities in civil, political, economic, social and cultural life; and Ensure gender equality within the UN Human Rights Office and the United Nations (UNHR, 2020:1).

Above are some of the policies influencing the practices that serve as a set of guidelines for the achievement of gender equality. Patriarchy is another practice that needs to be curbed to attain equality. The reason is that patriarchal ideologies arguably support oppression) hence promoting inequality (Aditi, 2021:1; Guy-Evans, 2023). Gender inequality is frequently coupled with oppressions based on caste, class, community, tribe, and religion in a hierarchical society, and "men as the principal oppressors" (Chaudhuri, 2004: xxii-xxiii).

Patriarchy is a system that guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell 1995, 77). To elaborate, patriarchy is a system of social stratification and differentiation based on sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females (Asiyanbola, 2005).

Patriarchy as a form of hegemonic masculinity also includes hierarchy among men. For example, the traditional patriarchy of older men over younger men (Napikosiki, 2020) and those deemed as weaker, for example, homosexuals (see Connell, 1995). Traditional patriarchal societies are usually also patrilineal — titles and property are inherited through male lines. In modern patriarchy, some men hold more power (and privilege) under their position of authority, and this hierarchy of power (and privilege) is considered acceptable (Napikosiki, 2020:1). Michele Barrett (1980:16) argues that the use of the term patriarchy assumes that the relation between men and women is unchanging and universalistic. She suggests it can only be appropriate if it is narrowly defined and refers to specific aspects of ideological relations, such as father-daughter relationships. The use of the term

often involves confusion between ‘patriarchy’ as a rule of the father and ‘patriarchy’ as men’s domination of women (Barrett, 1990:16). However, Sylvia Walby (1986:28) critiques Barrett as the problem is not with the concept itself but with the way it is used in specific texts as it involves problems of reductionism, biologism, universalism, and therefore the inconsistent definition of patriarchy needs to be overcome in an adequate analysis of gender inequality. This study will investigate how patriarchy is considered in constructing and interpreting female characters in the two soap operas.

In a traditional patriarchal family, South African women, especially the Zulus, are taught to respect men as the heads of their families (Ntshangase, 2018). Such gender stereotypes reinforce the portrayal of men as a “powerful species that can either destroy or build the lives of women” (Ntshangase, 2018:1). Men who fall short of such attributes are often viewed as weeklies and vice versa. Bantjes, Kagee, and Meissner (2016:3) revealed that some South African men feel pressured to fit into the parameters of hegemonic ideals – that a man must be aggressive and strong because that is what is expected by society and the media as the norm. This was evident in my master’s study (the representation of matriarchs in *Uzalo*, see Onuh, 2017) as MaNgcobo uses Zulu male norms and patriarchy to state that Mxolisi should exhibit more attributes associated with men because his trace of weakness negotiated her maternal roles for raising a weakling. Nzimande and Dyll (2024) further acknowledged this - a number of the participants in that study felt that society expected them to restrict their emotions and to be brave.

South Africa is a patriarchal society (Napikosiki, 2020; Walby, 1986), but some changes have occurred. While it was once about men directly controlling their wives or daughters in the home, although it always happens throughout society, it is now more complex. In terms of contemporary patriarchy, Walby (1986) (although it is not a South African study, it is used to help guide this study in understanding the concept of patriarchy) proposed a model that identifies six structures where women are exploited: paid work (paid employment), domestic work, violence, sexuality, the state, and culture. Over thirty years later, Rustin (2018) observes that these six structures are still relevant and highlights their interrelatedness. The six structures [*in italics*] will be explained briefly.

In terms of *paid work*, Walby (1986) described that it is widely used to discriminate against women as men always dominate high-paid jobs because they overestimate their capabilities and talents. In

contrast, women are regarded as less work-oriented and deserve low wage rates. According to Kiran (2023:1), low wages and fewer job opportunities further help in the establishment of patriarchy. Despite accounting for half of the total population in South Africa, women continue to be underutilized, accounting for less than a third of the workforce (Lagarde 2013).

According to Walby (1986), men still benefit from women's unpaid labour. Women still do most of the domestic work and childcare. Women are underrepresented in public and paid work but overrepresented in private and low-paying jobs (Oelz and Rani, 2015). Domestic work is probably among the lowest-paying jobs in the labour market, and women are concentrated in this sector. Some of the reasons for low remuneration of domestic work, according to Oelz and Rani (2015:1), are:

low formal skills and educational levels, high incidence of informality, lack of collective representation, weak individual bargaining power, lack of possibilities for income generation, and vulnerable social status. Another factor is the gender-based undervaluation of domestic work, as these workers also perform the traditional role of care and household tasks (unpaid work) within their own households.

*Violence* is another structure arguably related to patriarchy. Walby (1986) sees violence against women as a form of male control of women. This is so according to Guy-Evans (2023:1) and Johnson (2004) because women in a patriarchal society are seen as subservient to men's force and violence often works to keep women under men's command. Women are conditioned by society to ignore, explain away, and belittle their own experiences of sexism, discrimination, and abuse (Bates, 2022).

In terms of *sexuality*, there are different expectations and standards between men and women when it comes to sexual behaviour and relationships<sup>32</sup>. Despite the sexual liberation of the 1960s, there is still a 'sexual double standard' in society (Walby, 1986). Males condemn women who are sexually active as slags and those who are not as drags, which males with many sexual conquests admire (Thompson, 2017). Walby (1986) views heterosexuality as a patriarchal framework, as there is pressure on women to serve men by marrying them.

*The state* is another element in the structure of patriarchy by Walby (1986), defined as a set of

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<sup>32</sup> Available at: <https://www.tutor2u.net/sociology/reference/classic-texts-sylvia-walby-theorising-patriarchy-1990>  
[Accessed on 12/05/2023]

social institutions and their functions. The practices of the state are patriarchal racism and male domination in the capitalist system (Walby, 1986). However, Walby argued that there has been little attempt to improve women's position in the public sphere and that equal opportunity legislation is rarely enforced. Kiran (2023) agrees that there are changes; however, policies and schemes for the welfare of women need improvement. The last structure of patriarchy is *culture*. History reveals evidence that cultural practices and customs are often used to discriminate against practices. The Reed Dance<sup>33</sup> (*uMkhosi Womhlanga*) is a known practice among the Zulu community (Nkosi, 2019). It is an annual ceremony celebrated in September by the Zulu nation of South Africa. This practice, commonly described as virginity testing, involves the gathering of:

Thousands of Zulu maidens and visitors gather to participate at the Zulu Royal Residence, eNyokeni in KwaNongoma, and later eMachobeni Royal Residence in Ngwavuma. The Reed Dance allows young maidens to partake in an event that invokes national pride, [and] a sense of belonging and offers them immense emotional gratification for keeping their purity (Nkosi, 2019:1-2).

Another long-standing practice in South Africa is polygamy (Mabaso, Malope, and Simbayi, 2018). This is a practice where men have more than one wife and this practice is noted to be a prominent practice that is socially as well as culturally accepted phenomenon in South Africa and many African countries (Thobejane and Flora, 2014; Smith-Greenaway and Trinitapoli, 2014). The experiences of women in polygamous marriages vary according to the socio-cultural context (Thobejane and Flora, 2014). Walby (1986) highlighted that men and women still have different norms and values and that the culture is patriarchal. For instance, there is still a social norm that a man is "head of the household". Ideas about masculinity and femininity can be spotted in every domain of social structure and this training starts from the birth of a child (Kiran, 2023). For example, children are taught which toys are made for which gender. Culture has made specific assigned behaviors for men and women. If anyone is not following these, it is considered taboo (Kiran, 2023]. South Africa, particularly the Zulu nation, is described as a patriarchal society. Therefore, this study needs to investigate if/how the concept of culture/traditions and patriarchy is/is not incorporated into the construction of female characters in the two soap operas.

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<sup>33</sup> The Reed Dance signifies girls' readiness to become wives and mothers. That is, it provides young maidens with the opportunity to partake in an event that invokes national pride, and a sense of belonging and which offers them immense emotional gratification for keeping their purity (Nkosi, 2019).

The interrelatedness of the above six structures demonstrates that gender equality is not merely an issue of human rights but also cultural and economic, necessitating its inclusion on the development agenda (IMF and WB 2007; IMF 2017). The Global Gender Gap Index measures the development of gender-based gaps across four critical dimensions (economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment), and it tracks how much progress has been made in bridging these gaps over time (World Economic Forum, 2021)<sup>34</sup>. Below is the summary of some of the findings of the Global Gender Gap Report (2021), which were benchmarked among 156 countries:

- a) Globally, the average distance completed to parity is at 68%, a step back compared to 2020 (-0.6 percentage points). These figures are mainly driven by a decline in the performance of large countries. On its current trajectory, it will now take 135.6 years to close the gender gap worldwide<sup>35</sup>.
- b) The gender gap in Political Empowerment remains the largest of the four gaps tracked, with only 22% closed to date, having further widened since the 2020 edition of the report by 2.4 percentage points. Across the 156 countries covered by the index, women represent only 26.1% of 35,500 parliament seats and 22.6% of over 3,400 ministers worldwide. In 81 countries, there has never been a woman head of state as of 15 January 2021. At the current rate of progress, the World Economic Forum estimates that it will take 145.5 years to attain gender parity in politics.
- c) The gender gap in Economic Participation and Opportunity remains the second largest of the four key gaps tracked by the index. According to this year's index results, 58% of this gap has been closed so far. The gap has seen marginal improvement since the report's 2020 edition; as a result, we estimate that it will take another 267.6 years to close.
- d) Gender gaps in Educational Attainment, Health, and Survival are nearly closed. In Educational Attainment, 95% of this gender gap has been closed globally, with 37 countries already at parity. However, the 'last mile of progress is proceeding slowly.

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<sup>34</sup> The analysis presented in the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 report is based on a methodology integrating the latest statistics from international organizations and a survey of executives.

<sup>35</sup> It was noted in the report that while the drop-in score is relatively small over the last year, the number of years to close the gap increases substantially because the overall progress recorded between 2006 and 2021 is used to calculate the rate of progress over 15 years.

The index estimates it will take another 14.2 years to close this gap on its current trajectory. In Health and Survival, 96% of this gender gap has been closed, registering a marginal decline since last year (not due to COVID-19), and the time to close this gap remains undefined (World Economic Forum, 2021:5-7).

To bridge the gap that is noted across the globe, some policies have been established to help address the issues related to gender equality/parity. Therefore, the next section will discuss some global policies on gender issues.

### *Global policies on gender issues*

Resolutions adopted by the United Nations Member States at the UN General Assembly help shape UN policies and practices aimed at improving the status of women regarding gender issues<sup>36</sup>. These policies are noted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, n.d)<sup>37</sup>. Accordingly, Articles 2 and 23 state that there can be no distinction or discrimination based on gender, including the right to equal pay for work.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2012) treats the issue of gender balance in the workforce as part of human resources policy and practice. Gender balance is about the equal participation of women and men in all areas of work (international and national staff at all levels, including senior positions). Sustainable Development Goals Report (SDGR)– 2030 (2022:1), gender equality is a fundamental human right and a foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Noting such importance, the fifth goal is dedicated to gender equality and the first fifth target is to “end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere”. Other targets aim to promote gender equality (see SDGSR, 2022). Another policy-making body supporting the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to accelerate the realization of gender equality and women empowerment is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (UN Women, n.d).

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<sup>36</sup> Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/gender-parity-in-the-united-nations/laws-and-policies> [Accessed on 07/11/2022]

<sup>37</sup> Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/gender-parity-in-the-united-nations/laws-and-policies> [Accessed on 07/11/2022]

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2018) developed a policy mainstreaming gender in the humanitarian response and commits itself to ensure that its members take the following actions:

(a) Formulate specific strategies for ensuring that gender issues are brought into mainstream activities within the IASC areas of responsibility. Priority areas are assessment and strategic planning for humanitarian crises; the Consolidated Appeal Process; principled approach to emergencies; and participation of women in planning, designing, and monitoring all aspects of emergency programmes. (b) Ensure data is disaggregated by sex and age and include a gender perspective in information analysis. (c) Produce gender-sensitive operational studies, best practices, guidelines, and checklists for programming, and establish instruments and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, such as gender-impact methodologies, to incorporate gender-analysis techniques in institutional tools and procedures. (d) Develop capacity for systematic gender mainstreaming in programmes, policies, actions, and training. All these policies by IASC are guidelines for achieving gender balance in the workforce which should serve as an end means to gender equality.

Furthermore, Georgieva, Sayeh, and Sahay (2022) state that there are some well-proven solutions to adopt gender-sensitive macroeconomic actions of which policymakers should take note: firstly, to step up investment in women's human capital; secondly, enabling women to work outside the home or start their business; thirdly, tackle gender biases and fourthly, increasing the representation of women in leadership positions (see the below for details<sup>38</sup>). The IMF supported members in deploying and improving gender policies for several years. On July 22, 2022, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved the IMF's first Strategy toward Mainstreaming Gender into the IMF's core activities. Gender mainstreaming at the IMF begins by recognising that reducing gender disparities leads to higher economic growth, greater economic stability and resilience, and lower income inequality. Simultaneously, economic and financial policies can potentially exacerbate or narrow gender disparities. Well-designed macroeconomic, structural, and financial policies can support efficient and inclusive outcomes that benefit women, girls, and society as a whole (IMF, 2022)—exploring how meanings

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<sup>38</sup> Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/09/08/how-to-close-gender-gaps-and-grow-the-global-economy> [Accessed on 07/11/2022]

bestowed upon objects and events are influenced by both the producers' and audience members' frameworks of interpretation. By extension, the study will identify how these global debates and imperatives are factored into these frameworks of feminist media theory (Steiner, 2014) and the circuit of culture (du Gay *et al.*, 1997).

Hence, for a better perspective, it is relevant to be aware of gender (in) equality within a South African context.

### **Gender (in)equality: A South African perspective**

Gender roles in South Africa are both complex and diverse and gender inequalities persist at many levels in the economy, social institutions, households, and sexual partnerships (Mantell *et al.*, 2009). Gender, as noted earlier, can be understood as a concept that is learned within the early years through the social interaction form of engaging with and observing adults, as well as how certain behaviour from the child is received and rewarded (Kambouri and Evans, 2019; MacNaughton; 2000; Massey, 2013). For instance, South Africa's deep-seated patriarchy is entrenched in the language used when raising children. Girls are typically praised and reaffirmed as "princesses," while boys are encouraged to be superheroes and are told not to cry "like a girl"; this teaches them [boys] early that girls are inferior (Chang, 2019:1). These characteristics, behaviours, and roles are learned and reinforced through a socialization process that begins early in life and continues throughout the life cycle (Blackstone, 2003; Rolleri, 2012a; Steffens and Viladot, 2015). Due to the thorough entrenchment of gender in our institutions, actions, beliefs, and desires, it appears to be completely natural<sup>39</sup>.

Over the years, South Africa has made significant progress toward gender equality since 20,000 women marched to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 in opposition to the extension of Pass Laws to women (StatsSA, 2022). Activists rose in opposition to a patriarchal system that aimed to control women and reduce them to submissive beings at the mercy of men (StatsSA, 2022).

However, with the rise in gender-based violence (GBV), gender inequality is a serious concern in South Africa (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, 2012; Salahodjaev and Azam, 2015). Other areas in the country that indicate disparities between men and women are the education and employment

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<sup>39</sup> Available at: <https://web.stanford.edu/~eckert/PDF/Chap1.pdf> [Accessed on 24/-2/2022]

sectors; inequality exists as women remain at a lower level than their male counterparts<sup>40</sup>. Subsequently, significant efforts have been made to ensure the country attains gender equality. Gender equity and equality in higher education management have been in the spotlight in South Africa for the past 20 decades (Akala, 2019; Mdlaneni, Mandyoli, and Frantz, 2021; Naidu, 2018; Zulu, 2010). This is because one of the biggest challenges facing women in South Africa and even globally is educational inequality (Stats, 2022). Therefore, this section will provide an overview of some gender-related issues women face in South Africa. This will be a broad societal-based discussion and then Chapter Three will discuss how gender-related issues are depicted in the media.

### *Gender-based violence (GBV)*

Gender-based violence is the umbrella word for all sorts of violence that occur because of women's traditional roles in society (Yesufu, 2022). This could be due to one sex being assigned at birth or unequal power relations between genders in any given society (Bloom, 2008). Addressing Bloom's view, Hadebe (2010) revealed that cultural values such as respect, dignity, and authority may taint relationships between men and women because it places men at the top of the pyramid and women at the bottom. Not only that, Kim and Motsei (2002:1243) stressed that such "cultural values and norms [that] oblige to condone and reinforce abusive practices against women". Regardless of the much-needed progress and attention to gender equality within South Africa, the recent instances of gender-based and sexually motivated violence prove that strides toward gender equality are far from becoming a reality (PsySSA, 2019), as femicide remains alarming (Ellis, 2020; Mashaba, 2020; Modise, 2020; Wood, 2020).

Femicide is the murder of women or girls by men, usually occurring in the home and known as the most extreme manifestation of abuse and violence of men to women (Yesufu, 2022). Some other different forms of GBV are domestic violence, intimate partner violence, femicide, sexual violence by partners and non-partners, physical violence, psychological and emotional violence, economic violence, harmful traditional practices, stalking, human trafficking (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR), 2016; Mama, Melber, and Nyamnjoh, 2001; Sideris, 2005).

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<sup>40</sup> Available at: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=14559> [Accessed on 15/08/2022]

Gender-based violence (GBV) is widespread in South Africa (Clark, 2021). Among the different types of GBV listed above, intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most common type of GBV in the country (Kirkwood, 2018; Yesufu, 2022). According to 2012 Gender Links research conducted in four provinces, 77 percent of women in Limpopo, 51% in Gauteng, 45% in the Western Cape, and 36% in KwaZulu-Natal reported having experienced GBV in their lives. IPV statistics from the 2016 DHS suggest that more than 20% of women have suffered physical abuse from a partner at some point in their lives, with higher rates in the Eastern Cape (32%), Northwest (29%), and Mpumalanga (26 percent). In the same light, it was noted that ‘in South Africa, every 8 hours a woman is killed by an intimate partner’, making the femicide rate in South Africa “5 times more than the global rate” (Makou 2017:1). Within the first week of the Covid-19 lockdown around March 2020, it was reported, that the South African Police Service received 87 000 calls related to domestic violence by an intimate partner (Clark, 2021).

Domestic violence (DV) as noted is mostly portrayed as a crime perpetrated by men against women. In this contemporary South Africa, men also experience domestic violence with women as the culprits and active participants in the commission of the crime (Mshweshwe, 2020; Tshoane et al, 2024; Thobejane, Mogorosi, and Luthada, 2019; Thobejane and Luthada, 2019). Domestic Violence Against Men (DVAM) thrives in South Africa (Barkhuizen, 2015; Graaff and Heinecken, 2017), however, in comparison to those against women, this aspect of DV does not receive as much media attention. Many DVAM incidents in South Africa remain unreported, as they do in many African countries, and the ones that are reported are frequently not adequately documented by the authorities (Barkhuizen, 2015; Graaff and Heinecken, 2017; Tshoane et al., 2023). The scale of this problem is further worsened by the fact that most victims of DVAM tend to be silent about their ordeal due to historically driven sociocultural beliefs that ‘cowboys don’t cry’ (Barkhuizen, 2015b:47). The intricate interactions between patriarchy, culture, and the negative male construct led to domestic violence in South Africa. The conceptions of masculinity and the reinforcement of domestic violence are influenced by patriarchal cultural ideas and customs that place a premium on male aggressiveness and dominance over women (Mshweshwe, 2020). These further review that South African society is patriarchal.

Sexual abuse, particularly rape, is another form of abuse that is on the increase in the country. According to a World Population Report (2023), South Africa has one of the highest rape statistics

in the world, even higher than some countries at war. Based on the statistics of the increase in GBV within the country, particularly on rape, Gouws (2022) noted that rape in South Africa is systemic and endemic. In agreement (Thomas, Masinjila, and Bere, 2013) argue that sexual and gender-based violence is bound to systematic gendered inequality. The South African annual police crime statistics conducted between April to March 2019-2020 confirm this. The statistics show that there were 42,289 rapes reported in 2019/2020, as well as 7,749 sexual assaults, translating into about 115 rapes a day. According to the report of the South African Government News Agency (2023), it indicated that 2022 between October and December 2022, South Africa recorded an alarming rate of 5 935 rape incidents. Moreso, a report by Whitfield (2022:1) shows that South African current crime statistics indicate a shocking increase in violent crimes against women and children:

- a) 855 women and 243 children were murdered (an increase of 53.2% and 46.4%, respectively).
- b) 11 734 cases of assault with grievous bodily harm were reported against women, and 1 670 cases against children (an increase of 54.7% and 58.4%, respectively).
- c) 282 reported cases of attempted murder against women and 61 cases against children (an increase of 31.4% and 27.5%, respectively).

Whitfield's (2022:1) report states, "South Africa has become a gruesome war zone for women and children who are raped, murdered, and maimed daily. Every time a woman or a child is violently attacked, we lose a part of our soul as a nation". Because of violence against women, and since this study is focused on the representation of female characters in soap operas, there is a need for further interrogation and understanding of the issue of gender equity as the context in which they are constructed and interpreted. Are issues regarding GBV included or not in the popular South African entertainment media? If yes, how are they represented? This is discussed further in the analysis of Chapters Five and Six.

GBV inflicts significant economic as well as human costs, gender norms, and unequal power relations between women and men in South Africa (Kirkwood, 2018). A study (UCT, 2016) identifies the following factors associated with women's victimisation: a woman's economic dependence on a male partner, the extent to which the man controls the relationship, and the man's norms regarding inequitable gender relations. These factors are also at the root of HIV

transmission, as evidenced by the phenomenon of 'blessers'<sup>41</sup>, or men who exchange sexual favours for gifts or money to younger women (blessee) (Mampane, 2018:1; Kirkwood, 2018:4). This is supported by the findings of an Eastern Cape Province study, which discovered that relationship power inequity (as measured by a sexual relationship power scale) raises women's risk of HIV infection (Jewkes *et al.*, 2010). This is consistent with the findings of other studies from the Sub-Saharan region, which show a link between women's economic empowerment and vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases and IPV (De Walque, Dow, and Gong, 2014). Although this study is not concerned about sexually transmitted diseases, this study through the lens of some of the cited studies seeks to understand some of the influences or factors that subject women to GBV issues.

The alarming rate of GBV during the COVID-19 country's lockdown attracted the attention of the media, police, government agencies, and the country at large, led to the creation of a campaign by the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa called 16 Days Activism Against

Gender Base Violence<sup>42</sup>. The aim is to advocate for no violence against women and children in the country. On 3 August 2018, UN Women recorded a campaign by South African Women '#Totalshutdown. The campaign came about after the release of Stats Sa in 2018, which revealed an alarming increase in the murder rate of women by 117 percent between 2015 and 2016/17. The number of women who experienced sexual offenses also jumped from 31,665 in 2015/16 to 70,813 in 2016/17, an increase of 53 percent. The call-out points out the need to totally shut down GBV in South Africa. During the campaign, survivors of violence recalled their experiences and used the march to remember femicide victims such as 17-year-old Anene Booysen, who was raped and brutally murdered in 2013, and Karabo Mokoena, who was murdered and burnt by her boyfriend in 2017 (Saba, 2017). Within the last week alone, the remains of a 6-year-old girl were found after being reported missing a few days earlier (UN Women, 2018:1). Towards the aim of ending gender violence, 'Stop Gender Violence: A National Campaign' was created. The mandate and objectives to holistically address and respond to GBV more broadly (Sonke Gender Justice, n.d). In the

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<sup>41</sup> The "blesser and blessee" is a kind of relationship between the older rich men known as the "blessers" who tend to entice young women who are referred to as "blessees" with money and expensive gifts in exchange for sexual favours. In most cases, these older men are married men who secretly engage in extramarital affairs with these young women (Mampane, 2018:1).

<sup>42</sup> 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Available at: <https://www.parliament.gov.za/project-event-details/1233> [15/05/2023]

subsequent section, this study will investigate how these various concerns by campaigns are addressed in the South African policies and if they are reflected in their localised drama, particularly *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Another area where women in South Africa face some parity is education.

### *Education*

South Africa's education system appears to have parity across gender (Farrell, 2021). Though girls have equal access to school as their male counterparts, their continued education and future opportunities are highly affected by the patriarchal society that their education operates under (Farrell, 2021:1). According to Statistics South Africa (2021:1), 55 percent of the uneducated adult population are identified as women, suggesting a fairly equal education system in terms of numbers. This form of gender inequity in education drives a deep division between education access and outcomes (Farrell, 2021:1). This could hinder the harness and development of women's talents, which could curtail their ability to contribute meaningfully to society" (Akala, 2019:1). Also, some of the reasons women's access to education is hampered because of menstruation, and the inability/lack of resources to deal with that which results in a lot of female students not being able to attend school for some weeks during any given month.

Women are still underrepresented in the higher education sector in South Africa despite changes to laws and policies since 1994, particularly those from marginalised communities (Akala, 2019; Mdlenleni, Mandyoli, and Frantz, 2012). In South African universities in 2016, only 27.5 percent of professorial posts were held by men, while 56.6 percent of lecturer positions were held by women (Naidu, 2018). Thus, while there are more women than men at the lecturer level, this is not the case at higher levels. This imbalance results from institutional frameworks that, having primarily been male-dominated spaces, are insensitive to the needs of women and, as a result, exclude women from decision-making spaces, significant roles, and academic excellence (Zulu, 2016). This further points to the patriarchal nature of South African society. This inequality is also reflected in the workplace.

### *Workplace*

The workplace in South Africa is another domain highly dominated by men (Musetsho, Nicoleta, and Dobrin, 2021). Women in South Africa and around the world are still victims of discrimination

generated by inequality and this has hindered them from accessing employment (Musetsho, Nicoleta, and Dobrin, 2021; Stats SA, 2022). According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey of the 2nd quarter of 2021, the South African labour market is more favourable to men than women. Although women comprise 51.1 percent of the population, they remain relatively underrepresented in positions of authority and power (Stats SA, 2021). Although women accounted for 43.4 percent of employed South Africans (Stats SA, 2021), they are noted to have held only 29 percent of board seats in the country's top 100 listed companies<sup>43</sup> This could imply that women are likely perceived as inadequate to function in the labour market (position of authority/power). Similarly, like education, one of the issues women face in the place of woke is childrearing; this plays a huge role in women's accessing good jobs and positions. Hence, men are considered for such positions instead of women to avoid the interruption caused by the break created during childrearing. The proportion of men in employment is higher than that of women; more men than women are participating in the labour market as the labour force participation rate of men is higher than that of women; and the unemployment rate among men is lower than amongst women (Stats SA, 2022).

Considering the South African current state of gender equality, efforts have been made, which are still in progress. This was evident in May 2019, as the World Economic Forum (2019) observed that half of South Africa's Cabinet ministers are women for the first time in the country's history. Assessing women's economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, the Global Gender Gap Index ranks South Africa as the 19th out of 149 countries (World Economic Forum, 2018). But while these may be important markers on the path toward gender equality enshrined in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), activists expressed otherwise. They declared they hardly ensure systematic progress or tangible benefits for most women (Patel, 2019). Their point is backed by the country's high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), disproportionately high HIV prevalence among women, higher female unemployment, and a lack of representation of women in top management positions (Commission for Gender Equality, 2015). Again, within the South African context, Black women are the poorest in society because Black women have had to face the multiple jeopardies of the intersection of race, class, and gender in their exclusion from social and economic opportunities, something that

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<sup>43</sup> Available at: <https://www.getsmarter.com/blog/career-advice/women-disrupting-the-south-african-workplace/>  
[Accessed on 17/05/2023]

will be elaborated on in this study as it is influenced by intersectional theory (Carastathis, 2014; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990, 2015; hooks, 1981; 1992; Mohanty, 1988). This double discrimination generally made them invisible in the economy and most likely to be unemployed or clustered in the lower rungs of the informal sector (Gender Policy Statement (GPS), 1997:2). However, in terms of employment equity, companies, and institutions now prioritise the employment of Black women to mitigate the previous discrimination (Matotoko and Odeku, 2021; Oosthuizen, Tonelli, and Mayer, 2019). Hence, some South African policies regarding gender inequality are discussed briefly below.

### *South African policies on gender issues*

The legal and policy framework for gender in South Africa is the subject of the following section. It briefly examines the proposed legislation aimed at improving women's lives. Not all laws are covered here, only those that speak directly to my study and theoretical framework.

When the women of South Africa converged on these Union Buildings forty years ago, from every corner of South Africa, they created one of the enduring landmarks of our country's history. They declared that women would insist on their role in making history (Mandela, 1996:1).

In South Africa, the women's movement has always played a significant role in the national liberation struggle (Hassim, 2006; Walker, 1991). Also, the commencement led to the emergence of the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL), the Federation of South African Women (FSAW and later FEDSAW), the Communist Party of South Africa, Black Sash, the United Women's Organisation, Black Women's Federation, and many other organisations were keys in the liberation struggle but also challenged other discriminations including class and gender (Hassim, 2006; Walker, 1991, Britton and Fish, 2009).

In the period leading up to the negotiated settlement for a democratic South Africa, women mobilised under the umbrella body of the Women's National Coalition. They produced The Women's Charter of Rights. Women also made numerous submissions toward developing South Africa's first democratic Constitution (Gouws, 2004a). Women wanted to ensure that their rights were encapsulated in the new Constitution and that women were well-represented in the new government (Hassim, 2005). The women's movement contributed significantly to the National Gender Machinery established after 1994 with the aim of ensuring that gender was mainstreamed

in Government (Hassim, 2005). The Constitution and the National Gender Machinery included the establishment of the Commission for Gender Equality through section 187 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, No. 108 of 1996 (see discussion in section 4.3.1). The function of the Commission for Gender Equality is to promote respect for gender equality and the protection, development, and attainment of gender equality (Gouws, 2004).

Nelson Mandela (1994: 1) noted the importance of women's empowerment when he said: "It is vitally important that all structures of Government, including the President himself, should understand this fully that freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression." Two years later, in an address on South Africa's National Women's Day, Mandela (1996: 1) noted the intersecting oppression of poverty and gender and/or race when he said: "As long as women are bound by poverty and as long as they are looked down upon, human rights will lack substance" (Mandela, 1996:1). The realisation of gender equality was thus placed firmly on the agenda of the state. As Mandela resumed office in 1994, he championed women's rights in the following ways:

Recognising women – [he] established Women's Day on Aug. 9 to celebrate the women who fought to end apartheid.

Getting women into office - the number of women in government rapidly rose from 2.7% to 27%.

Advancing Global Women's Rights – In 1979, the UN ratified the United Nations Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, but it wasn't until Mandela was in office in 1995 that the treaty became the rule of law in South Africa.

Passing Laws - Mandela understood that solidarity wasn't enough to achieve gender equality. That's why he immediately fought for laws that could protect and open up opportunities for women once he came into power. [He] also expanded women's access to social services by introducing free prenatal and postnatal care to mothers in the public health system as well as free healthcare to children up to the age of six (McCarthy and Sánchez, 2018:1).

In line with the above, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act No 108 of 1996, is the supreme piece of legislation in South Africa, guaranteeing human rights, pursuing equality for all, and laying the foundations for a non-racist, non-sexist South Africa. This includes the values of (a) "human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms: (b) non-racialism and non-sexism" (section 1). The Bill of Rights in the Constitution is

unequivocal in asserting the rights pertaining to equality. In section 9 of the Bill of Rights, the Constitution asserts, “everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996). Through the provisions of section 9, the State may take legislative and other measures to protect and advance persons who have been unfairly discriminated against. The Bill of Rights is most profound in its section dealing with discrimination and denotes that the State may not unfairly discriminate against anyone (whether it is directly or indirectly) on the basis including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth. This acknowledges the place of intersectionality in a multi-racial country like South Africa; this is significant as intersectionality is one of the theories on which this study is grounded for a holistic understanding of how producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* choose to construct its female characters and how viewers read and interpret the depictions.

Since 1994, various pieces of legislation have been enacted that give effect to the equality provisions of the Constitution and the international agreements South Africa has ratified, which have been discussed above. The legislation that has particular relevance to gender equality and women’s well-being is noted in Table 2.1. The table was composed by me through consulting various sources, noted below:

<b>Legislation</b>	<b>Brief Overview</b>
Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997, including its Amendments	Enhancing social fairness and economic prosperity is the Act's stated goal. The Act outlines and upholds the fundamental terms of employment and protects the labor rights of workers, especially women. It outlines protections for women before and after childbirth and explicitly provides for maternity leave.
Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act 92 of 1996	This permits a pregnant woman to legally end her pregnancy upon request within the first 12 weeks of her pregnancy and under specific circumstances. A medical professional or a certified midwife who has had the requisite training may perform the termination, and it specifies the locations where such procedures may be carried out.

<p>Commission for Gender Equality Act 39 of 1996</p>	<p>According to Chapter 9 of the Constitution, the Act allows for the founding of an institution. According to the Act, as revised in 2013, the Commission is responsible for promoting gender equality and, among other things, its preservation, advancement, and realization. The Commission is given additional authority under the Act to monitor, look into, conduct research, provide advice, campaign for change, and report on issues related to gender equality.</p>
<p>Criminal Law Amendment (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Act 32 of 2007</p>	<p>This Act repeals previous laws that attempted to address sexual offenses as a whole in a single statute. It aims to support the country's increased efforts to combat sexual exploitation and crimes against all individuals, particularly those committed against women, children, and those with mental disabilities. The removal of the common law criminal of rape and its replacement with an extended statutory offense of rape, applicable to all forms of sexual penetration without consent, regardless of gender, is one of the key changes that this act brought about.</p>
<p>Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998</p>	<p>The Act's goals are to provide the most legal protection possible to domestic abuse victims and to bolster domestic violence prevention measures. It has a broad definition of "domestic relationship," which excludes heterosexual or married relationships, for instance. Persons are given additional protection by this Act from actual or threatened physical assault, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse, intimidation, harassment, stalking, damage to or destruction of property, and unauthorized access into their house.</p>
<p>Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998</p>	<p>Fostering equal opportunity and fair treatment in the workplace, the Act seeks to address equality in the workplace. The Act aims to achieve this by putting in place affirmative action policies that specifically target certain populations, such as women, people of color, and people with disabilities.</p>

<p>Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Person Act 7 of 2013</p>	<p>Whilst trafficking of persons has been addressed in many different pieces of legislation, the Act provides the first single piece of legislation to address human trafficking. The Act provides for the prevention, protection, and assistance of victims of trafficking, as well as for the prosecution of persons who commit offenses related to trafficking. The Act also sets penalties for persons convicted as per the Act to a maximum of R100 million or life imprisonment.</p>
<p>Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000:</p>	<p>As was said above, the State may not unfairly discriminate on the basis of race, gender, or pregnancy, among other things, according to Section 9 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. According to the Constitution, the State is required to implement equality through national legislation. The provisions of section 9 of the Constitution are intended to be implemented</p>
	<p>by this Act. The Act's goals include advancing equality, preventing and outlawing unfair discrimination, compensating victims of discrimination, and gradually eliminating all forms of discrimination, including customary, religious, and traditional practices that violate women's dignity and undermine gender equality.</p>
<p>Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011</p>	<p>This Act eliminates the guardianship of husbands during marriage and the minority status of women married under customary law. Additionally, it acknowledges and protects women who are partners in traditional and polygamous unions.</p>

**Table 2.1:** Summary table of legislation for women’s rights post 1994 (Commission of Gender Equality (CGE), 1996; Domestic Violence Act, 1998; Republic of South Africa (RSA)- Government Gazette, 1996, 1997, RSA – Criminal Law, 2007; RSA-Employment Equity Act, 1998; RSA - Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Person Act, 2013; RSA - Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 2000; RSA - Protection from Harassment Act, 2011).

Given the laws, multiple international agreements, and results from the various gender indices given above, one can argue that South Africa has succeeded in creating *de jure*<sup>44</sup> gender equality. What effects have the legislation's adoption and application had on women's lives in practice? While this study does not directly seek to understand the specific influence of women’s rights in

<sup>44</sup> *De jure* is a legal concept that refers to what happens according to the [law](#), in contrast to *de facto* which is used to refer to what happens in practice or in reality. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/de-jure>. [Accessed on 8Nov 2023]

the construction and reading of female characters, knowledge of the above is necessary to provide a context against which to investigate whether or how the soap operas portray female characters that mirror continued female subordination and/or as powerful women and its consequent meaning-making by the situated audience. It does so by ascertaining the producer's intentions and the audience's reading. It is impossible to make real-world claims based on a fictional character's action. For example, concerning a storyline based on the theme of polygamy, it would be a logical misstep to claim that consent is given through choices made within existing societal structures (Gramsci 1957, 78) if a wife character chooses to stay married to her husband although she is unhappy about him taking a new wife. However, besides its primary purpose to entertain, the soap opera genre is also known to assist audience members in *making sense of their world* by reflecting their lives to them as stories [my emphasis] (Kingara, 2010; Marx, 2008). This is particularly true of the study's selected South African soap operas that can be defined as community soap operas (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998) that are becoming increasingly indigenised (Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2019), as will be explained in the following chapter. But the section below introduces this relationship more broadly.

### **Relationship between gender issues and entertainment media**

The entertainment media includes television, video, film, radio, live drama, movies, games, music, and the internet. Out of many influences on how we view men and women, the media are the most pervasive and powerful medium with their messages infiltrating our consciousness at every turn, woven throughout our daily lives (Wood, 1994). The media has always been an important pillar of social transformation and change. The media's role in bringing about social change cannot be overstated. It could build public opinion by reaching a large and diverse audience and mobilise people (Jacobs, 2019; Kumari and Joshi, 2015). This could imply that in a democratic context like South Africa, the media is in a powerful position. There is a need within this context to investigate how media either perpetuates or addresses the issue of gender inequality. The content of media reflects the value pattern in any society (as its treatment of women-related issues reveals society's dominant attitude (Kumari and Joshi, 2015; Sharma, 2012). Consequently, Ray and Das (n.d) argued that the media can be both a perpetrator and a protagonist, either reinforcing gender-based discrimination by portraying stereotypical sensational images of women or providing balanced coverage that empowers women while exposing acts of gender bias. According to Wood (1994: 31), there are three themes that describe how media represent gender:

First, women are underrepresented, which falsely implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or invisible. Second, men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender. Third, depictions of relationships between men and women emphasize traditional roles and normalize violence against women.

Attention will now be paid to elaborating on the three themes Wood (1994) described above – the underrepresentation of women, stereotypes, and emphasis on traditional roles. In terms of underrepresentation in news and entertainment media, women have been marginalised with minor changes in proportions over the past decade (Kumari and Joshi, 2015:45). Behind the scenes, women are also underrepresented as many key roles in filmmaking, such as directors and cinematographers were for many decades dominated almost entirely by men (Lauzen, 2014; Yang, Xu, and Luo, 2020). Although representations of women in film have improved in recent years, this growth has been mitigated by the fact that from 1998 to 2018, women have only comprised 20% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 domestic grossing films. In 2017, only 1% of films employed ten or more women in the above roles; in contrast, 74% of films employed ten or more men (Lauzen, 2018:1). Achieving equality with media representation has been a challenge. Since the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s, Dutt (2014: 3) noted the roles of women in social, cultural, political, and economic life have changed and progressed for the better, seemingly giving women an equal footing to men in most aspects of life. Nevertheless, despite the change, Andrew Ali Ibbi (2017: 50) expressed that male dominance of the film industry, like many other industries around the world, is still evident in the 21st century. Consequently, women have been constantly underrepresented in movies (Yang, Xu, and Luo, 2020:2). Even when they are present, women are often portrayed in circumscribed and subordinated ways in traditionally feminine (i.e., stereotyped) roles, such as non-professionals, homemakers, wives or parents, and sexual gatekeepers (Collins, 2011). According to Haraldsson and Wangnerud (2019), lacking a role model on the big screen or television screen is detrimental to young girls and by implication, they could be discouraged from pursuing ambitions and participating actively in social affairs. This idea is directly relevant to this study’s research question on how female representations in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* may or may not be an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies.

In terms of *stereotypes*, mainstream entertainment media often includes stereotypical portrayals

and lacks the inclusion of complex female roles (Milburn, Mather, and Conrad, 2000). Stewart and Kowaltzke (2007) see stereotypes as an oversimplified, clichéd image repeated so often that it appears to have created a pattern. Soap operas, like other entertainment media, rely on gender stereotypes and unrealistic identities (Blöse, 2020). This agrees with one of the conventions of soap operas like exaggerations and stereotypical portrayal. This convention dictates the characters in the genre, so there will always be stereotypes as it is inherent to the genre. These include female characters who are either hyper-sexualised, unable to make crucial decisions outside of the home and dependent on men<sup>45</sup>. The subtle depictions of gender stereotypes in storylines through cultural practices contribute to gender inequality (Haider, 2017). Hui (2010) argues that there are limited image depictions that promote aspects of women as being intelligent, independent, socially responsible, and conscious. Rather, these kinds of attributes are associated with their male counterparts. Since one of the elements of stereotype depiction is repetition, as noted earlier, by implication, Ward and Grower (2020:8.5) affirmed that:

Individuals who repeatedly view television content that promotes traditional gender stereotypes are expected to be more inclined to accept these stereotypes as true and to endorse these beliefs in their own lives.

Hence, this study investigates if the dominant stereotypical portrayal is still prominent in today's representation of female characters. According to the UN Women (2020: 1), entertainment media often reinforces traditional gender roles and perpetuates negative gender stereotypes. In most countries, particularly in the African context, traditional gender roles within the household are still common and this is associated with the prevalence and persistence of patriarchal systems (Harrichurran, 2021). William Ickes (1993:1) described traditional gender roles as when men and women play out in their own behaviour the respective masculine and feminine gender roles traditionally prescribed by their culture. The popular view held by individuals holding traditional gender role beliefs supports women's role within the private sphere as the caretaker at home and in the family and men's role, most often within the public sphere, is to provide financial support as the breadwinner of the family (Dicke, Safavian, and Eccles, 2019). What is notable about the soap opera is that it takes place mostly within a feminine space. That is, in private spaces, male characters adapt to the domain for example, be more emotive, which is usually associated with women. Another thing to take into account is that African cultures do have their own set of values, and the normative Western view of patriarchy might not be one they wish to emulate. In a way,

this shows the distinction between what is global and what is unique to the South African context. Research shows that traditional gender role beliefs are more strongly endorsed by men than women (Larsen and Long, 1988; Brewster and Padavic, 2000). Therefore, the question to ask is what causes or influences such endorsement of traditional gender roles to be more prominent among men than women? Or, generally, what influences individuals to lean toward traditional gender roles?

According to Blose (2020:146), one implication of traditional gender roles is that they “suppress a woman’s voice,” particularly in some relationships or marriages. A woman no longer exists as herself, but her identity is stripped off as her husband’s needs take precedence. Although studies reveal that traditional gender role beliefs have become less prevalent over time (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Brooks and Bolzendahl, 2004; Raley *et al.*, 2006), these core beliefs about the roles of women and men in society might help explain still existing differences occupational choices across gender (Dicke, Safavian, and Eccles, 2019). All these are true, but typically, in soap operas, women do get to speak more, which is why the genre holds the potential to challenge these roles. Hence, this study will determine if the data collection will show themes that indicate if and how *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* challenge those roles.

Lan Kunsey’s (2019) study entitled *Representations of Women in Popular Film: A Study of Gender Inequality in 2018* reveals that depictions of women on screen repeatedly depend on roles behind the scenes. From the ten reviewed movies:

Female directors tend to hire more women in key roles and depict women in a more positive light than men. All five movies directed by women could also be classified as female stories, with plots directly subverting traditional male stories. While there are strong women in many of the five films directed by men, women in these movies tend to have less agency than those directed by women. Films directed by women were also much more likely to feature a female protagonist and pass the Bechdel test<sup>45</sup> (Kunsey, 2019:36).

Again, films that engage at least one female director, executive producer, producer, and/or writer are noticed to garner approximately the same domestic box office sales as films with exclusively male representation in those roles (Lauzen, 2018). Notwithstanding, women are rarely afforded the same resources and budgets as men (Kunsey, 2018). Considering the context, the ten films

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<sup>45</sup> Bechdel test is a test that shows the quality of cinematic gender representation (Bechdel, 1986; Valentowitsch, 2022). This is evaluated through the following three criteria: first, there must be at least two female roles in the film. Second, the women must talk to each something other than a man (Yang *et al.*, 2020).

examined were foreign, but Kunsey’s findings are relevant to this study in that its interviewees are the ‘behind-the-scenes’ creators of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

In 2004, Lincoln and Allen stated that the fewer female stars appear in fewer films than their male counterparts, the more infrequently they will become movie stars. In this way, films tell audiences that “men are more central and significant in all kinds of contexts than women” (Lincoln and Allen, 2004). These negative depictions have implications that reach far beyond the entertainment industry, as will be discussed in the next chapter under the media’s influence on gender beliefs and attitudes. Therefore, because of the role of film in popular culture and society, “motion pictures largely reflect prevailing cultural attitudes about gender roles, norms, attitudes, and expectations” (Simonton, 2004, 781). Recognising this problem and the need for gender parity, South Africa celebrated 2022 Women’s Month under the theme: “Generation Equality – Realizing Women’s Rights for an Equal Future”<sup>46</sup>. Kunsey (2018) expressed that these issues (inequality, stereotypes depictions, among others) could have a clear solution if female filmmakers are given more equal opportunities. More female characters are employed when women are hired as directors and writers (Kunsey, 2018; Sutherland and Feltey, 2017). This further buttresses the point that the role of creators behind the scenes determines or influences how gender representation and stereotypes are depicted in media. This study considers this influence by including female interviewees from the industry.

The inequality in gender disparity exists even in the world’s most prestigious cinematic awards - the Academy Awards, which often draw millions of viewers each year, leading to many outcries (Kunsey, 2019). For instance, in 2019, within the American context, there was an outcry that many Americans are not proportionally represented in film and these inadequacies in cinematic representation on screen/off screen have provoked several social movements over the past few years (Kunsey, 2019). This includes the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, which centered on the lack of racial diversity among Oscar nominees. As a result, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences vowed to “double the number of women and people of colour in the Academy’s membership by 2020” (Reign, n.d.). The #MeToo and “Time’s Up” movements shifted the focus to promoting awareness and advocacy for sexual assault victims—especially women<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Available at: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=14559> [Accessed on 15/08/2022]

Considering these social outcries, it would have been assumed there would be a shift in the representation of women. On the contrary, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the film industry arguably maintain an inadequate representation of women on and off the screen, which has not changed for the past five years (Kunsey, 2019). According to Integrated Management System (IMS) (2020:1), different forms of media can use their role to transform how women are generally constructed and represented in the media through the following:

By creating gender-sensitive and gender-transformative content and breaking gender stereotypes.

By challenging traditional social and cultural norms and attitudes regarding gender perceptions both in content and media houses.

By showing women in leadership roles and as experts on a diversity of topics daily, not as an exception.

This study will be cognisant of this list that arguably signals transformation when analysing the data from interviews and focus groups as a benchmark against which to ascertain if *Uzalo* or *Scandal!* may exhibit the above and thus fulfill a transformative agenda. Considering the relationship between the media and gender issues, it is evident from the scholars above that the media depictions of women differently. Hence, it is important to look at the role of women in South Africa within the sphere of their traditional role and culture.

### **Traditional roles of women in South African cultures**

As noted earlier, South Africa comprises four different racial groups – Black Africans, Whites, Indians, and Colours (Sidanius, Brubacher, and Silinda (2018). The role of women in South African cultures is typically shaped by tribalism, tradition, and religion<sup>47</sup>. Many of the tribal customs and beliefs are male-dominated and male-centered (Jackson, 2009:10). In most African households', traditional gender roles place a greater burden of care work on women, which can reduce women's leisure time relative to men (Harrichurran, 2021:1). Women often find that their existence is defined by childbearing, home management skills, socio-economic status, and service to the husband and his family which due to the prevalence and persistence of patriarchal systems (Harrichurran, 2021; Jackson, 2009). Traditionally, some women are expected to be stay-at-home

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<sup>47</sup> Available at: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-womens-struggle-south-africa> [Accessed on 20/07/2022]

moms. Even as young girls, women are taught how to clean and care for their families. All their daily chores originate in and around the private sphere (Jackson, 2009).

On the other hand, African males are taught not to assist with ‘woman work’, even if they want to assist. Male children are teased and called derogatory terms such as ‘sissy’ if they help with any household cleaning. Jackson (2009) found that if married men assist their wives, it is done strictly in private. Harrichurran (2021) further notes that both men and women may be spouses, parents, family members, and/or workers, yet these roles are associated with different responsibilities for men and women. Women are traditionally responsible for unpaid work in South Africa, regardless of their roles. Collectively, they spend more time on paid and unpaid work than men (Harrichurran, 2021:1). Even today, women struggle for equality and justice.

Historically, South African society across the racial spectrum has been patriarchal and misogynistic and has been traditionally structured to prioritise the needs of men over those of women (Lenser, 2019:4). In other words, generally, all racial and ethnic groups in South Africa have long-standing beliefs concerning gender roles, and most are based on the premise that women are less important, or less deserving of power than men<sup>48</sup>. This hegemonic masculinity cuts across the majority of the main cultural and racial groups that constitute South African society. Hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women and other men who are considered to be weak” (Connell 1995, 77).

However, despite their normative relegation to the domestic sphere, women have resisted. In 1913, women of colour launched a passive resistance campaign against passing laws and sexual abuse by police, which resulted in the formation of a movement called the Resistance against the stringent passed laws (Hassim, 2015: 23). According to Julia Wells (1993:3), this first campaign by women signifies “strength and militancy” and because it was so “costly to the personal lives of participants.”

In 1952, there was female involvement in large-scale public protests, including the Defiance Campaign spearheaded by the African National Congress (ANC), which consisted of large-scale

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<sup>48</sup> Available at: <http://countrystudies.us/south-africa/58.htm> [Accessed on 18/07/2022]

anti-apartheid demonstrations in several cities across the country. Four years later, on 9 August 1956, the Federation of South African Women (FSAW), supported by twenty thousand women, marched to the government capital, the Union Buildings in Pretoria, to protest passing laws, a date that is now celebrated annually (Steenkamp, n.d). In continuation of the struggles to protect and sustain the family, women continued to join the urban workforce, and by the late 1980s, women made up at least 90 percent of the domestic workforce and 36 percent of the industrial workforce, according to labour union estimates<sup>49</sup>. However, women's wages were lower than men's, even for the same job. In addition, positions normally held by women had long hours and few benefits, such as sick leave; women were often dismissed without advance notice or any termination pay. Notwithstanding, South African women, across racial lines, have been a source of courage for the entire community, and this was acknowledged decades ago by the first democratic president (see South African policies and gender issues above) and President Thabo Mbeki (2004) when appointing women into government:

No government in South Africa could ever claim to represent the will of the people if it failed to address the central task of emancipation of women in all its elements, and that includes the government we are privileged to lead.

The arguments and observations above imply the significant contributions that women have made in South African history. Women of South Africa, across all spheres of life, have contributed to the making of South Africa. Therefore, within the concept of traditional roles and the contribution of women in the country, it is important to investigate if/how soap operas – *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* reveal any differences in terms of a) the continuation of female character female subordination and or b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies.

The veracity of representation of the reality of South African women includes the use of the languages spoken by most people in the country. This is very significant as *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* use African languages to focus on ordinary issues experienced by ordinary South Africans, especially in the townships. The rise in viewership proved that the selected soap operas are popular with South African audiences, particularly township audiences. Hence, the next section considers how language has been used as a marker signifying a particular gendered narrative and identity, in this case, the female characters.

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<sup>49</sup> Available at: <http://countrystudies.us/south-africa/58.htm> [Accessed on 18/07/2022]

## **African language media**

African language media can be defined as print and electronic media that use local languages other than colonial languages, such as English, French, and Portuguese, to publish or broadcast news and information (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2021). It falls within “indigenous media,” a cover term for a broad spectrum of media phenomena, ranging from community-owned and operated radio, television, and video operations to locally produced programs that appear on national television (Spitulnik 1993). That is, it involves the use of languages of particular communities determined by geographical location or common interests (Orao 2009).

Language is an important component in constructing (female) characters as it can influence people’s views of reality (Webb, 2005). More specifically, language can be a tool in identity formation or an (evolving) image of Self (Marx, 2007:115).

African language media are people-oriented, targeting mainly rural populations with programming geared toward national development and socio-cultural preservation, ensuring cultural self-determination in the process (Ogunyemi 1995). Africa has more than 2500 indigenous languages, and very few of these are used for media communication (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2021). In most African nations, the indigenous languages of the majority are marginalised and underdeveloped. This is because in most multilingual states, colonial languages like English, French, and Portuguese are prioritised in higher education and the media (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2021). It is significant to know that the African languages are “predominantly symbolic”, and their inclusion helps to attract and establish a local connection among viewers or audiences (Dowling and Grier, 2016:572).

However, previous research reveals that this symbolic significance was not enough to sustain and maintain its indigenous users (Eyoh, 1986: 112; Molale and Mpofu, 2021; Salawu, 2001; Taiwo, 2018). Hence, Salawu (2004) calls for the need to promote African languages through mainstream media and direct attention to the study of this media. Within South Africa in 2016, language and culture experts alerted the country that “South Africa’s future is at stake” if efforts are not made to bolster the status of the country’s indigenous languages, as African language proficiency and usage continued to decline in South Africa<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Available at: <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/sa-indigenous-languages-on-decline> [Accessed on 07/07/2022].

South African soap operas appear to have taken up this call, with an insurgence of local language soap operas<sup>52</sup>, as will be elaborated on at the end of this section. Despite the popularity of African language soap operas in South Africa, particularly among middle to upper-class African millennials and Generation Z, local experts<sup>51</sup> have noted that the possible cause for language usage decline is that there is no parity of esteem and equitability among all the official languages in the country. Instead, within the sphere of business and other communication, English and Afrikaans tend to have dominance. That is, South African citizens who want to be and remain relevant within the sphere must be proficient in the dominant languages, hence, neglecting their indigenous language. Njeje (2018) argues that isiXhosa print media in South Africa fail because their maintenance and revival have been left to conglomerate media companies that do not have editorial policies that address isiXhosa content development. She suggests that if Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) companies invested in the media, they would be more interested in reviving indigenous languages. Conversely, Tshabangu and Salawu (2021) noted that such an argument by Njeje (2018), though reasonable, is not fool-proof, as BBE investors in the media are likely to be profit- and sales-oriented and not fully committed to the revival of indigenous languages.

From a language policy and planning perspective, Mpofu (2021) argues that the underdevelopment of indigenous-language media in Zimbabwe is due to the colonial and post-independence language politics and ideologies that have favoured the English language over indigenous languages. This aligns with Tshabangu and Salawu (2021), who noted that some indigenous African languages spoken by Khoisan communities in Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are now endangered and on the verge of extinction or being overtaken by dominant languages.

As some researchers are exploring the possible reasons behind the decline in African language media, others agree that the diversity of African languages is a challenge in and of itself. According to Taiwo (2018:1), it is not a coincidence that the poorest continent in the world is also the most linguistically diverse continent. This implies that developed continents are achieving their growth because of less linguistic diversity. According to UNESCO, Africans speak a combined total of more than 2,000 different languages, which roughly equates to about one-third of the entire world's linguistic heritage. According to Taiwo (2018), this statistic could be viewed as evidence of the

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<sup>51</sup> Available at: <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/sa-indigenous-languages-on-decline> [Accessed on 07/07/2022].

cultural richness of the continent, but the author's concern is: Which is better, cultural wealth or economic wealth? Hence, for the sake of nation-building, the use of diverse native or African languages is reduced (Taiwo, 2018).

Despite this broader concern about the lack of preservation and mainstreaming of indigenous languages, there is a noticeable shift from international to indigenous content currently in South Africa (particularly soap operas). For instance, in *Uzalo*, the African language adopted for the narrative is exclusively isiZulu with English subtitles and the location setting of the soap is in a KwaMashu township in KwaZulu-Natal. *Uzalo* is recognised as the number one most-watched soap opera in the country taking over the old long-running *Generation: The Legacy* (Kajusu, 2022) (as discussed in Chapter One). The use of the African language helped to display the localness of Zulu culture and the authenticity of the language and discourses shared by many people (Dunleavy, 2005). This explains why viewers across the country resonate with the storyline. The primary use of isiZulu is connected to SABC's indigenising imperative and attracting local audiences (Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2019). The frequent use of indigenised/African language in the broadcasting of soap operas, according to Mmanmits Thibedi (interview, 2017), the Executive Producer of *Uzalo*, was mainly to meet the mandate of the SABC. This further revived or re-enforced the old language policy approved in 1979 for televising programmes in African languages (Teer-Tomaselli 2015:10).

The demand and consumption of localised soap operas in South Africa are noted to be on the increase (Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2020). Such embracement and popularity of local content are attributed to the use of African/indigenised languages with English subtitles (and sometimes language mixing as evident in *Scandal!*) in broadcasting the soap operas, hence promoting localised identity (Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2020). Unlike *Uzalo*, multilingual languages with English subtitles are used in *Scandal!* The usage of language mixing in *Scandal!* could be a solution to the disinterest shown by younger South Africans in purely African language media. A study in Korea established that bilingual youth in Korea needed the non-standard, code-mixing variety, as it assists them to both "identify with modernity and globalization" (Lee 2006:88). The strategic inclusion allows audiences to "feel valued" and yet at the same time not isolated from "global discourses" (Dowling and Grier, 2016:556).

Lee (2006) and Dowling and Grier (2016) indicate some differences to Ogunyemi's (1995)

observation above that African language media are often people-oriented, targeting mainly rural audiences. However, this is not the case with *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* signaling the transition of African language media as mainstream media in the South African entertainment industry. In 2020, every weekday primetime, *Uzalo* is in the first position, attracting about 9,6 million viewers. *Scandal!* is in fourth position, attracting 4.7 million viewers<sup>54</sup>. However, in 2022, particularly in December, there was some significant move in viewership traffic among the top most-watched soap operas in the country (Labuschagne, 2022). *Uzalo* is still in first place, with 5,671,465 million viewers and *Scandal!* moved to the second position with 4,784,687 million viewers and other soapies experienced some increase in viewership (Alexander, 2022; Labuschagne, 2022). This shows that South Africans love their local soap operas and the African languages used in them target all types of audiences. This implies that the language helps the audience to immerse themselves in the setting. This appreciation is supported by the Consumers KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission (2017:4), that stated the South African audience particularly 80% of the KZN audience indicated that they advocate for South African domestic content because they are “unique, informative, relatable, proudly South African, and in local languages”.

Soap operas in South Africa are, therefore, arguably playing a role in eliminating the linguistic boundaries between English and widely spoken African languages (Weber, 2011). As this study takes on an intersectional lens as part of its conceptual framework, it has been necessary to appraise the status of the use of African languages in the case studies, as this will likely contribute to understanding the constructions and interpretations of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the study subscribes to a sociological and intersectional view on gender; hence, this chapter reviewed available literature on gender issues globally and within the South African context, describing the concept and the associated terminology. Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon viewed as a binary and opposite construct describing the characteristics, behaviours, and roles deemed appropriate and expected of men and women (and boys and girls) by a given society (Rolleri, 2012a). However, gender constructs vary from society to society and can change over time. The concept of gender is better understood through the five important elements: relational, hierarchical, historical, contextual, and institutional. Even though there are global and national policies (relating to gender balance in the workplace, education, and other spheres of life)

in place to ensure equality in all spheres of life, women are still struggling for equitable representation. Without equity, gender equality cannot be achieved because, without equity, people do not have fair access to resources and opportunities that allow them to operate in society as equals. Hence stating the importance of equity (Gilles, 2015:3). The widespread legitimacy of patriarchy as a form of hegemonic masculinity contributes to this inequality (Connell, 1995; Aditi, 2021; Guy-Evans, 2023)

According to South African statistics (2021), women are the largest in population; however, men still dominate the public sphere and are at the top of the hierarchy in politics, economy, social structures, and even in media. Although the impact of women is felt in the past (as noted by Mandela) and presently in all spheres of life, media depictions of female characters, particularly in entertainment, are far from reality. Media is often described as having the most influence on gender role issues; therefore, its power of influence could also be used in addressing gender inequality. While there are cases where the media is mobilised in the call for gender equality, the entertainment media is still riddled with gender stereotypes. Although the positive influence of the new media cannot be ignored, there is still a huge gap to cover in other forms to achieve balance when it comes to gender equality, especially in a context like South Africa, where GBV against women is on the increase (Kirkwood, 2018, Yesufu, 2022).

The next chapter narrows the focus by reviewing literature specific to soap operas, their generic codes and differences, and how they produce certain (gender) discourses and identities.

## **Chapter Three: Reviewing Soap Opera Scholarship: Generic Codes and Producing/Consuming Representations and Discourses**

### **Introduction**

One of the popular television genres with narratives relating to gender roles and stereotypes that resonate with the audience is soap operas (Barker, 1997; 2000; Garcia *et al.*, 2017; Motsaathebe, 2009). The previous chapter evaluates the global and national concept of gender issues (and other intersecting issues) to locate the study within contemporary thinking, dominant discourses, and policy on gender issues. Establishing such a background, this chapter starts with a discussion on media production studies with an emphasis on entertainment television. Reviewing global and local literature, it provides a scholarly and industry perspective that contextualises the study's considerations for the encoding (Hall, 1980) or production (du Gay *et al.*, 1997) aspects of South African soap opera. In doing so, it considers the indigenisation of production (linked to regulation) (Du Gay *et al.*, 1997; Gibson, Dyll, and Teer Tomaselli, 2021; Mahlatsim, 2018; Motsaathebe, 2009; Teer-Tomaselli, 1995). Also, to understand how gender roles have been previously constructed and represented in soap operas, a brief historical account of the genre is provided, placing a particular emphasis on gender representations. Soap opera's relationship with its audience in enabling identity configurations (Du Gay *et al.*, 1997) is also considered as it contextualises the study's consideration of the moment of decoding (Hall, 1980) and/ or consumption (Du Gay *et al.*, 1997), through reviewing studies on previous soap opera reception analyses (Blöse, 2022; Gilbert, 2009; Marx, 2008; Tager, 1999).

### **Global media production studies**

As a field of inquiry, production studies capture how power functions locally through media production to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities at the level of everyday interactions (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 2009). *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (Mayer *et al.*, 2009) examines cultural practices of media production from an interdisciplinary perspective to understand how the entire span of “media producers”—ranging from high-profile producers and directors to anonymous production assistants and costume designers—work through professional organisations and informal networks to form communities of shared practices, languages, and cultural understandings of the world (Mayer *et al.*, 2009:2). Production studies

"ground" social theories by demonstrating how particular production sites, actors, or activities reveal more general truths about the practices of workers and the significant role of their labor in relation to politics, economics, and culture (Mayer, 2009:15; Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 2009:2; Powdermaker, 1950). This description shows the relationship between the macro forces and the micro contexts that form part of the function of media in society. However, the connection between macro and micro is frequently lost in the efforts to describe the current media landscape, its interconnected industries, and its networks of professionals. Over the years, production studies have examined many different genres and geographical contexts (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2018; Davies, 2006), including one of the popular television genres – soap opera (Geraghty, 2005; Hobson, 2003). This study is concerned with television production, as the selected case studies are within the soap opera genre. It emphasises local production culture and associated structures that support the production of local content (*Uzalo* and *Scandal*) in how gender roles are depicted through the construction of female characters.

Television has become an indispensable part of homes since its invention in the 19th and 20th centuries, so it is difficult to envision existence without television despite the digital age (Pandey 2016). Particularly, soap operas are one of the television programs noted to have successfully won over large audiences as they spread across the globe and take over other service-oriented materials globally and locally (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton, 1992). This popularity has led to many production studies of the genre globally (Damasio and da Costa, 2020; Geraghty, 2005; Hobson, 2003; Lies and Livingstone, 2005; Murvey, 1989; Zoellner, 2010). According to Mayer *et al.*, (2009), production studies should not be undertaken without paying particular attention to the lived experiences of the producer and the scholars alike. The crisis of representing producers, their locations, industries, and products is the burden of representation for production studies (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 2009:13). This study takes up this call by including if/how the positions of *Uzalo* and *Scandal*'s producers influences their depictions, intent, and preferred readings of female character construction.

### *Influence and reflection of society in television production*

Production studies borrow theoretical insights from the social sciences and humanities, but, perhaps most importantly, they take the lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects for theorising production as culture (Mayer *et al.*, 2009:13). Scholars in this field

collect and analyse empirical data about the production, such as the complexity of routines and rituals, the routines of seemingly complex processes, and the economic and political forces that shape roles, technologies, and resource distribution based on cultural and demographic differences (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 2009). While this study's interview questions did not directly question each of these smaller components, the semi-structured open-ended questions did encourage narrative responses whereby the two producers drew on their experience of these aspects to explain their rationale behind how female characters were constructed in their respective soap operas.

Whether private or government-owned, the mass media, particularly television, are primarily economic institutions that rely solely on funding. In this sense, media institutions are material systems (Kinga'ra, 2010; Murdock, 1991). Simultaneously, because of their operational nature, the mass media have become embedded in the political system (Mak'Ochieng, 2000: 60). The media are regarded as a source of power for those who control them. Whoever has access to the media has access to the citizenry and can, therefore, use it to control their political beliefs and actions (Mak'Ochieng, 2000: 61).

Louis Althusser's (1971) conception of the media as an "ideological state apparatus is largely concerned with the reproduction of dominant ideologies, claiming relative autonomy for the mass media" (Woollacott 1982: 110). For Stuart Hall *et al.*, (1978), the mass media tend to reproduce interpretations that serve the interests of the ruling class, but they are also "a field of ideological struggle". However, Hall (1980b: 117) noted that Media Studies broke the tradition of the "direct influence" models and began considering the "ideological" role of the media. In this approach, the media is seen to play a significant role in defining social relations and political problems. They were an important cultural and ideological force capable of shaping how —the production and transformation of popular ideologies in the audiences [were] addressed (Hall, 1980b: 117). From this standpoint, Hall has also theoretically addressed the issue of how people make sense of media texts. He parts from Althusser in emphasising more scope for the diversity of responses to media texts.

Hall (1980) argued that the dominant ideology is typically inscribed as the "preferred reading" in a media text but that readers do not automatically adopt this. In essence, these dynamics play a role in the manufacturing and structuring (in other words, production) of media messages,

apparently because, as material and political systems, mass media are designed for work, for accomplishing specific communicative goals on behalf of their owners. Hence, through the data collection in this study (interview – to investigate how producers’ preferred messages are encoded regarding gender roles as constructed in female characters and how those messages were interpreted or accepted either in autonomy or diversities by the audience through the focus group discussion). This will be taken cognisance of in the forthcoming analysis chapter and how messages are encoded in media text is explored within the South African production studies in the next section.

One way in which producers are influenced by and capture the zeitgeist of society is through audience perceptions (Zafirau, 2009) through ticket sales, but more quantitatively through an awareness of current affairs, and more particularly through focus groups that provide a more nuanced understanding of what different audience segments want to watch, and what matters to them. This relationship between text creation as the form of representation and context lends the study to a cultural studies framework (Mayer *et al.*, 2009:2). This framework's application will be presented in Chapter Five.

### **South African television production studies**

South African television production studies have explored the introduction and evolution of the television industry from both a political economy (Alexia, 2016; Ives, 2015; Teer-Tomaselli, 2005) and cultural studies (Longhurst *et al.*, 2015; Pitout, 2007; Turner, 1996) perspectives. Television was first broadcast in South Africa in 1976, with a single channel on air for 37 hours a week, only in two languages, English and Afrikaans (Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). The South African television landscape currently consists of four free-to-air (FTA) channels. The public service broadcaster that provides three of the four channels mentioned in the country is known as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), established in 1936. In 1982, two other channels were introduced and added to the one channel that was initially in operation for five hours daily, – namely SABC1, SABC2, and SABC3. The fourth is an FTA channel, eTV, a privately owned commercial channel that broadcasts predominantly in English (Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). This is the channel that broadcasts *Scandal!* In addition to SABC 1, 2, and 3, the Corporation broadcasts two further 24-hour channels (*SABC News* and *SABC Encore*, a selection of local drama). Meanwhile, eTV produces *eNCA* and four additional entertainment channels on the DStv/MultiChoice platform (these

are fully private channels in the country). The channels are also responsible for broadcasting local soap operas.

One of the popular programs on television is the soap opera, initially transmitted on radio, which was introduced to television in 1984 and broadcast in English and Afrikaans (Teer-Tomaselli 2005:559). Although South Africa is a culturally diverse society, there were no television programmes for African languages (Teer-Tomaselli 2015:10). At that time, more than sixty percent of programming on the SABC was developed overseas and this had little or no relevance to the local population - particularly Blacks, Indians, and Coloureds (Mahlatsim 2018:15). As a result, a governing body - the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) - was tasked with overseeing the modification and restructuring of the broadcasting industry in South Africa (Motsaathebe, 2009; Teer-Tomaselli, 1995). The IBA suggested prioritising local programming (Mahlatsim, 2018; Motsaathebe, 2009; Teer-Tomaselli, 1995). In line, the South African Broadcasting Corporation was restructured (SABC1, SABC2, and SABC3), and all three channels currently exist and cater to different demographics (Teer-Tomaselli 2005; Teer-Tomaselli 2011). The channel with the largest footprint broadcasts is SABC1 and most of its primetime programming is in the Nguni group of languages, isiZulu, isiXhosa (the most widely spoken languages in South Africa), isiNdebele and Tshivenda (spoken by a smaller number of people). This is the channel that broadcasts *Uzalo*. The second largest footprint channel is SABC2, which carries Sesotho, Setswana, and siSwati, alternating with Afrikaans during primetime. SABC3 is the third channel and is described as a ‘public, commercial channel’. It broadcasts mainly in English and caters to the professional middle classes, mainly urban populations of all races and languages. The focus was to offer services in all eleven official languages in South Africa (Duncan and Glenn, 2010).

*Influence and reflection of society on television production: Influences and themes in storytelling*

Across all five channels (SABC 1,2,3, eTV, and DSTV), locally produced drama programming (including soap operas) attracts the highest audiences (BRC, 2018). According to Krabill (2002) and Stephen Ives (2007), the preference for local content is associated with the frequent appearance of Black South Africans on television and are depicted in prestige figures not only in the “context of accepted labor roles, as domestic servants, or mine workers and other disruptive figures. This shift aligns with Teer-Tomaselli’s (2019) observation that South African soap operas are more than mindless low-prestige programming but are the primary form of television’s dramatic expression.

According to Straubhaar (1991; 2007), cultural proximity is an element that increases the drive for South African audiences to be drawn to local shows/dramas. Mpanza (2018) and Nzimande and Dyll (2024) affirmed the applicability of this in their studies on local South African soap operas. Audiences tend to watch television programs that are closest, most proximate, or most directly relevant to them in cultural and linguistic terms (Straubhaar, 1991; 2007). Chronis (2013) stated that the heightened emotional journey that soap operas offer is unique, allowing the audience to live vicariously through the characters that mirror them, and it allows them to escape into the glamorous lives of characters in [diverse] locations. In an interview with Mkwanazi (2015:1), Duma Ka Ndlovu, a South African scriptwriter and producer, affirms that “South Africans want stories that reflect their lives. But they don’t want stories that look down on them or patronise them. They want people who understand black life, township life, and African life; someone who gives them a sense of pride”.

It is not only the representational concerns of entertainment, South African context, and sensibilities that influence South African soap opera production; framing all of this is a national mandate and associated regulations. Since the end of apartheid, South African television productions have been regulated and mandated to project content emphasising nation-building and reconciliation to promote a rainbow nation out of a divided past (Barnett, 1999; Ives, 2007; Roome, 1997). Television, with its depictions of the dramas of everyday reality, provides a compelling medium for influencing a normative national consciousness first as an apparatus of apartheid and later as an intended voice of a New South Africa (Ives, 2007:154). This thrust is evident in the themes of entertainment programming and the frequently multilingual languages of recent programming (Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). As of 2014, the SABC’s Educational wing produced a series of brochures and pamphlets designed to ‘inspire’ scriptwriters that pointed directly to the need for ‘togetherness.’ However, apart from entertainment, the SABC stated that “[i]n a nation like South Africa, storytelling has another purpose to service, namely, to heal, reconcile and bear testimony to the experience under apartheid” (SABC Education, 2014).

According to Teer-Tomaselli (2019), from 2010 onwards, the issues of diversity and identity-related concerns compensated for the issue of togetherness and nation-building. Further to this, the broadcasting regulator, the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA), has set in place a series of highly specific local content regulations that reward the use of single

(African) language production in localities outside of the main Johannesburg and Cape Town hubs (Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). The ICASA guidelines were effected in 2006, noting that SABC channels would be penalised if too many overseas programmes were broadcast in peak viewing time. Viewers had to wait until very late if they wanted to see international series, and popular international soap operas, such as *Days of Our Lives*, were moved from SABC 1 to SABC 2 (Ferreira, 2006:1). All this is to promote localised content and production. In line with this mandate, SABC Vuka Sizwa (2023) called for proposal submission on a drama long-form series in May 2023. They aim to produce high-quality, innovative, and authentic African content that affirms social cohesion and harmony. According to Smit (2020:1), ICASA sets “local content quotas of 55% for the public broadcast channels (SABC1 and 2) and 35% for the public commercial service (SABC3)”. The SABC Annual Report of 2019 shows that all three channels surpassed the local content requirements.

In eTV and SABC channels, the emphasis is on the production of programs that foreground the viewing preferences of people who prefer to be entertained in their own language. Programs are, therefore, more monolingual, ethnically, and culturally focused, creating opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic exchange. Contemporary drama storylines that focus on local communities with unique cultural identities and practices have started to problematize the previous message of multiculturalism; the emphasis now is on ‘authentic’ African experiences in the contemporary situation. The pull between tradition and modernity is a repeated leitmotif, but the here and now are being explored rather than a nostalgia for a world long gone (Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). This leads to the exploration of the general representation of women in media.

### **Representation of women in media**

Representation in media is a key component of empowering marginalised members of society (Letsoalo, 2019:1). When it comes to women’s representation in media, it’s not just important for there to be a significant presence of women in television shows — it is also important that these characters represent women fairly (Letsoalo, 2019:1). Television, among other media, influences millions of viewers daily (Haferkamp, 1999). “Television, due to its predominance of visual movement, can bring the world into the living room with great authenticity and efficacy” (Ahmed, 2012: 1). Television can be a socially transformative tool because it can guide culture and social perception and unite groups of people through message broadcasting (Collins, 2010; Jackson,

Brown, and Pardun, 2008; Hernandez, 2012; Rice, 2009). However, as a more negative influence, television programs are one potential source of negative and other stereotypical portrayal (Hall, 2003), including gender (Wille *et al.*, 2018). This is established through the continuous underrepresentation of women and the misrepresentation of femininity and masculinity (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017; Ward and Grower, 2020). Hence, media play a significant role in transmitting gender differences and inequality through daily visuals (Trolan, 2013:215).

Globally, women are noted to be underrepresented. For instance, in 2010, within the American context, Hether and Murphy's (2010) revealed that women represent 38% of the major characters appearing in health storylines on popular primetime television programs. In the Netherlands, Daalmans, Kleemans, and Sadza's (2017) study revealed that 22% of women were underrepresented on men's channels<sup>52</sup>, while gender distribution on women's channels reflected the Dutch population, which is 48.6%. Male sources also appear almost three times more often than female sources in newspaper coverage of same-sex marriage (Schwartz, 2010). In music videos drawn from five music-oriented television networks, male characters outnumber females by a ratio of 3 to 1 (Turner, 2010). In the same year, the Box Office films in the US and Canada found that the ratio of males to females in top-grossing G-rated (general audience) films was 2.57 to 1 (Smith *et al.*, 2010). The place women were least likely to appear was in video games. Downs and Smith (2010) find that only 70 of 489 (i.e., 1 in 7) characters appearing in the best-selling console games are females. Across entertainment media, generally, women have been underrepresented, objectified, and stereotypically represented (Thabethe, 20008). Hence, the next sub-section will focus on various stereotypes associated with the representation of women across media, with particular emphasis on soap operas.

### *Stereotypes in soap operas*

Since the early 1900s, stereotypes have been examined (Allport, 1954). Even now, stereotypes are still present in many organizations worldwide and in the larger society (Brink and Nel, 2015; Jussim, 2012; Mullins, 2010). This section concerns the various stereotypical images in which women in soap operas are represented. According to Michael Pickering (2015:1), stereotyping

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<sup>52</sup> Men's channel refers to a television station, network, or specialty channel that targets men as its major demographic; providing programs that appeal to the male population. Also, is the case with women's channels.

involves the “representation and evaluation of others in ways that ratify and endorse unequal social relations.” A gender stereotype is a generalised opinion or preconception about the traits or qualities men and women should or should not have or the roles men and women should possess (UNHR, 2014). Since the 1940s, when television first came to America, gender stereotyping has been a constant. Seeing the continuities of such kinds of portrayal across media is why the struggles of feminists who are aiming at fighting for gender equality are not only facing “patriarchal culture and men’s perspectives, but also media content that subordinates, weakens, and objectifies women” (Maryani and Ratmita, 2023:1).

Additionally, stereotypes can be positive or negative. Positive stereotypes help people comprehend different social groups, especially those with similar ideas. However, stereotypes can also be harmful if we believe falsehoods about them, such as that they are always untrue, that they only apply to minority groups (not our own), or that there is no proof to back up the stereotype (Lacey, 2018: 134–135).

One of the ways women are stereotypically portrayed is as a sex object. Women are objectified sexually when their sexual essence is broken apart, making them solely visible in terms of their physical appearance and disconnected from their personality (Maryani and Ratmita, 2023). Women portrayed as sex objects are usually young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent on men, and often depicted as incompetent, dumb, and enmeshed in relationships or housework (Davis, 1990; Kamiri, 2017; Roderick, 2017:1; Wood, 1994:31). According to a study *Perspective Chapter: Subjectification and Objectification of Women in Media* within an Indonesian context, Eni Maryani and Reksa Anggia Ratmita (2023:1) explained that:

Based on the narrative analysis carried out on the two soap operas, *Ikatan Cinta* and *Cinta Setelah Cinta*, there are various visualizations, symbols, and dialogs [sic] that weaken and marginalize women and position them as subordinate to men. In addition, it was found that several women who acted as subjects objectified women as well. The objectification of women in this study is interpreted as a process of degradation of women’s roles and abilities.

According to the authors' findings, the two local soap operas (*Ikatan Cinta* and *Cinta Setelah Cinta*) are directed by a male director, but the screenwriters for the two soap operas are women. It is assumed in the textual system that content produced by women typically develops a narrative theme based on women's desires and interprets what the audience perceives from a female

perspective (Kuhn, 1984). However, this is not the case in this study as Maryani and Ratmita (2023) noted that based on an analysis of the soap opera's plot, storyline, and portrayals of its female characters, continue to reinforce patriarchal ideals that are biased against women and mirror the opinions of men. The soap opera's plot and portrayal of its female characters both involve different forms of objectification of women. The authors lamented that this ought not to be so because the screenwriters of the two soap operas are female and they have “the power to make powerful stories, but instead, they create storytelling that weakens and demeans women” (Maryani and Ratmita, 2023:1). Hence, this study will establish in the analysis chapter (Six) if/how the writers influence the change or continuities of the representation of female character in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

Media tend to reiterate the cultural image of women as dependent, ornamental objects whose primary functions are to look good, please men, and stay quietly on the periphery of life. Other Stereotypical portrayals of particularly African American female characters include “the Mammy/Aunt, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire” (Kings, 2015:1). Carolyn M. West (2017:141) describes the stereotypes as follows:

The names *Mammy* and *Aunt* were both used in Southern antebellum fiction to describe a role and a person within the plantation household who served as a baby nurse, cook, and general domestic worker. (West noted that is a common portrayal of Black women).

Sapphires are represented as Angry Black Women (ABW) or Sister with Attitude. In some instances, they are depicted as very loud, opinionated, and domineering (West, 2017:149).

The Jezebel image is seen as Black women’s innate hypersexuality, making them “unrapeable” and undeserving of protection and sympathy (West, 2017:151-152).

Within the African setting, the stereotypes identified by West (2017) are also prominent as women are stereotypically constructed as “nurture, loud, talkative (likes gossiping), quarrelsome, emotional and make poor leaders” (Kamiri, 2017:3). The ‘Diva’ is another stereotypical role that the media depict women. The character is portrayed as demanding attention, often speaking down on others; things must always happen her way, and she is individualistic in nature (Blose, 2020). The ‘superwoman’ (the super wife, the super mother, and the super daughter-in-law) is a popular stereotype in the Indian community. The character is portrayed to have diversified qualities, which include compassion, loyalty, and devotion; her domain is her home and her family, which justify

her very existence. Her greatness lies in the obliteration of her individuality and self-worth (Ray and Das, nd.:13). Some of the TV advertisement portrayals are noted to be provocative, as ‘good women are depicted as submissive, sensitive, and domesticated, while ‘bad women’ are portrayed as rebellious, independent, and self (Ray and Das, nd.:12). Another stereotype image is the ‘dream girl.’ This image is described as gentle, sensitive, demure, submissive, sweet-natured, non-competitive, and dependent (Ray and Das, nd.).

Such stereotypical depictions are still much more apparent in today's society (King, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009) and are also prevalent in everyday media (Kangas *et al.*, 2015). Women are often portrayed solely as homemakers and carers of the family, dependent on men, or as objects of male attention. Stereotype depictions of women are not only seen in soap operas but also in other genres. For instance, Maree (2010: iv) observed that the depiction of women in advertisements is used as visual attention-attracting focus points across a range of different product or service categories. Another study by Nerisa Pillay (2008) that examined the portrayal of women in the SABC3 advertisements revealed that female characters are often stereotyped and portrayed in line with traditional roles (customary gender roles) associated with women and such representation has resulted in the limited view of women in advertising content. According to Ray and Das (nd), gender stereotypes are seen as profound in television advertisements. Often in advertisements, men are represented as autonomous, shown in some occupations, unlike women, who are mainly depicted as housewives. Again, men are seen advertising cars or business products while women are often seen advertising domestic products and in terms of authority, men are usually portrayed to gain more of it than their female counterparts (Ray and Das, nd). Also, within the Indian context, Ray and Das (nd:8) observed that the messages transmitted by the media to society about gender roles are the affirmation that the “more violent and dominant a man is, the more he is asserting his sex”. Meanwhile, the message women are receiving is that they should be beautiful, skinny, and made up at all times.

Soap operas are known for their stereotypical portrayal of women (Motsaathebe, 2009). For example, Barrat’s findings revealed that,

If a working person is portrayed, it is almost always a male image, and those working women that are depicted are shown to be incompetent and inferior to male workers; men are doctors; women are nurses and secretaries; men work in corporations; women tend boutiques (Barrat 1990: 46).

In line with what Barrat found above, generally, women are defamed as individuals who cannot handle anything constructive on their own, without the support and assistance of a man because they are too emotional (Gunter, 1986). The “emotional woman is believed to become flustered in a minor crisis: she is seen as sensitive, often fearful and anxious, and generally dependent on male help and support in all kinds of personal and professional situations” (Gunter 1986: 11). Another stereotype image that exists within soap operas, particularly South African soap operas is ‘the wife’. The image continues as the stereotypical possessive, ever-scheming, insecure, and nagging woman (Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, and Osunkunle, 2021). An instance given by the authors Onyenankeya, Onyenankey, and Osunkunle to further describe this stereotypical image is in episode 188 (2016) in *Generation: The Legacy*, “when a female character, Sphe, felt she was losing the attention of her husband (Mazwi) and resorted to injecting her daughter, Rorisang to make her sick, to get Mazwi’s full attention” (Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, and Osunkunle, 2021:1618). The ‘typical mother’ is another stereotype in soap operas. The character is described as “possessive, protective, who will do anything to prevent ‘the witch of a woman’ (often girlfriends) from getting any closer to her son with her perceived city ways” (Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya and Osunkunle, 2021:1618). The ‘classic *femme fatale*’ is also a stereotypical character who is depicted to always use her physical attraction and sexual prowess to trick, seduce, and even manipulate or compromise her sexual partners – sometimes manipulating them to take part in risky and lethal transactions (Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, and Osunkunle, 2021). Considering these stereotypical portrayals, this study’s concern is to investigate whether these portrayals are prominent in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

The problem of women’s underrepresentation and misrepresentation is associated with the idea that media has always been a patriarchal field since its inception (Altay, 2018; Murthiningsih, Avenita, and Ikom, 2017). Gallagher *et al.*, (2009) noted that stories by female reporters are more likely to challenge stereotypes than those filed by male reporters. As such, there is a link between the participation of women in the media and improvements in the representation of women. Is this a continuous act in the current South African soap operas? Or are constructions and representations of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal* influenced by the predominant patriarchal South African culture? Table 3.1 collates and summarises the dominant portrayal of women in entertainment media, including soap operas, according to previous literature cited in this chapter. It also notes the study location to provide information on the global spread of these stereotypes.

<b>Dominant Representations of Women in Entertainment Media, including Soap Opera</b>	
<b>Representations</b>	<b>Sources/Location</b>
The witch	Ibbi (2017), Nigeria; Warfield (2013), Germany; Livingstone (1995), America
Mistress	Ibbi (2017), Nigeria; Maryani and Ratmita (2023), Indonesia; Peyton (2019); Senegal
Prostitute	Ibbi (2017), Nigeria; Tso (2019), Asia
The femme fatale	Ibbi (2017), Nigeria; Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, and Osunkunle (2021), South Africa
The gold digger/trophy wives	Ibbi (2017), Nigeria; Sharot (2017), America
The Housewives	Kasimoğlu and Celik (2019), Turkey; Rousell (2013), America
The sex object	Maryani and Ratmita (2023), Indonesia; Nehanda (2020). South Africa; Near (2014) US
The wife	Mishra (2015), India; Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, and Osunkunle (2021), South Africa
The typical mother	Ibbi (2017), Nigeria; Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya, and Osunkunle (2021), South Africa
The mammy	Arceneaux (2005), America Henson (2013), America; Bossy, Thomas, and John (2001); America; West (2017), America;
The Jezebel	Brown (2015), America; Mueni (2014); Kanya; West (2017), America
The Sapphire	Blöse (2020) South Africa; Campbell <i>et al.</i> , (2008). New York; West (2017), America;

The Black angry woman	Blose (2020) South Africa; West (2017), America
The emotional woman	Cheng (2012), Sweden; Gunter (1986), America
The object of barter	Ibbi (2017), Nigeria; Maryani and Ratmita (2023), Indonesia;
The good woman	Ray and Das (nd,), Indaia
The bad woman	Ray and Das (nd,), Indaia
The superwoman	Ray and Das (nd,), Indaia
The strong and independent woman	Geraghty (1991), United Kingdom; Hobson (2003), United Kingdom; Onuh (2017), South Africa
Damaged woman	Stern, Russell, and Russell (2012), New York;
The Evil woman	Modleski (1982), America; Maxz (2008), South Africa
The Good mother	Bauer (2023), America; Feasey (2017), America; Neophytou (2012), South Africa
The Good girl	Neophytou (2012), South Africa
Strong woman/Matriarch	Hobson (2003), United Kingdom; Geraghty (1991), United Kingdom; Landers (2018), South Africa; Onuh (2017), South Africa; Tager (1997), South Africa
The Diva	Blose (2020), South Africa
The Homemaker	Collins (2011) America
The Nonprofessional woman	Collins (2011) America
The alcoholic woman	Furnham (1997), British; Hall and Kappel (2018), US, Modleski (1982)
Sexual gatekeeper	Collins (2011) America; Verma and Sharma (2018), India

Unwed mother	Kristashep (2015), America; Modleski (1982), America
The Bad mother	Feasey (2017), America; Rickwood, A. (2021), United Kingdom

**Table 3.1:** Summary table collating the dominant representations of women in entertainment media, including soap operas, and study location.

### **Relationship between dominant discourses and representations of female characters in soap operas and the shifts in feminist thoughts**

Soap operas are strongly associated with their address to and popularity among women viewers and are often viewed as a progressive text because of their “raising of problems which are seen as relevant to their [women’s] lives” (Hobson 1982:11). Some aspects of the genre encourage and portray women’s empowerment through the depiction of matriarchal roles and other public spheres of power (Hobson, 2003; Lander, 2019; Onuh, 2017). According to Tania Modleski (1979:14), soap operas do not encourage the advancement of a dominant ideology. Similarly, Christine Gledhill and Vicky Ball (2013: 362) elaborate that soap operas create “spaces on the margins of the dominant culture where women’s different positioning in society is acknowledged and allowed a degree of expression.” Currently, most popular soap narratives represent a blend of tradition and modernity. Varying, from the values of joint family, the primacy of the marital bond, sacrifice, patience, or tolerance of a woman, which is extremely glorified to the power and strength of a woman that is highly appreciated (Chanda and Chhotaray, 2018:121). Such mixed portrayal helps to sustain its authenticity among viewers across generations (Chanda and Chhotaray, 2018:121).

On the other hand, Parry (1991) states that soap operas often depict men as active characters while female characters as passive; thus, soap operas can be problematic in portraying women and femininity (Aston and Clark, 1994), as elaborated below. Discussing these debates and different points of view regarding female representation and dominant associated discourses in soap operas assists in establishing a knowledge base of the various portrayals against which to discuss how the *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* producers construct female characters and how the UKZN students decode or interpret them. The ultimate aim is to identify (in Chapters Six and Seven) how the representations in the study’s selected soap operas conform or subvert previous portrayals.

Within soap operas, women are represented across many dominant discourses/themes. Modleski (1982: 68) explained some soap themes as “the evil woman, the great sacrifice, the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse, marrying her for money, respectability, and so on. The unwed mother, deceptions about the paternity of children, career vs. housewife, the alcoholic woman (and occasionally man)”. Allen (1989: 49) sums up these varying themes as a “dramatic concern with heterosexual romance, kinship, and family.” According to Geraghty (2006), this is established around the features of emotions, relationships, and romance, which are often socially associated with women. In agreement, Byerly and Ross (2006) stated that this is one of the reasons why soap operas are traditionally perceived as a woman’s genre. Although the genre is aimed at women, it can also be considered a feminine and female genre in its conventions (Marx, 2007).

In the early days of the genre, soap operas' female-oriented narratives catered mainly to women, especially housewives, who were based in the domestic sphere (Geraghty, 2005:6). Due to the large attraction of viewership, soap operas portrayed stories of female characters who were often powerful and professional and held working positions outside of the home (Harrington 2016:110). This presented an appealing fantasy for the housewife who would be home all day but secretly aspired to professional life (Nzimande and Dyll, 2024). Soap operas provide a private sphere for its audience to understand how women can be involved in political and social functions; this private sphere helps its viewers to understand the contemporary world, which is why soap operas are described to be part of the “gendered cultural system” (Geraghty, 2005:315). Based on Honda O’Donnell’s (1999) argument focusing on European soap operas, it was noted that the portrayal of men and women are different, as women are presented to be more competent and dynamic than men even though it does not always guarantee happy endings. Hayward (1997) disagreed with the argument that even though soap operas are constructed by the rhythm of women’s lives, the themes and contents are shaped by all genders.

Gauntlett and Hill (1999) further buttress Hayward’s argument (1997) that soap operas have experienced a little shift, as they focus on stories that are not exclusive to women but men and this has made men become interested viewers. This shift led to Geraghty’s concern that this shift has affected the initial narrative orientation of the soap genre and the pleasure derived from it as it paved the way for an increase in the inclusion of “crime series convention” in the genre (Geraghty, 2005:191). My Master’s study (Onuh, 2017) found that this form of hybridity plays a prominent role

in *Uzalo*'s MaNgcobo's character, which is constructed to play her motherly role within the contexts of crime and violence. It has been six years since these, so this study will assess if and how there have been any changes or modifications. This also formed the basis for exploring female character constructions and representations in media.

Collins (2011:290) believes that women are portrayed as non-professionals, homemakers, wives or parents, and sexual gatekeepers. The studies also noted that women are under-represented in media and that when women are represented, they are typically scantily dressed and relegated to stereotypical roles.

In the development of feminist television criticism, soap operas have played a substantial role, making feminist television criticism widely visible in the field (Brunsdon, 1995). According to Laura Mulvey (1981), soap operas as a female genre are overrated because instead of promoting feminine ideologies, they promote patriarchal ideologies as women are regularly depicted as subordinates to their male counterparts. In agreement, Charlotte Brunsdon (1997) noted that most soap opera depictions are stereotypical, as women are often portrayed as sex objects and housewives. Brunsdon (1995:42) explains that:

soap opera is a compelling area of research in feminism because “they are seen as to be ‘about’ and ‘for’ women, they touch on personal relationships and domesticity, based on the notion of ‘personal is political,’ the term ‘soap opera’ has a metaphoric meaning. Early feminist works on the media mainly focused on stereotyping and categorized women’s representations in the media into two types: *sex objects* and *housewives* (Brunsdon, 1995: 42).

This is why Chris Barker argued that the enhancement of soap operas by glamour and the physical appearance of women was mainly for the gaze of the male (Barker, 1997). From the feminist theory perspective, Mulvey noted that determining the male gaze projects phantasy onto the female figure. With males being the active spectators, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with “their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-atness” (Mulvey, 1981: 347).

However, *somewhat* challenging the view of the simplification of women as either sexual or domestic ‘goddesses’, Geraghty (1981) notes in her study of *Coronation Street* that the portrayal of women in the soap operas is unrealistic as they are portrayed to be much stronger and independent in comparison to reality [my emphasis]. Chris Barker (2000) and Brunsdon (2000)

agreed that soap operas regularly deploy varieties of independent and strong-minded female characters and pay attention to the complexities of the private sphere often ignored by other television genres. Yet these “strengths are frequently put at the service of family and the men within it” (Barker, 2000:24). Likewise, the portrayals of women who are financially independent within the public sphere in soap operas are limited (Barker, 1997). For example, my Masters (Onuh, 2017) study recorded a shift as strong and independent women were constructed and depicted within the public sphere of crime and religion, leading a whole season without male head figures, although such portrayals are limited.

According to Boitumelo Matshaba (2018) and Letsoalo (2019), in the past, the most powerful characters often portrayed on South African television were men in suits. However, Matshaba (2018) notes a shift as central characters in dramas are now assigned to female actors. Actors like Pamela Nomvete, who played the cheeky Ntsiki Lukhele, and Chi Mhende as Wandile Radebe in *Generations the Legacy*, and Joyce Skefu, who played spicy Doris in *Muvhango*, Tyson played Lorcía Cooper-Khumalo kin in *Lockdown* (among others) have paved the way for more women to be considered for prominent roles. Letsoalo (2019:1) further noted that some localised South African soap operas are shifting by working to include empowered female characters. The author gave instances of some women in the soap opera genre whose constructions/representations have changed from earlier domesticated or sexualised depictions:

### Female President



**Fig 3.1:** Lufuno Mulaudzi, acted by Florence Masebe, in *Republic*. **Source:** Letsoalo (2019).

Fig 3.1 shows the character Lufuno Mulaudzi in *Republic*, first broadcast in 2019; she is depicted as the first South African democratically elected female president. Her reign came after President Hendrik Mbuli was fired for corruption and looting of state funds, and she took up the

responsibility of fighting corruption in her country. This new drama constructed and represented the female character with immense power. This depiction shows the shift currently seen in the soap opera genre, particularly South African soap operas, as the depiction of female characters in prominent positions is associated with male characters. For instance, female power and female villains. Such kind of portrayal also subverts the popular underrepresentation of women and subordination of women.

### **Leader of family Taxi**



**Fig 3.2:** Mkabai Zungu acted by Thembi Nyandeni in *Isibaya*. **Source:** Letsoalo (2019)

Figure 3.2 shows a scene from *Isibaya*. It depicts Mkabayi Zungu as prominent within the sphere, mainly associated with men. She is known for her bravery in leading a family of taxi owners. The “tough-talking” matriarch dismantles gender roles as she tackles the daily operations of the business. The character subverts African traditions, like the Zulu women, who are expected to be mothers, nurturers, and dependents, among others, and often within the private sphere (Nkosi, 2019). These could imply or be described as subordinate roles if they are the only roles women are expected to fulfill.

### Resilient young female character



**Fig 3.3:** Mapitsi Magongwa acted by Mogau Motlatswi in *Skeem Saam*. **Source:** Letsoalo (2019)

The female character Mapitsi in Fig 3.3 plays out her action in a small town called Turfloop in the Limpopo province, in *Skeem Saam*. She is arguably an empowering character through the portrayal of perseverance and realizing her dreams in the face of challenges such as her teenage pregnancy. The story is positioned as one of restoring hope and inspiring teen mothers who are often stigmatised in South Africa as teen pregnancy is on the increase (Ndlovu, 2022).

### Matriarchs



**Figure 3.4:** The Two *Uzalo* Matriarchs (MaNzuzza on the left, played by Leleti Khumalo and MaNgcobo on the right, played by Dawn King). **Source:** TV and Thinus (2015)

Figure 3:4 above illustrates the two matriarchs (MaNgcobo and MaNzuzza) characters depicted in binary opposition to religion and crime (Levi-Strauss, 1968). Both were de facto heads of their home. MaNzuzza is the wife of the Pastor Mdletshe and MaNgcobo the wife of Gxabhash Xulu

(gangster). Both women took leadership of the affairs of their homes and businesses in the absence of their husbands. They both ensure that their families stay together throughout their challenges in the absence of their husbands.

While the above examples show some shifts in female characterisation, they appear to be the exception, not the rule. These exceptions are most apparent when female characters operate with the agency in male-dominated spaces (for example, government, business, and crime syndicates), thus operating on a binary code. Table 3.2 collates and summarises primary representations of female characters in selected, currently screened contemporary South African soap operas. The table below summarises some of the female characters discussed above.

<b>Primary Representation of Female Characters in Contemporary South African Soap Opera</b>		
<b>Role</b>	<b>Soap Opera</b>	<b>Context</b>
Female President	<i>The Republic</i>	South African
Leader of a family taxi owner	<i>Isibaya.</i>	South African
Perseverance Youth	<i>Skeem Saam</i>	South African
Matriarchs	<i>Uzalo</i>	South African
Resilient character	<i>Lockdown</i>	South African

**Table 3.2:** Primary representation of female characters in contemporary soap opera

Margaret Gallagher (1978, 1979) noted that overall media treatment of women can best be described as narrow, where women are rarely portrayed as rational, active, or passive. The author further explains that practically all media images are a dichotomous motif that defines women as either perfectly good or wholly evil, mother or whore, virgin or call girl, and even traditional or modern. Fernandez (1992) and Iqbal and Abdar (2016) contend that the media generally subvert women’s positions and act to preserve the dominant values of society. Discussing the historical background of soap operas will help to further contextualise the possible reasons for the above and establish a foundation for analysing changes and continuities.

### **A brief history of soap opera**

Internationally, soap operas have played a central role in defining the television industry and are known as one of the earliest and most enduring broadcast genres (Meyers, 2015:333). Soap opera

first appeared on American radio in the 1930s and since its creation and broadcast, its popularity as “daytime radio serials” has been on the increase (Allen, 1985; Hobson, 2003:7; Kosnik and Ford, 2019). The first soap opera was on the radio station WGN in Chicago; it was called Painted Dreams created by Irna Phillips in 1930 (Ganniger, 2020). The term “soap opera” as a show name was first used in 1939 and was first mentioned in the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* in 1940 (Ganninger, 2020:1). The term “soap” referred to the sponsors, mostly household product companies (Anitha, 2014; Marx, 2007). The term “opera” alluded to the forms of overly dramatised domestic situations presented in those series (Ahmed, 2012; Allen, 1985; Brown and Barwick, 1987). Its primary objective was to serve as a platform for commercial (promoting and advertising) household cleaning products manufactured by Proctor and Gamble, the first major advertiser to sponsor one of these daytime dramas using their Oxydol soap powder, a laundry detergent (Ganninger, 2020), followed by other household manufacturers like Colgate, Palmolive, and Lever Brothers, and other adverts and sponsors of toothpaste, breakfast cereals, drugs, food, and beverages aimed at women and housewives as target audiences (Brown, 1994; Hobson, 2003; Meyers, 2015). The first successful soap opera was *Betty and Bob* in 1932, produced by Frank Hummert and his wife, Anne Achenhurst, with women as the major audience (Hobson, 2003).

By 1939, the early 15-minute daytime radio soap operas and other ‘washboard weepers’ were transformed and taken to the general press and used as “generic substitute for the less colourful and more cumbersome daytime dramatic serial which became the most elite of all narrative art forms, as a vehicle for selling the humblest of commodities” (Allen, 1985:8-9). Subsequently, soap operas successfully bridged the technological platform of radio to the social contexts of women’s everyday lives (Meyers, 2015). Hence the genre was recognised as a means of reaching potential female customers as “one of the most effective broadcasting advertising vehicles ever devised” (Allen, 2004:242), effectively matching the needs of advertisers to the interests of the desired consumer demographic. Notwithstanding their reputation as “drivel,” the commercial sponsorship of soap operas helped create the structure of advertiser-supported programming that continues to shape broadcast television today, positioning soap operas as a foundational genre (Meyers, 2015:337).

#### *A brief history of soap opera - Global shifts*

This section is dedicated to identifying the shifts in global soap opera conventions and themes like

the transition of the genre from radio to TV, the type of characters often constructed and represented in the genre, and issues surrounding feminism, among others, are discussed.

The first American television soap opera was created in 1949, titled *These Are My Children*, *Guiding Light*, followed by others. In the 1950s, radio serials, which transitioned to television serials influenced the commercial terrain, allowing American manufacturers to expand their market (Allen, 1985). Porter (2011:66) argued that “TV was a strange new medium, lighting up our living rooms and generating talk—but soap operas gave it a friendly face”.

In the late 1950s, more portrayals of “working class and low-middle-class” characters drew awareness to cultural changes in the industry’s entertainment and art sphere. This was called a “kitchen sink drama theatre” to portray “domestic realism,” showing the wave in British realism (Drabble, 1985:538). In the 1960s, American soap operas portrayed glamour and wealth. For instance, *Dallas* focused on upper-middle-class characters and was viewed internationally. In Australian soap operas, *Neighbours* was among the first to reveal the different attitudes and values of the culture it represented (family ties, young characters, more middle-class representation of a vibrant working population) (Hobson, 2003: 14-15). It also introduced young people to mainstream soap operas, which led to the inclusion of young actors and attracted younger viewers. Currently, different social standing and ages are included in global and local soap operas within defined contexts (Hobson, 2003).

As the soap opera genre continued gaining popularity, there was a shift from live to taped production and thirty-minute to one-hour episodes in the 1970s (Kosnik and Ford, 2019). Expansion of production budgets occurred in the 1980s. It was in the same period that soap operas were taken more seriously due to the “convergence of two merging trends,” which include “growing interest in popular television forms” and “awareness, prompted by feminism” (Geraghty, 1991:1). The interest of feminist theorists in the soap opera genre started because of its stereotypical portrayal of female characters. In the 1980s, feminists questioned representations for not depicting women/female characters “as they are, or really could or should be” (Gledhill, 2003: 346). They were concerned with how the dominant social and cultural discourses, as portrayed in soap operas, devalue women and enforce power differences. They, therefore, encouraged more

*realistic* media representations in their scholarship (Brunsdon, 1997). This was the basis for the genre's criticism by feminist theorists (Marx, 2008). However, the difference in feminist concerns currently compared to the 80s is the awareness of intersectionality (to be discussed in Chapter Four). Therefore, in this study, soap operas are used to map the changes and continuities in discourses of gender roles as they interact with media and society, particularly South African soap operas.

### *South African soap operas*

In South Africa, radio soap operas first debuted in 1953, broadcast on SABC's Springbok Radio, and the yearly SABC reports repeatedly noted how popular they were among female listeners (Tomaselli et al., 1989). In 1984, soap operas were introduced on South African television. The first South African soap opera, *The Dingleys*, was in the 1990s mainly targeted the white female audience. Initially, South African soap operas were modelled as American soap operas as they modelled the same codes, conventions, and dominant themes such as forbidden romances, feuding families, and old money versus new money. However, in post-apartheid South Africa, more themes and nuances common to the South African people became prevalent in soap operas (Chipana, 2023). Themes include social injustices, HIV/AIDS, sexuality, inequality, and crime. This inclusion of social justice issues into South African soap operas defined its local contexts, distinguishing it from American soap operas (Burton, 2012). This societal depiction is associated with community soap operas. South African soap operas, like those in the United Kingdom, can thus be characterised as community soap operas (this is explained in the later part of this chapter) (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998) with a closer verisimilitude to the societal context in which it is produced, as elaborated below.

Additionally, over time, there was an increase in broadcasting South African productions. As indicated in the SABC's 1994 Annual Report, SABC chairperson Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri specified that the SABC pledged to boost South African drama productions (SABC Annual Report, 1994). During this transformation, a veteran television producer, Mfundu Vundla, was approached to produce a soap opera for the SABC, *Generations*. Motsaathebe (2009:432) identified some prominent themes in *Generations* as "feminine values, abortion, homosexuality, rape, prostitution, child abuse, family violence, women in politics, business, illegal smuggling, and workplace demographics." While still entertaining, these themes reinforce the shift to storylines that resonate

with the South African audience's life-worlds (Barker, 1997; King'ara, 2013). Another South African soap opera released in 1994 was *Egoli: Place of Gold*. It was the first locally produced long-running soap opera created for the relatively new and only independent broadcaster in the nation, M-Net. This particular period in South African media history is marked by a heightened feeling of anticipation around *Egoli* (Jonker, 2015, see also Milton, 1996).

During periods of political and social transformation in South Africa, there was a recognisable shift as a renewed public appetite for soap opera was created, setting the stage for fresh stories to be created and told (Marx 2016:80; Teer-Tomaselli 2005). Today, single-language productions are “encouraged by the 2016 Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA)” (Gibson, Dyll, Teer- Tomaselli 2019:142). This has led to an increase in audience and the production of local soap operas. Indigenisation in the context of this study “refers to how global expressions are adapted by local cultures” (Gibson, Dyll, Teer-Tomaselli 2019:142), as explained in the previous Chapter (Two).

Having explained the shift in soap operas both globally and locally, it is important to briefly discuss the description of the soap opera genre according to the generic codes and conventions defined by various authors. This will help contextualise the understanding of the genre in this study.

### **Defining soap operas through generic codes and conventions**

This section is dedicated to explaining the soap opera codes and conventions. This is important as it provides an account of the generic framework as a foundation against which to identify the continuity and changes in how gender roles in female characters are constructed and interpreted across different contexts. Genres are defined by their conventions: repeated, expected, and almost predictable qualities. While many codes and conventions are similar across multiple contexts, their application in different contexts can differ.

When referring to soap operas, scholars provide different definitions; some define them based on their characteristics, and others define them based on viewers' understandings and standpoints (Mumford, 1995). De Kosnik and Sam Ford (2019) noted that soap operas are also defined by their frequency and duration. For instance, Brunsdon (1997:121) described soap operas as “the paradigmatic television genre - domestic, continuous, contemporary, episodic, repetitive, fragmented, and aural”. Dorothy Hobson (1982), Robert Allen (1985), Christine Geraghty (1991),

Ellen Brown (1994), and Anne McCarthy (2001) define soap operas differently based on scope and emphasis. To further explain this, Hobson (1982:26) added that soap operas are “escapist or fantasy programs through which women could realize the romance missing from their everyday lives” (Hobson, 1982:26). Such representation of fantasy assists in the creation of reality to its viewers (Worden, 2013:4). For instance, fantasy is a heavy part of the codes of American soap operas and

Brazil soap operas with fantasy portrayals like the visitations from ghosts and the resurrection of dead characters (Brown, 2011; Levine, 2020; Vilani, 2011). On the other hand, South African soap conventions (Marx-Knoetze, 2018; Tager, 2010; Onuh, 2018) are more realistic portrayals in line with British and Australian soap operas (Conway-Herron, 2016). They have a higher degree of “verisimilitude,” reflecting “real life,” than American soap operas (Gledhill, 2003:360). Gledhill claimed that verisimilitude is what makes the soap operas genre popular.

#### *Global generic conventions with a local difference*

Codes and conventions are the features that constitute a particular genre that the audience can use to connect to the genre (Allen, 1985). The learning and recognition of a particular genre’s conventions assist the targeted audience to “make meaning in the television medium” (Bignell, 2004:16) based on shared cultural references (Harrington, 2006). Thus, discussing soap opera codes and conventions presents a rationale for the suitability of soap operas as a form of popular culture on which to base the study’s research questions.

Soap operas have “strong generic” codes and conventions (Brunsdon, 1997:27). In this light, according to Chris Barker’s (1997) view, soap operas are global narratives and even though the same codes and conventions are repeated around the world, they could also be regional or local.

*Global:* Soap operas are considered global when they have formal conventions of soap operas and are viewed internationally, being “one of the most exported forms of television viewed in a range of cultural contexts” (Barker, 1997:75). An example of an international soap on SABC is the US-produced *Days of our Lives*.

*Regional or local:* Soap operas are referred to as local when they are produced to attract a specific home audience within a national space as “they encompass the history, culture and specific problems of particular local conditions,” while regional soap operas have a wider regional appeal

that serves a particular language, culture community (Barker, 1997:75-76). As such, it can be assumed that the selected soap operas for this study could be described as local soap operas as *Uzalo* is based in a particular township of KwaZulu-Natal and is produced in isiZulu and *Scandal!* is based in Newtown and Soweto with multilingual languages. However, their high ratings indicate that the soap operas appeal to a wider South African audience and may thus be considered regional soap operas. It is within this context that the concepts of glocalisation and indigenisation are established (Dragota, 2012). Despite the universal generic conventions, it is important to note how such conventions are produced and consumed locally, as these similarities and differences reveal national values and identities if we follow them (Barnard, 2006; Milton, 2008; Ponono and Wasserman, 2016; Teer-Tomaselli, 2007; Van der Merwe, 2013).

*Glocalisation and Indigenisation:* Indigenisation involves taking global expressions to reflect local cultures and homegrown “systems of meaning” (Buonanno, 2008:88; Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2020:144). Indigenised soap operas contain certain conventional characters adapted to reflect local concerns and characteristics (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020). The popularity of these localised soap operas, with South African 1, is arguably associated with their cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991, 1998). This is so because it enables the audiences to identify with the characters, contexts, and situations portrayed (Teer-Tomaselli, 2005:568). Local soap operas attract audiences not only because they follow the winning formula of good guy vs. bad guy but because they’re also relevant, up-to-date with current affairs, and ingrained in the psyche of the community (Jordaan, 2018:1). This adaptation of global conventions shows what is lost from the adoption of the global genre (international features) and what is gained by localising it to suit the given context in story narration. Local productions may present new and indigenised genuine elements that may affect how female characters are constructed and interpreted.

Conventionally, a soap opera’s *narrative structure* involves using multiple interweaving threads that connect the storylines since the narrative spreads across numerous episodes with different themes and subject matters that could be less (resolved) or more permanent (Barker, 1997; Greco, 2020; Kontranowski, 2014). That is, the narrative proposes “completing and intertwining plotlines introduced as the serial progress plot.... develops at a different pace, thus preventing any clear resolution conflict. The completion of one story generally leads to others and plots that often incorporate parts of semi-resolved conflicts” (Muriel, 1983:22). From this perspective, soap operas

are divided into two types: open soap operas that have no end and continue for years (serial), and closed soap operas, which eventually end (series) (Ahmed, 2012).

A serial is a developing narrative with organised and established characters, locations, and plots that run from one episode to the next, with a cliffhanger as a knot that connects previous episodes to the next and teases before commercial breaks (Bignell, 2004; McCarthy, 2001), creating an “endless drama” (Hobson, 1982:33; 2003:1). Aligned with this description, Kontranowski, and Childers viewed soap operas as a serial fiction genre that enables the weaving together of different and numerous “symbolic characters, issues, and subplots which virtually represent cultural rhetoric” (Childers, 2006:399; Kontranowski, 2014), making soap operas a suitable genre for investigating how female characters are constructed and read in a contemporary South Africa, with the view to reveal characterisations and discourses that signal the continuation of female subordination and/or an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African society.

*A cliffhanger* is a “hook” or “device” used to sustain audiences’ attention to the next episodes through suspense (Hobson, 2003:69). The deliberate use of this proairetic code (Barthes, 1975) occurs at the end of each episode at the highest pitch of audience/viewers’ interest, thus creating suspense, enticing the audience to ‘tune in to the next episode’ to see how the drama unfolds.

The serial format, supported with devices such as the cliffhanger, not only attracts a returning audience. This “infinite delay of closure” (Allen, 2013:48), according to a culturalist perspective (Hoggart, 1957; Hall, 1980), also works against ideological closure and allows for subversive / negotiated oppositional readings. Soap operas are thus a suitable text on which to base a study that is interested in the polysemic readings of female representations.

*As a key convention, melodrama* can best be illustrated in the themes. Soap opera themes revolve around the representations of “romances, families and attendant rituals [such as] births, engagements, marriages, divorces [and] deaths” (Brunsdon, 1981: 78). Furthermore, soap plots are usually recognised around the “falling out between family and community members; jealousies, infidelities, dirty dealings, hidden secrets, and their exposure, social problems, for example, illegitimacy, abortion, sometimes work problems, [for example] redundancy” (Gledhill, 2003: 352).

*Realism* is another important convention associated with the soap opera genre in certain countries, such as the UK, Australia, and South Africa. According to Ien Ang (1985), one of the scholars who is strongly associated with the cultural studies in the study of Dallas in defining soap operas maintained that melodrama and narrative structures were combined to evoke a tragic structure of feeling. That is, in soap operas realism is experienced by its audience not on a cognitive level but on an emotional level as happiness is not lasting but precarious (Ang, 1985:46). Ang further expressed that in soap operas, what is recognised as real is not knowledge of the world, but subjective experiences of the world which is depicted between philosophical and artistic realism. According to Lovell (1980:65), there are two dimensions of realism in art, the first is concerned with the ‘show things as they are’ and the second dimension deals with the ‘theory of the nature of the reality to be shown and the methods which must be used to show it.

In this case, realism refers to a “set of conventions by which the drama appears to be a representation of the real world with motivated characters, recognisable locations, and believable social problems” (Barker, 1997:78). This is the reason most soap operas are in areas with which the audience can geographically identify (Hobson, 1982; 2003). It assists in depicting the essence of community and localness, which is what made one of the first primetime soap operas, *The British Coronation Street*, very popular (Dunleavy 2005:13). In this context, *Uzalo*’s popularity could also be associated with its location since it is set within one of the popular townships in KZN. Therefore, it is significant to note that location and set are major components in the creation of dramatic realism in the production of soap operas (Hobson, 2003:70). Some examples of entertainment education<sup>53</sup> soap operas are *Intersexions*, *EastEnders*, *Soul City* and *Isidingo*, among others, and in these types of pro-social messaging soap operas are even more significantly associated with social realism (Cardey *et al.*, 2013; King’ara, 2013, Tufte 2001, 2008). Although the selected soap operas for this study are not EE, they have elements of EE. Soap opera realism is further explored below.

*Character* is one of the “most important elements in any soap opera,” which also serves as a tool for attracting audiences to the genre (Hobson, 2003:81). Remarkably, soap operas allow the depiction of diverse and multiple characters that play equal roles (Ahmed, 2016), the characters are screened

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<sup>53</sup> Education Entertainment (soap) refers to media messages that include useful or educational content to affect viewers’ overt behaviour, foster positive attitudes, and expand audience knowledge of a topic (Singhal and Rogers 2002; Moyer-Gusé 2008).

before being cast in television roles. There is an emphasis on female roles, including mothers, housewives, older women, divorcees, and widows with a range of social issues (Gledhill, 2003). How female characters are depicted is the focus of this study. However, male characters are important, often set up in binary opposition to female characters, and children often determine marriages and relationships (Modleski, 1982:86; Hobson, 2003). Female characters are often expected to be gorgeous, while male characters should have appealing physiques for female viewers. One of the major attributes that define each character in soap operas is their dress and appearance, this not only distinguishes them but also helps the audience understand and relate to the character's personality and how they advance (Hobson, 2003). For example, MaNgcobo and MaNzuza in *Uzalo*, as Zuma explained in an interview:

MaNzuza, who is in the church, her dresses are more conventionally modest, she got long sleeves, and she doesn't wear tight-fitting clothing...so she appears to what we conventionally understand as a modest woman. While MaNgcobo, on the other side, is in her dressing and wardrobe a lot flashier, bolder colours, big jewelry, and tight-fitting clothes. What we might conventionally associate with someone who is edgier, trendier, living a faster and more glamorous life... is also seen in their homes (Zuma, Interview, 22 Aug 2016).

Viewers of soap operas connect to the characters through parasocial relationships<sup>54</sup>. Viewers recognize themselves in the character's life, or the character may symbolize an ideal life that the spectator aspires to. Characters move viewers from their location to that of the character on screen, allowing them to experience their own lives via the character's perspective.

*Conflicts are created through binary opposition* (man vs. women, good vs. bad, strong vs. weak); the height of every narrative is its binary oppositions; this reveals the relationships that exist between the characters and their settings (Levi-Strauss, 1967; 1972; Lacey, 2000), making this perspective relevant to the examination of female characters within the *Uzalo and Scandal!* representation of KwaMashu, Newtown, and Sowato as settings. Fiske (1990: 116) describes “a binary opposition [as] a system of two related categories that, in its purest form, comprises the universe.” Although they are used as common plot techniques in television and cinema, they rarely depict reality because people's identities are ambiguous, and they can be both good and bad (Nzimande and Dyll, 2024). Buttressing this stand, Hobson (2003:106) argues that “good

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<sup>54</sup> Parasocial relationships are “attachments, defined as viewer relationships with fictional characters interpreted as real people” (Stern et al. 2005: 223).

characters and bad characters seem to be a redundant concept concerning (soap opera) genre. As in real life, people are more complex than merely being good or bad, hero or villain; they are not that simple.” The villains or troublemakers are often the characters that cause disruption of the narrative and extended disequilibrium (Todorov, 1977). Similarly, in my Masters’ study (Onuh, 2017), I found that the portrayal of the matriarchs was more complicated than a straightforward binary model, showing the complexity of the characters in their roles as mothers, wives, businesswomen/church leaders, and de-facto heads of their homes. Although one of the selected case studies is still *Uzalo*, this study aims to explore if the depiction of female characters is still the same or if there are any significant changes.

Oppositions in characters are traceable in their looks, dressings, actions, and so on, which can be used as differences and similarities between the oppositions (Lacey, 2000; Prinsloo, 2009). This relationship between the oppositions shows that “binary opposition are also hierarchies” as one character may be portrayed to have more privilege or dominance over the other (Moon, 1992:3). Grassi (2013) demonstrated that the soap opera genre often portrays a strict gender binary system in which men are attributed the dominant position. Faridah Ibrahim’s (2017) study found that the male dominance versus female submissiveness dichotomy is dominant in soap operas. For instance, some of the binary opposition themes depicted in past studies are (dependent vs. independent, leadership vs. subordinate, strong vs. weak, struggle vs. post-struggle masculinity, good vs. bad, hegemony vs. the sensitive man). It does subscribe to the notion that “opposites” are simply structuring devices and tools to facilitate the presentation of data into categories (Lévi-Strauss, 1978; Fiske, 1990). Both the real world and the soap opera can blur to present complexity.

Although soap operas are defined by generic characteristics, the genre boundaries are not fixed or permanent (Marx, 2007). In a study of European soap operas, Tamar Liebes and Sonia Livingstone (1998) conveyed that there are different types or models of soap opera genres: dynastic, dyadic, and community soap operas. This will be explored in the next section.

### **Soap opera models**

This section discussed the models of soap operas described by Liebes and Livingstone (1998) in their study of *European soap operas*; they conveyed that the soap opera genre comes in different forms, including dynastic soap operas, dyadic soap operas, and community soap operas.

Understanding these different models is important because it will help address one of the study's research questions. That is, it will assist in evaluating how aspects of these models may play out and influence the characterisations of the female characters in the two selected soap operas, how the productions may deliberately subvert aspects of these models, and whether or not these readings by the audiences recognise these models or not – allowing the identification of a shift in soap opera norms.

### *Dynastic soap*

Dynastic soap operas focus on one powerful family headed by patriarchy and traditional issues like power, family values, and gender relations. This model is further described in two forms: the Godfather and the Honourable Patriarch. Godfather dynastic models are stories that focus on mafia chiefs, which are powerful and have all it takes to organise the world around themselves, often through illegal means, and here violence and corruption are heightened. This is common among Greeks and Italians. Power is translated from economic to political and because of their pronounced success, they often escape justice, making them believe they hold the key to success (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998). While Honourable patriarchal families are opposite to the Godfather families as corruption is discouraged and the model laid more “claims to realistic representation” (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998:8). Dynastic soap operas are closely aligned with programming such as *The Godfather* (An American Film) and *Die Schwarzwaldklinik*, (A German drama series) each of which represents a diversity of gender and patriarchy. In the first soap opera, for example, corruption is celebrated while the later patriarch is upright (Liebes, Livingstone 1998:10). In a patriarchal or dynastic soap, the male characters move between the realms of work and home life, enjoying gain in both. One of the dynastic features is seen at one stage of the narrative of the selected soap opera (for example, the Ngeme family in *Scandal!* and Kap and Jezza in *Uzalo*).

### *Community soap*

The community soap contains “several equal, separate, middle and working-class, multigenerational families (including single-parent families) and single characters, mostly not romantically connected, all living within one geographical neighbourhood and belonging to one community” (Liebes and Livingstone 1998:154). The authors further noted that community soap is often associated with public service broadcasting, which is closely linked with the

problematisation of gender to portray messages to its viewers (Liebes and Livingstone 1998:154). The long-running British soap operas are examples of community soap, also known as matriarchal soap, and here, the soap opera is less concerned with the centrality of patriarchy (Geraghty, 1991). The model is aimed at portraying working-class characters in productions such as *Brookside*, *Coronation Street* (British soap), and *7de Laan* within the South African context. *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* both fit into the community soap, as the storylines are built within one community, are premised on “social realism” (Gibson, 2018; Nzimade, 2021; Onuh, 2017), and include characters who could be considered part of the working class. However, they diverge from the broad concept of what Liebes and Livingstone (1998:63) refer to as a “harmonious, all-encompassing neighborhood”. The neighborhoods featured in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* are far from harmonious; both are filled with weaponry, crime, fighting, and people's battles for survival.

#### *Dyadic soap*

The dyadic model is light on social realism and draws more heavily on melodrama. Typically, the reliance of the younger generations is sustained by powerful male figures, also known as patriarchal moguls. In dyadic soap, the mode “redefines family and community and brings about the destruction of each as a stable environment and framework for the story” (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998:64). The relationships that exist in this type of soap are often violent and the action centers on conflict and violence. Hence, the characters have no real sense of belonging. This is because characters constantly seek happiness but are forever mistrustful and uncertain of the future (Liebes, Livingstone 1998:64). While the soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal* are associated mostly with the community model, they also have some characteristics of a dyadic soap because some characters have no belonging, no family and are constantly trying to find happiness through crime.

In conclusion, Liebes and Livingstone's (1998) models provide a way of understanding the South African soap opera and how various soap operas may challenge and conform to the generic codes and conventions of the global soap opera. The two soap operas chosen for this study contain conventions from the three models discussed above, illustrating that South African soap operas tend to straddle across the models and do not neatly fit into just one. However, South African soap operas can be defined as predominantly a community model as they are heavily influenced by realism and tailored to the local landscape. They are, therefore, a suitable form of popular culture

to examine as mirroring the zeitgeist of contemporary South African society.

### **Soap opera as a feminine genre: Restructure and reconstruct**

This section deals with discourses around why soap operas are seen as feminine genres. Through its exploration by many scholars and authors, this section also explores some critiques by feminists; hence, it helps to assist if and how this genre has been restructured or reconstructed from its initial focus of creation.

Soap operas are part and parcel of the lives of many people around the world, with close interaction with female audiences (Aston and Clarke, 1994; Kielwasser and Wolf, 1989; Rogers, 1991; Qasmi, 2020). One reason why women are drawn to watching soap operas is that community soap operas “are likely to problematise gender issues in their conscious attempt to transmit social messages” (Liebes and Livingstone 1998:5). According to Barker (2004:185), women are lively creators of meaning concerning soap opera and they demonstrate a complex understanding of the genre. Soap operas provide pleasure for women who use them as a ‘social glue,’ a topic of conversation within a network of female friends and relatives (Barker, 2004:185). Based on Polly’s (2019:1) statement, The genre appeals to women more than their male counterparts, given instance with their emotional nature:

Men are typically practical, gravitating more towards action, sports, factual programs, thrillers with conclusions, or obvious humour. Women might like these too, but by nature, they are often more empathetic, feeling emotions in a different way than men. Men are much less caught up in the psychological dramas of day-to-day life - which is one of the main elements of soap operas that attract women (Polly, 2019:1).

Similarly, Ang (1985), Geraghty (1991), and Hobson (1982) all assert that soap operas are a women's genre because their themes are intertwined with interpersonal family ties, such as divorce, marriage, romance, family, children, and so forth, which are among the domestic issues that concern women. Themes are better explored throughout the narrative due to the unending nature, which describes soap operas as feminine (Modleski, 1982).

Another aspect that makes soap operas be described as feminine is that characters in soap operas mature and change over extended periods. Because of this, devoted female viewers get deeply involved with the characters, their backstories, and their experiences (Harrington 2016:110).

Furthermore, the author stated that “soap operas portray a world where women and their issues are central to the narrative, erasing boundaries between the public and private domains by converting any environment [of] a hospital lounge or an office into a home setting” (Harrington 2016:111). In this study, new knowledge is added to soap opera scholarship by analysing if there are any changes or continuities in how women are constructed/represented in soap operas. Data to this effect will be gathered by engaging with the producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* and students’ viewers who engage with the female characters as constructed and depicted in *Uzalo and Scandal!* and how they interpret the representations of gender roles in both the private and public domains.

One of the conventions that associate soap operas with feminine narrative is that women are central; the narrative offers stories that its female audiences easily comprehend and resonate with (Geraghty, 2005). In agreement, Barker (2000) and Brunson (2000) stated that soap operas regularly deploy different kinds of independent and strong-minded women characters (matriarchs) and the genre pays attention to complexities of the private world, which is often disregarded by other television genres.

Harrington (2015) explained that the reference to soap operas as a feminine genre is due to their portrayal of ideas in popular culture and they also explore the politics of sex and gender. Soap operas have also emphasised the rise of feminism in that it has “traditional feminine principles as a course of legitimate pleasure within and against patriarchy” (Harrington, 2015:111). Brunson (1995:62) also contributes to the arguments by stating that studies on audiences greatly influence the potential of soap being a feminist genre, which also contributed to “some of the simplicities and blindness of second-wave feminism.” This points to women’s media genre in general (women’s magazines, romances in print media, soap operas, and romantic comedies in film) as a source of women’s oppression due to the depiction definition of traditional gender with highly emotional or sentimental content (Herms, 2008:1). Hence it is important to further expatiate for the views of feminist with regards to a genre that is considered feminine.

The unending nature of soap operas, as mentioned above, their lack of resolve, and the constant disruption can also be associated with feminist thought because they create a forum that enables female voices to be heard (Modleski, 1982; Muriel, 1983:22). Soap operas give voice to women by challenging popular narratives about women's roles in the home, that depict how women's

voices are too silent, which constitutes appropriate behavior for women in public, and the influence of women's relationships with other members of society (Iqbal and Abdar, 2016). As stated earlier, this lack of closure amplifies women's voices and enables the polysemic readings of messages encoded by the encoders.

Nonetheless, feminist theorists and academics with a shared basis in feminist cinema theory became interested in the unrealistic and stereotyped portrayals of women and how soap opera plots reflect and interact with women (Barker, 2000; Brunsdon, 1997; Geraghty, 2005). Within this line of thought, this study seeks to understand the construction and depiction of female characters in contemporary South Africa if/ not still portray the worries or align to the previous discourse of feminism and the contemporary interpretations of such.

The range of characters involved in soap operas is one of the reasons why it is described as a feminine or feminist genre (Strinati, 2000). However, female characters in soap operas are frequently situated around their male counterparts (Modleski, 1979). This is seen as the genre shows males in more dominant positions than their female counterparts, thus maintaining gendered stereotypes (Motsaathebe, 2009: 429). In the same light, Hester Lockyear (2004: 37-38) noted the portrayal of the emotional characteristics of women:

Several of the women are portrayed as emotionally volatile and more expressive, more dependent, and [more] submissive than men. They are generally represented as compliant and allow men to dominate their social lives. The stronger characters who defy this characterisation are usually portrayed as unhappy, manipulative, and bitchy.

With such kind of representation, feminists argue that soap operas are produced within "male-dominated, multi-national media conglomerates and within discursive practices which construct the male as the norm" (Gledhill, 2003: 365). On the other hand, Modleski (1979) explained that soap operas not only address female spectators but also construct feminine subject positions that transcend patriarchal modes of subjectivity. Based on the feminine nature of soap operas, Iqbal and Abdar (2016:15) recommended that:

Soap operas must focus on being the medium that promotes the development and upliftment of women in society. Instead of portraying characters that submit themselves to male dominance, characters that live up for themselves and stand for their rights must be promoted. This will enable the mindsets of various sections of society to change and act as a huge factor in removing gender

bias.

Conversely, Meyers (2015:337) expressed that while the soap opera's feminised form was valued to target a specific audience, it was simultaneously held up as an example of a "bad" cultural object in its formal characteristics. This implies the initial provision of platforms that promote that subordinating and stereotypical portrayal of women. Even though soap operas are predominantly considered female programs, the male audience has grown over the years (Ahmed, 2012; Geraghty, 1991). According to Nzimande (2021:43), the shift in the soap opera genre about targeted audiences was revised to "accommodate other followers." The genre established this by including changes in "storylines, characterisation, and in the presentation of different points of view which involve a shift away from women and give a great prominence to men, adolescents, and children" (Geraghty 1991:168). Nevertheless, Gray and Lotz (2019) noted that the accommodation of various audiences - men and women audiences may perceive and interpret the contents and presentations of soap operas/television differently). This shift in viewership is why this study includes male participants to achieve a holistic perspective of viewers.

Although male characters are assigned significant roles in soap operas considering the shift, men are not the main driving force of the narrative (Hobson, 2003; Modleski, 1983). Geraghty (2006), Czarniawska, Eriksson-Zetterquist, and Renemark (2013) argued that the soap opera genre is valued among viewers because it displays emotional relationships like people's daily lives, presenting to its audience an "illusion of reality" (Qasmi, 2020:77; Stedman, 1971, Wiergacz and Lucas, 2003:71). Could these be some of the predominant factors that influence the creation of the female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* and the point of attraction for the viewers to the soopies? This will be established in the analysis chapter.

### **Soap opera realism**

After the brief discussion on realism above, this section further discusses realism due to the need to align itself to soap operas to examine and reflect how people think about gender roles depictions in the construction and interpretation of female characters as represented in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* This discussion above identified realism as a soap opera convention in certain countries, including South Africa. The discourse of realism is a critical concept generally considered in the production and reception of the soap opera genre (O'Donnell, 1999). Social and emotional realism is a key

component of the genre (Ang, 1985; Gibson, 2018; Longhurst, 1987). Soap operas are referred to as realistic due to their ability to be highly cultural-specific (Castelló, Dobson, and O'Donnell, 2009; O'Donnell, 2007). But what is the degree of social realism depicted in the genre? In this study, one of the important questions is to assess if/how the producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* construct female characters within the gender role discourses predominant in South Africa and how the audience interprets the constructions based on their real-life experiences. Therefore, the consideration of realism is essential because it's a discursive convention through which a sense of reality is constructed (Fiske, 1999), although it could be by different ideologies. This is because "television dramas are ideological and cultural products that project a point of view about our society and our nation through their narrative ideology" (Castelló, 2007:51).

Bignell (2014:97) explained that realism refers to television's representation of recognisable and often contemporary experiences, such as in the representation of characters the audience can engage with, or chains of events relatable to the audience. According to Harrington (2016:110), some of the ways soap operas appeal to the audience is that they portray fictional and nonfictional representations of everyday lives. One of the biggest drawcards of the soap opera is its depiction of a range of characters and how audiences would relate to them, either by recognising characters like themselves or people close to them or by the way characters played out fantasies that did not exist in their everyday lives. Harrington's (2016) views agreed with the statement above by Bignell (2016). This will be explored to investigate how it applies to the study's participants.

According to Brunson (1997:27), realism in soap operas is divided into "external realism" and "internal realism." Referencing the outside world through the discussion of contemporary issues, mode of dressing, settings, and depiction of social problems is known as external realism. This is also known as social realism, which narrates issues that are cultural, community-specific, and within a realistic cultural context (Longhurst, 1987; O'Donnell, 2007). This is associated with community soap operas and the selected soap operas for this study are structured along the community model because they are set within the social realism convention. An instance where a character verifies the audience's experience and knowledge of the personality being portrayed is known as internal realism. These two forms of realism will be considered when presenting findings of the construction and reading of female characters *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Allen (1985: 91) supports this line of inquiry by asserting that "the soap opera text constantly walks the line between one

that can be read as fiction and one that spills over into the experiential world of the viewer.” This will be further explained in the analysis chapter.

With the above authors’ observations on realism, Longhurst (1987: 634), Maria Lamuedra, and Hugh O’Donnell (2012: 63) noted that realism “is one of the most disputed terms used in cultural analysis”. Based on this, it is important to consider the difficulties surrounding the term “realism” (Marx, 2015:61). According to Polly (2019), things and the scenes in soap operas are magnified because they are created for entertainment; they cannot truly be realistic. To address Polly’s observation statement, one can look to Hall (2004), who noted that the realism of televisual texts can be evaluated through six criteria – plausibility, typicality, factuality, emotional involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness. This will be considered in the analysis of chapter (Chapter Six) as it aligns with the concept of representation. Ang (1985) suggests that, while on a denotative level, what happens in a show may appear unrealistic, on the connotative (or emotional) level, it may appear realistic and possible when you consider connections, relationships, associations between actions or characters, and so on. While Elizabeth Ann Worden (2013:29) stated:

Perhaps soap operas are emotionally realistic to viewers in as much as what happens is in sync with what viewers know has happened before. Heavy viewers will probably see the shows as being the most emotionally realistic because they have the most knowledge about the soap operas. So, the more you know, the more realistic soap operas probably seem to be.

The attraction of such a platform by many viewers in a way, shows the extent to which soap operas have depicted society back to the audiences. The exploration of the concept of soap operas as a feminine genre indicates that it still maintains one of its major focuses, which is to attract female viewers. However, the inclusion of different characters attracts other viewers too, implying that the genre can be for all as its storylines contain content on social issues and this is peculiar to all characters and not just female characters. Some of the critics noted above reveal that soap operas, even though considered to be for women, are limited in promoting women's empowerment but male dominance. The depiction of strong and independent women as one of the conventions of community soap operas associated with British soap operas is the model adopted by South African soap operas and this could help in the balanced portrayal of women across different spheres of life neglected by other genres. Hence, within this premise is the need for restructuring and reconstructing the genre to suit the shift. Therefore, it is important within this premise to

investigate how audiences of soap operas from past studies read and interpret the representation of female characters to better understand the perception of gender roles held by the study's participants.

### **Consumption/ decoding/ interpretation of female characters with specific South African focus**

The sections above have shared the constructions and representations of female characters in both global (Ang, 1985; Geraghty, 2005; Hobson, 2003; Lies and Livingstone, 2005) and South African soap operas (Blöse, 2020; Tager, 1997; Van der Merwe, 2013; Milton, 2008). This section reviews past studies on the interpretation/consumption/decoding of these representations only by South African audiences. It is imperative to do so as these studies serve as a benchmark against which the audience readings found in this study will be compared, to identify any shifts.

#### *Predominant characters <> discourses*

In this sub-section, certain South African studies on reception analyses will be reviewed with the main focus of identifying how characters are predominantly read and the associated discourses. These discourses are important as characters embody certain discourses and the audiences in these past studies drew on certain discourses to explain their reading. Discourses refer to socially referenced ways, or discursive frames, of talking, interpreting, and representing. Discourse is “framed by ideology, which orders content into taken-for-granted interpretive regimes. These are common-sense interpretations that naturalize particular kinds of analysis” (Mulwo, Tomaselli, and Francis, 2012:568). This section will continue with the reception study by a South African scholar who was a CCMS alumnus, Michele Tager (1997), *Identification and Interpretation: The Bold and the Beautiful and the Urban Black Viewer in KwaZulu-Natal*. The main focus of the study was to ascertain “the nature of the viewing experiences of urban black viewers of *The Bold and the Beautiful* in KwaZulu-Natal” (Tager, 1997:95). Through ethnographic audience research, Black urban viewers with minimal qualification of matric, ten nurses and ten students) made up the participants for the study. From the interviews conducted with each participant or informant, the author could identify the interpretation respondents hold of the characters depicted in the study. The informants acknowledged that they enjoyed watching the soap opera because it “is a break from everything” (Zola, interview in Tager, 1997). Based on this, Tager's (1997: 101-102) affirmation aligned with Spence's view (1995) that “watching soap operas is experiencing a fantasy which we believe to be true enough to warrant drawing moral conclusions, forming

opinions, and comparing to what we know of the real world.” Furthermore, Tager (199:102) noted that informants relate to the soap opera representations based on their “lived experiences.” Hence, the research informant, Songile, was asked to identify the character she most liked from *The Bold and the Beautiful*. She noted that:

I like Stephanie because she stands for the truth, and she sees things before they happen. She just talks the truth, and she's strong. She doesn't fear, she just says it out when there's something to say. [Sibolelo (student) also identified with Stephanie] I guess she's, um very motherly, you know. She wants to take care of her family and everything (Songile, interview, in Tager 1997).

[I] admire Stephanie because I think she [Stephanie] has a strong character. She's not cruel, but she always tries to get her way. (Songile, interview, in Tager 1997).

However, Sibolelo expressed his dislike for the character Brooke Logan:

She's a marriage-wrecker, I don't like her at all. I mean, she's good at what she does, but she's doing bad things. I mean that she's trying to win her way back into Ridge's life and what she's done to the family and everything – you know? She's someone who's trying to get what she wants, but she doesn't care about the consequences for other people. Although I think Sheila is worse because she hides. You know, Brook doesn't hide from anybody what she's doing – what you see is what you get (Sibolelo, interview, 1997).

Conversely, the same character that one informant disliked is loved by another. This is evident in Mandisa's comment by ascertaining that she likes "Brooke. I don't know, she seems like a strong woman, you know she always gets what she wants" (interview, Tager, 1997). From the participants' responses, it is evident they identified with the matriarch and other female characters as strong women who stand up for themselves and are protective of their families. Some viewers also appear to like a character based on their good looks. However, overall, they disliked those characters that pursue their desires at the expense of someone's happiness. Their expressions of the American female characters coming from the South African context could be inferred from what they could also identify with a black South African woman or matriarch and their understanding of the matriarchal status of Brook and Stephanie. From the comment above, it was evident that some of the informants conveyed their admiration for Brooke Logan, even some of the informants that criticised her indicated to be impressed with the “open manner in which she goes after what she

wants” (Tager, 1997:108). Based on this premise, Tager agreed with Hobson’s (1994) view on why some characters are prominent among views or why many audiences relate to such characters, is because:

Those who [had] to struggle against the vicissitudes of life. If the characters [were] seen as keeping on top of their own lives, that [was] judged as admirable and only in extreme cases [did] the audience excuse lapses in strength from the women in the soap operas (Hobson, 1994:158).

The above quote indicates how and why some of the participants relate to the matriarch and other female characters in the study. In a quantitative study of *Gendered roles, images, and behavioural patterns in the soap opera Generations* by Gilbert Motsaathebe (2009), the author’s focus was on gender stereotypes. Being a reception study, the authors’ main aim is to investigate gender images and roles portrayed in the selected soap opera *Generations* to find out whether “female characters successfully occupy roles that were traditionally regarded as male-only roles, and whether female characters have the same occupational distribution as their male counterparts” (Motsaathebe, 2009:430). Based on the ideology of gender roles, the audience of the study described and interpreted the representation of working women as depicted in *Generations*.

*According to the study, professionalism* involves the behaviour pattern exhibited by individuals generally reflecting the skills and expertise they possess. 70% of respondents indicated that males were portrayed in this way. Regarding *independence*, the majority of respondents (87%) saw men as independent. Meanwhile, women portrayed in *Generations* tend to rely more on others, especially men, for help or support. 75% classified men as most *successful* as compared to their female counterparts. In the study, power was considered to be a place for men, with 63%. Another attribute analysed was *business acumen*; 80% of the respondents rated males as having business acumen, while 13% disagreed with this view and 7% remained neutral. *Intelligence* is also ascribed to men with 71%. When it comes to *adventure*, 73% of respondents found male characters to be more adventurous. With regard to *responsibility*, a close assessment was given to 53% of women and 57% of men. However, regarding *happiness* and *benevolence*, females’ ratings outnumbered those of men, with 73% and 53%, respectively.

From the comment above, participants are of the view that male characters are portrayed to be prominent in the soap as they are associated with more positive attributes. Conversely, the study revealed that female characters in the soap were constructed to have similar attributes to their male counterparts but at lower levels of those positive attributes, while sometimes they are associated with some negative attributes. However, based on 90% of the respondents, acknowledged that male

and female characters in *Generations*, in a way, had the same occupational distribution.

According to Motsaathebe (2009:443), the observation and reading by the respondents indicate a change “from the traditional paradigm, where women are portrayed in traditional roles and men in more dominant positions.” After fourteen years, another reception study was done with the same soap opera *Generations* by Oluwayemisi Mary Onyenankeya, Kevin Onyenankeya and Oluyinka Osunkunle in the study titled: *Contradictions and Tensions Between Old and New: An Audience Perception of Indigenous Culture Representation in Soap Opera*. The participants identified that the image of ‘the classic femme fatale, the wife, and the typical mother, all within the ideology of indigenous culture, is prominent in how female characters were constructed and represented in the soap opera. The study’s participants strongly agreed that *Generations: The Legacy* endorses patriarchy or a male-controlled community. That is, they think that the values and customs portrayed in the soap often seem to highlight a culture in which men dominate, particularly in the home. The findings also indicate that audiences, as portrayed in *Generation: The Legacy*, acknowledged that the female characters are not often cast as disempowered women, sexual partners, or homemakers. Therefore, soap operas attempt to reflect the power dynamics in contemporary South African society. The soap has a history of women portraying powerful roles: CEOs and medical doctors, with female characters like Karabo who defy traditions to hold their own at work and home. Such reading, as noted by the researchers is that it subverts the argument from some past studies that point that depictions of women on television do not stray much from the traditional male-controlled notion of female roles (Mbagwu, 2011; Onyenankeya et al., 2017; Royo-Vela et al., 2008). Hence, this current study will assess if *Uzalo’s* and *Scandal’s* construction and representations of female characters subvert or conform to the traditional male-controlled notion of females.

Maud Blose conducted a (2020:3) reception study - *Exploring gender identities of females from townships in Durban as represented and negotiated through stereotypes by South African soap operas Generations: The Legacy and Isidingo: The Need*. The concern of the study was to look at gender identities and the media culture of black African women through digital storytelling using two of South Africa’s most popular South African soap operas, *Generations: The Legacy* and *Isidingo*.

Through focus groups, the study’s participants from various townships around Durban, KwaZulu-

Natal, discussed how women construct their identities through the television soap opera genre narrative. The study revealed that depiction is limited in the portrayal of realities as most of the characters are purposely selected with flawless body types, which are not the reflection of the society they know. However, those characters would have been more relatable if they also depicted actors holding key roles and who have some flaws that are seen or common in society. The participants identify the continuous existence of stereotypical portrayals in soap operas. They noted that different stereotypes exist in the two soap operas, as female characters are still depicted as passive individuals who cannot be at the top in multiple tasks. From the participants' view, the female character is still associated as a sex object, an area where she can show her most strength without the depiction of her succeeding in other spheres of life. Conversely, their male counterparts are heroes in all spheres of life. The 'damsels in distress' who is to be rescued by a male character is another image in which female characters are portrayed (Blose, 2020:62). There is also the portrayal of the 'female boss' character; this image is depicted with unstable relationship, often they show her not having her own families. Such portrayal, as revealed in Blose's study, feeds into a subtle yet obvious stereotype that a woman has to choose between her career and having a family. It was also identified that "female characters in soap operas generally do not have stable relationships and tend to engage in multiple intimate relationships. Soap operas are also rife with cultural stereotypes (Blose, 2020:62). For instance, some storylines in soap operas portray and sustain the false belief that a black woman is incomplete in the absence of a spouse.

Most extras, or the portrayal of extras, are often played by female characters, as viewers noted. Prominent male performers typically have a female partner who supports their endeavors, even if it means sacrificing her own pleasure and objectives (Zitha Langa for Jack Mabaso, for example). Viewers understand this as a sign of the general dominance of men in life, with women perceived as their allies. The focus on physical beauty, which is defined as being light-skinned, slim-framed, having perfect skin, and wearing wigs or weaves, is another stereotype about women that is perpetuated (Blose, 2020:166). This is why the viewers or participants think that:

Women don't have a choice but to be beautiful because their looks outweigh their brains, while the stereotype is that it's okay for a man to be ugly so long as he has money." (Senamile, interview in Blose, 2020).

In sum, Blose's participants questioned the prominence of men being given leading roles compared

to their female counterparts who are frequently given supporting roles. Including Blose's reception analysis in this literature review shows how participants read and interpret the representations of female characters, different portrayals of women and the existence of stereotypes in the construction of female characters in South African localised soap operas. Hence, this study will compare how/if participants of this current study read and interpret *Uzalo's* and *Scandal's* female characters.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Three, together with Chapter Two, reviewed relevant literature as per the framework of the circuit of culture (Du Gay *et al.*, 1997), more specifically, the intersections in the moments of production (making texts), representation (the texts imaged and what they 'look like' including characters etc.), consumption (audiences use and interpretations), regulation (policy, power, governance e.g. news SABC mandates) and identity (the self, positioning, particularly in terms of gender identity).

Chapter Three discusses soap operas as one of the popular genres in entertainment media, that provides a platform for the investigation of the construction and representation of female characters on how women or female characters are underrepresented and misrepresented in some cases. Character is one of the "most important elements in any soap opera," which also serves as a tool for attracting audiences to the genre (Hobson, 2003:81). Noting that soap operas were primarily created for women and fulfil a social role, as a topic of conversation within a network of female friends and relatives (Barker, 2004:185). Generally, stereotypes of women are prevalent in everyday media and soap operas (Kangas *et al.*, 2015). As the chapter shared the constructions and representations of female characters in both global (Ang, 1985; Geraghty, 2005; Hobson, 2003; Lies and Livingstone, 2005) and South African soap operas (Blose, 2020 Milton, 2015; Pitout, 2007), some stereotype images as identified by different authors show the continuities of such stereotypical portrayals and they are also noticeable in today's soap operas. Stereotypes like mummy, diva, superwoman, dependent, and submission, among others, are some of the prominent representations of women in media. In instances when female characters are depicted as strong and independent, it is often within the private sphere. In the few instances they are depicted in the public sphere, it is still within the patriarchal domain. This attracts the criticisms of feminists as a

genre that is associated with women, often portraying them in a derogating manner, hence the need for restructuring and reconstructing. The chapter concluded with a discussion on past reception studies to gain a better perspective on the interpretation/consumption/decoding of these representations by South African audiences only. It is imperative to do so as these studies serve as a benchmark against which the audience readings found in this study will be compared to identify any shifts. The next chapter is on the theoretical framework this study is grounded in.

## Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework

### Introduction

The theoretical framing for this study is situated within Feminist Media Studies but engages with Feminist Media Theory (Friedan, 1963; Allen, 1972; Haggins, 2018; Ibbi, 2017; Steiner, 2014; MiniÉ, 2007; Mulvey, 1981) which are viewed from the intersectionality perspective (Carastathis, 2014; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and the active audience theory (Hall, 1980) with particular use of the Circuit of Culture model (du Gay *et al*, 1997). The concepts associated with these two theoretical bodies of knowledge informed the research questions for data collection and will provide the analytical framework to interpret the data. The theories share a similar purpose in that they can assist in the understanding of how producers construct female characters and how they are read by the audience, simultaneously being cognisant of the wider socio-cultural context and discourses in meaning-making, both in the encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980) of these television representations. On the other hand, including an intersectional perspective in this study helps facilitate the analysis of intersecting influences of gender, class, and race in the discourses of meaning-making.

### Cultural Studies (CS)

The theories chosen for this study are rooted in Cultural Studies (CS). That is a parasol for relevant theories and practices within humanities and social science that are dedicated to studying the cultural process with a particular interest in popular culture (Pitout, 2007). According to Gilbert Rodman (2017), CS is the collection of interrelated leftist political and intellectual actions. Its main goals are to (a) create in-depth, contextualised analyses of how culture shapes, structures, and preserves power and social relations; and (b) disseminate those analyses in public forums appropriate for the purposes of political intervention, provocation, and pedagogy (Rodman, 2015:39-40).

The cultural studies approach mainly deals with daily activities of life, how they are constructed, and how individuals relate to these activities in their everyday lives (Turner, 1996). Hence, CS is referred to as an “important and contemporary way of engaging in the study of culture” (Longhurst *et al.*, 2015). Stuart Hall (2013:5) noted that “cultural studies has paid a tremendous amount of attention in

one way or another to the centrality of representations and the practice of representation.” From this premise, this study is grounded in CS to understand the construction/representation of female characters in South African local soap operas and how audiences interpret such depictions in relation to their lived experiences. According to Longhurst *et al.*, (2015), CS has three major components which are contained in the project of analysis: (a) production and the political economy of culture, (b) cultural text analysis, (c) audience reception of texts and their efforts. Hence, this study is concerned with components (a and c). That is, while this study does not provide a *political economy* analysis *per se*, it does include the aspects of production and the *production* context in the *cultural text analysis* of the two selected soap operas, as well as their *reception* by audience members selected from the UKZN student body. These overlapping analysis nodes endorse the suitability of du Gay *et al.*, 's (1997) circuit of culture model. The platform for this discussion will be created through the CS. According to Hall (1997a: 6), "a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site in society" is what cultural studies are described as.

One of the functions of CS is to examine how meanings are created and encoded by the producers of texts and how they are interpreted by the active audience (Tomaselli, 1996). Therefore, from a CS perspective, the study's central guiding theories are the active audience, the circuit of culture, and feminist media theory since the research questions lend themselves to a feminist perspective.

### **Feminist media theory**

A review initiated by UNESCO indicated that the United Nations International Decade for Women (1975-85) was a catalyst for debate about the many sites of women's subordination, while the media was identified to play a huge role as the specific source of oppression for women (Ceulemans and Fauconnier, 1979; Gallagher, 1981). Regarding activism and scholarship in the West, Betty Frieden's (1963) critique of mass media representations of women is significant. This noted the role of media in constantly depicting patterns of discrimination against women in society. Feminist media theory relies on feminist theory (Steiner, 2014:359). That is, it applies philosophies, concepts, and logic articulating feminist principles and concepts to media processes such as hiring, production, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms; and reception. Feminist theorising is explicitly political (McDougall, 2012). According to Ferguson (2017:270), feminist theory is a sprawling, diverse intellectual and political

assemblage that grows through imaginative interdisciplinary work and critical intersectional perspectives. Feminist theory aims to interrogate inequalities and inequities along the intersectional lines of ability, class, gender, race, and sexuality, among others. Feminist theory is also described as an extension of feminism (Chodorow, 1991). Feminism is central to feminist media theory (Ibbi, 2017). Feminism primarily originated from the West and aimed at addressing the tradition that restricted women's rights, but it is currently a worldwide movement represented by various institutions committed to movement on behalf of women's rights and interests, which is grounded in the belief of full social, economic, and political equality for women or sexes (Burkett, 2021; Caprino, 2017; Tuana, 1994). The temperance movement gained momentum after Cady Stanton met Susan B. Anthony, an activist, in 1851 (Gordon, 1991). The Woman's Movement's genuine operations in the United States started amid religious revivalism (O'Connor and McGlen, 1998). Social reform organizations, including the Abolition of Slavery, Social Party, and Temperance Movements, gave rise to the women's movement (World Book, 2005).

The women's movement started in the 19th century and ran until the early 20th century. Before this, women were not entirely content with their position in life, the quest for this led to the movements. The women's movement has been divided into three phases: The first wave, the second wave, and the third wave. Since 1848, the pursuit of women's rights has been thriving (Gordon, 1991; Muein, 2014; Stewart and Kowaltzke, 2007).

First-wave feminism saw the representation of the deadly and sexually alluring woman. The first wave of feminism consisted largely of White, middle-class, well-educated women (Campbell, 1989). With this clarified, all the women's groups were commonly focused on pushing suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality. It was by 1920 that the alliance was able to secure passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote (Campbell, 1989). But not until 1928 did all women, not just those who met the requirements for owning property and were over 30, have the right to vote ('women's movement, 2005).

The fact that suffragists challenged gender preconceptions is what made the first wave of feminism so significant. According to Krolokke (2005), their first challenge to a stereotype was that they used public persuasion, which was viewed as exceedingly unwomanly. In the words of Campbell (1989:10), "No true woman could be a public persuader." Secondly, they opposed the religion of domesticity, which at the time held that a real woman's role was to take care of her husband and children at home (Campbell, 1989:5). This argument was based on the idea that women were perceived as having a stronger domestic and maternal tendency than men. The counterargument to

this was that women are equal to males in all aspects, at least legally, and denying them the right to vote would be tantamount to denying them full citizenship (Campbell, 1989:14).

Women's continuous demand for more rights following their suffrage led to the second wave. The women's liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1980s is referred to as "second-wave feminism," and it addresses concerns of equality in all facets of life. The discourse on sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequality, and formal legal inequality was expanded by second-wave feminism (Duggan and Hunter, 1995). According to Wood (1994:106), there are several branches within Second-wave feminism rather than just one; therefore, the question to ask yourself may be which kind of feminist you are rather than if you are a feminist in general. Liberal, radical, environmental, viewpoint, and identity feminism are among them.

In reaction to the second-wave feminists' alleged shortcomings, the third-wave feminist movement emerged in the early 1990s. The first feminist wave lasted more than 150 years, but the second wave only lasted roughly 25 years before the mainstream media in America declared it to be finished. The third wave is buoyed by the confidence of having more opportunities and less sexism (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000:83). According to Krolokke (2005:17), local, national, and international activity in areas including body modification, trafficking, violence against women, self-mutilation, and general media pornography characterise the new feminism. As rhetorical devices, subversion and performance are used to characterize them. In her works *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), renowned feminist Judith Butler discussed emerging movements, including gay and transgender politics. As a theoretical framework of the politics of transgression, this marked the advent of third-wave feminism. This ushered in the performance of third-wave feminism as a theoretical framework for the politics of transgression. The goal of third-wave feminists is to develop feminist theory and engage in politics that honour contradictory experiences.

However, the feminist movement experiences resistance because of the misconceived notion that: feminism will overturn time-honored traditions, “religious beliefs, and established gender roles, and that feels scary and wrong; feminism could bring about negative shifts in relationships, marriage, society, culture, power, and authority dynamics, and business, job, and economic opportunities if and when women are on an equal footing with men” (Caprino, 2017:1). The movement encompasses a range of diverse ideas, all of which originate with the following beliefs: (a) “society is patriarchal, structured by and favouring men; (b) traditional ways of thinking to

support the subordination of women and the neglect or trivialization of issues particularly affecting women; and (c) this patriarchal order should be overthrown and replaced with a system that stresses equality for both sexes” (Tong, 2001:5485). Hence, within this context, this study focuses on intersectional feminism within the feminist media theory.

Feminist media theory focuses on gender issues, specifically regarding the representation of women and its consequent impact (Friedan, 1963; Allen, 1972; Steiner, 2014; MiniÉ, 2007; McDougall, 2012; Mulvey, 1981). It questions and enlarges our epistemologies, ideals, values, and culture and, therefore, lends a gendered inflection of the representation of women in the media and the influence on gender role construction (Govender, Rawjee, and Govender, 2014:2280). The critiques on media representations are positioned around two axes – firstly, analysis of the structures of power in which women are systematically subordinated, and secondly, centered on the politics of representation and the production of knowledge in which women are objects rather than the active subject (Gallagher, 2003; Mulvey, 2006). This study leans toward the two axes to understand representation within localised content, exploring the early feminist media theory.

### *Early feminist media theory*

The development of feminist media studies by Betty Friedan in 1963 was to interrogate popular women’s magazines that were run by men for their single-minded celebration of the feminine mystique. The magazines portrayed women within the private sphere as devoted housewives and mothers who often work towards maintaining their physical attractiveness and trying to attract and retain men (Friedan, 1963). This kind of portrayal of women in magazines has affected young women greatly in American society as millions of women lived their lives in the image of depicted pretty pictures of American suburban housewives, as Friedan noted. The proportion of women attending college was far less than their male counterparts, particularly in 1958. The dropout of women in education kept increasing as they believed “too much education would be a marriage bar” (Friedan, 1963: 16). Subsequently, the dream of young American girls was to get married, have four children, and live in a nice house in a lovely suburb. The suburban housewife was then, arguably, the dream image of young American women and the envy of women worldwide (Friedan, 1963). Strangely, with all the sense of achievement (as a suburban housewife), this still stirs up a “sense of dissatisfaction” among women (Friedan, 1963:15). Friedan thus questioned the implications of such representation on younger women than the larger demography of women.

Although Friedan activated feminist media theory, Donna Allen, a civil liberties and peace activist, is the theorist whose pioneering legacy survives most clearly. In 1972, she founded the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press (WIFP). The manifesto by Allen and her daughter Dana Densmore in 1977 called for inventing a radical and feminist philosophy of communication, one that is gentle and peaceful, respectful of all people, and politically equal. The activists identified (and enacted) three principles for feminist journalism: never attack or use words that judge people, privilege facts over opinion, and let people speak for themselves, something "male journalism" refused to do (Allen and Densmore, 1977:1).

McQuail's (2010: 123, Steiner, 2014:359) more recent summary of the basis of feminist media theory still embodies the earlier principles introduced above:

- Media have marginalised women in the public sphere.
- Media purvey stereotypes of femineity and masculinity.
- Production of the contents of media is gendered.
- The female perspective offers alternative criteria for equality.
- The personal is political.
- Media offer positive and supportive as well as negative role models.

From the above, when taking a closer look at the representation of gender in the media, women have suffered from stereotyped representation globally. According to Ibbi (2017), the media offer positive and supportive as well as negative role models and exposure to such portrayal leads to society risks having its youth copy how the media portrays women. Using Ibbi's standpoint as a parameter, this study will investigate if/how (not only the stereotypes portrayal but the general depiction of women) the representations of the soap operas impact the viewers because the study participants are within the youthful age bracket – 20-35.

Film is another form of popular media in which women are (mis)represented. Laura Mulvey (1975) noted women in films are represented from a heterosexual male perspective and desire. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey (1975/2006) conveyed that there is great pleasure derived from looking. She emphasised that the cinema constructed active aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic as men are constructed as active lookers and

females as passive, also referred to as the object of looking. The male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. Mulvey emphasised that women are constructed and depicted by their appearance (their look, their dress, make-ups, gestures) are coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-atness* hence, displaying them (women) as sexual objects (Mulvey, 2006:346). This kind of portrayal, according to Mulvey, made cinematic apparatus legitimates and perpetuates a patriarchal order in which the object of the look is female and the subject of the look – the active “looker” – is male. Traditionally, the representation has operated on two levels: woman as an erotic object for the characters within the screen story and as an erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium (in this case, the audience) (Mulvey, 2006:347). Mulvey achieved this analysis through psychoanalytic concepts. Therefore, a suitable lens through which to collect and analyse data as I take cognisance of how the participants “gaze” or read the female characters. In this study, women (and not only men) are considered to be the “active looker” (Mulvey, 2006:347).

Within the African context, feminist research in the inaugural issues of Feminist Media Studies is limited (Bosch, 2011; Dosekun, 2015; Opoku-Mensah, 2001). According to Middle East and North African feminist media theorists like Zahra Khosroshahi and Sara Saljoughi (2023:84), the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women as media representatives are inherently “gendered, sexualized, and racialized” as women are often the latter end. This type of portrayal is not only within the media but also in other sections of life. For instance, a study by Umar Farouk Mohammed and Sukanya Das (2022), conducted within a Ghanaian context, described that even in politics, women are underrepresented. The author explained that African women played a critical role in liberation; however, they are often forgotten in the continental and national memories as they are actively erased from history. In instances where they are mentioned in national memory textbooks, little documentation and publicisation about their contribution are stated; they are “framed as people who helped in these struggles with little acknowledgment of their contributions that were central to these freedom movements” (Mohammed, 2022:3). According to Pilane and Iqani (2016), women are often misrepresented particularly the Black women in South Africa. Within the feminist media studies, Pilane noted that Black women are represented in magazines as “valuable only in terms of their proximity to a white ideal” (Pilane and Iqani, 2016:126). Within all these premises of underrepresentation and misrepresentation, Tanja Bosch (2011) noted the importance of African feminist media studies, particularly within the South African context, assists

in developing a range of women's voices from the global South and helps to avoid homogenisation of women's experiences. According to Aida Opoku-Mensah (2001:26), feminist media studies have offered African feminist scholars the opportunity to highlight issues pertinent to the African context within a global forum, for instance, the increasingly diverse nature of women's use of the media in Africa. Feminist media studies have further helped highlight women's use of electronic communication, creating new spaces (e-campaigns, e-solidarity) and communities of women, hence helping promote diverse women's voices (Opoku-Mensah, 2006:27).

In feminist media theory, a long-dominated assumption exists that if women-controlled media production, content would be different and better (Steiner, 2014). This application of "difference feminism" (which rejects patriarchy's devaluation of the feminine to affirm a positive value) predicts that women running broadcasting and film studios would offer more diverse, creative, and "positive" representations of women (Steiner, 2014:362). Steiner (2012) argues that these differences are evident in managerial styles and news-reported content. However, as per the status quo of hegemonic patriarchal society, Romy Frohlich (2004) noted that emphasising women's inherent approachability and expressiveness (which she attributed to childhood socialisation) reinforces gender stereotypes that potentially limit women, confining them to job ghettos<sup>55</sup>. Furthermore, Bhasin's (1994: 4) critique supports Frohlich's view:

We are not just concerned with how women are portrayed in the media or how many women work in the media. We are also concerned about what kinds of lives they lead, what status they have, and what kind of society we have. The answers to these questions will determine our future strategies for communication and networking. Communication alternatives, therefore, need to emerge from our critique of the present world order and our vision of the future.

Ferguson (1990:215) attributed feminists' demands and their demand for better representations of women in the programs' content and a higher-status representation of women inside media organisations to their shared beliefs about "increased visibility as a key to greater access, equity, and power." Implying that those positive depictions and representations of women in media influence women's mental empowerment in reality.

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<sup>55</sup> The job ghetto exists where occupational gender segregation is particularly present and damaging to women's social and economic advancement. Female job ghettos are typically characterized by little economic security, little opportunity for promotion and repetitive menial tasks (Krahn, Lowe, and Hughes 2008).

According to Allen (1972), women can express progress and power if only they are involved in media and remain functioning within the male-owned media. This will help to correct the latter's distorted, misleading content, which often emphasises violence, conflict, and sex. Besides the quest for women's presence on the media platform, Rush (2004) noted that even if women sought nonconventional careers, they would be barred by men. This implied that such resistance faced by women showed that it is a patriarchal society, after all, because, be it in the media, conventional or nonconventional careers, men are still dominant. Among the feminist theory's internal contradictions, however, was the argument that women (potentially all women, although women of color were particularly vulnerable to negative and limited stereotyping) were uniformly harmed by such content. Yet the theory also predicted that women hired and promoted by media organisations would produce more "realistic" and "positive" content. (Steiner, 2014). Even if media can mirror reality and "accurately" reflect women, who defines the ideals? Media texts are made in contexts that articulate the current dimensions of power and ideology, and these are beyond the making of individuals, but such texts remain cultural forms whose meanings are neither real nor unreal but made-constructed (Rakow, 2001; van Zoonen, 1994). To have a good understanding of content (gender roles in female character constructions), creators, a female producer, and a female head writer were among the expert informants interviewed for this study.

Based on Bhasin's (1994) observation, women's construction and representation should not be merely about the historical differences between women and men in the media but, more especially, their realities in society, including their small or significant everyday achievements. This idea aligns with this study's interest in examining if and how constructions of the female characters in the selected soapies are interpreted as being based on the historical or popular depictions of women in media or if they are read as realistic representations of South Africans. This will be ascertained in the analysis chapter.

### *Contemporary feminist media theory*

Feminist media theory interrogates powerful gender norms that are reinforced to a greater or lesser extent in media and the relationship between media representation of gender and inequalities in broader social life (McDougall, 2012). Gender roles, stereotypes, and other interrelated components are considered factors that structure identity and experiences without assuming

permanent or static gender differences (McIntosh and Cuklanz, 2014; Krijnan, 2017; Steiner, 2014; Volčič, 2008).

One of the limitations identified in the early feminist theory was its generalisation of women's oppression, ignoring the differences among women – race, class, gender, and abilities (Gallagher, 2003). However, currently, the emphasis has shifted from the “politics of shared female experience” to the acknowledgment of differences within the group of women to avoid generalization of experiences and construction of “a singular truth about womanhood” (Fenton, 2004:84). This explains the intersection of gender with other dimensions of identity such as race, class, ethnicity, ability, nationhood, and sexual orientation, as well as with the relations of subordination or domination that these categories carry along (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Anthias, 2014; Collins, 2015; Steiner, 2014; Veenstra, 2011). To better understand identity and the politics of difference, one must examine all the interconnected systems that govern or control our lives (hook, 1992).

According to Steiner's observation (2014:361), the central assumption of the early, essentially second-wave, feminist media theory was what could be termed the “three Rs: depictions of women (and girls) result from, reflect, and reproduce dominant ideologies”. This triggered feminists' concerns that portrayals prescribe and perpetuate roles limited by race/ethnicity, gender, and class, which could cause women to internalise a highly constrained sense of their possibilities and options. This will be addressed through the intersectionality feminist approach. Therefore, the feminist lens of intersectionality was adopted as it assists in conceptualising the relation between systems of oppression, which construct multiple identities and social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege, often between race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989) and strive for gender equality (Carastathis, 2014). Hence, feminist media theory focuses on examining the conception around the construction and representation of women and the ideologies they belong to, as they relate specifically to gender (McIntosh and Cuklanz, 2014:266). This will be elaborated below as it investigates how these diversities are/are not included or influence the portrayal of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* At this point, it is important to acknowledge that most of the early feminist media studies originated from the West. However, South African gender relations have been accounted for in my Literature Review chapter (for instance, representation of women generally in the media, emphasising their gender roles and female depiction in soap

operas), indicating that the newer intersectionality theory is useful in the South African context.

### **Intersectionality theory**

Intersectionality theory seeks to explain how women's lives are constructed by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression. This awareness demonstrates that oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems that originate in antiracist feminist critiques of the claim that women's oppression could be captured through an analysis of gender alone (Carastathis, 2014:304). Intersectional feminism is understanding how women's overlapping identities, including race, class, ethnicity, space, religion, and sexual orientation, impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination. That is, it is concerned with how the feminist movement can be more diverse and inclusive (Dastagir, 2017).

Intersectionality is also utilised as an analytical framework that assists in understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities are integrated to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Hence, it identifies multiple factors of advantages and disadvantages (Runyan, 2018). Some of these factors are gender, caste, sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability, weight, and physical appearance (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Anthias, 2014; Collins, 2015; Steiner, 2014; Tucker, 2012; Veenstra, 2011). These intersecting factors and overlapping social identities may be empowering and, in other ways, oppressing (Holley *et al.*, 2016; Zinn and Dill, 1996). The intersecting influences of the theory, such as Runyan's view among major authorities of the theory (Crenshaw, Collins, hooks etc.), are used as a guide to evaluate if/how intersectionality influences the study's participants on how they read and associate meaning to the female characters they view on *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* For instance, being a Zulu participant, knowing all the common traditions and expectations associated with females according to culture in relation to the participant's age and may be other factors - how these two or more factors could/could not influence the participant's interpretation of the depictions of female characters in the selected soap operas. That is, are intersection factors influencing their interpretation? This could further help the study to evaluate if the concept of intersectionality is applicable in any context or some specific context.

The concept of intersectionality was coined in 1989 when Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor at

UCLA and Columbia and a leading thinker on race theory, wrote a seminal paper on the topic. In the first and second waves of feminism, intersectionality broadened the scope of feminism, which largely focused on the experiences of women who were white, middle-class, and cisgender,<sup>56</sup> to including the different experiences of women of color, poor women, immigrant women, and other groups (hooks, 1981). Crenshaw (1989) began with Black women, whose oppression could not be encompassed exclusively with the term “racism” or “sexism” if they were framed as an either/or proposition. Crenshaw’s main aim of intersectionality was to describe how systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories.

According to Crenshaw’s observation, Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often do not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender. These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. As the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated (Crenshaw, 1989:140). The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways (Crenshaw, 1989:139). Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides (Crenshaw, 1989:149). The inability to grasp the importance of Black women's intersectional experiences denies the “unique compoundedness” of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Black women (Crenshaw, 1989:149). This gap in feminist theory led Crenshaw (1989: 139-140) to critique and:

contrast the multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences. Not only will this juxtaposition reveal how Black women are theoretically erased, [but]it will also illustrate how this framework imports its theoretical limitations that undermine efforts to broaden feminism and antiracist analyses.

Crenshaw’s explanation above shows that intersectionality does more than focus on specific

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<sup>56</sup> Cisgender it’s from the Latin word *cis*- meaning “on the same side as”. The term is used in describing individuals who possess from birth and into adulthood the male or female reproductive organs (sex) typical of the social category of man or woman (gender) to which that individual was assigned at birth (Aultman, 2014)

segments of the population that exist at the intersection of social categories. However, the concept of intersectionality “is not exclusively or even primarily preoccupied with categories, identities, and subjectivities; rather, [intersectionality] emphasises political and structural inequalities” (Cho *et al.*, 2013:797). This implies the centrality of intersectionality in accounting for the experiences of women’s diversities. In line, Kubeka and Rama (2022) stated that there is a paradigmatic shift in intersectionality, which tries to move beyond additive approaches to oppression, such as those that may begin with gender and then add another dimension, such as sexual orientation. Instead, intersectionality as it arises, it appears Black feminist thought assumes that one overarching structure of dominance and that appropriate attempts to analyse it need to assess how different positionings intersect in relation to power, resulting in unique configurations that are contextually specific [in character construction and reading] (Collins, 1993). As this study is aware that it is not tenable to make real-world claims on the intersections of oppression and political and/or structural inequalities on the basis of fictional characters *per se*, intersectionality theory will be mobilised to identify the possible awareness of these intersections in how the producers choose to represent certain characters, and most importantly how the audience participants read these characters.

Crenshaw’s conceptualisation of intersectionality was grounded in the long tradition of Black feminist scholars, such as the Combahee River Collective (1977/2017), Patricia Hill Collins (1986), Angela Davis (1981), and bell hooks (1981). These authors criticised the marginalisation of Black women’s issues in the feminist movement, which historically focused on issues of white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied women. They emphasised the need to recognise and analyse race, gender, and other means of social categorisation as “major systems of oppression” that shape the experiences of Black women in “interlocking” ways (hooks, 1981:205). Some of the key tenets of intersectional feminism informed by Black feminist thought are (a) the importance of social categories, (b) concretisation of social categories in context, and (c) analysing the purposes and effects of the four domains of power (Chai, 2021:27). The domains of power framework describe the operation of power and the different ways it can influence social realities in four intersecting domains which are the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal (Collins, 2000). Furthermore, Collins (2000:276) asserted that:

[e]ach domain serves a particular purpose. The structural domain organizes oppression, whereas the disciplinary domain manages it. The hegemonic domain justifies oppression, and the

interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experiences and the individual consciousness that ensues.

In this study, the focus is not to investigate how women are oppressed through their diversities but through the lens of intersectionality to observe how the factors of social categories do or do not influence the construction and interpretation of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Hence, only the importance of social categories will be explained among the key tenets of intersectionality for a better understanding of the perceptive.

### *Importance of social categories*

Social categories or social categorisation is the process through which individuals are classified based on social information or factors such as gender, sexuality, age, class, culture/tradition, geographical location, ethnicity, and race (Chai, 2021; Stolier, Jonathan, and Freeman, 2016). These categories will be elaborated briefly. *Gender* is described as an identity that comprises the attributes and traits we express and is ascribed by our social and cultural affiliations (Harvey, 2020). *Sexuality* describes sexual identity, attraction, and experiences that may or may not align with sex and gender (Zevallos, n.d:1). Another way people are categorised is based on *social class*. It is described as a “dimension of the self that is rooted in objective material resources (income, education, and occupational prestige) and corresponding subjective perceptions of rank vis-a-vis others” (Cote, 2011:5; McGinn and Oh, 2017:84). *Age* is noted to be a frequent and significant category. According to Swift, Abrams, Drury, and Lamont (2018), the concept of age is the process of categorising others/self as belonging to a particular age group. Also, age is described as a framework of social representation of different ages across the lifespan (Roselli and Argentina, 2018). Age perception can affect how we feel and act toward people (Swift *et al.*, 2018). *Culture* is “the collective programming of the mind [with the social habits of a community] which distinguishes the members of one group from another,” which is passed from generation to generation (Hofstede, 1980:21).

According to Şahin (1998), *geographical location* refers to the natural characteristics of the people inhabited. People develop their identity according to their region and climate conditions (Avci, Ibret, and Recepoğlu, 2017). *Ethnicity* is referred to as the social group an individual belongs to, identifies with, or is associated with by others because of a variety of cultural and other variables such as language, diet, religion, lineage, and physically identifiable characteristics that have

historically been linked to race (Bhopal, 2004; Bos, 2015). Collins (2009:23) noted that the rhetoric of color-blindness—or the notion that “talk of race fosters racism” and thus should not attend to differences along the lines of race—functions to perpetuate social inequalities by making them “invisible”. However, that which is not visible to our consciousness is difficult or impossible to address, let alone dismantle (Chai, 2021). Similarly, Lorde (1984/2007:122) cautioned women against ignoring the differences among themselves (e.g., along the lines of race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, etc.), for “it is not our differences which separate [create divisions among] women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.” In other words, ignoring social categories that define the diverse experiences of individuals who are categorised as “women,” does more harm than good. This is done through ‘othering’ and excluding those who do not fit under the narrow definition of “woman,” which implicitly translates into white, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied women in many contexts (Lorde, 1984/2007:122).

Thus, recognising the existence of social categories and the different lived realities they engender matters. How we make sense of and deal with those differences also matters, particularly regarding the hierarchies and power dynamics that manifest at the intersections of multiple social categories (Chai, 2021). Hence, the analysis chapter will establish if/how social categories influence the construction and interpretation of the representation of female characters in the selected soapies, particularly in the aspect of power or hierarchy placement.

### *Media representations of Black women in terms of social categorisation*

Although the representation of African American women in mainstream media is studied by many Black and Latino scholars (Bobo, 1995; Collins, 2000; 2004; hooks, 1992; Lewis, 2019; Lubiano, 1992; 2004; Manatu, 2003; McPhail, 1996; Moraga and Anzaldua, 1981; Perry, 2003), most mainstream feminist media approaches are limited in the marginalisation of Black women and women of colour that emphasises sexual and economic identity (Gaines 1999: 294-295). This observation is illustrated by prominent soap opera scholars (Brunsdon, 1995; Geraghty, 2005; Hobson, 2003) lack of inclusion of black and Asian women in their work on soap operas and femininity in the 1980s (Geraghty and Weissmann, 2016: 369, Landers, 2018). Therefore, in the instance where Black women are represented, the media images of Black women perpetuate white ideologies (Hudson 1998; Collins 2000, 2004).

According to bell hooks (1992:5), Black female representation in the media determines how blackness and people of colour are seen and how other groups will respond to them based on their relation to these constructed images. In agreement with hooks, Hudson (1998:249) argues that these stereotypes simultaneously reflect and distort both how Black women view themselves (individually and collectively) and how they are viewed by others. Lewis (2019:5) further noted that, by implication, such media portrayal of women, particularly Black women, influences the oppression of women in society. This indicates that such (stereotypes of black women) representations (misrepresentation) of Black women have a more complex impact on black women (identity-related issues, lower self-esteem, mood swings, and depression, among others). According to hooks (1992:1), the interplay of race, gender, and class reinforced a system that the author refers to as the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” and this influences how people, particularly Black women, are represented in media. Therefore, the inclusion of intersectional feminist theory in this study assists in noting the limitations of earlier feminist theories (and even previous scholarship on South African soap opera) by recognising the intersection of social categories and how it creates space for exploring power and privilege in the encoding and decoding of female identities (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981).

Historically, in the South African context, soap opera concentrates on the Black/White female dichotomy in the representation of female characters (Landers, 2018:55). Funeka Thabethe (2008: 78-84) contends that whiteness ideals play a dominant role in the construction and depiction of Black female characters in *Generations*. Motsaathebe’s (2009) study on *Generations* also attests to the valuation of whiteness in the representation of the female character. Motsaathebe stated that some participants felt the characters were stereotypical and unrealistic. They described the show as “too Western” and emphasised it as a misrepresentation of South Africa (Motsaathebe, 2009: 446). *Generation’s* female characters are predominantly Black, which is the case with this study’s selected soap operas. However, the representations of Black women have changed in the South African context. The indigenisation of soap operas has impacted how Black (African) women are portrayed on screen. The encouragement by the 2016 Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) for single language production to promote local content has impacted how Black women are portrayed. This enables soap operas to offer “stories that authenticate the audience world by reflecting that world [characters] to them” (King’ara, 2013:90). This was

supported that the change could be related to the promotion of genuine South African televisual entertainment that strategically responded to incentives to indigenise content (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaseli, 2020). The subordination of one group by another dominant group associated with the black/white dichotomy is averted (Tsri, 2015), as one character will not be portrayed through the lens of another, as Motsaathebe's study participants noted. All female characters in *Uzalo* are Black and the majority in *Scandal* are Black. Although this is not the central focus of this study, however, during the data collection and analysis, attention will be given to see if any issue regarding the White ideal or valuation of Whiteness will come up.

Motlafi (2015) argues that within the South African context, women have not fully embraced the feminist discourse (Motlafi, 2015). However, there is a noticeable change as women are carving out their own spaces, and their efforts are starting to transcend "racial and class lines to build a brighter future for all South African women" (Lenser, 2019: ii). One of the challenges of South African feminism is to rid itself of such racialised stereotypes and practices, where in this context, white women have sometimes been charged with usurping the voice of black women in the name of gendered empowerment (Frenkel, 2008). Another challenge for South African feminism has been to incorporate varying traditions within a woman-centered agenda that respects different ideas of traditions, and these traditions are part of indigenous practice (Frenkel, 2008), as women are still misrepresented and underrepresented within the media and even the political arena. Are these traditions and indigenous practices reflected in the representations of gender roles in *Uzalo* and *Scandal*? Taking cognisance of this, this study assesses how it's been supported in the traditional representation of the female characters. If/if not, audiences decode and identify such traditions and indigenous practices in the representation.

Nerisa Pillay (2008) noted that female characters (in advertising content) are stereotypically represented as sex objects and appear predominantly in the private sphere; female characters are not associated with professional positions, work, or recreational roles in South African media. According to Gallagher (2005:28), women are underrepresented in the public sphere of politics, which is further depicted in the media. Women joining the political arena pose a problem for the media. Gallagher asserts that —as active, powerful women, they defy easy categorisation. This explains why Bligh *et al.*, (2011:29), while doing a study on the role that gender stereotypes play in politics, advised that women politicians may need to be more vigilant than men in monitoring and

proactively counterbalancing how the media depicts them. This implies that the stereotypical portrayal or misrepresentation of women within such underrepresentation is the fear of what women's abilities can achieve, hence marking a clear term for comparison. Hence, from the production and interpretation perspectives, this study assesses if/not female characters in the two soapies fit into or 'defy easy categorisation' both in how they are encoded and decoded and the significance of such representations and readings.

In sum, having reviewed relevant literature, this study acknowledged a gap in the representation of women in local and foreign soap operas about gender roles. However, the concern in this study is on local South African soap operas. While trying to understand why the field of representation is important, this study mobilises the feminist media theory and intersectionality approach to understand how female characters in the two soap operas are constructed and represented. Again, through the intersectionality feminist approach, this study evaluates how the subordination or aspiration of women is rooted and depicted in the soap operas. According to Locke (2004:7), discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure (class, age, race, ethnicity, and gender) and culture. By including intersectionality, this study allows these ideas on the interrelationship between social structure, ideology, and gender role discourses to emerge from the data (see Chapter Six). Understanding how women are constructed in the selected soap operas through the lens of feminist media theory and the role intersectionality plays in such portrayals assists the study in evaluating how participants interpret such portrayals through the active audience model from the perspectives of the moments in the circuit of culture. This is explored in the next section.

### **Active audience theory**

This section explains how the broader cultural studies approach, as discussed earlier, is a valuable perspective for both data collection and analysis, particularly the adoption of active audience theory to the study (Fiske, 1987; Hall, 1995; Livingstone, 2000, 2008, 2013; Morley, 1992, 1980) as they foreground the role of cultural context and lived experience in audience interpretation. In other words, this section provides a tangible theoretical framework that assists in understanding the processes of producing messages in television programmes and how the audience derives meanings from them. Stuart Hall's (1993) well-known encoding/decoding model was a major stimulus for developing active audience theory. Understanding the encoding/decoding communication model (Hall 1993) helps a researcher explore the relationship between what

senders (the producers) encode into texts and how receivers (the audiences) interpret or decode the messages. Senders encode messages in line with their views and ideological standpoint, and audiences decode these messages in line with their understanding (Hall 1993:91). The process of meaning-making by both producers and audiences of television entertainment programmes is pragmatic, particularly because people's involvement with television is goal oriented. The producers and the audience intend to gain something from their television communication relationship (King'ara, 2010:119).

In television production, the concept of 'audience' connotes boundaries and framing (King'ara, 2019:67). As Hartley (1992) suggests, there is no television audience outside the television discourse. However, being an audience is complex as it involves many factors, the most significant of which is the agency of the viewer, which is dependent on given socio-cultural values and parameters of meaning-making (King'ara, 2019). A text may have a preferred reading – the meaning intended by the person producing it, but that meaning can be undermined when decoded by the audience due to its polysemic nature (multiple meanings) (Hall, 1980; Mensilang, 2009:3). This polysemic nature explains how an audience can decode a given message in multiple ways. The first is the “dominant hegemonic position” – here, viewers take the meaning “full and straight” (Hall, 1980:36). This means that the viewer/audience decodes the message in the same terms within which it was encoded by the encoder. Here, the message relates directly to what the audience member sees as ‘normal,’ natural, and “taken for granted.” The second position is the “negotiated” position, which contains a mixture of “adaptive and oppositional” elements. Here, viewers might accept the hegemonic viewpoint at a general level but seek exceptions regarding their own beliefs or behaviour. The message is accepted and understood but modified to fit their own viewpoints, cultural context, and discourses (Hall, 1993:103). So, a viewer of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* might appreciate or even relate to how female characters are portrayed but might not believe or accept all aspects of the portrayal. Their understanding and interpretation of gender roles may also be diverse and range according to the discourses and resources at their disposal, which might be modified from the dominant viewpoint encoded by the encoder.

The third of the positions is what Hall terms the “oppositional position”. Here, the viewer decodes the message in a contrary way, rejecting the intended message encoded by the encoder or sender. The message is “re-totalised” within an alternative frame of reference. Given an instance, Hall

(1980:138) used wages – the author explained the case of the “viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but “reads” every mention of the “national interest” as “class interest.” Audience categorisation plays a role in these decoding positions; this helps to reshape the role of the audience, affording audiences participation that is more active and counteracting linear accounts of media influence, which imagine the process as starting with the media institution and ending at the audience (Livingstone, 2015). Assuming a more visible role, the audience is active in the aspect of reception and meaning making and ‘the circuit of culture’ (Livingstone, 2015:442). In this sense, Napoli (2010) maintains that the audience, as a concept that is evolving<sup>57</sup>. Following the contexts of audiences generating meaning or interpretation, Morley (1980; 1992) described two perspectives - semiotics and sociology. Based on these modes, he argued that the first deals with the two distinctions of constraint that exist within the process of producing meaning. The semiotic perspective lies within the internal structures of a text or reading, which deals with drawing on certain readings and excluding others. The selection of the study’s case studies for the investigation of gender roles among other South African local soap operas was deliberate. The second is the viewer’s cultural background (sociology). Morley’s sociological approach is considered in this study specifically through the analyses of how the viewer’s/participants’ cultural background determines “individual interpretations of the programmes in question” (Morley, 1992:71). In sum, Morley investigated the audiences’ diversities, which could result from different socio-economic backgrounds like class, gender, age, culture among others. This conceptualisation of the active audience thus aligns with intersectionality.

Following the conceptual trajectory of the active audience, Van Dijck (2009) notes that the notion of the user/viewers often rests on the misleading belief in a dichotomy between the passive receptor grounded in the traditional media (an assumption that the television viewer is passive before the television screen), and the active participant. Nevertheless, the passivity of television viewers cannot be generalised, as shown by studies on the activity of television fans (Jenkins, 2013). This will be further explained later in this study in the discussion of the circuit of culture. Hence, the active audience theory is adopted based on the assumption that audiences in interpreting

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<sup>57</sup> With the appearance of new screens, habits of television consumption have not only diversified but also become personalised (Astigarraga-Agirre, Arrizabalaga, and Espilla, 2016). However, this is not the focus of this study and will not be elaborated upon

discourse/text are not passive but actively negotiate the meaning of the text. This study aims to investigate how the study participants read these representations in terms of possible differences between a.) past South African soap operas and b.) societal realities of gender dynamics.

This study acknowledges that diverse interpretations may result from the discourses and resources at the audience's disposal. On the other hand, King'ara (2013:106), buttressed within an African context, investigates the "symbolic spaces for sociocultural interactions between producers and audiences". These enable audiences in their active interpretative state to reflect socially and evaluate who they are because of the sociocultural programmes they view. Since this study investigates both aspects of the producers and the viewers, such interactions may be visible. Hence, this study assumes that the construction of female characters and the storylines, as portrayed in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* provide a means through which audiences can reflect on their lives and society. This further assists in evaluating King'ara's (2013: 106) argument that when audience members and producers of conventional soap operas are preoccupied with a search for moral lessons in the realism depicted in these types of entertainment programmes, a socially responsible television production-viewing culture emerges. While this may not be the primary intention of either *Uzalo* or *Scandal!*, there are arguments that this form of inadvertent entertainment education can often be identified in soap operas, particularly in South Africa (Cardey *et al.*, 2013).

Members of one cultural context who share similar discourses and cultural orientations may similarly decode messages. This explanation is based on Morley's (1992:81) conceptualization that certain messages are read and interpreted from cultural practices embedded in each social structure. This study explores this, as all the participants share some elements of cultural practice since most of them are Zulu and are all students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. While similar readings and decoding of the texts took place within the homogenous group of participants, differences are also likely to be found in the heterogeneous groups based on individual experiences.

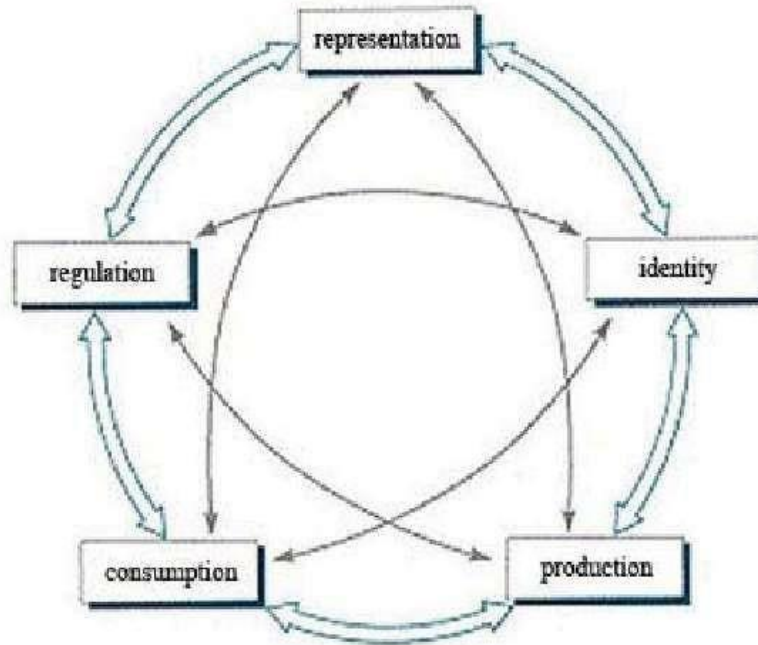
King'ara (2010) explored the content derivation of the audience through the encoding/decoding of television programmes and found that the processes of constructing messages implicate the nature of the audience as conceptualised by the producers. That is, the professional code of television programme production works to structure meanings into programmes to ensure the meaning is found by the audience (Hall, 1973; Moore, 1993). However, the audience can only realise this specific meaning if it virtually occupies the same sphere of meaning-making (signification) as the

producers. This means that for the audience to understand a television programme's content, it must be infused with the cultural capital that enables it to process the meaning embedded in these programmes. There are two ways through which the audience may gain this perspective: Firstly, it may be cultivated by the communicative processes of television to enable it to gain knowledge of how to understand programmes. Secondly, the producers may encode programme content with signs and cultural symbols they know the audience would recognise (King'ara, 2010). The audience can acknowledge these symbols only because they are imbued with resourceful cultural capital (King'ara 2010:123).

### *Circuit of culture*

The circuit of culture was developed by the Open University British cultural studies theorists Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus (1997) when studying the Walkman cassette player. The circuit of culture is arguably an expansion of Hall's (1973) traditional encoding-decoding model of communication, extending the creation of meaning to five moments: regulation [conditions], production [construction], consumption [readings], representation [text], and identity [lived cultures/social relations] that work together to "create a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified and recreated" (Curtin and Gaither, 2007:38).

The circuit of culture can serve as a "theoretical and methodological framework [because it] is based on the articulation of several distinct cultural processes whose interaction can and does lead to variable and contingent outcomes" (du Gay *et al.*, 1997:3). This study adopts the model in these two ways. On a theoretical level, the circuit of culture contributes to interpreting the discourses that relate to 'how and why' meanings are made, and at the methodological level, I will interpret the data generated in the interviews conducted with the expert informants and the focus groups discussion according to the five moments. This enables understanding the social and cultural meanings being generated' (Grey 2004). Below is the figure that illustrates the moments.



**Figure 4.1** - The circuit of culture (du Gay *et al.*, 1997:1)

The circuit of culture (du Gay *et al.*, 1997) is a modified version of the earlier model by Richard Johnson (1986). It streamlines Johnson’s (1986) original structure by removing the public/private and abstract/concrete dichotomies, incorporating conditions within the circuit as regulation, and emphasising the interconnections that link each of the five elements to the others. A significant aspect of the Circuit of Culture is that all the cultural processes are equally important and connected. The unity of these processes can be considered a commitment toward the meaning-making of a cultural text. According to du Gay *et al.*, (1997), cultural studies aim to say something about meaning. Establishing meaning could involve attempts “to capture a sense of meaningful social processes: How is meaning produced? Which meanings are shared within society, and by which groups? What other counter meanings are circulating? What meanings are contested?” (Champ and Brooks, 2010:574).

Raymond Williams (1976: 86) described the concept of culture as “multi-discursive,” suggesting that it is not only used in different ways within different contexts, [but] rather its other meanings tend to actively co-exist. In general, culture can be understood in two ways, firstly as a “whole way of life” and secondly as “the production and circulation of meaning” (du Gay *et al.*, 1997:13). With regards to the first meaning of culture, Rogoff (2003) and Shweder (2000) defined culture as

systems of beliefs, ideals, behavior, and traditions associated with unique communities. People develop culture through shared activities in specific locations, and culture influences how people engage in practices and construct places (Causadias, 2020). From the second angle, Curtin and Gaither (2007:35) define culture as “the process by which meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, commodified, and endlessly reproduced and renegotiated in society.” This study adopts this multi-perspectival description of culture that regards meaning-making as a continuous, non-linear dialogue.

Du Gay *et al.* (1997:3) argue that to conduct a cultural study or analysis of a cultural text or artifact, it is important to consider specific moments in the circuit of culture. The ‘moments’ on the circuit are points of notation or emphasis within particular cultural processes in the construction of meaning (Leve, 2012: 5). The following section explains the five moments – production, representation, consumption, identity, and regulation (the discussion on regulation will be brief, lesser than the other four moments) in the context of this study.

### Moment of production

In the moment of production, all the essential details involved in encoding media texts and the varying forces of production that may impact the outcome of contents are considered (Devereux, 2013). According to du Gay *et al.* (1997), the moment of production involves several narratives and accounts of the *facts* associated with a cultural text [du Gay *et al.* emphasis my emphasis]. That could imply that cultural production is found in researching the roots and ideas behind the production process and the different discourses surrounding it. The production forces involve the political economy of production, power acquisition, and control and their effects on meaning-making and meaning-circulation (Louw, 2001: 4). This study does not aim to explore the depths of the political economy of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* but will consider production in terms of the contexts in which they are created and their influence on the construction of female characters. This is because the process of production is not limited to the technological aspects alone but also to how meaning is produced culturally and intentionally (du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 4). This is why the process of production is positioned as one of the major determinants in the manner cultural phenomena may be ‘encoded’ with their meanings and uses (du Gay *et al.*, 2013: xiii). Ott and Mack (2014) described encoding as the creation of meaningful messages, while decoding is the

use of codes to decipher the encoded message and thereby formulate meaning from such encounters. Often, meanings are enveloped within cultural practices laced with cultural meanings, so much so that these make sense concerning the issue of representation, consumption, and identity all at once (du Gay *et al.*, 2013).

The production process involved in any cultural practice can also be referred to as the encoding of messages and meanings in ways that the audience can interpret (Bodker, 2016: 417; Kropp, 2015: 13; Manning, 2001: 219). Negus (2002:12) described the process of production as involving artistic creation to marketing to consumption, describing this process in terms of a “decision chain” or a “filter.” In an attempt to understand the process of encoding, du Gay *et al.* (1997, 2013 and Vaidya (2019) noted that it is essential to understand the technical and economic processes and patterns of manufacturing, advertising, organisation, and distribution (the production of culture) and the culture through and within which cultural texts (in this case *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*) are made and given meaning by their producers (in this case the construction of female characters). The ‘cultures of production’ perspective involves exploring the relationship between the company (Sony) and the product (Walkman) (du Gay *et al.*, 1997). In my study, therefore, to study the moment of production, I explore the relationship between Stand Glass House/*Uzalo* and Orche Moving Pictures/*Scandal!* and examine the cultural backdrop and motivation against which female characters were conceived and the relationship between them. In a similar vein to du Gay *et al.* (1997), I approach this study as an attempt at interpreting “the distinctive practices used in the production of the object (Walkman) and the way that such widespread practices are represented in terms of specific values, beliefs, and patterns of working” (du Gay *et al.*, 1997:43).

As noted in Chapter Three, certain contextual, societal and ideological factors could influence the production process (Clarke, DeNora, and Vuoskoski, 2015; Dunn *et al.*, 2011; Oppong, 2013; Schramm, 2006). This explains why du Gay *et al.*, (2013: xxii) noted that producing messages within meaningful cultural practices is deeply rooted in cultural considerations [like contexts and the media] aside from production technicalities and the implications these may have on consumption and identity. Kinga’ra (2010:121) expressed that these dynamics play a role in the manufacturing and structuring of media messages, apparently because, as material and political systems, mass media are designed for work, for accomplishing specific communicative goals on behalf of their owners. Hence, mass media products must be laden with coded messages designed

to accomplish the said purposes. This is one of the reasons why the circuit of culture (du Gay *et al.*, 1997) model is valued in this study, as it assists in the evaluation of if/how the agendas of the broadcasters, eTV and SABC 1 are encoded in the construction and representation of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* with emphasis on gender roles. According to John Corner (1999), the production contexts and methods explored in 'language' construction (audio-visual or linguistic) are just a handful of the distinct inflections that influence the production process. More elaboration on language will be presented in the discussion of representation.

### Moment of representation

Representation is the shape that a cultural text adopts and the meanings encoded in that shape (Curtin and Gaither, 2007). Our conceptions of what something means are solely dependent on how we portray it or how it is represented (du Gay *et al.*, 2013: 7; Hall, 1997b: 4; Leve, 2012: 6). On both the aspect of encoding and decoding of texts and audiences, there is significant focus on discourses associated with representation (Kellner and Durham, 2006: xxxiii). The meaning of representation has been described as ambiguous and polysemic (see above for details - under the brief introduction of active audience theory); even the most "single and basic meanings" can have several applications depending on what is represented and in what context (Pitkin, 1967: 10). This further emphasises the importance of context as noted under Production. Within the context of this study, it is important to understand how gender roles are constructed in the South African context and how such popular perceptions surrounding gender roles impact or are infused in the representation of female characters. Leppert (1988: 3) noted that representation's inherent selectivity adds to its ambiguity in terms of broad description and definition. For encoded messages to be meaningful, they must be associated with certain social and cultural practices, dominant or passive, that aid meaning and sense-making, which du Gay *et al.* (2013: 11, 34) regarded as signifying practices. The signifying practices are concerned with the practice and processes of constructing meaning through the use of signs and language (du Gay *et al.*, 1997). Such practices and associations make a cultural phenomenon's portrayal significant and relevant.

Language is a cultural representation because it is "the use of a set of signs or a signifying system to represent things and exchange meaning about them" (du Gay *et al.*, 2013: 7). Due to social interactions and the signifying system of representation, we can learn about the world and the people that inhabit it. However, to decode these cultural practices, we must place such objects or

behaviors within an interpretative framework shared by both the encoder and the decoder (du Gay *et al.*, 2013: 12). The essence of this is that people may relate to others with whom they share a common understanding. In other words, Shaw (2010) noted that whatever is contained in media texts or contents, people desire to see those who are like them in those representations. This emphasises the importance of linguistic consideration of language use in representation because one cannot know what a language represents unless one knows the language. For instance, as found in my master's research (Onuh, 2017), isiZulu is the broadcast language for *Uzalo*. The narrative constructed and depicted the two different types of women (one operating in a world of crime and the other in a world of religion) dominating the public sphere within a culture that is known to be highly patriarchal. The difference in the construction and representation of the matriarchs was further noted in their embodiment through dressing (conservative and traditional/ trendy and Western), costume, and *mise en scene* of their home. Hence, through this medium, audiences can have an in-depth understanding of the style and it “helps to create personality and register the change in a personality” (Hobson, 2003:68). Therefore, the choice of wardrobes, home setting, speech/script, action, props, roles amongst others within the Zulu indigenous language helped to establish the differences and oppositions between the two matriarchs. This indicates the importance of visual (image) and verbal (sound) representations; in this study, they are quite relevant to understanding language.

The study's goal is to determine how the moment of representation through language (the inclusion of symbols, words, signs, and images) plays a role in attaining meaningful experiences (Champ and Brooks, 2010: 574; Hall, 1997c: 15) and how these have been encoded and decoded within the localised soap opera genre.

### Moment of consumption

The process of decoding, as described by Hall (1993), is comparable to the moment of consumption, and it is evolving into a private act of “production” (du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 21). Little can be known about television producers unless we also study television viewers (Harrington and Biley. n.d). According to Louw (2001: 3), “all individuals [audiences] play a role in making, re-making and circulating meaning.” The analytic splitting of production from consumption overstates the interpretation control exercised by consumers and understates the power of culture industries to limit what is made available for interpretation (Traube, 1996: xii). The consumption

or decoding process cannot be separated from the production or encoding process, emphasising how these two processes are intertwined and the importance of contextualising message production/encoding and consumption/decoding. Based on this relationship, de Certeau (1984: xiii) referred to consumption as “secondary production.” Likewise, du Gay *et al.*, (1997:86) defined it as “the production of meaning through usage”. Hence, how do the study’s participants view and interpret the constructions they engage in when they watch *Uzalo* and *Scandal*?

Typically, media content is consumed to satisfy a need (du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 86). This process is frequently carried out in accordance with the audience's norms (Kropp, 2015: 13). Norms [social or cultural] influence the required information needed for encoding and decoding messages (Minkler and Cosgel, 2004: 7). These norms, which are reflected in both verbal and visual symbols or other culturally specific codes, serve as vehicles for communication between the encoder and the decoder at various moments of the process (Kropp, 2015: 13). In the context of this study on gender relations within South African society are patriarchy and the cultural expectations associated with gender roles. In Vaidya’s (2019) words, the consumption of cultural texts also has a performative function. For instance, reading a book, attending a concert to enjoy music, or going to the movies are all examples of consumptive performative behaviors where meaning is created by continual use. The term "performance" is used here to refer to the act of consuming popular cultural texts [*Uzalo* and *Scandal!*] as fans, audiences, or consumers.

Fandom is a crucial area in studying the circuit of culture. Fans or audience activities are associated with the practices and processes of consumption. Jenkins (1992) challenged the prevailing notion of popular culture fans as passive ‘dupes’ dependent on mass culture. Studies on fan reception and production highlight the active role of fans/audiences of popular culture as consumers who produce and reshape meanings of cultural texts in ways with which they engage with those objects. Fans are at the core of the meaning-making of popular culture and are active agents in reproducing and reshaping cultural objects (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, Booth 2010, Hills 2002). This supports several scholars’ views that consumers are not passive victims but are rather active individuals who are “working with a range of materials, and, through a range of consumption practices, constructing and making sense of everyday life” (Mackay, 1997:10; Maxwell, 2001; Pàmies, Ryan, and Valverde (2015). Du Gay *et al.* have shown through their study of the Sony Walkman that what is consumed is the physical object. Curtin and Gaither (2007)

claimed that what is usually consumed is the symbol, not the manufactured reality. Han and Zhang (2009) argued that consumers assign meanings to texts based on their use and association with them. This is because consumption is believed to be “an everyday human experience that makes sense to those directly involved in it” (Yamato 2012:202). This idea will be considered in this study’s analysis of the consumption practices of the selected *Uzalo* and *Scandal* audience and how they interpret the construction of female characters based on their lived experiences.

According to Pitout (2001a: 258), different sociocultural contexts may influence the consumption and interpretation of media content. Equally, consumption selections help to resolve the problem of how to convey and recognise popular as well as cultural identities (Minkler and Cosgel, 2004:1). Consequently, soap opera preference, character construction/depiction interpretation, and media of consumption may be connected to the idea that people relate to representation that reinforces and reflects their personalities, attitudes, and emotions (Rentfrow *et al.*, 2011: 1141). The study assumes that such reinforcements and reflections can be apparent in the way these groups of people (UKZN students in this study) see themselves and other people because of cultural, traditional, gender, class, and race (as the case may be) evident in the South African sociocultural context and their consumption of character depictions in South African soap operas. This again reaffirms the idea that visual or verbal texts are polysemic and could have various meanings to different groups (Hall, 1980; Philo, 2008). What they see and hear is influenced and defined by their class, gender, or ethnicity, forming their identity.

### Moment of identity

The moment of Identity is the next examination in the circuit of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* The practices and processes related to consumption are rooted within an individual’s identification with the text, especially in the context of localised soap operas. By identifying with the text, consumers can engage with and be involved in meaningful ways with *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* The process of audience identification with the soap opera characters should be understood within the context of cultural industries - Stained Glass House and Ochre Moving Picture play an important role in constructing cultural identities, and the ways by which audiences engage in various activities [regular viewing, discussing with friends, episodes from the selected soap operas] thereby identifying with *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

The moment of Identity is the process or set of practices involved in establishing (by the marking

of sameness and difference) who ‘I’ am in relation to ‘you,’ and who ‘we’ are in relation to ‘them’” (Grey 2004:27). In that sense, identities are seen as cultural processes involving negotiation in which individuals are active agents capable of negotiating their sense of self or subjectivity (Vaidya, 2019). In Burke and Stets’ (2015: iii) words, all individuals “derive particular identities from [our] roles in society, the groups [we] belong to, and [our] personal characteristics.” These forms of representation are expressed through sets of meanings that define who we are as occupants of unique roles within society, as members of particular groups, or as characteristics that identify us as unique individuals (Burke and Stets, 2015: 1). Examining morals through the text achieves this cultural classification as the portrayal of binary characters, for example, good vs. bad, depictions of crime vs. religion as portrayed in *Uzalo* on the two matriarchs – MaNcgbo and MaNzuza (Onuh, 2017). Behaviour and morals are represented through a distinction between various depictions of female characters. Identity is constantly within a ‘production process’ that is never complete but finds new ways of being reproduced within different modes of ‘representation’ (Hall, 1990: 222). The view held by du Gay *et al.*, is that individuals negotiate their positions by appropriating texts such as *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

Hesmondhalgh (2007:3) made a connection between cultural industries and identities, suggesting that cultural industries “contribute strongly to our sense of who we are and what it means to be a woman or a man, an African or an Arab, a Canadian or a New Yorker, straight or gay.” The cultural text itself is an expression of symbolic meaning rooted in the identification process enabled by the cultural industries. In Newton-Francis and Young's (2015) study of the ‘Hooters Girl’<sup>58</sup> as a cultural text and a cultural industry, they located their analysis within the production of culture perspective to argue that Hooter Girl is an identity that embodies both the physical meaning and form and one that is embedded within the organisational expectation of the Hooter Girl as a commodity. du Gay *et al.* (1997) suggested that not only are production and consumption closely linked, but representation and identities play equal importance in gathering meanings for a cultural text and all these moments are also connected to the moment of regulation (Mora, Noia and Turrini,

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<sup>58</sup> Hooters Girls are all young female wait staff at the Hooter restaurant chain dressed in shorts and form-fitting tops and they mainly serve as the primary brand image of the company (Newton-Francis and Young, 2015). The Hooter Girls can be differentiated from other waiters in their age range and clothing, also, in the girls as they “provide vicarious sexual recreation, to titillate, entice, and arouse male customers’ fantasies” (Avery and Crain, 2007: 30).

2019). Identity expression is not without the process of consumption, which is a performative aspect [as noted earlier].

### Moment of regulation

This moment includes the different types of control implemented through laws, policies, and rules at various levels (Han and Zhang, 2009). These include the attempt to control cultural activity, including formal, informal/local, and legal control of cultural norms and expectations, as well as formal or legal controls of technical infrastructure, regulatory agencies, and institutionalised educational systems (Curtin and Gaither, 2005). Regulations serve to provide a sense of right and wrong and what is appraised as acceptable and unacceptable within the cultural context and then “form the context” in which gender roles are packaged in the construction and representation of female characters in the South African soap operas (Curtin and Gaither, 2007:38). By implication, the moment of regulation are policies that guide the process of production (construction and representation), distribution, and consumption (readings and interpretation) of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

According to Thompson (1997a:1), meaning is generated within the moment: “regulate and organize conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions” by which the female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* should be constructed and depicted. Mora, Noia, and Turrini (2019:1) noted that the moment of regulation provides more clarity to the other moments in the circuit:

the regulation node allows us to highlight something that the scholars of practices know very well: technological devices or any innovation that alters the ordinary organized course of events requires, or derives from, a restructuring of the pole of meanings available in practice and a restructuring of the pole of competencies of practitioners, to adapt or to consolidate the new emerging order.

In other words, the relationship and the interconnectedness among the moments of production, representation, consumption, and identity influence regulation practices (Mora, Noia, and Turrini, 2019). Hence, in this study, the moment of regulation will take three analytical levels: national (the regulatory bodies governing South African media – see Chapter Three), organizational (Stained Glass Production and Ochre Moving Pictures), and individual (the expert informants). This is to investigate if/how the governing bodies' policies and the company's policies control or influence how female characters are constructed and depicted in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Also, if/how the

individual roles of the expert informants, either as a Producer, Executive Producer, or head writer, influence the issues of gender roles and how they are infused in the construction of female characters.

In studying the five processes of the circuit of culture using *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* as a case study, the circuit of culture is used as an analytical tool. My thesis explains how the selected soap operas encode several meanings about the continued or changed constructions of female characters with specific emphasis on gender roles through the articulation of the five moments. This is further illustrated in a diagram in Chapter Six, the analysis chapter. The schematic is titled 'The Matrix of Data Analysis' and shows how the five moments interconnect with the study's theories (feminist media theory-intersectional and active audience theory) to help provide a more holistic interpretation of the data gathered.

## **Conclusion**

This study aims to analyse the representation of female characters in local South African soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* through the lens of feminist media theory with an intersectionality perspective. The theory proposes that increasing women's participation behind the scenes with agency in production and construction may result in more equitable representations. Also, women demonstrate development and influence if they engage in media activity and work for media outlets controlled by men. This will assist in correcting the latter's twisted, deceptive material, which frequently emphasises conflict, violence, and sex. This all supports the long-dominated assumption that the involvement of women in controlling media production and content would be different and better (Steiner, 2014). Considering women's diversity, the intersectionality lens is used to investigate the inclusion of various influencing factors in female character constructions and interpretation. The chapter explains the theoretical framework that allows this study to investigate the processes of producing messages in the selected soap operas and how deliberate representations are interpreted. This is mobilised through the guidance of the active audience theory as grounded by the circuit of culture (du Gay *et al.*, 1997; Halls, 1997; 1980,1992; Livingstone, 2000; Morley, 1992). Through the circuit of culture, the soap operas, as a cultural text, are explored through the five moments of Production (construction), representation (text – soap opera), consumption (readings), identity (lived cultures/social relations), and regulation (conditions) providing a more

holistic perspective within which the processes of meaning-making with television by both the producers and the audiences happen.

Although all the participants are students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, their diversities are noted in age, culture, class, level of education, social positioning, and upbringing, among others. In other words, meanings are not just sent by producers and received passively by consumers; rather, meanings are actively made in consumption through the use to which people put these products in their everyday lives (Du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 5). Despite the diversity (albeit from different social structures such as class, gender, ideology, or associational divisions) of the audience, some elements help to account for the commonality in meanings that different audience members find in television programmes. Firstly, television functions as a social space (Adams, 1992) capable of consolidating people from different strata into a common realm of virtual social interaction. Secondly, individuals from a cultural context with similar cultural orientations and discourses may have a common interpretation of a particular message; this is due to the similar cultural practices that are embedded in each social structure (Morley, 1992; Nzimande and Dyll, 2024). The polysemic nature of a message is another element that plays a huge role in the commonality in meaning or different interpretations attached to a given message (Hall, 1980; Mensilang, 2009). A reason is that a text may have a preferred reading – the meaning intended by the person producing it - but that meaning can be undermined when decoded by the audience. As a result, viewers of programmes tend to evolve different or similar interpretations of such programmes because their content harmonises the disparate status discourses otherwise associated with individual audience members (King'ara, 2010). The next Chapter Five provides details of how the study was approached methodologically.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Research Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter delineates the methodology used in conducting this study. A methodology serves as the “blueprint” of research (Patrick, 2018:126), where research paradigm, approach, design, research instrument, sample strategy, and data analysis all need to be considered (Cresswell, 2012). It, therefore, has implications in determining the findings of the research.

This study focuses on understanding how gender roles are infused in the construction/representation and interpretation of female characters in two selected South African soap operas – *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Hence, it is important to identify and implement a suitable methodological approach for investigating the intention of the producers/encoders and the interpretation of the viewers from their viewpoints and experiences (Snap and Spencer, 2003). This chapter will explain the adoption of the interpretive paradigm within which this study is located. The feminist qualitative approach required empirical data collection in four interviews (with producers) and six focus groups (with a sample of the audience). This study adopts the feminist qualitative approach because it allows the investigation of social and cultural experiences of individuals or human subjects within a natural setting or real-world and is not experimental like in the case of the quantitative approach (Abiolu, 2019; Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan, 2022). According to Olesen (1994: 167), the qualitative method helps in “realizing as fully as possible women’s voices in data gathering and preparing an account that transmits those voices” (Olesen, 1994: 167). This is one of the reasons why the qualitative study is considered feminist since “feminist research is characterized by ‘non-hierarchical relations’ between the researcher and the participants” (Wambui, nd.:2). A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants. As the study seeks a holistic view from both the producers and the audience, it takes on a case study design. I<sup>59</sup> focused on these two groups for the selected soap operas to address the

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<sup>59</sup> In this Chapter the first person is used to refer to the researcher instead of the third person which was used in the previous Chapters. This chapter enables me to describe my personal experiences while undertaking the fieldwork, particularly during the process of data collection. Hyland (2017:192) suggests that the use of ‘I’ in research has a critical meaning and credibility, which establishes the commitment of the writer of a text as “effective argument involves making language choices, including those related to the use of I, based on assessments about our readers and our text”.

broader issue of contemporary South African female representations and readings in soap operas. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The generated themes were further analysed through feminist media theory, active audience theory, and the circuit of culture model, which guided the study. Relevant literature selected from Chapters Two and Three also informs the analysis. Below is a reminder of the study's objectives.

The objectives of the study are to:

- Investigate how female characters are represented in *Uzalo* and *Scandal* in terms of gender roles.
- Explore if there are any differences revealed in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and or b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies.
- To appraise the changes and continuities of how women are represented in South African soap operas.
- Explore the ways in which audiences read these representations in terms of possible differences between a) past South African soap operas and b) societal realities of gender dynamics.
- Investigate ways the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women.

To answer the issues raised in the research objectives, the study focuses on the following imperatives, which are asked from two perspectives but which will help to address the interrelationship of the four nodes of production, representation, consumption, and identity and to a lesser degree regulation (du Gay *et al.*, 1997).

<b>Key Research Questions</b>	
<b>Encoding (Producers/textual analysis)</b>	<b>Decoding (audience interpretation)</b>
<p>In what ways are female characters represented in <i>Uzalo</i> and <i>Scandal</i> in terms of gender roles?</p> <p>What do any differences reveal in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and or b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies?</p>	<p>In what ways do the audience read these representations in terms of the possible differences between a) past South African soap operas and b) societal realities of gender dynamics?</p>
<p>What are the changes and continuities in how women are represented in South African soap operas?</p>	<p>In what ways do the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women?</p>

**Table 5.1:** Key Research Questions

**Interpretive research paradigm**

A paradigm is an approach that can be adopted to visualise a social reality or phenomenon being investigated (Punch, 2014). It is crucial as it guides scientific discoveries through their assumptions and principles (Kuhun, 1970; Park, Konge, and Artino, 2020). It helps a researcher in the following ways: (a) It aids scholars by highlighting critical difficulties confronting every discipline. (b) It enables the development of models and ideas that will help researchers solve these problems. (c) It specifies the criteria for the necessary research tools. (d) It outlines the principles, procedures, and approaches to follow when comparable problems arise (Yong *et al.*, 2021:5858).

I situate and position myself in this study through the adoption of an interpretive paradigm, as it is grounded in the belief that the participants become actively involved in all the phases of the processes (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:7). The paradigm focuses on the belief that reality is constructed through subjective perceptions and interpretations of reality (Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2015: 51).

### *Ontology*

Interpretivism assumes a relativist ontology whereby a single phenomenon may have multiple interpretations rather than a truth that can be determined by a process of measurement (Creswell, 2007). This interpretive perspective guides the study's objective to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of female representation in contemporary South African soap operas instead of trying to generalise the base of understanding for a whole population (Creswell, 2007). The interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding the world as it is from participants' subjective experiences. Therefore, in this study, the way viewers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* read, understand, and interpret gender roles are analysed according to their sociocultural experience. This is possible because the interpretive paradigm allows the understanding of the nature of human experience (Thanh and Thanh, 2015:24) and is founded on the idea that reality is socially constructed (Thanh and Thanh, 2015:25; Willis 2007:583).

The complexity that this study seeks was established via the engagement of “the diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the world through different contexts and cultures” (Hammersley, 2013:26). Hence, it is important as the interpretive approach helped the researcher and social participants to understand the differences that exist between people (Saunders et al., 2012). As the students are involved in the focus group discussion, they all understand that they are all different. Hence, their perceptions and views regarding the phenomenon of discussion may be expressed differently. This implies that there might be more than one interpretation of the data gathered, hence relativism. Therefore, having this notion in mind via the interpretive perspective, I was able to understand that there could be more than one interpretation of the findings derived from the data. The Cultural Studies approach, discussed in the previous chapter, supports this relativist philosophy as it also calls for acknowledging the diversity of experience in meaning-making.

### *Epistemology*

Epistemology is “a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (Crotty, 2003:3). Epistemology is also “concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (Crotty, 2003:8; Maynard, 1994:10). The epistemological assumption of interpretivism is that of social constructionism. Social constructionism may be defined as a perspective that believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985:265). The subjects that social constructionism is interested in are those that have to do with what anthropologists call culture and what sociologists call society (Galbin, 2014).

Hence, the epistemological assumptions which I set out herein form the basis for my thinking about and understanding of the world and its phenomena. Since knowledge, viewed within social constructionism, is seen as personal and subjective (Al-Saadi, 2014) and social reality cannot be captured or portrayed objectively, there are different perceptions and understandings of reality (Bryman, 2008; Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Ormston *et al.*, 2014; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Therefore, one of the ways of knowing adopted by this study is by understanding the phenomenon from the participants' perspective through their lived experiences and understanding, hence having a better understanding of the social world or context.

My epistemological assumptions about social research have arisen from my reflection and readings of previous literature and similar studies within the same context (see Chapters Two and Three). This study explores the interpretation of the audience on the issue of gender roles since its focus is on how a set of participants construct meaning on a specific topic and it is based on the understanding that viewers can construct meaning based on social and cultural factors and influences (Butler 1999). My understanding of the intersectionality perspective, as discussed in the previous theoretical chapter, further helped me to understand participants' readings attached to the female characters they view in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*

### **Qualitative feminist research approach**

A qualitative research approach focuses on people's descriptions of lived experiences in understanding human phenomena and the meaning that societies assign to these phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), which is the representation and reading of female characters within

the context of this study. Feminist qualitative research further centers on marginalised groups of society, such as women, radicalised groups, persons with a disability, and gender nonconforming persons (Olsen, 2005). It also assists in revealing and understanding the experiences of women in contemporary society and suitably attends to their demands by permitting subjective knowledge (Depner, 1981), so contesting the incomplete narratives of the gendered lives of men and women. Feminist qualitative research is also concerned with the question of voice and the text that discusses how to make women's voices heard without manipulation (Olsen, 2005).

Broadly, the adoption of this approach enables the study to understand the lived experiences of UKZN student participants on how they interpret or read the construction of female characters regarding their gender roles (Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey, 2016; Dieronitou, 2014: 7). A feminist qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study because it is humanistic and naturalistic, dealing with human beings as subjects rather than objects of research, through a variety of empirical materials such as personal/human experiences, texts [visual, objects, sounds, writings] observations, human interactions, and historical records, among many others (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

One of the main objectives of a feminist methodology is to produce knowledge for social change (Naples, 2017). Feminist research deals with the work feminists do, which could be either qualitative or quantitative, aiming to challenge hierarchies and inequalities within the social system (Doucet and Mauthner, 2007). However, qualitative approaches/methods align more with feminist values (Doucet and Mauthner, 2007). One of the reasons for pursuing feminist research is that feminists believed methods like the positivist research framework mainly marginalised women's voices and presented men's perspectives. Although this study includes both male and female participants, the objective is to examine how the portrayal of contemporary female characters on soap operas continues the sentiments of female subordination and/or serves as an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies. Accordingly, it necessitates the need to challenge mainstream research approaches and propose new techniques to present women's standpoint in the research (Qasmi, 2020:129). Feminist research began by including women's lived experiences at the center of research and recognizing them as research participants (Hesse-Biber, 2012). As such, female students from UKZN constitute a major part of the participants for the FGD alongside male participants. Considering the aim of the feminist

qualitative approach, this study does not focus on participatory research but on how hierarchies and inequalities within a social system are challenged. Therefore, within this premise, the study aims to explore representations with a view to adding to scholarship the ways in which the representations and readings subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women.

The differences between feminist research and other forms of traditional research begins with the type of questions, methodologies, knowledge, and purpose brought to the research (Wilkinson and Morton, 2007). Based on Hesse-Biber's (2014) and Doucet and Mauthner's (2007) argument, feminist research revolves around gender inquiry and research process, which also tends to be *for* women and not only *of* women. This further explains why this study, as stated above, included male participants even though it is established from a feminist perspective. Renate (1983) also argues that research *for* women aims to consider women's needs, interests, and experiences to improve women's lives, while research *on* women does not take into consideration methods suitable for feminist scholarship, and there is a lack of explanation on the selection of methods, problems, and limitations during the research. Adopting this method helps to determine if the narratives regarding the construction of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* are for women or *for* women.

This study adopts the feminist qualitative approach because it guided how the type of research questions asked during the interview and focus group discussions. As already discussed in the theoretical framework, the study is guided by an intersectionality feminist perspective (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981), which here is not only about gender but also how discourses and behaviours are interrelated with race, class, and sexuality, among others. This study was conscious of these interrelationships by deliberately including questions in the FGD that elicit responses that reflect on how their race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity may affect the reading of gender roles in the construction of female characters as depicted in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* (See Appendix 6) for the research questions.

Considering the importance of context in feminist qualitative research and as noted in the early section of this chapter, social or cultural *context* is an important factor to consider when aiming to achieve accurately presented data (Qasmi, 2020). Hence, this study abides by Yardley's (2000: 219) indicators of good qualitative research, in this case, from a feminist perspective, as shown in

Figure 5.1 below. Regarding rigour, transparency/reflexivity and the impact will be accounted for in Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2020) reflexive thematic analysis to be discussed later in the chapter.

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**Sensitivity to context**

*Theoretical; relevant literature; empirical data; sociocultural setting; participants' perspectives; ethical issues.*

**Commitment and rigour**

*In-depth engagement with topic; methodological competence/skill; thorough data collection; depth/breadth of analysis.*

**Transparency and coherence**

*Clarity and power of description/argument; transparent methods and data presentation; fit between theory and method; reflexivity.*

**Impact and importance**

*Theoretical (enriching understanding); socio-cultural; practical (for community, policy makers, health workers).*

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**Figure 5:1** *Characteristics of good qualitative research* (Yardley, 2000:219)

The five stages in Figure 5.1 are explicitly explained in the process of data collection and analysis which are discussed in the later part of this chapter.

**Case study research design**

The research design is a representation of the investigational strategies used in the study and, as a result, is critical to the study's success or failure (Creswell, 2013: 13).) It is the "glue" that holds all of the elements in a research project together (Akhtar, 2016:68) and a "compass" which offers a framework in the process of data collection and analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The significance of the research design rests in its ability to effectively communicate information about the study's essential aspects, depict the complete research process, and how data was acquired (Harwell, 2011: 148).

This study takes on a case study design. It is an appropriate design because it allows me to "conduct an in-depth exploration of intricate phenomena within a specific context" (Rahid *et al.*, 2019:1).

*Uzalo* and *Scandal!* were investigated as real-time soap operas within their naturally occurring context (South Africa), with an understanding of the influential role of context on meaning-making. A case study is "a systematic investigation into an incident or series of related events with the goal of describing and explaining the phenomena of interest" (Bromley, 1991:302). This study is a systematic investigation to contribute knowledge to the soap opera producers' motivations and intentions concerning the design of female characters and the readings of these characters in a changing South African context, with a specific focus on gender roles.

The characteristic of case studies as building "(holistic) knowledge of how individuals relate and interact with one another in a specific circumstance and how they construct a sense of a phenomenon under investigation" (Maree, 2007:75) is the primary reason that the design can be described as a case study, and not as a reception study. The study does include the reception of the text and can, therefore, arguably be described as a reception study that usually explores "critical theoretical problems regarding the relations among texts, ideology, and social determinations" (Livingstone, 1998: 7) from the audience perspective. The predominant data collection tool for reception studies is focus groups. This study does include this technique. However, it also engages the production perspective by including interviews with the soap opera creatives. The study thus provides a rich qualitative case study that provides a relational and holistic account of meaning-making around the phenomenon of contemporary soap opera representations and how they support or subvert dominant discourses on gender roles. In doing so, it meets the case study criterion of providing an "exploration of multiple perspectives" (Simons 2009:21), where representatives from groups involved in the phenomenon are allowed to air their views concerning the issue rather than just a particular individual. The use of case study design in this study thus enables the investigation of changes or continuities in the development of gender roles within a "bounded system" of setting or context (Creswell, 2007: 73).

Despite the benefits of the dynamic and evolving nature of a case study approach, it is not without some criticisms. A lack of generalisability of findings or results is one, as most often, findings from a case are not always applicable to other similar cases and cannot contribute to scientific development (Starman, 2013). Kobus Maree (2007) and Beverley Hancock (1998), however, oppose Starman's (2013) view, arguing that it contradicts the primary aim of the case study since it does not focus on generalisation but on a specific phenomenon and its peculiarities. Even if the

findings of a qualitative research study cannot be generalised, these inferences can be transferred from one context to the next to draw similarities and differences between different samples and results and provide a foundation for future research. This will help this study to address if there are any changes or continuities in the way female characters are constructed and depicted in South African soap operas.

## **Sampling**

### *Sample population and size*

A research population could be an aggregate or totality of persons, objects, or subjects from which cases may legitimately be sampled (Oliver, 2014). This study's population comprises individuals, each with distinguishing features that make them viable as those to be researched. The totality of the target population in research must possess certain unique criteria related to the research problem (Etika *et al.*, 2015). Samples are then drawn from the greater population (Barreiro and Albandoz, 2001) as a proportion of a population that represents the entire population under investigation (Etika *et al.*, 2015; Oliver, 2014;). Therefore, sampling is the practice of selecting individuals from a larger population to identify the characteristics of the entire population relevant to the research subject under consideration (Gentle *et al.*, 2015; Etika *et al.*, 2015; Oppong, 2013; Singh and Mauku, 2014).

In this study, the general location/population under investigation is South African residents (citizens or non-citizens) within the provinces of Gauteng - Johannesburg and KwaZulu-Natal, specifically Durban. The study's samples are producers from Johannesburg (*Scandal!*) and KwaZulu-Natal, particularly Durban (*Uzalo*). However, because the focus is to investigate students' perceptions, students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal have been selected as the sample for focus group discussion. The specific and identifying characteristics or unique criteria that decoders/audiences/participants must possess adhere to the following inclusion criteria-registered students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, from any of the campuses, viewers of selected soap operas, and ages arranged from 20-35 years are the similar comprehensive features that this research seeks to investigate. All the selected students fit the age and all the other specified criteria. The other groups selected were staff from Stained Glass House and Ochre Moving Picture (further discussed below).

In sum, the research consists of two sets of data collection, and 28 individuals were selected from the smaller group. The first data collection consisted of four, comprising two producers/scriptwriters from each of the production companies of the selected soap operas, referred to as the expert informants. The second set of data collection is the focus group discussions, which were conducted with 24 participants, all of whom were students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

### *Sampling technique*

Both purposive sampling and convenience sampling were adopted based on the need to focus on the characteristics of a population of interest to stimulate the necessary information (McCombes, 2019). The subjective strategy carried out in purposive sampling, which is targeted towards the producers of the selected soap operas, ensures that the sample selected has unique characteristics in relation to the study (Creswell and Plano, 2011; Oliver, 2014). As a result, the purposive sampling technique is based on the selection of information-rich cases depending on the phenomena under investigation (Barratt *et al.*, 2015; Gentle *et al.*, 2015; Patton, 2015). In light of considering this, the purposive sampling technique allows for the selection of cases/individuals with enough knowledge/experience of the phenomenon while considering their availability, willingness to participate, and ability to communicate coherently and insightfully (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). In terms of the involvement of audience participants in this study, convenience sampling was deployed. According to Rahi (2017), convenience sampling refers to the data gathering method from a research population that is easily accessible to the researcher. In this type of sampling, the target group that satisfies certain practical requirements, including being easily accessible, being close by geographically, being available at a specific time, or being ready to participate, is included for the study's purposes (Dörnyei, 2007). These criteria were considered during the process of recruitment.

### Producer (encoder) sample and recruitment process

In this study, an intentional selection of informants was sampled “based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon” (Robinson, 2014: 227) from “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990: 169). In this case, certain groups (the Producers and Head writers) represent the encoders as they are part of the soap opera’s production teams of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Another

group of participants (UKZN students) represent the decoders as viewers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal*.

This study based its selection of participants on respondents with knowledge, experience, and influence on the construction of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* thus known as expert informants (Bless and Higson-Smith, 2004). Interviews with four (4) participants from the production teams were conducted – two expert informants from each soap opera to explore the value of their insights, which lie in their experience with the *Uzalo* and *Scandal* productions. They included the Creative light (Eric Mogale), the Head Writer (Clive Madiya), the Director (Aneera Pata), and the Head Writer/Creative Producer (Grace Mahlaba) of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* respectively.

The *Scandal!* interviewees reside in Johannesburg, and the *Uzalo* interviewees reside in Durban. However, as the interview time was at the end of COVID-19, all four expert interviews were conducted virtually via the online Zoom platform (details are under the interview section). The interviews were done at the convenience of the expert informants. Producer interviews provided this study with the encoders' perspectives and preferred messages of gender roles and stereotypes in their construction of female characters. This helped to address the following research questions of the study: a) how female characters are represented in terms of gender roles and b) how these representations compare to previous representations in terms of a continuation of female subordination, or whether there has been a shift that includes an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies.

In terms of recruitment with regards to the informant experts, prior to this research, communication and cooperation between the Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS) and Stained Glass Production had already been established in 2015 by Dr. Lauren Dyll Prof. Ruth Teer-Tomaselli and Prof Sarah Gibson for the broader research project, “Representing and consuming the local: Exploring the production and reception of *Uzalo*, KwaMashu” (ethics approval number HSS/1110/015CA). As such, in the case of *Uzalo* expert informants, convenience sampling was employed as interviewees were selected “amongst a readily accessible group of people” (Pitout, 2009: 501). All interviews with the expert informants and research activity with the two Stained Glass Production staff members and FGD with *Uzalo*'s audience were permitted via the gatekeeper permission letter provided by the *Uzalo* Creative Director (Pheello Makosholo). Regarding Ochre

Moving Picture, there was no previous relationship; this was the first time CCMS reached out to them to get permission for a study like this. Through Google search, I was able to locate their website and got their contact address. Through that, I sent them an email introducing myself, thoroughly explained my study and the aim of the study and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. After several exchanges of emails with Ochre Moving Picture's operating manager in the person of Liesl Thomson, approval was given to interview two of the staff members and FGD with *Scandal's* audience through the gatekeeper letter. The gatekeeper's permission letter was provided by the CEO (Stan Joseph). The expert informants were recruited via email and the approval of a gatekeeper letter (see Appendix 2) from the production companies – Stained Glass Production and Ochre Moving Picture. Each expert informant was provided with an informed consent form (see Appendix 3) before the interview was conducted.

#### Audience/participants (decoder) sample and recruitment process

In terms of the audience sample, a total of 24 participants were selected for the audience analysis. They consist of students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Durban. Permission to conduct this research using the UKZN students was granted via the gatekeeper permission letter provided by the institution's Registrar (see Appendix 4). This provides relative ease of access to members of the audience who are exposed to the two soap operas. Research has shown that students are among the biggest viewers of soap operas (Babrow, 1989; Hadi and Pujiani, 2019; Mahlatsi, 2018). Though the study focuses on representations of women, the focus groups included both male and female participants from different provinces and even diasporic students. This is possible because UKZN comprises students from all over the country and students from other countries. This assisted in gathering a varied and diverse data from the audiences' perceptions or experiences (Coenen *et al.*, 2012; McCombes, 2019). Considering Grønkjær *et al.*'s (2011) observation, an overly homogenous group will limit the variety of the data. On the other hand, Hennink (2014:39) noted that FG stratification based on gender homogeneity helps to “foster an open, productive discussion, which contributes to better quality data.” Therefore, both homogeneity and heterogeneity were considered in the UKZN group composition.

Based on the focus of this study, as noted earlier, which is aimed at having varied and rich data, both Hennink's view and Grønkjær *et al.*, observations were considered in the FGD composition. Therefore, focus group discussions were constituted as two (2) groups for females, two (2) groups

for males, and the last two (2) groups were mixed - including both women and men. Focus group discussions with students from the UKZN assisted in addressing the last two key research questions: a) In what ways do the audience read these representations in terms of the possible differences between i) past South African soap operas and ii) societal realities of gender dynamics? b) In what ways do the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women?

To further elaborate on the sampling rationale, in terms of viewership, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) reveals that almost an equal number of women and men watch soap operas (Uys, 2018; Pool, 2020). This audience shift is associated with the indigenisation of South African soap opera content (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020). Social realism is noted to play a huge role in audiences' participation, as enables them to resonate with characters, contexts, and situations depicted in soap operas (Castello, 2010:207; Gibson, Dyll and Teer-Tomaselli, 2020:144; Nzimande, 2021:18; Teer-Tomaselli, 2005:568;2011:414). The rationale is to understand audience readings and interpretations and not the audience from a specific ethnic/cultural/religious/social group. The sample can, therefore, include Black, Coloured, Indian, or White individuals and diasporic audience members. The main inclusion criteria are that the participants must be between the ages of 20-35, be regular viewers of the soap operas, and be registered students of UKZN. Though *Uzalo* is primarily in isiZulu, the English subtitles allow a multilingual audience to connect to the storyline. Doing this study as a diasporic Nigerian and a viewer of the two soap operas, I understand the program and could relate to the storyline through the English subtitles.

The rationale is that SABC statistics revealed that the age bracket chosen for this study is the largest age demographic that watches soap operas (Uys, 2018). Beyond South African statistics, research also reveals that many young people and students are avid fans of dramas like soap operas (Hadi and Pujani, 2019; Mahalatsi, 2018; Nzimande and Dyll, 2024; Tager, 2002).

FGD participants were recruited for the study through UKZN's online notices. This was done in the form of an advert providing all the details and criteria for the study. Any interested participant was asked to contact me via phone, email, or SMS/WhatsApp chat (see Appendix 4 UKZN gatekeeper permission letter). Though it was critical to get qualified participants for the study, at

the same time, it was necessary to look “for those that are both qualified and free at the right time” (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, 2013:179). Adopting this format helps people to volunteer because it is less likely that potential participants will be compelled to participate (Padgett, 2008). From this initial recruitment, snowballing was then used to identify and recruit other interested participants.

Snowballing is also known as chain referral sampling and is considered a type of purposive sampling. In this method, participants or informants who have already been contacted use their social networks to suggest the researcher to other persons who may be interested in or contribute to the study (Mack et al., 2005:5). Prior to each of the focus groups, it was explained to participants that participation is voluntary as they fill out informed consent forms, also guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity using of pseudonyms (the study use popular South African male and female names).

#### *Inclusion selection criteria*

Participants are registered students at the university (UKZN)

Viewers of both selected soap operas – *Uzalo* and *Scandal*

The age group of 20 – 35 years

From any of the UKZN’s campus

#### *Exclusion criteria*

Non-students of UKZN

Viewers below the age of 20

Viewers above the age group of 35

#### Sampling rationale for selected soap operas

The primary reason for including *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* is to provide variety in what is encoded (production) and the decoding (interpretation by audiences):

Since this study focuses on gathering empirical and qualitative data on the changes or continuities of female representation and the readings thereof, the soap opera genre is selected as it is a popular form of media entertainment in South Africa (Chronis, 2013; Gibson, Dyll, and Tomaselli, 2020;

Marx, 2008; Mkhwanazi, 2015). Both selected soap operas are on the top list of viewership in the country, with *Uzalo* being the first in SABC and the country at large, while *Scandal!* is at 4<sup>th</sup> position in the country and 1<sup>st</sup> at eTV (Jabulani, 2022).

In terms of encoding, *Uzalo* is set in the KwaMashu township and bases much of its storylines and characters on the Zulu culture. However, to provide varied representations, *Scandal!* is included as it is set in a mix of suburbia (Soweto and New Town). *Scandal!* has been airing since 2008, and *Uzalo* since 2015. *Uzalo* is relatively new in comparison to the more established and long-running *Scandal!*. Including both soap operas provides a broader basis for exploring the change or continuity of the stereotypical representation of contemporary female characters in the two soap operas. During my Master's study, it was discovered that part of the SABC policy, as communicated to the producers of *Uzalo*, is a request to change the representation of women from victims to a more positive portrayal. From an ideological standpoint, the producers of the soap operas (*Uzalo* and *Scandal!*) believed that women are powerful, which is seen in their strength, resilience, and stamina. These attributes are seen in women from different capacities ranging from cleaners to housekeepers (among others) in the way they carry out their duties and take charge of the homes where they work either within traditional or contemporary identities. Hence, it is important to investigate how female characters are represented with regard to their gender roles, therefore necessitating the inclusion of these two of the two soap operas for the study. This is further established in the data collection process.

### **Data collection**

The goal for all data collection is to capture quality evidence that then translates to rich data analysis and allows the building of a convincing and credible answer to questions posed (Kabir, 2016).

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic created the most significant disruption of education systems in human history (Li and Lalani, 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). However, it has paved the way for digital teaching and learning to be prevalent (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was also felt in academic research (ACCORD, 2020; Radecki and Schonfeld, 2020). In line with this shift, this study's data collection was conducted online via

Zoom platform and face-to-face FGD for those who were physically available. The formats were online semi-structured in-depth interviews, online focus group discussions (OFGD), and face-to-face FGD. Compared to other platforms like Skype, Zoom offers the ability to communicate in real-time with geographically dispersed individuals via computer, tablet, or mobile device and also can securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software (Archibald *et al.*, 2019). All the interviews and focus group discussions were done in English.

### *Interviews*

Online individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four-production staff of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* known as the expert informants. They are named as such, as their interviews allowed me to explore their informed viewpoints on reasons for the specific ways in which the female characters are represented, as well as to gain knowledge of their experiences (Blandford, 2013). The in-depth nature of the interview allowed me to “elicit a vivid picture of the participant’s perspective on the research topic” (Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole, 2013: 193). Generally, interviews are classified into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured and the choice of adopting any of the classifications is dependent on the interviewer’s level of control over the interview process and the interviewee or participants (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick, 2008; Harrell and Bradley, 2009). The four interviews were semi-structured as I wanted them to be conversational in style while not straying from the guiding interview questions. The semi-structured interview is valued for its accommodation of a range of research goals and objectives that incorporate open-ended questions that are theoretically driven to elicit the participants’ experiences while not neglecting data guided by existing constructs in that area of study (Galletta, 2013: 45).

The interviews gathered data using the spoken word using a planned series of open-ended questions categorised under the study’s first three key research questions (see the interview schedule/guide as Appendix 6). The semi-structured interview guide or schedule enabled me to address the defined topic while allowing the expert informants to answer on their terms and to discuss issues and topics pertinent to the phenomenon (Choak, 2012), allowing other relevant themes to develop throughout the interview (Blandford, 2013). The questions were structured to move from a rather general viewpoint to more specific issues (Gill *et al.*, 2008). The interview guide was structured in this format: introduction, opening questions, core in-depth questions

(which are all categorised under the research key questions), and Closure (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003). The expert informants were all given informed consent forms to sign, and the Zoom link was sent before the commencement of the interview (see Appendix 5). The Zoom interviews were recorded, and consent for doing so was established with the interviewees.

S/N	DATE CONDUCTED	NAME OF SOAP	POSITION HELD	GENDER	DURATION
1	20 April 2022	<i>Scandal!</i>	Writer	Female	1:07 min.
2	26 April 2022	<i>Uzalo</i>	Head writer	Male	45:59 min
3	28 April 2022	<i>Uzalo</i>	Creative Director	Male	1:05 min
4	18 May 2022	<i>Scandal!</i>	Creative Producer/Head writer	Female	1:43 min

**Table 5.2:** Interview Details

There were two interview guides generated for the study. Although they are all the same questions, each was adjusted based on the soap opera to have smooth conversational questions directly to the specific soap operas during the interview. For instance, when interviewing the producers from *Stained Glass House*, the questions were structured to address/reflect the soap opera - *Uzalo* and when I was conducting the interview with Oche Moving Pictures, *Scandal!* was reflected in the question instead of *Uzalo* (see Appendix 6 for more details) for the interview guide. To achieve a natural conversation and not a rehearsed one, I familiarised myself with the interview schedule. This is important because it helped me embody the appropriate emotion and gestures that urge the participants, in this case, the expert informants, to listen attentively to forestall any unnecessary interruptions (Gill *et al.*, 2008).

### *Focus group discussions*

Focus group discussions (FGDs) elicit information from a group of people to acquire diverse perspectives on a phenomenon of interest (Fusch and Ness, 2015; Gill *et al.*, 2008). An FGD is a flexible, unstructured flow of ideas between members of a group coordinated by a moderator (Brockman *et al.*, 2010). This format of data gathering enables a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of a community's social structure and group dynamics, allowing them to

comprehend how opinion and knowledge are created in a social context (Patton and Cochran, 2002).

For this study, both online FGD and face-to-face FGD were conducted to discuss the topic, aiming to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction (Hayward, Simpson, and Wood, 2004; Mack *et al.*, 2005; Israel *et al.*, 1998; Morgan, 1998). Specifically, synchronous online focus groups<sup>60</sup> were adopted for UKZN students who were not physically available. The rationale for adopting this format is that it is most similar to the live predecessor in that the moderator can easily direct the conversation flow, encouraging participants to build on each other's comments. The FGD was recorded. The participants' consents were required as they were alerted to the recording and were given the option to either accept or decline the recording.

Two groups were conducted via face-to-face FGD and four groups via the online FGD. The group composition consisted of two (2) heterogeneous groups (mixed female and male) and four (4) homogeneous groups (two (2) groups for females and two (2) groups for males). This composition meets the criteria for gathering sufficient data, according to Greg Guest, Emily Namey, and Kevin McKenna (2016), who noted that three focus groups were also enough to identify the most prevalent themes across the data collected. They concluded (from 40 focus groups conducted) that when averaging the sequential and randomised order of focus groups, two to three focus groups are sufficient to capture 80% of themes, including the most prevalent themes, and 3 to 6 groups for 90% of themes in a homogeneous study population using a semi-structured discussion guide (Guest *et al.*, 2016). The findings of these studies are significant, as they demonstrate that saturation is achieved at a relatively small number of focus groups, compared with typical guidance given in methodology textbooks that are not empirically based (Hennink, Kaiser, and Weber, 2019:2). This is an empirical study, hence, six focus groups were adopted. However, saturation was noted in the last FGD.

I decided to use smaller groups of three (3) – six (6) as it “often yield[s] interesting and relevant data, giving more space for all participants to talk and to explore the various themes in detail” (Smithson, 2007:358) Though the group is small, it is “large enough to provide a diversity of

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<sup>60</sup> Available at: <https://www.rev.com/blog/how-to-conduct-online-focus-group-interviews-2> [Accessed on 05/08/2021]

perceptions” (Krueger and Casey, 2000:10).

WhatsApp groups were created for each of the six (6) group discussions conducted; it was used as a medium for communication between me and the participants. It was through the platform that participants agreed on the time and date convenient for them to conduct the discussion and when there was a need to cancel the scheduled meeting, it was passed across through the group chat. Other things like the meeting reminder, zoom link, and informed consent forms were also communicated through that medium.

The table below summarises the focus group stratification and rationale for 4-6 participants and six focus groups.

<b>Focus Group Stratification and Rationale</b>			
FGD 2&4	Gender homogeneity	Female	Aimed for a platform for free expression without possibly being intimidated or dominated by male participants (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013; Qasmi, 2020).
FGD 3& 6	Gender homogeneity	Male	Since the discussion focuses on female characters, there is free expression from male participants without interruption or intimidation from female participants (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013; Qasmi, 2020).
FGD 1 & 5	Gender heterogeneity	Female and Male	To gather a varied and diverse range of data from individual perceptions or experiences (Coenen <i>et al.</i> , 2012; McCombes, 2019) and to observe any possible differences in discussion that may emerge when the two genders converse.

**Table 5.3:** Focus Group Stratification

The discussions lasted between 40-90 minutes. Informed consent forms were sent to participants

to sign prior to the time of discussion (see Appendix 5). During moderation, I invited another individual as assistant moderator [also a viewer of the soap operas but conversant with technology – particularly in the face-to-face FGD] to assist in handling any technical issues before and throughout the focus groups<sup>61</sup>. The assistant moderator also took notes and monitored recordings, acting as both a listener and observer and at the end, the observation notes were compared to further ensure accuracy. The focus groups were also semi-structured and were guided by discussion questions (see Appendix 7).

### **Data transcription and analysis**

Data transcription is the first step in data analysis (Bailey, 2008) as it plays an integral role in research on spoken discourse, distilling and freezing in time the complex events and aspects of interaction (Edwards and Lampert, 2014). It is the process of creating a text-based version of any original audio or video recordings<sup>62</sup> through verbatim writing. Transcription of all Zoom and audio recordings of the face-to-face interviews was done as soon as possible after the interviews and focus groups. This helped to highlight areas that need to be followed up, dropped, or introduced in the remaining group discussions (Lindlof, 1995:210-211). Once the transcriptions were completed, the transcribed data were organised through a thematic analysis process.

#### *Reflexive thematic analysis*

This section outlines the analytical method I used to engage the research data and construct research themes. The method of analysis chosen for this study is the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) framework by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke, 2019; 2006; Clarke, 2021a; 2021c). Thematic analysis (TA) is “a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question” (Braun and Clarke, 2013:175). Thematic analysis is an inductive approach to analysis that involves immersion in data, considered perhaps the most common approach to analysing focus group data (Hennink, 2013) in generating themes that capture a phenomenon which is then explained (Daly, Kellehear, and Gliksman, 1997; Ryan and Bernard, 2000). It affords a researcher the base for identifying, organising, analysing, describing, and reporting themes within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is one of the reasons why the

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<sup>61</sup> Available at: <https://www.vitalstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Guide-to-Conducting-Online-Focus-Groups.pdf> [Accessed on 19/08/2020]

<sup>62</sup> Available at: <https://www.rev.com/blog/resources/what-is-data-transcription-qualitative-data-transcription-meaning> [Accessed on 19/08/2023]

method was chosen for this study. The popularity of their thematic analysis approach motivated Braun and Clarke to continue to develop and modify their analytical method, and one of the more prominent changes made was the modification from ‘thematic analysis’ to ‘reflexive thematic analysis.’ This modification stresses the importance of making conscious choices, remaining aware of how the researcher engages with the data, and acknowledging theoretical assumptions (Braun and Clarke, 2020; Clarke, 2021a). According to the authors:

Themes do not passively emerge from either data or coding; they are not ‘in’ the data, waiting to be identified and retrieved by the researcher. Themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skills, and the data themselves (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594).

Braun and Clarke (2020: 6-7) argue that reflexive thematic analysis is interactive and iterative, which fully embraces qualitative research values:

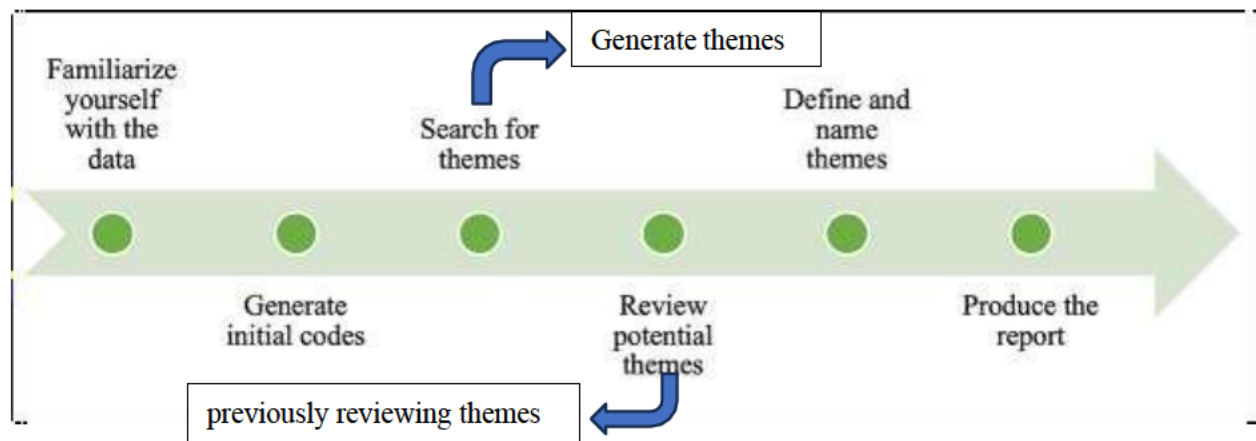
Analysis is more inductive or more theoretical/deductive and is a situated interpretative reflexive process. Coding is open and organic, with no use of any coding framework. Themes should be the final ‘outcome’ of data coding and iterative theme development (Braun and Clarke, 2020:6-7).

Flexibility is one of the strengths of TA, as it provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed yet complex account of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004; Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules, 2017).

Instead of “searching for themes,” as articulated in their 2006 work, Braun and Clarke (2020; 2019) claim that themes are generated. The researcher thus constructs them, and this is a product of interpretive engagement with the data. This view contrasts the idea that themes *emerge* or are *found* within the data (Clarke, 2021a; 2021c; Freeman and Sullivan, 2019) [*my emphasis*]. This method aligns with the interpretive paradigm and allows me to be aware of the active role I play in research analysis as I actively applied meaning to the data set through my engagement with the data and the themes constructed were influenced by my understanding of relevant literature (Chapters Two and Three) and my theoretical assumptions (Chapter Four) (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2019; Clarke, 2021a; 2021b).

There are six data engagement phases, providing clarity and transparency at each stage (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Clarke, 2021c; 2021d; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). They include a) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes; b) systematic data coding; c) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; d) developing and reviewing themes; e) refining, defining, and naming themes; and g) writing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2020: 4).

The old six phases were illustrated below to indicate the phase that was changed or developed in the RTA process for data engagement.



**Figure 5.2:** Six-phase Thematic Analytic Process

Source: Uştuk, (2022) (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012).

The thematic analysis process (as illustrated in Figure 5.2) is discussed in detail on how RTA was carried out in this study in line with Braun and Clarke’s 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis, as indicated in the figure below. The guidance presented in Figure 5.3 below was used to help evaluate if this study followed the correct process for data engagement since the major differences between TA and RTA are in phase three.

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
Analysis	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
Overall	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – ie, described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

**Figure 5.3:** A 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis  
Source: (Braun and Clarke, 2006:21)

### *Phases of analysis*

#### Phase one: familiarise yourself with the data

Due to the pandemic, the use of video calling, recording technology, and other internet platforms and internet-based services to communicate and interact became popular platforms used among most people [individuals, students, institutions, and researchers] (De', Pandey, and Pal, 2020). Therefore, UKZN students and *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* expert informants who were this study's participants had become adept at using video calling and recording platforms. This was extremely helpful considering the first phase of the reflexive thematic analysis. As such, I was able to not only immerse myself in the audio data but also have the visual data from the semi-structured interviews and the FGD add to the overall information available during the analysis process. This assisted in using both visual [video recordings] and practical aspects of the interviews and FGD to familiarise myself with the transcripts. That is, this allowed me to process the visual information alongside auditory information rather than relying solely on the auditory information.

Braun and Clarke (2006:12; 2020:9) claim that “you will develop a far more thorough understanding of your data through having transcribed it.” Therefore, I transcribed the semi-structured interviews and FGD without the use of transcription software, which provided a good

start to getting to know the data. In addition, I double-checked the transcripts alongside the video recordings to ensure accuracy. This relates to No.1 in Braun and Clarke's criteria for good thematic analysis and Nowell *et al.*, (2017) commitment to rigor and trustworthiness in conducting a thematic analysis. It was during this process that I began noting down initial ideas and highlighting quotes from the raw data for each interview and FGD relating to the research questions (Clarke, 2021c; Freeman and Sullivan, 2019). This allowed me to begin to make sense of the data. In addition, Freeman and Sullivan (2019) suggest that this step supports subsequent phases of the analysis and provides a connection to the coding process in phase two.

#### Phase two: Coding the data (previously generating initial codes)

When considering how to engage with phase two of the analysis, I considered Braun and Clarke's suggestion that if coding manually, "you can code your data by writing notes on the texts you are analysing, by using highlighters or coloured pens to indicate potential patterns, or by using 'post-it' notes to identify segments of data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:14; 2020:8)

To have clarity of the process, I also inquired about the experience of colleagues who suggested writing codes on small pieces of paper and spreading them out on a large table or the floor to be able to view them all at once and to have the flexibility to move them around during subsequent phases of analysis. However, I was worried that I could be overwhelmed with the many pieces of paper spread across a large area and I was eager to find a methodical approach to organise and exhibit these codes so that I could feel more in charge and manage the data (Clarke, 2021a). I did the coding manually and used the track changes in Word to emulate what my colleagues and Braun and Clarke had suggested. This serves as a data management tool for organising segments of similar or related text (Crabtree and Miller, 1999).

I was able to build basic codes after becoming acquainted with the data and jotting early ideas and thoughts (Freeman and Sullivan, 2019; Thomas, 2017). I took an active role in the analysis by generating these codes (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). These codes were influenced by the research questions, my interpretivist stance as a researcher, and the literature I explored during this study (Yardley, 2000 Sensitivity to context). This explains how the deductive aspect is adopted in this study and this phase allowed me to further organise the data and apply meaning to the raw data (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2006). An essential element of coding using

the reflexive thematic analysis method is to provide equal attention to each transcript and ensure to generate codes throughout the entire data collection with equal rigour (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2006; Clarke, 2021c; Freeman and Sullivan, 2019). I applied this process to all the data from the interview and FGD. Following Clarke's (2021c:16) statement - "a code captures what is analytically interesting about the data," during the coding process, I was able to highlight elements of the data that stood out and could contribute towards the construction of overall themes during the subsequent phase of the analysis process (this relate to No.2-4 of the criteria for good thematic analysis). At this point, I found myself noting codes that appeared contradictory (e.g., 'stand out' and 'weak character'; some characters that are described as outstanding characters are in some instances referred to by other participants as weak characters and vice versa) which encouraged me to reflect on the research questions (Yardley, 2000 transparency and coherence). I did this to ensure I did not omit or overlook a potential code if one appeared more dominant (Clarke, 2021c). It was important to provide a code for both, regardless of the differing nature, to ensure that the codes accurately reflected the data collected. Braun and Clarke (2006:14) argue that "it is important to retain accounts that depart from the dominant story in the analysis." I chose to do this systematically and present the coding by collating all the codes in a table according to their association with the research questions. This is presented in the next chapter Six.

### Phase three: Generating initial themes (previously searching for themes)

Braun and Clarke are known for publicising the idea that themes do not emerge from data; rather, they are created by the researcher through the process of engaging with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2019; Clarke, 2021d). Therefore, in their later work, they used this modified name for phase three to reflect this concept more accurately. At this stage in the process, I looked at all the codes across all transcripts (interview and FGD) for each research question (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2006; Freeman and Sullivan, 2019). Starting with the codes for the first research question, I was able to merge duplicate codes and collate similar codes. At this stage, the transcripts were no longer separated, and the coding presented an overall view of the research, organised according to the study's research questions (Clarke, 2021c).

I found a variation of ease and difficulty during this stage of the process as some codes presented more obvious connections (e.g., traditional role, polygamy, patriarchy) and some codes took more consideration and thought to unpick and identify patterns. Also, intersecting codes were identified

between the production/expert informants' research questions and participants/consumption research questions. For instance, I looked for aspects of class, gender, socio-economic, and tradition, among others, in how they express similar narratives in terms of the producers' construction of female characters and the interpretation by the audiences. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:15), it is expected to "have a set of codes that do not seem to belong anywhere." These codes took longer to group with others as I re-read the associated sections in the transcripts and moved the codes in and out of other groups to consider the suitability of merging them with an established group or whether creating another group would be more appropriate. (Clarke, 2021c). This relates to No.5-6 of the criteria for good thematic analysis.

#### Phase four: Reviewing and developing themes (previously reviewing themes)

In this phase, the aim is to evaluate and refine themes in case there is a need for i) modifying the description or scope of themes, ii) developing an additional theme, or discarding an unhelpful theme. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:16), "it will become evident that some candidate themes are not really themes...while others might collapse into each other...[o]ther themes might need to be broken down into separate themes".

Braun and Clarke changed the name of this phase to emphasise the evolving nature of theme creation. They acknowledge that, as a researcher processes the information and continues to interpret it in relation to the overall story of the research, it is natural to alter and change themes throughout the analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Clarke, 2021c). Taking note of Braun and Clarke's observation from the quote above, I reviewed my themes by revisiting the transcripts. In my opinion, some preliminary theme names did not appear to capture the codes or contribute to the study tale, in my opinion. Clarke encourages researchers to "be prepared to let things go" (Clarke, 2021c:37). Therefore, I continued to merge or omit codes that either conveyed a similar narrative as I reflected or were irrelevant to the research aims or questions. For instance, omission of similar narratives - *relatable to the audience / resonate with the audience, female power/ dominance*. Subsequently, it was appropriate for some codes to form sub-themes to further arrange the content of some of the central themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Freeman and Sullivan, 2019; Thomas, 2017). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006:16) argue that "... 'accurate representation' depends on your theoretical and analytic approach". Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the construction of these themes was based on the reflection of the interpretive position I took

throughout this research (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021; 2019; Freeman and Sullivan, 2019). This stance relates to No.15 of the criteria for good thematic analysis noted in the table above.

#### Phase five: Refining, defining, and naming themes (previously defining and naming themes)

In this stage, the aim is to review the names of the themes to ensure that they reflect the data appropriately and are related to the research aims and questions. To do this, I gave a brief description of each theme, this helps to explore whether the essence of each theme is captured (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke, 2021c). According to Braun and Clarke (2006:18), theme names should be “concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about.” This process supported my exploration of the story that my research was beginning to tell. Hence, upon reflection (initial themes, research questions, aims, and objectives), I was able to generate theme names that I believe reflect and capture the story being told through this research (Clarke, 2021c; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The generated themes are presented in the next Chapter-Six.

Another critical aspect of this stage is to identify and discuss interesting elements of the data and how they connect to larger studies (Braun and Clarke 2021; 2019; 2006). At this point, I did not just provide a description of what was discussed during the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Freeman and Sullivan, 2019). I was able to do this by constructing the story of my research by making sense of the data and applying meaning by drawing on theoretical assumptions (Chapter Four) and relevant literature (Chapters Two and Three). This is an example of inductive coding, and it relates to Braun and Clark (2006), No.7-9 of the criteria for good thematic analysis; Yardley, 2000, sensitivity to context. This indicates that theory is still important, as Braun and Clarke (2020: 4) explain: “We mean inductive in the sense of analysis ‘grounded in’ the data, rather than ‘pure’ induction because you *cannot* enter a theoretical vacuum when doing TA”.

#### Phase six: Producing the report

The final stage of Braun and Clarke’s (2021b; 2021c; 2019; 2006) reflexive thematic analysis framework refers to the final product and presentation of the research. I began the final phase after I had fully established the themes and was ready for the final analysis and write-up of the report. According to Freeman and Sullivan (2019:180), this “[phase] is where you bring the analysis to life for the reader.” The write-up of a thematic analysis should provide a concise, coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting account of the data within and across themes (Braun and Clarke,

2006). In addressing this, themes generated under the intersection code were analysed in a different section to avoid repetition. At this point, the themes have been constructed and the story being told is discussed in detail in response to the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2021; 2019) emphasise that themes can be continually reworked during the writing process. While in the write-up phase of my research, the themes and theme names continued to develop. In this final stage of Braun and Clark's framework to ensure credibility, direct quotes from the participants were used and analysis and interpretation were done in line with the theoretical framework of feminist media theory (Allen, 1972; Friedan, 1963; Steiner, 2014; MiniÉ, 2007) from the perspective of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981 ), active audience (Fiske 1987; Hall,1995; Livingstone 2000, 2008, 2013; Morley 1992, 1980) and circuit of culture (de Gay *et al.*, 1997) stated in Chapter Four and the literature reviewed in the study (Chapters Two and Three).

In analysing the data, all four (5) moments of the circuit of culture indicated in Chapter Four (production, representation, consumption, identity, and regulation) and their interrelationship were explored and how they are all influenced by the identified theories of the study. In the next chapter, an "analytical matrix" I have schematically presented shows how the moments integrate the themes and the theories, which will be presented and mobilised.

### **Validity and reliability**

A crucial prerequisite in an empirical investigation is the reliability and validity of research findings (Patrick, 2018). Validity is known as the genuineness or authenticity, relevance, and honesty of the data in accurately representing the phenomenon under study (Anderson, 2010; Cypress, 2017). Validity also speaks to the instrument's precision in measuring what it is supposed to measure (LoBiondo-Wood and Habier, 2014), whereas reliability refers to the stability and capacity to recreate the data's output. (Anderson, 2010). It also indicated that the research instrument used is consistent throughout the study period, which indicates that the trustworthiness (LoBiondo-Wood and Habier, 2014). To ensure validity in this study measures were taken to practice a sound research design [as noted earlier] (Cypress, 2017). Data collection (interviews and focus group discussions) was properly recorded and afterward transcribed verbatim, as noted above. Furthermore, to establish the validity of this study, the concept of triangulation was employed. Triangulation is a method of gathering data from multiple sources (Mays and Pope 1995). Hence, this study ensures its validity by including oral testimonies, taped recordings,

transcriptions, observation, and note-taking. Again, some of the findings are linked to existing theories and literature [as noted earlier], which may account for their reliability and validity (Mays and Pope 1995).

Reliability in this study was safeguarded by sending transcripts back to interviewees, enabling the informants to correct, add or remove data they were comfortable sharing (Rowlands, 2021). Also, reliability was observed by maintaining records of the interviews and focus group discussions, meticulously saving all notes and observations for each interview and focus group discussion. The essence of documenting every single process of the analysis where possible enhanced the possibility of achieving and maintaining reliability in this study (Mays and Pope 1995). Furthermore, to ensure that participants' identities were protected, recordings and transcriptions were safeguarded through proper backing up on the cloud (Google Drive), as well as on an external drive, and also there are backups with my supervisor. This also helped in the information safety of all the data gathered which cannot be easily destroyed. Again, validity and reliability can be achieved in cases where sets of data are verified with other sources and the experiences are consistent over time in different social contexts (Sangasubana, 2011: 571). In this instance, the concept of data saturation served as a basis for data validity and reliability. This helped to measure “whether the number of interviews [or focus group discussions] conducted is sufficient” or whether there is a need for more (Mandal, 2018: 446). With regards to the FGD, it was established in the 6<sup>th</sup> FGD conducted.

To ensure the reliability and viability of the study or the research instruments used, at the initial stage of the investigation, the study proposal, interviews, FGD schedules, and other relevant related documents were submitted at various stages. (a) The proposal was submitted to the CCMS colloquium committee and was reviewed by two reviewers. After the queries were addressed, they were sent to the next stage. (b) The Faculty of Humanities proposal committee was reviewed by three reviewers, and their recommendations and suggestions were integrated with reconfiguring the research instruments. (c) the last stage was the University ethical committee, where approval was given before the study commenced fully.

## **Rigour**

Some of the challenges and criticisms associated with qualitative research are how to verify the

rigour, objectivity, validity, credibility, and reliable outcome of the study. Rigor is described as the quality or state of being very exact, careful, or with strict precision or the quality of being thorough and accurate (Brigitte, 2017). The practice rigour in a study is mainly to increase the study’s credibility and confirmability, which involves asking a research participant to verify the transcription of an interview (Leininger, 1994; Morse, 2015). This study’s rigour was observed by following a clear analytical process that is transparent and clear (see the elaboration above on the phases of thematic analysis).

According to Ahmed (2024) in qualitative research, the term trustworthiness is considered more suitable than rigour, validity, and reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) rely on four general criteria in their approach to trustworthiness. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Table 4;3 below briefly explains how these four components were explored to achieve trustworthiness:

<b>Trustworthiness components</b>	<b>Description of components</b>	<b>How it was adopted in the study</b>
Credibility	Credibility is described with the terms “Authentic” and “Accurate” (Amin, <i>et al.</i> , 2020). That is, to the degree to which the findings accurately reflect the realities that the study’s participants experience (Ahmed, 2024)	This was ensured in the study by creating rapport during recruitment, and in a way helped the participants to express themselves freely. As the researcher, it helped me to understand their perspective deeply. According to Ahmed, the inclusion of triangulation helps a study achieve credibility. This study employed multiple data sources or methods (interview and FGDs), as well as the use of theories, and the data were analysed inductively and deductively.
Transferability	Transferability pertains to the degree to which the research findings can be extrapolated to alternative contexts or situations	To maximise transferability, this study provided detailed and thorough descriptions of the study's setting, participants, and methods.

Dependency	<p>(Riazi, Rezvani, and Ghanbar, 2023).</p> <p>This deals with trust in trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Dependency is also known as "reliability", it refers to the research findings' consistency and longevity over time (Ahmed, 2924:2).</p>	<p>These in-depth explanations would enable readers to assess how applicable the results are to comparable circumstances.</p> <p>To ensure reliability, the approaches, techniques for data gathering, and procedures for analysis were rigorously done (Amin, et al., 2020). Also, the study created and maintained an audit trail, which comprises an extensive log recording the decisions taken throughout the research process.</p>
Confirmability	<p>Conformability refers to the impartiality and objectivity of findings, ensuring they are not influenced by researcher biases or preferences (Haq et al.,2023).</p>	<p>To reduce any form of biases, the study's data was interpreted including direct quotes from the study's participants which were further interpreted through the literature reviews and the theoretical framework of the study.</p>

**Table 5:4:** Trustworthiness in this qualitative study (collected by the author)

**Ethical considerations**

The researcher of any study must stand by safe and ethical practices to ensure and avoid violating or abusing the privilege of studying other people's values and belief systems or their life experiences, which makes the protection of human subjects or research participants imperative (Jelsma and Clow, 2005; Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, 2000: 93). When ethical considerations are followed to the letter, it does not only protect the participants but also provides applicable, honest, and trustworthy outcomes (Gill *et al.*, 2008; Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi and Cheraghi, 2014).

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's ethical guidelines were followed in completing this research. I completed and submitted the ethical clearance application form alongside the research proposal, instruments and gatekeeper's letters from Stained Glass Production, Ocher Moving Pictures, and UKZN [see Appendix 2, 3, and 4]. Ethical clearance approval with protocol number HSSREC/00003753/2022 was issued. The purpose of the study and protocols were thoroughly communicated to the expert informants and participants and their informed consents. The expert informants and participants were properly communicated the purpose of the study and the protocols, and their informed consents were provided before the commencement of the interview and the FGD. Participants were all given an informed consent form to read and sign before the interviews and discussions. Finally, they were told that they were free to withdraw their participation at any point during the interview or FGD.

### **Anonymity**

Another ethical consideration in this study is protecting the anonymity of the study's participants. Anonymity is one form of confidentiality that involves keeping participants' identities secret (Saunders, Kitzinger, and Kitzinger, (2015). Data collection was done in such a way as to preclude being able to identify or link specific people with the information they have given. This was taken into consideration, particularly for those participants in FGDS who did not wish for their names to be disclosed in the body of the work. They will be given pseudonyms. This will not apply to the interviews of expert interviews, because participants are selected based on their positions in the companies which are well known. The interviewees (expert informants) have permitted their names to be used in the study.

### **Confidentiality**

This involves protecting the privacy of research subjects, particularly those FGD participants who do not wish their names to be disclosed<sup>63</sup>. The researcher promised not to disclose their identities or link their information to them personally. This was explained in the informed consent form. Hence, it is crucial to obtain an informed consent form for the enrolment of participants in a research project to guarantee the autonomy and confidentiality of the participants and to familiarise

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<sup>63</sup> Available at: <https://www.enago.com/academy/what-are-the-ethical-considerations-in-research-design/> [Accessed on 4/10/2021].

them with the conditions they agreed to (Jelsma and Clow, 2005: 4).

### **Beneficence and non-maleficence**

Beneficent and non-maleficence are concepts mostly considered and clearly stated in bioethics and medical research, as pharmacological experimentation and medical treatments may be hostile and life-threatening (Sobocan, Bertotti, and Strom-Gottfried, 2018). Here, the notion of harm can be related to physical harm, pain, or disability. Beneficence is concerned with a research study that must be performed in a manner that benefits those involved and minimizes any adverse effects<sup>64</sup>. While non-maleficence deals with the process of avoiding accidental or intentional infliction of harm and minimising the risk of harm or discomfort for research subjects (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001). Hence, this study considered this by ensuring that all the necessary information was made clear to the participants during the informed consent processes (Jelsma and Clow, 2005:5). Maintaining privacy, participants were allowed not to disclose beyond what they feel is necessary. The participants were not compelled to respond to any questions they were uncomfortable with, and they had the right to decline their participation at any point they felt threatened or based on personal reasons. Participants will also be informed that they may stop participating in the study at any time without fear of penalty (Barrow, Brannan, and Khandhar, 2021).

### **Limitations of the study**

Limitations of any study are usually 'imposed' restrictions that are mostly outside the researcher's control (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2019:156).

The fundamental challenge faced during this study was in the recruitment process of the FG participants. Due to the COVID-19 policy that was still active in the UKZN's system, lectures were mostly online; hence, the students were not physically present on campus. The University notice system was initially used as the major medium to advertise and recruit interested participants. However, after several months of posting the advert and not even one participant indicated interest, my supervisor and I decided to write to other lecturers in the faculty and other schools/faculties and requested that they put up the study's poster for participant recruitment. That largely yielded a positive result as several participants indicated interest, out of which eleven (11)

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<sup>64</sup> Available at: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/beneficence-nonmaleficence-in-research-ethics.html> [Accessed on

candidates were recruited for the study, seeing that they met all the criteria. The challenge was further overcome using snowballing to recruit the remaining participants needed for the study.

Another challenge I encountered was the issue of electricity load shedding. During the data collection process, load shedding in the country, particularly in Durban, was at level six (6). So, in most cases, when the time and date were fixed, most participants were not able to join the discussion because their areas were having load shedding, which also affected their networks. I overcame this challenge by pleading with the group participants to verify when their areas were free from load shedding. However, getting a time that suited all the participants was a great challenge. Hence, some discussions were held late at night (midnight) because that was the only time that all the participants in the group had electricity. It was a huge sacrifice and I highly appreciate all the participants for allowing the focus group discussion to take part in their resting time.

Absenteeism was another problem I faced in the process of data gathering. Participants usually indicated the date and time that was convenient for them to be part of the discussion; unfortunately, on that date and time, most of them were absent without any prior notice. I overcame this challenge by recruiting more than the required number of participants for the discussion. In cases where the ones present met up with the required number, the discussion continued. If not, it was rescheduled for another date and time, which was agreed upon by the group again through the group chat.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a complete overview of the study's methodology and the rationale for its suitability. It demonstrated the study as located within the interpretive paradigm and explicated the concomitant case study design, qualitative approach, case study design, and empirical data collection techniques of focus groups and interviews. It also discussed how and why each expert interview and focus group was performed and any difficulties or victories encountered. It goes into greater detail about the sample and recruitment processes. In total, four (4) interviews with expert informants and six (6) focus group discussions with a total of twenty-four (24) UKZN students as participants were conducted. This is because the focus of the study is to gain an understanding of students' perceptions regarding the subject investigated. The reliability and validity of the research instruments were clearly discussed, and ethical consideration and approval were duly secured for

the research. The qualitative data was organised by RTA and analysed by the descriptive method of analysis alongside the study's theoretical framework and literature review. This latter component is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

## Chapter Six: Findings and Analysis - Themes Generated from Soap Opera Production and Consumption Process

### Introduction

This qualitative study is an exploration of *changes* and *continuities* in the representations and readings of female characters in South African operas - *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* A significant focus of this study is that female representations in soap operas are influenced by society's desire to locate an aspirational forecast in recognition of the powerful role women play. It is against this background that this study examines gender roles ascribed to female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* The import of this reasoning is premised on the need to establish ways in which the audiences read female representations. As such, the study attempts to establish if there are possible differences in South African operas that have been produced over the last couple of years. Similarly, another key aspect of this study is to establish societal realities of gender dynamics that underpin South African communities. It is within this context that another key aspect of this study is its endeavour to establish ways in which the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women.

From the foregoing, the study gathered data from interviews conducted with expert informants who work in the industry and focus group discussions with soap opera viewer participants. This current Chapter Six presents and analyses the findings according to the themes generated from the producer/encoder's interviews (expert informants<sup>65</sup>) and the consumers/decoders' FGDs (participants<sup>66</sup>).

To avoid repetition of interpretation and discussion of themes, the discussion is structured according to similar themes identified from the interviews and FGDs. In addressing the objective, a relational analysis is used in identifying similar themes across both encoders and decoders, as well as in comparing past representations of female characters in soap operas with the selected soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* As was somewhat anticipated at the start of the study, the encoder themes are related to the decoder themes, hence the study uses relational analysis. A relational

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<sup>65</sup> Expert informants agreed for their real names and positions held during the interview to be used.

<sup>66</sup> Participants provided their consent for pseudonyms to be used during analysis. Hence, popular South African names for male and female were given. This is to assist the reader have a better perspective of the readings and interpretations of the participants.

analysis seeks to tie those “themes, codes or categories together into a coherent combination” (Robinson 2001:200). The advantage of this is that relational analysis is “used to help explore the full spectrum of possible relationships between analytical themes within qualitative data....in the process of connecting data topics” (Robinson 2011: 97).

The study appealed to Hall’s (1997) decoding and encoding process to analyse the relationships between the preferred encoded messages and their decoded interpretations. By so doing, the study demonstrates whether and how their interpretations are dominant, negotiated, and or oppositional readings (Livingstone 2000, Morley 1992, 1998). Given this background, the analytical process adopted is briefly explained below.

### **Theme explanation and analytic process**

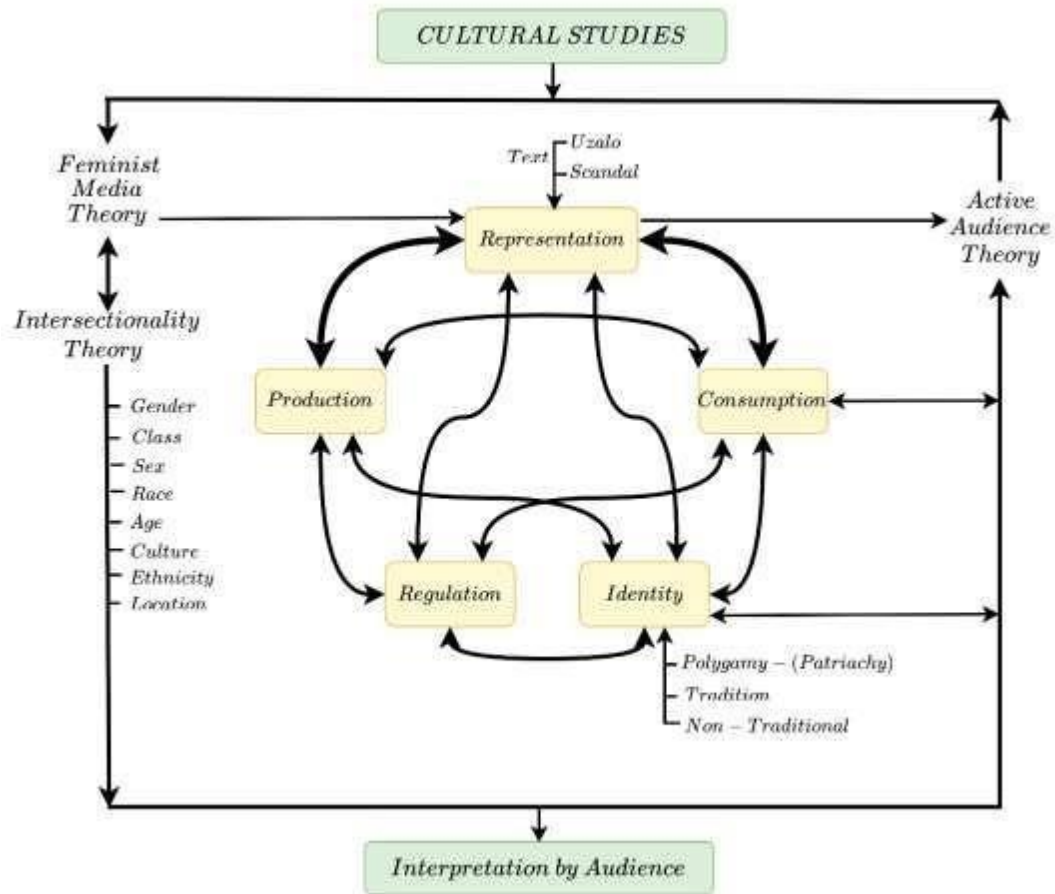
This study mobilised thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019; 2020), specifically making use of both deductive and inductive approaches, respectively. This is because theoretical (or deductive) theme analysis is openly analyst-driven (informed by theory and literature) and allows for direct addressing of the research questions (Schreier 2014). The inclusion of an inductive thematic analysis enables the study to identify emerging themes and categories directly from the primary data (Chong and Yeo, 2015). According to Thomas (2006), some of the reasons for adopting the approach are as follows: inductive in the process of analysis includes:

- (a) inductive coding summarises unprocessed textual material.
- (b) establishes connections between the study research questions and objectives deduced from the raw data.
- (c) creates a framework based on the experiences and methods visible in the raw data.

Schreier explanation (2014:173), that “inductive coding allows for assigning any number of codes to a piece of text” is also important. It highlights how an inductive approach allows for the creation of new themes and categories based on the raw data.

The analysis is also informed by the circuit of culture (du Gay et al 1997) and feminist media theory, with a particular emphasis on intersectionality. This chapter analyses how female characters are constructed/represented by *producers* and how those representations are read and interpreted by the viewers. Furthermore, if/how regulation influences producer/encoders' choices

and intentions in the *representation* of gender roles within *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* This study is also concerned with how *identity* influences their interpretations. The diagram below, as Figure 6.1, schematically presents the interconnectedness of the selected theories in the process of analysis in this study.



**Fig 6.1:** The interconnected matrix of data analysis (created and collated by the author)

Figure 6.1 has been created in the execution of this study, and is the interconnected matrix for data analysis. The figure explicitly shows how the study’s theories were mobilised in interpreting the data collected during the semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussions. Within the Cultural Studies approach, the moments of the circuit of culture model were used to describe the relationship between theories. The moment of representation in Figure 6.1 stands as the text or the case studies of this research (*Uzalo* and *Scandal!*). Through the feminist media theory, the position of the producers of the two soap operas is shown in how they interacted with the production process in the construction and representation of the female characters with regard to their gender roles in the text.

The active audience theory assisted the study in understanding how the consumers (viewers of the soap operas) interacted with the representation. This also helped to reveal the audience’s reading of the text and how they interacted with the moment of identity and how the views of issues such as polygamy, traditional and non-traditional roles influence their interaction with the representation of female characters. The line connecting to the intersectionality showed how and if factors like age, sex, gender, culture, ethnicity, and location, among others, influenced the interpretation of the audiences of the text. The arrow connected to the moment of production indicated if intersectionality also influenced the way producers of the two soap operas constructed and represented female characters with regard to their gender roles. The data analysis, below, mobilises this matrix.

Below are the key research questions as a reminder:

<b>Key Research Questions</b>	
<b>Encoding (Producers/textual analysis)</b>	<b>Decoding (audience interpretation)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways are female characters represented in <i>Uzalo</i> and <i>Scandal</i> in terms of gender roles?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do the audience read these representations in terms of the possible differences between a) past South African soap operas and b) societal realities of gender dynamics?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do any differences reveal in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and or b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the changes and continuities of the way in which women are represented in South African soap operas?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways do the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women?</li> </ul>

Before the commencement of the analysis, a brief plot of the two selected soap operas is presented to establish a narrative background.

## Brief plot of the selected soap operas

### *Uzalo*

*Uzalo* is a South African soap opera produced by Stained Glass Productions, co-owned by Kobedi “Pepsi” Pokane and Gugu Zuma-Ncube. The production company came into existence in 2015. They became a household name in South Africa and arguably beyond because of their compelling narratives, writing, direction, and the performances of the relatively unknown casts. All of their productions are broadcast on MultiChoice DSTV channels, further appealing to non-South African communities. *Uzalo* is a provocative, bold, and authentic narrative that initially told the story of two-family dynasties, the Mdletshe, the Xulus, and the two young men who carry their hopes and legacies. However, the storylines have dramatically changed, with interchanging characters contributing to many new story arcs. The female lead characters which storylines move around their lives, relationships, and struggles within themselves and others around them. Apart from the main characters, other supporting characters are mentioned during the interviews and FGD are listed below (only female characters are listed since that is the focus of the study).

<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Actor Name</b>
Gabsile Mdletshe	Baby Cele
Nonkanyiso Xaba	Thuthuka Mthembu
Gladys Madlala	Ntombifuthi Dlamini
MaNgcobo (Lindiwe Xulu)	Dawn Thandeka King
MaNzuza (Zandile Mdletshe)	Leleti Khumalo
Nosipho Xulu	Nompilo Maphumulo
Fikile Hlatshwayo	Nelisa Mchunu
Thobile Vazi	Nokuthula Mabika
Hlengiwe Mlambo (Mambolambo)	Gugu Gumede
Nyalleng Thibedi	Zekhethelo Mhlongo
Lilian "Lilly" Dongwe	Noxolo Mathula

**Table 6.1:** *Uzalo* Female Cast (source: collated by the author from Stained Glass Productions) (See Appendix eight (8) for more details).

*Scandal!*

*Scandal!* formerly known as *The Voice*, is a South African soap opera produced by Ochre Moving Pictures and has been broadcast on e.tv since 2008. It is one of the most-watched soap operas in South Africa (Maldonado, 2021). It is also broadcast across Africa on eAfrica, e.tv Botswana, and e.tv Ghana feed3. The narrative is set at the fictional media company Nyathi Family Holdings (NFH), based in Newtown, Johannesburg, which produces the newspaper *The Voice* and the gossip magazine, *Scandal*. Below are the names of female characters referred to in the interviews and FGDs.

Character Name	Actor Name
Dintle Nyathi	Mapaseka Koetle
Layla MacKenzie	Natasha Sutherland
Winnie Hlatshwayo	Fundiswa Ngcobo
Lindiwe Ngema – Maseko	Nomvelo Makhanya
Boniswa Langa	Lusanda Mbane
Mbali Kubeka	Nolwazi Ngubeni
Hlengiwe Thwala	Nqobile Nunu K.H
Zindile Ngena	Gcina Nkosi
Yvonne Langa	Kgomotso Christopher

**Table 6.2:** *Scandal!* Female Cast (source: collated by the author from Ochre Moving Pictures) (See appendix eight for more details).

The themes constructed in this chapter were developed from the literature review and other seminal sources consulted in this study. The themes that emerged from the interviews with the producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* and FGDs with participants from UKZN students are clustered deductively according to the study’s research questions. The sub-themes signal the inductive responses.

Themes generated from the interviews (Encoders) and FGDs (Decoders)	
Themes	Sub-themes

<p><b>Predominant gender roles represented in South African soap operas: <i>Uzalo</i> and <i>Scandal!</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Businesswomen/troublemakers/mother-matriarchs</li> <li>• Contemporary and traditional identities</li> <li>• Aspirational roles</li> <li>• Expectation</li> <li>• Stereotypes in gender roles and character construction</li> </ul>
<p><b>Female Subordination and Female Power</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representation of female villain</li> <li>• Patriarchy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Influences in the construction and readings of female characters and gender roles</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation.</li> <li>• Education Entertainment</li> <li>• Regulation and production company in the construction of female characters</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Writing room)</li> <li>• Social structure influence on construction and interpretation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Perceptions of Realism and Relatability</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realistic or unrealistic portrayal</li> </ul>

**Table 6.3:** Specific themes to the encoding process

**Theme 1: Predominant gender roles represented in South African soap operas: *Uzalo* and *Scandal!***

As established in the literature review section, even though gender and sex are often used interchangeably, they are different, as gender is noted to be a socially constructed phenomenon (Rolleri, 2012a; Qasmi, 2020). According to Butler (1990), gender is more of a performance and a set of acts and understanding gender and gender-related issues aided in the understanding of (in)equalities in a society based on gender identity. Gender relations are noticeable in how people speak, feel, socialize, and play different roles (Qasmi, 2020).

Gunter (1995) and Manstead and McCulloch (1981) contend that television advertisements romanticise idealised depictions of acceptable male and female behaviors and roles by attributing behaviours to women as signs of their femininity and particular behaviors to men as signs of their masculinity. Grace Mahlaba, Head Writer and Creative Producer of *Scandal!* notes that these idealised roles may change over time:

Looking at just the subject of females and males, to me, it is very interesting and intriguing because I'm now older. I can modify that. I have been able to grow up in a different era, as a young woman, and went into a different era and now I'm in a different era. So, I've got three phases of my life in terms of female and male characters (Mahlaba, interview 18 May 2022).

Mahlaba has a long and varied career in the entertainment industry. She started acting at the age of eight and at the time of the interview, she was 54 years old. She shared the different capacities in which she worked:

I have been with *Scandal!* for the past 11 years in different capacities behind the scenes. The Head Writing position has been almost a year, but the Creative Producer has been five years. Prior to that, language advising, and cultural advising. So, a whole lot of spectrums I have worked on behind the scenes, specifically in *Scandal!* But prior to that, was an actress (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022).

From the above revelations, the study acknowledged du Gay *et al.*, (1997), which noted that the moment of production involves several narratives and accounts of 'the facts' associated with a cultural text. How Mahlaba bases her contributions to the construction of female characters on her past experiences in which she worked in different capacities suggests that cultural production includes different discourses that surround it, even individual experiences. This is further established in the data analysis, if and how those experiences influenced the construction and representation of the characters. From the data gathered, below are some of the prominent roles that *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*'s female characters were represented:

#### *Businesswomen/troublemakers/mothers-matriarchs*

During the interview, the expert informants were asked to state the predominant roles that are depicted in the selected soap operas, and they gave diverse responses. The Head Writer from *Uzalo*, Clive Madiya, emphasised that they focus on women in business:

For us, it's mainly business roles. And again, that goes for our positive message, not just for women, but then, you know, like for the youth of South Africa, for our audience, and we try and encourage that, you know, and also when you look at our setting, we set in a township KwaMash. So, it's always about how you make a better life, you know, from where you are, despite all the challenges that many face..... And I think we play more on the business side of things. So, I would say, it's mostly like business, and it is just purely to play the positive role in the community to encourage people to not sit there, let's just do something positive, something good, you know, something that will uplift you (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

In addition to the business role, the Creative Director, Eric Mogale, also acknowledged the roles of mothers/matriarchs and sisters to be the most prominent in *Uzalo*. This, he noted helped them to continue to uphold their essence or convention as a local family show.

Ah, because we are more of a family show, we do have more of our link to a mother, matriarch, wife, and sister. As well as a businesswoman, we do highlight all of those....But mainly, we drift towards a mother and a sister. So, that, ah, we bring back that whole family loving, caring, ah, structure that we kind of like lost as a society. You know. For instance, we have a character called MaDongwe, she has a son and a daughter, but she took in her niece [loosely]. But when you look at that family, they feel like a family that, ah, like she's the mother to all of them, you know? So, we do represent that warm family, sister, brother love. Yeah, there are troublemakers....., you need troublemakers, you cannot only have nice warm stories. You do need those troublemakers, you do need a mistress somewhere that makes a story interesting and spicy for people to watch (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022).

The comment above showed *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* uphold some of the generic conventions of soap operas, which are connected to the narrative structure. In this convention, the moments of conflict are always included to drive the narrative. The completion of one story generally leads to others and plots often incorporate parts of semi-resolved conflicts (Muriel, 1983:22). Hence, helped to build on the continuity of the story or narrative told. From the data, it is evident that the matriarch is still a central character in previous soap operas as noted by Hobson (2003), and in current soap operas, this has not changed as the matriarch is still a prominent character in soap operas. A dominant position was held by participants as they noted the existence of strong matriarch characters in soap operas. Dumisile's (male, focus group, 26 February 2023) reflection of *Uzalo*'s two main matriarchs illustrates this:

MaNgcobo, for some time after the story got rid of Xulu, MaNgcobo's husband posted herself as the

leading character. I think for a few months she was the leading character in the soopies because sometimes she was the one that took care of the business, I think she was the one that took the role of the male character and ran with it because, ah, every problem or the major problem of the soap were associated with her. I think that every problem that she faced she overcame those problems.

MaNzuzza, on the other hand, was depicted as a typical strong female character of any community, as a pastor's wife [Okay], which [I relate with]. There was a time when she lost her husband, and then they later found out that her son was not hers. There was a lot of emotion going on. Yeah, and from that chaos that happened [she was able to hold it together], this showed a typical woman who's strong emotionally and who is smart (Dumisile, focus group, 26 February 2023).

The participants' descriptions of the matriarch characters align with the descriptions of matriarchs by Barker (2000:24) and Onuh (2017:24) as “strong and independent-minded characters” (Barker, 2000). Although a patriarchal society, the producers and viewers both recognised the matriarch character, which is telling of the role of strong women in South African society, with particular emphasis on ‘the township Matriarch’ (see also Onuh, 2017). The ability of the matriarch character to excel in the sphere that is often described as a male domain, in a way indicates her strength or power. This could be because the context in which the character was constructed is within a high gangsterism domain in which the character did not struggle to fit in but strived. However, some participants acknowledged the strength of the matriarch not because she stepped into the male role but because the character showed emotional strength. This also implies that female character individual strength is very important, and their courage can also be acknowledged not only when they thrive in men’s world but even within their world. Hence, this negated the societal expectation that only men could thrive in such a domain, and when a woman does, it must be within the spectacle of a male figure.

Situating this study within the circle of culture model, showed how the producers included intertextuality and the hybridity of gangster elements in the soap to play a huge role in the construction and representation of the mothers/matriarchal figures in *Uzalo and Scandal*. Also, the blending of American soap with community soap (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998) revealed the genre-blurring and hybridity in this soap with regards to character construction. This further showed how both soap operas conformed to the international convention of character depiction of mothers/matriarchs. However, their settings within a patriarchal society are both acknowledged in the narrative of how the characters fulfill the traditional norms and also challenge them in some

instances. That is, though the characters are not new, within the soap opera genre, but their uniqueness is revealed in the way they are constructed within the township.

Also, characters like troublemakers are set up in opposition to the matriarch, causing conflict and propelling the narrative forward. The villain or troublemaker often caused disruption of the narrative and extended disequilibrium (Todorov, 1977). This is important because Berger (1997) explains a particular event or object gains its meaning only when it is compared against its contrast. In terms of soap operas, it is such depictions of complex characters that help to avoid redundancy in character depiction (Hobson, 2003). Hence binary opposition is the fundamental building stone in narrative (Herman, 2006). The study's participants also agreed that troublemakers are included in the soap operas, even though you could hate the characters, you also come to love them because they add flavour to the show, as he gave instance with Yvonne (Lunga, focus group, 05 October 2022). In like manner, Omphile (focus group, 02 September 2022) described the character Madlala as a troublemaker: "that woman, she like things too much [lol] and wherever she's, there is trouble, there's no one to help her she's alone". For Nandi (focus group, 05 October 2022), "Dintle and Yvonne are the troublemakers. For instance, Yvonne getting to the Langa family, she was devious and all that using, I think that sexual allure to get into a rich man's life that kind of situation".

Similarly, in *Scandal!* Ameera Patel, the Producer, noted that they depict diverse roles which helps in the continuity of their narrative week by week.

I think that we've got virtually all of them, ah, and I think the thing with *Scandal*, we keep moving our stories don't necessarily stay on one family or one person for too long [...] The mother's role is so important in soap operas because it is an easy way to show the moral compass of a character. And it helps us to have families in the soap [and to] see different sides to characters. What are they like with their mother? What do they like with their friends, that kind of thing? Ah, but we, yeah, we also, we've got lots of businesswomen. The lover mistress, ah, we, I mean, I think love triangles and soapies go together like bread and butter. So, I think, ah, you know, people love watching love stories, and they love a little bit of spice. But we have tried to do differently more recently is to see who the triangle is with and that it's not always, ah, kind of a young mistress coming in, but sometimes it's a boy or, ah, yeah. So, to shift that, it's not that this is the only way that a woman is a baddie, if that makes any sense (Patel, interview, 20 April 2023).

In support of, the *Scandal's!* Head Writer added that although the show acknowledged different roles, the top three are the roles of a wife, troublemaker, and businesswoman:

I think wife, troublemaker, and businesswoman are the three tops. First troublemakers are the ones that give you more because they meddle. Like Mbali now, what she is causing now is troublemaking; your husband is sleeping with your sister and conceiving a baby.... it's trouble. Is violating people's rights, violating people's names, but she's doing it, and it keeps the viewer interested and yet she's a wife. Then you've got the Lindiwa, then Dintle who much as they want to be wives, they want to be businesspeople, so they want to juggle both. So, they don't necessarily think just because I'm a powerful, empowered woman, I cannot have a husband. I still think I can have both. Yes, that is very strong in this show (Mahlababa, interview, 18 May 2022).

This response demonstrates deep structural challenges associated with the previous constructions of female characters viewed as either a mother or a businesswoman and that both are possible. The study also found that soap operas in South Africa are premised on a strong desire to champion women's emancipation in a changing world. This gives more clarity to the difference between feminist waves, as the first strived for equality, and the second and third waves strived for a new role of women within society (see chapter four). Although African women are culturally reserved for domestic preoccupations, the study found that South African soap operas are an attempt to project a more inclusive industrialised post-apartheid society. In such a society, women are depicted as equal to their counterparts, but they find themselves annihilated, stigmatised, and framed as troublemakers.

Although businesswoman was one of the top three roles, particularly in *Scandal!* Patel explained that the soap opera constructed a businesswoman role accompanied by a shift in characterisation through the inclusion of homosexuality.

Ah, I think we've got a businesswoman who's very strong, very driven. She's lesbian, but we've never focused on her sexuality. Ah, as opposed to being like this is a lesbian, you know, and drumming on that point, it's kind of, we wanted to take a different angle on it and have her family already be okay with it. So, she's not coming out, we're doing a woman who is out and whose family [have already] accepted. And so, it doesn't become, that's not the issue in her life. And that for us is kind of different (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022).

Representation in media is a key component of empowering marginalised members of society (Letsoalo, 2019:1). When it comes to women's representation in media, it's not just important for there to be a large presence of women in television shows — it is also important that these characters represent women fairly (Letsoalo, 2019:1). From the responses above, it is evident that the producers of the two selected soap operas are aware of the concept of representation in media by the prominent roles they chose to highlight, as mirroring contemporary times (see

King'ara,2010). That women can be both mothers and businesswomen, subverts the previous binary categorisations of female characters occupying only one of these roles. Even though sexuality was not the focus, the *Scandal* producer depicted the character of Dudu (a businesswoman who is from a home that upholds traditional values). The character was constructed and represented to have embraced her sexuality. The normalisation of the characters' sexuality within a traditional context subverted the traditional gender role. Thus, the Dudu character embodied sexuality and, in a way, challenged other women to explore their sexuality.

Traditionally, female characters are predominantly constructed within the private sphere and are not associated with professional positions, working, and recreational roles in South African media (Gallagher, 2005:28; Pillay, 2008). Furthermore, feminist media approaches, particularly that of intersectionality, indicate that there are limitations in the representation of Black women and women of colour in terms of their sexual and economic identity (Gaines 1999: 294-295). Media images of Black women often perpetuate white ideologies (Hudson 1998; Collins 2000, 2004). Such portrayals are noted to be seen in the way the female characters are depicted in terms of looks, hair, and dressing, among others, which are often associated with Whiteness or Western but little or none to African identity. However, in the examples offered by the soap opera producers, the characters are Black women, and they are depicted within the economic and public spaces (the world of business), which are often associated with men. Additionally, these characters are not necessarily part of an elite society but are from middle-class backgrounds, predominantly living in townships. This could be assumed that women in South Africa may find it difficult to reach high levels of success in male-dominated business environments as more effort could be expected from women to prove their efficiency and strength to meet up and cope with the demands of such a domain.

The inclusion of a lesbian character, where the storyline does not focus on sexual status but that it is simply part of identity, also likely reflects the shift in society where LGBTQ matters are less taboo and more openly discussed. The study is of the view that South African soap operas mirror the fast-changing nature of commonly agreed cultural norms, values and ethics that underpin the moral fabrics of African people. By broadcasting homosexuality, the soap operas demonstrate the 'reality' of sexual ideologies emerging in South Africa.

Hall (1980) argued that the dominant ideology is typically inscribed as the '*preferred reading*' in a

media text but that this is not automatically adopted by readers. This communicative dynamic plays a role in the manufacturing and structuring media messages because, as material and political systems, mass media are designed to accomplish specific communicative goals on behalf of their owners/producers, etc. Hence, the producers encoded the ideologies of the centrality of family and the matriarch's primary role in this, but also of simultaneous financial independence and empowerment in the form of businesswomen characters from township settings, thus building in an aspirational message. The data indicated that the audiences decoded the messages of the producers as intended. Although the aim of the predominant roles is clearly stated, the encoders ensure the narratives are still based on conflict to maintain and sustain the interest of the viewers. However, there appears to be a move to this conflict being based on multiple character types and not the typical conflict of two distinct (good vs bad) female characters stereotypes, being 'pitted against each other'. The troublemaker is thus not only in the form of female characters but could be depicted within different identities. It is important to this point to state that this study avoids structuring the analysis in a binary form but to holistically investigate the changes and continuity in the construction and interpretation of female characters the concept of contemporary/traditional or terms like weak and strong were used. However, they are not set up as. This helped to explore the dynamics in the characters. Also, the themes in the analysis were generated or constructed based on the literature review and other seminal sources consulted in this study as noted earlier. Hence the different identities as constructed in the narrative of *Uzalo* and *Scandal* are explored.

#### *Contemporary and traditional identities*

The use of concepts like contemporary and traditional identities, among other similar contrast words are not used in this study in juxtaposition but to help explore the dynamic aspects of female characters as depicted in *Uzalo* and *Scandal*!

Identity is naturally used to describe the intricate and constantly changing ways in which people express their sense of who they are, how they relate to and develop attachments to their historical, social, and cultural environments throughout their lifetimes, and how they consciously or unconsciously arrange their priorities and commitments to reflect those, sometimes conflicting, attachments (Wamsely, 2021). Identity "denotes an understanding of who we are, as individuals, and not merely as products of history, culture, or caste. Gender identity deals with "one's own internal sense of self and gender" (Wamsely, 2021:1). During the interview, the informants were

asked to reflect on any complexities in the relationship between contemporary and traditional lifestyles.

Patel responded that, generally speaking, in *Scandal!* the cosmopolitan characters are younger, “juxtaposing the elders and the more traditional kind of families that we see on the screen”. However, some younger characters are still portrayed as very traditional, such as Jojo and Mbali (in the narrative, this couple was depicted as young individuals with so much love in their relationship, but the wife - Mbali, was a bit insecure since she was not able to give her husband a child) (Davidson, 2021). Mahlaba's (interview, 18 May 2022) response to the same question noted that the character's “roots” or background has more influence on the character’s lifestyle or identity:

It depends on where the character has been brought up, most of our characters right now are brought up in townships, and in South Africa, we have so many townships and every township has its own culture.

We’ve got Dintle, she's a young woman, a mother, but also very career-driven, very ambitious and she's grown. But obviously, it's soap operas, so we’ve got to bring up some drama for her. So, she's now being confronted by a daughter that she gave up for adoption. So, she's dealing with herself as a mother, knowing who she is trying to figure out who this daughter is, and it's bringing up new questions about her identity. Her having to reflect on her past and her past mistakes, but also, as a female character needs to see how to go into motherhood differently (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022).

The story of Nonka, who is from the township, is an important one as we show how she grows from poverty without being dependent on a man. (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022)

*Uzalo* and *Scandal!* involves a community of characters and depicts socio-cultural realism, whether younger or older characters, through love, family, crime, violence, and drugs (among other themes) mainly to show the lived experiences of individuals irrespective of their chosen lifestyles in the selected set township of KwaMashu and Soweto. For instance, Patel noted above that younger characters are often associated with contemporary lifestyles; however, there are young characters that are also associated with traditional lifestyles. This view affirms Bhasin’s (1994) observation that women’s construction and representation should not be merely about the historical differences between women and men in the media but more especially their realities in society at large, including their small or big everyday achievements. Therefore, the construction of women in the

selected soap operas arguably aligns with Steiner's (2014:361) second-wave feminist media theory conception of the three Rs: "depictions of women (and girls) result from (their root), reflect (show their lived experiences) and reproduce (represent taking cognizance of the intersectionality of their different social categories) dominant ideologies".

A response by Madiya (interview, 29 April 2022), *Uzalo's* Head Writer, indicates that the encoding process involves numerous discussions and debates, where the production staff members are influenced by their frameworks of knowledge and experience, as well as current events. In terms of contemporary or traditional lifestyles, he added:

[I]t's May, and we're writing for August. So, a lot of what is currently happening, we're able to fit it in like the world as it exists, you know? So, there'll be like your characters, like branching out, and that's mostly what's happening in South Africa anyways, especially with the younger ones. But then, how do you make sure that you do not neglect your traditional... village characters? How do you portray them in a manner that does not undermine them... They are still fashionable, you know? So, we do that without saying that, eh, this kind of lifestyle is better than this one. You know, we don't compare that way.....So, we try and balance it (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

Based on the comment above, showed how important it is for indigenising a narrative. The selected soap operas for this study allow their construction of female characters to be influenced by the current times as well as lived experiences, which could be a product of traditional or contemporary lifestyle influences like Mahlaba also noted above. This follows the line of thought by Mayer et al., (2009) as they proposed that in production, in this case construction of female characters, the lived experiences of the producer and the scholars alike must be given attention. This could be interpreted as such experiences by the producers could also influence the kind of lifestyles that are portrayed in the narrative. According to Executive Producer Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022). *Uzalo* also "exhibits both lifestyles and we do not elevate one lifestyle over the other, but we try to balance both [to] provide a platform for the introduction of new characters to keep the narrative running". An example of such portrayal is the construction of characters like Zandile and Nomvula, who are depicted within the popular traditional role as traditional, respectable women and mothers" (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022). The character "does every kind of traditional things like she's always cooking and baking". Patel acknowledged that such depiction is within the context of stereotypical depictions with the allowance of growth as she is seen "doing things that have been prevented in her life before in marriage when her husband stops her from pursuing her dreams. So,

we're seeing her taking her life back in a way even though she is a very traditional woman” (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022). In support, Nomvula in *Scandal!* and MaNzuza in *Uzalo* are female characters who are considered traditional by many of the viewers. They are described as “good mothers to their children and very respectful wives to their husbands. Also, they are involved in business not only in the house” (Behati – female, focus group, 02 September 2022).

On the other hand, a character like Lindiwe is constructed to hold contemporary norms even though she is from a traditional home. The character challenging the father was all the norms that Mahlaba expressed (interview, 18 May 2022). The expert informant continued that as we have experienced through the years:

Lindiwe now met the love of her life. We still don't trust that she will stay in that marriage because she's so hot-headed, but she [had] a husband who is more understanding. The dream has been, the husband that she is not submissive, but he is understanding; he has grown up now. He's a modern man who knows that there is space for both strength and both powers. It's not about me and me having more strength (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022).

Although Lindiwe is from a traditional home that is highly patriarchal, the character is allowed to show her own individuality and personal strength in the way she runs her own home. This type of depiction has shifted from the “politics of shared female experience” to the acknowledgment of differences within the group of women to avoid generalisation of experiences and the construction of “a singular truth about womanhood” (Fenton, 2004:84).

According to viewers, the traditional lifestyle or norms are associated with strength and resilience. Philani (male, focus group, 10 October 2022) believes that Lindiwe’s strength is derived from her roots and upbringing that is grounded in the Zulu culture, and this is something with which he resonates:

I think because of social upbringing in Zulu traditions, Zulu family values, and ethics. For a very long time, she has managed to be, can I say, a well-mannered girl who is not into reckless sexual relationships. Her father Mr. Mlungisi Ngema is someone who instilled true social African values in a woman, that a woman, you are not supposed to sleep around. Even if a man proposes you don't just accept. It is the father who should approve that... So, Lindiwe, even though she goes outside the house, she's in a real world where maybe it's cool at university, she mixes and mingles with a lot of people there. For a very long time, in my view, she managed to maintain a social-cultural

upbringing, but a girl shouldn't be well-reserved. A girl should represent your family values (Philani, focus group, 10 October 2022).

Philani (focus group, 10 October 2022) demonstrates a dominant reading per se of the value of a traditional lifestyle as depicted, even though it does not seem that these are the dominant representations that the producers of the two soap operas were looking to encode. His response also signals that even if someone is considered to be 'traditional', they do not operate outside of contemporary society. That Lindiwe can maintain her traditional roots, good manners, and morals while still part of 'modern' experiences like university appears to encourage appreciation for this character. The portrayal of both contemporary and traditional identities by the creators of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* showed that the producers acknowledged the dynamism of both contemporary and traditional identities, and each can be allowed to strive in a character. For example, modern yet traditional, bossy yet material. Such kind of portrayal assisted in the representation of the different dynamic aspects of characters, particularly the concern of this study, the female character. This also implies that even though the times are contemporary, there are still individuals who uphold some traditional norms within their contemporary lifestyle, and such should not be ignored in the current portrayals of South African local depictions of female characters. The finding shows that participants hold a dominant reading of the producers' intended message that women can be both traditional and contemporary in that women can be homemakers, work to contribute financially and they could also be aspirational.

### *Aspirational roles*

The mass media "plays a constructive role in contemporary society, which increases awareness among the public. They convey messages in such a manner which may change the public's attitude towards the certain issue" and meanings which people draw on to make sense of their world and act upon their social reality (Shivya, 2020:1). On the topic of the interplay between contemporary and traditional characterisation, Patel's (interview, 20 April 2022) response also highlights the tendency to include contemporary characters that enable an aspirational reflection on what is occurring in society, and to mirror the shifts in the roles of women in society:

We are definitely moving towards the more modern and contemporary characters in terms of the new characters that we're bringing in...I think it's because the traditional role is filled, you know, we've got those women there and we've got them, um, very much in the hearts of our viewers because they exist. And I think that, yeah, all the women that we're bringing in now, ah, kind of,

yeah, because we wanna want to fulfill other roles (Patel, interview, 20 April 2023).

This portrayal of changing times or society is one of the major conventions of soap opera–reality depictions (Fiske, 1999). Madiya (interview, 29 April 2023) gives a specific example to illustrate:

Yeah, and for us, it depends on the storyline, but I think one of the examples is Lilly being a police officer and then coming out as a lesbian, you know. So, we try to, like, write roles that reflect society, know that they are not necessarily acceptable to society, but, you know, they are there, they exist. And it's kind of like, our attitude is kind of like, you know, what we are going to be fair (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2023).

The Head writer of *Uzalo* further stressed the point that when constructing female characters, particularly concerning their gender roles, they just desire “to tell the story fairly, from our (as African) point of view, and honestly, it's kind of accepted, or you don't accept it. And, you know, we serve like millions and millions of viewers, so some will accept and some, ah, will not, you know”.

The expert informants were further probed to discuss which of the identities exhibited in the *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* of the female characters resonate more with the audience and why. Although they are not the audience, it helped the study to understand how the encoders evaluated the stands of their viewers. Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022) exclaimed, “ah, you know, with an audience, it's very tricky, ah, I'll be honest. Ah, how I always viewed the audience, I try to balance, we try to balance across the board.... With those kinds of ah, characters, I believe we need both”. Patel buttressed this point, emphasising the variety of characters within these two categories of contemporary and traditional:

So, I think that they got both, ah, because our audience base is both. So, the younger viewers resonate more with the cosmopolitan and contemporary identities. So, which is also why I think our young women are ambitious and driven and being, um, even in the way they dress, um, modern and, um, but also have differences. So, we've got the slay queen types, but we've also got down-to-earth women, ah, you know, and we've got the baby mamas, and both are doing it for themselves (Patel, interview, 20 April 2023).

Not only is a full spectrum of characters therefore offered that resonate with different audiences, but it also allows for entertaining and attention-grabbing storylines. Patel further stated that “even the older women with our older viewers are okay, they feel better about our younger characters

doing bad things than our traditional older characters (Patel, interview, 20 April 2023). This finding complicates Kidd's (2016) point of view that viewers are more likely to identify positively with positive media images and relate better with characters than negative stereotypes, as it signals that it depends on which characters are constructed according to these negative portrayals and identities. According to Ibbi (2017), the media does not only offer positive role models, but they also depict negative role models, creating the risk of youth copying these negative role models. In the instance of the older audience, they might not copy the portrayals, but they resonate with the depictions, helping them to create a world where they could fantasise about their youthful days. On the other hand, this shows that the producers encoded the character construction content with signs and cultural symbols (both contemporary and traditional identity) that they knew the audience would recognise (Kingara, 2010). Viewers identify with media characters and even formulate a parasocial relationship with them (Blose 2020).

Another way that the producers believe an audience resonates with characters is through their dress codes. According to Hobson (2003), one of the major attributes that define each character in soap operas is their dress and appearance, this not only distinguishes them but helps the audience to understand and relate to the character's personality and how they evolve (Hobson, 2003). This is illustrated in the comment below:

Younger viewers do resonate more with the cosmopolitan and contemporary identities.... even in the way they dress also have differences (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022).

The ability of the audience to be able to resonate with the characters as depicted in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* largely depended on how South African society is depicted. Ndlovu (in an interview with Mkwazi, 2015) explains that "South Africans want stories that reflect their lives. But they don't want stories that look down on them or patronise them. They want people who understand black life, township life, and African life; someone who gives them a sense of pride" (Mkwazi, 2015:1). According to Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2023), South African townships consist of community members from various cultures. Others alter their original cultures based on geographical location, their social groups, and their social positions within that group. Soap operas include characters from varying cultural backgrounds in their storylines and allow viewers to learn about different cultures, their practices, and, at large, the construction of female characters. This is demonstrated by the portrayal of relationships, rituals, traditional marriages and customs, the use

of multilingual characters, and the encouragement of cross-cultural partnerships (Bloese, 2020:147). Furthermore, the platform created by television, with its depictions of the dramas of everyday reality, provides a compelling medium for influencing a normative national consciousness first as an apparatus of apartheid and later as an intended voice of New South Africa (Ives, 2007:154). The responses above show that the producers deliberately encode characters to reflect women in a variety of roles, social statuses, and identities, including sexuality. This is noted in Mogale's (interview, 28 April 2022) comment below which demonstrates the intersectionality in female character construction:

Ah, there are more; we definitely [have] changes that are happening...If I can highlight the current characters that we have. Nosipho, who runs her business hub. We've got Nonkanyiso, who operates in Nosipho in that business hub, but she has her own business, ah facial product business. And then we have Gabisile who is moving out of the shadows of Nkunzebombu and is starting her talk show, her radio slot. We have the two old ladies, Ushlobos, or the two church ladies who have started their own business called *Shlobos Tours*. So, yes, we balanced it all from all ages and all LSMs<sup>67</sup>.

One of the study's lines of inquiry is to establish if and how any female characters embodied any aspirations in what they represented and the reason behind their inclusion in the storyline. According to *Scandal!* Writer Patel (interview, 20 April 2022): "our women are ambitious, but I think that [Dantle] she's one of the most aspirational because of where she comes from. Her determination is kind of unwavering, in the way that she pushes forward". The reasons for such portrayal of ambitious, strong, independent women based on Mahlaba's (interview, 18 May 2022) view, "we were just trying to be to portray that there is nothing as women you cannot achieve".

Some participants held a dominant reading of the producers' aspirational characters. Their responses reflect a variety of characters based on their frameworks of knowledge and experience.

Dintle is a representation of a woman who can defy all the odds in a society where male dominance is a common characteristic of our lives. She is the type of woman who is an example of encouragement to other women to say in marriage: if your mother-in-law is that kind of decent crook, how do you handle her and make sure that to stay in the marriage? Dintle is action-packed when it comes to delivering goals. So, I think in my view, if I were to get that kind of woman...Maybe on this particular question, my response would be limited because of myself being

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<sup>67</sup> Living Standard Measures.

a male... (Philani, focus group, 10 October 2022).

However, Rosemary responded to the last participant, thanking him and saying, “I have learned a lot from you here. So, now I know that I must be a goal-getter [lol] and that in the male perspective, where you would have thought that males expect us to be a bit docile”. She further added that due to Dintle’s mischievous behaviour, she will have never associated her character with anything positive, but having a men's perspective in the group this discussion had helped her to view things differently and deeply (Nandi – female, focus group, 10 October 2022). In a way, it could be said that the soap operas’ content caused this diversity, but was only obvious when a male perspective was included as he viewed and narrated the representation from a different angle that was there but was not taken note of by the female participants. This supports Coenen, *et al.*, (2012) and McCombes (2019) views that having an FGD composition of gender heterogeneity assists in gathering a diverse range of data from individual perceptions or experiences and this helped me to observe possible differences in the discussion (like the instance of Philani, and Nandi- female) which emerged when the two genders converse. This provides a diversity of perceptions (Krueger and Casey, 2000:10) which is especially important in a study that is guided by the active audience theory.

Another character that is referred to as inspirational is Nosipho. She is the only beloved daughter of the gangster Gxabashe Xulu. The character was described as one that speaks hope as the participant expressed, “this gives me hope to hang in there because one day everything is going to be fine, and I will be successful” (Noxolo – female, focus group, 03 October 2022). Omphile (female, focus group, 09 September 2022) also agrees that “Nosipho was a strong woman despite the challenges she faced, she was able to overcome and own a company”. The participants saw the trait of Nosipho to be inspiring because she did not allow situations and challenges of life to define her or hinder her from achieving her goals and dreams in life. The attributes of resilience by Nosipho are associated with being strong as a woman. Zanele (focus group, 03 October 2022) explains that life generally is full of challenges and the ability to hold it all together and be there for others is a good trait that she appreciates with the character of Layle:

I would say I aspire to be Layla from *Scandal!* because we see her living without depending on anyone. She can be there for others, and she is not being selfish; she is one person that people can rely on and she is a very honest person. Even though she faces her challenges and losing her son, she's still able to be there for Dintle and Dintle’s child as well as other people surrounding her, so

she's, yeah, she inspires me. (Zanele, focus group, 03 October 2022).

Aspirational characters are not only wealthy but are those characters who inspire women to overcome challenges independently and are honest. This kind of reading by participants conforms with Tager's (1997) informants, as they relate with characters based on their lived experiences and due to the challenges and strengths shown by the characters. On the one hand, the participants also related to the characters based on their strengths, struggles in life, and the victories they finally experienced. On the other hand, the participants refused to associate with the aspect of the character's depictions of crime or immoral tendencies (like the case of MaNgcobo, participants liked her character but refused to associate with her aspect of crime). This is affirmed by the statement of Hobson (1994), as noted by Tager (1997) that female characters who were considered as most popular were:

those who [had] to struggle against the vicissitudes of life. If the characters [were] seen as keeping on top of their own lives, that [was] judged as admirable and only in extreme cases [did] the audience excuse lapses in strength from the women in the soap operas (Hobson, 1994:158).

Although many participants identified with some female characters as aspirational role models, the majority of participants in FGD Three, consisting of male viewers, stated that they did not wish for their female family members to be like any of the female characters. This implied that the male participants viewed the female characters' aspirational ability as not good enough for emulation. Their objection appears to be founded on perceived gender differences and societal expectations that judge women for their sexuality. This could, therefore, be interpreted as founded on hegemonic masculinity that often judges women. According to Ndumisa (male, focus group, 05 September 2022), all those gaming female characters lose their manners when it comes to men. I mean, all of them. Even my Nonka, my precious Nonka is just like that. She's been up and down with almost five men that I've seen now" (Ndumisa, focus group, 05 September 2022). In the same light, Lunga (male, focus group, 05 September 2022) expresses that:

The character of a female, [okay], in terms of what she portrays, let me tell you something, you know if I can walk into a club as a male, and then there are 10 chicks [women], and then I'll be able to actually, maybe fill up the table and then I will sleep with them all. When I'm going out with my other friends or other people closest to me, and I tell them that story, they will say, 'yoh, man you are the man. How were you able to do that? Yoh, you are the king my man. But if a female walks into a club and finds ten males, and she's able to sleep with them all, no man would love to sleep

with her after that. And I think no man would take that woman and make her his wife. Because of the character that she possesses, which boils down that differential standards regarding women and men will never be the same. (Lunga, focus group, 05 September 2022).

The findings revealed that audiences exhibit both dominant positions concerning the characters that may serve as role models to the audience and aspirational in what they embody. However, some participants held a negotiated position in their readings as they partly shared the text's code and broadly accepted the preferred reading but, to some extent, resisted and modified it in a way that reflected their position, experiences concerning the sexuality of the female characters as represented in the two soap operas. On the one hand, from the participant's perspective, a woman is frowned upon when she frequently changes partners; such an attitude is associated with being promiscuous. On the other hand, the male is allowed to have multiple partners as such an attitude is associated with strength and masculinity, hence enforcing traditional gender roles - patriarchy. This also indicated that the viewers described the sexuality of the characters based on cultural and societal expectations of who and how a woman should portray herself.

#### *Cultural and societal roles associated with women and their sources*

The study's participants created meanings through their cultural context. This viewer agency is dependent on given socio-cultural values and parameters of meaning-making (Kingara, 2019). According to Hall's (1980; 1993) framework, there are different ways decoders can interpret messages encoded by the encoders. In this process, the themes that emerged from the data indicated that participants took into account culture, sociology, and lived experiences when decoding the messages (Hall, 1993; Livingstone, 2000). This is evident in how the participants responded to the inquiry on the social roles that they believe women within South Africa are expected to fulfill:

In our African societies, a woman is naturally expected to be peace-loving. One who can put together the moral and social fabric of our everyday lives (Philani, focus group, 10 October 2022).

Women are supposed to be submissive, not ruffling feathers, you know. They're supposed to be calm and not aggressive (Nandi, focus group, 10 October 2022).

They believe that women must be obedient; you don't talk back to elders, and you don't talk back even to boys in your age group. Yeah, and you are not allowed to show your tie and cleavage. You are to respect your body and you are to wear dresses, not pants (Behati, focus group, 02 September

2022).

These findings reveal that such societal expectations are meant to distinguish females from their male counterparts. Gender roles and expectations are learned. They are socially constructed and usually viewed as binary opposites describing the characteristics, behaviours, and roles deemed appropriate and expected of men and women (and boys and girls) by a given society (Rolleri, 2012).

Ndumisa (focus group, 05 September 2022) sees such expectations as unfair expectations on women as he further mentions some practices that buttress his points:

You'll find that in most cases, women are expected to be on their best behavior, while men are allowed to go around galivanting to all the staff, and it will be labeled in a very nice way. A man who is in seven relationships he's called a '*Isoka*' [boyfriend/groom], which is a compliment. But when you find a woman carrying her load of eight men, they're [going to] call her 'Bitch', which is not a nice word. It's kind of humiliating for women. So, whenever we consider women, we must also consider men. So, some of the standards we set we only set for women, without considering ourselves as men. For instance, virginity testing in the Zulu culture, where all young girls are going to be tested if they're still virgins. Only the females are tested, not the men and, in a way, it's humiliating those girls.

According to Lunga (male), such kind of expectations and practices are unfair because "some of the girls are victims of crime, and that will not be considered in the context of a society in which a girl was raped. All that matters is that she's no longer a virgin and it will be news for gossip". This subjugation of one gender over the other shows that society is deeply hierarchical, privileging that which is male or masculine over that which is female or feminine (Heise et al. 2019, Weber et al. 2019). Hence, it shows how patriarchal ideologies are promoted, as women are regularly depicted as subordinates to their male counterparts (Mulvey, 1981). All the expectations and the roles associated with women are rooted in different familial structures and institutions, as illustrated by the participants that apart from the families and schools, even churches are also institutions for learning social expectations. A participant explained that "there are bible verses - I don't know where it is in the verses in the bible which say women should respect their men. [Yes, it's in Ephesians 5]" (Dumisile, focus group, 26 February 2023). The media is also noted as one of the institutions. The portrayal in television, particularly in soap operas, influenced its viewers through the portrayal of "different women [with different lifestyles], some are traditional, some are

midway, some are extremely contemporary” [Nandi, focus group, 10 October 2022].

The statement by participant Nandi above substantiated that the encoders of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* are the construction and representation of dynamic female characters and not only one lifestyle or identity. The majority of the participants are of the view that such societal expectations of women are mainly from the home and traditions which has been passed from generation to generation. Although these are contemporary times, those traditional expectations still find expression. This is why most of the participants declared that their grandmothers or grandfathers would never react or respond to today's soap operas' depictions of female characters the way we do:

Grandparents want their wives to be submissive and want their wives to be obedient to everything that the male does. Generally, they wouldn't like to go with the idea of women being independent based on the views they hold and the fact that the time when they were growing up is so different now (Mondli – male, focus group, 26 February 2023).

They believe that now women have lost dignity and self-respect because most of them wear things that show their body parts, like wearing a crop top that shows their stomach, wearing some skirts that have holes and wearing swimming costumes on the beach (Mpho, focus group, 02 September 2022).

I think they will not approve of the lifestyle. You'll find out that MaNgcobo married Nkunza within a period of two years they were already divorced. So, I don't think they would approve of the lifestyle that is going on within the show. But I do think in terms of equal opportunities they would approve because they were also denied opportunities in the past (Dingane – male, focus group, 26 February 2023).

The findings show that the main reason why participants believed their grandparents would react differently was because the times when they were raised were different from today. However, even though grandparents might disapprove of how female characters are currently depicted to some extent, they may not reject the message or depictions of the possibility of having equal opportunities, which was almost impossible in their days. The comment of Dingane (focus group, 26 February 2023) is a negotiated reading of *Scandal's* preferred message as shared by Ameera Patel (interview, 20 April 2023) that “our older viewers feel better about our younger characters” portrayed in today's soap operas, but only in terms of the new opportunities and self-empowerment. The comments by the producers and the audience confirmed Harrington's

(2016:110) standpoint; one of the ways soap operas appealed to the audience was that they portrayed fictional and nonfictional representations of everyday lives. One of the biggest drawcards of the soap opera is its depiction of a range of characters and how audiences would relate to them, either by recognising characters like themselves or people close to them or by the way characters played out fantasies that did not exist in their everyday lives. Hence, the next section discussed how stereotypes are included in character construction.

### *Stereotypes in gender roles and character construction*

The mainstream entertainment media is known for its often portrayals of stereotypical depictions that lack the inclusion of complex female roles (Milburn, Mather, and Conrad, 2000). Gender stereotyping is a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women (United Nations Human Rights (UNHR), 2014:1). Gender stereotypes can be both positive and negative for example, “women are nurturing” or “women are weak”. This is established through the continuous underrepresentation of women and the misrepresentation of femininity and masculinity (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017; Ward and Grower, 2020). Based on Trolan's (2013:215) argument, this shows how media plays a significant role in the transmission of gender differences and inequality through daily visuals. Stereotypes are part of the convention of soap operas; therefore, it is expected that they could be included in the construction and representation of the female characters. In line with this, the concern of this study - is to investigate how stereotypes are included in the constructions and representation of female characters in the selected soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* and why. Does their depiction of female characters in the soap operas challenge or perpetuate “existing constructions of gender”? The following section presents and interprets the ways the *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* production staff viewed the concept of stereotype in the construction of characters. Some of the producers responded as encoders and, at the same time, as decoders.

Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2023), the Creative Producer of *Scandal!* responded to the question by expressing her views when she watched *Uzalo* explaining her views from the perspective of a ‘consumer’. She acknowledges the impact of the setting, culture, language and how the depictions of the matriarchs within a highly patriarchal sphere contradict her prior knowledge associated with the women in such setting:

So, when I watched *Uzalo*, I thought the women were different in *Uzalo* because when you think of Zulu as a tradition, you are thinking, wow, the women must be oppressed, and when I watched the show. It wasn't [depicted] like that. So, of course, the settings in the township make(s) a lot of scenarios very different, but it was one of the shows that I also felt in terms of portraying women, they are very, very progressive.

Mahalaba (interview, 18 May 2022) continues her view on *Scandal!* from the production point of view as she reflected that “stereotypes sell”. It is important to present women “with layers” although “unique women don't quite sell, you know”. TV is about women who go 178345 they are up and down, they're all over. That's what makes them because you want to see somebody that's like you. So perfect people, there's not a lot of them on as a standalone story”.

Mahlabla notes that, based on her years of experience, the audiences love characters that are complicated or with unstable consistency as she uses the number 178345 as compared to the consistent 12345. This view aligns with Hobson's (2003: 106) explanation that “good characters and bad characters seem to be a redundant concept in relation to [soap opera] genre. As in real life, people are more complex than merely being good or bad, hero or villain; they are not that simple”. This was also affirmed in my Master' study (Onuh, 2017:121), which revealed that the two matriarchs in *Uzalo* were constructed and represented as complex characters with complex personalities. Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2022) did, however, add that stereotypes can play a particular role “for relief”; “you go to stereotypes. Yes because sometimes the story can be too heavy”.

Gilbert argues that (2009:440) stereotypes in soap operas degrade women, while men are generally represented in a more highly positive light. Marx (2008: 88) elaborates that “male dominance is ideologically perpetuated by emphasising that women's main purposes are childrearing and childcare”. Motsaathebe (2009:445) contends that male characters are generally depicted as being stronger and domineering than female characters and are commonly viewed as heroes by female characters. Conversely, although stereotypes are often expressed as having a negative influence on the construction and representation of women in media, the findings above indicate that there are still some positive nuances of stereotypes in soap opera narratives. Firstly, the findings, stereotyping, or perhaps rather ‘stock characters’ help in some ways to sustain the interest of the viewers. Secondly, it assists in spicing up the narratives with excitement and lastly, as coded from

the findings, it brings some form of relief to a heavy story that could be overwhelming to the audience.

Allen's (1985: 91) assertion that "the soap opera text constantly walks the line between one that can be read as fiction and one that spills over into the experiential world of the viewer" encouraged this study to explore if producers actively challenge any stereotypes of South African women. South Africa can be described as a patriarchal society. The Creative Director of *Uzalo* Mogale (interview, 28 April 2023) explained that "we were breaking that kind of stereotype; we don't stereotype and say Zulus are like this, or black men are like this". His views regarding the township representation are derived from his lived experiences as he expatiates:

We try to highlight the [happenings]. I mean, I grew up in a township where a gangster that's fierce so much in a township and that we know everyone will bow out too, but the person that softens and that person, it's the wife or a girlfriend, you know". Control. So, we try to highlight that here's a powerful gangster, and as much as this power, where does he get this power from? From the matriarch of the house (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2023).

Mogale's explanation contradicts Motsaathebe's (2009) view that female characters frequently need the assistance of male characters to overcome their problems, whereas masculine characters frequently succeed on their own without assistance from female ones. Mogale notes that although the patriarch or male character is constantly depicted to be powerful, that strength has a source which is the woman or matriarch at home. This appears to be a trend in current South African soap operas, particularly the ones in this study – *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Mogale (interview, 29 April 2023) reminds us that it is all about shifting perceptions and generational experience by further stating:

Every generation they want, they see themselves in a different way from the previous generation, you know. Ah, so we cannot ah shove down ah, what we believe in, into the next generation. We can only guide them into what they see and then they'll start breaking that. I mean, at a whole lot of traditional things that have been broken over the years, you know, cultural things that have been changed. So, we are not stereotyping, we are challenging the stereotype of how we see traditional things as well, with retrospect concerning culture and tradition (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2023).

In this study's literature review (Chapter Two), it was explained that media reports on current events provide frameworks for interpretation, mobilises citizens on various issues, reproduces predominant culture and society, and entertains its audiences (Llanos and Nina, 2011). This

indicates how media is key in propagating, projecting, and reflecting gender roles and stereotypes (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017; Mueni, 2015; Trolan, 2013). Mondli (focus group, 26 February 2023) believes soap operas can challenge stereotypes: “Going back to the example of MaNgcobo, being the alpha of the family”. In support, Zanele (focus group, 03 October 2022) admits that soap opera depictions can both challenge and confirm cultural expectations of how women are expected to be or behave:

I think they are challenging. We also see married women like Lindiwa who married at a young age, but she hasn't stopped living. You know, she hasn't stopped partying, she hasn't stopped wearing short things, she hasn't stopped working. She's still doing what a young person her age is expected to do, even now that she's pregnant. We also see women represented in the olden days fashion or traditional roles and then we also see the ones that are now more modern and more independent.

However, the findings also show that *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* lean more on challenging societal or cultural expectations as they depict more women who are independent, powerful, and strong. This different portrayal of female characters is picked up in Philani's (focus group, 10 October 2022) comment as he explained that “any time I watch *Scandal*, the dominant discourse that they want to seem to drive to the table is that South African women, fast-moving, they kind of have abandoned the traditional forms of life. They are now elitist in nature; they are now English”. He further explains that such depiction “contradicts the moral, ethical, cultural expectation of an African woman, who is supposed to be a wife, a mother, or something like that”. This data showed that the participation does not consider this kind of depiction as necessarily good since it downplayed the African culture and propagated Westernisation in the way and manner the female characters are represented. This ascertained how *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* challenges cultural expectations in the way they construct female characters as read and interpreted by the audience.

*Uzalo*'s Head Writer Madiya (interview, 29 April 2023) adds that although they actively aim to challenge stereotypes, broadcaster expectations and regulations impose limitations.

Being on SABC 1.... that's another thing like a very conservative audience, you know, where you are always nervous about every storyline that you come up with because people are going to fault you and they will complain and so on. We currently kind of have like a bisexual storyline where, one of our police officers, is bisexual, and even the response from social media, in the beginning, it was like, what nonsense is this? You know, like, why are we announcing lesbians on TV? But then your younger audience is like, oh my God, we've been waiting for this. We do want to see

more of this. We do want to see people, ah, accepting who they are and not be shy about it.

In the selected soap operas, all the female characters are constructed in a way that their strength is visible and not dominated by the male characters. They are thus arguably debunking the traditional division in gender roles of men as powerful and women as weak (Hadebe, 2010: 74):

For instance, the characters of Nkunzebombu and Gabsile, for one. Ah, Nkunze is this gangster who is powerful and bad, right? We are trying to show that. And here is Gabsile living under the shadow of this man for the longest time, ah, fighting for her son and all that. So, we're trying to shift from that where she starts to have her own world and our own power. You know, where you say, females are not designed to be shadows of men or a ripe of a man like they say, you know, they're not that. There are individuals who can do things on their own without, ah, being in the shadow of a man (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2023).

The idea above illustrates the conception that the “differences between women and men are socially constructed and thus subject to change” (Van der Watt, 2007:53). This flexibility and the constructive, malleable nature of gender roles can be highlighted by the media. Mogale (interview, 28 April) reaffirms the benefit of not setting up roles or belief systems in opposition to each other.:

Ah, we trying to say we're not ah totally killing what patriarch has set up with highlighting what matriarch power has in that space, because they work hand in hand. If we approach it correctly. Ah, when I say correct, I say, uh, we'll listen to each other, work with each other, rather than to say that your place is there, your place is here?

In this study's literature review, it was explained that the media reports on current events provide frameworks for interpretation, mobilises citizens on various issues, reproduces predominant culture and society, and entertains its audiences (Llanos and Nina, 2011). This indicates how media is key in propagating, projecting, and reflecting gender roles and stereotypes (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017; Mueni, 2015; Trolan, 2013). Mondli (focus group, 26 February 2023) believes soap operas can challenge stereotypes: “Going back to the example of MaNgcobo, being the alpha of the family”. In support, Zanele (focus group, 03 September 2022) admits that soap opera depictions can both challenge and confirm cultural expectations of how women are expected to be or behave:

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traditional roles and then we also see the ones that are now more modern and more independent.

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## **Theme 2: Female subordination and female power**

The expert informants shared their approaches to constructing gender roles that can be interpreted within the relational theme of female subordination and power. According to Grassi (2013), soap opera often portrays a strict gender binary system in which men are attributed the dominant position. Similarly, Ibrahim (2017) noted that the male dominance versus female submissiveness dichotomy is dominant in soap operas. Examples of such binary oppositions include dependent vs. independent, leadership vs. subordinate, strong vs. weak, struggle vs. post-struggle masculinity, good vs. bad, and hegemony vs. the sensitive man. Hence, within such binaries, this study aims to assess if female characters in the two selected soap operas were constructed to show their strengths and pursue their dreams, interests, and desires in life or if they are only constructed within previous depictions of domestication and subordination. For instance, Asiyanbola (2005) described male dominance as a system of social stratification and distinction based on gender benefits men while restricting female roles and activities. 'Good' women are presented as submissive, sensitive, and domesticated (Ahmed 2012). Therefore, this study explored the different ways female characters are constructed and represented in the narratives but not from the binary point of view as noted above.

Eric Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022) and Grace Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2022) emphatically stated that *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* emphasise “female power”. Mogale continued by giving an example:

We started seeing characters called Vika on-screen and Njinji. So, when we see those characters, we feel the power of these two men when they arrive and threaten KwaMashu and threaten Nkunze as well, but they are very reckless in how they do things. And we know how we as males sometimes do tend to operate. It's all brute force and all that. But behind that, there is a power, which is female power behind that (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022).

Similarly, Madiya (interview, 29 April 2022) stated that the expression of “female power” is evident in the situations and events that the female characters face:

You know, we see a lot of women overcoming different and tough challenges to make, it. An example that I mentioned earlier, is Gabsile coming out of debt, you know, had nothing. And ah, last season where now she actually owns a community radio station, you know, and that's like all the emphasis on female power (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

According to Patel (interview, 20 April 2022), *Scandal!* “swings between them,” showing both female subordination and power. She provides a storyline as an example:

At the moment, we've got the GBV story, which is definitely about a man forcing subordination. Hm, but [Hlengiwe Thwala] is a very powerful woman.... She is kind of married to her work and she's strong and she feels very contemporary. But what happens to her when she undergoes something like that?... I think about a lot of our female characters that they've very ambitious and determined. So yeah, I think we lean towards female power often. Yeah. They don't. Yeah, they don't lean back.

Popular stereotypes are the associations of strength, aggression, and power with men, while weakness, passiveness, and kindness are associated with women (Knabe, 1977). The encoders of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* intentionally shift this norm by portraying women's power within townships and male-dominated spheres. Such intentional role depiction by the encoders could help to address the concerns of Rostami-Povey (2007), who argues that violence against women, women's low status, and the imbalances of power between men and women generated by patriarchal policies eventually became norms. Shifting representations of women in power (rather than subordination) may encourage audience members to rethink these norms that are detrimental to women. In the instances where male characters are depicted as strong, particularly within their popular male domain, the producers still try to bring to light the strength of women as the source of male success and power. Within the soap opera genre, villains are often associated with male characters, but as evident from the data, female characters are now depicted as villains.

### *Representation of female villains*

A villain is described as a character that often causes disruption or complication to a narrative (Propp, 1968) and is often associated with male characters. With regards to television programming, in general, men are often described as the sanctioned actors of violence or villains with a relatively low number of cases of violence carried out by women (Fernández-Villanueva *et al.*, 2009:92).

However, female villains are a prototypical character in the soap opera genre (see Modleski, 1982). Villainess is often associated with traits like mischief, selfishness, and immorality (Shah, 2008;). The character is described as an individual who is indifferent to her family and home. This subset of female characters emphasises maintaining their individuality and freedom. According to Schachter (1998), the daytime villainess is an expert manipulator as she uses traits associated with traditional feminine frailty to her advantage (Bennett, 2023). Her drive to remain unattached manifests itself in various fields, although her predominant crimes are career-oriented and childless. Modleski (1982:40) summarised the purpose of the villainess quite succinctly:

If soap operas keep us caring about everyone, if they refuse to allow us to condemn most characters and actions until all the evidence is in (and, of course, it never is), there is one character whom we are allowed to hate unreservedly: the villainess. The negative image of the spectator's ideal self.

Therefore, this section will discuss if/how female villains are constructed and depicted in South African soap operas in terms of female subordination and power.

According to *Scandal!*'s Writer, Patel (interview, 20 April 2022), presently, within South African soap operas, there is a “shift” in the way female characters are depicted. She elaborates that in the past, female characters were often portrayed as waiting for a man to save them. But “what's different now is we're not always looking at the male Knight to come riding in on a shining horse to save the woman. Sometimes, the women are saving themselves. Ah, sometimes I think they're the bad ones with the questionable moral lines” (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022). It's interesting, though, that for ‘female characters to ‘save themselves’ a degree of violence is part of their characterisation. This shift is also evident in the comment by *Scandal!*'s Creative Producer that now “you start seeing women's violence” (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). In the same light, *Uzalo*'s Head Writer noted that currently, there is a huge shift as women are depicted in roles popularly associated with men:

We try something different by writing female villains. In traditional soap opera, the villains are usually men and are usually killed off. But we are careful with this as we don't want to show men killing women. All to protect women. The story of Nonka, who is from the township, is an important one as we show how she grows from poverty without being dependent on a man (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

Madiya's comment above shows that in the past years, villain roles have been associated with male

characters, as Fernández-Villanueva, *et al.*, (2009) noted above. Madiya further explained that:

If you look at a TV show from like early 2000, I think then like women served a certain purpose, you know, like be just like a housewife or whatever and they changed to saying that women are equal to men, like they can do anything. They can run a business company and change to that. And now, I'm seeing it changing and I have given the example of being our villain. In early 2000, you can't really expect a female villain to take on someone like Nkunzebombu, but now it's becoming acceptable in the talent. And the Channel is, ah, is saying that, uh, you know, like do this, you know? (Modiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

Similarly, participants acknowledged the shift and the current depiction of a female villain as Mpho (focus group, 02 September 2022) noted that “in the older soapies, we never experienced a place where a woman is a gangster stealing cars or bombing ATMs, but now, we can see that in MaNgcobo”.

From the encoders' statements above, it is evident they are excited by the new turn depiction of female characters as villains. When women are presented as powerful – in characters like villains, bitches it often attaches some negative connotation (Guerrero, 2016). This, in a way, could take away the agency because of these powerful women's depictions, in some ways deviant from the popular representation of villains/women. From the view of the participants, it is evident that they also enjoyed seeing these changes in female villains on their TV. Hence, it could be described that they hold a dominant reading regarding the representation of the female villain as constructed by the producers. The findings above show that there is a shift to female villain portrayal in localised South African soap operas, particularly in the study's selected soap operas. This subverts the common convention associated with past South African soap operas as Patel (interview, 20 April 2022) *Scandal's* writer stated, “Yeah, it is a shift in that the women are not just there to be kind of romanced or the mother needing to be saved as the victim. I think that we've shifted. We're not telling those stories only, yeah, our characters are a little bit more, ah, complex”. This statement reveals that the female characters in *Scandal* are constructed to reveal the different complex nature of a character, and this agrees with Hobson (2003: 106) that “people are more complex than merely being good or bad, hero or villain... and soap opera genre enables the production to develop and reveal many aspects of major characters”. This shift also in a way helped the creators of *Uzalo* and *Scandal* to drive their narrative, agreed with Lyon's observation that “you may be shocked to learn that the characters who most drive a story is the antagonist. Whoever you designate to oppose the actions and desires of your protagonist is a powerful character and demands as much careful

development as your protagonist” (Lyon, 2004:119). An example of a female villain as portrayed in *Scandal!* can also be described as a powerful woman.

Although the character of the villainess is not new in the soap opera genre, it is evident in the narratives that the female characters' construction and representations conform to both international and local conventions of villainess depiction. However, the female character constructions subvert the international villains due to their construction within the context of South African townships which are defined by patriarchal culture. Also, their distinction is seen in the complex depictions of their roles as villains, mothers, wives, business-woman/church leaders, and de-facto heads of their homes. Their construction as Black African villains distinguishes them from international matriarchs. This helps to reveal their strength as women.

### Powerful woman

According to Grace Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2022), Boniswa is a character that demonstrates a gender power struggle:

Boniswa would have imagined that [she] had more strength than the husband and tried to push the husband, and it didn't happen. The husband took his second wife, and when she said she was losing it all, she had to take power, and she became powerful, and the power went to her head as well. That's why the end was so destructive for her. So, these are three distinct women for me in the show that I think in three different parts. Boniswa is educated already, cares for other children, opens the school, has her own children, has her own skeletons in the cupboard, and holds it together until breaking point (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022).

The findings reveal that Boniswa was manipulative, obsessed with power, and very selfish at one point, these attributes are all associated with the female villain. The character's end was destructive, this is because there is always a repercussion. This is in line with Schachter's (1998:44) comments that the villainess is punished for her attempts to manipulate the lives of the other characters within the narrative and for having the arrogance of believing that she can better control the narrative than the other characters. The villainess is punished for actions that she has taken. In the case of Boniswa she loses her integrity as an owner of a school, family business, and the love and trust of her children. From the participants' view, some of them also described MaNzuza and MaNgcobo as powerful women “because they have common power in their space, public, and man-dominated spaces (Mondli, focus group, 26 February 2023; Thando, focus group, 02

September 2022). Their description of the women as powerful was from two different perspectives, one from the space of crime and the other from a religious space. This shows that the participants acknowledge each strength of the women based on their peculiarity and diversity. Thando (focus group, 02 September 2022) further explained that the power she associates with MaNgcobo is because she should play many roles in the show – ranging from a wife, mother, businesswoman, and gangster, among others, within a patriarchal context.

### *Patriarchy*

Although the discussion above does reveal an attempt to challenge some patriarchal stereotypes, there is no denying that South Africa is a patriarchal society. Stereotypes founded on this may, therefore, portray men as a “powerful species that can either destroy or build the lives of women” (Ntshangase, 2018:1). Men who fall short of such attributes (strong, aggressive, fearless, among others) are often viewed as weak. Bantjes, Kagee, and Meissner (2016:3) revealed that some South African men feel pressured to fit into the parameters of hegemonic ideals – that a man must be aggressive and strong because that is what is expected by society and the media as the norm.

During the interview, Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022) aptly explained the issue of power. As being somewhat ‘balanced’. That although gender roles may be separated, each holds power: “I grew up in a very patriarchal society. The patriarch was there, but matriarch was [too]”. Even though the informant noted that the society was male-dominated, the influence of the matriarch was also felt:

So, we highlight patriarchy and how it operates, and then we highlight the power of a matriarch. And then, at the same time, because we come from different backgrounds, we try to highlight that this is how people see it, uh, in terms of men should do this in a world and a woman should do this in the world. And then we try to say, there's another way of looking at it. Let's just give you the chance of let's look at it differently that a woman is not a rip of a man or a shadow of a man (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022).

As at the time of the interview (April 2022), the depictions in *Uzalo*, as explained by Mogale above, subverts the view of van Zoonen (1994), who noted that media portrayals of femininity and masculinity are skewed. According to Van Zoone (1994), media reinforces gender differences and inequities rather than putting women and men in positions of equality in the private and public arenas. Here, the producers affirm that their encoded meaning concerning the ideology of

patriarchy was mainly to move away from enforcing traditional patriarchy and that is why their current seasons are not heavy in the portrayal and discourse of patriarchy. Mahlaba explains that “right now...we have almost men that are edging closer to modern” (interview, 18 May 2022). Madiya (interview, 29 April 2022) noted that ‘light patriarchy’ is still included in the construction of female characters in current soap operas, particularly *Uzalo*:

So, there is patriarchy; it exists, we all acknowledge, especially more in some areas than others. And it's about like, how then do you overcome patriarchy? You know, is it fair? Is it unfair? We do have a story, which I can just tell now when you look at Gabsile, like what happened in the last season is that she was killed and like thrown into the river, the story she actually survived. And so, she, she made it back to KwaMarsha, came back to Nkunzebombu and who is our main lead, and like started the relationship with Nkunzebombu, but then she was like dependent on the guy because I mean, she had lost literally everything in life. I mean, she didn't even have a roof over her head. So, she was very dependent on Nkunza, but she never, like ah, you know, like stop trying to get back on her feet. She then managed to get herself back on her feet by finding a stable job, and Nkunzebombu is now trying to dictate the terms of what she can and cannot do, and that is how we played the patriarchy (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

Patel (interview, 20 April 2023) shared that *Scandal!* engages patriarchy as a theme to ‘debate’ in how it is included in the storylines:

Yeah. So, with the relationship between Zinzile and Mlungisi Ngema, I think because they are a traditional family, there is this patriarchal role that he plays, and he's kind of a strong, stubborn man. But I think we couldn't have the family on the screens for so long [without] unpacking the patriarchy.... unraveling it layer by layer. Kind of looking at how it affects the lives, how it affects the choices, how it affects, um, her relationship with her children (Patel, interview, 20 April 2023).

Mogale goes as far as to assert that “[p]atriarchy is a crime” and that in their portrayal of it, storylines also include “how to overcome it” (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2023). Conversely, Nandi (focus group, 10 October 2022) expressed that polygamy is patriarchal and “I think this aspect of polygamy is something that is now being fed into most of these soap operas and whichever woman you look at, I think they're just trying to show us that there is a possibility to accept or be in polygamy whether you are a younger or an older woman”. This indicates that the participants do not hold a dominant position but a negotiated one. This could imply the fact that polygamy is now prominent in most of the localised South African soap operas, including the *Uzalo* and

*Scandal!* shows that the producers, in a way, are not only including patriarchy but also promoting it in their narratives.

Walby (1986) highlighted that township culture is patriarchal, and since cultural practices vary, so will its exhibition. According to the comments above, patriarchy is not only introduced in the narrative but it is also included as a point of analysis or debate. *Uzalo* aims to depict the various practices regarding patriarchy, simultaneously highlighting the power of matriarchs. This kind of portrayal avoids assigning preference or power to one gender over another. This more balanced portrayal creates the space for the audience to make their choices of such ideologies. This refers to the agency of preferred meaning in reading and interpreting media content by the audience. Pitkin (1967: 10) explains that even the most “single and basic meanings” can have several applications depending on what is represented and in what context.

The next section discussed if/how resilience features are incorporated in female characters.

#### Resilient and Ambitious woman

According to the findings, another character that is associated with female power, as depicted in the two soap operas, is the ambitious and driven woman. One of the characters that is constructed to possess such features in *Scandal!* according to Patel (interview, 20 April 2022), “we've got Dintle Nyathi, and she is very ambitious. She's a young woman, a mother, but also very career-driven”. The soap opera shows how the character has grown over the years, fulfilling things”. *Scandal's* Creative Producer also identified “Dintle as a survivor; she started from nothing, and she doesn't have a full education. She's a high school dropout [but] nothing stops Dintle from doing what she wants to do. The character was found to achieve what she wants to achieve” (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). The character is also associated with strength as producers further explain that “Dintle, even held a CEO position without education and now running an online TV show like a gossip show (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). In agreement, viewers also described “Dintle character as one of the strongest characters in line with the other two characters [Lindiwe and Layla] throughout the years he has been watching *Scandal!* (Philani, focus group, 10 October 2022). Zanele (focus group, 03 October 2022) also appreciated the ability of Dintle to “always stand her ground, she fights for her truth”. However, also acknowledges that the character of Dintle sometimes exhibits an element of weakness - “so, it's a mixture of both strong and weak women”. Nonka, Gabsile, Nosipho, and Shlobos are some of the characters associated with strength and

resilience by Magole, the Creative Producer (interview, 28 April 2022). The Shlobos<sup>68</sup> characters are funny, but “what they represent are those old ladies in a township” (Magole, interview, 28 April 2022). These characters, according to the producers, were included in the narrative to correct popular perceptions. For example,

You’ve got this perception that when you get old in a black community, you start to prepare for your grave. So, we are breaking that with these two old ladies that you can start anything at any age. So, they started their business, which is Shlobos. They are being helped by youngsters to build this business. So, they've got life, they are driven to inspire other old ladies that when you're old, you're not facing your grave; there is the life you have to leave. There's so much that you can give back to the community and the youngsters (Magole, interview, 28 April 2022).

The data showed that these characters are complex, this showed that women’s resilience and ability to challenge the status quo by making something out of nothing about their dreams and aspirations says a lot about the characters. Their refusal to settle for nothing as the normal norm of people their age also could give hope to people that it is never too late to start building something meaningful out of life. In some instances, some of the characters are considered strong and resilient, but some participants see them as weak. For instance, some participants viewed the Shlobos as characters associated with weaknesses: “the Shlobos always think they have to find some men for them to be complete. [Okay], you will see uMadlala crying over a man. I'm like, wow. Look how beautiful she is to just go down like that; she thinks being in love with a man is everything in life” (Ndumisa, focus group, 05 September 2022).

This implies that the audience does not necessarily decode representations in the same way. This is why Hall (1980) noted the preferred reading by decoders and with the agency of the active audience, they have the power to view or interpret things from their perspective. The findings also showed that the producers allowed factors like age, sex, gender, culture, and location, among others, to influence the construction and representation of the character of the soap operas were influenced by intersectionality theory and the audience also allowed the theory to influence their reading and interpretation. Furthermore, participants did not associate strength with some characters “because there was nothing much to learn from their characters” (Dumisile, focus group, 26 February 2023).

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<sup>68</sup> Shlolo tour is a kind of business that provides tour services for the French Institute.

It is also evident that intersectionality theory, in terms of social structure, influences how the majority of the participants identified with the character ‘Gabsile’ from *Uzalo*. She is a young female character in her 20s. Even though the character is young, if she exhibits the characteristics of a strong personality like the matriarchs, most of the participants acknowledged her uniqueness and resilience even though initially they did not understand her roots (Thulile and Nandi, focus group, 10 October 2022). The findings revealed that the weak characters noted by the participants are referred to as those characters with no moral lessons that participants could relate to or learn from. This affirms the evaluation of King’ara (2013: 106) that audience members of conventional soap operas are preoccupied with a search for moral lessons in the realism depicted.

The findings help a researcher explore the relationship between what senders – the producers encoded into texts and how receivers – the audiences – interpret or decode the messages. Senders encode messages in line with their views and ideological standpoints (intentionally depict female characters as independent, strong villains, allowing them to strive for their strength whether within contemporary or traditional lifestyles, subverting the portrayal of them as weak, strong only within the private sphere particularly kitchen, not capable of doing evil), and audiences decode these messages in line with their understanding (Hall 1993:91). The process of meaning-making by both producers and audiences of television entertainment programmes is pragmatic, particularly because people’s involvement with television is goal oriented. The producers and the audience intend to gain something from their television communication relationship (Kingara, 2010:119). Hence, it is important to ascertain the motives that influenced the construction and representation of female characters.

### **Theme 3: Influences in the construction and readings of female characters and gender roles**

#### *Innovation*

In the circuit of culture, the process of production is not limited to the technological aspects alone but also to how meaning is produced culturally and intentionally (du Gay *et al.*, 1997: 4). This is why the process of production is positioned as one of the major determinants in the manner cultural phenomena may be ‘encoded’ with their meanings and uses (du Gay *et al.*, 2013: xiii). Based on this premise, this study aimed to understand how the producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal* produce meaning culturally and intentionally. Interviewees (encoders) were asked to reflect on what influences their choices. Madiya (interview, 29 April 2022), the Head writer of *Uzalo*, responded

emphatically, “It's a deliberate attempt to innovate”. According to Madiya, female characters were intentionally constructed in a way that they could stand for themselves. This is evident in his statement below as he gave an example of Nonka, a young female character who was in a relationship with a rich dude but refused to rely on him for her financial needs rather she wants to take care of herself:

deliberately, uh, we tried to like, uh, your Nonka refusing, a beautiful Mercedes-Benzenes say, allow it's beautiful, I love you. I want to be in a relationship with you, but don't do things for me. I'll do it for myself. You know it's deliberate what we did there (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

According to Patel (interview, 20 April 2022), it is a more deliberate attempt to innovate because it makes for much more interesting TV to have women speak up to have them challenge things: “Hm, so there are more characters to play with who will kind of shake the world a little bit”. As noted in the theoretical section, certain contextual or societal factors (culture, tradition, systems, etc.) can influence the encoding and decoding of messages (Clarke, DeNora, and Vuoskoski, 2015; Dunn, *et al.*, 2011; Oppong, 2013; Schramm, 2006). These findings revealed that one of the factors that influenced the way female characters are constructed and represented in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* is a great attempt to innovate within a patriarchal society. With the participants, the word innovation was not directly used, but the creation of female villains and other powerful female characters was something new they believe the producers introduced in the current soap operas as it was not a common trait with the older South African soap operas they knew. In line, Thembeke (female, focus group, 02 September 2022) explained in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Gays and Lesbians are depicted and allowed to show their sexuality freely, and this is something we never see in olden days soap”. This finding indicates that the viewer agreed that the producers are innovating and bringing up narratives that were initially not freely spoken in the society or even their local South African show. This, to them, is a shift. Education entertainment is another theme that came up during the interview. The informants all agreed that it is one of their intentions when creating the female characters in soap operas.

### *Education Entertainment*

Entertainment education (EE), based on the description by Govender (2013:1), is “the strategic and theoretically informed process of developing educational messages using a range of media platforms to facilitate a desired behavioural or social change”. Television entertainment,

particularly the soap opera genre, is created with a deliberate element of entertainment education (Cardey *et al.*, 2013; King'ara, 2013; Tufte 2001, 2008). The creators of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* think that their shows contain an element of EE.

In the interview with *Scandal's* Creative Producer, Mahlaba, it was clear that, despite the soap opera's primary focus on providing entertainment, there are lessons that viewers can take away, which the producer referred to as 'edutainment' '(Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). Mogale further supported Mahlaba that they are "educational entertainment soapies" (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022). For instance, some of the social issues incorporated in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* includes issues that relate to crime, family, relationships, the corporate world (the business sphere), GBV, gender equality, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) community (with characters like GC and Constable Biyela in *Uzalo* and Duduzile Kubheka and Chumani Langa-Xaba in *Scandal!*) According to Ratele (2014), the LGBT community is typically viewed as being intolerant in South Africa. It is, therefore, important for characters like GC to be displayed on television. While it may or may not be intentional EE, the inclusion of (LGBT) in some ways promotes tolerance for the depiction of different femininities, masculinities, and sexualities. The depiction and popularity of such characters (GC and Dudu) within the storyline of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* goes together with the public's adoration and sometimes criticism of such representations within a localised soap opera. Madiya stated that they had a bisexual character, which initially attracted a negative response from the audience online, but that later changed with their younger viewers:

The response from social media, in the beginning, [was not pleasant]; it was like, what nonsense is this? You know, like, why are we announcing lesbians on TV? But then your younger audience is like, oh my God, we've been waiting for this. We do want to see more of this. We do want to see people ah accepting who they are and not be shy about it (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

Similarly, the *Scandal's* Creative Producer emphasised that even though edutainment can sometimes be boring, it helps the production to perhaps tell the audience a captivating story with a prosocial message to their audience:

I mean, nothing is boring like edutainment, but you have to try and put it in there somehow between the lines; there has to be edutainment. Otherwise, then it is hard to tell a story because that has to be learned, there has to be the moral of the story, and there has to be: Why are you telling that story? (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022).

The views expressed by the interviewees confirm the existence of the "grey zone" in entertainment education (Govender, 2013). This means that while the productions may not be didactically intended to be instructive, some storylines can simultaneously instruct and amuse (King'ara, 2013), thus operating in the EE's grey zone (Govender, 2013; Cardey *et al.*, 2013). The interviewees explained that *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* can be instructive because they spark conversations with viewers about moral, social and cultural issues. According to Govender (2013:5), "these often undocumented and grey zone experiences challenge our understanding of EE as a purposive or strategic communication process when non-purposive and non-strategic development of interventions reflect EE principles and EE outcomes". In this sense, soap operas seem to subtly include EE themes in their storylines, especially when it comes to modern problems and their role as stewards of culture (King'ara 2013). Understanding the motivations for the inclusion of specific gender roles in the creation of female characters helps to address some of the study's research questions.

Brown and Singhal (1999) believed that soap operas intended solely for social change are different from those created for entertainment and gratification purposes. *Scandal!* Writer Patel (interview, 20 April 2022) contradicts this conception by stating that the local show *Scandal!* is constructed to have the three main elements to their audience, which are to educate, entertain, and for social change:

Ah, so I would say that it is all three [educate, entertain, and social change]. Ah, you know, if we don't entertain the educational things and I think that it's so, especially when we're doing something like the GBV story, it's important that people understand that there are questions around the story that maybe the characters who are having things happen to them, can't express, but characters in the world can express about what's going on and about society and men and patriarchy, which, you know, it's very difficult to have the abuse to say: oh my gosh, I shouldn't have tried to control her. You're not really going to get someone to do that, but you can have what we did in terms of an educational thing is to add another man into the story who was playing the friend to the abuser and to look at that role of what do you do when you find out that someone, you know, who is like this. When do you stand up, and when do you doubt it? And through that character, and one of the other female characters who were friends with the woman who was being abused, you know, or a bunch, those kinds of subjects. And then, and I suppose that is also pushing towards social change, ah, because we're opening the subject matter, not just telling the story and, oh, it's terrible, you know?

Patel's comment above is in line with Kincaid, Rimon, Piotrow, and Coleman's (1992) standpoint

that entertainment can be an efficient approach to reaching the public with a social message. As Brown and Singhal (1990) argue, entertainment media have a high potential to enlighten audiences on various social issues such as health, environment, family planning, gender equality, and mental health. Hence, using the entertainment created by *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* the encoders ensure that their narratives are embedded with some elements of education and social change on some South African prevalent social issues. During the interview, Madiya, the *Uzalo* Head Writer, acknowledged that GBV is an issue that is prevalent at an alarming rate in the country “South Africa, as a country, is faced with Gender Based Violence (GBV), and in *Uzalo* we write against abuse. Some of our most successful stories are on GBV, where there has been a positive audience response” (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022). In *Scandal!* too the producers note that the issues sounding GVB are highlighted to educate the audience and to create discourse around the country’s disturbing rising issue of abuse.

Ah, well, I think what we always try and do is... We've got this abusive story now... on the one hand, we've got that happening to a woman. And on the other hand, we've got a woman who, so this is with them, Mbali and Jojo's relationship where basically she got her sister to sleep with him and he thought it was her sleeping with him. Ah, and in the sense, well, and it basically comes down to that she raped him, you know, because he had sex with someone he didn't consent to have sex with... Does she even see this as rape? (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022).

The kind of GBV that is portrayed in *Scandal!* as explained by Patel above, is intimate partner violence, this shows the depiction of current reality in the country as intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most common type of GBV in the county (Kirkwood, 2018, Yesufu, 2022). Furthermore, Patel noted that in terms of the depiction of GVB, “the women are not always the victims in our story”, they could sometimes be the perpetrators of GBV this subverts the popular depictions of soap operas where women are always the ones needed to be saved (Barker, 1997:83). That is, if they are villains, there is the possibility of their involvement in other crimes. However, men are victims of GBV too and this kind of portrayal is evident in the construction of female characters such as Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2022) noted, “Now we have gender-based violence, I'm not even sure how we're gonna we're going to solve it, and we slowly realising that not only is it emerging from the male side is also emerging from the female side now.” In agreement, the participants acknowledged that the soap operas educate on GBV, and they are also aware that either party could be the victim not only women (Londiwe – female, focus group, 02 September 2022). The participant further notes that the show also brings awareness to the side effects of abuse and

being exposed to abuse, giving instance:

Yes [okay], they reflect on reality; I will look at NJeza and Nosipho. So, when they are in a relationship, NJeza beats Nosipho and speaks harsh words to her. Well, that happens in reality. Well, in most homes out there, mothers are being beaten by their husbands. Well, badly that happens in front of their children, which causes their children to grow up with anger issues and hatred inside their hearts, yes, just like Njeza who had issues because of the abused home he came from (Londiwe, focus group, 02 September 2022).

According to Omphile (focus group, 02 September 2022), the show has empowered female viewers in a way to say no to things they do not want to do – “now we are allowed to say no as she said that if you don’t want to have the sex you say no, but olden days, our mothers were scared to voice out - I don't want to do this, they were forced to have to do it because they need kids but now we do go to the clinic even to have kids and so now it's much better to be in”. This showed that the viewers are maintaining a dominant position with the producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandals* that the show contained elements of EE.

One of the concerns raised by Mahlaba is that “we need to examine how these women get to that point where they're also as violent as men, maybe they're tired” (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). Feminist media theory is the interrogating of powerful gender norms that are reinforced to a greater or lesser extent in media and the relationship between media representation of gender and inequalities in broader social life (McDougall, 2012). In this way, it may be useful to also interrogate how men are being subordinated in certain events/contexts.

Intersectional feminism is understanding how women's overlapping identities — including race, class, ethnicity, space, religion, and sexual orientation — impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination (Dastagir, 2017). Mueni (2014: 6) argues that “scriptwriters and producers need to be empowered to understand the role their works can play in the attainment of gender parity”. Mahlaba aligns with Mueni’s view as she described their influence: “as storytellers [and] we have the power to set the pace and we have the power to set the trends” (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). Hence, she further expressed that as storytellers, they should “come up with a storyline where both parties (victims and perpetrators) could be healed and move forward” (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). This implies that the encoders acknowledged their influential role in gender representations.

With the rise in GBV, gender inequality is a serious concern in South Africa (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, 2012; Salahodjaev and Azam, 2015). In a world where gender inequality is rife and GBV is a daily lived experience for some, this kind of increased representation of GBV serves to excuse social injustices towards women (Blose, 2020). Gender inequality was another issue that is encoded in the construction of female characters:

I think that the idea that women can have a choice is good and that both can be right, depending on you.... which is what I think equality is about. It's about women being given the space to choose, as opposed to now competing for a head-on head, to head with the man in the business. What we've done is we've got strong women who are mothers and who are homemakers, and then we've also got really strong, intelligent, driven businesswomen. And then we've got hustling women who are trying to get somewhere. So, I think that yeah, for me, it's that it is a way of encouraging equality as opposed to showing one (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022).

One of the areas where the study is located is in South Africa's largest province, KwaZulu-Natal. As noted earlier, the province is rich in traditional African culture, and gender equality remains a sensitive issue to some. Hence to promote gender equality, it is essential to spread awareness among audiences that gender roles are not fixed as perceived but change over time and across geography (Butler, 2010). Mogala (interview, 28 April 2022) stated earlier that their narrative is within the township setting. According to Blose (2020:86), the effects of South Africa's history are very much visible in townships and are described as breeding grounds for patriarchal traditional practices. Furthermore, Blose (2020) emphasised that South African townships are socially, culturally, and economically diverse. The producers expressed that in their constructions and representations of female characters with regards to their gender roles took cognizance of the noticeable diversities in townships; however, their narratives tried to avoid the enforcement of traditional roles, but diverse representations were depicted for audiences to explore their negotiating power as "we help people to start seeing it differently" (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022). According to Mueni (2014: 38), "violence against women is still a major problem, religions, and cultural fundamentalisms are on the increase, discriminatory laws still serve to control women's lives and bodies, and harmful traditional practices persist". The media's perpetuation of negative stereotypes subjected women to repressive norms. The media, rather than serving as a vehicle to advance gender equality, accessibility, and opportunities, emphasises harmful preconceptions that prevent women from realising their full potential and claiming their proper place in society (Blose, 2022). This posed the need for regulatory bodies and policies that guide

the production companies and media at large for fair and position representation of female characters concerning their gender roles.

### *Production companies and regulations in the construction of female characters*

During the interview, the interviewees were asked if and how the production company for which they work influenced the creation of the female characters. According to *Uzalo*'s Head writer, their construction of characters, particularly the female character is according to the specification of the governing bodies "I answer more to channel, which is the SABC, and they always like to throw in the, ah, the emphasis, you know, like lets us be fair to women" (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022). These regulations guide the production of South African soap operas (see Chapter Two). The broadcasting regulator, the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA), has set in place a series of highly specific local content regulations that reward the use of single (African) language production in localities outside of the main Johannesburg and Cape Town hubs (Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). Mahlaba (interview, 28 May 2022) affirmed the importance of the use of local languages in South African soap operas as she stated, "I happen to be lucky to speak, read and write South African languages all of them". The Creative producer further explained that the use of local dialect allows the depth of a narrative to be revealed and helps the audience to relate better because the integrity of the culture portrayed is better explored and this can be limited when the English language is used as the main medium of the narration considering is a story from a localised context.

I'm lucky that when I watch a show, any show in the country, I hear the language firsthand; I don't have to read subtitles. Yes, and you can tell when most of our characters speak in their mother tongue yoh... you'll see their strengths from the core. It is when you go to English, they sometimes get lost [lol...] (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022).

The encoder further affirms that she is "an advocate for language because I know that we can go deep to those layers that English does not allow us to go to, you know". According to Ndlovu's statement in an interview with Mkwazi, the use of language also helps the audience to connect to the narrative as it also assists in the reflection of true South Africa (the societal happenings) and its people drawing more viewers to the genre of soapies. "South Africans want stories that reflect their lives" (Mkwazi, 2015). In sum, it could be noted that language is one aspect of diversity because it serves as a symbol of who we are. Beyond means of communication, language could be

described as a vehicle of culture and heritage and provided a means of identifying what we mean by communities. This helped to explain why audiences also easily relate to stories that are narrated with vernacular they are familiar with. As it assisted in the deep presentation of what is represented by the encoders. That is, helped to reveal the setting of the soap operas beyond their ordinary setting to the audience.

According to the circuit of culture, regulation provides a sense of right and wrong and what is appraised as acceptable and unacceptable within the cultural context and then “forms the context” in which gender roles are packaged in the construction and representation of female characters in the South African soap operas (Curtin and Gaither, 2007:38). According to Madiya, the depiction of female villain in the South African soap operas were based on the request of SABC:

We've done so much positive around women that [SABC] said: can we then have like a female villain? ...In a way that doesn't say so that we not [be] saying that women are only good because they are bad as well. They do want to see women portrayed in different ways that reflect society again (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

The comment above reiterates Thompson's (1997a:1) view that meaning is also generated within the regulation moment: “regulate and organize conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions” by which the female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* should be constructed and depicted. The participants did not mention language as a major factor when reading and interpreting female characters, but they are of the view that “African stories should be narrated using African context and values, not the Americans” (Linga, focus group, 05 October 2022). This implies that they also appreciate the localisation of content. Another way that the production company influences the construction of characters is through the involvement of individuals in the writing room. This sub-theme was prominent among the expert informants (producers) during the interview.

### Writing room

In the theoretical chapter, it was established through the feminist media theory that a long-dominated assumption existed that if women-controlled media production, content would be different and positive (Steiner, 2014). This application of “difference feminism” (which rejects patriarchy's devaluation of the feminine to affirm a positive value) predicts that women running broadcasting and film studios would offer more diverse, creative, and “positive” representations

of women (Steiner, 2014:362). Patel (interview, 20 April 2022) reflects on the value of this female-led production: “I think that we've got a lot of strong women in the room in the writing room [and] when we're creating characters, obviously, [we] first start from ourselves, you know”.

Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022) shares the ways in which the writing room is heavily influenced by women:

We do have a lot of women, who are driving the ship in the writing room. Ah yes, the head writer is male, but we do have a lot of females because they are the individuals that constructed the stories and then they pitch to the HOD [heads]. And then, uh, even our head of channel is a female. So, ah, our stories, we do have a lot of females, ah, in our room that pushes and make sure that we protect ah, the stories and tell the stories accordingly without just some second information as male.

Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2022) highlights the importance of a difference in age and marital status and not only gender, highlighting the need for intersectional awareness:

In that room [writing], it's me, Sylvia, who is 60 years old. And there's Ameerah who is about 35, there's Nkhankhila who is about 42. There's ah Teresika was about 48 these are just women, there's Yonella who is 30. So, you can see there are already three generations of women [in the team], and then there's Rosalind as well who's 56 now. Finally, only two women are married in that whole group.

Mahlaba continued in her explanation, that the individual writer has a large influence on the kind of character that is constructed – “it depends on who's writing, sometimes when these women are written by men who were brought up by strong women, you find strong women coming up. If they're written by someone who really does not think much of women, that also comes through” (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). One of the assumptions of feminist media theory is that women will be represented positively if they are the ones behind the scenes doing the construction. Some believe that male authors cannot write accurately from the female perspective or present feminist ideals because they have not experienced life as women (Lange, 2008). Mahlaba challenges this by noting that men can write strong women, as his framework of knowledge and experience is based on observations and appreciation for strong women. According to Kinsey (2019:36), female directors tend to hire more women in key roles and depict women in a more positive light than men. The author further expresses that all the movies directed by women could also be classified as female stories, with plots directly subverting traditional male stories. While

there are strong women in many films directed by men, women in these movies tend to have less agency than in the movies directed by women. In *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* even though women are not necessarily the ones currently directing the narratives, their influence as women in the writing room is seen as most of the female characters in the soap operas are constructed and depicted with agency in their different spheres of life. This is substantiated in the data through the construction of characters like Lindiwa, Nonka businesswomen in their early 20s, Dintle in her mid-30s who rose from a waitress to a CEO, Grace, Layla, MaNuza, MaNgcobo in their early 50s among others.

Alternatively, female dominance in the writing room is also one of Madiya's (interview, 29 April 2022) concerns as he bemoans the larger number of women in the writing room: "I always complained that, you know, our room is dominated by women. Yeah. Like men are underrepresented" (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022). He further explained that in the writing team of 12 people, four are men (with two being interns). Madiya's comments could imply that the writing room has always been associated with or known to be a male-dominated space within the South African film industry. However, the current increase of women in the writing room is termed to be a good improvement in their visibility within the South African entertainment industry, particularly soap operas, but the concern of the Head writer is the fact that men are beginning to lose presence in a space that they are once dominant considering the current ratio of men to women in the writing room. How social structure influenced construction and interpretation is discussed in the next section.

#### *Social structure influence on construction and interpretation*

According to Dillon (2014), social structure is the set of guiding ideas and laws that characterize a society and primarily shape how people behave. Culture, social class, social position, roles, groups, and social institutions, among others, are some of the elements of social structure. People's actions are governed by social structures. That is, a person's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are influenced by their position within the social structure, which includes their socioeconomic class, social standing, roles they perform, and the cultures, groups, and social institutions they are a part of.

In intersectionality theory, women are not the only focus, in this study, it is used to seek to explain how women's lives are constructed by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression. From an

analytical framework angle, intersectionality (through the element of social structure) assisted in understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities are integrated to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. In this case, how does it/not assist in the construction and interpretation of female characters? Hence, it identifies multiple factors of advantages and disadvantages are gender, caste, sex, race, geographical location, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability, weight, and physical appearance (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Anthias, 2014; Collins, 2015; Steiner, 2014; Tucker, 2012; Veenstra, 2011). According to the encoders of *Uzalo*, the story is based in a township with relatable characters. Given instance, the encoder noted that “the people you see around in the township, you are certain to see someone like Gabsile, someone like a Nonkanya, someone like a Mamlambo, it is honestly that is just like life experience” (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022). Furthermore, Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022) explained that in the storyline, you will see “a young township female, who is driven. She is seen facing hardships in the township, but she's trying to make it in the township”. Similarly, Ndumisa (focus group, 05 September 2022) also noted that geographic location “influences how viewers interpret female characters because individuals from rural areas behave and react to things differently from their urban counterparts”.

This shows that location is one of the major social structures that influence the construction of the female character as their identity must portray the culture and practices of the location to enhance better reliability to the viewers. Age is another factor used in the narrative, the combination of young, middle-aged, and old characters is all included for narrative authenticity. This kind of identity and lifestyle, as noted by Musa (male, focus group, 05 September 2022), is associated with locations such as Avci, Ibret, and Receptoğlu (2017) stated that people develop their identity according to the region and climate conditions they live in. The findings indicated that in the interpretation of characters in *Uzalo* or *Scandal!* location plays a major role in how the character is portrayed. There is often a high tendency to construct rural women within the context of either traditional or contemporary lifestyles for more relatable stories. Also, audiences in different locations will likely interpret the portrayal similarly. For instance, a rural audience may be more conservative and traditional as compared to an urban audience, which could lean toward a more contemporary lifestyle and portrayal (Mcgrane, Berdahi, and Bell, 2016). This is why when producers are “portraying characters in a cultural role, for instance, marriage, they make sure they perform and portray some traditional wedding rights” (Behati, focus group, 02 September 2022).

Such depiction of cultural practices also, in a way, helps the audience to identify with the location of the narrative setting since one of the conventions of soap opera is a relatable location set (Hobson, 2003:70). According to du Gay *et al.*, (2013: 12), to decode cultural practices, we must place such objects or behaviors within an interpretative framework shared by both the encoder and the decoder, in this case, the location could serve as an interpretative framework that both the producers and the consumers share.

According to Noxolo (female, focus group, 03 October 2022), in South African soap operas you find out that “it's very rare where you find that like a Black woman is successful or in power. For instance, in *Uzalo*, you found that when it started, a woman like MaNgcobo was already successful”. All the participants believe that the success of MaNgcobo from the inception of the narrative is because *Uzalo* is mainly Black cast, “but most of the time we find that when it's a black person, it's always the case of them being poor and having to work their way up to the top. Whereas you find people like Layla who from the moment she was on *Scandal!* was already rich and she's fine” (Noxolo, focus group, 03 October 2022). This finding is similar to that of Funeka Thabethe (2008), who noted that whiteness ideals (body type, skin colour, and hair texture, among others and often Western culture mostly influenced how female characters are represented in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!*) played a dominant role in the construction and depiction of Black female characters in *Generations*. Here, the participants believed that the issue of race plays a significant role in the construction of characters in terms of social status, particularly when there are mixed races in the show. Hence, this study's finding indicates that female characters in *Uzalo* are Black and the majority in *Scandal* are Black. Where there are mixed races, White women are placed in the high level of social status from the initial state of the narrative as compared to their Black women counterparts whose process of success is gradually depicted, for instance, Dintle.

The findings further revealed that in terms of the hierarchies and power dynamics that manifest at the intersections of multiple social categories (Chai, 2021), there are differences. As participants noted, Whiteness (White female characters) is often depicted in a more hierarchal position (position of power) from the beginning of the narrative, while Black women are portrayed later in the show and otherwise only in the instances where the show is mono-racial. Although not noted initially in the study, family values and upbringing came up as part of a social structure that influences interpretation through their lived experiences (family values and upbringing). Hence, it

is established in this study that social categories influence the construction and interpretation of the representation of female characters in the selected soapies, particularly in the aspect of power or hierarchy placement. The study's findings also revealed that the elements of social structure assisted the participants in evaluating the influence the show might have on them.

According to Bongani (male, focus group, 02 September 2022), the construction and portrayal of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* are influenced in “positive and negative influences”. The participant further gives an instance: “Negative in the life of crime like MaNgcobo and sometimes someone might be inspired positively relating to the situation that character undergoes in some certain time [MaNgcobo] as a good mother to her kids and how she protects her family” (Bongani, focus group, 02 September 2022). Another positive influence as noted by another participant “is that through the portrayal of GBV and how to voice out, many individuals who are suffering in silence were able to voice out and call for help” (Lunga, 05 September 2022).

During the discussion, a participant noted that “producers, when putting their narratives [together] in the soap opera genre, should always consider the African context when adapting the equality of people [in] how they imposed Western life in the African soil. It will never work in Africa” (Lunga, 05 September 2022). This implied that context is very important for portrayal to be more relatable to the targeted audience (the customs, culture, beliefs, and social stands should be included in the narrative). For gender-related issues to be communicated in Africa, the social structure element should be included in the narrative. When considering the issues surrounding gender, context is one of the important elements to be considered<sup>69</sup>. This is because gender relations are context-specific (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), 2003).

A few viewer participants agreed that the generic convention of disruption plays a significant role in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* For instance, the participants noted that: “Soapies portray marriages that will fail at the end. If there's a relationship, they will portray it and make sure that it fails. We've never seen a relationship that will start nicely”. The acknowledgment of disruption in the soap operas by the participants further confirms the description of the soap opera genre by Modleski (1982) as feminine due to the unending nature, its lack of resolve, and the constant disruption, which can also be associated with feminist thought because it creates a forum that enables female

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<sup>69</sup> Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/sex-and-gender> [Accessed on 04/08/2022]

voices to be heard. However, the role and influences that media have on its audiences were also recognized in place of media, particularly with the current pandemic of GBV in the country (see Chapter Two).

The participants' concerns regarding the short-lived portrayal of marriages that work and overcome challenges showed that the viewers believed that positive and lasting marriages and relationships in soap operas will also influence their viewers in society at large. Hence, this implied that the audience held a dominant position that media largely influences her viewers. Even though the story constructed and portrayed Lindiwa as young, she was still able to fulfill all her dreams within a cultural setting and still be a career woman with a successful home. Participants viewed this kind of portrayal as positive because it shows the accomplishment of possibilities within a system that is defined as patriarchal. Concerning MaNgcobo's portrayal, participants acknowledge her complex character, as Hobson (2003) noted, but they chose to only associate with her positive attributes/behaviour within a South African context. This shows how participants are deeply immersed in the storylines (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000). The concept of the Shlobos brings hope and essence of living to the older generation, as it instills in its viewers that you have still been working or building a system that can still operate even in old age, hence subverting the popular belief that once you are old, you should start preparing and waiting for your death like the expert informant noted (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2023). This kind of influence showed how the media's portrayal of women and girls does not only influence attitudes but also has the potential to shape cultural norms and expectations on gender's role in society, potentially excluding women from full and effective participation in public life (Komarova, 2021). This further indicates that when viewers watch soap operas, they voluntarily engage, whether positively or negatively, with its content and they can identify with it (Cohen, 2001) through the agency of an active audience (Hall, 1980). After engaging with the soap operas, the study evaluated if/not the representations are relatable with huge elements of realism

#### **Theme 4: Perceptions of realism and relatability**

One of the attributes of the community model of soap operas is that the genre mostly deals with everyday life issues (Geraghty, 1995). This is described as realism. Realism in soap operas reflects the contemporary social issues familiar to audiences, which allows them to connect and associate with plots and characters (Geraghty, 2006; Kilborn, 1992). Thus, realism is created through settings,

events, language, and characters (Qasmi, 2020). This explains why Hobson (1982) states that soap operas are concerned with the portrayal of people and the problems faced in their daily lives involving their personal lives and relationships. Findings in this study show that *Uzalo* and *Scandal*'s female characters, with a focus on gender roles, were constructed with the convention of social-cultural realism. Again, one of the reasons why this study is grounded within the cultural studies approach is mainly because it deals with daily activities of life, how they are constructed, and how individuals relate to these activities in their everyday lives (Turner, 1996).

Hall (2013:5) noted that “cultural studies has paid a tremendous amount of attention in one way or another to the centrality of representations and the practice of representation”, which is one of the cardinal elements of the circuit of culture model (du Gay *et al.*, 1997) used in this study. Hence, part of the concern of this study is to investigate if/how society influences the construction and representation of female characters and to evaluate if/how the audience of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* relate to those constructions. The Creative Director Eric Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022) emphatically stated that society does influence the construction and representation of female characters because of the necessity to tell their authentic stories:

You need to, when you're watching a show, you need to see yourself in there. You need to see your aunt. You need to see someone in there. Do you know what I'm saying? So, we do get inspiration from the authentic life that we experienced. And then have inspirational people out there, powerful female people without going far maybe making an example of a female person that's starting to break into other spaces. Ah, I would say Mamkhize for one [in *Isibaya*]. Ah, we are inspired by those kinds of people. Ah, we said that our personal lives, but focusing on the back of their career in how they build it themselves, in how they break into a male-dominated space without backing down. I mean, she stood against powerful people. So, we are inspired by those kinds of things. She fought for a team to be where it is today, again a male-dominated space. Yes, society does influence how we construct our stories a lot.

From the comment above, it is evident that to portray realism, the creators of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* are not only influenced by societal happenings but also by the content portrayal of other localised South African soap operas. This aligned with the views of Stefano DellaVigna and Eliana La Ferrara (2015), who stated that the role played by the content of (other) soap operas leads to imitative behavior of other producers and viewers. That is, positive media portrayal of a role model leads to imitation. In this case, the creator of the study's selected soap operas does not only allow

their realistic portrayal of female characters to be influenced by the societal and current happenings but they are also influenced by the successful portrayal of some lead roles by other localised South African soap operas. This could also be said that trends occur in production companies. That is, some representation of a particular character or issues occur due to their prominence within a particular time or season.

During the interview with Mahlaba, she revealed that the female characters were deliberately constructed so that the portrayal would be interpreted as proximate to the audience's experiences; hence she emphasized it as a "true reflection" of South African society (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022). The findings aligned with the description of realism as a "set of conventions by which the drama appears to be a representation of the real world with motivated characters, recognizable locations, and believable social problems" (Barker, 1997:78). This is the reason most soap operas are in areas with which the audience can geographically identify (Hobson, 1982; 2003). Substantiating the data gathered, Mondli (focus group, 26 February 2023) stated that "yes, I do think that the portrayal of women is a true reflection". The participant further explained that in terms of dating, "it's always been a thing for women in South Africa to date people with money. And for men, I believe the issue of crime [Okay], a lot of male characters are involved in crime". Dumisile (focus group, 26 February 2022) noted that in *Uzalo*, it's definitely a 100% portrayal of the society that we live in [Okay]. Right now, we are "living in a society that is full of thugs and people are committing crime to run their business on money which is simply stealing cars to run their business, so, it's a portrayal of something that happens in our societies".

In South Africa currently, according to participant Lesedi (focus group, 02 September 2022), "it is rare to find a father and mother who are having kids and are still in a relationship. For instance, Nhlamulo and Vuvu. So, once kids/pregnancies are involved, they always separate". These storylines are included for dramatic effect and arguably mirror South African society. According to the Statistics records (Stats SA) (2016), 41.3% of homes are headed by women, and after 5 years, Lungelo Matangira (2021:1) reported that only "31.7% of black children stayed with their biological, compared to 51.3% of coloured children, 86.1% of Indian/Asian children and 80.2% of white children". Ratele *et al.*, (2012) demonstrated that there is a huge case of fatherlessness in South African homes; their findings showed that women are the ones shouldering most of the family responsibilities in the absence of men or patriarchal figures.

The findings substantiated the observation by Ratel *et al*, that the portrayal of female characters with successful relationships strives better when kids are not involved is not fiction but a reoccurring situation in the context of South Africa. What could cause just drastic resentment in a relationship that was noted to blossom with love once a baby is on the way? But there is a common saying: children bring joy, or are there other factors for such retrogression? This is not the focus of this study, but it is an area that could require further study. In essence, realism helps uphold a level of recognition among people, as supported by Strinati, who opined that the portrayal of reality by soap operas helps gain and maintain its popularity (Strinati, 2000).

In terms of GBV, Mpho (focus group, 02 September 2022) noted that “yes, they reflect on reality, giving NJeza and Nosipho as an instance of an abusive relationship, which currently happens in reality”. The participants further expressed:

Well, in most homes out there, mothers are being beaten by their husbands. Well, badly, that happens in front of their children, which causes their children to grow up with anger issues (Mpho, focus group, 02 September 2022).

This shows the prominence of GBV in South African society and its influence not only on the victims but also on children who are exposed to or experienced GBV at home, like anger issues, as studies indicate some impacts of GBV on children – GBV effects may compromise general relational skills, growth, and wellbeing as well as post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, self-depreciation, problems at school and with concentration, low self-esteem, and drug or alcohol abuse (Katzmann *et al.*, 2003; Montserrat *et al.*, 2022; Moylan *et al.*, 2010; Stanley, 2011; Tsavoussis *et al.*, 2014).

Since soap operas are known for the portrayal of realism which shows the practical understanding and acceptance of the actual nature of life/world rather than mere idealism that is seldom centered on female audience women and families (Barker, 1997). This enables viewers to identify with those portrayals as it provides the means to view their lived experiences (Geraghty, 2006; Hobson, 2003; 2006; Tager, 2010). This confirms the view of the producers that their constructions of soap’s characters are derived from research carried out in the community or township to ensure that reality is depicted. According to Madiya (interview, 29 April 2023), before engaging in the writing room, as the Head writer, he carries out research by just:

like taking a Texas into the [community] before the COVID-19, just to hear what people are saying

in that environment, and that's how you get your story. You walk around and then you want to like, hear like some expressions, but [due to the limitation of the pandemic, the personal walking around the community no longer works]. So, now the research depends on the storyliners, you know. So, it's like you work on a particular story, then it will be on them to do that research (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

Similarly, Mahlaba (interview, 18 May 2022) noted that such research, as Madiya mentioned, helped them as encoders whenever a character requires further research to enrich the narrative and to ensure the authenticity of stories and representations. Conversely, participants believe that the soap opera depictions are not a total reflection of reality but are infused with some elements of fiction and stereotypical depictions. According to Musa (focus group, 05, September 2022), the construction and representation of female characters in *Uzalo and Scandal* are actual “depictions of reality to a certain extent”. Another participant also agreed with the depiction of reality by the two soap operas but with some reservations, which appeared like a suspension of disbelief:

There is this thing about TV: it makes [crime] look so easy and possible, whereas, in reality, it is way too difficult. Also, TV doesn't portray the results of the crime. It does it, maybe you go to jail for three weeks and then the person is back on screen. But you know, in reality, you go to jail for 15 years, you know. I think that's the part they do not portray. I think it is because it's TV and drama (Thando – female, focus group, 02 September 2022).

The findings reveal that the representation of female characters in the two selected local soap operas (*Uzalo* and *Scandal!*) maintained the main objective of soap operas, which is to entertain, but that there are elements of social realism. According to Barker (1997:78), realism is a “set of conventions by which the drama appears to be a representation of the real world with motivated characters, recognisable locations, and believable social problems”. This showed that *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* have a higher degree of “verisimilitude,” reflecting “real life,” which further confirmed the two soap operas as community soap operas (Gledhill, 2003:360). This explains why *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* are among the most-watched soap operas in South Africa. Internationally including in South Africa, soap operas are known for drawing in female audiences and showcasing strong and powerful women known as the matriarchs (Brown, 1994; Geraghty, 1991; Hobson, 1982, Marx, 2008; Onuh, 2017). In this study with regards to the concept of gender roles, the construction and representation of female characters also resonated with the public. On the one hand, the reason for this is that in contrast to pure idealism, which is rarely focused on the needs of female viewers and

their families, soap operas are renowned for their portrayal of realism, which demonstrates the practical awareness and acceptance of the actual nature of life and the world (Barker, 1997). This, on the other hand, assists the viewers to identify with those portrayals as it provides the means through which they view their lived experiences (Geraghty, 2006; Hobson, 2003; 2006; Tager, 2010).

Even though the participants acknowledged the involvement of realism in the portrayal as the encoder intended, some of the participants noted that the representation, to some extent, is not a complete depiction of reality because of exaggeration, which is an element of melodrama. It is centered on “the moral fantasy of showing forth the essential ‘rightness’ of the world order...” (Cawelti, 1976:45). The acting format, lingering close-up shots, dramatic music, and several twists that frequently undermine the plausibility of the plot or narrative are all used to intensify the situation here. From the findings, it was evident that one of the participants described melodrama as an instrument that helps to capture and sustain the interest of the viewers of soap operas. This participant’s view indicates the importance of melodrama to soap opera, this falls in line with Cappello’s (2021) view that melodrama is the foundation of many forms of popular entertainment and not only soap operas.

The findings showed that participants hold a negotiated position, which involves participants holding a mixture of dominant and oppositional views. Here, viewers accept the hegemonic viewpoint of realism portrayal by producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal* at a general level but seek exceptions in terms of complete societal reality depiction, which is based on their own beliefs built from lived experiences. That is, the message is accepted and understood but modified to fit their viewpoints, cultural context, and discourses (Hall, 1993:103). According to Chris Barker (1997:79), melodrama is another convention of soap operas; it is the “heightened sense of the dramatic, a focus on emotions and life’s torments where characters may appear to have insufficient motivation from a ‘realist’ point of view”. According to Zafirau (2009), one of the means that producers get familiar with the happenings in each society is due to research by the producers. The findings show evidence that producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal* explore this option to access the happenings in society that are current and trending. The data indicated that the portrayal of realism in a community/society shows that the two soap operas adopted the community model of soap operas. Hence, the conventional aspects of the community models play out and influence the

characterisations of the female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Therefore, the findings show that the producers deliberately aligned to the aspects of community models through depictions of community/society reality in their construction of characters. However, most of the participants do not know the specific model adopted by the producers. According to their perceptions, they identified a shift in soap opera norms (not a complete representation of reality, over- exaggeration is observed).

Madiya (29 April 2023) further commented that their portrayal is not only about reflecting actual South African society and life experiences but “especially because our characters are very relatable”. He explained that in as much as “we want to protect women, we also want to portray characters that are relatable to the female audience”. He gave an instance that the people you see around in the township, you are certain to “see someone like Gabsile, someone like a Nonkanya, ah, someone like a Mamlambo, it is honestly that is just like life experience” (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022). To further expand on this, Madiya gave an instance that fully demonstrates how characters are relatable:

I think *Uzalo* is very real in that sense because even when we do our research, I'll tell you a story. Like very recently we had one of the actors. He is a known actor in the country and his character refused to shoot the script because he was so shocked at how close the story was to home, you know? So basically, what we had written was so close that he thought that maybe I knew him and maybe somehow like found out about his story. And yet, I didn't even know the guy. We had cast someone else, but the person wasn't pulling it off. And so, we had to recast. That's how he got the job and because of how relatable the story is, you know, he felt that maybe we kind of stole the story from him. So, all our characters and our story are very relatable. You go around the communities a lot of people do relate to them (Madiya, interview, 29 April 2022).

Such kind of relatability to the female character portrayed is also acknowledged by the viewers. Nonka, Nosipho, MaNzuza, and Mbali are some of the characters that participants relate to personally or due to the experiences of individuals around them. According to Lesedi (Focus group, 02 September 2022) she stated that one of the characters she related with the most is “Dintle’s character”. The participant was able to relate to the character since she had a similar experience with teenage pregnancy and she noted one of her regrets by saying, “If I was brave enough, I wasn’t also going to give my baby away for adoption, but I wasn't brave enough. So, I know what Dintle was feeling by that time when she gave Motshabi away” (Lesedi, focus group,

02 September 2022).

The essence of this is that people may relate to others with whom they share a common understanding. In other words, Shaw (2010) noted that whatever is contained in media texts or contents, people desire to see those who are like them in those representations. The findings show that participants can relate to some specific characters because the experiences they are depicted in are similar to their lived experiences. The familiarity of the experiences portrayed in the soap operas made the participants see their lives being played back to them, further enhancing the authenticity of the portrayal to be a reality instead of fiction to the audience. In terms of representation, one cannot know what a language represents unless one knows the language (du Gay *et al.*, 1997). In this study, the participants are familiar with the situations of the characters as it is something they have experienced or are currently experiencing at the time of the interview. In instances where they are not the ones directly [male participants] experiencing similar situations, they could relate because they have a sister or neighbour that has experienced similar situations. This kind of lived experience affirms the notion that soap opera preference may be connected to the idea that people relate to representation that reinforces and reflects their personalities, attitudes, and emotions (Rentfrow *et al.*, 2011: 1141).

This further indicates that the study's participants did not just watch the soap operas (*Uzalo* and *Scandal!*), but they felt as if they were involved with the lives of the characters. Also, this further ascertains the study's initial assumption that such reinforcements and reflections can be apparent in the way these groups of people (UKZN students in this study) see themselves and other people because of cultural, traditional, gender, class, and race (as the case may be) evident in the South African sociocultural context and their consumption of character depictions in South African soap operas. This again reaffirms the idea that visual or verbal texts are polysemic and could have various meanings to different groups (Hall, 1980; Philo, 2008). Hence, in terms of realism portrayal by the two soap operas, the participants held a negotiated reading but held a dominant reading with regard to character relatability.

Considering the character construction relatability, the informants were if there are changes in the way female characters are constructed and represented when compared with the past South African soap operas. Both creators of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* noted that there is a shift in the way female

characters are currently constructed. According to Eric Mogale *Uzalo*'s Executive Director, there have been some changes, based on his observations generated from his experiences over the years with other soap operas:

Female characters were always [depicted as] mistresses, secretaries, people who cause chaos, and there is that innocent female in the house as a housewife. There is that slay queen who is going to disrupt everything and there is also an innocent secretary. So, over the years, we've stopped seeing those roles, those secretary roles. We kind of like phase them out (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022).

Similarly, Mahlaba from *Scandal!* (interview, 18 May 2022) highlights the duality of the situation:

So, I can genuinely tell you that nothing has changed. But a lot has changed. I will explain what I mean. Because in our early days, when we started acting and everything, female characters, were informed by our mothers. Then later you start watching television, and you start seeing women's violence, you start seeing slay queens, where they are constantly queened today. But they've always been there, they just come in different names, different times of our lives. And they're portrayed differently (Mahlaba, interview, 18 May 2022).

From Mahlaba's comment, it is evident that there is a shift, and the shift is not based on the construction and representation of new roles but that these roles have been in existence just that they are repackaged and reinvented. This finding subverts Hui (2010) finding of 13 years ago that there are scant depictions of images that promote aspects of women as being intelligent, independent, and socially responsible. Compared to the past soap operas, Mogale (interview, 28 April 2022) explained that "there are more female characters that are running companies that are, more in the driving seat and are telling stories in a feminist environment [.....] So, we've moved on a bit". He further emphasised that "in terms of how we saw women or how people perceived women [in past soap operas], it was always a woman belongs in the kitchen, they belong in the house. So, we were breaking that kind of stereotype and, ah, how we see [construct] our characters, they are driven, our female characters are driven (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022). This type of time-dependent portrayal was read as it was intended by some of the viewer participants:

*Uzalo*, is a current soap, right? So, it portrays women of our time, women who indulge in businesses, who participate, and who are at the forefront of most things. Unlike those women from back in the days who worked or who believed that their place was plowing in the kitchens. Now women of our time they're goal-driven (Thando, focus group, 02 September 2022).

*Uzalo*'s Head writer Modiya concurred with Mogale's view, "we are trying something different by writing female villains. In traditional soap operas, the villains are usually men and are usually killed off" (Modiya, interview, 29 April 2022). Furthermore, Modiya (interview, 29 April 2022). says "now you can have like a female villain. So, there is the shift and it's very interesting because it's not like it's shifting from good to bad. Ah, it's just different, so definitely there is a shift". In agreement, Patel (interview, 20 April 2022) *Scandal*'s Writer stated "Yeah, it is a shift in that the women are not just there to be kind of romanced or the mother needing to be saved as the victim. I think that we've shifted. We're not telling those stories only, yeah, our characters are a little bit more, ah, complex". This statement reveals that the female characters in *Scandal* are constructed to reveal the different complex nature of a character, and this agrees with Hobson (2003: 106) that "people are more complex than merely being good or bad, hero or villain... and soap opera genre enables the production to develop and reveal many aspects of major characters". Again, Patel acknowledged that the construction and representation of a female villain is a common character currently among many South African soap operas by stating that "female villain is strong at the moment, ah, across many soap operas we've got quite a lot of very fiery actresses who are very strong" (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022). Participants also noticed the introduction of a female villain in the soap opera stating that "in the older soapies we never experienced a place where a woman is a gangster stealing cars or bombing ATMs but now, we can see that in *MaNgcobo*" (Mpho, focus group, 02 September 2022).

Expert informants briefly expressed the reasons behind this shift in the current portrayal of female characters, "the changes are always driven by time, the changes are driven by the current situation and what's happening out there in society" (Mogale, interview, 28 April 2022). One of the conventions of entertainment television is its depictions of the dramas of everyday reality (Ives, 2007:154). This is one of the elements that push the changes in the depiction of female characters. This indicates that changes in female characterisations are incremental, or slow...as society changes.... these changes are reflected in how characters are represented Ameera Patel noted this as one of the elements that cause the shift that the soap opera genre in South Africa is currently experiencing – "I think it's the world that's changing. But also, that the women who are creating the stories are very vocal in the room. And some of it is also what we'd like to see. So, it's not necessarily just what's happening" (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022). Also, the involvement of women in the writing room has further confirmed the assumption of the feminist media theory which noted that the involvement of women behind the scenes or in the construction of female characters will lead to

a positive [change] in the way they have been constructed in the past. The findings reveal that the change in the depiction of women in contemporary soap operas is also based on requests from the government bodies as well as the intentions of the producers as Madiya (interview, 29 April 2022) noted that the change in the way Uzalo portrayed female characters is a response to the request of SABC. As the findings show evidence of changes in the way female characters are depicted some aspects of old representation remain, this is the content of the next section.

Despite the changes or shifts, some aspects of female character construction continue particularly the role of the traditional mother, the expert informant further explains that:

the traditional mother role is a great bouncing board for the daughter. Again, having generations, you know, means that you're getting different types of advice when things are going wrong. And, ah, it's important to have, what's helpful to have that kind of motherly presence that we all know exists in society. Ah, and that they are people, who resonate with those roles (Patel, interview, 20 April 2022).

According to Madiya (interview, 29 April 2022), the identification of continuity is a difficult:

It's a very difficult question for me to answer because [the show has] changed so much you know when the show began like on season one, we had like two families and now in season eight, I think like only two characters are left from the original cast, you know? Madiya (interview, 29 April 2022).

The comments of Madiya, in a way, confirm Kontranowski's and Childer's view of soap operas as a serial fiction genre that enables the weaving together of different and numerous numbers of "symbolic characters". This convention according to Madiya makes the continuity of the character depiction difficult. This is because new characters are meant to portray different and new roles as compared to the old or previous characters.

Participants on the other hand believe that the portrayal of female characters in the two soap operas has not changed in the continual depictions of "female as sex object" and that the narrative is still likened to "being stuck in the Cinderella story" (Ndumisa - male and Lunga – male). Part of this story is a dependency on male characters as "often the female characters are made to depend on the male figure, (Lunga, focus group, 05 September 2022). In the South African (Zulu) context, this dependency is framed within storylines of polygamy. According to Nandi, polygamous relationship is a concept that has remained in South African soap operas. The participants noted that is not only

in the selected soap operas – *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* but across other localised South African soap operas such as *Isibaya Muvhango* and *Imbewu* (Nandi, focus group, 10 October 2022)

There is a shift in the way women are currently depicted particularly in the construction of township matriarchs, businesswomen, CEOs, female villains, and others, all the expert informants acknowledged that in contemporary soap operas, female power is promoted and not female subordination. However, the findings from the study revealed that the concepts of patriarchy and polygamy is still evident in the narrative of the two soap operas. The participants held a negotiated reading that stands as they stated that polygamy is portrayed across many South African soap operas, and this in their belief promotes patriarchy and on the other end promotes female subordination. The study's findings also affirmed some of the claims made particularly in the theoretical section – that women could be well represented if women are behind the construction of the characters. Expert informants ascertained that some of the reason for the portrayal of stronger and independent female characters is due to the writer in the writing room, which in this case majority are strong women writers. The informant further explained that such a shift also allows the producers to explore different aspects.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter is organised thematically and analyses the findings from the four expert informants from the production houses of the case studies (Stained Glass Production and Ochre Moving Pictures) and the FGDs from UKZN students who are the study participants. The themes are presented inductively and deductively, guided by the literature review, seminal sources consulted and theoretical framework underpinning the study. The chapter's findings and analysis are rooted mainly within the field of cultural studies and from the lens of feminist media theory (Friedan, 1963; Allen 1972; Haggins, 2018; Ibbi, 2017; Steiner, 2014; MiniÊ, 2007; Mulvey, 1981) which are viewed from the intersectionality perspective (Carastathis, 2014; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991;) and the active audience theory (Hall, 1980) from the perceptive of circuit of culture model (du Day, 1997). The concepts associated with these two theoretical bodies of knowledge informed the research questions for data collection and provided the analytical framework in which data were interpreted. Hall's (1996, 1997) view of the encoding process can be described as mental frameworks, concepts, thoughts, and categories, which create representations that audiences can decode and assign meaning to. The chapter illustrated how

this message-creation process involves a complex interaction between ideology and hegemony, the deliberate goal of creating strong, diverse women with an embedded focus on education while entertaining, and the indigenization of culture, language, and setting in South African soap opera to tell gripping stories. Hence, the theories share a similar purpose in that they assist in the understanding of how female characters are read and interpreted by the audience, simultaneously being cognisant of the wider socio-cultural context and discourses in meaning-making, both in the encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980) of these television representations.

The analysis revealed a shift in how female characters are currently constructed and represented in *Uzalo*, *Scandal!* and other South African soap operas as female villains and strong independent women became more prominent within the public sphere, which was often described as male dominated domain. Within the context of reality depiction, the case studies show evidence that characters are constructed by the producers to embody aspiration to help eliminate female subordination as they are depicted in empowering roles, which are also acknowledged by the audience. Even though this change is noticeable within the localised genre, there are still some roles that are noted by both the producers (traditional mothers and daughters) and the participants (the persistent representation of women objectification), which still promote the stereotypical portrayal of women in media.

The conclusion and suggestions for further research areas are provided in the next chapter.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

### Introduction

Previous scholarship has explored issues around how women are constructed and represented, or on the other hand, interpreted in soap opera (Blose, 2020; Landers, 2018; Marx, 2008; Ndayi and du Plooy, 2019; Onuh, 2017; Tager, 1997; 2010). However, few, if any, have included a rich qualitative analysis of both the encoding and decoding in the sense-making context of the circuit of culture. This current chapter summarises each chapter and synthesises the main findings of the study in response to the key study objectives and research questions. Some recommendations for areas of further research are suggested. Finally, conclusions are provided.

### Summary of Chapters

#### *Chapter One: Introduction*

The introduction stated the study's main aims and objectives. The background to the study was outlined along the lines of previous discussions that had only considered the construction of female characters within global and localised or indigenous South African soap operas with an emphasis on gender roles. The study's objective was investigated from two perspectives. The first three research objectives are structured to address the encoding aspect and the last two are focused on the decoding aspect. The study is not a comparative study between the two soap operas and past soap operas rather, the study identified the previous dominant discourses in South African soap operas through already published research. This study then focuses on identifying and analysing contemporary representations, using *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* as illustrative cases.

Gender inequality is a global problem (Khachatryan and Peterson, 2015) as much as it is a South African problem (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, 2012; Salahodjaev and Azam, 2015). Currently, South Africa has declared gender-based violence (GBV) as a second pandemic struggle in the country, as femicide remains worryingly high (Ellis, 2020; Mashaba, 2020). Societal norms, standards of gender roles, and stereotypes are described as some of the contributing factors to this shadow pandemic (Frohlich, 2020). To address the scourge of GBV and unequal gender dynamics, the UN Women South Africa and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

(GIZ) – Partnerships for Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls programme (PFP) urges the media and creative industry to promote gender equality and parity.

Gender within South African traditions is described according to the role and functions in the society (Ngubane, 2010). In other words, what it means to be male or female in a certain society shapes the opportunities one is offered in life, the roles one may play, and the kinds of relationships one may have. Hence, this study used soap opera television as a site to explore if and how today's South African soap opera continues a stereotypical representation of female subordination, as well as how it can serve as an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies. The literature review chapter provided a thorough explanation and extensive evidence for these concerns. The theoretical angle of this study was introduced: Feminist media theory rooted in the intersectionality perspective and active audience theory, which was explored from the models of encoding/decoding and circuit of culture. The research methodology was presented through the feminist qualitative approach grounded in the interpretivism paradigm. The chapter concluded with the thesis's structure.

#### *Chapter Two: Gender issues in policy, society entertainment media – a global to national review*

This is the first literature chapter as the study's literature is divided into two (Chapters Two and Three). Chapter Two, as the first literature review chapter, discussed available literature on gender-related issues globally and within the South African context, describing the concept and the terminology associated with it. To provide a broader societal contextualisation for the study and to further elucidate the problem statement, this chapter reviews global and national policies that address gender issues<sup>64</sup> (USAID, n.d.; United Nations Women, 2015).

Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon viewed as a binary and opposite construct describing the characteristics, behaviours, and roles deemed appropriate and expected of men and women (and boys and girls) by a given society (Rolleri, 2012a). However, gender constructs vary from society to society and can change over time. The gender terms to which this study subscribes and discusses are - gender roles, gender norms, gender identity, and gender stereotypes. Furthermore,

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<sup>64</sup> National Gender Policy Framework. Available at: [https://www.dffe.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/environment\\_sector\\_genderstrategy/policy\\_framework](https://www.dffe.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/environment_sector_genderstrategy/policy_framework) [Accessed on 13/04/2023]

the concept of gender is better understood through the five important elements, including - relational, hierarchical, historical, contextual, and institutional. Another aspect explored in the study is gender (in)equality from both a global and a South African perspective, Global and national policies on gender issues, and even though there are global and national policies (relating to gender balance in the workplace, education, and other spheres of life) in place to ensure the presence of equality in all spheres of life, women are still struggling for equitable representation.

The relationship between gender issues and entertainment media was also discussed. Out of many influences on how we view men and women, the media are the most pervasive and the most powerful medium with their messages infiltrating our consciousness at every turn, woven throughout our daily lives (Wood, 1994). Considering the significant contributions that women have made in South African history, traditional roles of women in South African cultures were explored in the study. Lastly, due to the noticeable shift from international to indigenous content currently in South Africa (particularly soap operas), African language media was discussed in the chapter. African languages are “predominantly symbolic”, and their inclusion helps to attract and establish a local connection among viewers or audiences (Dowling and Grier, 2016:572). Therefore, language is an important component in the construction of (female) characters as it can be used to influence people’s views of reality (Webb, 2005). More specifically, language can be a tool in identity formation or an (evolving) image of Self (Marx, 2007:115).

### *Chapter Three: Reviewing Soap Opera Scholarship: Generic Codes and Producing/Consuming Representations and Discourses*

As a field of inquiry, production studies capture how power functions locally through media production to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities at the level of everyday interactions (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 2009). This chapter discussed global and South African media production studies as it helps in the understanding of how the entire span of “media producers”—ranging from high-profile producers and directors to anonymous production assistants and costume designers—work through professional organisations and informal networks to form communities of shared practices, languages, and cultural understandings of the world (Mayer et al. 2009:2). Representation in media is a key component of empowering marginalised members of society (Letsoalo, 2019:1). In terms of women’s representation in media, it is not just important for there to be a large presence of women in television shows — it is also important that these characters

represent women fairly (Letsoalo, 2019:1). Hence, the chapter further explores the theme on the representation of women in media. Furthermore, the history of soap operas and other related themes were discussed in the chapter to explore the context in which this study was built. Lastly, this study is aimed at investigating the perspective of the audience, consumption/ decoding/ interpretation of female characters as a theme was discussed as the section reviews past studies on the interpretation/consumption/decoding of these representations. It is imperative to do so as these studies serve as a benchmark against which the audience readings found in this study will be compared to identify any shifts.

#### *Chapter Four: Theoretical Framework*

The fourth chapter explained the theoretical framing for this study, based on feminist media studies (Friedan, 1963; Allen, 1972; Haggins, 2018; Ibbi, 2017; Steiner, 2014; MiniÉ, 2007; Mulvey, 1981), which are viewed from the intersectionality perspective (Carastathis, 2014; Collins and Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Through the feminist media theory, the study investigates the construction of female characters from the point of the conception of the three Rs: “depictions of women (and girls) result from (their root), reflect (show their lived experiences) and reproduce (represent taking cognizance of the intersectionality of their different social categories) dominant ideologies”.

The active audience theory (Livingstone, 2000; Morley, 1992) with particular use of encoding/decoding (Hall, 1980) and the circuit of culture model (du Gay, *et al*, 1997) help to investigate how the study’s participants read and interpret the construction of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* These theories are rooted in cultural studies (CS). The cultural studies approach mainly deals with daily activities of life, how they are constructed, and how individuals relate to these activities in their everyday lives (Turner, 1996).

Through the circuit of culture, the soap operas, as a cultural text, are explored through the five moments of Production (construction), representation (text – soap opera), consumption (readings), identity (lived cultures/social relations), and regulation (conditions) providing a more holistic perspective within which the processes of meaning-making with television by both the producers and the audiences happen.

### *Chapter Five: Research Methodology*

This chapter presented the methodological approach for the study by outlining its applicability of feminist qualitative methodology in the context of the interpretive paradigm. Qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with industry producers and focus group discussions (FGDs) with viewers and was organised through reflexive thematic analysis through inductive and deductive methods. The chapter also included an explanation of the sample strategy's logic.

### *Chapters Six: Findings and Analysis - Themes generated from the production and decoding process*

This chapter describes the way producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* construct and depict female characters and the reasons behind such depictions. Also, how consumers read and interpret those female characters represented. Themes were generated from the data gathered from semi-structured interviews with the producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* and themes from the focus group discussions with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's students who serve as viewer participants. Chapter Six presents and analyses the findings according to the themes generated from the producer/encoder's interviews (expert informants<sup>69</sup>) and the consumers/decoders' FGDs (participants<sup>70</sup>). To avoid repetition of interpretation and discussion of themes, the discussion is structured according to similar themes identified from both the interviews and FGDs. This was accomplished using relational analysis in identifying similar themes across both encoders and decoders, as well as in comparing past representations of female characters in soap operas with the selected soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* As was somewhat anticipated at the start of the study, the encoder themes are related to the decoder themes, hence the study uses relational analysis.

### **Relevance of findings**

Conclusions from the relevant findings are provided as this research set out to investigate the changes or continuity in the representation of female characters concerning their gender roles within the localised South African soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* The study was framed within a changing media environment that has experienced the emergence of the production of local soap operas. To answer the five research questions on (1) In what ways are female characters represented in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* in terms of gender roles? (2) What do any differences reveal in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women

in South African societies? (3) What are the changes and continuities of the way in which women are represented in South African soap operas? (4) In what ways do the audience read these representations in terms of the possible differences between a) past South African soap operas and b) societal realities of gender dynamics? (5) In what ways do the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women? A qualitative research study was conducted. The analytical method included reflexive thematic analysis whereby the themes were interpreted using feminist media theory and active audience theory to investigate the predominant and shifting representations of women.

### **Predominant gender roles represented in South African soap operas: *Uzalo* and *Scandal!***

The findings demonstrated that gender representation in the media, as constructed in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* is generated from several narratives that have been accumulated over time. Some of the producers have gained experience behind the scenes, which influenced their perception as writers of those characters. Their familiarity with the cultural context also aids in the construction and representation of different gender roles in which women are depicted. This is evident in the different stages that Grace Mahlaba has experienced as noted in the analysis chapter, from a young age till now as the current *Scandal!* producer and Eric Mogale's experiences as *Uzalo* Creative Director. This revealed that the *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* producers affirmed that the moment of production involves several narratives like the lived experience of the encoders and the cast, the evolution of events over time. That could imply that cultural production is found in researching the roots and ideas behind the production process, as well as the different discourses that surround it. Findings also revealed that societal expectations are meant to distinguish females from their male counterparts. As Ukaid (2015) noted, gender norms are informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviour based on gender. The study's participants illustrated that within South African society, a woman is naturally expected to be peace-loving, submissive, calm, and not aggressive, one who can put together the moral and social fabric of our everyday lives. Gender expectations are learned and socially constructed, and participants affirmed it by stating the various places and practices from which these expectations emanate. For instance, church, family, generational values, peers, schools and even the social media. Some of the prominent roles, as substantiated from the data, include:

### *Businesswomen/troublemakers/mothers*

In the two soap operas, female characters appeared more at ease in their public lives. Female characters, for instance, like Dintle and Layla in *Scandal!* and Gabisile and MaNgobo in *Uzalo* are represented as successful businesswomen and CEOs thriving in economic and public domains, often associated with male characters. This representation subverts how female characters are predominantly constructed within the private sphere and are not associated with professional positions, working, and recreational roles in South African media. Date substantiated that the producers of the two selected soap operas were aware of the prominent role in which women are often represented within the private sphere in media, hence, they intentionally chose to highlight the depiction of women to be successful within the public sphere in contemporary times. Within this type of genre, men are often depicted as active characters while female characters as passive, but in *Uzalo* and *Scandal* female characters are often central characters who drive the narrative, but who nonetheless are 'active' within a set of patriarchal values. Matriarchs and traditional mothers who, within the township context, now pursue their dreams and aspirations in life while maintaining their traditional values are roles that are prominent in current soap operas. This negates the traditional gender roles often associated with women, which confined them to private spaces, cleaning the house and caring for their children. Also, this type of portrayal further substantiated the complexities of the female characters as Hobson (2003) noted in the literature. Women were constructed to be more in their careers and pursuits in life – they can be mothers, businesswomen, and anything more that they wished to be, maintaining balance without giving one for another.

As revealed from the findings, the troublemakers' roles are also prominent in the two soap operas. Their prominence, according to the findings helped in creating and telling interesting and entertaining stories to their audience. For instance, characters like Dintle and Yvonne in *Scandal!* and Shlobos in *Uzalo* (are described as gossips in the soap operas) in *Uzalo* are considered troublemakers in the two soap operas by both the producers and audiences. Some of the audience considered the characters as troublemakers because of the ways they want things to go their way. Other audiences viewed them as troublemakers because of the way they defy some gender norms and patriarchal expectations. This showed that the audience held a dominant reading in agreement with the view of the creators that even though the characters are associated with trouble. The producers intentionally included the character of the troublemakers with the aim of spicing up the narrative which also help create interesting stories for the audience. Visualising these characters

by the audience from the two soap operas, even though they are familiar with such characters in their environment, helped the viewers to see the good or spicey nature of the roles. Having such an opportunity to view the troublemakers' roles from different angles on television helped in changing viewers' perceptions of the troublemakers' roles – “they are not all about disrupting the narrative, but there is something positive about them” (Mogale, interview 28 April, 2022).

### *Contemporary and Traditional Identities*

This study demonstrates that people develop their identity according to the geographica locations, time and cultural background in which they live. *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* involved the community of characters and depicts social-cultural realism, whether younger or older characters, through love, family, crime, violence, and drugs (among other discourses) mainly to show the lived experiences of individuals irrespective of their chosen lifestyles in the selected set township of KwaMashu and Soweto. The data showed that both soap operas depicted both modern and traditional identities. As revealed from the findings, female characters were constructed to straddle the dynamics of both modern and traditional lifestyles. Grace, Dintle, and Layla in *Scandal* were depicted as contemporary women who also identify with traditional identities as they played traditional mothers to their kids. Zindele also was depicted as a very traditional woman with high traditional morals and principles, but in some instances, the character was seen to have identified with the contemporary lifestyle as she determined to improve herself by aiming and pursuing her dreams of being educated and achieving more in life, in way this showed how the character became more orenited to modern lifestyle.

Notably, MaNgcobo in *Uzalo*, who is constructed within a contemporary lifestyle as seen through her dress, house setting, and colours; however, the character was also constructed and represented to have traditional masculine traits dealing and doing businesses that are associated with men, particularly within the sphere of crime. The dynamics of MaNgcobo were revealed in instances where she exhibits the attributes of working masculinity, bossy yet maternal. All the female characters, according to the producers, were allowed to thrive within the two identities of contemporary and traditional. The two *Uzalo* producers explained that the aim was never to elevate one identity over the other but to depict a story that would resonate with its audiences by allowing the characters to thrive within their well-defined identities. This indicated that even though the times are modern, there are still individuals who maintain and uphold traditional values and for

there to be relatability among viewers, both identities must be represented.

There are young characters that are associated with traditional lifestyles, this is also acknowledged by the audiences. This showed that women's construction and representation should not be merely about the historical differences between women and men in the media but more especially their realities in society at large including their small or big everyday achievements. This showed how producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* in their constructions and representations of female characters with regards to their gender roles took cognisance of the noticeable diversities in township representations. Such representation assisted the audiences in exploring their negotiating power as they viewed things differently.

The study also found that some of the audience resonated and appreciated the portrayal of traditional identity. Even though we are in contemporary times, some young individuals still uphold traditional norms and values. Although older audiences were not interviewed; however, little insight was gotten from the focus group participants during the focus group discussion as they were asked: "if they think their grandmother or grandfather would respond in the same way as they do regarding the way female characters are currently depicted in South African soap operas". The data substantiated that older audiences might not appreciate the portrayal of contemporary lifestyle, but they resonate with the depictions, as it helps them to create a world where they could fantasise about their youthful days. For instance, in their days, women are expected to be submissive, operate mostly within the private sphere and hold the patriarchal value in high extreme, but this has changed. Considering how different audiences interpreted and resonated with the depictions of the full spectrum of characters from different perspectives also showed how the narratives of the two soap operas allow for entertainment and attention-grabbing storylines. Therefore, it is evident from the findings that both contemporary and traditional-styled characters are aspirational depending on the preference of lifestyle values held by the viewer of the soap operas. In sum, this revealed that contemporary and traditional lifestyles as depicted in the female characters could be aspirational depending on the preference of lifestyle value held by the viewer of the soap operas.

#### *Aspirational roles*

The study's findings also demonstrated that the female characters that are represented in the two

soap operas are aspirational in what they embody. Based on the encoders' view, aspirational roles portrayed by the characters are based on their experiential background. The characters that are aspirational are often empowered in the narrative. To be empowered, women must be able to rely on themselves in their daily lives, this also helped to show their level of self-reliance. According to Ahmed and Khalid's (2012) poll, Star TV (India) revealed that women who were financially independent and possessed greater decision-making authority within their families and businesses were highly favored. Self-reliance comes with a feeling of independence and, hence, empowerment. Examples of women who are self-reliant within the soap operas are Layle, Dintle, Grace in *Scandal!* and MaNgcobo and MaNzuza in *Uzalo* who ran a complete season without the presence of patriarchal figures.

*Uzalo and Scandal!* offered viewers two types of self-reliant women. The first group consists of women who have come into wealth based on their relationship with men. Boniswa and Yvonne (*Scandal!*) and MaNgcobo (*Uzalo*) have their husband, Siseko Langa and Gxabhash Xulu (respectively) to thank for their wealth. The second group, which is the most significant, consists of women who have worked hard to earn their CEO position, wealth, and education, among other things. Dintle, Lindiwa (*Scandal!*), Gabisle, Noshipo and Nonka (*Uzalo*), these women attained their high status through hard work in the narrative. Many other female characters work and earn a living in the *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* cast. Notably is Dintle in *Scandal!* who, against all odds (teenage pregnancy, abandonment from her mom, an absentee father, poverty, scheming, and manipulation, among others), rose from a waitress to a CEO of a prestigious company leaving her dream. The study's findings showed that many participants appreciated her resilience and fight to achieve her goal. In this type of role depiction, participants found it aspirational and, in a way, aids self-actualisation. Many of the participants from the FGDs hold a dominant position regarding the characters as they were inspired to be like some of the characters who served as positive role models to their audience.

A negotiated position was also held by some of the participants by the temporality of the characters' success. Even though the producers represent characters that embody aspirational roles, those roles are never maintained for a long time, they are often shortlisted. In reality, some aspirational role models in society stand the test of time, but the absence of such a portrayal in soap operas could also, in a way, affect the audience's perception, should they view the character's efforts as unsustainable.

Both male and female audiences held oppositional reading to the representation of female

characters in terms of their sexuality. When they were asked if they wished their sisters, aunties, and friends to be like any of the female characters, they emphatically said "NO". This is because they believe the characters' moral standards are very low and that is not something they wish any of their relatives or close friends. This reading showed that the participants have certain gender and moral expectations that the characters must meet and the absence of such attributes in the portrayal of the character is below the expected morals of "a lady", and such cannot be emulated. This further indicates that gender expectations are socially constructed.

### *Stereotypes in Gender roles and character construction*

According to the findings, stereotypes are not intentionally promoted in the two soap operas but the effect it has on narratives necessitates their inclusion in the storylines. Gender stereotypes can be both positive and negative, but the producers of *Uzalo* and *Scandal* aim to encode positive role models of female characters. Their storylines, plots, and narratives specifically try to create new messages and representations such as businesswomen, independent and strong women who are self-empowered, driven, and aspirational characters. These positive representations subvert the submissive stereotypes of women as only housekeepers and nurturers, popularly depicted within the private sphere like the kitchen, keeping women from reaching their full potential and asserting their rightful place in society.

The findings also showed that stereotypes sell. Although the producers actively intended to challenge the stereotypes, broadcaster expectations and regulations impose limitations. They acknowledged that soap opera narratives cannot sell without stereotypical depictions. This is because straightforward characters that go in the format of '123456', like *Scandal* Creative Producer noted, appeared to be a boring storyline but complicated and inconsistent characters that follow in this format number *178345* engage the audience more. The study shows that stereotypes, particularly in soap operas, play a particular role of 'relief' because sometimes overcomplicated storylines can overwhelm the audience. Following the effect of stereotypes on a soap opera narrative from the findings, it could be described as the heartbeat of the narrative (that is stereotypes are like the concepts around which the characters and the story revolves, and it's through the perspective that the reader usually navigates the world of the story).

On the one hand, the findings revealed that patriarchy is not only introduced in the narrative, but the encoders ensured they included an analytical discussion around it. The encoders try to depict

the various practices regarding patriarchy and, at the same time, highlight the power of matriarchs. That is, patriarchy are highlighted in the narratives and in the construction of female characters in current soap operas. This kind of portrayal allegedly allows the encoder to consider both genders without affording substantial preference to either one. On the other hand, participants believe that patriarchy is still a substantial component of the storylines, as polygamy is portrayed in the two soap operas, which they label as “highly patriarchal”. Polygamy and multiple romantic relationships for men, are depicted as normal, whereas when women engage in these affairs willingly, they are depicted negatively. Hence promoting female subordination. That is, some part of the story is dependent on male characters and in the South African (Zulu) context, this dependency is framed within storylines of polygamy. Such stereotypes that arguably normalise polygamy in soap operas can contribute to the suppression of black women, especially among habitual viewers of such content, as they continue to struggle to construct positive identities from negative media images. Also, from the findings, the audience stated that the portrayal of female characters as sex objects is still prominent in the two soap operas, hence further promoting patriarchy.

### **Subordination and Female Power**

The popular gender stereotypes portrayed in entertainment media are the associations of strength, aggression, and power with men, while weakness, passiveness, and kindness are associated with women. The data substantiated that the encoders of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* intentionally shift this norm by portraying women’s power within suburbs, townships, and male-dominated spheres. For instance, the construction of female villains. The female villain character is not a new character within the soap opera genre. However, within the South African soap operas, men have often been portrayed in that role. Such intentional role depictions (strong women, independent women, resilient women, and female villains) by the encoders could help to address the concerns regarding violence against women, women’s low status, and the imbalances of power between men and women generated by patriarchal policies that eventually became norms. This is seen in the case of Hlengiwe Thwala and her partner in *Scandal!* and Gabsile and Nkunze in *Uzalo*, as noted above by the producers. The study’s participants acknowledged the shift in the two soap operas as women are depicted in places and spaces of power; like the female villainess who is simultaneously characterised within the South African context as a mother or a businesswoman. This inclusion of villainous traits in the maternal characters was not common in past South African soap operas.

However, some of the participants held a negotiated reading as they observed that some women who were constructed and depicted in the place of power were within the perimeter of their male counterparts, and this, to some extent, they find limiting.

Some of the characters that are considered strong by the producers were viewed as weak by some of the viewers. For instance, on the one hand, producers considered characters like the Shlobos, Nosipho, Dintle, among others. On the other hand, the participants associated weakness with the same characters. For instance, the Shlobos were viewed as weak because they always feel their lives will only be complete when they have a man, Dintle as a manipulator, and troublemaker, Nosipho as a spoiled rich child. This implies that the audience does not necessarily decode representations in the same way. This affirms Hall's (1980) view as he noted that preferred reading by decoders and with the agency of the active audience, they have the power to view or interpret things from their perspective.

### **Intentions and influences that determine the construction of female characters and their gender roles**

#### *Innovation*

According to the circuit of culture, the process of production is not limited to the technological aspects alone but also to how meaning is produced culturally and intentionally (du Gay *et al.*, 1997:4). The expert informants explained that the depiction of gender roles in the way female characters were constructed was intentional with the purpose of innovation. One of the instances producers gave to show how they innovate in their construction was by “pushing the ladies to say they could do it for themselves without expecting it from a man” (Magole, interview, 28 April 2022). Some participants noted these positive depictions as they appreciated the courage of some female characters rising from nothing to business owners and CEOs, as they cited examples of Dintle, Nosipho, Gbisile, and Shlobos, among others.

The study revealed that social structures like age, race, location, class, and culture, among others, influence the representations and interpretation of female characters by encoders and decoders of *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* This is achieved through the intersectionality theory as it mobilised to identify the possible awareness of these intersections in how the producers choose to represent certain characters and most importantly, how the audience participants read these female characters. From

the producers' perspective, the inclusion of social structure assisted in rooting the identity of a relatable character. The audience can read and interpret the narrative or relate to some of the characters based on their gender, cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991), family values, and age.

### *Entertainment Education (EE)*

The *Uzalo* and *Scandal* producers purposefully included EE content subtly to educate viewers, especially on current social issues such as GBV and crime. The participants held a dominant reading of these intended pro-social messages. In terms of GBV, predominantly the storylines centre on female discrimination and abuse. Yet some storylines include men as victims subverting the typical portrayal of only women as victims and survivors. This agreed with the notion that in contemporary South Africa, men also experience domestic violence with women as the culprits and active participants in the commission of the crime (Mshweshwe, 2020; Tshoane et al, 2024; Thobejane, Mogorosi, and Luthada, 2019; Thobejane and Luthada, 2019). In sum, the study revealed that *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* are constructed to have three main elements for their audience which are to educate, entertain, and for social change.

From the literature, authors like Modleski (1979) explained that soap operas not only address female spectators but also construct feminine subject positions that transcend patriarchal modes of subjectivity. Based on the feminine nature of soap operas, Iqbal and Abdar (2016:15) recommended that:

Soap operas must focus on being the medium that promotes the development and upliftment of women in society. Instead of portraying characters that submit themselves to male dominance, characters that live up for themselves and stand for their rights must be promoted. This will enable the mindsets of various sections of society to change and act as a huge factor in removing gender bias.

Through the influence of EE, the selected soap operas assisted in promoting representations of female character who are strong both emotionally and physically and this subverts the frequent stereotypical portrayal of the emotional characteristics of women "as emotionally volatile and more expressive, more dependent, and [more] submissive than men" (Lockyear, 2004: 37-38). The study showed that the majority of the audience participants believe that the soap operas bring awareness on social issues that are prevalent in society, and they also helped individuals who are abused to have a voice by speaking out for help as they give an instance of Nosipho who was

abused by her partner. Most of the characters presented in the two soap operas who are either victims of men or ill circumstances are represented to eventually voice out the process they took to seek and get help. The perpetrator then faces justice. These storylines arguably encourage audience members who may be facing abuse to be bold enough to report the abuse and seek assistance. This kind of representation is positive and could help to negate the stereotype that men cannot be punished. For example, Noshipo in *Uzalo* and Hlengiwe in *Scandal!* are victims of ill circumstances/GBV.

### **Perceptions of Realism and Relatability**

Realism in soap operas is described as the reflection of contemporary social issues familiar to audiences, which allows them to connect and associate with plots and characters (Geraghty, 2006; Kilborn, 1992). The findings established that through research and community surveys by the producers, the narrative depicted in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* is relatable to the audiences. Parasocial interactions were discovered to aid the audience's relatability to the narrative as they either recognise characters like themselves or people close to them or by the way characters play out fantasies that did not exist in their everyday lives. The use of local dialect, as the findings revealed, was another factor that helped the audience to relate to the characters and storylines. Although the participants acknowledged the involvement of realism in the portrayal as the encoder intended, the representations were interpreted by several audience members exaggerated. This exaggeration is a convention or an element of melodrama. It is centered on “the moral fantasy of showing forth the essential ‘rightness’ of the world order...” (Cawelti, 1976:45). Therefore, showing such convention in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* satisfied the notion that the two selected dramas are soap operas, further justified their selection as case studies for this study.

### **Continuities and Changes in Soap Opera Constructions of Female Characters**

Women are typically portrayed as a fragile group that relies on males and relationships to succeed in life (Stern, Russell, and Russell 2005). Within soap operas, women are represented across many dominant discourses/themes. Please see Table 3.1 (summary table collating the dominant representations of women in entertainment media, including soap operas, as well as study location) for more detail. This study aimed to investigate the changes or continuity in the representation of female characters and established that currently, South African localised soap operas are

experiencing a shift in how female characters are constructed and represented. On the one hand, the prominent roles of female characters that were often portrayed in previous soap operas as mistresses, secretaries, people who cause chaos, and naive housewives were softly phased out. On another hand, in instances where the previously mentioned characters are included in the narrative, the characters undergo role reversal (like women are depicted in roles that are often associated to men) and reinvention. Though they are old character roles, this time around with a twist and portrayed differently. Hence indicating a shift.

In current South African localised soap operas, female characters are constructed and depicted running companies and dominating domains that are often described as men's spheres. Hence, the soap operas represented female characters in the driving seat, telling stories from a feminist perspective. This subverted the notion that women belong in the kitchen/house, as the soap operas narrative showcase that women have strength that can influence not only their homes but their society at large. The study further established some changes by portraying female villains, a role commonly associated with male characters and also women (although not a common portrayal within the South African context). This shift is not only seen in *Scandal!* and *Uzalo*, but is a shift that is currently (as at the time of the study) prominent across other South African localised soap operas. Women were also represented as saviors and not the ones who are often waiting to be saved within the public domain.

The data substantiated that such portrayals put women not only in the place of strength but also revealed the female characters' dynamic and complex nature (they can be anything, they want or choose to be). That is, the representation of female characters has shifted from that of being a mother and wife to one where they can be both nurturers and strong-willed (possibly at times ruthless) businesswomen. This finding aligns with Hobson's explanation (2003: 106) that "people are more complex than merely being good or bad, hero or villain...". When compared with older soap operas streamed on South African television, the study's participants noted that they had never experienced a place where a woman was a gangster stealing cars or bombing ATMs, but now, we can see that in MaNgcobo. They further acknowledged that women in the soap operas are not only fulfilling the roles of wives or mothers but they are doing other great things; this is something that was not common or not seen in the older South African soap operas, such as the portrayal of a female character who is a wife, mother, and CEO.

The reason for the shift as discovered from the findings was driven by time, the changes are driven by the current situation and what's happening in society. This shows that the producers of the two soap operas took cognizance of one of the conventions of entertainment television which is depictions of the dramas of everyday reality (Ives, 2007:154). Also, the study showed that the majority of the individuals in the writing room constructing those female characters are women. This study's theoretical perspective established that feminist media theory, a long-dominated assumption exists that if women-controlled media production, content would be different and better (Steiner, 2014). The study demonstrated that the kind of women seen on the screens is the reflection of those individuals who construct them in the writing room. This implies that the kind of individuals in the writing room directly or indirectly influence the kind of characters that are constructed and depicted. Also, the findings indicated that men can also write about strong women as their framework of knowledge and experience is based on observations and appreciation for strong women. That is, individuals who have positive perceptions of women can also influence his/her positive portrayal of women. The shift was also a result of the responses to the request of the government bodies/SABC for a change in female characters' portrayals.

Despite the visible changes in the way female characters' roles are portrayed, some aspects of female character construction continue, particularly the traditional mother. Although, other female characters have undergone some reinvention, the traditional mother as noted by the finding still remains the same. The continuity of this character Female characters as sex objects are depictions that remain in the portrayal of female characters in *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Part of this story is a dependency on male characters as often the female characters are made to depend on the male figure. In the South African (Zulu) context, this dependency is framed within storylines of polygamy. Nandi Polygamous relationship is a concept that has remained in South African soap operas. The participants noted that is not only in the selected soap operas – *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* but across other localised South African soap operas such as *Isibaya Muvhango* and *Imbewu*.

In summary, this study contributed to the body of knowledge by investigating the representations and readings of female characters in South African soap operas *Uzalo* and *Scandal*. As noted in the early chapters, the study was carried out using *Uzalo* which is relatively new in comparison to the more established and long-running *Scandal*. These are regional soap operas. *Uzalo* is set in KwaMashu, a township near Durban, while *Scandal* is set near Johannesburg (between Soweto

and Newtown). This doctoral thesis builds on my master's thesis, which focused on the images or representations of female characters in soap operas. While on the one hand, the subject of the dissertation is not new, on the other hand, this dissertation moves away from merely examining the representations of female characters to investigating changes and continuities in these representations. In doing the latter, this study offered some insight into how the representation of women in soap operas have improved or remained unchanged and the possible motivating factors that influenced the changes or continuities in the female character presentations, particularly within localised South African television dramas.

The focus of the study was aimed at the construction of feminine and female representations, and the possible negations these texts offer to normative representations. Hence, its particular contribution lies in the fact that it considers participants' views from both a production and viewer perspective, something which has not been done to this extent within South African scholarship on the topic. Again, within the theoretical framework that informed this research, feminist media theory, which pays attention to intersectionality, and the circuit of culture specifically active audience theory, an interconnected matrix for data analysis was developed. This showed the relationships between those theories and how they all informed the reading and interpretation of the data collected. The developed matrix for the data analysis process can be tested on other studies within the framework it addresses for further study.

### **Suggestions for further research**

In this study, the township context was an influence in both producing and interpreting the female characters concerning their gender roles (for example, the township matriarch and the township villainess). Hence, a study dedicated to identifying how archetypal soap opera characters (men and women) compare to the past could be useful in further understanding location as an influence on representation.

Polygamy is one of the roles that participants noted to have persisted across South African soap operas, but it was not raised in the interviews with the producers or expert informants. Therefore, a suggestion for further research could be to investigate the representation of polygamy in soap operas and the reason behind such continuous depiction within a genre that is currently identified with female empowerment.

Since the feminist media theory is not only about women but about any form of unequal power dynamic, it may be useful to also interrogate how men are being represented in certain events/contexts or soap operas or tested on other local soap operas for further research.

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# Appendixes

## Appendix 1: Ethical clearance approval



27 January 2022

Janet Atinuke Onuh (215080588)  
School Of Applied Human Sc  
Howard College

Dear JA Onuh,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003753/2022

Project title: Changes and continuities? Investigating the readings of female character representations in South African soap operas Uzalo and Scandal

Degree: PhD

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 06 January 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 27 January 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

### Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

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## Appendix 2: Gatekeeper letter from Stained Glass Production (Uzalo)



04 November 2021

Janet Atinuke Onuh  
Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS)  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
College of Humanities  
Howard College Campus  
University of Kwazulu-Natal

Dear Janet Onuh (Student) and Prof Lauren Dyll (Supervisor)

### Gatekeeper Permission to Conduct Research

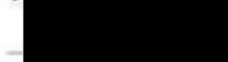
Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct your PhD research on the production of the television show *Uzalo* provided ethical clearance from your institution is obtained before data collection commences.


We note the working title of your thesis is: *Changes and continuities? Investigating the representations and readings of female characters in South African soap operas Uzalo and Scandal.*

It is noted that you will be gathering data and constituting your sample by interviewing two Stained Glass Production staff members (as and when they are available), particularly Pheello Makosholo (Creative Director) and Clive Madiya (Head Writer). The interviews are expected to be no longer than 60 minutes. We also note that focus group discussion will be conducted with *Uzalo's* audiences in Durban. All data will be collected virtually through the Zoom platform, due to Covid-19 protocols.

Data must be collected with due confidentiality as stipulated in the informed consent form to be provided to interviewees.

Yours sincerely,



Pheello Makosholo  
*Uzalo* Creative Director  
On behalf of Stained Glass Productions  


## Appendix 3: Gatekeeper letter form Ochre Moving Pictures (Scandal!)

**ochre media**  
A MEDIA GROUP COMPANY

ARSENAL HOLDINGS PTY LTD - REG. NO: 2012/074307/017  
HILL ON EMPIRE, 16 EMPIRE ROAD, PARKTOWN,  
JOHANNESBURG 2193, T +27 (0) 11 280 3000

8 September 2021

Janet Athuke Onuh  
Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS)  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
College of Humanities  
Howard College Campus  
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Dear Janet Onuh (Student) and Prof Lauren Dyll (Supervisor)

### Gatekeeper Permission to Conduct Research

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct your PhD research on the production of the television show Scandal! provided ethical clearance from your institution is obtained before data collection commences.

We note the working title of your thesis is: Changes and continuities? Investigating the representations and readings of female characters in South African soap operas Uzalo and Scandal.

It is noted that you will be gathering data and constituting your sample by interviewing staff members (as and when they are available), particularly Grace Mahlabane (Creative Producer) and Ameera Patel (Writer). The interviews are expected to be no longer than 60 minutes. We also note that focus group discussion will be conducted with Scandal's audiences in Durban. All data will be collected virtually through the Zoom platform, due to Covid-19 protocols.

Data must be collected with due confidentiality as stipulated in the informed consent form to be provided to interviewees. It is agreed that Ochre Media will have approval on the aforementioned confidentiality terms prior to conducting the interviews.

  
Stan Joseph  
CEO

t: +27(0)11 280 5447

c: +27(0) 

e: [stan@ochre.co.za](mailto:stan@ochre.co.za)

DIRECTORS: TD MOHOELE, WG WHEATLEY, AGC GILL

[www.ochre.co.za](http://www.ochre.co.za)

## Appendix 4: Gatekeeper letter of the University of KwaZulu-Natal



15 September 2021

Janet Onuh (SN 215000588)  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
College of Humanities  
Howard College Campus UKZN  
Email: [atinukefisanya@yahoo.com](mailto:atinukefisanya@yahoo.com) [dylis@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:dylis@ukzn.ac.za)

Dear Janet,

### RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), towards your postgraduate studies, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

*"Changes and Continuities? Investigating the representations and readings of female characters in South African soap operas Uzalo and Scandal"*.

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample as follows:


- by performing focus groups with students at UKZN
- with a request for responses on the website. The questionnaire must be placed on the notice system <http://notices.ukzn.ac.za>. A copy of this letter (Gatekeeper's approval) must be simultaneously sent to ([governderlog@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:governderlog@ukzn.ac.za)) or ([ramkiesnonh@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ramkiesnonh@ukzn.ac.za)).

Please ensure that the following appears on your questionnaire/attached to your notice:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely,

  
Dr KE CLELAND: REGISTRAR

### Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54003, Durban, 4000, South Africa  
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 7971 Email: [registrar@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:registrar@ukzn.ac.za) Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)

Founding Colleges:  Durban Westville  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

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## Appendix 5: Informed consent form

### UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

RESOURCE TEMPLATE

INFORMED CONSENT

#### Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Janet Atinuke Onuh from the Center for Communication, Media and Society department under Applied Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Nata. Below are the details of the researcher and the institution of research:

Researcher	Janet Atinuke Onuh	+ [REDACTED]	<a href="mailto:atinukefasanya@yahoo.com">atinukefasanya@yahoo.com</a> <a href="mailto:215080588@stu.ukzn.ac.za">215080588@stu.ukzn.ac.za</a>
Department	Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS)	+27-31-2602505	<a href="http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za">http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za</a>

Institution	University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)	Howard College Campus, Kunene Ave, Glenwood, Durban, South Africa	<a href="http://www.ukzn.ac.za">http://www.ukzn.ac.za</a>
Supervisor	Prof. Lauren Dyll	+27-31-2602298	<a href="mailto:dyll@ukzn.ac.za">dyll@ukzn.ac.za</a>

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on “*Changes and continuities? Investigating the readings of female character representations in South African soap operas Uzalo and Scandal!*”. This research aims to examine the ways female characters are represented in South African local soap operas (*Uzalo* and *Scandal*) and to further understand viewers’ perception and reading of such representations. The study is expected to enroll 28 participants in total in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. 24 participants for the online focus group discussion which will take place via zoom platform. In addition, 4 expert interviews will also be conducted via Zoom with *Uzalo* and *Scandal* producers (two informants each). It will involve the following procedures: you will be asked questions about the soap operas, *Uzalo* and *Scandal* that will be recorded on a tape recorder for the purpose of analysis. In terms of focus group discussion, other participants will be involved in the discussion. The duration of your participation, if you choose to enroll and remain in the study, is expected to be between 40-60 minutes.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (**HSSREC/00003753/2022**).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at [REDACTED] and email address: [215080588@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:215080588@stu.ukzn.ac.za) / [atinukefasanaya@yahoo.com](mailto:atinukefasanaya@yahoo.com) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

## **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001  
Durban 4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Participation in this study is voluntary. As a participant, you may withdraw from the research at any time without negative consequences or incur a penalty or loss of treatment. The interview/focus group discussion will not be paid for in money, but a small token gift or incentive may be given (in form of data). In general, responses will be treated confidentially. Confidential information will not be used without your permission. If you agree to be interviewed, we will request that you choose a pseudonym for the purposes of this research, so your real identity will not be revealed in the final reports. As a participant, you will be treated with respect and dignity.

The data will be kept securely for five years for purposes of verification by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, after that it will be destroyed. At your request, an electronic copy of the final projects will be sent to you on completion.

Your willingness to participate in this study will greatly be appreciated.

---

## CONSENT

I ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) have been informed about the study entitled “*Changes and continuities? Investigating the readings of female character representations in South African soap operas Uzalo and Scandal!*” by Janet Atinuke Onuh.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study: To examine the way female characters are represented in South African local soap operas (*Uzalo* and *Scandal*) and to further understand viewers’ perception and reading of such representations.

I have been allowed to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any

time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if an injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at [REDACTED] and email address: [215080588@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:215080588@stu.ukzn.ac.za) / [atinukefasanaya@yahoo.com](mailto:atinukefasanaya@yahoo.com).

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

### **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001  
Durban  
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Video-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Use of my photographs for research purposes YES / NO

**Signature of Participant**

**Date**

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**Signature of Witness**  
**(Where applicable)**

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**Date**

---

**Signature of Translator**  
**(Where applicable)**

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**Date**

## Appendix 6: Production Interview Questions (*Scandal!* and *Uzalo*)

### *Scandal!*

#### 1. In what ways are female characters represented in *Scandal!* in terms of gender roles?

- In general, how would you describe the roles of female characters in South African soap operas today?
- Are there any characters in *Scandal!* that stand out for you in what they represent in their gender roles? Who are they and what do they characterise?
- What are the predominant influences that determine the creation of the female characters? (Probe: cosmopolitan/contemporary identities, tradition, patriarchy)?
- In what ways are the female characters in *Scandal!* depicted in a complementary fashion or in opposition to the male characters? (Probe: which is the most frequent, and why do you think that is?)
- Do you include the idea of patriarchy in the storylines and if so, why and how? (Probe: in other words, is patriarchy included as an unquestioned system, or do some storylines challenge it in any way?)
- In constructing female characters, are there deliberate attempts to juxtapose cosmopolitan/contemporary lifestyles with traditional (and in some cases patriarchal) lifestyles? Or do characters exhibit both? Please explain or give an example.
- Traditionally, in soap operas, female characters fulfil certain roles – most predominately those of the mother, matriarch, wife, sister but also the businesswoman, the lover/mistress, the troublemaker. Which of these (if any) do you think is most prominent in *Scandal!* and why?
- Are there any ‘uncommon’ roles that you feel female characters fulfil in *Scandal!*? What are they and why are they included? (Probe: are these roles influenced by the SA context in any way?)
- In your opinion, do you think female characters that exhibit a cosmopolitan/contemporary identity or female characters that exhibit a ‘traditional’ identity resonate more with the audience, and why? (Probe: it could be both, but perhaps you could speak to this a bit).
- Are those depictions stereotypical or do you think they challenge any stereotypes of

South African women?

**What do any differences reveal in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and or b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies?**

- Is there a trend towards reinforcing the traditional role of female characters or do you think there are changes in *Scandal!* in depicting female characters that are more modern and contemporary? Please explain.
- Between the contemporary/traditional depictions of female characters, which identity do you think encourages *self-actualisation* for women in South Africa today? And why? (Note: the realisation of one's potential).
- Between female subordination and female power, which of the two is the most popular and frequent depiction of female characters in your soap?
- Are these choices you have just spoken of influenced by the predominant patriarchal South African culture or is it a deliberate attempt to innovate?
- Generally speaking, what do you think the role of soap opera is in encouraging gender equality?
- In what ways (if any) is there an impulse to stir up debate around gender equality in *Scandal!*? (Probe: Could you please give me an example).
- Which characters in *Scandal!* do you think could be considered aspirational role models for women in South Africa today?
- What are the aspirations they embody, and why was this included in the storyline? (Note: hope, ambitions)
- Would you say society influences the construction and representation of the female characters? Please explain / or give an example.
- Does the general context of the production companies influence the creation of the female characters? Please explain.
- What is the intention of the construction/representation of female characters? For example, is it mainly to entertain, educate, or for social change?

**Change and continuities**

The crux of my study is to appraise the changes and continuities of the way in which women are represented in South African soap operas.

- Based on what we have already discussed, would you say there have been changes in how women are represented in soap operas, compared to the past? If so how, or could you give me an example from *Scandal!*?
- In your opinion, what do you think is responsible for these changes, if there are?
- What are some of the continuities that have remained? Please give an example from *Scandal!*
- Why have these continuities remained?
- How have these changes or continuities challenged the representation of women in *Scandal!*?

## Production Interview Questions

### *Uzalo*

#### 2. In what ways are female characters represented in *Scandal* in terms of gender roles?

- In general, how would you describe the roles of female characters in South African soap operas today?
- Are there any characters in *Uzalo* that stand out for you in what they represent in their gender roles? Who are they and what do they characterise?
- What are the predominant influences that determine the creation of the female characters? (Probe: cosmopolitan/contemporary identities, tradition, patriarchy)?
- In what ways are the female characters in *Uzalo* depicted in a complementary fashion or in opposition to the male characters? (Probe: which is the most frequent, and why do you think that is?)
- Do you include the idea of patriarchy in the storylines and if so, why and how? (Probe: in other words, is patriarchy included as an unquestioned system, or do some storylines challenge it in any way?)
- In constructing female characters, are there deliberate attempts to juxtapose cosmopolitan/contemporary lifestyles with traditional (and in some cases patriarchal) lifestyles? Or do characters exhibit both? Please explain or give an example.
- Traditionally, in soap operas, female characters fulfil certain roles – most predominately those of the mother, matriarch, wife, sister but also the businesswoman, the lover/mistress, the troublemaker. Which of these (if any) do you think is most prominent in *Uzalo* and why?
- Are there any ‘uncommon’ roles that you feel female characters fulfil in *Scandal!*? What are they and why are they included? (Probe: are these roles influenced by the SA context in any way?)
- In your opinion, do you think female characters that exhibit a cosmopolitan/contemporary identity or female characters that exhibit a ‘traditional’ identity resonate more with the audience, and why? (Probe: it could be both, but perhaps you could speak to this a bit).

- Are those depictions stereotypical or do you think they challenge any stereotypes of South African women?

**What do any differences reveal in terms of a) the continuation of female subordination and or b.) an aspirational forecast for the powerful role of women in South African societies?**

- Is there a trend towards reinforcing the traditional role of female characters or do you think there are changes in *Uzalo!* in depicting female characters that are more modern and contemporary? Please explain.
- Between the contemporary/traditional depictions of female characters, which identity do you think encourages *self-actualisation* for women in South Africa today? And why? (Note: the realisation of one's potential).
- Between female subordination and female power, which of the two is the most popular and frequent depiction of female characters in your soap?
- Are these choices you have just spoken of influenced by the predominant patriarchal South African culture or is it a deliberate attempt to innovate?
- Generally speaking, what do you think the role of soap opera is in encouraging gender equality?
- In what ways (if any) is there an impulse to stir up debate around gender equality in *Uzalo!*? (Probe: Could you please give me an example).
- Which characters in *Uzalo!* do you think could be considered aspirational role models for women in South Africa today?
- What are the aspirations they embody, and why was this included in the storyline? (Note: hope, ambitions)
- Would you say society influences the construction and representation of the female characters? Please explain / or give an example.
- Does the general context of the production companies influence the creation of the female characters? Please explain.
- What is the intention of the construction/representation of female characters? For example, is it mainly to entertain, educate, or for social change?

**Change and continuities**

The crux of my study is to appraise the changes and continuities of the way in which women are represented in South African soap operas.

- Based on what we have already discussed, would you say there have been changes in how women are represented in soap operas, compared to the past? If so how, or could you give me an example from *Uzalo*?
- In your opinion, what do you think is responsible for these changes, if there are?
- What are some of the continuities that have remained? Please give an example from *Uzalo*
- Why have these continuities remained?
- How have these changes or continuities challenged the representation of women in *Uzalo*?

## Appendix 7: Focus group discussion

### Focus Group Discussion Guide

3. In what ways do the audience read these representations in terms of the possible differences between a) past South African soap opera and b) societal realities of gender dynamics?
  - Do you think that the ways in which women are represented in *Uzalo/Scandal!* is different or the same as other older soap operas? Please explain.
  - What do you think of the roles of the female characters in *Uzalo and Scandal!*?
  - Which female character do you think is the ‘strongest’ and why?
  - Which female character do you feel is the ‘weakest’ and why?
  - Which female character do you relate with the most and why?
  - Do you aspire to be the type of women that is characterised in any of the female characters? Please explain.
  - Does the depiction of female characters by the two soaps portrays an increasing role for women in the society?
  - Do you consider the portrayal of these roles to have a position/negative influence on South African society? Please explain.
  - Do you think that the portrayal of the 1) women and 2) men in in the two soap is a true reflection of South African society or not?
  - Do you think that these gender roles as portrayed in the two soap operas have the potential to promote social cohesion and social mobility? If so, or if not, why? (Probe: please give me an example).
  - As an audience of the two soap operas, what is your general perception of the narratives in relation to the portrayal of female characters?
  
4. In what ways do the representations and readings thereof subvert or accept popular and dominant discourses of South African women?
  - In your opinion, what is the dominant view of how women should be or behave in South African society?
  - Does the depiction of female characters in the two soap operas support or challenge this view? Please explain.
  - Do you think your grandmother or grandfather would respond in the same way as

you? Please explain.

- Based on the two soap operas representation of female characters, in what ways do you think the soap operas encourage/undermines the dominant discourses of South African women?
- Considering the South African context, do you think the social structure (class, race, age, ethnicity or gender) influence in the representation of female characters in the soap operas? Please explain.
- In your opinion, which among the social structure concepts play more prominent role in the depiction of the female figures?
- In what ways does the participant social structure affect the reading of the ideologies depicted in the representation of female characters in the two soap operas?

## Appendix 8- More Details on *Uzalo* and *Scandal!* Casts

Character Name	Actor Name	Status /role	Setting	Time frame
Gabsile Mdletshe	Baby Cele	Recurring /main	Township	Current
Nonkanyiso Xaba	Thuthuka Mthembu	Recurring	Township	Current
Gladys Madlala	Ntombifuthi Dlamini	Recurring	Township	Current
MaNgcobo (Lindiwe Xulu)	Dawn Thandeka King	Main	Township	Season 6/2021
MaNzuza (Zandile Mdletshe)	Leleti Khumalo	Main	Township	Season 3/2017
Nosipho Xulu	Nompilo Maphumulo	Main	Township	Season 9/2022
Fikile Hlatshwayo	Nelisa Mchunu	Temporary	Township	Season 6/2021
Thobile Vazi	Nokuthula Mabika	Temporary	Township	Season 4/2018
Hlengiwe Mlambo (Mambolambo)	Gugu Gumede	Recurring/main	Township	Current
Zekhethelo Mhlongo	Nyalleng Thibedi	Temporary	Township	Season 7/2021
Lilian "Lilly" Dongwe	Noxolo Mathula	Recurring	Township	Current

**Table 6.1:** *Uzalo* Female Cast (source: collated by the author from Stained Glass Productions).

<b><i>Scandal! Female Cast</i></b>				
<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Actor Name</b>	<b>Status of role</b>	<b>Setting</b>	<b>Time frame (cast)</b>
Dintle Nyathi	Mapaseka Koetle	Main	Suburb	Current
Layla MacKenzie	Natasha Sutherla	Main	Suburb	Current
Winnie Hlatshwayo	Fundiswa Ngcobo	Supporting role	Township	Current
Lindiwe Ngema – Maseko	Nomvelo Makhanya	Starring role	Township/suburb	Current
Boniswa Langa	Lusanda Mbane	Starring role	Suburb	2021
Mbali Kubeka	Mbali Kubeka	Supporting role	Suburb	2023
Hlengiwe Thwala	Nqobile Nunu K.H	Supporting role	Suburb	Current
Zinzile Ngema	Gcina Nkosi	Supporting role	Township	Season 12/2022
Yvonne Langa	Kgomotso Christopher	Starring role	Suburb	Season 1/2020
Thembeke	Masasa Mbangeni	Main	Suburb	2020
Gloria Legae-Lekgodu	Marjorie Lange	Main	Township	Current
Dudzile Kubheka	Sihle Ndaba	Supporting role	Suburb	2022
Grace Medupe	Bathabile Mashigo		Suburb	Season 4/2022
Gontse Lagae	Khanyisile Zwane	Supporting role	Township	Season 4/2018

**Table 6.2:** *Scandal!* Female Cast (source: collated by the author from Stained Glass Productions).