

DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

**THE PERCEIVED ROLE AND REPRESENTATION OF
WOMEN ON TELEVISION: A STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICAN
SOAP OPERAS**

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THE PERCEIVED ROLE AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN ON TELEVISION: A STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOAP OPERAS.

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on media representation of women through selected South African television soap operas. The problem at the crux of the study is that women encounter prejudiced depictions from different media, resulting in women being perceived as inferior and of less status compared to men. This subject has a significant effect on gender relations in society, as media representations of gender shape gender identity. The study examines the roles and representation of women on television soap operas to discover how these depictions reflect, reinforce or contest societal gender norms. Soap operas are a prominent genre on television, and they have been historically linked to female audiences and are frequently regarded as a crucial arena for the negotiation of gender identities. The research utilises a predominantly qualitative mixed-methods approach, gathering data through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. The research integrated textual analysis of selected soap operas with audience feedback to evaluate the positioning of women within narrative frameworks, character roles, and thematic progressions.

Results indicate an intricate interaction between progressive and stereotyped portrayals. Some female characters are shown as assertive and autonomous, while others are restricted to traditional roles that highlight domesticity, emotionality, and reliance on male counterparts. The research emphasises the cultural importance of soap operas in influencing public views on gender and illustrates the medium's capacity to reinforce or contest prevailing gender beliefs. The study's broader significance is that, women's fair representation can play a role in tackling social injustices suffered by women, such as gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide. Media do not directly cause femicide or any other acts of injustice directed to women, however, their coverage and depiction can influence public perception and attitudes towards injustice, potentially normalising and trivialising it.

DECLARATION

I, Thembisa Euribel Mjwacu hereby declare that the work presented in this research is my own and all sources have been duly acknowledged.

Thembisa. E. Mjwacu

(July 2025)

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my boys, Qhayiya and Lakhanya as a motivation for them to value education. My desire to give them a better and secured future served as an inspiration for me to keep moving even during hard and uncertain times. Their daily affirmations of love worked magic and kept me sane and determined to reach the finishing line.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
DECLARATION.....	iv
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiii
LIST OF TABLES.....	xv
ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
1.CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Context: women in the media.....	3
1.3 Research problem.....	4
1.4 Research Aim and Objectives	5
1.4.1 Main Research Aim	5
1.4.2 Research Objectives	6
1.5 Delimitations.....	6
1.6 Rationale and significance of the study.....	7
1.7 Literature Review	8
1.8 Research methodology	11
1.9 Definition of significant concepts	13
1.10 Overview of the study	15
1.11 Conclusion	16
CHAPTER TWO: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS- BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES.....	17
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 Definitions, context and background of Representation	18
2.3 Media representations as ideological, social and cultural apparatuses.....	19
2.4 The Influence of Representations on identity	21

2.5	Political economy of media representation.....	26
2.6	Feminist approach to media representation	28
2.6.1	Mary/Eve dichotomy and femme fatale.....	31
2.7	Stereotypical representation of women on television and in film	33
2.8	Soap operas: a historical overview.....	38
2.8.1	Soap Opera Models.....	41
2.8.2	Soap opera as a women’s genre	44
2.9	Synopsis of research conducted on the selected soap operas	45
2.10	Conclusion	47
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES UNDERPINNING THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MEDIA		49
3.1	Introduction	49
3.2	Media effects theories	50
3.2.1	A brief outline of media effects research.....	51
3.2.2	Phases of Effects research and theories	52
3.3	Long-term effects theories	54
3.3.1	Meaning construction theory.....	55
3.3.2	Modelling theory	56
3.3.3	Stereotype theory	60
3.3.4	Social expectation theory.....	63
3.3.5	Agenda-setting and Framing theories.....	65
3.4	Normative Media theory framework	68
3.4.1	Setting the scene for normative functioning of the media	69
3.4.2	Social Responsibility and the media’s depiction of women.....	71
3.5	Feminist Media Theory.....	73
3.6	Conclusion	75

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	77
4.1 Introduction	77
4.2 Research design	77
4.3 Methods of data collection	78
4.3.1 Textual analysis	79
4.3.2 Focus groups	79
4.3.3 Interviews	81
4.3.4 Self- administered online questionnaires	82
4.4 Sampling method	83
4.5 Data analysis.....	84
4.5.1 Thematic content analysis: focus groups, interviews and open-ended questions.....	85
4.5.2 Textual analysis of the selected soap operas	86
4.6 Validity and reliability.....	88
4.7 Conclusion	91
CHAPTER FIVE: <i>UZALO</i> : A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS	92
5.1 Introduction	92
5.2 Women’s roles and occupations in <i>Uzalo</i>	94
5.2.1 Women at home	95
5.2.2 Women in the workplace	100
5.3 Themes and behavioural patterns exhibited by women characters.....	103
5.4 Paradigm shift: notable challenges to conventionality and patriarchal dominance	105
5.4.1 Women acquiring independence and self-sufficiency.....	105
5.4.2 Women exhibiting bravery	108
5.4.3 Sexual abuse of boys	108
5.4.4 Women in football.....	109

5.5	Conclusion	109
CHAPTER SIX: SKEEM SAAM: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF		111
6.1	Introduction	111
6.2	Roles and occupations of women in <i>Skeem Saam</i>	112
6.2.1	Women's roles in the workplace	114
6.2.2	Women's roles in their households.....	116
6	Themes and behavioural patterns of women in <i>Skeem Saam</i>	119
6.2.3	Envy, competition and jealousy	119
6.2.4	Commitment to love and romance.....	120
6.2.5	Objectification of women.....	121
6.3	Paradigm shift: Turning tables on gender roles?.....	123
6.3.1	Single parenting men.....	124
6.3.2	A boy-child initiative	124
6.3.3	Career-focussed and businesswomen.....	126
6.4	Conclusion	126
CHAPTER SEVEN: <i>MUVHANGO</i> : A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS		127
7.1	Introduction	127
7.2	Status, roles, and occupations	128
7.2.1	Women's place in Thathe	128
7.2.2	Women's occupational status in MMC.....	129
7.3	Themes and behavioural patterns of women on <i>Muvhango</i>	133
7.3.1	Subjection to culture and male domination.....	133
7.3.2	Marriage and motherhood	136
7.4	Paradigm shift in <i>Muvhango</i> : Smashing the glass ceiling?	137

7.4.1	Women challenging men’s position of power.....	139
7.4.2	Challenging patriarchal bonds	139
7.4.3	Women in business	142
7.5	Conclusion	143
CHAPTER EIGHT: DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS.....		144
8.1	Introduction	144
8.2	Summary of soap opera viewership patterns	145
8.3	Gender dynamics and perceived roles of women: a quantitative response analysis.....	149
8.4	Roles and representation of women in soap operas: A qualitative analysis. 158	
8.4.1	Theme 1: Women’s domestication	160
8.4.2	Theme 2: Seduction and sexual objectification.....	165
8.4.3	Theme 3: Subordination and submission.....	167
8.4.4	Theme 4: Status and significance of women’s roles	170
8.4.5	Theme 5: Dependence vs independence	172
8.5	The perceived effects of women’s images in soap opera.....	173
8.6	Cultivation of women’s potential in soap operas	181
8.7	Paradigm Shift: Changing gender dynamics in soap operas?.....	188
8.7.1	The ascent of women to positions of prominence.....	189
8.7.2	Empowered women and parenting men.	189
8.7.3	Female leadership.	189
8.8	Theoretical implications of the findings	190
8.9	Conclusion	192
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....		194
9.1	Introduction	194
9.2	Conclusions and implications of the findings.....	194

9.2.1	Objective 1: Examining the ways in which women are represented in soap operas through roles and status of the women characters.....	196
9.2.2	Objective 2: Exploring the stereotypical and ideological connotations carried by soap operas through the female characters	197
9.2.3	Objective 3: Assessing probable effects carried by the representations of women in soap operas.	199
9.3	Proposed model for women’s acknowledgment and empowerment in the media.....	200
9.4	Recommendations	204
9.5	Opportunities for further research	207
9.6	Conclusion	207
	REFERENCES.....	210
	APPENDICES	236
	Appendix A: interview Questions for viewers	236
	Appendix B: Focus group discussions with viewers.....	237
	Appendix C: Self-administered online questionnaire	238

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1 Summary of findings on Women in Film and television study conducted by NFVF and SWIFT (Adapted from nfvf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Gender-Matters-in-the-SAFI-Report.pdf).....	33
Figure 2-2 Feminine vs masculine traits (Gledhill, 1997).....	45
Figure 3-1 Nkunzi approaches MaNgcobo suggesting that they have sex in her office.....	58
Figure 3-2 Nkunzi insinuates that a wife is a sex toy and a pleasure object	58
Figure 3-3 MaNgcobo’s frustration when Nkunzi does not see her the way she sees herself	59
Figure 3-4 MaNgcobo wants to model a different cut of a woman, not confined to home space	59
Figure 3-5 Sexual objectification of Pretty by Nimrod upsets Pretty (Season 9 episode 76).	62
Figure 3-6 Kat, Pretty’s boyfriend confronts Nimrod about his lewd remarks on Pretty.....	63
Figure 3-7 Advertising media challenging a stereotypical social expectation .	65
Figure 3-8 Agenda-setting theory	67
Figure 5-1 A gun-waging MaNgcobo takes over the world of gangsterism	96
Figure 5-2 Power fight: Nomkhosi questions Nkunzi’s intention about Indlende	97
Figure 5-3 Njinji tries to kill Mthambisi (Putin): women fighting men brutality back.....	99
Figure 5-4 Lilly shows bravery by facing criminals face-to-face	102
Figure 5-5 Domestic roles follow women (Nosipho)	106
Figure 7-1 Women showing reverence to men	134
Figure 7-2 Domestication of women in Muvhango.....	136
Figure 8-1 Participants' soap opera choices	146
Figure 8-2 Perceived role of soap operas	149
Figure 8-3 Respondents' perception of gender dynamics in Soap Operas	150
Figure 8-4 Setting associated with women in soap operas.....	150
Figure 8-5 Popular roles identified with women.....	151

Figure 8-6 Behavioural patterns identified with women	152
Figure 8-7 Presence of role models in Soap operas	152
Figure 8-8 Nature of Women's portrayal (positively and with dignity?)	153
Figure 8-9 Does the nature of women's portrayal matter?	154
Figure 8-10 Women as servants: Mrs. Kgomo serving her family	163
Figure 8-11 Domestication of women: Mrs. Kgomo brings lunch for Mr. Kgomo 1	163
Figure 8-12 Domestication: Mrs. Kgomo brings lunch for Mr. Kgomo 2.....	164
Figure 8-13 Contributing factors to women's domestication	164
Figure 8-14 Melita's seductive look	165
Figure 8-15 Melita's seductive impression	166
Figure 8-16 Melita's seductive look 3	167
Figure 8-17 Personality traits associated with women role models by viewers	172
Figure 8-18 Media influence on society.....	174
Figure 8-19 Keywords on effects of women portrayal on society	178
Figure 8-20 Negative traits showing women's lack of potential in their roles	182
Figure 8-21 Venda cultural practice- women bowing.....	184
Figure 8-22 Khumo stands tall at MMC boardroom- women's potential	185
Figure 8-23 Susan as the Mayor of Thathe- women's potential in soap operas	185
Figure 8-24 Positive traits showing women's potential in their roles.....	187
Figure 9-1 Proposed model for women acknowledgement and empowerment in the media	203

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Most Watched Programmes on SABC 1 and SABC 2 (November 2022)	4
Table 1.2: Gender binaries (Adapted from Lacey, 2008:191)	11
Table 2.1 Summary of stereotypes insinuated by women representations on selected soap operas (developed by the researcher)	37
Table 4.1 SABC 1 and 2 viewership figures, June 2023	87
Table 5.1 Uzalo Cast	93
Table 6.1 Skeem Saam Cast	112
Table 6.2 Roles and occupations of women on Skeem Saam	113
Table 6.3 Roles and occupations of men on Skeem Saam	113
Table 7.1 Muvhango characters and real names	127
Table 7.2 Women's roles and occupations on Muvhango (MMC)	130
Table 7.3 Men's roles and occupations on Muvhango	130
Table 8.1 Profile of Questionnaire respondents	145
Table 8.2 SABC1 Top programmes and ratings	147
Table 8.3 SABC 2 Top programmes and ratings	147
Table 8.4 Status of roles played by women in relation to men	154
Table 8.5 Popular stereotypes identified by participants	156
Table 8.6 Views on effects of women's portrayal on society	157
Table 8.7 Effects of women's portrayal on them (women)	157
Table 8.8 Depiction of women and their potential	158
Table 8.9 How portrayal of women influences the society (created by the researcher)	179

ABBREVIATIONS

BDPA	-	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
CEDAW	-	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CCI	“	Creative and Cultural Industries
CEO	-	Chief Executive Officer
COO	-	Chief Operations Officer
DSTV	-	Digital Satellite Television
FGD	-	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	-	Gender-Based Violence
GBVF	-	Gender-Based Violence and Femicide
ICASA	-	Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
ISAs	-	Ideological State Apparatuses
MMC	-	Mukwevho- Mudjalifa Construction
NFVF	-	National Film and Video Foundation
PA	-	Personal Assistant
PSB	-	Public Service Broadcaster
SABC	-	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SANEF	-	South African National Editors’ Forum
SDGs	-	Sustainable Development Goals
SWIFT	-	Sisters Working in Film and Television
UN	-	United Nations

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1 Introduction

Television remains one of the most popular and influential forms of media in South Africa, with widespread access across urban and rural areas. According to the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (2023), television reaches over 90% of South African households, making it a dominant medium for information, entertainment, and cultural expression. The public broadcaster SABC, alongside private channels like e.tv and pay-tv services such as DStv, offers a diverse range of programming in multiple languages, reflecting the country's linguistic and cultural diversity (GCIS, 2022).

Television's popularity is also driven by its accessibility and the emotional connection audiences form with local content, particularly soap operas and dramas that resonate with everyday experiences. Soap operas are described as signifying practices that are governed by institutional, discursive and formal mechanisms that enable them and other popular fictional television programmes to function as sites for the negotiation of meaning and identity, for cultural struggle over representation (Gledhill, 1997). As a result, soap operas, which morph into telenovelas and drama, remain the most watched genre on television across all channels (Teer-Tomaselli, 2020). The main interest of this study is to explore the nature of cultural identities and significations circulated about women by soap operas.

Since 1994, South Africa has been undertaking comprehensive changes in all areas to include and support those who have faced disadvantages based on their race or gender. Consequently, the Bill of Rights in the country's Constitution states that all individuals are treated equally under the law, and this equality encompasses the complete and equitable enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. Specifically, the law commits to promote the attainment of equality through legislative and other actions aimed at safeguarding or advancing individuals, or groups of individuals, who are disadvantaged by unjust discrimination (The Constitution of The Republic of South Africa, 1996). This declaration establishes a ground for women to have a fundamental entitlement to be safeguarded against unjust discrimination in all forms, including

prejudice perpetrated by the media. The study acknowledges the importance of Strategic Development Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls worldwide. The United Nations progress report emphasises the necessity for immediate action to address biased social norms, eradicate harmful behaviours, and reform discriminatory laws, particularly with regards to this goal. It is of utmost importance to enhance the participation of women in leadership positions and allocate resources towards achieving gender equality on a national, regional, and global scale United Nations: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5#progress_and_info. To address the concerns outlined, it is necessary to critically examine how the media portrays these issues, to prevent any regression in the progress that has been made and still must be made in terms of gender equality.

Fictional entertainment programmes have enjoyed freedom to an extent that viewers and the larger society rarely take a moment to critically observe what they are watching, just because 'it is fiction, not reality'. However, fiction can also have unfavourable effects and therefore needs to be put under scrutiny. To this end, Igartua and Ramos (2015) assert that fictional characters stimulate processes that foster involvement with the messages or programs viewed, such as affective disposition or appreciation, perceived similarity, para social interaction and identification. This study aims to critically examine elements of the media that are often overlooked or passively consumed yet may have serious implications for gender relations in society, particularly through the perpetuation of stereotypes and the erosion of women's dignity in media portrayals. Media industries are powerful institutions in contemporary societies, and it is essential to comprehend how they work in order to understand, act in, and transform the environment in which people live their lives (Kellner, 2009). In summary, media culture teaches individuals how to fit into the dominant system of norms, values, practices and constitutions. This therefore suggests that soap operas as media cultural products can inculcate negative or positive perceptions about women or gender, depending on the norms, values and practices that they portray and endorse.

1.2 Context: women in the media

Studies reveal that women in the media are portrayed in roles that devalue their ethos and competencies in relation to their male counterparts and by so doing, they carry connotations that women are inferior to men; women are weak and emotional beings compared to men; and women are objects to be adored and enjoyed by men for their own pleasure (Santonnicolo, et al, (2023), Seluman, et al, (2024), Seabrook, Ward and Giaccardi, (2019). The media also insinuate that women are not complete without men; women cannot attain happiness without men; marriage and childbearing are achievements of good women; and women's position in society is lower and less respected than that of men (Santonnicolo, et al, (2023). As a result, women are confined to a narrow set of roles on television that promote sexuality, idealised beauty standards, and gender stereotypical vocations and lifestyles (Sink and Mastro, 2017). Representations of women in soap operas influence the ways in which women are perceived by society, even as far as how they perceive themselves. This study explores the representations of women in soap operas and how these create certain opinions and expectations about women.

Due to being defined as a women's genre, soap operas have received the attention and scrutiny of feminists from different eras. The feminist perspective holds that society is shaped by relations of unequal power based on gender (Govender, 2015). As a result, feminist action in media studies encompasses a broad agenda aimed at understanding how gendered relations are mediated; how gender plays a role in the consumption and creation of media; and how the tools of media can be used to achieve greater inclusion and equality across the world (Govender, 2015). The rise of third-wave feminism in the 1980s saw media as a central object of scrutiny, as well as a tool of action (Harvey, 2019). This statement sees media as having a critical stance but also considers its role as a liberation tool for women's injustice. It is also argued that mediated images are pervasive, hence there is a need to scrutinise the relationship between media framings and social problems, such as sexual assault and workplace harassment to anorexia and low self-esteem in girls and women. In this context and background, soap operas (as media framing) occupy a powerful position to build, shape or destroy women's dignity and social status. The objectification of

women on soap operas and other television programmes may be suggestive of the treatment and equality that women deserve, thus putting them in danger of being violated if dominating images are of a degrading nature. The media can and should play a key role in empowering women by raising the public profile of women’s role in society. This study examines the nature of images that dominate soap operas, and the associations that these images carry for women and for society, now and in the future.

Soap opera popularity has been emphasised by most studies on this concept. South African television is dominated by these throughout the day, and they tend to have a larger following than other programmes at their respective times (Gibson, Dyll and Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). To ensure a solid argument about the television genre under discussion, the study analyses three SABC soap operas, namely *Uzalo*, *Skeem Saam* and *Muvhango*. Similarities and differences in the portrayal of women’s roles and status will be discussed through a textual analysis of each of these in further chapters. These three soap operas were selected based on their high viewership ratings on the two SABC channels, as reported by MyBroadband in November 2022, indicating their widespread popularity. The data presented in the table below demonstrates that soap operas consistently occupy the top three positions on both SABC 1 and SABC 2.

Table 1.1 Most Watched Programmes on SABC 1 and SABC 2 (November 2022)

Rank	Programme	Number of viewers
SABC 1		
1	Uzalo	5,671,465
2	Generations	4,509,223
3	Skeem Saam	3,910,369
SABC 2		
1	Muvhango	1,728,874
2	Muvhango Repeat	1,235,545
3	7de Laan	883,330

Source: [South Africa’s most-watched TV shows \(mybroadband.co.za\)](https://mybroadband.co.za)

1.3 Research problem

The prevalence of stereotyping and endorsement of patriarchal values in entertainment media programmes such as soap operas is the problem behind this research (Czarniawska, Eriksson-Zeeterquist and Renemark, 2013). South Africa has

a history of inequality in several areas, prominently those of race and gender (Fourie, 2018). As a result, since the 1994 democratic elections, measures have been put in place to ensure equality for all citizens. Gender equality has taken centre stage in the country's reforms, guided by a vision for human rights which incorporates the acceptance of equal and inalienable rights for all women and men (South Africa's National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, 2013). However, the mentioned policy framework succinctly states that communication technologies still contribute towards the negative or degrading portrayal of women. The depiction of women in soap operas remains deeply problematic as it often reinforces outdated gender stereotypes, limiting women's roles to those of caregivers, romantic interests, or manipulative antagonists. While some progress has been made in representing women as independent and professionally successful, these portrayals are frequently undermined by plotlines that prioritise their relationships with men or put women against each other, thereby reinforcing patriarchal norms (Mitra, 2022; Mabunda, 2023). Additionally, female leadership is often portrayed as either corrupt or unstable, reflecting societal discomfort with empowered women. In social psychology terms, the media are defined as agents of socialisation, which means that they play a role in acculturating people into a certain way of life and understanding (Paus-Hasebrink et al, 2019). O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2006) argue that the media are carriers of culture, and ways of communicating ideology. The media are in a pivotal position to shape and stimulate the society's views about women and their role in society.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The focus area of the study is media representations, with a specific focus on how women are represented on television soap operas. Representation as an area of study is popular in media studies as it is presumed that what people see in the media, especially television, is likely to relate to reality to a certain extent (O'Shaughnessy, Stadler and Casey, 2016).

1.4.1 Main Research Aim

The broad aim of the study is:

To investigate how women are represented on television soap operas in relation to the roles they play, and the effects of those representations on viewers.

1.4.2 Research Objectives

From this aim, four objectives are defined, namely:

- To examine the ways in which female characters are portrayed on the selected soap operas, focusing on:
 - The roles that they play compared to those played by males; and
 - The value and status of role assigned to women.
- To explore and understand the stereotypical and ideological connotations that soap opera storylines endorse and encourage,
- To assess the effects of women's portrayal on soap opera viewers, which establishes the need for an analysis of perceptions created by soap opera representations of women, and
- To propose a framework that promotes women's recognition and empowerment in media, focusing on their roles and status.

1.5 Delimitations

The study also acknowledges the effects of various media content in shaping views and perceptions about gender and social dynamics but limits itself to soap operas as they are often described as female genre, concerning itself with how soap operas determine how women are perceived in a society. In this way, the study focusses on the portrayal of women and partially refers to men. The study also delimits itself in focusing more on aspects that need to be addressed with regards to women's representation in the media, while it also acknowledges the changes and developments that have been recorded by other researchers and by research participants.

Another delimitation of the study is that it focusses only on SABC soap operas, which in a national broadcaster, and in that way, it excludes other non SABC soap operas. Its participants' profile also present another delimitation, as samples for all methods of

data collection were conveniently drawn from students in one University of Technology. The last delimitation is that its textual analysis and data collection is limited only on three soap operas over a specific period time viewership, which is 2021-2024.

1.6 Rationale and significance of the study

Media create perceptions about people, places, events and all aspects of life. However, they are also an economic interest factor for those who own them. As a result, the quest for the economic viability of media productions has led to the adoption of strategies and content that bring profits but lack responsibility and accountability to the users of such content. Amongst television productions, soap operas are the most popular, and it is this popularity that has triggered interest in studying them. Soap operas also take up most of the screen time as they run for a long time from season to season, thus creating a spiral of effects on those who continuously watch them, either positively or negatively. Soap operas are not only dominated by women characters in their storylines, but they are also enjoyed more by women than men. Hall, (1997) argues that soap operas as mass produced entertainment contribute to the field of cultural representation, particularly to definitions of gender. This study is therefore significant as studying matters of gender representation on the most popular genre can steer the media to play a role in empowering women through the transformation of their roles on screen.

The other reason for studying soap operas is that they are a fictional representation of national identities, cultures, achievements and struggles (Blöse, 2020). In that way, they carry the soul of the many identities that are represented and offer a space to forge relations and question what needs to be questioned. Soap operas attract large and diverse audiences, these portrayals become critical in influencing public perceptions of women (Gqola, 2015). Despite the increasing visibility of female characters, these portrayals frequently lack depth, complexity, and agency, often relegating women to roles centered on romance, domesticity, or rivalry. Moreover, the way women are visually and narratively constructed in soap operas can influence viewers' perceptions and expectations of real-life gender behavior (Tager, 2019). In the South African context, where media is a key player in both reflecting and

challenging societal issues, it becomes imperative to investigate how these portrayals are interpreted by audiences. Understanding viewers' perceptions provides insight into how media consumption contributes to either the reinforcement or transformation of gender norms. This study, therefore, aims to critically explore not only the roles and representations of women in popular soap operas but also how audiences make meaning from these portrayals, contributing to broader discourses on gender, media, and cultural identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

Nelson Mandela once stated that "freedom cannot be achieved if women are not emancipated from all forms of oppression" (South African History Online, 2011). This calls for all sectors of society, including the media, to play a positive role in making women's situations and experiences better. In a society saturated by ever-advancing media and ever-changing social life conditions, the discussion on whether television soap operas contribute to the perception of women's roles in society as valuable or not, remains an integral one.

1.7 Literature Review

Representation in media is the process by which individuals of a culture produce meaning via the use of a sign system (Orgad, 2012). Representation is a prominent issue in media studies. Therefore, it has been the focus of research from a variety of perspectives. Media representations shape culture, meaning and one's understanding of oneself and the world around one. Beyond just reflecting reality, media representations such as film, television, photography and print journalism shape reality and normalise specific worldviews or ideologies (Fürsich, 2010). From this point forward, media representations are more powerful than simple messages, as they carry connotations and associations regarding the life aspects that they portray.

Gender relations is a subject that has garnered significant interest in media portrayals. Hall (1997) contends that initial feminist analyses of the media focused on how prevalent media portrayals of women contribute to perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes and expectations regarding the roles of women and men in society. Gallagher (2013) cites Tuchman (1978) on how mass media images render women invisible in a collection of essays called "Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass

Media". This collection argues that women are depicted in a manner that aligns with societal expectations, suggesting that the media plays a role in perpetuating the images that conform to the existing social structure (Gallagher, 2013).

Media representations contain preconceptions and ideological attitudes that impede favourable impressions of women. Women are depicted as meek and reliant on men for rescue, whereas men are seen as powerful, brave, strong and clever (Cekiso, 2013). Cekiso (2013) states that this depiction is clichéd and does not accurately represent many women in present-day South Africa. Bloese (2020) contends that content producers are also influenced by gender stereotypes, having been part of a media audience at some point in their lives. Individuals' identities are shaped by their real-life encounters and the idealised media content they have been exposed to. Subsequently, gender stereotypes depicted in cultural practices within narratives subtly perpetuate gender inequality under the pretext of amusement (Bloese, 2020). Larsen (1997) asserts that certain forms of media or genres have a greater impact in creating and maintaining gender role stereotypes, depicting women as either weak, powerless and fragile, or alluring and sexually available. These studies indicate that, collectively, women's identity in the media is shaped through a combination of negative attributes than positive ones.

Mumford (1995) alleges the significance of illustrating how certain concepts related to gender, sexuality, femininity, masculinity and societal roles are perpetuated through a specific aspect of culture, such as the television soap opera. Ives (2009) contends that soap operas serve as a platform for exploring national identities, going beyond mere entertainment. Soap operas can indicate how viewers participate in generating new meanings and forming new identities, as Ives discusses in relation to post-apartheid South Africa. She argues that soap operas shape concepts of identity by using their ongoing narratives and characters and these being broadcast daily, continuously present their characters and visuals to viewers, leading to the recurrent presentation of identity concepts (Ives, 2009).

Modleski (2009) discusses the unfavourable portrayal of women relative to men in soap operas. She proposes that this could influence the opinions of regular women, given that women are the primary target audience for soap operas. The 'good

housewife' stereotype reinforces the patriarchal ideology, promoting the principles of a male-dominated society and removing women from positions of leadership (Laughey, 2009). Additionally, Brooks and Hebert (2006) contend that audiences' knowledge and interests are influenced by the visuals, symbols and stories presented in various forms of media such as radio, television, film, music, and others. Tager's (2010) study, based on the soap opera *Generations*, also ratifies the idea that soap operas like *Generations* provide viewers with emotional engagement that can help them develop new understandings, images and guidelines for social and individual behaviour.

Research has highlighted the effects of media representations on viewers. Collins (2001) specifically discusses the issue of women being portrayed less frequently in the media. She contends that it is crucial to carefully analyse how women are depicted in order to prevent the reinforcement of negative or stereotypical portrayals that could be especially damaging to viewers. Collins (2001) further asserts that the way in which women and men are depicted may have a greater impact than the mere fact of their depiction. Another crucial aspect in analysing women's portrayals in soap operas is the set of beliefs and ideological perspectives they convey. They can either challenge or endorse ideological beliefs linked to women. Czarniawska, Eriksson-Zetterquist and Renemark (2013) analysed three soap operas from different countries, including South Africa's *Isidingo*. They found that these series present an accurate portrayal that can prompt reflection and potential change, or alternatively, they can reinforce and correct the current societal structure.

Research has shown that gender stereotypes persist in portraying men as dominant and women as subordinate, less intelligent and primarily focused on caregiving (Tous-Roviroso, Ayerdi and Sola, 2013). The authors highlight how fiction as a form of communication offers greater opportunities for social change by utilising the connection formed between characters and audiences. They also discuss the impact of series in transmitting values and socialisation models. Lacey (2018) hints on discrepancies on how the media portrays gender, as shown in the table below. Popular soap operas frequently display these inequities both directly and indirectly.

Table 1.2: Gender binaries (Adapted from Lacey, 2008:191)

Male	Female
active (do)	passive (talk)
dominant	submissive
hard	soft
intelligent	intuitive
(hard) muscles	(soft) curves
rational	emotional
strong	weak
thoughtful	impulsive

Van Zoonen (1994) reiterates that the media often portrays femininity in a derogatory and disrespectful manner, which is a common focus of the feminist critique. Liberal feminists believe that the equitable representation of women in media will help recognise women in society, while radical feminists support societal intervention (Govender, 2015). This study holds the premise that societal intervention needs collaboration with all other socialisation agents, including the media. As a result, the media ought to be accountable in their narratives and practices, particularly on crucial matters such as gender equity.

1.8 Research methodology

This research is interpretivist as it involves humans (viewers) interacting to assign meaning to social phenomena, in this case, media and gender. An interpretive study aims to understand individuals' interpretations of social phenomena rather than seeking universal, context-free knowledge and truth (Rehman, 2006). This research utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods such as a survey, interviews and focus groups. Studying the viewers' perceptions, comprehension, feelings and ideas regarding the programming they watch is a qualitative part of the study. The study aims to offer quantitative data on viewers' soap opera preferences and the varying perspectives on issues raised. Conclusions were made based on the figures produced to identify the most prevalent thoughts conveyed. The study's sample are students selected from three programmes within the Department of Applied Management at the Durban University of Technology's Riverside campus. The programmes offered are Business Administration, Human Resources, and Public

Relations and Communication. The sample comprises students from the second year of the Diploma to the Advanced Diploma levels of study. However, the study also aims to include any other student who desires to participate in the conversation, regardless of programme of study. Focus groups and interviews were also conducted with university residence students who are interested in soap operas.

The study adopted non-probability sampling, whereby the sample was selected based on the researcher's judgement. The probability of choosing a certain member is unpredictable with this method (Habid, Pathik and Maryam, 2014). Purposive and convenience sampling methods was used to gather a sample that effectively represents the designated population. The researcher chooses the most advantageous situations for their sample and excludes the disadvantageous cases (Habid et al., 2014). The selected campus for this study is Riverside, which is convenient and practical for the researcher because she is located on this campus, and the chosen Department is also part of her daily routine.

In terms of data collection, the study utilised focus groups with selected students to provide candid discussions and the examination of soap operas collectively, thereby identifying perceptions regarding the genre. Four focus groups were held, each consisting of 10 to 12 participants. Two focus groups took place on campus, and the other two were conducted from the residences, with the assistance of a research assistant. The programme of study is not utilised for selection in the focus group discussions in the residence, rather, interest in the soap operas being discussed is the determining factor. Data was also collected from a varied set of students through self-administered surveys disseminated via Google Forms. The researcher and research assistant shared a link with the targeted audience, identified from class registers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants, some sampled from the focus groups while others were referred by those interviewed first, thus leading to snowball sampling of participants.

Thematic content analysis is appropriate for this study because of its qualitative characteristics. Themes in soap operas often revolve around gender roles and prevalent behavioural habits. The obtained data was evaluated based on specific topics that each reflect a potential representation of women on television. McQuail

(2010) defines content analysis as a method for the impartial description of media texts, which is beneficial for categorising output, identifying impacts, and comparing content with reality. Thematic analysis is approached by the study as one way of conducting content analysis, by organising the content into specified themes.

The data was analysed and categorised in connection with theoretical concepts crucial to the study, alongside representation and media effects theories. The frequency of specific types of representations and their associated meanings are crucial for this investigation. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilised to provide the quantitative data on the number of comparable interpretations and meanings associated with a specific soap opera by viewers. Tables and graphs were utilised to display such data. In addition, NVIVO was used to categorise themes and group qualitative data, incorporating features like mind maps and word clouds. Textual analysis was utilised as a method of data analysis to examine episodes from all three soap operas in order to find themes and trends related to the representation of women in this genre. Triangulation of data was employed to enhance the credibility and dependability of the study findings. Various data gathering methods will be utilised, along with diverse demographic groupings based on age and gender. Eliminating bias is important, which could occur if the study just focused on one group. To enhance credibility, the findings was supported by theoretical viewpoints pertinent to the investigation.

1.9 Definition of significant concepts

Soap opera: Mumford (2010:6) defines it as a continuous fictional dramatic television program presented in multiple weekly installments, featuring a narrative composed of interlocking storylines that emphasise the relationships within a specific community of characters. Africa (2021) asserts that among the various genres available on public service broadcaster (PSB) platforms, soap operas rank as one of the most popular. They provide dramatised entertainment for audiences and depend on regular viewership, featuring long storylines and plots that do not reach resolutions.

Representation: Hall employed the term representation to elucidate the intricate methods by which mass media not only displays images but also actively re-

presents images that possess various interpretations. The analysing media representations is essential for understanding the influence of the prevailing meanings attributed to them (Campbell, 2016).

Feminism/feminist perspective: This denotes a collection of beliefs and concepts associated with the extensive social and political movement aimed at attaining enhanced equality for women (Fiss, 1994). Feminist theory posits that throughout human civilisation, women have been assigned a subordinate status within male-dominated social discourse and the Western philosophical tradition (Raina, 2017). Feminism is an ideology advocating for equal rights for men and women in political participation, decision-making, career opportunities, and parental responsibilities. The movements encompass various social, cultural, and political efforts aimed at achieving equal rights for men and women (Asnani, 2020 in Mohajan, 2022). Malinowska (2020) defines feminism as an overarching term encompassing various cultural phenomena associated with the declining status of women within the patriarchal framework.

Waves of feminism: Feminism encompasses both institutional and grassroots efforts aimed at eliminating gender-based disparities concerning women and their societal status. The progression of the feminist movement over time is commonly described as "waves" of change (Mohajan, 2022). The metaphor of 'waves' is frequently employed in the analysis of feminism to delineate its evolution and to encapsulate its salient characteristics at various historical junctures (Molyneux et al., 2021).

Stereotypes/gender stereotypes: These are convictions regarding specific elements that distinguish the characteristics and expected behaviours of women and men, often concerning traits, physical features, roles, and professions (Ward and Grower, 2020). Ward and Gower (2020) assert that gender stereotypes exert considerable influence on various dimensions of psychological functioning, encompassing perceptions, social behaviours, interests, and self-assessed competence.

Role/s: a role or character portrayed by an actor in a performance. This study adopts the definition of role from the Collins Dictionary (online), which describes it as the rights, obligations, and anticipated behavioural patterns linked to a specific social standing. The phrase will be utilised in each of its meanings concurrently.

The femme fatale: This term refers to a woman who is emancipated, self-governing, and defiant, challenging male authority (Lindop, 2015). This woman is perceived as an adversary to male supremacy, hence epitomising patriarchal anxieties. The femme fatale, a multifaceted archetype, possesses considerable importance for feminist theory and cultural representation. This character, often shown as an enticing yet dangerous woman, challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the tensions between female independence and society norms. The representation of the femme fatale in art and literature serves as a basis for feminist theory to analyse power, sexuality, and gender relations (Fiona, 2018).

1.10 Overview of the study

Chapter 1- This chapter provides a background and context for the whole study. It also explains the purpose of the research and highlights its importance and relevance in society. It presents the primary research question and establishes the atmosphere for subsequent discussions in later chapters.

Chapter 2- This chapter discusses literature regarding the topic of representation in the media and the relationship between media and society.

Chapter 3- This chapter presents theoretical frameworks relevant to the study, including normative theory, media effects theory, and feminist media theory. The chapter delineates the principal discussions of these theories grounded in existing literature and instances from the chosen soap operas.

Chapter 4- The fourth chapter offers comprehensive elucidations of the research traditions and procedures. This section provides a comprehensive overview of data collection methodologies, population sampling methods, strategies for ensuring study validity and reliability, and the analysis of the results.

Chapter 5-7- These chapters present a subjective textual analysis of selected soap operas, with each chapter concentrating on an individual soap opera. These chapters seek to elucidate the overarching cultural themes that each soap opera associates with women about the responsibilities and status ascribed to them.

Chapter 8- This chapter offers an in-depth examination of data extracted from participants and analyses this data according to the merging themes.

Chapter 9- The last chapter provides conclusions and recommendations for the equitable and conscientious media representation of gender, drawing from the research and analysis presented in the preceding chapters. It also suggests a model for women acknowledgement and empowerment in the media.

1.11 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the background to the problem leading to this study by highlighting the popular representations of women in the media. The chapter also drew a link between existing research on the topic of women's representation and the current study. From the brief literature review, attention is drawn to how women continue to be marginalised in television programmes such as soap operas. The rationale for the study has also been established and objectives have been set to guide upcoming chapters. This chapter also outlined how research and the collection of data were undertaken and how the data analysis was conducted to reach conclusions and make recommendations. The upcoming chapter provides an in-depth, literature-based discussion on the concept of media representation, highlighting the role and influence of media representations in society.

CHAPTER TWO: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS- BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Introduction

Representation is a fundamental and intricate subject in the field of media and communication studies. While the phrase 'representation' may appear to be uncomplicated, the process of constructing representations of various aspects or groups of individuals within a society is profound and multifaceted. Representation can be distinguished at two levels; the act of representation when visual symbols are generated and produced to signify something outside their own existence (Reid, 2018). The media is replete with various signifiers that producers employ to create diverse artefacts. Soap operas exemplify these objects by employing visual signifiers to convey a specific perspective of life to their audience. The second level, the idea of representation, explores representation as theory that pertains to viewers' comprehension of how visual symbols depict the intended subject matter. Representation in this context is synonymous with portrayal or depiction and delves deeper into the theoretical discourse on how the signifiers used by producers make those who view them perceive the perspectives depicted. The act of representing aligns with the semiotic examination of many signs produced and employed to convey a specific perspective on the world. It aligns with a structural examination of how signs acquire meaning for individuals who interact with them (Reid, 2018). This study aligns itself with representation as theory, building upon Foucault's assumption that representations in the mass media are used to spread ideologies and Reid's perspective that written words and visual images function as structured representations of reality (Reid, 2018). These concepts are used interchangeably throughout the study because they co-exist, and one cannot be without the other.

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the concept of representation, as well as its significance and complexity in the field of media studies. It explores various aspects of representation and reviews literature to reach understanding of the following:

- i) media representations as ideological apparatuses
- ii) Representation's role in identity formation and acceptance
- iii) Political economy influences on media representation
- iv) Feminist theory perspectives on media representation
- v) Media representation and stereotypes
- vi) Soap operas and representation of women.

2.2 Definitions, context and background of Representation

Representation is what every media user encounters and engages with every day when receiving communication of various kinds through different texts and channels. Hall (2005) claims that to present is to offer a depiction of something, and the word representation carries with it the notion that something was there already and through the media, has been represented. Representations come in different forms: language and actions in audio-visuals and a combination of all these. These are the carriers of thoughts and ideas of those who use them, such as media programme producers. These programmes, in turn, directly or indirectly allow the communication of perspectives and worldviews to audiences. Hall (1997), for example, states that representation is the use of language, signs and images in a way that allows for meaning to be produced and exchanged between people. This highlights the power of the media in creating views, understanding and meaning in people's lives. Hall's exploration of representation is vast, and he analysed representation as a signifying practice in diverse media and social contexts (Govender, 2015). Branston and Stafford (2010) also state that representation is one of the key terms in media studies. However, they argue that media images may seem realistic, but they can never simply represent the world directly, hence they are a construction, a re-presentation, rather than a mirror or a clear window on reality.

Media are typically seen as communication tools that send diverse forms of output to their audiences with the purpose of entertaining, educating or informing. This analysis does not focus on the technical aspects of media, but rather in a broader sense in which media have transformed into a "public sphere" where popular culture is created. From this standpoint, media have been categorised as 'cultural products' by media studies scholars like Stuart Hall. Hall (1997) posits a causal relationship between

media and culture, asserting that cultures possess cognitive frameworks that enable people to interpret and comprehend their environment. Media texts are carriers and transporters of representations through messages encoded in them about culture and the socio-economic disparities thereof (Zeeshan, 2015). Hall (1997) describes the media as a crucial medium for the exchange and interpretation of meanings. The media, as a platform for grappling with meaning and discussing important societal concerns, find themselves torn between presenting these issues in a straightforward manner and manipulating them to align with their established conventions and financial motivations.

Gender has been a prominent topic of discussion in connection with how the media portrays and represents social interactions, shifts and advancements. Hence, there is a contention that media has a substantial impact on cultural beliefs and attitudes regarding gender, encompassing both advantageous and detrimental effects (Rodriguez, 2021). The media often perpetuates gender stereotypes and fails to adequately represent women, which can contribute to negative disregard and violence towards women (Rodriguez, 2021). The term 'representation' implies that some media repeatedly show specific images, tales, situations and perspectives, which can create a sense of naturalness and familiarity whilst simultaneously marginalising or excluding other images (Branston and Stafford, 2010). Representations therefore do not only appear to be formidable for both the society and the media, but they also appear fluid and slippery, just like the society that they represent, which also shapes them.

2.3 Media representations as ideological, social and cultural apparatuses

South Africa is a demographically diverse nation, as a result, there are diverse ways in which these demographic groups are depicted by the media. Branston and Stafford (2010) argue that the media gives people ways of imagining groups, identities and situations. As society becomes familiar with the scripts about these groups provided by the media, they perform them in their lives and thus exclude other ways of being. In her book *Media Representation and the Global Imagination*, Orgad (2014) explores the images, stories, voices and accounts that appear in the media on a daily basis and the ways in which people imagine the world: how they come to see, think of and feel

about the world, and their place and relations with others in this world. Orgad (2014) asserts that media representations are immensely powerful as they nourish a wide and deep understanding and feeling that guides and frames people's actions and practices. Additionally, Kidd (2015) argues that when people create representations of the world, there are agendas at play and particular sets of ideas, values, attitudes and identities are assumed and normalised. Kidd (2015) further contends that representation studies focus on the creation of meaning, and meaning is formed by language, signs and symbols, yet these processes always carry inherent values due to issues of power, ownership and authenticity. As a result, a critical and cautious enjoyment of media representations is important in an age heavily saturated by media content that is significantly influenced by ideology and bias (Kidd, 2015).

Hall (1997) is of the opinion that representations are cultural artefacts created and marketed by the media to society. These artefacts serve as a means for society to either reflect upon itself or deviate from its current state to bring about societal change. Croteau and Hoynes (2014) add that perceptions and ways of thinking are created in people's minds through what they see (through cultural artefacts such as soap operas). As a result, people, places and social dynamics incur meanings through the ways in which media represent them. Another fact about representations is that they are not natural or neutral. When media professionals construct news, films, documentaries or any genre, they are not only relying on reality but on a set of beliefs or ideas seated deeply in their sub-conscious state, which interferes with their creativity (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014). Therefore, it is possible that media producers influence media viewers' worldview as they interact with the producers' texts daily. In this way, media become ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which according to French philosopher Louis Althusser, prepare people to accept their society as it is. Althusser was against the idea that economic conditions determine social relationships between different classes as Marxists would argue, but he saw social institutions such as family, school, church, politics, language and mass media, as promoting social norms that make people conform within their society (Sonderling n.d in Fourie, 2007).

Each society has its own ways of making sense of social dynamics such as class, gender and sexual orientation. The media serves as a tool to reflect and challenge these social dynamics. A question has been raised by other researchers about

whether the media simply reflect such social dynamics or if the media also influence them (O'Shaughnessy, Casey and Stadler, 2016). O'Shaughnessy, Casey and Stadler (2016) suggested two models of understanding the media-society relationship. The *reflections* model suggests that the media reflects the realities, values and norms of a society, but the *effects* model suggests that the media does affect what people think, what they believe and how they behave (O'Shaughnessy, Casey and Stadler, 2016). This study's main interest is to discover if and how soap operas represent matters pertaining to women, and how such representations shape society's perceptions of women. Such analysis takes cognisance of both models, hence the textual analysis chapters of this study, as well as analysis of perceptions from the viewers.

Media representations take shape in or through a particular context, be it social, political or cultural. They do not exist in their own world, hence, Lacey (2009) points out that representations are often the product of institutions that produce them and are the result of conventions and norms produced at a particular time and place and are determined by the dominant ideology. No media genre invented the portrayal of women as inferior to men unexpectedly. Rather, it is a perspective that circulate in societies, starting with the family as a social institution and ending in the media as an institution. This reveals a complicated relationship between the media and society, as each of these have a profound influence on each other.

2.4 The Influence of Representations on identity

Mass media representation can either accurately depict, misrepresent, or under-represent social groups and other critical societal aspects. Each of these scenarios influences the identity of the groups portrayed. Annese (2004) asserts that individuals form their identities through their participation in social practices. Interactions with others disseminate identity's multiple meanings, making it transactional in nature. From this viewpoint, identity is not a fixed and comprehensive aspect of human existence but rather a dynamic process of navigating and comprehending oneself in relation to others and societal structures (Annese, 2004). Lawler (2015) posits that systems of inequality shape identities and form them in connection with others. Lawler's argument implies that identity is not a self-contained and isolated phenomenon, but rather one that is negotiated in relation to individuals who are

different from oneself. Lawler (2015) highlights another dimension of identity, namely that it is not innate or bestowed by a higher power, but rather constructed, thereby generating curiosity in the social, political and even psychological realms that shape identities. Lawler (2015) further contends that identity is not a static thing, but rather an ongoing and dynamic interaction with the social environment.

Media representations significantly influence the formation and negotiation of both individual and collective identities by shaping perceptions and understandings of self. In this context, the media fulfils two primary roles: it assists individuals in interpreting and expressing their identities, and it offers a platform for the exploration, discussion, and potential transformation of those identities (Keller, 2020). Spencer (2014) argues that the media plays a crucial and continuous role in this process, serving as an intermediary for the exchange of discourses on identity. The media distributes meticulously crafted messages designed to validate and strengthen individual identities within cultural contexts, a phenomenon referred to as the bardic function (Spencer, 2014). Television serves as a "bardic medium," particularly significant in today's globalised context, where television formats enable both localised and transnational narratives. Hartley (1999) posits that television facilitates the narration of societal stories while contextualising these narratives within wider global frameworks, thus reinforcing or contesting prevailing ideologies. Lotz (2018) notes that contemporary television genres, including dramas and reality programming, often tackle significant social issues, such as gender, thereby participating in public moral discourse and aiding in cultural meaning-making. Njogu (2009) emphasises the ability of media platforms to shape new social structures and identities, while also maintaining or altering existing ones. Furthermore, media frequently contributes to the decline of traditional beliefs, highlighting its capacity to challenge and redefine established notions of identity.

Traditional gender roles for both men and women have long been associated with soap operas (Gledhill, 1997). However, research indicates that soap operas can also contribute to the empowerment of women by presenting an alternative view to the roles (Iqbal and Abdar, 2016). The media's considerable influence in shaping public opinion stems from its ability to develop definitions that are presented as objective facts (Njogu, 2009). The media, whether at a local or global level, serves as a representation of

different lifestyles and offers examples of how individuals should interact with others. Additionally, they demonstrate how respect, position, honour and prestige can be granted or denied. The reason for this is that representations provide a variety of depictions that link various identity groups with distinct opportunities for how to exist as an individual, and how to conduct oneself in a community (Njogu, 2009). Media play a crucial role in contemporary society, but gender and sexuality continue to be fundamental aspects of individuals' self-perception (Gauntlett, 2008). Gauntlett (2008) contends that the media is replete with numerous depictions of both men and women, along with messages pertaining to gender and sexuality. Consequently, it is extremely improbable that these concepts and images would not influence the sense of identity of individuals, irrespective of their gender.

2.5 The question of 'reality' in media representations

People get their knowledge about society and the world mostly through the mainstream media (Luhmann and Cross, 2000). In a study on the symbolic realism of surrogacy, Shalev and Lemish (2011) found that the comparison between media representations and the actual legal, medical and social realities showed that contemporary entertainment media can create false information and misunderstandings through misrepresentations. This study is concerned with examining how accurately the media represents society, its processes, issues and relationships, particularly the dynamics between men and women. The question of whether media representations reflect reality or create a distinct "media reality" has been a topic of inquiry in media studies. The global society has undergone many facets of transformation and shifts in perspectives on several areas, including the role and status of women. South Africa, like the rest of the world, has witnessed women rising to positions of power and leadership formerly held by men. In terms of quantity, these types of developments may seem insignificant, but they must be continually highlighted in order to be integrated into the lives of women and viewers, thereby enhancing the overall value of women.

Contemporary society has been actively challenging and surpassing certain limitations when it comes to the role of women in society. This significantly alters the perception of women regarding their capabilities. South Africa is ranked amongst the top 20

countries with a significant representation of women in ministerial and parliamentary positions, as stated in the World Economic Forum's 2021 Global Gender Gap Report (Nkgadima, 2021). Furthermore, Ritchie's findings (2023), contends that although women constitute slightly more than half of the South African population, they only occupy one-third of the 257 mayoral positions in the country's towns. In the corporate sector, reports show that:

“South Africa has one of the highest percentages of female entrepreneurs according to the Veuve Clicquot 2020 Barometer, which measured 17 countries. In fact, more than half of South African women identify as entrepreneurs. This is good news for the businesswomen of tomorrow, as 97 per cent of the nation's female entrepreneurs believe that networking is paramount to success. With an abundance of courageous role-models to choose from across different sectors, South Africa's leading women are not only leaving a legacy for their younger peers, but their insights and resilience are truly inspiring for any CEO or business owner (CEO Magazine, 2021).

Given the provided information, it is crucial for media scholars to evaluate how accurately the media (specifically television soap operas in this study's context) captures and portrays social reality, and whether its portrayal has shifted towards catering to popular opinion or avoiding controversy. Reid (2018) expresses a concern about the dependability of media representations, asserting that they possess a restricted ability to encompass the entirety of truth within their programming. Amongst the several theorists that addressed the concept of reality in representation, Aristotle characterised representations such as images as 'referents' that indicate or signify some form of reality, whether it be a person or an object. The inherent nature of representations is such that they do not embody reality but rather are intended to "refer" to reality with a certain level of accuracy. The central contention is how the media may present an accurate understanding of reality whilst actively resisting the infiltration of ideological biases and instead actively questioning and challenging them (Reid, 2018).

Media function through codes and conventions that govern the different genres. As a result, their reflections and representations of the world are influenced by these. Fourie (2018), quoting Ernst Combrich, proclaims that images are more influenced by other images than reality, meaning that what is produced now is to a certain extent impelled

by what has been produced before. This questions the ability of media to remain in touch with the current reality and remain authentic. Artists and producers have created most photographs with predetermined ideas or intentions. This implies that representations can either replicate a specific pattern or question it. This phenomenon is seen in South Africa, where certain television programmes mimic shows from other countries, particularly America. An example of this is the Real Housewives series, which began in Johannesburg, followed by Durban, Pretoria and Gqeberha. This suggests that media representations can be inclined to follow trends than capture and contextualise the reality.

Combrich (2004) discusses the necessity for artists in different media to adhere to standards and conventions to create works that align with a specific genre. The artist, who can be anyone creating a text with a specific meaning, begins by using established rules, conventions and forms that they have learned throughout their life to interpret the visible world. He further argues that the perception and presentation of reality by artists, such as photographers, television programme makers, film makers and journalists, have a significant impact on how subsequent artists and mass communicators interpret and create their own images (Combrich, 2004).

Hall (1997) identified three approaches to comprehending the process of meaning construction through representations. The *reflective approach* posits that meaning is inherent in an object, person, idea or event in the real world. Language, in this approach, acts as a mirror that reflects the pre-existing meanings. The *intentional approach* posits that the speaker or author imparts their distinct interpretation to the environment using language, thus the author's intention determines the meaning of words. The *constructivist perspective* asserts that society employs the language system, or any other system, to produce meaning, thereby facilitating interaction. The third approach is particularly pertinent to this study since it strongly argues that media are not only "windows" to the world. Instead, various psychological, ideological and social systems and processes come into play when meanings are encoded and decoded in texts (Hall, 1997). This process further distances media representations from the untainted reality and questions their trustworthiness and validity.

2.5 Political economy of media representation

Communication and power are inherently interconnected, and the dominant groups in a society can shape the media's portrayal of events and information (Hall, 1997). In addition to power, 'economy' refers to the means of production of ideas. Political economy in media studies analyses how ownership, market practices and commercial interests, amongst other things, influence the forms and content of media and communication (McChesney, 2008). A political economy perspective emphasises that capitalist societies are structured based on a prevailing mode of production that organises institutions and practices in line with the principles of commodification and capital accumulation. Durham and Kellner (2008) contend that media platforms such as television have transformed audiences into commodities. It is claimed that the decisions about media creation and ratings are influenced by the potential revenue that shows can earn for many parties involved, including the channel, the producer(s) and the advertisers. The ratings of television programming are influenced by the social value and status of the target audience. Consequently, programmes that cater to the interests of higher-status groups tend to be more popular. In this type of system, the production and distribution of cultural goods are driven by the pursuit of profit and are focused on the market (Durham and Kellner, 2008).

Media products are used and viewed as commodities for their producers who want to generate profits. Typically, the expected profits of these products have a significant impact on producers' choices, giving them a powerful role in determining what to create and disseminate to customers. The television industry, like other sectors of the culture industry, operates as a commercial enterprise that leverages entertainment to produce income and enhance financial gains (Pant, 2021). This creates inquiries regarding the legitimacy of content, as what generates profits may not necessarily be beneficial to the public, but rather advantageous to the individual or entity obtaining such gains. Soap opera producers typically prioritise popular elements, such as characters, storylines and airing hours, to ensure audience comprehension and engagement. The variation in advertising slots is due to factors such as timing, audience size, and occasionally the economic worth of the viewership. The field of Media Economics presents a potential obstacle when it comes to choosing between

creating content that is morally upright and intellectually enriching, and producing content that will attract a larger audience, thus increasing the economic worth of a specific production (Durham and Kellner, 2008).

There is a correlation between demand and price in the context of broadcasters, because as the number of genuine customers viewing increases, the price paid by networks also increases (Meehan, 2012). Media products function on two levels, namely economic and cultural. The media firms were primarily focused on the economic aspect, while the audiences they were targeting for sale considered it to be of lesser importance (Meehan, 2012). This remark suggests that most media representations, particularly those that are fictional, prioritise their own financial gains over the concerns of viewers or audiences. Owners and managers in the media industry possess a clear advantage in influencing and endorsing views that correspond to their own ideological perspectives. The reason for this is that they have control over significant institutions that have the power to shape public opinion. As a result, they can express their viewpoints consistently and effectively to the public in a way that is attractive and persuasive (Dines, 2003). Meehan (2012) further states that society and its many institutions give higher importance to the interests of men over those of women. Therefore, feminist political economists would argue that the overwhelming focus on male audiences reinforces the sexism of patriarchy and normalises the subjugation of women. Moreover, implementing restrictions on markets to advance women's empowerment will undermine the objectives of capitalism, as capitalism flourishes in the presence of unequal social dynamics (Dines, 2003). It is important to have an understanding that media representations are not produced through and under straightforward conditions. Rather, they are trammelled by social structures such as politics, economics, technology and cultures. The field of Political Economy encompasses various aspects that go beyond the scope of media and media studies. However, this study will not delve deeper into this topic due to its specific focus on women. Hence, the following section provides a concise overview of feminist perspectives on media representations.

2.6 Feminist approach to media representation

The feminist criticism of the media is based on Marxist principles and the conviction that the media disseminate distorted portrayals of certain social groups. These portrayals aim to oppress individuals by restricting their roles and expectations (Steiner, 2014). Bosch (2011) advocates for the incorporation of a feminist ideology into present-day media studies in Africa, highlighting the alignment between the feminist political agenda and media studies. Media have always played a crucial role in facilitating political and social advancements for women, closely intertwining feminism and media (Bosch, 2011). Since the inception of the first wave of feminism in the early 20th century, the primary objective has been to advocate for women's suffrage and ensure their access to equitable opportunities. During this feminist wave, which began from the 1840s to mid-20th century, Amelia Bloomer (Women's rights advocate and an American newspaper paper editor) made a significant media advance for women by launching *Lily* in 1849. *Lily* was the first newspaper in the United States owned, edited and published by a woman. The newspaper emphasised the topics of temperance, women's rights and fashion reform (Johnson, 2017).

Mohajan (2022) asserts that the second wave of feminism shared similarities with the first wave as it remained primarily concerned with advocating for women's rights, specifically in the areas of equal access to education and employment. This wave witnessed the emergence of radical activity by women and other organisations who took to the streets through protests and other means to advocate for women's rights. Amongst all these manifestations, Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* emerged as the most widely known and acclaimed mass media item of that era. In this book, Friedan (1963) questioned the traditional view of women as homemakers, specifically criticizing mainstream advertisements that solely featured women performing household chores. It revealed women's lack of political power required for effecting change in the world, which motivated many to actively engage in society and establish their own voice (Mohajan, 2022).

The second wave of feminism ignited an intensified emphasis on the correlation between media and gender. During this period, there was a thorough analysis of how the media reinforced gender stereotypes, reinforced traditional male-dominated norms,

and portrayed a biased viewpoint that benefited males (Krijnen, 2017). Malinowska (2020) states that throughout the second quarter of the 20th century, television emerged as the primary medium, resulting in the second wave of feminism focusing on women's struggle to gain representation on television. To create a fair and reliable system, it was essential to tackle and overcome the current employment patterns and representation templates. Malinowska (2020) posits that the television business, which was primarily dominated by men, perpetuated conventional gender stereotypes by marginalising women from positions of authority and confining them to technical, administrative, organisational or entertainment roles.

The third wave of feminism diverged from earlier waves by embracing previously stigmatised features, including the sexual liberation of women and the recognition of their bodies and reproductive autonomy. Young women belonging to the third wave expressed their feminist beliefs by engaging in diverse forms of cultural creations and forms, such as zine-making, songwriting, painting, sculpture, graffiti, radio, music, sticker-making, guerilla theatre, film, blogging, video, dance and comedy (Karaian and Mitchell, 2010). This wave not only presented challenges in its definition but also demonstrated a rich abundance of ideas and perspectives due to its intersectional approach. It connected women's oppression and liberation to other social issues such as race, ethnicity and politics. Many academics do not extensively discuss the role of mainstream media during this wave since it primarily emphasises personal liberties and expressions without explicit mobilisation and radicalism (Mitchell, 2010). Sowards and Renegar (2004) argue that popular culture emerged as a suitable platform for promoting awareness and understanding of third-wave feminist ideals. Women were becoming more prominent on television, movies, music, and other forms of media. There was an increase in feminist role-models and cultural icons that girls and women hold in high regard and esteem (Sowards and Renegar, 2004).

The advent of the fourth wave of feminism brought forth a culture of "callout", enabled by the internet, where women challenged societal norms and responded to misogyny, sexual violence and discrimination based on intersecting identities (Sternadori, 2019). Younger women have been described as more active during this wave, mostly due to their ability to utilise the Internet and social media to confront gender inequality (Sternadori, 2019). The primary distinguishing characteristic of the fourth wave is the

utilisation of the internet and digital technology for feminist causes. The emergence of the fourth wave of feminism can be observed in online debates pertaining to feminism and women's issues, particularly on blogs and through the utilisation of "hashtag feminism". One notable example is the #MeToo campaign, which shed light on the widespread occurrence of sexual assault and harassment (Pruchniewska, 2019). A summary of the four waves of feminism illustrates that the media have played a role in promoting the progress of women's revolution by providing them with a means to express themselves and advocate for both collective and individual empowerment. Given that soap operas are categorised as a "women's" genre, it is reasonable to anticipate that they should strive for the advancement of women's position and status, rather than perpetuate their marginalisation and oppressive dominance.

The advancements brought about by successive waves of feminism encompass feminist theories, thus leading to the incorporation of feminist analysis in television discussions, frequently drawing upon Feminist theory. Feminist critics and theorists assert that television, along with other forms of popular culture, has a substantial impact on teaching and upholding the existing political and social order (Mumford, Geraghty and Lusted, 2003). Derived from Feminist theory, feminist media theory promotes an equitable and impartial representation of women in both realistic and artistic portrayals. Thornham (2007) delineates the connection between feminism and the media across various stages of feminism and epistemological emphasis. Starting in the 1960s, it has been argued that depictions of women in women's magazines, cinema and advertising conveyed the idea that women achieve fulfilment through sexual passivity, masculine dominance and nurturing maternal love. Consequently, feminist media academics have created analyses of femininity, its depictions and women's intricate connections with them (Thornham, 2007). As feminist discourse evolved, attention shifted among various concepts that either contested the socio-political conditions of the era or facilitated improved living conditions for women. These developments encompass the associations of women in media with the Mary/Eve dichotomy and the femme fatale archetype.

2.6.1 Mary/Eve dichotomy and femme fatale

One of pivotal feminist discussions is Mary/Eve dichotomy, which is assumed to create gendered expectations and ideals that shape and constraint women's roles and identities. Biblical depictions of women became a central concern to second-wave feminism, not only for feminist theologians but also for feminist writers (King, 2023). This dichotomy reinforces patriarchal values by elevating Mary's passivity and Eve's culpability, effectively devaluing women's agency and diversity (Christ, 1997). Other prospects view this dichotomy as a restrictive framework where women are either idealized or vilified, thus narrowing the scope of acceptable female behaviour (Paskow, 1991). The figure of Eve provided an important contrast for many, since she represents all that woman should not be, while Mary, often referred to as the New Eve, who represents all that woman must aspire to. These two figures stand as binary opposites, used by patriarchal societies to define woman at her worst and at her best (King, 2023).

Often, fictional media carry these juxtapositions in many ways, thus creating both conventional and non-conventional perspectives of women. Mary, the good, kind and meek woman is often rewarded to proclaim acceptability of her character and behaviour while Eve, on the other hand, is seen as rebellious, undesirable woman who has fallen from grace (Hurst, 2013). Nehanda (2020:10) asserts that the storylines of many soap operas and telenovelas often revolve around women who are shown under two binaries of the evil manipulative seductress or the typical good girl. Both archetypes receive different interpretations from a feminist perspective. Mary is the favoured type by patriarchy while Eve is frowned upon. However, from a feministic point of view, Mary's compliance to male domination and the status quo subdues women to oppression and subordination. Eve is an epitome of women celebrating themselves and their power as she is liberated and takes an initiative to achieve what she wants.

Onuh (2017) asserts that binaries in soap opera female characters presents various facets of womanhood. Neophytou (2012) sees the villainous character (Eve) as reinforcing ideal notions of femininity as she is positioned in direct contrast to the other women characters of the soap opera. In acknowledging the complex version of women

who can exude both binaries, Suparsad (2023) argues that such a character is significant because it forcefully moves beyond limited space given to women to exist. Suparsad (2023) further asserts that such representations of women move away from the stereotypical representation and a stifling status quo one step at a time.

One of these interpretations of Eve is a negative one, associating her with a concept of *femme fatale*. Kuhn (1990), states that the *femme fatale* is primarily defined by her desirable but dangerous sexuality which brings about the downfall of the male protagonist. Farrimond (2023) argues that feminist film scholars have found value and view *femme fatale* as a symbol of power for women. This female figure is defined as fatal, dangerous and fearless, who unsettles the patriarchal core that most societies are established on. Bogoevici (2023) traces it back to antiquity and biblical eras of women such as Eve and Delilah. The *femme fatale* resists clear definition as the term relates to sexuality, femininity, danger, violence and deceit, but these connotations are slippery, as many of those characters popularly associated with the term do not fit a coherent pattern (Attraction and Lane, 2021. Nehanda (2020:11) explains the origins and characteristic of *femme fatale*:

The post 2nd World War era, saw some significant changes for 'women in pictures', as films, especially, those categorised as film noir, sought to offer a new perspective on female characters. No longer were women portrayed as the *mater patriae* or as the damsel in distress. Rather, filmmakers, because of shifts in the socio-economic space, begin to show women as stronger and more independent, yet sinister.

None of the selected soap operas fully exemplifies the *femme fatale* concept in their representation of women. However, Khumo in *Muvhango* comes close in many ways, as she exudes beauty, attraction at the same time executes some deadly acts to usurp those who stand on her way. Njinji in *Uzalo*, is an epitome of dangerous and fatal woman, as she does all in her power to remove any obstacle to her goals, especially men. However, both women do not use sexuality and seduction to their end goals. This discussion will be elaborated on when a textual analysis is conducted on *Uzalo* and *Muvhango* respectively.

2.7 Stereotypical representation of women on television and in film

The NFVF, in partnership with SWIFT, generated a report that investigates the participation of women in the South African film industry, both in on-screen and off-screen roles. The analysis indicates a shortage of women in powerful and significant roles on film (Smith, Choueiti, Prescott and Pieper, 2016). The study's findings also suggest that the low representation of women in significant roles has a negative impact on their dignity and threatens their integrity. The report has additionally collected substantial input from media professionals. Within these responses, the following have been recognised as pertinent to this study:

- There are limited stories told about strong women.
- As long as there are no women head writers, women will remain misrepresented.
- Transformation needs to start at the conception stage where women will write about themselves positively and realistically.
- Most women play a secondary role to the lead and end up having to get naked.
- Women are represented as commodities and are over-sexualised to continue feeding the monster of patriarchy.
- A lot of women are stereotyped.
- Sometimes women are seen as weaker sex.
- Women are always represented as weak people and victims

Figure 0-1 Summary of findings on Women in Film and television study conducted by NFVF and SWIFT (Adapted from nfvf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Gender-Matters-in-the-SAFI-Report.pdf)

One of the issues raised by the above report is the stereotyping of women on television. However, this scourge is not limited to South Africa. Several countries have conducted extensive research on this subject, particularly focusing on racial and gender stereotypes. Black women in the United States face several challenges as they are often stigmatised, hypersexualized and marginalised (Jefferies and Jeffries, 2015). The portrayal of women in visual media, particularly in film and television, has a significant impact on how society perceives them, often in a demeaning and overly sexualized way. Yunjuan and Xiaoming (2007) allege that in the Chinese context,

several studies have consistently revealed that women are frequently depicted in conventional roles that are passive, subservient and dependent. Furthermore, they contend that the media serves the purpose of meeting the structural requirements of a patriarchal and capitalist society by strengthening gender disparities and inequities. Yunjuan and Xiaoming (2007) highlight that the way the media portrayal of women has evolved over time due to the influence of the feminist movement and wider social and economic changes. One notable improvement is the transition from depicting women solely in domestic roles to emphasising their ability to pursue independent careers in the workforce.

Ibbi (2017) conducted a study on the portrayal of women in Nigerian films. The study found that although the industry has had significant expansion and success, the content of the films continues to reinforce gender inequities in the way women are shown. He asserts that Nigerian societies are primarily patriarchal, with the girl child being regarded as inferior to the boy child. As a result, this idea has had an impact on how women are shown in films. Ibbi (2017) contends that Nigerian films have perpetuated stereotypes of women by depicting them in roles such as prostitutes, witches, gold diggers, and husband killers. The main contention put forth by Ibbi (2017), which underpins the basis of this research, is that society is confronted with the peril of younger women emulating the portrayal of women in the media, which gives both positive and negative role-models.

Research on soap operas and the representation of women has demonstrated two key ideas: the depiction of a male-dominated society and the ability of women to overcome such portrayal by assuming positions of authority traditionally associated with men (Czarniawska, Zetterquist and Renemark, 2013).. Despite some progress, women are still often depicted negatively in the media, either as dependent on men for their success (as seen in the case of Lee Haines in *Isidingo: The Need*, who was the daughter of a successful businessman) or as using their ability to seduce men to climb the social ladder (as exemplified by Cherele Haines, who was married to Barker Haines, a prominent businessman in the community of Horizon Deep). It can be inferred that while women are to a certain extent depicted as capable of advancing and succeeding in business like men, their success is still dependent on the assistance or exploitation by men (Czarniawska, Zetterquist and Renemark, 2013).

A study conducted by Landers (n.d.) on *Uzalo* also highlights the distinct roles and personas played by prominent women. One character is depicted as virtuous, whilst the other is regarded as conniving. Additionally, the submissive character is portrayed as vulnerable, while the assertive character is depicted as strong. Regarding the positions, one is situated within a domestic environment, whereas the other is mostly situated outside of the domestic environment. This representation of women can be seen as both a reflection and an obstacle to a society that is striving to transcend its stereotypes and become more responsive to the ongoing advancements of women.

Furnham, Pallangyo and Gunter (2001) conducted a study on television in Zimbabwe, and they also found a significant disparity in the representation of men and women. In their study, the researchers contrasted the representation of gender in British and African contexts. Their findings concur with Ibbi's, as they concluded that advertising often depicts women in home settings, while corporate settings more frequently feature men. Women are often depicted as being reliant on others, while men are typically seen as self-sufficient and authoritative in making decisions. Furnham, Pallangyo and Gunter (2001) further content that that the media, especially television, has a significant impact on social learning and cognitive development. They support the findings of Manstead and McCulloch (1981), who identified mass media as influential source of social conditioning regarding the appropriateness of various behaviours based on gender. Branston and Stafford (2010) assert that media possesses considerable influence in moulding and defining the boundaries within which audiences are encouraged to perceive specific groups and concerns. The issue is the persistent and uniform depiction of women in a negative light, as this might shape societal attitudes towards women and impact women's self-perception. Blose (2020) reiterated this view by highlighting that the plots convey nuanced signals that contribute to the cultivation of low self-esteem, particularly amongst black female viewers. These messages perpetuate stereotypes that depict them as weak, flawed and inadequate.

According to social expectation theory, certain individuals can imitate a behaviour that is depicted in the media and incorporate it into their own actions (Fourie, 2001). Due to this inclusion, it is crucial to examine the roles given to women in television, as young girls may imitate the behaviours of the female characters they observe on

television. This is mostly because television and film are visual media, renowned for their ability to convincingly portray events with great precision. Scholars studying women's portrayals on television have developed various frameworks to elucidate the prevalent or recurring roles ascribed to women, which perpetuate stereotypes in the material.

Table 0.1 Summary of stereotypes insinuated by women representations on selected soap operas (developed by the researcher)

STEREOTYPE	INSINUATION
Submission	Women ought to submit under the leadership of men, both at home and work. They cannot lead but play a supporting role to men.
Dependence	Women's success depends on men's support or presence in their lives. Their intellectual capacity is lower than that of men.
Male assertion/Affirmation	Women's goal is to have a man to complete them. No matter how hard they try to stand on their own, somehow in the process they will need men to rescue them.
Limited authority and subordination	Women may be in high positions but cannot make decisions on their own authority. They need men to support and approve their decisions. Women occupy a subordinate position while men dominate.
Victims of male abuse (home or work)	They have fallen or failed in their ventures because of men. Some have even faced some form of abuse-physically or emotionally.
Sexual objects	Men can do as they please with women, and they can use them as tools to climb up their corporate or social ladder. They can entice them into a relationship and then discard them for the next as they wish. Men expect women to be sexually available to them, as they are their (men's) objects of desire and lust.

Women possess various other characteristics, some of which stem from their psychological disposition rather than their abilities. The analysis above demonstrates the portrayal of women as a subordinate gender and the consistent ability of men to use women to their advantage. A thought-provoking perspective from Ahmed and

Khalid (2012) suggests that there could be a shift in the perception of women, although the depiction of both genders on television remains conventional and clichéd.

The media can play a dual role when it comes to gender stereotypes, as both a perpetrator for the existing and a protagonist for reformed ones. They can either perpetuate gender-based discrimination by depicting stereotypical and sensationalised images of women, or the media can give fair and unbiased coverage that empowers women and exposes instances of gender bias (Kumari and Joshi, 2015). Studies on stereotypes and the media consistently emphasise that media images or portrayals serve as a reference point for understanding gender dynamics in various settings, such as the home or workplace. Hence, Goodall (2012) citing Wood (2011:257) states that:

The media do this through the presentation of images of men and women, which allows the “media [to] advance ideals of what is desirable in men and women”, because the media have provided the audience with “models of what it means to be male or female, or in a relationship” as well as images “of what men and women are and should be.

Soap operas have always been associated with stereotypes due to their association with one gender and not the other. The upcoming discussion briefly outlines the background and nature of the soap opera as a genre, and how it is deemed a feminine genre.

2.8 Soap operas: a historical overview

Soap operas are an American originated genre that has become popular worldwide and has been a subject of interest in broadcasting and communication studies for more than 70 years (Soukup, 2016). Soap operas present a fragmented ongoing narrative that provides distraction and fantasies for women at home, while ideologically positioning women in traditional stereotyped roles (Wasko and Meehan, 2020). Mumford (2010) defines the soap opera as a continuing fictional dramatic television programme presented in multiple serial instalments each week through a narrative composed of interlocking storylines that focus on the relationship within a specific community of characters. Soap operas have successfully been able to present the everyday happenings and form a part of the cultural exchange which goes on in both

the home and the workplace. Fiction is inter-woven with events in the “real” world, both those directly experienced by the viewers and those which have been reported in the media (Ahmed and Khalid, 2012). Soap operas, being a distinct genre, function within a few conventions, a significant one being that of social realism or melodrama (Neophytou, 2012). Rather than concentrating on long-term goals and events, the soap opera narrative focuses on the reactions and emotions of characters as they live through constant change, disruption and temporary resolutions, to plots that will eventually change and continue to develop in unexpected ways (Bajner, 2008).

The Soap Opera genre is more profitable than other television genres in South Africa as soap operas account for more than 40% of overall television viewing. Soap Operas are so successful because they are relevant to current affairs and they highlight South Africa’s rich cultural landscape. Due to the high viewing rate of soap operas in the country, broadcasters keep their prime television spots for soap operas, ensuring that advertising slots are highly contested amongst advertisers (Chipana, 2024).

Khan (2010 in Mathobela, 2021) asserts that the portrayal of women in soap opera narratives reflects moral oppression as the plots revolve around patriarchal systems that persist in both private and public broadcasting. In the South African context, they hold a significant role in shaping the perception of post-apartheid national identity and culture (Gibson, Dyll and Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). Literature reveals that the soap opera in South Africa was introduced through foreign soap operas such as *Dallas*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and *The Days of Our Lives* (Durban and Cowling 2005). During the 1980s, when peripheral countries began creating their own soap operas, the dominant countries that sponsored these shows insisted on assigning inferior groups undignified, corrupt and domesticated character parts (Harrington, Scardaville, Lippmann and Bielby, 2015 in Mathobela, 2021). On the 6th of April in 1992, South Africa debuted its first domestic soap opera called *eGoli: Place of Gold*, which was broadcast on M-net. The show mostly featured white characters and used English and Afrikaans as the main languages (Durban and Cowling, 2005).

Soap operas primarily feature female-oriented programming that portrays submissive characters who care for those around them. They are also recognised for depicting gender and race inequality, as well as the educational deprivation for women, through

less empowered female characters (Igbal and Abdar, 2016). Blose (2020) argues that soap operas were originally created to shape women's identities as they were initially sponsored by detergent firms targeting women in domestic roles. Soap opera representations are deeply rooted in the everyday lives and societal contexts they inhabit. Consequently, the images conveyed in soap operas are strongly intertwined with social norms and convictions (Maseeme, 2021). Moreover, soap operas have adapted to reflect the changing times and ensure that their storylines remain socially relevant. Soap operas underwent a significant transformation in both style and content throughout the 1970s (Britannica, 2024). This historical period-initiated discussions on socially significant topics such as abortion, drug misuse, domestic violence and sexually transmitted diseases. Despite being fictional, soap operas provide viewers with insight into specific societal aspects of life as they address real-world issues and concerns, notably those related to family life, love and relationship difficulties. Worden (2013) alludes that soap operas are cultural artefacts that expose both society's greatest successes and most significant shortcomings. Hence, they mirror everyday preoccupations and obsessions.

Amongst the soap opera characteristics raised in this discussion, the most easily recognised of these is its never-ending storylines, which are perceived as a defining feature of its narrative style. This lack of closure is not only a major source of enjoyment for women but also plays a significant role in evaluating the ideological function of these programmes (Mumford, 1995). Verisimilitude is another concept associated with soap operas (Marx, 2007). In this context, "verisimilitude" refers to being genuine, authentic, or like real life (Alexander, 2004). Soap operas, while serving as a form of escapism, also maintain a connection to societal realities by addressing real-life concerns, conflicts, events and situations. During the period when HIV/AIDS was a pressing concern in South Africa, many soap operas included storylines with individuals living with HIV in their storylines. Brown (1994) states that the initial creators of soap operas aimed to integrate aspects of women's culture into the programme. Brown (1994) reiterates that soap operas were intentionally created to cater to women's role in society, which is established within a patriarchal and capitalist framework. This is a space where women are expected to conform, which aligns with how society perceives them. Worden (2013) contends that soap operas provide a

platform for marginalised women, particularly homemakers, to engage with television dramas that revolve around topics that are highly significant to women, such as family, love and money. This statement leads to the core of the current study: analysing the depiction of women in television soap operas and its potential impact on their dignity and status. Soap operas are identified through different model. The following discussion focuses on these.

2.8.1 Soap Opera Models

The initial producers of soap operas were Frank Hummert and his wife Anne Achenhurst, who created a soap opera titled *Betty and Bob* in 1932 (Hobson, 2003). The soap opera captivated a wide audience, particularly women, with its narrative centred on diverse topics related to family dynamics, romantic relationships, marital issues, divorce, second marriages, loyalty, envy, infertility, parenting and love. These themes continue to be defining features of contemporary soap operas. Liebes and Livingstone (2005) categorised soap operas into three models: dynastic, dyadic, and community soap operas.

The Dynastic model

The narratives of this paradigm mostly revolve around a dominant family led by a patriarch, with a strong emphasis on traditional themes such as power dynamics, family values and gender relations. This model features dominant male figures who wield power in multiple domains, including criminal activities, economic control, and often leveraging their political influence to evade legal consequences (Liebes and Livingston, 1998). The term used to describe this is the *Godfather dynastic model* (Liebes and Livingstone, 1998). There are numerous instances of such characters in South African soap operas, such as Jack Mabaso in *Generations: The Legacy* (SABC 1). Mabaso instilled fear in others because of his formidable criminal influence, which also enabled him to amass wealth and evade legal consequences. The same principle applies to another character in the same soap opera, Gaddafi. The *honourable dynastic paradigm* discourages crime and corruption while glorifying honour and good social position. This paradigm was exemplified through the character of pastor Mdletshe on *Uzalo*.

The *dynastic* soap opera model, also referred to as the *patriarchal* soap, depicts a specific representation of family dynamics where the struggle for power revolves around the male protagonist. However, the moral obligations, interpersonal connections and value system are entrusted to the woman or mother, even if she has a career, because her primary role is that of a mother or wife (Geraghty, 1991). Azwindini Mukwevho is a suitable character for this model in *Muvhango* (SABC 2), while Makhadzi and Masindi play a moral obligation role. Azwindini holds the position of chief in a tribal region called Thathe, located in the Venda area of Limpopo Province. His authority is influenced and reinforced by the presence of Makhadzi. The gender dynamics in dynastic soap operas exhibit a strong asymmetry, with men being given priority over women in terms of access to power and job opportunities (Geraghty, 1991). This attribute relates well to *Muvhango* as chieftaincy and positions of high authority such as CEOs in the corporate sector are entrusted more to men than women. Women, on the other hand, are only able to exert actual influence through their ability to enhance their physical appearance or bear children for their spouses (De Kock, 2010). Susan, Azwindini's ex-wife, is an example in this case, as she gets honour from the royal house by virtue of her being a mother to the chief's heir, Vutshilo.

The Dyadic model

This model lacks a significant focus on social reality, instead heavily emphasising melodrama. It portrays the younger generations as dependent on influential male characters, commonly referred to as patriarchal moguls (Onuh, 2016). Dyadic soap operas, such as *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *The Young and the Restless*, consist of a multitude of closely related couples who primarily belong to the same generation and frequently switch partners. These couples have romantic relationships that span over their past, present and future (De Kock, 2010). Typically, it is a woman who engages in a pattern of moving from one male to another, sometimes within the same family but across different generations, such as transitioning from a father to a son. Brooke on *The Bold and The Beautiful* was involved in a romantic relationship with both father and son, Ridge Forrester and Eric Forrester, and frequently switched between the two. This element is not well recognised or prominent in any of the South African soap operas being studied.

The Community model

Community soap operas like *Skeem Saam* consists of multiple families from different generations, typically from working or middle-class backgrounds, residing in the same neighbourhood. As a result, they are considered part of a single community. *Skeem Saam* is situated in two distinct locations: the city of Johannesburg and the rural/township of Turfloop in Limpopo. While there is some connection amongst the characters in these various locales, the differences in their lifestyles and dynamics are more pronounced. Community soap operas depict a more authentic perspective by featuring single-parent families and unmarried individuals. The characters grapple with job and family issues, and interact with each other in public venues, such as cafes, financial institutions, supermarkets and laundrettes. Community soap operas portray women as strong (Liebes and Livingstone, (1998). Unlike hierarchical structures based on family lineage, this portrayal emphasises the communal aspect through its depiction of everyday occurrences of love, betrayal, reconciliation, disease, unemployment, and teenage drug addiction (Onuh, 2016). Geraghty (1991) categorises these soaps as 'matriarchal soaps' since they prioritise the portrayal of women as strong pillars of support for the family, both practically and ethically, rather than focusing on patriarchy. *Skeem Saam* features four matriarchs: Meiki Maputla, MaNtuli, Gogo Mantsha and Celia Magongwa. These women are portrayed as backbones for their families, while some are perceived as pillars for the community (Gogo Mantsha).

Liebes and Livingstone (1998) assert that this model emphasises the lives of ordinary working-class individuals who strive to resolve social conflicts and promote unity within their community. *Skeem Saam* (which translates to "my friend" in English) exemplifies this notion specifically in the Turfloop area where there is an intense sense of familiarity and knowledge of each other's backgrounds. *7de Laan* also serves as another prime example, where the residents of *7de Laan* work together as a community to address issues that impact them. It explores the many challenges encountered by individuals in their homes and workplaces within the community. The interconnectedness of the characters in this soap opera is evident in the relationships they have. South African soap operas emphasise this aspect because of the historical political atmosphere of isolation and prejudice that South Africa faces. These models

suggest a combination of elements and features for narratives. However, none of them states that the issues tackled are specifically issues pertaining to women, hence the genre is defined as women's. The following discourse presents perspectives from multiple scholars on the genesis of soap operas as women's genre, along with the ramifications and critiques of this viewpoint.

2.8.2 Soap opera as a women's genre

The soap opera is aimed at women audiences. Nevertheless, scholars such as Mulvey, Cook and Modleski see gendered spectatorship as a problem (Kuhn, 2007). Modleski (2008) associates this genre with themes such as the portrayal of evil women, the act of making great sacrifices, the pursuit of winning back an estranged lover or spouse, marrying for financial gain or social status, the depiction of unwed mothers, the use of deception regarding the paternity of children, the conflict between pursuing a career and being a housewife, and the portrayal of alcoholic women. Examining these themes alone raises concerns about the prominence women's vulnerabilities and shortcomings receive in this genre, a phenomenon that strangely captivates women themselves. By the 1980s, television soap operas and film melodrama had already begun to receive criticism and theoretical analysis as narrative styles.

Modleski (2008) contends that soap operas not only target female viewers but also create feminine roles that go beyond patriarchal forms of identity. This perspective implies that soaps have been categorised as drawing in or appealing to female viewers by their depiction of topics from a female point of view. From this perspective, it may seem that soap operas can depict women in a more favourable and positive manner. However, this research raises questions regarding that assumption.

Branston and Stafford (2010) state that genres attain status based on their perceived gendered nature and classification. The distinction is established on the premise that masculine genres are more verisimilar since they make more frequent references to the actual world. Furthermore, they exhibit reduced sentimentality and refrain from indulging in emotions and escapism, recognising that emotions are associated with vulnerability and tenderness, qualities that are contrary to male virtues such as resilience. The soap opera genre was found by feminist scholars to provide women with specific pleasures that needed abilities and competences traditionally associated

with femininity, such as interpreting emotional distress and comprehending intricate family dynamics (Branston and Stafford, 2010). Consequently, an examination of these attributes links soap operas to every characteristic traditionally associated with females as opposed to males. The gendering of soap operas as ‘feminine’ can be attributed to several factors, the first of which is the social construction and distinction between men and women, as exemplified in the figure below.

Mass culture/entertainment	High culture/art
Popular genre conventions	Realism
Romanticized stereotypes	Rounded psychological characterization
Glamour	Severity
Emotions	Thought
Expressive performance	Underplaying, understatement
Talk about feelings	Taciturnity, decisive action
Fantasy	Real problems
Escapism	Coming to terms
Private domesticity	The public world
Pleasure	Difficulty
Soap opera	The western
Femininity	Masculinity

Figure 0-2 Feminine vs masculine traits (Gledhill, 1997)

2.9 Synopsis of research conducted on the selected soap operas

Substantial amount of research exists on the selected soap operas already. However, the specific framing of this study to focus on the broader roles played by women characters on the chosen soap operas make it distinctive. Research conducted on *Skeem Saam* for example has focused on factors such as language and ethnographic pluralism (Aiseng, 2022). Montle (2020) also focused on socio-economic aspects such as Black Tax, while Kemp (2021) examined the representation of townships and township life in *Skeem Saam*. Maggs (2021) took a gender approach to media representation in *Skeem Saam* but focused on depictions of masculinity and its

association with neoliberal ideas of success. *Skeem Saam*'s audience engagement using Twitter was studied by Sono (2021) while Mathobela (2021) observed the portrayal of racial characterisation.

Some studies have been conducted on *Uzalo* as well, these include representation of matriarch in South soap opera (Onuh (2017), with findings suggesting the construction of matriarchs (women leading characters) as strong independent individuals, mothers, wives and their line of actions and decision making is driven by the love for their families. Representation of gay men (Dube, 2020) found that most of the representations of black gay men are negative and found to rely on stereotypes and are depicted as accessories to straight people. The exploration of Zulu masculinities (Nzimande and Dyll, 2023), reveals that although there are deliberate attempts in soap opera's preferred messaging to subvert the dominant discourses of Zulu masculinities founded on machismo entrenched in Zulu tradition, as well as negative stereotyping, the audience participants predominantly decode these according to a hegemonic understanding of an ideal Zulu masculinity based on patriarchy.

Most of the studies on soap operas provide a less critical perspective on roles of women, as they focus on the positive role that women play. They hardly pay attention to the issues of power, status and dignity attributed to women, as compared to men. The later notion is the focus of this study, thus making it essential, as it takes a critical feminist stance to representation of women and their roles in soap operas. Landers (2018) concludes that *Uzalo* attempted to establish a feminine discourse by positioning matriarchs as central characters. However, patriarchal values permeated the text. This study aims to explore how patriarchal values permeate *Uzalo*'s women character roles and behaviours.

Related research conducted on *Muvhango* and gender representation include Hingston (2016), who provided a feminist critique of two South African soap operas (*Muvhango* and *Skeem Saam*). The main purpose relates closely to the current study as its objective was to determine whether these soap operas reinforce or transform the status quo of women in South Africa. Hingston's conclusive argument is that "the South African story regarding the status of women is contradictory when one considers the fact that South Africa has been commended for having one of the

most gender progressive constitutions worldwide yet is steeped in cultural traditions that discriminates against women” (2016:65). Mapokgole’s study (2019) took a Human Rights perspective concerning the representation of specifically black women in the media. Her study argues that the representation of women fails to meet the obligations set out in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (African Women’s Protocol) (Mapokgole, 2019). This perspective will be revisited later in the study when a model for women’s acknowledgment and empowerment is proposed. Other studies on *Muvhango* include Maseeme (2021), whose focus was on media’s role in sustaining culture. Maseeme’s study shows that there is a good relationship between the media and culture, which the media as transmitters of culture are fulfilling. Other researchers reviewed *Muvhango* in relation to language and culture (Aiseng, 2024), (Nzimande, 2015).

This synopsis shows that there is no study conducted to closely examine the occupational and social roles and behaviours depicted by women characters on these soap operas. These elements are important to study as they make the societal framework for women to go about their everyday lives. Therefore, studying these, adds value and uniqueness of this study.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter provided an exposition of the notion of ‘representation’ within the field of media studies, with specific emphasis on scholarly works that examine gender portrayals in the media. The chapter also revealed that media representations are not replicas of reality but are constructions that are tamed by their producers’ ideologies, as well as media and genre codes and conventions. Also discussed in this chapter is the evolution of feminism and specific challenges that the different waves tackled. The role of media representations in the construction, making sense of and transformation of identity cannot be taken for granted as scholarly views cite that identity is socially constructed.

Due to the influence and dominance of patriarchal ideology, stereotyping has been discussed as a problematic element in the media, not only in South Africa but globally.

At the close of the chapter, the discussion focused on soap operas as a genre and its association with women. It has been raised throughout the chapter that soap operas carry a considerable amount of content regarding social aspects and developments. To justify the study, the chapter also provided an overview of research conducted on selected soap operas and what has not been, thus identifying the knowledge and research gap it fills.

The next chapter offers an account of the theoretical perspectives relevant to the study, reflecting upon literature that already exists and citing cases and examples from the chosen soap operas.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

UNDERPINNING THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MEDIA

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines some important theories that are deemed relevant in framing media representation. There are a few theories that this study can draw from, but this chapter focuses on media effects theory framework, feminist media theory and normative media theory framework. The discussion on this chapter will be guided by the existing literature on these theories, while drawing on their relevance to the current study and its concepts such as the power and effects of the media, feminist view of media representations as well as ideal function of the media in society.

Bryant and Finklea (2022) acknowledge that *media and communication effects* occur at individual and social level. On individual level, they argue that some individuals may be susceptible to media influence due to factors such as gender, personality, attitudes and moods. On societal level, media effects develop through the media system dependency model, which assumes that individuals in modern society become increasingly dependent upon mass media as a source of news and information (Bryant and Finklea, 2022). For a soap opera study, it can be argued that people use them as trendsetters for their lifestyle choices, thus enforcing the media system dependency. Theorists of note on study of media effects framework include Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998), DeFleur and Dennis (1998), and McQuail (2005).

Normative media theories are an important consideration in a society whose media is rapidly evolving and enjoying more liberty than before. South African media enjoys much freedom compared to media of other states where high level of censorship exists for example. However, as a developing country South Africa still needs the media that considers its normative development-driven role, particularly when the notion of Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) is concerned. Pioneers of media normative theory include McQuail and Deuze (2020), who posit that normative theory is concerned with prescribing how media ought to operate if certain social and public

values are to be observed or attained (16). Other theorists on normative theory include Christians and White (2009).

Feminist media theory is also of major importance to the study. This is because gender remains a socially significant to South Africa as a society, and so to its media. The feminist underpinning lends a gendered reflection on the content and narratives of the soap operas, tracing the manner of representation of women and its perceived effects thereof. Feminist media theory relies on feminist theory as it applies philosophies, concepts and logic articulation of feminist principles to patterns of representation in news and entertainment platforms (Steiner, 2014).

3.2 Media effects theories

Jim Morrison, an American singer, famously stated that “he who controls the media, controls the mind” (Bryant and Finklea, 2022). This phrase implies that media can have a lasting impact on individuals who consume various media productions, as dictated by those in charge of the media. Given the widespread tendency to credit too many of today's societal problems on various forms of media, the matter of mass media effects remains highly significant in society (Bryant and Finklea, 2022). Media effects research is one of the nine early techniques to studying media, as proposed by O'Shaughnessy, Stadler and Casey (2016). The underlying assumption is that although it may be challenging to measure direct media effects, it is undeniable that media has an influence on individuals' cognition, emotions and behaviour.

Fourie (2001) delineates three dimensions in the motivation for media effects research: strategic, scientific and ethical. Firstly, he asserts that understanding that certain types of communications, organised in particular ways, can elicit a specific type of response in given situations, is strategically crucial in political, social awareness, marketing, and advertising campaigns, amongst other examples. Furthermore, the pursuit of information regarding a widespread phenomenon like the media is of scientific significance due to its impact and the need for ongoing research on media effects. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon current and future communication professionals to possess knowledge regarding the potential consequences of their work on the well-being of individuals and society. Disciplines such as sociology,

political science and psychology have shown an inclination towards media effects research. For these disciplines, the study of media effects involves the development of theories and conducting experiments to analyse the impact of media technologies and messages on their viewers (Nabi and Oliver, 2009). This chapter primarily focuses on the historical backdrop and stages of media effects research. It will also explore relevant long-term theories regarding the soap operas under investigation.

3.2.1 A brief outline of media effects research

Media effects research is a firmly established discipline within the realm of communication and media representation. The topic of media effects has sparked debates, with the primary concern being the challenge of quantifying them. The study emphasises the significance of media effects, since it explores how media texts intentionally and unintentionally influence audiences' thoughts and emotions about women. Potter (1998 in Fourie, 2001) drew an analogy between media effects and weather, proposing that while weather does not have a direct impact on humans, it is continually present. Likewise, the presence of media effects may be difficult to ascertain, but this does not invalidate their existence. In their study, Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) classified the behavioural effects into three distinct categories. Cognitive effects pertain to the influence that a communication, such as a story, article or programme, has on individuals' comprehension, perception, and cognition regarding several topics, such as race, gender, country or individual. Affective effects pertain to the influence that media messages exert on people's feelings and attitudes regarding specific subjects, such as the mistreatment of women, Covid-19, aliens, and various other themes. The range of emotions may encompass feelings of shame, embarrassment, hatred, or humiliation. Conative effects pertain to the impact that messages can exert on people's actions or attitudes towards a certain object or individual. Individuals' emotions might motivate them to engage behaviours, such as joining demonstrations or endorsing petitions. These actions become incorporated into their conduct, whether for a momentary or prolonged duration (Fourie, 2018).

3.2.2 Phases of Effects research and theories

Media and communications effects research has been categorised into different phases, which are determined by both the progress in media technology and the critiques of earlier researchers' conclusions. There are four distinct phases that affects research has undergone. The initial period, spanning from the early 1900s to the 1930s, acknowledged the substantial influence of the media in shaping opinions, beliefs and lifestyles, as well as moulding behaviour in accordance with the intentions of those in charge of the media (McQuail, 2005). The drawback of this concept was its lack of scientific study foundation, relying instead on observations of the media's widespread presence in various parts of daily life and public matters (McQuail, 2005).

The second phase spanned the 1930s to the early 1960s. During this time, researchers conducted independent investigations on the effects of different modes of communication and media, specifically focusing on the influence of films on young individuals. The conclusion of this phase was that mass communication alone is not an adequate source of audience effects but rather functions through a network of mediating elements (McQuail, 2005). McQuail (2005), further contends that the media did have an impact and influence, but there was no expected direct relationship between media stimuli and audience response. The media operates within existing frameworks of social interactions and the socio-cultural environment. McCombs and Shaw (1972) elucidate this argument in Govender (2005), asserting that media audiences determine the order of importance of individual concerns and the level of significance they assign to them based on their portrayal in the media. During the period of this research (March 2020), the global society was grappling with a worldwide pandemic referred to as the Coronavirus or Covid-19. Society was gripped by a sense of alarm, not just due to the pandemic itself, but also because of the extensive media coverage of the prevailing situation, and the constant data updates. This exemplifies the influence of media in shaping individuals' cognition, emotions and perspectives around a specific topic. Mheidly and Fares (2020) propose that the media plays a crucial function in raising awareness and promoting health, therefore serving as a significant intermediary for health communication. It exerts a substantial influence on attitudes, intentions, and health behaviour. Hence, the media exerts cognitive and

conative impacts by shaping individuals' understanding of Covid-19 and influencing their actions in response to it.

The third phase of affects research revised the influential concept of media impact, challenging the previous phase's assertion of a minimal media effect. McQuail (2005) provides evidence that the media can have significant social implications and can be utilised to exert social and political influence. The resurgence of effect research was characterised by a shift in focus towards enduring transformations; cognitive processes rather than individual attitudes and emotions; towards collective phenomena such as public opinions, belief systems and social definitions of reality, ideologies and cultural norms; and institutional frameworks for media provision (McQuail, 2005).

McQuail's statement aligns with DeFleur and Dennis's (1998) claim that mass communication media have the potential to promote social and cultural change. The accumulation of effects theory suggests that even slight changes in public perception gradually build up over time, if there is consistency and corroboration across many media platforms in presenting a particular topic (DeFleur and Dennis, 1998). People can gradually alter their perspectives, understandings and attitudes towards these topics. DeFleur and Dennis (1998) assert that for the accumulation of effects to take place, three factors must be present, namely: the media must give priority to a specific topic through repetitive coverage. Furthermore, it is imperative that there is consistency in delivering a unified interpretation. Lastly, the various media formats should offer complementary material and interpretations that are reinforced by each other.

The media in South Africa collectively depicts women as being tamed for marriage and as being dependent on men. An illustrative instance can be observed in Mkhuma's (2004:25) examination of *Isidingo*:

Despite her gallant efforts, life has not been smooth sailing for Agnes. She had to fight a sad battle as her husband, disregarding her unhappiness, went ahead and impregnated young Refiloe, once the family helper. Tradition forced Agnes to swallow the bitter pill and stay in the marriage, which is still the case in our society today.

Marx's (2008) analysis of *7de Laan* offers another example of media corroboration in their depictions. Marx emphasises that Dezi (from *7de Laan*) vehemently resists her mother-in-law's perception of her as a wealthy, passive wife by actively pursuing her own career but still depending on her husband's assistance to attain higher social status. This corroboration between two soap operas on different SABC channels is seen as perpetuating the portrayal of women as subordinate and dependent on men.

The fourth phase of media effects research stands upon the contention that the media exerts the major influence when they actively participate in the process of creating understanding and significance (McQuail, 2005). Research in this phase is driven by two key understandings, namely:

First, media "construct" social formations and even history itself by framing images of reality (in fiction as well as news) in predictable and patterned ways. Second, people in audiences construct for themselves their view of social reality and their place in it, in interaction with the symbolic constructions offered by the media. The approach allows both for the power of media and for the power of people to choose, with a terrain of continuous negotiation in between, as it were. (McQuail, 2005: 461)

The foregoing statement implies an ongoing interaction between media content and media audiences, which is elucidated through several short-term and long-term theories. The study examines several long-term theories proposed by Fourie (2017) and (DeFleur and Dennis, 1998), including Meaning-construction, Modelling, Social Expectation, Stereotype, Agenda Setting, and Framing theories.

3.3 Long-term effects theories

Long-term effects theories propose that media exerts impact on individuals' behaviour and cognition over an extended period. Some of these theories postulate that individuals exist inside a society that is guided by social institutions such as family, school, politics, and leaders, who might potentially shape an individual's overall viewpoint on media material.

3.3.1 Meaning construction theory

People have different perspectives and interpretations of the world around them, which impact their moral values and belief systems. These are acquired through familial engagements, social connections and the media. These institutions facilitate the development of individuals' personal and shared understanding of the world around them. The meanings of words and labels are not inherent but rather acquired through the process of socialisation. People acquire these meanings through verbal communication, employing language, which subsequently moulds their understanding. For instance, the term "slay queen" has gained popularity as a descriptor for women who adorn themselves in costly, exposing attire and extravagant hairstyles. The term carries multiple implications. Initially, it was seen appropriate to label women as "slay queens" since it was associated with being fashionable and trendy. However, as further interpretations emerged, women today find it offensive to be labelled as "slay queens", due to the term's association with women who prioritise their appearance, rely on men for financial support to preserve their appearances, and lack intellectual stimulation. Entertainment programmes employ these types of terminology to describe their characters, thereby upholding their societal connotations. Therefore, DeFleur and Dennis (1998) agree that being exposed to mass media influences the development of our ingrained patterns of perceiving, comprehending, and behaving towards the environment surrounding us.

According to the meaning construction theory, the media plays an active role in the process of defining things, events, people, and places. The media's portrayal of nations or locations, such as Dubai or America for example, significantly shapes people's perception of them. The initial stage in creating meaning involves categorising and articulating the characteristics of entities, individuals, events, or situations using appropriate designations and linguistic expressions. The concepts "femininity and masculinity" are labels that pertain to gender. When people hear these terms, they form mental conceptions depending on their internalised beliefs and the context in which the media use them. For instance, femininity is characterised by attributes such as sensuality and gentleness, while masculinity is attributed to physical strength. People's associations with labels are influenced by their readings of the texts

in which the labels are present. Then individuals begin using these terms to express their unique connections and relationships in their conversation, which helps to establish their stability (Fourie, 2001).

3.3.2 Modelling theory

This theory, (also referred to as social learning theory) suggests that certain media audiences may assimilate the behaviours portrayed in the media as their own (Fourie, 2018). This can pose an issue if the media neglects its societal duty to accurately depict people's behaviours. Most of the human activity is acquired through the process of observation and modelling. Through the observation of others, individuals acquire knowledge about the execution of novel behaviours, and this encoded information functions as a blueprint for their own actions (Bandura, 1977). This poses a difficulty in contemporary culture as a considerable number of young individuals prioritise the status of being a 'celebrity', and the media allows them unrestricted access to the personal lives of these celebrities. Bandura discusses a symbolic model of social learning that encompasses the observation of behaviours exhibited by actual or fictional people in various forms of media such as books, films, television programmes, and internet platforms (Cherry, 2022).

Albert Bandura formulated the social learning theory to explain how individuals acquire new behaviours by observing and imitating others (DeFleur and Dennis, 1998:470). Bandura's theory, although not specifically centred on mass communication, is strongly associated with modelling theory, which highlights significant behavioural transformations resulting from exposure to media content, which is referred to as symbolic modelling (Cherry, 2024). There are numerous tangible instances of imitating media-influenced behaviours. As an illustration, women have become obsessed with perfect weight, physical attractiveness, and fashion. It is common for individuals to have a desire to test out products and clothing items that are endorsed by female celebrities that they admire. By observing these personalities, women can covertly emulate their true essence and aspirations based on their models. DeFleur and Dennis (1998) recounted the tale of a woman who developed romantic feelings for a cocktail called "Brandy Alexander" after witnessing a character on a soap opera ordering it. She was eager to experiment with it, despite her complete lack of knowledge about its

nature or flavour. This is a consequential outcome as, had she not viewed that soap opera and observed a woman placing a beverage order, she would not have been informed or inclined to do it. In this instance, social learning took place through observation and modelling of the observed pattern.

Stages of social learning

DeFleur and Dennis (1998) alludes that modelling goes through many stages:

1. A media consumer sees an action performed by a person (model).
2. The media user/viewer identifies with the actor/model, which could be due to their gender, age, or other identifying characteristics.
3. The user imitates the model's actions or choices in a subsequent situation.
4. The user receives a reward for their actions (if satisfied with the process).
5. Motivation leads to the likelihood of repeating the behaviour (adoption).

I had the privilege of watching a YouTube video featuring Albert Bandura engaging in a conversation with the Cinema for Change team. In the video clip, he discusses the influential role of soap operas in promoting positive social models. In his introductory remarks, he explores the concept of acquiring knowledge from observing the actions of others and the resulting consequences. When asked about the correlation between violent behaviour and the consumption of consuming violent media content, he contends that the influence of television violence may be affected by other elements that interact with media. He further asserts that violent content normalises, endorses, and downplays violent behaviour. In relation to the concept of entertainment education, he suggests that cinema producers should employ modelling techniques to bring about beneficial social transformation, aligning with some theories in the field of development communication. ([Albert Bandura: The Power of Soap Operas \(youtube.com\)](#)).

Several characters in soap operas are shown in a favourable light, and their acts are acknowledged and rewarded in some manner. Nkunzi, a character from the soap opera *Uzalo*, is widely regarded as the most feared individual in the Kwa-Mashu Township. However, he sustains his livelihood by engaging in car theft and carrying out robberies in the neighbouring townships of Durban. Additionally, he possesses the

ability to captivate the affections of women. The provided screenshots capture a scene from an episode in which Nkunzi engages with his on-screen spouse, MaNgcobo, and symbolically equates women to objects of sexual gratification.

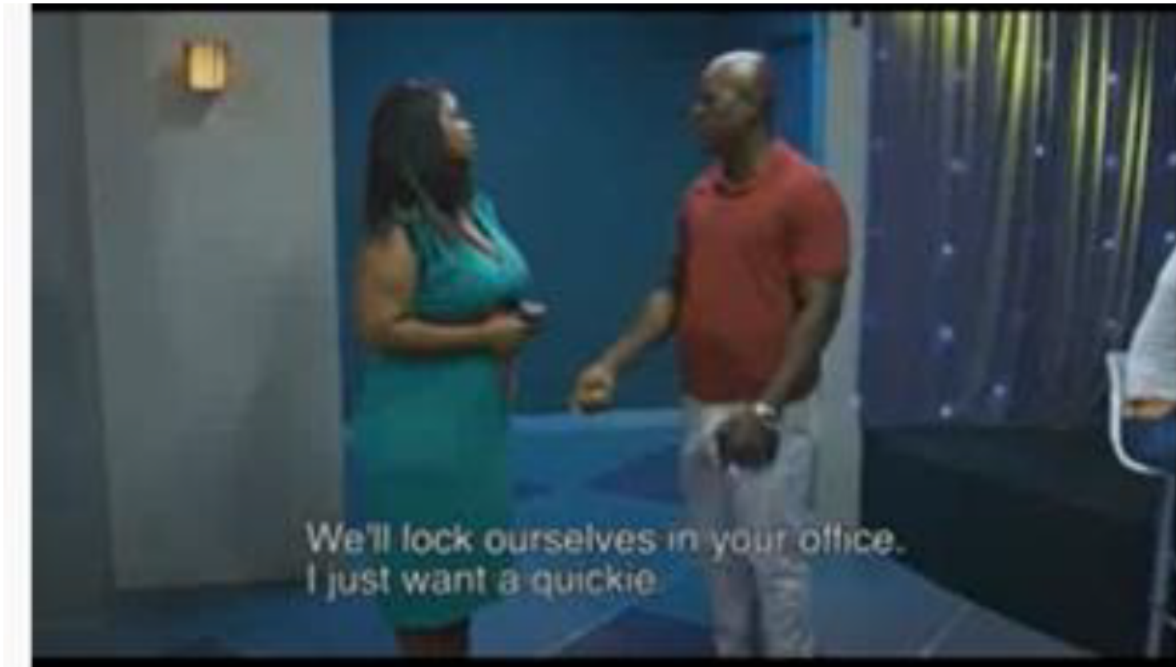


Figure 2-1 Nkunzi approaches MaNgcobo suggesting that they have sex in her office

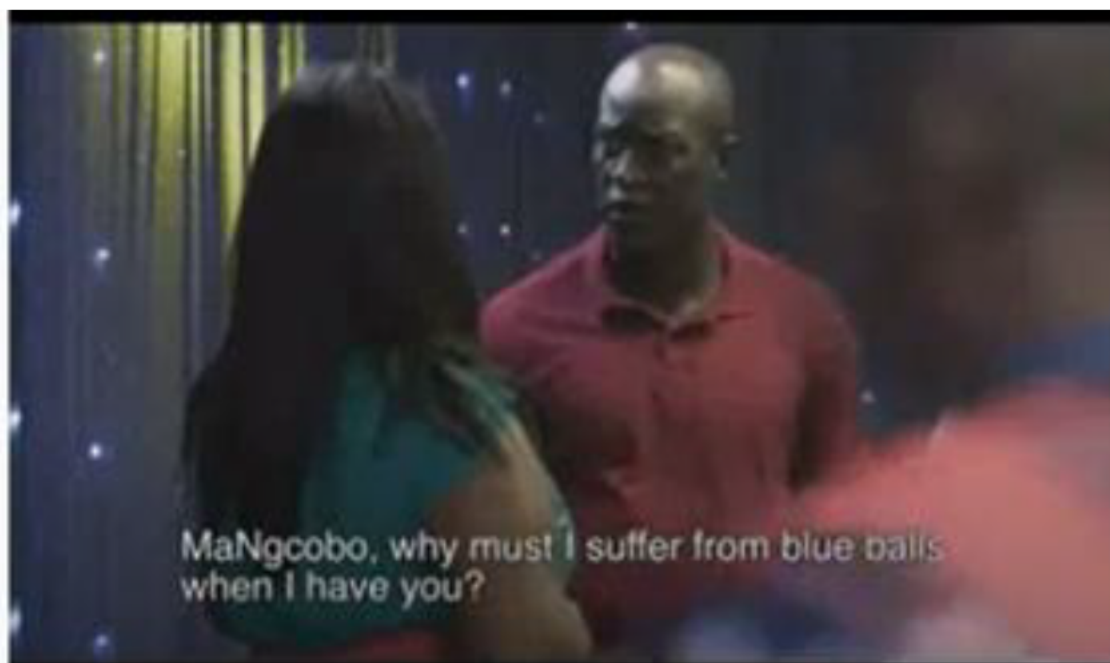


Figure 2-2 Nkunzi insinuates that a wife is a sex toy and a pleasure object



Figure 2-3 MaNgcobo's frustration when Nkunzi does not see her the way she sees herself



Figure 2-4 MaNgcobo wants to model a different cut of a woman, not confined to home space

Nkunzi's behaviour may serve as an exemplar for adolescent males, fostering the notion that women are objects of sexual desire and subservient to domestic duties. Bandura and Walters (1977) argue that humans are cognitive beings, implying that their thoughts and mental processes have a significant impact on their behaviour and deeds. Hence, it is incorrect to base human behaviour only on external influences. They contend that neglecting to consider the aspects that impact individuals' behaviour based on their cognitive processing would be a limitation in understanding human behaviours. However, Bandura and Walters (1977) acknowledge the presence of external symbolic representations that individuals can use as a guide for their behaviour. Humans possess cognitive problem-solving skills that allow them to mentally analyse and resolve issues without the need for physical experimentation. Additionally, they can predict the probable consequences of alternative acts and adapt their behaviour accordingly (Bandura and Walters, 1977). For example, young men can acquire understanding by watching the consequences of Nkunzi's behaviour and subsequently adjust their own behaviour by treating women in a different way. The displayed images reinforce detrimental stereotypes about women by objectifying them solely for the purpose of male pleasure and fulfilment. The following discussion focuses on the stereotype effects theory.

3.3.3 Stereotype theory

Dixon (2019) argues that to comprehend the possible impacts of media stereotyping, it is necessary to ascertain the degree to which they are prevalent in the media environment. Also, he emphasises that personal identities are intrinsically linked to individuals' self-perceptions within a collective context, particularly in comparison to other groups. This has the potential to harm the reputation of groups who are commonly portrayed in stereotypes, such as women. Stereotypes are defined as sets of unfavourable associations that are often attributed to specific groups of individuals (DeFleur and Dennis, 1998). Gender stereotypes dictate that women are expected to exhibit traits such as dependence, weakness, incompetence, emotionality, fearfulness, passivity, modesty, soft-spokenness, gentleness, and caregiving abilities. On the other hand, men are expected to display traits such as power, competence, logic, decisiveness, aggressiveness, focus, strength, and assertiveness (Lika, 2019). The pervasive influence of gender stereotypes and gender inequality has become firmly

ingrained in the collective social consciousness over history. Consequently, it is widely acknowledged that the media, with its extensive reach and influential capabilities, is considered the most effective vehicle for promoting gender equality. It is necessary to uncover stereotypes through narratives and investigations in order to increase the understanding of South African media consumers regarding stereotypes and their role in promoting ideology (Fourie, 2001).

In addition to media biases, gender stereotypes can also be influenced by family and upbringing. An edition of *The Wife Talk* show (SABC 2), aired on 6 August 2023 tackled the topic of marriage and divorce. The participants engaged in a discussion questioned the tendency of women to endure hardships without expressing their suffering within the context of marriage, since they saw marriage as a personal achievement. They added that girls are often taught with a strong emphasis on marriage, to the point where parents may reject a girl if she shows signs of laziness, using the reasoning that no one will want to marry her. This perpetuates the notion among girls that women are valued primarily for their suitability for marriage. The prevailing belief is that a woman's identity, fulfilment, achievement, and happiness are contingent upon marriage. Consequently, women are expected to persevere in their marriages regardless of the circumstances. Women endure gender-based violence within dysfunctional relationships but are reluctant to leave due to societal biases around divorce (Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan, 2008). This storyline holds a prominent position in most of the television programming, especially soap operas. The stereotype is that good women are validated by their marital status, which equates to attachment to men.

Bullen (2009) argues that girls are not adequately taught about media engagement. He asserts that young girls are frequently exposed to images that portray women as powerless, passive victims who are primarily valued for their physical appearance and sexuality, rather than their intellectual ability and skills (Bullen, 2009). Goodall (2012) references this concept as he argues that if young women are not taught in the proper use of media, they may become increasingly vulnerable to the adverse influences exerted by the media. This phenomenon may occur as females emulate and implement the behaviours they observe in the media by establishing relationships.

Bullen (2009) investigates the impact of media on young viewers, particularly females, and the potential for the messages they receive to incite harmful stereotypes.

While some stereotypes may appear entertaining, especially when directed towards others, they can have adverse consequences on the emotional, psychological, and social growth of women. In 2014, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights released the following statement:

Gender stereotyping is wrongful when it results in a violation or violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. An example of this is the failure to criminalize marital rape based on the stereotype of women as the sexual property of men. Another example is the failure of the justice system to hold perpetrator of sexual violence accountable based on stereotypical views about women's appropriate sexual behaviour ([Gender_stereotyping.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](#)).

This passage suggests that it is imperative to prevent the media or any social institution from compromising the efforts to eliminate the subjugation of women and the violation of their human rights. Regrettably, despite this, the selected soap operas still depict women in a disadvantaged position compared to males, perpetuating the propensity towards sexual objectification. The following scenes from *Skeem Saam* illustrate how males perceive women as their sexual possessions, a portrayal that is ingrained in women by the media.

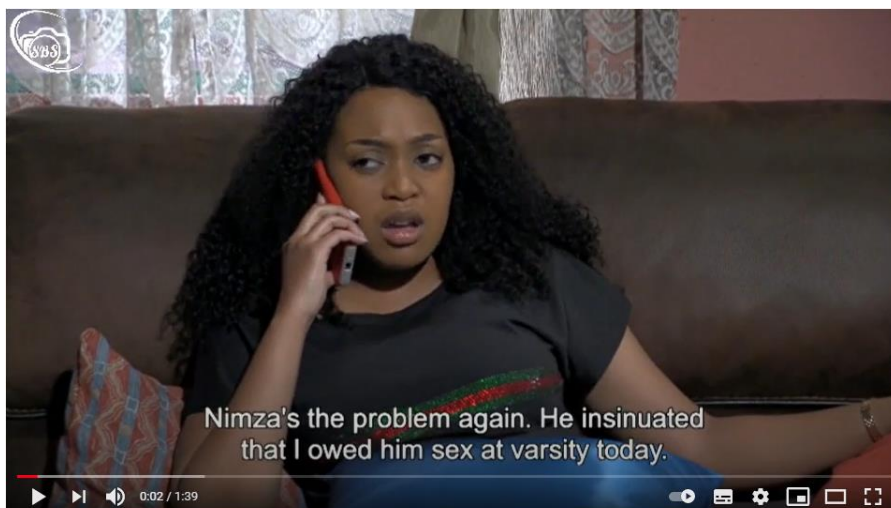


Figure 2-5 Sexual objectification of Pretty by Nimrod upsets Pretty (Season 9 episode 76).



Figure 2-6 Kat, Pretty's boyfriend confronts Nimrod about his lewd remarks on Pretty

The portrayal of women in the media through stereotypes has detrimental consequences, including distorting the perspective of women and exposing them to various forms of harm, such as sexual assault and gender-based violence. Furthermore, when the media promotes stereotypes about any social group, including women, it diminishes the society's awareness of the actual hardships faced by women. This is because the media's portrayal of these issues minimises their gravity.

3.3.4 Social expectation theory

This theory elucidates the process by which individuals acquire knowledge and understanding of the societal norms and expectations associated with groups, persons, and organisations (Fourie, 2001). Audiences are presented with these roles through television shows and films, as well as newspapers and magazines, which establish expectations and sometimes lead to evaluations. The separation between social expectation and stereotypes is quite narrow, as most social roles portrayed in the media are blurred by stereotypes. Media depictions of women across several genres impact social expectations placed upon them as a collective group (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). For this instance, advertising strategically portrays either men or women in a manner that aligns with societal norms and expectations.

These norms, roles, and expectations may derive from the dynamics and anticipated interaction between men and women, both in personal and professional settings,

including their interactions at home, work, or in a romantic partnership. They can also be based on the attributes of either gender, males are typically discouraged from displaying emotions such as crying in challenging, sorrowful, or disheartening situations due to societal expectations that dictate that "men do not cry". Therefore, it is customary for women to be portrayed in commercials as emotional, as women are inherently emotional beings simply by virtue of their gender. Women frequently serve as models for beauty and home items, because of societal expectations that women possess beauty, maintain an ideal physique, and manage household chores. These are essential feminine qualities that any woman should possess. However, men can be utilised in commercials that display vehicles, engineering, or corporate settings, as these effectively demonstrate their masculine characteristics and skills.

The social expectation assumptions for this study will vary slightly from the main tenants presented by DeFleur and Dennis (1998), as their emphasis is on groups such as organisations and employment rather than gender. Soap opera storylines encompass a diverse array of subjects, such as the professional environment, domestic life, and the community at large. Society's expectations are shaped by the distinct roles and positions that men and women occupy in various circumstances. For instance, within a hospital, which is an organisation, there is an anticipated conduct and environment where nurses provide assistance to doctors. Nevertheless, the crucial aspect to consider in this study is the gender distribution of these roles. A nurse is commonly associated with the female gender, while a doctor is commonly associated with the male gender. The nurse follows instructions from the doctor, and she holds a subordinate position. Consequently, patients will perceive more safety under the care of a doctor compared to a nurse, mostly because of the greater importance assigned to the responsibilities of a doctor in comparison to those of a nurse.

One premise of the social expectation theory is that media portrayals, whether fictional or not, are depictions of reality that accurately or inaccurately reflect the characteristics and interactions of diverse groups in society. Rodgers and Thorson (2012) challenge this approach by analysing 'mirror' or 'mould' perspectives. There is a contention in advertising regarding whether it accurately reflects the standards of society or if it

actively moulds the values of its intended audience. Gender roles in advertising are believed to align with cultural norms and expectations around gender, with advertising media serving as a reflection of societal traditions and objectives (Thorson, 2012). Consequently, it is assumed that when the cultural climate changes, advertisers will adapt the images and philosophies they communicate to align with what is more commonly accepted (Rodgers and Thorson, 2012). The MAQ Dishwashing soap commercial exemplifies this transition. This suggests that the responsibilities of the cooking and cleaning are no longer exclusively assigned to women, but rather men and the society must also adjust to the evolving circumstances.



Figure 2-7 Advertising media challenging a stereotypical social expectation

3.3.5 Agenda-setting and Framing theories

The media material is influenced by a hidden agenda that dictates which themes are included, which ones are excluded, and the perspective from which the covered subjects or concerns are presented. Various issues impact women in all communities. The question at hand is whether the media allocates sufficient attention to these themes and issues. The agenda-setting hypothesis explains how the media determines and prioritises the topics to cover, and how this might shape the opinions and understandings of individuals who study these subjects in different ways. The agenda-setting theory posits that the media, whether intentionally or unintentionally,

construct a specific representation of reality that they consider significant (Fourie, 2001).

Shaw (1979) asserts that the media have a widespread influence in directing public attention towards particular events, problems, and individuals, as well as shaping the significance that people assign to public affairs. Individuals tend to incorporate or reject information from their thoughts based on what the media includes or excludes from its material (Shaw, 1979). The agenda-setting theory posits that the news media's wide coverage and emphasis on a certain topic is likely to capture the attention of society. While soap operas may not be considered news media, they possess the capacity to highlight or repress significant issues pertaining to women. McCombs and Valenzuela (2020) posit that the media play a significant role in shaping people's cognitive maps. Cognitive maps are formed through a series of psychological processes, where individuals acquire, store, recall, and interpret information about the locations and characteristics of things in their everyday surroundings. As a result, attitudes and behaviours are typically influenced by these cognitions - the knowledge, thoughts, or beliefs that a person possesses (Guo and McCombs, 2011).

The agenda-setting hypothesis, originating from journalism, pertains to the process of choosing which news to prioritise and cover within a specific period. A multitude of events take place globally, although only a fraction of them garners media attention, and a specific set of criteria is employed to determine the relative importance of certain events over others. In other genres, it is common for there to be collaboration regarding shared concerns, and particular stories may receive more attention than others. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the challenges that seem to commonly arise when examining the depictions of women in images and media. This is important because Fourie (2001) argues that when certain elements or topics are excluded and others are focused on, it shapes the way media users see reality.

Agenda setting can also reinforce stereotypes by highlighting or giving priority to certain themes, problems, and aspects of social life that are of stereotypical nature, particularly when it comes to women. Soap operas have traditionally been linked to romantic relationships, marriages, and all related aspects. This genre often glorifies

and stresses these themes, suggesting that they should be the primary concerns for women. This validates romantic relationships and marriages for women, shaping societal perceptions of women and diminishing the significance of critical issues that should be prioritised in the portrayal of women, such as personal growth and leadership. Advertising often prioritises appearance and the ideal slender physical shape for women, while disregarding other qualities such as intelligence, strong will, strength, and determination. If women's achievements are restricted or omitted from publications, it will diminish the quality of information provided to readers and influence their perspectives (Govender, 2015). Govender asserts that if magazines prioritise depicting women in stereotypical roles, it could adversely affect the process of constructing one's identity and influence women's self-perception.

The key elements in agenda formation are the process of choosing, ranking, and highlighting. The media selectively covers a portion of reality, based on their own preferences and norms (Govender, 2015). Once a decision has been made, the subsequent process involves highlighting and reinforcing specific aspects of reality through continuous and repetitive treatment. The entire process culminates in the formation of a public agenda that is shaped by individuals' interpretation of the mediated reality. The accompanying diagram (Alonzo et al, 2014) visually represents this concept.

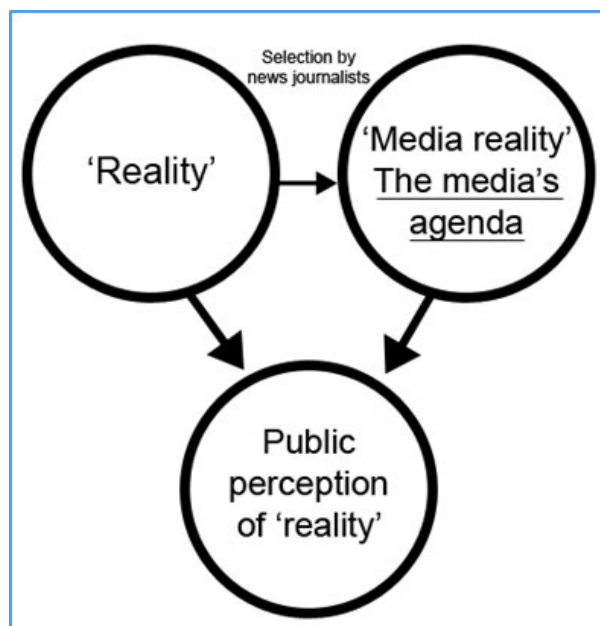


Figure 2-8 Agenda-setting theory

Several factors impact this process, such as the conventions of a particular medium and the understanding of content creators. Consequently, a distinct agenda tailored to the media arises, attracting the interest of the public and influencing their perspective. Another factor to consider is the potential association between narratives of various genres regarding the allocation of attention. Given our focus on media impact, the act of collaborating information across different media platforms has been recognised as a crucial method for the accumulation of these effects. Okinyi, Otieno, and Nyabuto (2014) assert that individuals utilise narratives from news and entertainment media as benchmarks for determining significance and for contrasting their existing knowledge or beliefs regarding morality and appropriate responses to issues. The outcome frequently reinforces preconceptions and delineates what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within the culture.

The above comment strengthens the implications of the agenda-setting model (figure 3.4) mentioned earlier. The media's curation and presentation of reality alters the way the public perceives it. The media's emphasis on actual events and elements, as well as the viewpoints from which such content is collected, frequently give the public a perception of authenticity. The alarming notion is that those who shape media narratives have their own beliefs, goals, and perspectives, be it as professionals, businesspersons, experts, or specialists. Media consumers bear a significant obligation to recognise that media can be utilised to promote personal interests, which calls for policy deliberations regarding media's social responsibility, accountability, and autonomy in both financial and political aspects. The upcoming sub-section focuses on this aspect, with reference to the normative theory.

3.4 Normative Media theory framework

The reference to normative theories can be traced to the 1950s when Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) coined *Four Theories of the Press* which comprised The Libertarian, Authoritarian, Social Responsibility and Soviet Communist concepts. These theoretical concepts emerged in response to a question about why mass media appear in different forms and serve different purposes in different countries (Christians et al., 2010). Their assertion was that the press [media] always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. It reflects the

system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956). This assertion provided a stimulus to reflection about the media's role in society by suggesting that media systems are linked to different political systems and philosophies (Christians et al., 2010). McQuail and Deuze (2020) allude that normative theory is concerned with examining or prescribing how media ought to operate if certain social and public values are to be attained. They further argue therefore that this kind of theory is important because it plays a part in shaping and legitimating media institutions and has considerable influence on the expectations concerning the media that are held by other social institutions and by the media's own audience.

McQuail (2010: 14) contends that "a society's normative theories concerning its own media are found in laws, regulations, media policies, codes of ethics and the substance of public debate and it plays a part in shaping and legitimising media institutions". South Africa as a democratic state allows media considerable freedom and liberty, however, there are laws and policies in place that are meant to guide media-society relationship for the enrichment and benefit of all. The study of normative theory therefore is relevant for this study as it aims to extrapolate whether media should consider regulating their behaviour to ensure accountability and responsibility in their depictions of social matters such as gender relations. There are many laws and policies passed to regulate and guide media output and functioning; however, the study will discuss a few of these, with an intention to determine best practices on the representation of societal matters.

3.4.1 Setting the scene for normative functioning of the media

The code of ethics and conduct for South African media (2019) cites Section 16 of the Bill of Rights, which sets out that everyone has freedom of expression which includes:

- a) Freedom of the press and other media
- b) Freedom to receive and impart information or ideas and
- c) Freedom of artistic creativity

The code further states that the media enables citizens to make informed judgements on the issues of the day, a statement that implies that the information (content or

messages) provided by the media should be accurate, fair and in cont. From this point it is worth pondering on how accurate and fair are media depictions of women and assess if such depictions do justice in enabling informed citizen's judgement of women entirely. Women are defined as vulnerable groups in society; therefore, media are expected not to put them in further jeopardy through their content. "Media have the ability to influence the thinking of individual readers and if focus is regularly on men while continuously playing down the abilities and achievements of women by devaluing their accomplishments, these representations may become accepted as the norm" (Govender, 2015:90). Chapter Two, section 9 of The *Bill of Rights* (1996), anchored by the Constitution of the country awards 'equality' as a right for everyone in the country, stating that no person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on the grounds of amongst other things race, gender, sex, pregnancy or marital status. This right compels the media to be mindful and not discriminate in any form under the auspice of freedom of artistic creativity. Furthermore, the SABC Editorial Policy (2020) addresses the issue of stereotypes in programmes, and as encouraged by the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa (ICASA) to develop their own internal guidelines for dealing with such matters. The Policy explicitly states that " Given South Africa's past, and the role of public service media in healing divisions, it is imperative for the SABC not to broadcast programmes that promote discrimination or stereotyping on the grounds of race, national or ethnic origin colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or disability" (SABC Editorial Policy, 2020:15).

The United Nations Women (2024) also asserts that the media plays a significant role in perpetuating stereotypes as well as challenging social norms that condone discrimination against women. As a result, UN women has collaborated with the media as a key ally in advancing women's rights and has to date launched the UN Women Media Compact (2016), which calls on media outlets to play their part in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a focus on gender equality and women's rights issues on two fronts:

- a) In their reporting, disrupting stereotypes and biases; and
- b) In increasing the number of women in the media, including leadership and decision-making roles.

This discussion provides a background for the call for normative roles of media in South Africa and other nations. In this backdrop, media are expected to play a supportive role in ensuring that South Africa reaches its goals concerning gender equality, dignified treatment of women and chucking off discrimination.

3.4.2 Social Responsibility and the media's depiction of women

Among the normative media theories listed above (3.5), Social Responsibility theory relates well to the study and its objectives. Media has a responsibility to communicate information in an objective manner and present an equitable account of women's position in society. However, many media workers continue to have oppressive attitudes towards women (Govender, 2015:94). The purpose of normative theory is also to be a yardstick against which the media's social responsibility can be judged. The media's social responsibility is to produce and distribute a diversity of content (information, entertainment, education) which has as an objective the individual, social, cultural and educational enlightenment of media users, the preservation and protection of agreed upon social and cultural norms and values, critical debate about all the issues affecting the orderly functioning of society, the exposure and questioning of anyone and anything that threatens or may threaten social values and norms, and the orderly functioning of society (Fourie, 2017).

The above assertion from Fourie (2017), not only speaks about the production and distribution of diverse content, but also about how it is also media's responsibility to ensure all-round enlightenment of media users, as well as preservation of desirable social and cultural norms. The agreed upon and desirable social and cultural norms are outlined in policies and rights of citizens as outlined above. As a result, entertainment media programmes need to exercise social responsibility to preserve these. Social responsibility thrives on concepts of objectivity, accountability and fairness among others (McQuail, 2005). While attaining these concepts, media professionals (producers in this study's case) are expected to exercise self-regulation while abiding to ethics and professional principles and standards (Govender, 2015). While the theory allows autonomy of professionals, it expects unselfish commitment to balance of views and accuracy in their productions. In the case of representation of women and their roles in the media, social responsibility principles therefore advocate

for balance and accuracy on the roles assigned to men and women. South African women have advanced to social roles that used to be assigned to men only, however, the media often turns a blind eye on such developments, thus not ensuring accuracy.

Television programmes need to represent women fairly and objectively by depicting their development and achievements along the challenges and obstructions they face in society. To represent women as less valuable, subordinate and with less capabilities compared to men, fails women and puts their lives into socially and culturally threatened position. Among the Social Responsibility theory principles provided by McQuail (2005 in Ravi, 2012), these related well to this study. Firstly, the media should avoid offensive content triggering crime, violence, or civil disorder or harm to minority groups. Secondly, the media should be pluralist and reflect the diversity of their society, giving access to various points of view and rights of reply.

According to some of the above principles, the media should avoid harm to minority groups. While women make up more than half the population and are not a minority in numerical terms, they can be considered a minority group in a sociological sense due to the marginalization and inequality they experience. To such extent, soap operas (as defined a women's genre), should not depict women in a way that puts them in harm's way concerning their dignity, image and how the society perceives them. Media should also provide pluralist depictions of women, not to only endorse patriarchal views that incite women's marginalisation.

When weighing up on media's adherence to the above principles, Ravi (2012:311-312) asserts that:

...the habits and practices of media have again and again been leading towards or often resulted in sensationalizing, misleading, instigating, being insensitive or making the consumers insensitive to issues or havocs or irregularities, giving ulterior ideas, leading to commit mistakes, triggering catastrophe, toppling governance established by law, titillating, enhancing anxiety, decreasing enthusiasm and such other disturbing consequences.

Nevertheless, the latest arguments on normative theory and its relevance to media functioning have suggested that normative theory needs to be revised to project the latest media landscape. The key to "new" normative theory (in the new media landscape) should be the acknowledgement of diversity and the recognition of

universal human virtue in and through mediated communication and in the communication of the media (Fourie, 2017). Based on this argument, media content producers ought to acknowledge social groupings (women in this case) and recognise their virtue through their mediated communication [and entertainment].

Duncan (2006:22) posits that “media both construct and are constructed by social relations: a women’s media movement needs to recognise this and commit itself not only to changing the media, but to changing the media relations”. The study takes a feminist stance in its analysis of the media text (soap opera), and its portrayal of social relations, particularly relations between men and women. As a result, feminist media theory is of great relevance, therefore will be discussed next.

3.5 Feminist Media Theory

Feminist Media theory originated as a critique of gender stereotypes portrayed in the media. However, it has since developed to elucidate how audiences interpret and make sense of media messages during their interactions (Van Zoonen, 1994). McQuail (2010) identified several presumptions that underpin arguments in Feminist Media Theory. The initial assertion posits that the media have relegated women to a position of lesser importance in the realm of public discourse. Secondly, the media plays a role in maintaining stereotypes related to femininity and masculinity. Thirdly, gender plays a significant role in shaping the creation of media content. Lastly, the media presents a range of role models, encompassing both positive and negative influences, as well as those who are favourable and supportive. Feminist media theorists are primarily concerned with the gendered power dynamics and social status of women in communication materials. Feminist theories have a shared focus on analysing and clarifying the role of gender and gender-based power in communicative texts (Cuklanz, 2016).

There is a prevailing belief that fictional texts should be regarded as creative efforts of their creators and so should not be deeply internalised and questioned, as it is primarily intended for amusement purposes. However, it is crucial to inquire about the implications for entertainment that come at the cost of marginalising some groups in society. Researchers have extensively investigated gender-media relations,

uncovering the unjust portrayal of women in the media and its detrimental impact on the advancement of gender equality in South African society (Buiten, 2009). Consequently, there have been suggestions to shift towards giving more importance to symbolic, relational and integrated interpretations of gender (Bosch, 2011). Reference is made to feminist media theory because it supports the idea of empowering women through media portrayal. A prevailing premise in feminist media theory is that the control of media production by women would result in distinct and better content for women (Robert, Fortner and Fackler, 2014).

South Africa has witnessed the rise of female producers and directors in television programming, namely Sindi Dlathu, Gugulethu Zuma, Leleti Khumalo and Connie Ferguson. These have been chosen based on their widespread recognition and the fact that several of them have appeared as leading actors in major television shows. In 2016, SWIFT (Sisters Working in Film and Television) was established as a non-profit organisation with the goal of promoting empowerment and equal opportunities for women in the Film and Television industry in South Africa. SWIFT aims to address the historical imbalances and discrimination that women have faced in this traditionally male-dominated field. From a feminist standpoint, this would be regarded as a favourable advancement in tackling gender disparities within the television industry. Nevertheless, it does not provide any insight into how women are depicted in the industry's artistic endeavours. Lauzen (2018), the founder and executive director of the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film, asserts that the dearth of women in positions of power in the entertainment industry is a crucial employment concern that profoundly affects the content and character of cultural portrayals ([About Us – Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film \(sdsu.edu\)](#)). Mitchell (2022) asserts that women have been mostly marginalised in the realm of storytelling in film and television, leading to a scarcity of female characters and restricted portrayals on screen.

Zama Mkosi, the director of the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) identifies five difficulties that contribute to the initial disparity in representation between men and women in the film and television industry. Firstly, Mkosi (2016) argues that men own the means of production, such as films or other cultural items, leading to a limited representation of women. Secondly, there is insufficient representation of powerful

female characters in film roles, as it is common to encounter films that lack strong female protagonists or female leaders in key departments responsible for determining the narrative direction. Consequently, this perpetuates misleading perceptions about gender roles in the minds of the audience. Thirdly, there are limited financial resources. Film-making requires substantial funding, and obtaining the necessary finances to produce films is fiercely competitive, particularly in the hard realm of marketing and distribution. Fourthly, there is a lack of understanding of the commercial aspects of the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs) by women. A lack of crucial knowledge regarding the operational and financial aspects of the sector is a serious drawback. Lastly, women often face limited or insufficient opportunities in various fields, including editing and high-ranking positions. To bring about notable change and achieve true gender equality, all individuals in the sector must act. This includes opening doors, creating chances where there are none, and providing support to women as they progress in their careers (Mkosi, 2016). Such collective efforts would help alter the current situation and establish concrete, visible and tangible parity in media representations and media business (Branston and Stafford, 2010).

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided insights into theoretical framework relevant to media and society relationship. Media effects theories presented a compelling argument on the diverse impacts that the media has on its audience. This study examined the negative impact of media portrayals of women, specifically focusing on the portrayal of women as stereotyped and marginalised group. Feminist media theory was also outlined in relation to the position and the role of women in South African media content as well as media as industry. Under this theory, a compelling argument is that women's role in media industry determines how they are represented on the actual media products such as soap operas. As a result, different bodies and organisations have been tasked with a duty to pave a way for women's development and empowerment in media industry. Another theoretical underpinning established was based on normative media theory, which encapsulates the expected functions and structures of media in society. The discussion on normative theory also provided a scene for activation of normative theory in South African media, as well as the relevance and applicability of social responsibility concerning the representation of women in the media.

The upcoming chapter explains methodological concepts employed by the study, focusing on all crucial aspects including research design, data collection, sampling techniques, data analysis techniques as well as measures considered to ensure trustworthiness and reliability.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

Research methodology is the key to meeting the set objectives for each study. It is imperative that proper questions are asked and analysed using suitable methods and techniques. The previous chapters focused on the background of the study and its theoretical assumptions; they expounded on the nature of media representations as well as the effects on media content on viewers. Every empirical research study aims to combine the existing literature and new data from the participants. This aids in developing new sets of knowledge and identifying gaps in the existing literature. Research methodology refers to the principles, procedures and practices that govern research (Marczyk, DeMatteo and Festinger, 2010).

This chapter discusses the ways and means by which new knowledge was acquired on the topic of women's representations and their effects. It has been established through literature and scenes from the selected soap operas that women are mostly disadvantaged when it comes to role distribution. Stereotypes associated with women and power dynamics as far as social roles are concerned have been brought to attention. In quest for primary data, this chapter outlines the research design and methods that were employed to extract views and ideas from participants. The chapter also discusses the tactics followed to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

4.2 Research design

The research design is concerned with ways of acquiring and analysing knowledge on a specific matter and research questions. This epistemological process can be approached following two distinct yet often combined approaches, namely qualitative and quantitative. The quantitative design describes, predicts and explains quantities using numerical data (du Plooy, 2009). The qualitative design on the other hand is concerned with the subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviours (Kothari, 2004). The epistemological framework of qualitative research is interpretivism. Interpretivism posits that knowledge is rooted in individual experiences,

which are subjective and contextually tied to natural circumstances (Donkoh and Mensah, 2023).

The research falls dominantly within an interpretivist paradigm even though there is slight use of quantitative methods by way of the questionnaire. Using open-ended discussion questions, the questionnaire provided a platform for respondents to relay their own interpretations of the issues raised in the study. Within interpretivism, axiology locates truth in context, hence, the research was designed to review the context of representation from the audience/fan perspective. The researcher took time with participants to understand their context of reception, to elicit their perspectives on the chosen texts. This is also relevant to ontology, where the paradigm of interpretivism relates to understanding others and their internal, subjective experiences (Pervin, and Mokhtar, 2022). In this paradigm, meanings are derived when people decide to participate in a communicative process and make normal implications for these meanings (Roman-Tamesis, 2022). In this regard, primacy is given to “the personal interpretations of the participant(s) rather than theoretical knowledge of the researcher or previously held ‘truths’ about a selected phenomenon” (Pope, 2013:21). Personal interviews were also conducted as the paradigm (ontologically speaking) posits multiple internal realities which are context-bound and this method was deemed appropriate to discern the particularities of the participants’ reception.

4.3 Methods of data collection

The systematic consideration of the mixed method of data collection strategies reveals that mixing multiple methods affords opportunities to use the strengths of some methods to counterbalance the weaknesses of other methods (Axinn and Pearce, 2006). It is therefore important to prioritise methods that will allow an exploration of the subject matter from different angles and perspectives. As a result, a combination on different methods of data collection were used to get ideas and perspectives from soap opera viewers. Having individual and group discussions afforded the viewers an opportunity to take an analytic approach to the entertainment content. This is important to create balance in the meaning-making process, thus ensuring the validity of the findings through a triangulation of methods. To ensure a diversity of views on the

subject matter, focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires were used as methods of data collection, in addition to textual analysis of the selected soap operas.

4.3.1 Textual analysis

Textual analysis is closely related to content analysis and is in some instances described as a form of content analysis. Textual analysis is the preferred term to describe a broader category of qualitative content analysis. While content analysis is concerned with the frequency and patterns of content in texts, textual analysis broadens the scope of analysis by looking at the context outside the text (Brenden, 2021). Texts are known as carriers of ideologies- politically, economically, sociologically and culturally. Genre analysis and ideology analysis are some of the examples of textual analyses provided by Brennen (2021). The study incorporated both in an intertwined manner as the analysis of the soap opera as a genre is intertwined with their ideological dissemination capabilities as texts.

The three soap operas, namely *Skeem Saam*, *Muvhango* and *Uzalo*, were watched rigorously on a weekly basis from March 2020 to January 2024. Notes were taken, incidents recorded, images captured and kept for further analysis in respective chapters (5, 6 and 7). The main purpose of textual analysis was to engage in a critical consumption of these soap operas, whilst identifying the meanings that they carry in a broader context outside the ambit of entertainment. Soap operas are considered as media text and have thus been studied to draw conclusions about their portrayal of women and their consequences for gender relations in society. Kress (1983) contends that meaning in a text comprises ideological elements that must be revealed. Textual analysis, as a qualitative research approach, seeks to learn about how other people make sense of the world as captured by a certain text, making educated guesses about some of the interpretations of that text (McKee, 2001).

4.3.2 Focus groups

Focus group discussions were facilitated with soap opera viewers of different ages and genders. Four focus group discussions were held, each group comprising of 12 participants from the Applied Management department of the Durban University of Technology's Riverside Campus. The number of the participants of the focus groups

may differ, commonly focus group members consists of 10-12 people (Tümen and Ahmed, 2021). The first two focus groups were facilitated by the researcher at the campus with a duration of one hour each. The third and fourth focus group was held at the student residence (Indumiso campus) and were facilitated by a research assistant. The participants were not asked their ages, however, on estimation based on university enrolled students, the groups consisted of participants between the ages of 19-35. The schedule of questions began with the participants' general understanding of the power of the media and its effects (see Appendix B). The second focal point was looking at the relationship between the soap operas narratives and reality. Lastly, the discussions scrutinised the roles and positions of leading female characters in these soap operas from a viewer perspective. These discussions were open-ended, allowing participants to refer to their favourite soap opera whilst addressing and commenting on each other's points of view.

Focus groups helped to discover new aspects and information about the research problem, as the participants own and contribute more diverse perspectives on the selected topic than the researcher could imagine alone (Gundumogula, 2020). Focus groups have a high chance of grasping and considering the people's feelings, expressions, views, beliefs, and responses while collecting the data (Escalada and Heong, 2014). Groups were made up of students coming from different fields of study: Public Relations and Communication, Human Resources Management and Business Administration. This diversity in groups and their backgrounds was the key to the rich and diverse perspectives expressed during discussions. The recruitment procedure for participants was through word-of-mouth during lectures and tutorial sessions. The two focus groups from student residence did not consider the field of study, but interest in soap operas was considered. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed to facilitate data analysis, in accordance with Wilkinson's (2004) assertion that focus group discussions should be recorded, transcribed, and analysed using conventional qualitative data techniques, such as content and thematic analysis. Anonymity was ensured during discussions, and the nature and purpose of the study was explained to students in adherence to ethical standards.

4.3.3 Interviews

Brennen (2021) states that the purpose of asking questions is to acquire information, assess opinions, build shared perspectives, and comprehend fundamental aspects of our life. Interviews have long been employed as a research methodology and can be conducted in structured, semi structured or unstructured formats. Semi-structured interviews are based on pre-established set of questions that are asked of all participants, allowing for a higher degree of adaptability. Interviews may vary the order of the questions and may also ask follow-up questions to delve more deeply into some of the topics or issues addressed or clarify answers given by the participants (Brennen, 2021).

Interviews were conducted with ten viewers of the selected soap operas. The choice to use interviews was driven by the desire to have an in-depth personal conversation with those participants who showed more passion about soap operas. Interviewees were recruited from focus group discussions, but a notice was also put on the WhatsApp group by the research assistant. The ten participants were selected conveniently due to their active engagement with other participants during focus group discussions. The reason for only ten respondents is based on saturation and agreement noted in participants' views. Wutish, Beresford and Bernard (2024) advise that theme saturation may be achievable with nine interviews and four focus groups. Interviews were also recorded and transcribed, and their duration was between 15 and 30 minutes. The interviews delved into the specific soap operas that each participant is a fan of, its characters and narrative, particularly women characters, their roles, and portrayals. The other important aspect during interviews was media and communication effects. Interviewees were allowed the opportunity to offer a subjective analysis of female characters and discuss whether what they watched in their soap operas had any kind of effect on them. These interviews helped in assessing perceptions based on the specific soap operas and characters identified by interviewees. As these were semi-structured, interviewees raised issues that concern the way characters are portrayed in these soap operas. They were allowed to talk about their favourite characters, analyse and discuss how they relate to them. Semi-structured interviews consisted of key questions to help contextualise the area of

research and allowed the researcher and participants to diverge to explore ideas raised in more detail.

The flexibility of this approach allows for the discovery of information that is crucial to participants but may not have been identified by the researcher as pertinent (Gill et al., 2008). These conversations, backwards and forwards, are important as the goal of qualitative research is to explore how the participants experience, perceive, and make meaning of the content they consume. The purpose is to learn more about their views, opinions, and beliefs about a specific phenomenon (, Bezuidenhout, Davis and Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). As focus groups focused on broader media issues such as the effects and power of the media, interviews focused mostly on soap operas as a genre and more on characters, their roles and the perceptions attached to them. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because the views and perceptions expressed by participants might differ and therefore build up to a more engaged conversation.

4.3.4 Self- administered online questionnaires

The study used a newly developed questionnaire as there was no similar study from which to adopt a questionnaire. Questionnaires were administered as one of the quantitative methods of data collection. At first, online questionnaires were administered through *QuestionPro* to a group of students to conduct pilot testing for the study and solicit responses and direction for focus group discussions. These were used to ensure participants' familiarity with the subject and concepts to be explored during the focus groups, as groups for discussions were selected from those who had responded to the questionnaires. After the pilot study, the questionnaire was reviewed and administered through Google Forms to the selected group of students.

The research instrument (questionnaire: Appendix C) consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions which allowed participants to express themselves or expand on their responses to the closed-type questions. A total of 60 questionnaires were administered; the administration of questionnaires was gradual as the total number depended on the researcher's judgement and satisfaction that themes were easily identifiable. The inclusion of open-ended questions can yield data of a more qualitative nature, bearing in mind that questionnaires are defined as self-report methodologies,

whereby participants provide information regarding themselves and describe their own behaviour, attitudes, opinions, and perceptions.

The role played by the questionnaire in this study was to ascertain whether the group of participants could identify the differences in the way women are portrayed on television compared to men. Secondly, it was also used to determine the number of participants holding a particular view or perception about the nature of women's representation on television.

4.4 Sampling method

Sampling is a crucial factor to consider for research findings to be meaningful and achieve a certain degree of validity. Jalali (2020) states that the goal of sampling in qualitative research is not to create a random sample from a population. Instead, it aims to identify groups of individuals who have relevant characteristics or life experiences related to the social phenomenon under investigation. Informants are selected based on their ability to provide valuable insights on a certain aspect of behaviour that is important to the research. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) provide evidence to support the notion that qualitative researchers do not make external statistical generalisations because their primary objective is not to draw inferences about the larger population, but rather to gain insights into educational, social, and familial processes and practices within a specific location and context.

Even though qualitative investigations typically involve the use of small samples, the choice of sample size is still an important consideration, because it determines the extent to which the researcher can make generalisations (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). However, it is imperative that the sample be as representative of the population as possible. The target population for this study comprised undergraduate students within the Department of Applied Management, situated in the Faculty of Management Sciences at the Durban University of Technology. The estimated population size was approximately 570 students, the selected therefore represented just above 10% of the population. Eligibility for participation required individuals to be currently registered on a second or third level of study at the Durban University of Technology, specifically at the Midlands campuses and within the department. The selection of these study levels

was based on the perceived higher levels of engagement and confidence among students, as they are considered to have adapted more fully to the university environment.

A convenience sampling technique was employed to select participants for the survey component of the study, based on the researcher's ease of access and close proximity to the student population. For the focus group discussions, however, a snowball sampling strategy was utilised, whereby initial participants referred others whom they perceived to have an interest in soap operas. Robinson (2014) states that researchers using convenience sampling locate a nearby source of potential participants who are convenient in their proximity and willingness to participate. As a result, participants for the study were located at the same university and same academic department as the researcher. This aligns with the statement that convenience sampling proceeds by way of locating any convenient cases who meet the required criteria and then selecting those who respond on a first-come, first-served basis until the sample size quotient is full (Robinson, 2014).

Alongside the students from the designated programme of study, additional students were permitted to participate in focus group discussions based on their interest in the subject matter. A note soliciting prospective students for focus groups and interviews was displayed on the departmental noticeboard. The samples included both males and females, although a greater number of females expressed interest and attended than males. Age ratings were assessed to be between 19 and 30 years. In summary, all participants were selected from both Riverside and Indumiso Campus based on convenience and accessibility to the researcher.

4.5 Data analysis

This study is analytical and interpretative in nature, as the central objective is to examine the fictional scenarios associated with women in the selected soap operas. The soap opera narrative is dominated by both images and linguistic signification, which can be interpreted differently by viewers. These interpretations therefore need to be organised in a manner that makes it easy to reach conclusions and make assumptions about the soap opera genre. A central aim of data analysis is to reduce

data (Robson, 1993 in Rabiee, 2004). Yin (1989 in Rabiee, 2004) posit that data analysis consists of several stages, which, categorising, tabulating recombining the evidence to address the initial goal of a study. The process of qualitative analysis aims to bring meaning to a situation rather than the search for truth focused on by quantitative research (Rabiee, 2004). Rabiee (2004) further suggests that in research with qualitative elements, data analysis begins during data collection, where the researcher carefully crafts questions and guides discussions to produce directed data. However, this still needs to be followed by familiarisation with the data by going over the transcripts again (for focus groups or interviews).

4.5.1 Thematic content analysis: focus groups, interviews and open-ended questions.

Thematic content analysis is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data where the researcher groups and distils from the texts a list of common themes to give an expression of the communality of voices across participants (Anderson, 2007). Inductive thematic analysis was used as similar views and opinions were grouped together and an analytic discussion followed. The objective of the discussion was to establish the relationship between the existing literature and the new data, highlighting any new developments. The aim of this analysis was to organise data and at the same time to capture how participants attach meaning to the soap opera content and how that influences their perceptions about women.

Data from interviews and focus groups were presented utilising tables, mind-maps and Word Cloud Creator, with the intention of highlighting the most prominent perspectives in a concise summary. These aids facilitated the interpretation of the findings and identified recurring expressions and perspectives that emerged during conversations with participants. For quantitative data findings were provided in tables and charts generated through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and some via Google Forms, which is the app used to design and distribute the questionnaire. Where Google Forms analysis was not sufficient, SPSS was used to provide more information and an analysis of the findings.

These themes below served as a blueprint in terms of what questions were asked and what meanings were extracted from the textual analysis, interviews and focus group discussions. These were later used as an organising tool in Chapter Eight. The broader information categories through which themes were organised were as follows:

- The *perceived nature* of women's representations with regards to their roles, occupations and status;
- The *behavioural patterns* that women exhibit on all three soap operas; and
- *Paradigm shifts*: to identify any diversion from the dominant vision that has influenced women's representations.

The data analysis technique for focus groups involves identifying and organising statements and viewpoints from each group discussion based on the emerging themes. At first, statements were manually coded using distinct colour highlighters, with each colour representing a theme. These were later transferred to NVIVO, using its coding tool to organise the themes. Thematic analysis is essential in studying the representation of women in television soap operas because it enables researchers to systematically uncover and interpret recurring patterns and themes that shape gender narratives. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that thematic analysis is flexible and well-suited for examining complex social phenomena such as gender representation, as it provides a systematic framework for exploring both explicit and implicit meanings. Through this method, researchers can critically assess how women are portrayed in terms of agency, identity, and relational roles, and whether these portrayals reinforce or challenge dominant cultural norms (Gill, 2007).

4.5.2 Textual analysis of the selected soap operas

Textual analysis is another qualitative research technique that can be employed for both collection and analysis of data (McKee, 2001). Soap operas are considered as media text and so have been studied to make conclusions about their portrayal of women and their consequences on gender relations in society. The nature of these media texts will also be examined to raise questions about their stereotyped approach to roles and positions, with a focus on the topics mentioned above. The focus has

been on language and meaning, with the argument that textual analysis allows media to shift from being conveyors of reality to constructors of meaning (Curtin, 1995). Kress (1983) alludes that meaning in a text comprises ideological elements that must be revealed. When executed, presented and illustrated effectively, textual analysis tries to systematically persuade others of one’s interpretation to bolster any argument or make broader statements about societal significance, cultural understanding, or even the impacts of media texts (Long and Wall, 2021).

Textual analysis is a specific empirical analytical methodology that plays a crucial role in the field of culture and media studies (Hartley, 2012). It entails scrutinising the structural and contextual aspects of a text to determine the possible interpretations that might be derived from it. Textual analysis focuses on examining the cultural and political significance of representations, rather than solely on the process of constructing meaning (Hartley, 2012). This exercise is necessary considering the changing times that women live in, as well as challenges that they face due to the undesirable scrutiny that the media content often puts them under.

Textual analysis seeks to learn about how other people make sense of the world as captured by a certain text, making educated guesses about some of the interpretations of that text (McKee, 2003). The researcher began collecting data by watching all three (3) soap operas on a continuous basis over a period of two years (January 2022-January 2023). Chapters five through seven focus on textual analysis of these soap operas, assessing how they offer comparable depictions of women in terms of roles allocated to women and the social issues that their narrative addresses. These soaps were picked as case studies because of their popularity, as reflected on the table below.

Table 3.1 SABC 1 and 2 viewership figures, June 2023

SABC1	Number of Viewers	SABC 2	Number of viewers
Uzalo	5,194,834	Muvhango	1,430,531
Skeem Saam	4,639,225	7 de Laan	1,191,198
Generations: The Legacy	4,078,149	Giyani	681,012

Skeem Saam-R	2,432,908	Muvhango - Omnibus	631,097
Zulu News	2,320,498	Matlholadibona	595,539

Source: [Most Watched TV Shows in South Africa - June 2023 \(yomzansi.com\)](https://yomzansi.com)

The numbers above show that the selected soap operas are among the most popular shows in South African television viewing. Due to their popularity, it was easy to engage with participants about their daily events and narratives. These soap operas were chosen from two of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) television channels to provide a representative sample for the soap opera genre. The SABC has been designated as a public service broadcaster (PSB) as it has a different mandate than commercial broadcasters. This mission includes the idea that a PSB should contribute to the formation of national identity whilst addressing the needs of minorities (Fourie, 2003).

4.6 Validity and reliability

The value of research resides in the researcher's strategic use of research methods to address a research topic. Moreover, for research findings to be meaningful, they must possess a certain level of validity. Research validity pertains to the level of trustworthiness and precision in a study, particularly in relation to its ability to accurately measure what it purports to examine (Zohrabi, 2013). Neuman (2011) states that in qualitative research, validity is primarily focused on achieving authenticity rather than uncovering a single version of truth. Maxwell (1992) developed five dimensions through which qualitative research validity can be judged, namely, descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalisability and evaluative validity. This study applied descriptive and interpretive validity. Descriptive validity explains the level of accuracy during data collection, and a researcher's ability to accurately comprehend what the participants say during conversations through interviews and focus groups is a measure of validity. Interpretive validity. People's behaviour, actions, expressions and state of mind during research activity need to be taken into cognisance by the researcher. This is a crucial element of interpretive validity.

Descriptive validity in interviews and focus groups was achieved by recording and transcribing all interactions and conversations word for word. Interpretive validity was maintained by using direct quotes and summarising participants' statements, whilst also establishing their relevance to the researcher's main point. Mind-maps and word clouds were utilised to succinctly represent the core ideas expressed, thus facilitating comprehension. The nature of interviews and focus groups allows for validity checking through their semi-structured nature which allows for further probing to accurately grasp the participants' perspectives. participants' expressions such as shock, laughter and disagreement over opinions were all noted and contextualised in relation to the issue discussed to allow for a free expression of ideas.

The analysis of media and communication effects mostly depended on theoretical validity to formulate generalisations and draw conclusions. The participants provided examples that confirmed the conclusions drawn by some theories on the effects of media. They unanimously agreed that the media promotes stereotypes in its representation of women. The study may not have generated any new theory, but the concepts established can be inferred to have generalisability and transferability as a result of employing the triangulation technique. Golafshani (2003) states that triangulation involves the use of many techniques for collecting and analysing data. Validity and agreement in findings were ensured using three data collection methods: questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. Johnson (1997) alludes that an additional method to ensure validity is by utilising numerous sources of data to enhance comprehension of the phenomenon. Like other empirical studies, both primary and secondary data were utilised to identify patterns and similarities in the depiction of women by the media.

The challenge with the generalisability of this research is that its findings might not be accurate and applicable to all groups in society, as they are based on perceptions from university students between the ages of 18 and 35 years old. The same findings might not hold true when applied to teenagers or older participants. In terms of meeting evaluative validity, this study adopted a two-step flow approach between the existing

literature and its own findings. As a result, the data analysis chapter links interpretations of such data to existing related research.

Reliability is inseparable from validity. However, reliability is more concerned with behaviours associated with methods or instruments of data collection. In other words, how research methods are administered as well as how participants behave as informants during research, have an impact on reliability. Reliability can be achieved by ensuring fairness in the data collection, as the same standards should be maintained during interviews, questionnaire distribution and focus group discussions. It is also argued that repeated measurement using the same groups, and the same instrument elevates reliability (Kothari, 2004). Kothari (2004) also emphasises the standardisation of conditions during data collection, and the elimination of external sources of variation such as boredom and fatigue improves the stability aspect.

To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, the schedule of questions for focus group and interviews remained the same until the end of all sessions. This ensured the fair administration of the research instruments utilised. Secondly, focus group discussions were conducted by different people in different venues. In this way, the strength of participants' opinions was ensured through the elimination of facilitator bias. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) point out that reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behaviour is never static. To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was administered under consistent conditions to all respondents to minimize external influences (DeVellis, 2017). Participants accessed a link to the survey (google form), which allowed them an opportunity to complete it at their convenience. The longitudinal study of soap operas through textual analysis also provided another element of reliability. The period of two years permitted the researcher an opportunity to track character evolution, which it either endorsed or challenged stereotypical roles and representation of women.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the methodological approach, namely the methods and techniques employed in this study. It also outlined the measures followed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The chapter established the importance of the use of various research methods on topics that require participants' articulation to the research problem. Suitable approaches for data analysis were also outlined, displaying a relationship between primary data and existing literature.

The upcoming three chapters provide a detailed textual analysis of the three selected soap operas, *Uzalo*, *Skeem Saam* and *Muvhango*, based on forty episodes from each soap opera from January 2022 until January 2024. No sequence was followed in terms of the months and subsequence of episodes. These chapters firstly examine the roles and status of women characters in each soap opera. Secondly, the prevailing behavioural patterns that women characters exhibit, including their interests are explored. Lastly, instances of shifts in women's roles, status and behavioural patterns are examined.

CHAPTER FIVE: *UZALO*: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

Uzalo is a South African prime-time television soap opera developed by Stained Glass Productions, with Gugulethu Ncube and Pepsi Pokane as producers, and Duma Ndlovu serving as the playwright producer. The series debuted in 2015 and is both set and filmed in the KwaMashu Township of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province (Dube, 2022). *Uzalo*'s storyline initially centred on two young men who were accidentally swapped at birth, leading one to be reared in a Christian household and the other in a context fraught with criminality. The program broadcasts on SABC1 from Monday to Friday at 20:30 and is recognised as the most popular television show in South Africa (Head, 2018). *Uzalo* mostly uses IsiZulu, supplemented with English translations. As the show progressed, the narratives underwent substantial changes, with characters being replaced and new plot arcs being established. By the time this research was completed (2024), *Uzalo* had experienced significant changes in its principal characters relative to its original debut. The cast comprises entirely new characters that have been presented progressively. The narrative changed from solely featuring the two original families to addressing community-centric challenges, including the struggle for power and survival among individuals of all ages and genders.

Uzalo adheres to the community soap opera model by featuring a varied ensemble cast and addressing authentic social and cultural concerns like crime, violence, and drug abuse (Onuh, 2017). The show seeks to communicate the daily experiences of individuals residing in the township of KwaMashu. *Uzalo* features several locations, such as residences, workplaces, and urban environments. There is a significant amount of activity taking place both on the streets and inside various homes. These homes comprise single mothers and their children, who face many obstacles such as economic hardships, romantic relationships, and engagement in criminal behaviour. During these events, gender dynamics are evident in concerning ways, including gender-based violence and different types of victimisation, such as sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse, primarily affecting women.

This chapter aims to do a textual analysis of Uzalo, focussing especially on the plot and events concerning the roles of female characters. Textual analysis is widely utilised in media and communication studies to examine media content and the socio-political dimensions of media representation. Hawkins (2017) contends that textual analysis is a tool for understanding language, symbols, and images inside texts to get insights into how individuals perceive and express life and life experiences. Hawkins further argues that messages both mirror and may challenge the historical, cultural, political, and ethical contexts in which they are situated. Therefore, the analyst must understand the broader societal structures that influence the content of the text under examination. The textual analysis of Uzalo will concentrate on the depiction of women, their interactions with males, social hierarchy, and behavioural patterns associated with women.

The chapter concludes by summarising potential deviations from conventional norms related to the previously discussed issues, as well as changes in gender dynamics. The chosen methodology is qualitative, interpretive, and subjective in nature. This study aims to analyse the significance and implications conveyed through language, references, settings, and interactions in specific scenes of soap operas. Lumby (1997) posits that feminist textual analysis entails identifying credible alternative interpretations of texts, focussing on the construction of gender and the representation and perpetuation of gender inequality by the media. The textual analysis of all three soap operas adopts this perspective. This chapter examines a few storylines from seasons 7, 8, and 9 of the soap opera. The seasons aired from March 2021 to February 2024. This section presents a list of actors from Uzalo for reference during the analysis.

Table 4.1 Uzalo Cast

Character Screen Name	Real name
Lindiwe MaNgcobo Mhlongo	Thandeka Dawn King
Hlengiwe MaMlambo	Gugu Gumede
Gabisile Mdletshe Mhlongo	Baby Cele
Nosipho Xulu	Nompilo Maphumulo
Njinji Magwaza	Thembi Nyandeni

Nomaswazi Magwaza	Fanele Ntuli
Nonkanyiso Xaba	Thuthuka Mthembu
Hleziphi	Sibongiseni Shezi
Nkunzebomvu Mhlongo	Masoja Msiza
Sibonelo Mhlongo	Wiseman Mncube
Mondli Mdlalose	Thembinkosi Thwala
Sbusiso	Simphiwe Majozi
Njeza	Nkanyiso Makhanya
Mbatha	Thabo Mnguni
Zekhethelo	Nyalleng Thibedi
Lilly Dongwe	Noxolo Mathula
MaDongwe	Zama Magubane
Mam Madlala	Ntombifuthi Dlamini
Nomkhosi	Sibusisiwe Jili
Hlelo	Nothando Ngcobo
Philile	Thandeka Qwabe
Flavia	Sthembile Mhlongo
Thobile	Nokuthula Mabika
Colonel Mabaso	Smangele Mhlongo
Kwanda	Sandile Mfusi
Constable Biyela	Thabisile Zikhali
Smangele	Sihle Ndaba

5.2 Women's roles and occupations in *Uzalo*

The term 'role' has multiple meanings, one of which pertains to an actor's part in a theatrical performance or film. Wikipedia describes a role as a compilation of interrelated behaviours, rights, obligations, beliefs, and standards conceptualised by individuals within a social framework. A projected behavioural modification that may be associated with an individual's social status. The function encompasses numerous expectations, significances, and consequences for the allowable acts of the given character. For example, regarding women's societal status, their position in relation to males, and whether they are homemakers or professionals. The behavioural patterns displayed by a character in a script require examination, as they provide a standard

for assessing women as a social group. Some character positions challenge societal norms, while others reinforce them, therefore subjecting women to comparable treatment as depicted in the soap opera narrative. The textual analysis of all soap operas under examination will focus on female characters and narratives within their domestic environments, professional settings, and community interactions.

5.2.1 Women at home

The analysis of women's roles in the domestic sphere will focus on three prominent households: the Mhlongo household, the Indlende chieftaincy, and Mam Njinji's household. Additional houses exist beyond these, although the selected ones have traditionally relayed narratives featuring notable female protagonists.

Mhlongo household: Initially, Nkunzi resides with his wife, MaNgcobo, who is also known as Lindiwe. Upon MaNgcobo's departure from Nkunzi and their marriage, Nkunzi subsequently marries Gabisile Mdletshe, the mother of his son, Sibonelo. Both women are subjects of Nkunzi, following his directives. Household duties are distinctly divided, with women primarily occupying the domestic sphere, performing traditional tasks such as cooking, serving, and attending to children's needs. Nkunzi operates in the public sphere, managing his business (KwaNjomane) while engaging in criminal activities, including car hijacking. This represents a standard practice until MaNgcobo chooses to depart from the domestic sphere and establish her own enterprise (Club Sheba), which is met with Nkunzi's disapproval. This leads to Nkunzi setting fire to Club Sheba due to his inability to compete with a woman, whom he perceives solely as an object of sexual gratification and a homemaker (see Figure 3.1-3.4 in Chapter 3). The setting supports Khelghat-Doost, and Sibly's (2020) argument that patriarchy advocates a domesticized set of roles for women. These roles have been achieved through developing the dichotomous discourse of public (for men) and private (for women) spheres in which women should be restricted to household.

Following the destruction of her business, MaNgcobo transitions from a businesswoman to a gangster, enlisting a group of young individuals, both male and female, to collaborate with her. The image below depicts a transformed MaNgcobo who assertively enters the domain commonly referred to as *gangsterism*. She engages extensively in criminal activities, primarily involving the theft and hijacking of various

vehicles in the Durban area. Upon her departure, after observing the amassed spoils, she delivers a speech that transforms her from the domesticated MaNgcobo of the Mhlongo household into a *guluva*kazi, a female gangster commanding the streets of KwaMashu. Gill (2007) and Tasker (1993) posit that women gangster characters can appear empowering by disrupting the passive or domestic female archetype, they are often hypersexualized, emotionally volatile, or portrayed as deviant and morally corrupt, reinforcing patriarchal anxieties about women in power.



Figure 4-1 A gun-waging MaNgcobo takes over the world of gangsterism

MaNgcobo: (Standing at the back of a van and wielding a gun, while others are spinning cars)
 I say to kwaMashu, as the gangstress, as the heroine... as Pablo, as King Don Father...
 I say Salute!

The crowd: (Whistling) Salute!

MaNgcobo: Salute KwaMashu Salute!

Crowd: Salute

MaNgcobo: I respect you KwaMashu.
 As the general, the big boss, the big dog,
 I salute you!

After MaNgcobo departs from Nkunzi, Gabisile enters marriage with him; however, this union is also not enduring. Before leaving her marriage, she transitions from domesticity to freelance writing for a magazine and subsequently manages a local radio station, K-Mash FM. The dynamics within this homestead present a contrast of various roles for women. Both women transition from roles as wives and mothers to

positions of independence and self-sufficiency. The social significance of these changes and incidents lies in women's ability to assume control in traditionally male-dominated spheres, thereby liberating themselves from dependence on and constraints imposed by male authority. Uzalo challenges societal norms that restrict women to traditionally feminine, safe, and less risky activities through these changes.

Indlende chieftaincy household: Nkunzi and Sibonelo are apprehended due to Sibonelo's money laundering operation. Following his release from imprisonment, Nkunzi undertakes a journey to Indlende, a rural locale where his ailing brother, the chief, need his presence. Nkunzi ascends to the throne as the chief of Indlende following the death of his brother, usurping Nomkhosi, who had served as chief regent during her father's illness. The dynamic between Nkunzi and Nomkhosi subjugates women, as Nomkhosi is compelled to report to Nkunzi, so relegating women to a state of servitude and catering to male interests. Nomkhosi endeavours to convince her father's council to endorse her return to the throne; however, they prefer a male leader over a female one. This indicates that women continue to be undervalued in leadership roles, since males fail to acknowledge their capability to fulfil such positions. Interactions and situations at Indlende reinforce male dominance as Nomkhosi is marginalised and excluded from critical decisions regarding the community.

During conversation with Nkunzi while viewing the beauty of Indlende:



Figure 4-2 Power fight: Nomkhosi questions Nkunzi's intention about Indlende

Nomkhosi: It is beautiful, isn't it?
Nkunzi: If I didn't know much about heaven...I'd say this was it.
Nomkhosi: Is that why you want to take it from us?

Nkunzi: I'm not taking anything from anyone. What I'm taking is rightfully mine.

Nomkhosi: Is that the story you cooked up after you killed my father?

Nkunzi: It's not a story.

Nomkhosi: Nkunzi, I'm not a fool. Nor are the people of Ndlende. We know that you've lost everything ... That's why you have come to reclaim this land. And don't think I don't know what you do, just because I live here. I know how you operate and I will fight you and bring you down. I will bury you myself.

Nkunzi: (*with a grin on his face*). I admire your courage, **my girl**...but when it comes to me...**you will bend the knee** [my emphasis].

The tribal council of Indlende, predominantly male, initially endorsed Nomkhosi as her father's successor. This position contested prevailing norms and expectations regarding women's roles within traditional leadership frameworks. The producers of Uzalo recognise the contemporary socio-political dynamics concerning women's empowerment and their advancement into leadership roles. Nonetheless, Nkunzi's characterisation of Nomkhosi as 'my girl' and the assertion that she will 'bend the knee' perpetuate the existing limitations on women, despite recognising their capabilities. Nomkhosi's ousting from the throne illustrates the patriarchal nature of the chieftaincy system in South Africa, which has marginalised women from leadership roles and upholds customary laws that are detrimental to women's rights (South African History Online, 2024). In addition, Mnguni (2021) argues that when women gain power in soap narratives, it is frequently contested or delegitimized through conflict, scandal, or moral questioning, signaling discomfort with female authority. This dynamic is particularly evident in Uzalo where women's leadership is often portrayed as exceptional or temporary, while male dominance remains normalised. The power fight between Nkunzi and Nomkhosi exemplifies this insertion.

Njinji's household: Mam Njinji, colloquially referred to as "Njinji," hails from an unspecified remote rural region to KwaMashu. Her role is not constrained by motherhood and domesticity, as was the case with earlier women. Rather, she defies this trend and confronts the men who have wronged her directly. In the KwaMashu community, she rapidly gains infamy for employing violence and criminality to address issues. She arrived in KwaMashu with the objective of acquiring power, generating wealth, seeking vengeance, and establishing herself as the kingpin of KwaMashu. Njinji's character is distinguished by her complete absence of feminine qualities,

including tenderness, politeness, kindness, and humility. She is assertive and formidable, and those who engage with her encounter her unyielding nature. In the image below, she attempts to personally assassinate Putin, a man who has terrorised her and her family for years. Although she fails at the scene, her endeavour to murder such a notorious figure as Putin demonstrates that she is not an ordinary woman.



Figure 4-3 Njinji tries to kill Mthambisi (Putin): women fighting men brutality back

Njinji asserts her influence in business by acquiring Nkunzi's enterprise from Sibonelo, who is compelled to cooperate despite his romantic involvement with Njinji's daughter, Nomaswazi. This chat below illustrates this point.

- Njinji:** *(addressing Sbonelo and Nomaswazi about running her newly acquired business, KwaNjinji)*
I hope you haven't come here to gawk at me.
- Nomaswazi:** No, we are not here to do that. We've come to tell you that we will accept your offer to run KwaNjomane for you.
- Sibonelo:** Yes, with a percentage. We'll take 40% of the profit.
- Njinji:** Don't talk nonsense. Who said you could talk?
- Nomaswazi:** This is called negotiating.
- Njinji:** Seven percent. And that's for you (pointing at Nomaswazi), not you (pointing at Sbonelo).
- Sibonelo:** Seven percent? That's madness, I'm leaving.
- Njinji:** There is no need for that. Get up, the door is open, so you're free to go....
(Nomaswazi convinced Sibonelo to take the offer)
- Njinji:** Good. But there is one other thing. KwaNjomane is mine. If you two tried to pull the same stunts you and your dad pulled (*pointing at Sibonelo*), listen to me carefully, you'll regret the day you met me. You will rue the day.

Sibonelo: Oh really?
Njinji: Get out!

Njinji epitomises the femme fatale archetype, characterised not as a damsel in distress, but as an embodiment of strength, autonomy, and malevolence (Nehanda, 2020). Furthermore, she embodies a complex femininity, as she is not linked to any traditional female roles in the soap opera. Her character is a unique interpretation of the femme fatale, characterised by a lack of misogyny yet exhibiting physical aggression, notably towards men. She is a lethal woman; nevertheless, her deadly weapons are not reliant on seduction, sexuality, or beauty as conventional fatal woman, but rather on firearms. Njinji's character and role in the soap opera reflect a liberal feminist worldview that promotes women embracing non-traditional vocations and careers.

The portrayal of women in Uzalo as homemakers is both established and contested. Despite the traditional responsibilities of managing households and raising children, many women have transcended these roles to achieve positions of equal respect and recognition within the community as their male counterparts. Indlende women's roles, however, represent an exception, as the stand-off between Nkunzi and Nomkhosi reinforces the dominance of men and the subordination of women, particularly in leadership matters. The next section examines the representation of women in the workplace as depicted in Uzalo. Uzalo does not feature a corporate setting; however, it includes some locations where individuals operate within hierarchical structures that differentiate levels of authority between men and women. Nonetheless, most of these structures are not formalised.

5.2.2 Women in the workplace

K-Mash FM: This is a local radio station managed by Flavia, with Gabisile initially serving as the primary anchor and subsequently becoming a shareholder. In season 9 of Uzalo, K-Mash FM serves as a beacon of female empowerment, devoid of male representation in its upper echelons, until Gabisile permits a platform for her boyfriend, Mthambisi, to exploit the station for his illicit activities. Women at K-Mash FM were pivotal decision-makers regarding programming and station affairs, a role that empowered them without subjugating them to male authority. However, this role might

not be entirely liberating as argued by Wood (2009) and Gill (2007), that in soap operas, women are often positioned as "talking heads" characters who primarily function as conveyors of dialogue, emotion, and relational tension rather than agents of action or change. This role emphasizes emotional expressiveness, interpersonal insight and social connectivity, reinforcing traditional feminine traits such as empathy, nurturing and verbal communication.

KwaMashu Police station: The police station is characterised by male authority, with females occupying subordinate jobs. The station explicitly differentiates between the duties of men and women, sometimes accompanied by a prejudiced assessment of women's talents and an implication that women are inferior and incapable of performing tasks typically assigned to males. Lilly Dongwe, a police officer, was shot at the crime scene. Rather than expressing compassion and applauding Officer Dongwe for her bravery in doing a task typically assigned to men, Mbatha emphasises her gender and suggests that her presence on a crime scene was inappropriate. His explicit statement was: "MaDongwe's daughter, what was she doing in a shootout? She's a girl"! (Season 8, Episode aired on March 8, 2022). Female police officers are typically assigned to straightforward and less demanding responsibilities, such as administrative duties, rather than engaging in crime-fighting activities. Consequently, women encounter various forms of discrimination in crime-fighting endeavours, as the community often perceives them as incapable of managing issues typically addressed by men. Mbatha's statements illustrate the societal gendered connotations of jobs and professions.

A previous episode illustrates how men display a sexist demeanour and attitude towards women. Vika explicitly declines to obey a female officer, asserting that her gender renders her inferior and unworthy of respect. This can be viewed positively as it challenges stereotypes, given that Officer Dongwe is now the sole professional woman on set.



Figure 4-4 Lilly shows bravery by facing criminals face-to-face

Trailblazers: This facility serves as a community development centre focused on educating young individuals in art and essential life skills. The centre is primarily led by women, with MaMlambo serving as the key developer and Hleziphi acting as the manager and facilitator of the centre's programs. These roles position these women, especially MaMlambo, in a place of authority, as the centre serves as a beacon of hope for young individuals and their families. The nature of the business that the centre focusses on can be perceived as embodying feminine roles, as it involves nurturing young individuals, with women often assuming the roles of mother or older sister to the youth who attend the centre. This further restricts women to roles linked to caregiving, which is another characteristic associated with femininity. Significant changes have occurred at the centre, resulting in its closure and the reassignment of its originator, MaMlambo, to a different role that entails a notable paradigm shift, which will be addressed later.

In conclusion, the portrayal of women in Uzalo illustrates a shift from traditional household roles to a challenge against male authority, culminating in their liberation and independence. Uzalo illustrates a transition in women's depiction from complete oppression and marginalisation to actively combating such subjugation.

5.3 Themes and behavioural patterns exhibited by women characters

Behaviour pertains to the facets of life that are enhanced by women's acts and conduct. It pertains to their interactions with one another, their conduct towards males, and the way men treat them on set, as well as whether women comply to or contest these behaviours. The depicted behaviours have an impact on women, as a result, Motsaathebe (2009:434) argues that “judging by the number of people who watch television every day, one can predict that gender relations would never be normalised in South Africa if this powerful medium continues to depict negative and inaccurate gender images”. There are several behaviours that fictional television content often associates with women, a few are picked from *Uzalo*.

Victims: In *Uzalo*, women frequently appear as victims of male dominance, cruelty, and greed, indicating that their societal suffering is often a consequence of their interactions with men. Nosipho experiences gender-based violence perpetrated by her boyfriend, Njeza. The physical abuse occurred overtly, with bystanders present and few intervening. Such scenes pose a challenge to society as they may lead to desensitisation towards these behaviours. The second example illustrates Nonkanyiso's experience with her drug-dealer boyfriend, whose manipulation was so effective that she remained unaware of his illicit activities, resulting in her imprisonment. The most traumatic scene occurs when the boyfriend, Kwanda, discloses that he was merely exploiting her, as she was 'too intoxicated by love' to suspect any deceit regarding his wealth.

This narrative suggests that women have a pronounced propensity for material items. Offering them with financial means and a luxurious lifestyle will secure their devotion. The episodes from July and August 2022 illustrate a range of occurrences, including parties, gift exchanges, corporate festivities, and family dinners. During this time, Nonkanyiso stays oblivious to the events transpiring and becomes an unwitting victim. Women have been stereotypically depicted as individuals with a pronounced inclination for material belongings, a notion exemplified in the case of Nonka and Kwanda. Women in television soap operas are often shown as victims of sexual abuse, a well-documented phenomenon.

Male accessories: This represents a trend in television's depiction of women, which is similarly prevalent in music videos, where women are often presented as trophies intended to attract viewers through their appearance and sex appeal. These women frequently perform erotic movements that are recognised for attracting views to the videos. In *Uzalo*, women are portrayed as figures intended to attract their male counterparts, including husbands, boyfriends, or bosses. One example is Vika, who attends social gatherings accompanied by women, whom he subsequently dismisses when their presence is no longer required. Officer Biyela at the Kwa-Mashu police station serves as the second example. Upon Mondli's wrongful imprisonment, Officer Dongwe initiates a rescue operation, employing Officer Biyela as a diversion to distract Captain Nyawo, who is infatuated with Officer Biyela. Dongwe advises Biyela to leverage her appearance, specifically her eyes, to divert Nyawo's attention from his work towards herself. Biyela serves as an accessory in the effort to rescue their Captain, representing a risky yet heroic endeavour.

In a separate scenario, Colonel Mabaso, the female police district manager, conspires with Mthambisi to subvert the KwaMashu police force while concurrently advancing his illegal drug operation. Mabaso is prepared to commit murder for Mthambisi, with whom she is colluding, for her financial benefit. The ongoing trend of women prepared to do any actions for money, even at the cost of relinquishing autonomy to males, persists. Women are often perceived as things or objects owned and utilised by men.

Versatility: Despite the stereotypical representations discussed, *Uzalo* has depicted women as versatile individuals capable of managing businesses while simultaneously maintaining the household. Typically, soap operas and similar genres depict narratives in which women who achieve corporate success frequently experience failures in domestic spheres, including marriage and interpersonal relationships. Neophytou (n.d) describes this versatility as simultaneously conforming to and challenging social constructions of femininity, as well as the conventions of soap operas. This is often illustrated through characters who embody both traditional and modern roles for women. Nosipho is one example, she is married to pastor Gwala but successfully running the business hub. Gabisile is another one, she runs a radio station but also able to balance being a wife to Nkunzi and a mother to Sibonelo.

5.4 Paradigm shift: notable challenges to conventionality and patriarchal dominance

Despite the depiction of women in traditional roles, Uzalo has also illustrated scenarios where women have sought positions, careers, and attributes that equate them with males. It has also demonstrated that women are not solely motivated by romance but also aspire to achieve significantly on their own. Certain women have demonstrated traits that contest and displace men from positions of authority and prominence. Few of these scenarios are discussed below.

5.4.1 Women acquiring independence and self-sufficiency

The business hub offers women a forum to autonomously pursue self-empowerment, excluding men. This is the domain where women cultivated own enterprises, managing them according to their own terms and for their own benefit. Nosipho's character demonstrates the transformation in which certain women attain such self-sufficiency to an extent that males actively seek her assistance. She evolves from Nkunzi's servant to the manager of the business hub and becomes a moneylender. This is her conversation with Mbatha (the pastor) in episode 2 of season 8.

Mbatha: *knocking and barging in at Nosipho's house while Nosipho is dressing up (still underdressed).*

Nosipho: No Bab Mbatha, I'm still getting dressed, look away.

Mbatha: Mhmm (*looking away and making a sound of desire to look at Nosipho's body*).

Nosipho: Lord help my business grow faster. People just barge into my house.

Mbatha: Malindi's daughter, I've come to borrow R450.

Nosipho: No, I can't do that ... I said look away.

Mbatha: Oh, my child, why are you shouting? Don't worry, you're a child. **I'm used to everything that you have, and I've touched it** [my emphasis]

Nosipho: My answer is still no. Get out of here

Mbatha: (*Looks at Nosipho, who is still not fully dressed in curious and lusting eye, then walks out*).

In the excerpt, Nosipho occupies a position of dominance while a man solicits her assistance. This challenges customary norms and patriarchal codes, but still conveys significant sexual objectification, as Mbatha expresses curiosity in observing Nosipho's partial nudity. Despite Nosipho's emergence as a prominent entrepreneur, the stereotypes of 'wife' and 'mother' persist in Season 8 of the soap opera, beginning with episode 198. In the next excerpt, Nosipho adheres to the traditional position of women by accepting domesticity.



Figure 4-5 Domestic roles follow women (Nosipho)

Nosipho: *(in the kitchen, chopping and cooking).*

Nkazimulo: Mh, it smells nice in here.

Nosipho: the food is almost ready.

Nkazimulo: Oh, great.

Nosipho: How was school today?

Nkazimulo: Fantastic as usual.

This contrast in women's positions indicates that producers recognise the diverse narratives linked with women yet remain unable to fully transcend traditional viewpoints.

Nonkanyiso (Nonka) is a young woman who initially balanced her responsibilities as a schoolchild with her role as a street vendor, striving to provide for herself and her younger brother. During that period, Njeza, her elder brother, was imprisoned. Upon his release, he endeavoured to assume the role of the head of the household.

Nonkanyiso subsequently marries Sibonelo, who has also taken a second wife, Sphilile. This polygamous marriage is entirely unsuccessful for all parties involved. Amidst these challenges, Nonkanyiso begins selling beauty products on the streets of Kwa-Mashu, facing significant difficulties, including being pursued by dogs. Sibonelo helps, but she is reluctant to accept his help, thereby subverting the traditional knight-in-shining-armor stereotype. A snippet below illustrates Nonka's ascent.

Nonka: *(shouting at the gate)* Hello!
I'm selling some products!
(Talking to herself) Who locks their gate? *(She pushes the gate)* Oh! It opens.
Knock and knock! I'm selling some products. Hair products and Colgate.

Nonkanyiso persistently seeks to capitalise on this sales opportunity, although only a dog appears. She flees for her life as the dog pursues her, regrettably to the extent of forsaking her bag containing her belongings. While attempting to evade a dog, she injures her leg. As she sits down to tend to her minor injuries, Sbonelo arrives in his elegant car and offers assistance. This is the time when Nonkanyiso could adore Sibonelo as a charming knight to her rescue, yet, the narrative diverges, illustrating women's aspiration for autonomy as Nonkanyiso declines Sibonelo's offer of assistance. The chat below exemplifies this argument.

Sbonelo: Hey, Nonka! Are you alright?
Nonka: *(looks away)*
Sbonelo: *(Looking at Nonka's leg bruises)* Alright. Whoa. I don't want you to get an infection.
Nonka: I don't want your help Sbonelo
Sbonelo: Come on, Nonka
Nonka: No
Sbonelo: *(Trying to touch Nonkanyiso)* (I must...
Nonka: *(hitting and pushing his hand away)*
Sbonelo: Nonka ...
Nonka: I thought I'd be sitting in my corner office...not being chased by KwaMashu dogs.
Sbonelo: I'm so sorry, but I have to ...
Nonka: No. you don't understand Sbonelo.

This analysis indicates that women may have been portrayed as dependent on men, although there exists a potential for women to attain success autonomously. Moreover, television is beginning to acknowledge and use this concept within its narratives.

5.4.2 Women exhibiting bravery

Bravery is a characteristic linked to masculinity; hence, instances of women displaying this feature are infrequent. The police force is male dominated due to the requirement for courage. However, there appears to be a divergence from this perspective at the KwaMashu police station. When Officer Dongwe intervenes in Vika's truck hijacking, she exhibits considerable bravery, even though it lends her in hospital. The depiction of women's courage instead of their fragility and fear should be regarded as a significant shift in societal norms.

Lilly, ordering Vika to stop at a roadblock:

Lilly: Hey, step out [of] the truck.
Lilly: Keep your hands up. Get down on your knees.
Vika: I don't kneel for women.
Oliphant: What did you say?
Vika: I can't.

Regrettably, Lilly is shot by a corrupt police officer colluding with Vika, resulting in a near-fatal incident. Notwithstanding her display of courage and the exertion of authority, the stigma of female inferiority and unworthiness of respect permeates Vika's statement, "*I don't kneel for women.*" His manner of expression conveys disdain, arrogance, and a significant denigration of women, rendering the sentiment more impactful than the actual words.

5.4.3 Sexual abuse of boys

Sexual abuse is often depicted as an issue solely affecting women and girls, despite the existence of cases involving males and boys, albeit less frequently. In seasons 9 and 10 of *Uzalo*, Hlelo perpetrated sexual abuse against four young boys and subsequently was incarcerated. The nature of the sexual violation differs slightly, as it is less violent than rape, which women and girls experience. Hlelo seduced the lads into engaging in sexual relations with her, without them perceiving any impropriety.

This represents a paradigm change, as women are typically victims of sexual violation; hence, presenting an alternative scenario bears significant social implications regarding issues that society may be neglecting.

5.4.4 Women in football

Football and sports are predominantly overseen by men; nevertheless, MaMlambo and Njinji have purchased a football team, KwaMashu Football Club. It is apparent that they lack an understanding of the operations within their new venture, rendering them a subject of ridicule to their male adversaries. Research indicates that women have been under-represented not only as sportswomen but also in sports leadership and administration within the media (Bruce, 2016). Historically, numerous sports have been predominantly male dominated in terms of participation and governance, with women markedly under-represented, especially at advanced levels of competition and in leadership positions within sports organisations. In South Africa, no football team is owned or managed by a woman; thus, Uzalo's depiction of women in football management directly challenges this norm.

5.5 Conclusion

The representation of women in Uzalo illustrates the diverse issues they face in society and inside their domestic spheres. It further reinforces existing biases concerning gender, as men are selected for esteemed professions and positions of respect by community members. Women are often portrayed alongside men, either as spouses or romantic partners, or as subordinates obliged to adhere to men's directives. Women are often subjected to the brutality and injustices perpetrated by men, so reinforcing the dominant narrative of women as victims, as corroborated by additional research on the topic. Nonetheless, a nuanced transition towards endorsing women via self-empowerment and personal development is seen in the latter episodes of seasons 9, and 10. A salient characteristic of Uzalo is the lack of distinctly delineated roles and professions within the corporate sector, except for those in the police force.

It is reasonable to note that Uzalo primarily addresses the challenges associated with township life, such as crime, drug dealing, and gangsterism. The literature clearly indicates that patriarchy primarily manifests in the sexual division of labour, which is

both apparent and subject to challenge. Landers (2018) argues that the sexual division of labour impeded Uzalo's ability to establish a robust and impactful discourse on women's empowerment. The paradigm shift analysis of Uzalo presents an alternative conclusion to Landers's perspective, indicating that women are actively engaged in redefining their narratives and capabilities. The challenge persists in the inherent nature of the text, as current developments may rapidly alter, potentially reverting us to conventionality. The subsequent chapter concentrates on the textual analysis of *Skeem Saam*. The analytical technique is similar to this one, albeit changes will arise due to *Skeem Saam*'s inclusion of formal professions that were conspicuously absent in Uzalo.

CHAPTER SIX: SKEEM SAAM: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF

6.1 Introduction

Skeem Saam is another popular soap opera that achieved ratings of 5,500,172 in 2021, 3,930,841 in 2022, and 1,191,198 in 2023. In the years 2020 and 2021, *Skeem Saam* ranked as the third most popular show on the SABC1 channel. However, in 2023, it moved up to the second position despite a sharp decline in number of viewers. The local drama series explores the predicament of contemporary male adolescents and the formidable obstacles they encounter during their journey towards adulthood (SABC 1 website). The fundamental assumption of the series is that authentic men are shaped via experience, rather than being inherently predetermined. The series provides an in-depth examination of the lives of three adolescent males and their respective families. The show explores how these young men navigate challenges related to masculinity, gender dynamics, interpersonal connections, and self-worth. *Skeem Saam* made its debut on the big screen on October 13, 2011, at its 10th anniversary celebration (2021), its producer, Winnie Serite, praised the soap opera for its significance, influence and dedication to addressing contemporary issues that affect the youth (SABC1 website).

This chapter aims to conduct textual analysis of *Skeem Saam* in an analogous way to that of *Uzalo* on the previous chapter. However, there are some differences due to *Skeem Saam* having more women and men in professional and corporate settings compared to *Uzalo*. The focus of the analysis is women's roles, occupations as well as their behavioural patterns. For this analysis, references are made based on different episodes from season 9 to 12, which were broadcast between July 2020 and June 2024. The list of characters below is provided for easy reference to them during the discussion. The list is not exhaustive, as some characters, particularly those that the discussion does not refer to, have not been listed, and others' names have not been provided.

Table 5.1 Skeem Saam Cast

Screen character name	Real name
Principal Thobakgale (Jacobeth)	Elizabeth Serunye
Mantuli Seakamela	Dieketseng Mnisi
Meikie Maputla	Harriet Manamela
Elizabeth Thobakgale	Amanda Manku
Mapitsi Magongwa	Mogau Paulina Motlhatswi
Celia Kunutu	Shoki Mmola
Melita Monama	Hellen Motsuki
Pretty Seakamela	Lerato Marabe
Samukele Mkhize	Khwezikazi Gasela
Ivy Kgomo	Molobane Mbatha
Obed Kgomo	Lebogang Elephant
Professor Maputla	Africa Tsoai
Lehasa Maphosa	Cedric Fourie
Sthoko Seakamela	Innocentia Sadiki
Evelyn Maswahla	Vele Manje
Inspector Desando	Not listed
Leeto Maputla	Eric Macheru
Marothi Maphuthuma	Macks Papo
Sgt Babeille	Mathews Manamela
Eunice	Oratile Maitisa
Charles Kunutu	Masilo Magoro
Mr Moloisi	Themba Mokoena
Mr. Shivhambu	Not listed
Koloi	Joseph Tshepo Senatle
Billy	Not listed
Lewatle	Not listed
Nimrod	Buhle Maseko
Zamokuhle 'Kwaito' Seakamela	Clement Maosa
Katlego 'Kat' Peterson	Patrick Seleka
Thabo T'bose Maputla	Cornet Mamabolo/
Dr. Hlongwane	Sebasa Mogale

6.2 Roles and occupations of women in *Skeem Saam*

Skeem Saam has a different setting from *Uzalo*, as its backdrop is education (it is an SABC education programme). It has more interactions taking place in a family setting, where there is both father and mother or reference to both. The narrative revolves around three families the Maputla's, the Magongwa's and the Seakamela's, all in Turfloop, and set in Johannesburg, where the focus is more on Lehasa Maposa a shrewd but also devious businessmen who has some business and personal ties with

Turfloop. *Skeem Saam* is also set on different formal workplaces including: a high school, a hospital, and a university. This soap opera upholds a trend of portraying women on conventional roles such as mothers, wives, and girlfriends. Some of the women have professional jobs, some own and run their own businesses (Meiki, Khwezi). While some are formally employed (police, teachers, doctor, psychologist, personal assistant, journalist, receptionist), some are engaged in casual occupations such as waiters, security guard, personal assistant, and receptionist). It is important, however, to state that some of these women have changed roles and occupations in the process, and this has been the source of a paradigm shift in terms of challenging norms and stereotypes about women's roles. The table below shows a comparative distribution of roles and occupations on *Skeem Saam*.

Table 5.2 Roles and occupations of women on Skeem Saam

Women: roles and occupations	No of characters	Character names
Wife and mother	4	Meiki, Celia, Ivy, Khwezikazi, MaNtuli, Mapitsi, Jacobeth
School principal	1	Jacobeth Thobakgale
Girlfriend	2	Pretty, Khwezi, Sthoko
Teachers	4	Sthoko, Evelyn
Doctors	1	Elizabeth (Lizzy)
Receptionist	1	Melita/Celia
PA	1	Mrs. Pehla
Psychologist	1	Ivy
Journalist	1	Mapitsi
Businesswoman	1	Khwezikazi
Waitresses	2	Eunice, Bontle
Police officer	1	Sgt. Rathebe

Table 5.3 Roles and occupations of men on Skeem Saam

Men- roles and occupations	No. of characters	Character names
Hospital CEO (Chief Executive Officer)	1	Mr. Kgomo
University Professor	1	Mr. Maputla

Businessmen	3	Lehasa, Leeto, Marothi
Doctors	1	Dr. Hlongwane
School principal	1	Mr Magongwa
School inspector	1	Mr. Desanto
Police station commander	1	Not listed
Police officer	2	Sgt Babeile, Tsheola

Table 6.2 reflects that more women (4) are portrayed at a home setting, where their activities revolve around being a wife, mother, or girlfriend and hardly on their professional roles. The table also reflects a certain number of women who have formal occupations such as teachers, doctor, psychologist, journalist, police officer, while some are general workers (waitress, receptionist, and personal assistant). However, these professional women have little or no authority and honour, as they often face male chauvinistic behaviour at work. This is concerning because it limits women capabilities to proving themselves to men who either compete with them or see them as subordinates who can be addressed and commanded anyhow (in case of Mr. Kgomo). The following analysis shows prevalent and dominant characteristics when it comes to their roles and the way they fulfil them. However, table 6.3 on the other hand shows how high status, high authority and prestigious occupations are held by men, thus giving men an upper hand against women when it comes to status and social importance of their roles.

6.2.1 Women's roles in the workplace

Turfloop High school: this is a local high school whose workforce is dominantly women, with a few men. Women hold a variety of roles such as ordinary teachers and some have been in management roles. Regardless of women being in leadership positions, there is still a prevailing social norm that high positions in the workplace are a male domain. This is evident when a female Principal, Jacobeth Thobakgale is compelled to show deference to a male education inspector, Mr. Desando. Regarding the occupation of the principal, the deputy (Mr. Magongwa) harbours resentment towards Principal Thobakgale as he believes he should be the principal instead.

Despite being in authority, Thobakgale's authority is limited by the approval of Mr. Desando, who is the departmental inspector. This setup implies women's subordination by men and society. Thobakgale encounters resistance from both her staff and students on her decisions, particularly while addressing the disruptive conduct of students. Wood (2007) asserts that the media often portrays men as capable individuals who save women from their perceived incompetence. Consistent with this claim, Principal Thobakgale subsequently relinquishes her position to Mr. Magongwa.

Turfloop Hospital: Elizabeth Thobakgale (Lizzy), the sole daughter of Principal Thobakgale, is a medical doctor at Turfloop hospital. The facility is overseen by the ruthless Superintendent, Mr. Kgomo. Elizabeth is a diligent and committed young doctor who collaborates with her male colleagues on an equal and cooperative basis. She is accountable to the Superintendent, who exhibits an ardent desire for power and embodies the characteristics commonly associated with masculine chauvinism. Mr. Kgomo emphasises that his authority is the utmost priority at Turfloop, leaving no room for anything else to be considered vital. There is no scope for bargaining or compromise, as only his approach is considered authoritative and binding. Once again, Lizzy might be in an appealing profession, however, she is constrained by male dominance, resulting in her lack of authority and decision-making abilities even on matters pertaining to her professional expertise.

Every soap opera features women in roles such as personal assistants, receptionists, and secretaries, which are typically linked with being pleasant and attractive rather than exerting authority. Celia Magongwa finds herself in that position, despite having considerable authority and control within her household. At the hospital, she is expected to display submissiveness and comply with orders, a common expectation for women in this soap opera. Holtzhausen, Jordaan, and North (2011) argue that there is a portrayal in television advertising where women are seen as decorative items and subjugated to male domination. This image is sometimes referred to as an 'unbreakable glass ceiling'. In a study conducted by Furnham et al (2001), it was discovered that a higher percentage of females were portrayed in roles that displayed dependence to men (73%) compared to those in professional roles (27%). Some

female employees at Turfloop hospital do have professional roles, however, their scope of work is determined by Mr. Kgomo.

Turfloop University: Within this university, there are only a limited number of individuals who are continuously there, excluding the students. Professor Maputla is the highest-ranking authority, often interacting with while three women. Mrs. Phehla serves as his personal assistant, Mrs. Kgomo is the university's psychotherapist, and MaNtuli fulfils the role of a security officer. These women lack any authority to make decisions, as they all get instructions from Professor Maputla.

Turfloop police station: The police station is predominantly male dominated, with only one female officer, Sergeant Rathebe. All of them report to the station commander, a male individual, who frequently exasperates Rathebe by sending her to cases that she deems less significant. Once again, this workplace establishes distinct limitations on the abilities of women, resulting in the subjugation of women under male authority.

6.2.2 Women's roles in their households

Maputlas: This household consists of John and Meiki Maputla as parents, their son Thabo, daughter-in-law Mapitsi, and grandson Pitsi. Although both women express their opinions on family matters, they are nevertheless limited to traditional gender roles at home, as they are responsible for tasks such as cooking, cleaning, taking children to school, and tending to the family's emotional needs. From a feminist standpoint, it is necessary to critically examine this matter with a focus on its impact on the actual lived experiences of women. Furthermore, it imposes restrictions on women's ability to pursue equal chances to men, both inside their households and in society. Watkins (2020) contends that gender plays a significant role in shaping the norms, values, and production processes of the television and cinema business.

Kgomos: Mr. Kgomo and Mrs. Kgomo have been leading a content and harmonious life as a perfect couple until Mr. Kgomo engages in infidelity with Melita (hospital's receptionist). This tragedy alters the dynamics of their marriage, as Mrs. Kgomo has transitioned from being a submissive wife and caring mother to a feisty woman who is unable to tolerate this disrespect. In African culture, women are instructed and

anticipated to disregard their spouses' inclination to cheat, as this is perceived as the embodiment of being a 'good woman' or a resilient wife. There is a proverb that states "a woman holds a knife by its sharp end," implying that women are supposed to endure any situation, no matter how challenging, especially in the context of marriage. Mrs. Kgomo exemplifies a woman who is emancipated and refuses to allow anyone to take advantage of her, in contrast to societal norms.

Maphosas: Lehasa Maphosa is a businessman who has a contentious past with women. He was formerly married to Khwezikazi (Khwezi), with whom he has a child. However, their relationship deteriorated since Khwezi transformed from being just a girlfriend to a successful businesswoman. He is currently residing with Pretty, who has also undergone a transformation from being his girlfriend to becoming a law graduate and a trainee attorney. Prior women in Lehasa's past, such as Khwezi, had encountered being exploited for his selfish business pursuits and then abandoned. In addition, he perceives women, particularly Khwezi, primarily as a homemaker and a mother to their child. This perspective leads him to question and confront Khwezi's professional obligations that need her to be away from home and her motherly duties. He believes that Khwezi should prioritise her role as a mother than focus on advancing her business. Furthermore, Khwezi's family exploits her as a commodity, coercing her into a marriage with Lehasa in return for a substantial *lobola* payment. This eventually leads Khwezi into perceiving her marriage to Lehasa as a type of accomplishment that elevates her above other women, specifically Pretty, who was previously in a relationship with Lehasa. Nevertheless, both ladies shift their focus away from Lehasa and onto their individual growth. In support of this view, Ndlela (2020) posits that the roles of women in soap operas are increasingly challenging patriarchal norms by portraying female characters as complex, independent, and professionally empowered individuals who resist traditional gender expectations. While earlier soap operas often depicted women primarily as mothers, wives, or romantic interests, contemporary storylines now include women as CEOs, politicians, detectives, and even criminal masterminds—roles historically reserved for men (Ndlela, 2020). Further examination of this twist will be explored within the context of a paradigm shift.

Seakamelas: MaNtuli is a single mother to her son, Zamokuhle (Zamo) and daughter, Pretty. Although MaNtuli works as a security guard at Turfloop University, Zamo is

always pressured as a boy child to provide everything for his family. This does not only cause a strain in Zamo's life but also interferes in his marriage. This dependence on Zamo shows how the society has put a different responsibility to a male child compared to a female child. This on its own creates gender disparity at home as Zamo is put in a position to exert and exercise his authority over his family. It also makes a distinction between gender roles and socialisation of boys and girls. Hartely (1959) argues that social roles mean all the personal qualities, behavioural characteristics, interests, attitudes, abilities, and skills which one is expected to have because one occupies a certain status or position. In this household, Zamo is elevated by the social role that he is expected to play in his family, this has a likelihood of subjecting Pretty and her mother under his authority because he is a male. This might also indirectly communicate a message to Zamo (and other boys watching *Skeem Saam*) that he is more important and has an esteemed social role than his sister because he is a male. This has implications on society, as findings suggest that children tune into gendered depictions, as well as observations of acceptable gender behaviour at home and at school, to inform their own enactment of gender (Norman, 2018).

Kunutus: Charles Kunutu runs a local tuckshop that he co-owns with Principal Magongwa. He is a traditional man who treats his wife as his servant who has no say in the decisions in their household. He carries the role and responsibility to provide for his family and a wife must remain at home to take care of all womanly tasks such as cooking and looking after children. When his wife, Salamina, enrolls herself at university to get a qualification that will enhance her dress-making small business, Charles struggles to understand her vision and therefore challenges it instead of being supportive. He directly tells her that she should be at home to serve him and look after their children's well-being. When he realises that the financial burden is unbearable, he instructs Salamina to sell more clothes. Salamina depicts a humble and submissive wife, who has no option but to agree with her husband's decisions even when she is not happy. This kind of portrayal is observed by Reshma (2022) in her study of soap operas in India, where she argues that the depiction of the conventional notion of women sacrificing and compromising in soap operas has been widely accepted by the audience.

6 Themes and behavioural patterns of women in *Skeem Saam*

6.2.3 Envy, competition and jealousy

The female characters in *Skeem Saam* exhibit hostility and envy towards one another, particularly the older ladies who perceive themselves as more accomplished than their peers (MaNtuli, Jacobeth, Meiki). This hostility extends beyond mere gossip and to the level of conspiring to bring about each other's demise. Women are rarely depicted as actively challenging male dominance and social injustice that is directed towards them; instead, they are often depicted as being in unhealthy competition with one another. The fundamental premises are that this attitude is the primary obstacle preventing individuals from progressing to leadership roles and top positions in the corporate realm and society at large. Women in television series are portrayed as more willing to comply with men's authority than with women's.

While serving as the Principal of Turfloop High School, Jacobeth Thobakgale faced resistance and criticism from female colleagues who harboured animosity towards her leadership and frequently engaged in derogatory conversations about her. The specific aspects of her leadership that were disliked are not clearly stated, other than her firm and uncompromising approach to school performance, which has proven beneficial for the school over a significant period. The instructors were pleased to witness Jacobeth's position being challenged to the extent that they opted for Magongwa to become their principal.

Meiki Maputla, the owner of a local grocery shop, is widely regarded for her business acumen. However, her rapport with the community is strained, as she frequently becomes the subject of gossip and envy among the residents. They exhibit animosity towards her while displaying a significant amount of respect towards her husband, Professor Maputla. Conclusively, *Skeem Saam* depicts woman-on-woman battle as one of the causes of their inferiority as this might be viewed as a lack substance to focus on things that really matter and build them up. This portrays women as petty and immature in their behaviour. In many soap operas, women are frequently depicted as rivals who undermine each other, are in competition for male attention, romantic

partners, social status, or power, reducing female relationships to jealousy, betrayal, and manipulation (Gill, 2007; Modleski, 2008).

6.2.4 Commitment to love and romance

Love, marriage, and relationships are always central in soap opera storylines. Certain women in *Skeem Saam* are willing to go to great lengths for the sake of their romantic relationships. Jacobeth neglects her professional duties and her daughter to get the admiration of a man (Professor Kganyago) who coincidentally turns out to be fraudulent scammer. Kganyago successfully swindles Jacobeth, not only taking away a substantial sum of money (one million rands) but also causing her to lose her happiness and self-respect. She is deeply in love to the point where she is prepared to migrate with him and abandon her daughter. At this point, she is oblivious to the fact that Kganyago is a fraudster who has no interest in her but is on a mission to steal from her. The depiction suggests that women, regardless of their achievements, are perceived as gullible and vulnerable in matters pertaining to love, as their ability to think logically diminishes when they are consumed by romantic emotions. Television programmes provide young people with diverse verbal and visual illustrations of how dating, intimacy, relationships, and sex are handled, through its discourse, characterization, storylines, and subjects (Mahlatsi, 2018). Given that *Skeem Saam* is produced by SABC Education, it is reasonable to assert that it has a cognitive impact to its viewers. This is evident in the portrayal of Thobakgale's experience, from her initial infatuation to her subsequent financial troubles caused by a fraudster she fell for. This can serve as a revelation for female audiences, prompting them to approach love matters with caution.

Pretty on the other hand forsakes her family to reside with Lehasa while pursuing her studies in Johannesburg. Despite the peril of potential harm from Lehasa's another girlfriend, she remains loyal to him. Her perception of Lehasa's is obscured by her infatuation. Pretty appears to lack any work aspirations beyond being Lehasa's romantic partner and spouse. The absence of any mention of her studies and self-empowerment at first (previous seasons), indicates a dearth of ambition. Another character of note is Khwezi, who has been Lehasa's girlfriend before Pretty, is compelled to marry him because she is pregnant with his child. She is a skilled nurse

but has forsaken her job in prioritising her role as Lehasa's wife. What is disconcerting in this narrative is the lack of information and focus on the professional paths of these women. Instead, their identities are made to revolve around Lehasa. Marx (2008) argues that despite the presence of female protagonists with professional careers, their focus on romance and family always outweighs their professional pursuits. In contrast, male professionals are portrayed as superior individuals who surpass their specialised roles. *Skeem Saam* at this point typifies Marx's claim.

6.2.5 Objectification of women

Studies on gender aspect in movies and film have always brought forward the topic of women's objectification. *Skeem Saam* as well embodies this notion through Melita and Mr. Kgomo. At some point Mr. Kgomo is depicted drooling over Melita as he looks at her with a lustful eye. This kind of look normally focusses on the lower body of a woman, and a man usually has a facial expression of 'desiring' the woman. Besides being in an extra-marital affair with Mr. Kgomo, Melita uses her sexuality to secure employment. This trend is also popular in television content, where women use their bodies to get what they want. Doing so, they put themselves in a position of being 'sexual objects' of the men in authority. These men in return portray a sense of ownership to these women, demanding their availability whenever they desire them. To show this, Mr. Kgomo used the job that he offered her to threaten her if he is not pleased with her, thus showing a sense of ownership of her. This is a problematic representation of women as it connotes that women's best assets are their bodies. This is complete commodification of women as it suggests that women are pleasure objects available for men to use as they desire.

Melita's objectification does not end with Mr. Kgomo; Mr. Nonyane also uses her for his lustful agenda and then dumps her, leaving her ashamed, humiliated and without the promised job offer. These incidents carry portrayal of women as lacking morals, and not self-respecting as they allow men to do as they please with them, without considering consequences. From one of his lectures, Kant (1963) quoted in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (1997) argues that sexual love reduces the loved person to an object of desire; once that desire has been satisfied, the individual is discarded like a depleted lemon. Once a person becomes an object of desire for someone else,

all moral connections and motivations cease to operate. This is because when a person is seen as an object of desire, they are reduced to a mere thing that can be abused and exploited by anyone. The scene from episode on 17 February 2023 shows how Melita offers to reward Mr. Kgomo for having her back when the HR (Human Resources) Manager wants her fired due to her deficient performance at work. This scene shows clearly that Melita is Mr. Kgomo's 'object and is indebted to him (through her body).



Figure 6-1 Sexual objectification of women (Melita)

This is after Shoki, Mr. Kgomo and Melita had a talk about Melita's work behaviour and whether she keeps her job or not.

Shoki: This is the very last chance. One year. That's it!

Melita: Oh.... So, I get to keep my job?

(Shoki stands up and leaves the office).

(Melita jumps over to Mr. Kgomo in excitement).

Melita: Oh my goodness. You did it, baby.

Mr. Kgomo: *(trying to stop Melita)*
I'm sure she is still here.

Melita: I'm sorry, but you... *(Hugging him)*
Powerful men turn me on.

(Moving Kgomo's hand over her lower body).

Mr. Kgomo: What are you doing tonight? I know this great hotel.

Mr. Kgomo: Dinner with the family.

Melita: I think you should cancel it.

Mr. Kgomo: I can't afford to miss this dinner. Ivy would kill me.

Melita: Just when I thought you were the boss.

Mr. Kgomo: *thinking and changing his mind...*

I don't take orders.

Melita: Well, I.... (*Pulling Mr. Kgomo chair towards her*) like taking orders from you. Especially when you tell me how and where.
(Intensely looking at him. Mr. Kgomo's face showing pleasure from what Melita is doing).

Mr. Kgomo: Ivy will understand if I miss just one dinner.

Melita: It's a date then. I will see you tonight.

(Melita walks away, flaunting her body sexily, while Mr. Kgomo is looking at her with a suggestive look of desiring her.

It is, however, unfortunate that Melita is willingly volunteering herself to be exploited by Mr. Kgomo in exchange for a job. It raises questions about women's morals and supports the prevalent stereotype that women can utilise any means necessary, including their physical attributes, to achieve their desires. This is a sensitive depiction considering its implications on young girls' body image and self-worth. Melita can be defined along the parameters of a *femme fatale*, a woman who possesses many questionable traits that normal femininity would question. The *femme fatale* is portrayed in a cliché way as a "seductive, double-crossing, manipulative murderer, who uses sex and violence to get power, money and entertainment" (Özdingç, 2020: 180). Melita, however, does not kill any of the men she seduces, but leads to some kind of demise to Mr. Kgomo who even lost his job. Hence Özdingç (2020) posits that the *femme fatale* can cause only the downfall of the male without any killing, or she can bring the demise of the male lover in a metaphorical sense; she can end the life he knows/has before her. That is exactly what Melita has done, Mr. Kgomo loses his job (which he later gets back), loses his home and marriage.

6.3 Paradigm shift: Turning tables on gender roles?

Most women in *Skeem Saam* adhere to the established gender norms and behaviours, with few instances that demonstrate the atypical, as they depict a glimpse of role change for both men and women. Parenting and nurturing are commonly portrayed as interconnected themes in soap opera storylines, traditionally associated with women's domestic responsibilities. However, *Skeem Saam* introduces several changes in terms of gender roles and women's ambitions. A few of them are examined below.

6.3.1 Single parenting men

Television programmes typically portray parenting as a responsibility that is primarily assigned to women. Undoubtedly, this idea is readily understandable as women are the ones who become mothers. However, this does not mean that they are the only parents in the realm of parenting. This notion stigmatises mothers as unsuccessful if their children do not meet the expectations set by their family and society. The media consistently emphasises that women are the most proficient primary carers for children (Feasey, 2012). This hypothesis could be valid since parenting is commonly linked with qualities such as nurturing, loving, and tenderness, which are often perceived as feminine attributes. *Skeem Saam* depicts three fathers independently caring for their children. Magongwa assumed primary responsibility for parenting after Celia departed following a conflict with Mr. Kgomo. Mr. Moloisi, an uncle who assumes the responsibility of raising his nephews, Kolozi and Billy, following the unfortunate demise of their mother. In addition, there is Sergeant Babeile, who is also fulfilling the role of a single parent to her teenage daughter, Lewatle. It is noteworthy that the writers of these soap operas do not depict the challenges faced by these fathers in their role as parents. However, there is a clear absence of affection in their households. Feasey (2008) notes that single fathers in soap operas are often portrayed as heroic, compassionate, and capable, challenging traditional notions of masculinity while simultaneously reinforcing gendered double standards. These characters are typically depicted as struggling to balance their professional responsibilities with caregiving, which earns them admiration and sympathy from viewers—traits that are often taken for granted or even criticized in single mothers. Unlike female characters, who are frequently judged or burdened for their maternal shortcomings, single fathers are celebrated for their efforts, even when their parenting is flawed or inconsistent (Gill, 2007). These are indications that gender roles in the media are juxtaposed against men and women, thus creating a perception about gender roles in general.

6.3.2 A boy-child initiative

Principal Magongwa has introduced a new project for his team at Turf High, resulting in another shift in the soap opera narrative and social norms. For an extensive duration, there has been a significant emphasis on safeguarding the girl-child and

prioritising her well-being, thereby demonstrating her susceptibility. Mr. Magongwa contends that male children experience a sense of neglect, challenging the notion that boys and men possess inherent superiority and do not require the same level of care as girls and women. According to Magongwa's statement during a meeting with the teachers, boys also experience a sense of dependency and have a desire for attention. Below is his address about the initiative, extracted from episode (28) of season 11. This initiative does not go unchallenged by some who perceive it differently.

- Magongwa:** I've come up with a new initiative for 2023.
I want us to look at our vision for Turf High this year.
It's the boy child. I want all the teachers to commit to shaping the minds of our boy learners.
- Evelyn:** *(looking unimpressed).*
You must be joking.
I'm sorry, but personally...I will not succumb to stroking and brushing wounded egos of patriarchy.
Why are we not including all the children?
That's what I don't understand.
- Magongwa:** I can see you don't understand, Ms. Maswahla.
Ever since Thabo Mbeki's presidency, we've been focused on the girl child.
We started the 'Take a girl child to work' initiative.
We were focused on women leadership...
But, what about the boy child?
- Evelyn:** You're not serious.
- Magongwa:** I'm serious as the prank those kids pulled on me that left me blind.
Let me tell you why they poured that chemical on me which left me blind.
Because they feel neglected.
They've been forgotten.
If we start working hard to help the boy child, **we'll make him the pillar of our society** (my emphasis).
We'll give him confidence in this school so they can see their own potential. [In] that way, we'll build our children's futures...and thereby putting Turf High on the map.
- Sthoko:** *(looking impressed and clapping hands).*
I hear you, Meneer.
- Magongwa:** I'm glad you get it, because we have to get to the root of this problem...and help our communities, so that our kids can thrive.

The passage above shows a shift in perspective, that which openly states that boys also need the same attention that has been perceived as belonging to girls because they are a weaker gender. Nevertheless, Magongwa's statement that boys need

attention to be made *pillars of society* can be seen as a provision for continued male superiority as they are referred to as “pillars” of the society.

6.3.3 Career-focussed and businesswomen

On the current season (12) of *Skeem Saam*, Khwezi and Pretty reflect what can be defined as women power. They both have broken away from the conventional boyfriend dependent girlfriends to a life of independence, focus and goal driven. Khwezi is renowned owner of Khwezi Beauty, a cosmetic company she started herself, without a help of a man. Pretty is an aspiring attorney, serving articles under the mentorship of well-known law firms, Bopape’s and later at Kobus’s. This positive depiction of women is worth noting, however, most women is still trapped on a conventional role determined by the male-dominated society. On a similar point of view, Ahmed and Khalid (2012) reiterate that women on Indian soap operas are stereotyped, but the image of the modern women has changed. From being a meek, docile, subservient homemaker, she has grown and evolved into a strong individual.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter outlined how *Skeem Saam* portrays women from all angles, such as home, work, and their behaviours in general. This analysis reveals that women lack an authoritative voice in the workplace, and their role at home is limited to nurturing and serving. *Skeem Saam* portrays women as petty and incapable of mutual respect. It also portrays women as sexual objects, as Melita persistently seduces men with her body to achieve her desires. Collins (2011) questions the quality of roles that females play in television programmes, drawing attention to the limited depictions of female roles such as sexual gatekeepers, homemakers, prostitutes, and non-professionals who aim to perpetuate these roles. Mathobela (2021) also asserts that non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, desires, and the incapability of female roles confirm traditional feminine stereotypes that corroborate with the norms of conservative societies. Despite a few advances to challenge such conventionality, *Skeem Saam* has confirmed both assertions, thus portraying women in demeaning and low-status roles, while also introducing the possible and positive moves.

CHAPTER SEVEN: *MUVHANGO*: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

7.1 Introduction

Muvhango is a South African television soap opera that was created and produced by Duma Ndlovu. It first premiered on 7th April 1997 as a Venda-language television drama but later became multilingual to incorporate all languages and cultures of South Africa. This was intended to unite all people of South Africa (Mahlatsi, 2018). *Muvhango* resembles elements of the dynastic soap opera model, as its storyline revolves around the struggle for power between men and women in Thathe and MMC. In its narrative, men are the most powerful and influential gender in both of its location, which are Johannesburg where there is Mukwevho-Mudjalifa Construction (MMC) company, and Thathe were the epitome of the story is Mukwevho royal family under the chieftaincy of Azwindini Mukwevho. *Muvhango* explores intergenerational tensions in the rural Venda via the Thathe royal house, extended family rivalry over business in Johannesburg, as well as infusion of personal conflicts against the backdrop of local government through the office of the mayor (Afrika, 2021).

Table 6.1 *Muvhango* characters and real names

Screen character name	Real name
James Motsamai	Dingaan Khumalo
Chief Azwindini Mukhwevo	Gabriel Temudzani
Khumo Motsamai	Seneo Mabengo
Susan Mukwevho	Maumela Mahuwa
Vho-Gizara Mukwevho	David Sebe
Vho-Masindi Mukwevho	Regina Nasengani
Gugu Nkosi – Zikalala	Fanele Cebekhulu
Tendamudzimu 'Tenda' Mudau	Nat Ramabulana
Rendani Mukwevho	Inocentia MaNchidi
Vho-Makhadzi Mukwevho	Eunice Mabeta
Paballo	Bohang Moeko
Lefatse	Kagiso Latane
Mpho Mudau	Azwimbavhi Rambuda
Mulimisi	Humburani Tsharani
Vhangani	Kingsley Ramabulana
Ma-Hangwani Mukwevho	Connie Sibiya
Kgosi Mulaudzi	Tebatso Mashishi
Vutshilo Mukwevho	Wavhudi Lidzengu
Shaz	Candy Magidimisa
Zama Khakhathi Mulaudzi ('KK')	Yolanda Bhuthelezi McDonald Ndou

7.2 Status, roles, and occupations

The narrative for *Muvhango* moves between Johannesburg and Thathe; in Johannesburg, the story revolves around MMC which initially was a Mukwevho family milling company. Because of its origin, the Mukwevho family has always had a dominant role and influence in it, through its throne heirs in succession from Mashudu to Azwindini. Thathe on the other hand is a ground for struggle based on traditional perspectives of leadership and succession to the royal throne. This section approaches the text (*Muvhango*) to scrutinise the position of women in both these locations in relation to status, roles, and occupations.

7.2.1 Women's place in Thathe

Thathe is culturally driven community that prides itself with Venda customs and traditions. One of such traditions is polygamy and enthronement of male child to position of authority in royalty. As a result, from the beginning, Mashudu as the patriarch of the family had three wives, and his successor, Azwindini has had more than three, although he currently has one. Due to this practice, women are portrayed as something to be owned by men and use them for their own benefit, which in this case is to create ties with other royal houses. Marriage and bearing children (particularly a male heir) are seen as a sign of a good woman and wife. This has a history of causing a strife between the wives in the Mukwevho royal house. Women focus on fighting and undermining each other, which denies them an opportunity to fight injustice directed to them as women. In line with this argument, Maree (2019) posits that although many soap operas feature women in positions of authority such as business owners, politicians, or matriarchs, they frequently face greater scrutiny and backlash than their male counterparts. Their decisions are often portrayed as emotionally driven, manipulative, or self-serving, and their power is regularly challenged by male characters or undermined through scandal, betrayal, or personal downfall.

There are many women who are central to *Muvhango's* plot in Thathe, however, the analysis will focus on the longstanding ones, to use a yardstick to determine women's representation. Masindi is Azwindini's mother, she is the only surviving wife of Mashudu. As the Vhakoma (Venda term for a chief's mother), Masindi has a significant

role to play in Thathe matters, however, this is dependent on Azwindini. Together with Makhadzi (Venda term for paternal aunt to the chief), Vhakoma can exercise a certain degree of authority, which is, however, limited. They also find themselves in a position to submit and bow to the chief, like the rest of the community. In Thathe women are subjected to male authority on every sphere, as their influence remain in the domestic arena as mothers and homemakers. It is argued that in Venda tradition and customs, women are subjected to male leadership through patriarchal social structures that prioritize male authority in both the family and community. Leadership roles such as chiefs (Khosi), headmen (tshigogo), and decision-makers in traditional councils are held by men, with women expected to support and uphold these roles rather than occupy them (Mufamadi, 2019).

Suzan on the other hand is Chief Azwindini's first wife, whom the royal family has always treated like a servant because she does not come from a royal family. Susan was a nurse by profession, though now a mayor of Thathe. Her representation has always been around his role as a mother and wife in the royal house, hardly on her as a nurse. This puts an emphasis on a perspective that women's value in the society (and media) is tied on their domestic abilities. The other aspect that women in Thathe (Chief's wives) have been depicted on is their commitment to please their husband and secure his love and attention. This undermines women's completeness as mature beings, thus lowering their value and status. Susan's place in the royal house has always been to cook and manage all domestic matters. However, Susan has broken the chains of male domination and submission, divorced Azwindini and took on the position of mayor of Thathe. More on this development will be discussed under change in basic assumptions regarding women's roles in the soap opera.

7.2.2 Women's occupational status in MMC

From the days of Thandaza, who was the first female Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of MMC (while it was still Mukwevho Milling), women's power and authority has always been challenged in *Muvhango's* storyline. Despite having to work with board members who were mostly men, Thandaza's role as the CEO was always trammelled by women's personal issues such as family, marriage, and children. After Thandaza, the leadership of MMC has been on the hands of men, Khakhathi Mulaudzi (KK), Tenda Mudau and James Motsamai. During the men's tenure at MMC, women occupy

secondary positions such as a Chief Operations Officer (COO) instead of CEO. This is apart from Rendani, who briefly becomes the CEO before her exit from soap opera in season 24 (she came back in season 25). This textual analysis and reference to Muvhango anywhere in the study will cite episodes from season 22 to 24 which were broadcast from March 2020 to July 2024. The table below shows that women are confined to less influential and less authoritative occupations compared to men.

Table 6.2 Women's roles and occupations on Muvhango (MMC)

Role and occupations of women	No of women characters	Character names
COO	1	Gugu/Khumo
Architect	1	Imani
Receptionist	2	Bubbles, Itseng
PA	1	Marang
Waitresses	1	Sharon

Table 6.3 Men's roles and occupations on Muvhango

Men- roles and occupations	No. of characters	Character names
CEO	1	James Motsamai
MMC Board Chairman	1	Tenda/
Admin Assistant	1	Vutshilo
IT specialist	1	Kgosi

Gunter (1986) argued that women are denigrated as people who are too emotional to handle anything constructive on their own, without the intervention and support of men. The emotional woman is perceived as flustered in the most minor crisis. She is seen as sensitive, often fearful, and anxious, and dependent on male help and support in all kinds of personal and professional situation.

Women's competence in the workplace is not taken into consideration in *Muvhango*. An example for this is Imani who is an architect by profession, but she is hardly portrayed in work related setup. This role is blurred by her consistent appearance alongside James, as his wife. Most of her battles and appearances are more about her marriage

and family, much less about her as a professional. Maree (2019) agrees with this view, arguing that in some cases, women's workplace achievements are overshadowed by narratives that place their worth in relation to men, either as romantic partners or as mothers, thus reinforcing traditional gender expectations even within progressive roles. At times, this role for women is even spelt out so explicitly during interactions, conversations, and fallouts, below is one such example (taken from season 23).

James and Imani had a fallout about Khumo coming to stay with them without her (Imani's) approval, as a result, Imani threatened Khumo with a knife.

James: You know what, this is not on.
Imani: What are you talking about?
James: Babe...A knife? In front of a guest?
Imani: Guest? You call her a guest? Why don't you call her an intruder?
James: Geez. No, Imani.
Imani: Don't say no to me. You ambushed me. In my own home.
Who does that?
I remember your uncle saying he wants Khumo to stay with us.
And I remember saying very clearly that I don't want her (*with a stern and commanding voice*).
In my house.
James: I know but...
Imani: You were supposed to find out what business she wanted to discuss with you.
James: I spoke to her.
Imani: I don't remember you coming back to me...
To tell me you've decided to ask her to move in with us (*with anger and shouting*).
Because even if you'd come back to me, I'd have still said NO.
James: Hey! (*shouting at Imani angrily*).
Hey, woman!
You are a wife in the Motsamai home. Understood? (My emphasis).
It's not your place to dictate who can live in my place or who cannot!
Imani: watch your tongue, James.
I still cook for you.
James: Yes. You do.
Because **it's expected of you** (my emphasis).
As my wife.
It's for you as my wife to help me build the Motsamai family, not to tear it down!
You need to decide if you want to be my wife or not. If so, you can go.

Imani is informed in this interaction that her role as a woman and wife includes supporting her husband in establishing their family. She is not regarded as a fully mature and capable individual who can think critically and make valuable contributions beyond the roles of a wife and a helper. Afrika (2021) contends that in *Muvhango*, women who are considered 'independent' face a barrier that limits their advancement, and the prospect of a genuinely influential woman is highly unlikely. This agrees with Ahmed's contention (2012), that femininity in soap operas is often linked to characteristics such as emotional sensitivity, caution, cooperation, a feeling of community, and conformity. James is actively advocating for compliance from Imani, regardless of her level of satisfaction.

Continuing the pattern of portraying women primarily in domestic roles rather than in professional settings, Zama is a skilled fashion designer. However, the emphasis placed on her role in *Muvhango* is primarily centred on her being Vutshilo's girlfriend. The drama that occurs in her life revolves around her romantic relationship, but her talents and professional abilities are not displayed. The domestication of women may imply that women's participation in the corporate sector is undervalued and receives no attention. For instance, Susan holds the position of mayor in Thathe. However, she is rarely associated with this post, as her identity is primarily defined by her roles as a mother, ex-wife, and cousin. These factors are significant, but they detract from her prominence in a more highly regarded position, such as that of a mayor. Ahmed (2012) contended that there has been a shift in women's interests depicted in soap operas. A considerable number of women transition from a family-oriented environment to actively participate in the professional sphere. While it is true that *Muvhango* portrays women with professional expertise, this representation is undermined by the fact that men hold ultimate control and decision-making power in all matters. This depiction undermines the talents of women, which can jeopardise their self-worth and dignity. Rashid and Kianai (2012) propose that presenting a favourable picture of women in the media could increase public awareness of female issues and concerns.

While Gugu has the role of Chief Operations Officer at MMC, it is important to note that the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) and Board Chairperson are the ones responsible for making decisions. Gugu's C-suite position does not grant her any significant power or responsibility. Zaheen, Safdar, and Bhatti (2022) found that female viewers of soap

operas felt that the subordinate behaviour of women was the primary cause of female suffering in society. Duerst-Lahti (2002) argues that the media played a substantial influence in promoting patriarchal ideals in society, which in turn led to the exploitation of women. Even after two decades from Duerst-Lahti's assertion, several forms of media still exhibit remnants of patriarchal mentality.

7.3 Themes and behavioural patterns of women on *Muvhango*

7.3.1 Subjection to culture and male domination

Most women in *Muvhango* exhibit a greater inclination towards submissiveness and compliance to male dominance and are heavily influenced by cultural norms. Given the studies on roles and occupations, it is unsurprising to observe that men tend to hold more authority than women in both business and cultural settings. For example, the chief may be presented with a woman to marry, and the woman is obligated to accept without any input. This is an illustration of individuals adhering to cultural norms without respect for their emotions and intentions. Nendauni (2016) asserts that *Muvhango* constructs alternate identities that are influenced by societal norms, particularly within the Thathe community. This soap opera displays and celebrates the cultural identities of the Venda-speaking community, portraying its unique customs and traditions. Nevertheless, the promotion of cultural identity may perpetuate enduring stereotypes and discrimination experienced by certain groups within society. The cultural identities of South Africa are based on patriarchal underpinnings, as is shown in the television show *Muvhango*. Here are a few instances:

- a) The chief is traditionally expected to be male. If this is not the case, it raises doubts. Only Azwindini, as a male child, is eligible to become a chief, not any of his sisters.
- b) The male child is given more responsibility for preserving the family's heritage than the female child (Vutshilo is encouraged to be part of MMC).
- c) Women are perceived to have a lower social status in comparison to males (as seen in the example of Susan, when a male candidate was favoured for the position of mayor).

Muvhango adheres to the cultural norms and traditional leadership structures of Thathe, proving research findings that highlight the influence of culture on the soap opera genre. These studies suggest that:

culture still plays an important role as it mediates on the influence of the genre on its viewers. This is seen in the contrasting views of some female participants who, despite the genre's exposure and the inequality associated with traditional practices; they still view traditional roles in marriage practices as a duty and part of culture (Muindi, 2019:87).

Muindi (2019) also cautions that it is important to remember that culture is a vehicle through which traditional gender structures are reinforced, often resulting in gender inequality. Another Venda cultural aspect that sets men and women apart is how respect is shown for persons in authority, who are mostly men. Women must lie down on the floor, while men can stand. Practices such as the one below is normal in *Muvhango*, particularly in the Thathe setting.



Figure 6-1 Women showing reverence to men

Source: Muvhango Season 24, episode 259

Male hegemony is not limited to Thathe alone. At MMC, there are numerous instances where concerns related to the CEO position arise. There is a prevailing belief that a competent CEO is typically male, which frequently manifests in men opposing and

belittling women who hold such esteemed positions. Throughout its 30-year history, *Muvhango* has had only two female CEOs: Thandaza, who held the job for a significant period, and Rendani, whose tenure was very short-lived.

The dynamics of domination and coerced submission are clearly apparent in the Motsamai home, as James exercises control over his wives, Imani and Gugu, in succession. The excerpt from episode 212 (season 23) on page 133 above exemplifies the viewpoint that James embodies a robust and traditional masculine dominance over women. Here is another excerpt from episode 256 (season 24), depicting a confrontation between him and Gugu. Their altercation stemmed from a lack of acknowledgment in decision-making. Gugu had anticipated James to check with her when he makes decisions, however James' response pushes Gugu in the same unfavourable position as he had done to Imani.

James: My love, what's wrong?
Gugu: You can't even see there's a problem. Seriously?
Or my feelings don't matter in this house.
James: Goodness! Gugu, if there is a problem, why don't you talk to me, and stop beating by the bush?
Gugu: James, why did you invite Lefatshe to live with us before talking to me about it? I have to be part of the decision making in this family.
James: Gugu, this is my house. Don't I have a say in whether or not my son is with me?
Gugu: Oh, so that's why you do whatever you want in this house. My mistake, my bad. I thought it was ours.
James: No, no, no. This is my house.
Gugu: Okay. Did you treat Imani like this? Or was she the good wife who was treated well?
James: What is your issue? You don't want Lefatshe to live with us?
Gugu: No, my issue is that you didn't consult me. You don't talk to me first regarding things that happen in this family.

Based on the preceding exchange, three distinct observations may be made about James. The first point is that he is the rightful owner of the house. Secondly, he holds the authority to make decisions, lastly, he is not compelled to seek Gugu's input or approval for his actions. The decision he has made is absolute and should not be subjected to scrutiny. *Muvhango* effectively portrays a traditional male-headed family and interpersonal dynamics rooted in patriarchal ideology. This might be interpreted as an endorsement of this belief system. To concur with this, *Muvhango* repeatedly

depicts women on a domesticated light. The image of Gugu below supports this interpretation.

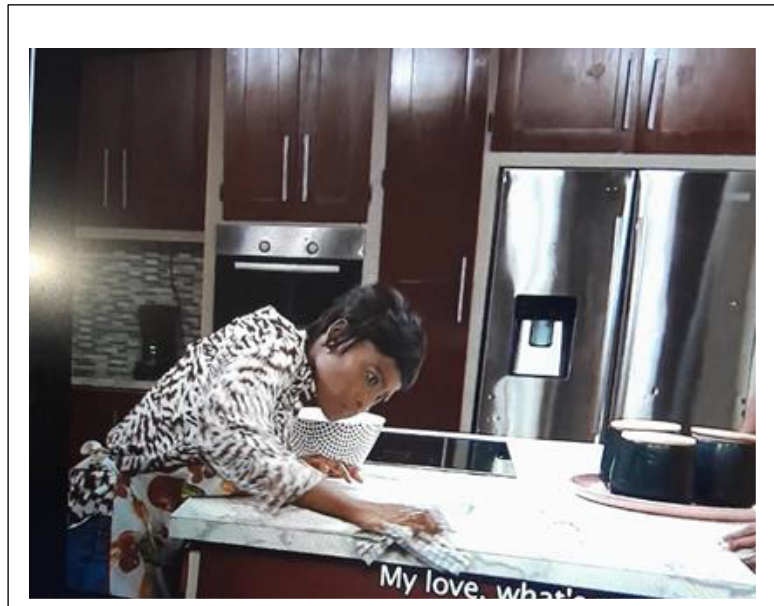


Figure 6-2 Domestication of women in Muvhango

7.3.2 Marriage and motherhood

The soap operas being reviewed excessively idealise the concepts of marriage and motherhood. However, *Muvhango* specifically emphasises the worth of women depending on their capacity to get married and be wonderful mothers. The primary focus of liberal feminism is the contention that the presumed inherent function of women as mothers and wives is responsible for the unequal status of women in society (Motsaathebe, 2009). Second-wave feminists posit that one of the main reasons why women are oppressed is because they are often excluded from the same chances as men due to their primary responsibility of raising children (Feasey, 2012). Masindi's role has transitioned from being Mashudu's spouse at the inception of the soap opera, to assuming the role of Azwindini's mother in subsequent and ongoing seasons. During *Muvhango's* tenure, Masindi has never been involved in the operational and decision-making aspects of MMC. Despite MMC being a family business, she has never had the opportunity to be in the boardroom. Despite the emergence of succession conflicts within both the MMC and Thathe royalty, Masindi consistently takes a position of maintaining her family lineage and advocating for her son and grandson, Vutshilo. Put simply, her role is excluded from the industrial and business

domains and confined to exerting influence within the domestic sphere. Her status and respect in the village of Thathe is also attributed to her role as *Vhakoma*.

Susan's character is depicted in similar fashion; her worth is determined by her role as a mother. Vutshilo is being prepared to succeed Azwindini as the future chief of Thathe. Consequently, Susan's duty is to nurture him to the best of her capabilities, ensuring that he is well-suited for this role. It is noteworthy that neither Susan nor any of Azwindini's spouses had given birth to a daughter, indicating an inclination towards male dominance and importance in *Muvhango*. Hangwani's worth and purpose also primarily centres on her role as a mother and her status in marriage. Her daughter, Rendani, is the sister of Azwindini, and she is expected to assume the role of Makhadzi to the chief because of their familial connection (their fathers were brothers). Rendani's father, Albert, fulfilled the important function of *khotsimunene* to the chief, which holds significant value in the Bakwehvo royal family. *Khotsimunene*, which can be loosely translated as "uncle," refers to the senior brother of the family head or chief's father (Matshidze, 2013). He fulfils an advisory duty like that of Makhadzi. Albert's influence extended to both the Thathe royalty and MMC, resulting in Hangwani and Rendani's heightened statuses because of their association with him. Feasey (2012) examines the portrayal of motherhood in soap operas from a neutral perspective. This overlooks the price that women incur when they are constrained by the responsibilities of parenthood in a modernised culture. This study does not regard motherhood as a negative commitment. However, it does express worries about the exclusion of women from corporate positions and leadership roles due to their need to prioritise their responsibilities as mothers. This study also highlights problems regarding the valuation of women based on their reproductive capacity and nurturing abilities. Such perception believes that motherhood is inherently synonymous to womanhood.

7.4 Paradigm shift in *Muvhango*: Smashing the glass ceiling?

It is interesting contemplating the degree to which South African soap operas have adapted to mirror the shifting societal dynamics. Examining matters of women's empowerment in both society and the media is vital. Soap operas are a source of worry due to their classification as a genre primarily targeted towards women. The origin of soap operas may be traced back to their purpose of providing entertainment

to housewives during the daytime, with the content, information, and advertisements specifically catering to their domestic roles. Gledhill (2003) contends that the genre involves a variety of characters, with a particular focus on female roles such as moms, housewives, elderly women, divorcees, and widows, who deal with a wide range of social challenges. Although housewife characters are no longer present in contemporary soap operas, this does not indicate a complete transformation in the portrayal of women, or the associations made about them. Typically, most women in *Muvhango* are employed, except for those residing in the Mukwevho royal house. This proposes a fresh perspective to analyse the dynamics of power and gender in a soap opera. Therefore, the concept of a 'glass ceiling' is introduced. It is important to analyse and challenge the depiction of women and the associated roles in *Muvhango*, particularly in relation to conventional and patriarchal ideologies that are prevalent in both professional and domestic settings.

This section implies that there are minimal but significant alterations that producers do when it comes to depicting women compared to men. Given that *Muvhango* prominently features both corporate settings and traditional leadership, it is appropriate to introduce the concept of the 'glass ceiling'. The concept of the glass ceiling, as defined by Purcell, MacArthur, and Samblanet (2010), as the phenomenon where numerous women are unable to progress beyond a specific level in their careers and professions. The glass ceiling effect has been examined in the field of human resources, but certain studies have also associated it with the media sector (Ramoenyane, 2016; Gender Links, 2018; Rao and Gumede, 2020; Rabe, 2006). However, there has been a scarcity of study undertaken on the potential existence of a 'glass ceiling' phenomenon specifically related to women's occupational positions from media representation context. The poor representation of career women in films may have repercussions for the maintenance of the glass ceiling (Ezzedeen, 2015). The objective of this discussion is to determine whether and how the depiction of women's roles and occupations in *Muvhango* pushes the barriers that impede on women's advancement in society.

7.4.1 Women challenging men's position of power

During the focus group discussions, some participants pointed out that soap operas, which have historically depicted women as feeble and reliant, are undergoing a subtle transformation that presents women as courageous, daring, and self-reliant. An example of such women is Susan, who has ascended to the mayoral position while facing resistance from the male-dominated royal family and the former mayor, Tenda Mudau. Observing her ascend to this position following her separation from her husband provides a much-needed sense of comfort and redemption for the subordinate status of women, as depicted in various media texts and throughout history. Pearson, West, and Turner (2005) propose that media representations are undergoing a transformation to accurately portray women in their multifaceted and developing societal roles. Nevertheless, this transition is frequently undermined by other stereotypical portrayals in some manner. Wood (2011) notes that traditional gender stereotypes persist beneath the surface of the new image of women and men. This claim is seen in *Muvhango*, where males exhibit an ardent desire for the power possessed by Susan. They go to the extent of forcefully seizing her to manipulate her according to their own wishes.

Susan's role as mayor in the community of Thathe challenges male dominance, however it was also supported by individuals such as Rendani. Despite objections from her family, Rendani willingly quit her work at MMC to become Susan's trusted assistant. The rise of women to positions of authority, particularly in the role of Mayor, has been seen in South Africa. Morapela (2018) mentions that South Africa's gender equality data show that 107 out of the 257 mayors in South Africa are female. Limpopo boasts the greatest proportion of female mayors, standing at an impressive 59%. The Eastern Cape closely follows with 51%, while the North West comes in third.

7.4.2 Challenging patriarchal bonds

Media is frequently perceived as a tool for indoctrinating persons into different ideologies. Althusser, a renowned German academic and philosopher, introduced the notion of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as mechanisms that facilitate the socialisation of individuals into cultural, political, economic, and other lifestyles, without

the use of force. Althusser (2001) argues that social institutions, such as the media, impart practical skills in a manner that guarantees submission to the dominant ideology. The reproduction of skills is not the only outcome, but also the reproduction of social roles that exist within the dominant ideology, as stated by Wright and Roberts (2013). The relationship between Vutshilo and Zama in certain episodes of *Muvhango* has introduced scenes that can be perceived as a direct challenge to the prevailing patriarchal cultural paradigm. There is a conflict between the modern lifestyle and traditional perspective of the two lovers. Although brief, this plot successfully advocated for a revised stance on gender roles and duties, specifically within partnerships, with a focus on empowering women.

The Zama-Vutshilo relationship began normally, like any conventional and ordinary partnership. Nevertheless, it undergoes a significant transformation when the couple has a disagreement regarding their individual responsibilities in the partnership. The dispute begins when Vutshilo proposes to Zama, who does not react to the gesture as anticipated. However, she is surprised and unprepared for Vutshilo's actions, as she believes she should have a voice in the decision-making process. She refuses to surrender her power to a man in shaping their destiny and future. Another type of ideological conflict emerges when the couple argues about who is accountable for buying a property. Zama, as a modern liberated woman, feels that she is not obliged to depend on Vutshilo. As a result, she feels insecure when Vutshilo autonomously decides to buy a property. Nevertheless, Vutshilo maintains that it is incumbent upon a man to assume the financial burden of supporting his wife or partner, which includes the provision of housing. The following conversation shows Zama's objection to that assumption:

Zama comes back from her home to their house full of half-dressed ladies, clothes all over the place, and Vutshilo and Kgosi sleeping in couches, surrounded by ladies.

Taken from Episode 250 of season 23.

Zama: Vutshilo I leave for a few hours ...

And this is what I come back to?

Vutshilo: Zama...all we did was braai some meat and eat some snacks.

Nothing happened

Zama: Vutshilo!! What do you mean nothing happened? Huh?

Vutshilo, you had a party in my house?
Vutshilo: In your house? You are mad. Is this why you wanted to buy it yourself? Unfortunately, I bought the house! Yeah
Zama: What are you talking about?
Vutshilo: I was afraid this would happen. My house this, my house that. Unfortunately, I bought the house. This is my house, *and I'm the man here* (my emphasis). You won't do anything.
Zama: It's fine, man of the house. Whatever... (*she then pushes him with a finger on the forehead*).

Zama and Vutshilo's relationship demonstrates numerous occurrences that allude to the challenges faced by women and their yearning for freedom and equality, as depicted in soap operas. Another scenario arises when the couple has divergent priorities over whether to prioritise getting married or designing their property to meet their needs. Episode 252 of season 23 shows this discord:

Zama: (*excited after a chat with an interior designer*). Baby, I just pulled a miracle. Got the interior designer to agree to meet us tomorrow.
Vutshilo: I thought she was supposed to have a long queue...
Zama: Well, she does, but who can say no to me. Your shirt's a bit wrinkly.
Vutshilo: Whose fault is that?
Zama: Sorry. But it doesn't even make a dent. You are far too much of a prince.
Vutshilo: About that project.... Any chance we could wait until after the wedding to take on this project?
Zama: My love, why? The place is ours. Time to put our stamp on it. Plus, we haven't even set the wedding date yet.
Vutshilo: I know what.
Zama: I want to take my time planning a proper wedding. It's my first and last wedding, so it has to be epic.
Vutshilo: I just thought we could take things one step at a time. Plan things nicely and properly.
Zama: But babe we are. First the décor, then the wedding.
Vutshilo: I want to focus on the wedding first. If we blow our money on the décor, we won't have money for the wedding.
Zama: **I'll pay from my own pocket** (my emphasis).
Vutshilo: *sighs and scratches his head...in disapproval to what Zama is saying*
Zama: Ok, I guess that's not an option. Do I have a say in this matter?
Vutshilo: Of course you do. Thanks for understanding. I love you.
He stands up, kisses her on the cheek, and walks away, leaving an unhappy Zama looking at him.

The excerpt above first provides an opportunity for women to express themselves and exert control over their lives. However, this opportunity is abruptly taken away when

Vutshilo disregards Zama's feelings, implying that men dominate and marginalise women, leaving them with little agency.

7.4.3 Women in business

Muvhango features two assertive women, Sharon and Hangwani, who hold positions of power in their businesses. Hangwani, a widow of the Mukwevho tribe, transitioned from being submissive to her husband, Albert Mukwevho, to becoming an autonomous individual who makes independent business decisions. On a similar note, Sharon is a young lady who transitioned from being a covert member of royalty to serving as Hangwani's assistant at Dukathole. Sharon eventually becomes the proprietor of Waterside Restaurant in Thathe. Unlike at the Mukwevho Royal house, where they are required to adhere to cultural norms and traditions and bow to male authority, there is no such male authority in their business spaces.

Commonly, women are frequently portrayed as gold-diggers and after material gain in most situations. Under conventional soap opera narrative, it would have been normal to associate Hangwani and Sharon with some favours offered to men for them to get what they have. The absence of such reliance offers a paradigm change, as they have acquired their business ventures independently, without men for support or decision-making. Onyenankeya (2018) posits that the persistent negative depiction of gender, ethnicity, or culture in films and television can lead to injustices by causing individuals to accept these fictitious portrayals as reality.

Sharon successfully raised funds to purchase the restaurant without any male assistance. For a woman to achieve success independently, just as men do, is a cause for celebration as it shows women's capability to break down barriers that limit women's advancement. This kind of depiction restores women's dignity and worth. Sharon's situation can be compared to Melita's in *Skeem Saam*, when Melita utilised her sexuality to get a job at Turf hospital, thus fitting into the stereotype of a woman who offers herself to men to advance. Sharon is also without a lover, which challenges the common depiction of women primarily as companions to men. During the focus group discussions, one participant expressed apprehension with the portrayal of women in soap operas, particularly how they are shown as primarily existing for the

purpose of relationships or males. Sharon's depiction challenges the traditional portrayal of women, which is described by Tuchman (2000) as the symbolic annihilation of women. Symbolic annihilation implies that women are reliant on male supervision and incapable of leading their own lives (Tuchman, 2000).

7.5 Conclusion

Muvhango demonstrates strict limitations regarding the duties, professions, and social standing of women in both urban and rural environments. The contrast between the workplace and conventional traditional structures highlights how soap operas provide a platform for many forms of stereotypes to be portrayed and supported rather than questioned. The workplace preference for male leadership over female leadership highlights society's failure to recognise and value the skills of women. Culture plays a prominent role in *Muvhango*, especially in Thathe, where Venda cultural norms subjugate women. While some women willingly conform to these cultural expectations, some challenge them. Both scenarios could potentially instil a mindset of acquiescence and defiance in young girls.

The researchers acknowledges that in *Muvhango*, women are represented in the workplace, but the focus of their representation is primarily on their domestic roles, such as being a wife, mother, or girlfriend, rather than their professional ability. In a study conducted by Mahlatsi (2018) on the impact of local television soap operas on romantic relationships, a participant mentioned a concerning issue:

I feel like media and culture channelled us into thinking [that] men are more intelligent, that's why when we get to college most women major with things like humanities while men choose to be scientists. If they could be careful of their portrayals, women would also be aware of their potentials (Mahlatsi 2018:80).

However, there is a glimmer of hope to challenge traditional stereotypes in favour of women, as demonstrated on shifts of perspectives and behavioural patterns of women. Nevertheless, this endeavour is not without difficulties. It is contended that despite the portrayal of successful women on soap operas to inspire female viewers, the depiction of these women as vulnerable and emotional continues to persist (Mahlatsi, 2018).

CHAPTER EIGHT: DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

8.1 Introduction

The previous three chapters examined the soap operas being studied through textual analysis. Each chapter examined the roles and behavioural patterns of women in comparison to men. This method proved difficult since soap opera narratives have several stories that can abruptly alter with the arrival of a new character, so adding a new aspect to the topics being analysed. *Uzalo*, for instance, introduced a new dynamic by having Njinji assume control of Nkunzi's territory and company, offering a fresh perspective on the portrayal of women. This is how a paradigm shift has been recognised and examined in earlier chapters.

This chapter aims to give an examination of the problem under study from research participants' point of view. It aims at analysing and discussing the views and perceptions received from focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires. This chapter is divided into two parts for the purpose of organisation. The initial phase of the study employs a quantitative methodology by displaying numerical data in tables and charts to depict the viewpoints of participants on the enquiries posed in the self-administered online survey. The second section of the chapter utilises a qualitative analysis to examine the inductive themes that arose from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, as well as from the conversations during interviews and focus group discussions. The subsequent section is specifically dedicated to presenting the findings and interpreting the obtained data, focusing on the core elements of the study, namely:

- a) Perceived roles, status, and behavioural traits of women in soap operas as displayed by characters,
- b) The perceived effects of these perceived representations

Data collected does not focus on each of these soap operas individually but accumulates the viewership experience and perceptions about soap opera as a genre in its entirety.

8.2 Summary of soap opera viewership patterns

Study participants' profile

Among the 60 participants to the questionnaire, 43 were female and 17 were male. This has significance due to the prevailing belief that soap operas have a greater appeal to women than men. Furthermore, the sample was extracted from a community with a higher proportion of females than males. Regarding age, most participants (33) belong to the 18-25 category, followed by 15 participants in the 26-35 category, and the smallest proportion (12) falls into the over 35 categories. The frequency of viewership data reveals that a small number of participants (6) are consistent and devoted viewers, whereas 24 participants reported watching soap operas most of the time, and 30 people watch them on an irregular basis. Consequently, the data indicates that exactly half of the participants are loyal viewers of soap operas, while the remaining half are not. These statistics indicate that soap operas may not enjoy the same level of popularity with smaller demographics as they are commonly believed to be. The following table provides a concise summary of the figures.

Table 7.1 Profile of Questionnaire respondents

Variable	(No. and %)		
Gender	Male 17 (28%) Female 43 (72%)		
Age	18-35 33 (55%)	26-35 15 (25%)	Above 35 12 (20%)
Frequency	Always 6 (10%)	Most of the time 24 (40%)	Once in a while 30 (50%)

Soap opera popularity

The participants selected four SABC soap operas as the top programmes, surpassing those from other channels. Among the three soap operas being studied, *Uzalo* is the most watched, followed by *Skeem Saam*, while *Muvhango* is the least watched. The diagram below illustrates this assertion.

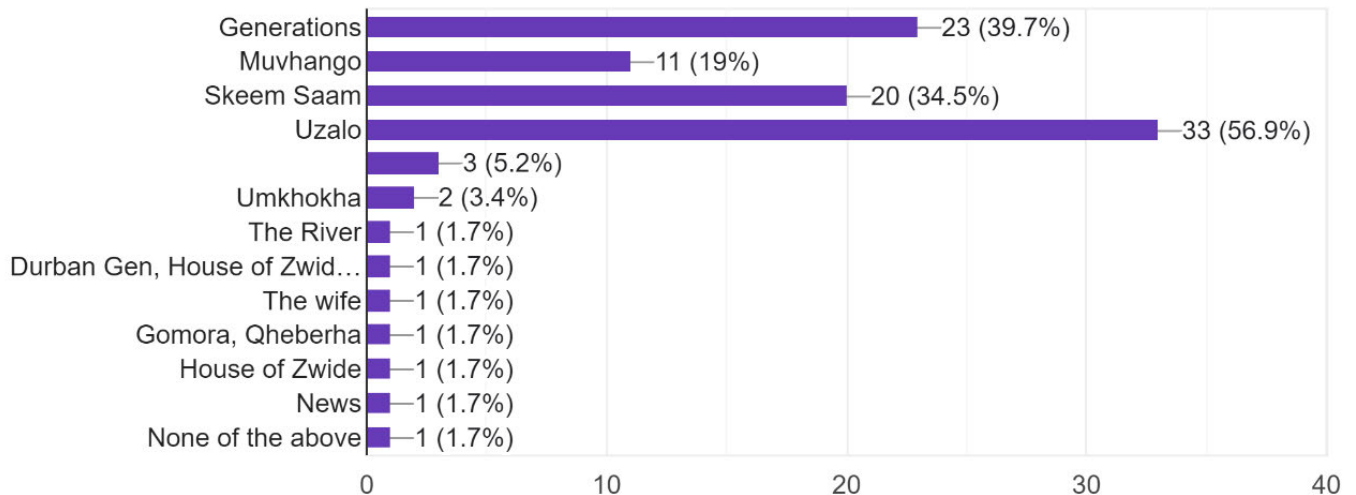


Figure 7-1 Participants' soap opera choices

Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli (2019) assert that the soap opera genre exerts a dominant influence over television entertainment in both South Africa and worldwide. The appeal of these soap operas stems from their cultural affinity and the audience's ability to easily relate to the people, settings, and scenarios depicted (Gibson, Dyll, and Teer-Tomaselli, 2019). Multiple interviewees highlighted the significance of the relatability of storylines and themes explored in soap opera narratives, indicating the crucial role of the relevancy of soap opera material to its audience. Furthermore, it is argued that soap operas are perceived as a form of escapism and are not considered to have significant societal benefits due to their strong entertainment appeal (Afrika, 2021). However, there have been opposing viewpoints suggesting that the soap opera genre, as a manifestation of popular culture, serves as a significant asset in the expression of cultural citizenship (Afrika, 2021). This implies that soap operas hold significant value for individuals who actively select and derive pleasure from them, as they contribute to their social fabric and significance. The following numbers depict the level of popularity of the soap operas under study in South Africa.

Table 7.2 SABC1 Top programmes and ratings



**Top 20 Programmes All Adults 15+
July 2023 Prime Time 17h30 - 22h00**

Adults 15+ years U:38694 S:8397

Day	Date	From	To	Station	ProgrammeTitle	Genre	AR	Viewers	Share
Tue	04/07/2023	2031	2059	S1	Uzalo	Dram	13,93	5 388 373	56,5
Mon	03/07/2023	1829	1900	S1	Skeem Saam	Dram	12,94	5 007 032	47,4
Wed	19/07/2023	2000	2030	S1	Generations the Legacy	Soap	10,78	4 169 443	44,8
Mon	03/07/2023	1900	1930	S1	Zulu News	News	6,49	2 511 006	24
Tue	18/07/2023	1900	1930	S1	Xhosa News	News	6,36	2 461 314	23
Tue	04/07/2023	930	1000	S1	Skeem Saam -R	Dram	6,25	2 416 295	39,9
Mon	03/07/2023	1800	1829	S1	The Big Secret	Vari	5,82	2 250 863	26,2
Tue	04/07/2023	900	929	S1	Uzalo -R	Dram	5,68	2 197 352	41,4
Sun	09/07/2023	1400	1427	S1	Uzalo Omnibus	Dram	5,67	2 193 697	30,2
Tue	18/07/2023	1759	1829	S1	Roxic	Real	5,59	2 162 158	24,1
Wed	26/07/2023	1931	2000	S1	Deal or No Deal	Real	4,83	1 870 245	20
Wed	05/07/2023	1801	1830	S1	Plate it up	Maga	4,81	1 859 955	22,7
Thur	06/07/2023	1800	1831	S1	Instapreneurs	Real	4,7	1 816 697	22,9
Fri	07/07/2023	1800	1829	S1	Issa Vibe	Musi	4,54	1 758 284	22
Tue	04/07/2023	1000	1028	S1	Velaphi -R	Sitc	4,36	1 685 152	27
Thur	06/07/2023	1730	1800	S1	Siswati/Ndebele News	News	4,34	1 680 252	21,4
Wed	19/07/2023	830	859	S1	The Estate-R	Dram	3,77	1 458 378	34,8
Sat	01/07/2023	1929	1959	S1	Ikas'lami	Real	3,62	1 401 370	16,6
Sun	02/07/2023	1130	1159	S1	Skeem Saam -O	Dram	3,4	1 317 140	23,5
Wed	19/07/2023	1300	1330	S1	Lunch Time News	News	3,38	1 308 976	20,8

Source: July 2023 Top TV programmes - Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (brcsa.org.za)

The figures above suggest soap opera popularity on SABC 1 as *Uzalo* and *Skeem Saam* take a lead, each with above 5 million viewers compared to other programmes on the same channel.

Table 7.3 SABC 2 Top programmes and ratings



**Top 20 Programmes All Adults 15+
July 2023 Prime Time 17h30 - 22h00**

Adults 15+ years U:38694 S:8397

Day	Date	From	To	Station	ProgrammeTitle	Genre	AR	Viewers	Share
Thur	06/07/2023	2100	2130	S2	Muvhango	Dram	3,83	1 481 264	17,8
Tue	04/07/2023	1800	1829	S2	7De Laan	Soap	3,33	1 289 711	14,5
Tue	18/07/2023	2132	2201	S2	Giyani	Dram	2,01	776 944	12,8
Thur	06/07/2023	1830	1900	S2	Nuus	News	1,75	678 786	7
Fri	07/07/2023	2129	2201	S2	Matlholadibona	Dram	1,66	642 871	10,2
Fri	21/07/2023	2128	2200	S2	Matlholadibona	Dram	1,58	609 476	10,9
Tue	18/07/2023	2000	2030	S2	Ses/Tsw/Sep News	News	1,56	603 180	6,1
Sat	08/07/2023	1031	1101	S2	Muvhango -O	Dram	1,49	576 857	10,6
Thur	06/07/2023	1030	1059	S2	Giyani-R	Dram	1,45	562 026	9,9
Wed	19/07/2023	600	858	S2	Morning Live	News	1,35	523 987	17,5
Tue	04/07/2023	1730	1758	S2	Venda/Tsonga News	News	1,34	518 296	6,9
Thur	06/07/2023	1000	1029	S2	Muvhango -R	Dram	1,33	515 503	8,7
Sun	16/07/2023	1530	1555	S2	7De Laan -O	Soap	1,21	468 743	7
Sat	08/07/2023	1829	2026	S2	Joyful Noise.	Musi	1,2	465 342	6
Fri	07/07/2023	2201	2231	S2	Ngwanaka O Tla Ngopola	Dram	1,2	463 389	9,9
Sat	22/07/2023	956	959	S2	Music	Musi	1,18	455 284	9,7
Wed	05/07/2023	1900	1959	S2	Noot Vir Noot	Musi	1,18	454 901	4,7
Mon	10/07/2023	1029	1101	S2	Matlholadibona - R	Dram	1,1	426 616	6,8
Fri	28/07/2023	1756	1941	S2	Netball World Cup 2023:South Africa vs W	Spor	1,07	414 031	5
Sat	08/07/2023	1157	1224	S2	Giyani-O	Dram	1,07	413 828	6,8

Source: [July 2023 Top TV programmes - Broadcast Research Council of South Africa \(brcsa.org.za\)](https://www.brcsa.org.za)

For SABC 2, it is evident that *Muvhango* is on the lead, despite having small number of viewers compared to *Uzalo* and *Skeem Saam*.

Participants also found soap operas more entertaining than being informative and educational, as indicated on the figure below. It is, however, worth noting that there is a portion of viewers who find them more than entertaining; in this case, it is important to explore what is informative or educational on soap operas and how does it happen. This attests to Fombang's view that soap operas are entertaining, informative, and used as an escape from everyday problems. Since it deals with realistic themes, many viewers see it as a way of exploring reality (Fombang, 2023).

How would you define the soap opera/s that you watch?

60 responses

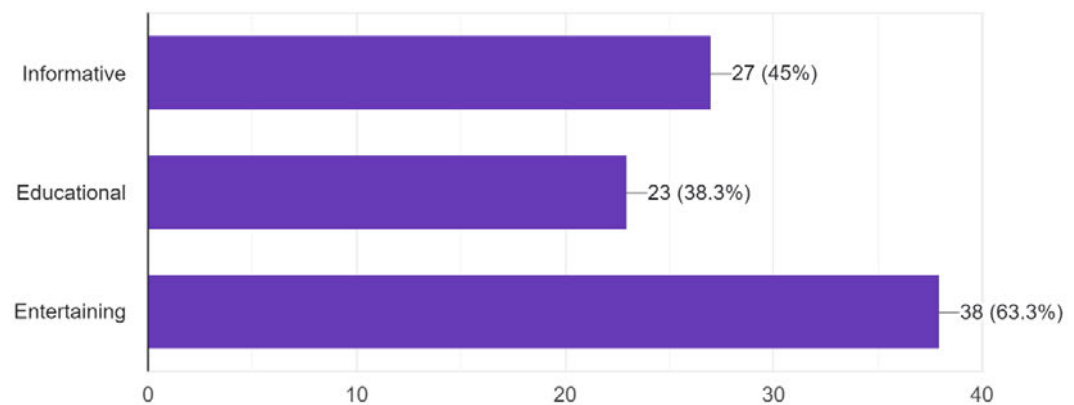


Figure 7-2 Perceived role of soap operas

The participants chose more than one attribute on the given list of attributes; the figure above shows that entertainment function is the most popular amongst others.

8.3 Gender dynamics and perceived roles of women: a quantitative response analysis

The following discussion and numbers are based solely on the perspectives of the 60 participants who were selected for sampling. This section presents a quantitative examination of participants' opinions and concepts concerning the roles and behavioural patterns of women in soap operas. The questions offered represent the prevailing sentiments among individuals on the topics raised.

How do you find gender relations depicted in soap operas?

Participants were provided with a set of assumptions to choose from, stating their level of agreement as either strongly agree (SA), agree (A), strongly disagree (SD), or disagree (D). The graph below illustrates the number of participants and the magnitude of their favourable or negative sentiment towards the provided hypothesis.

SA= strongly agree A= Agree SD= Strongly Disagree D= Disagree

What gender dynamics do you find dominating in soap operas?

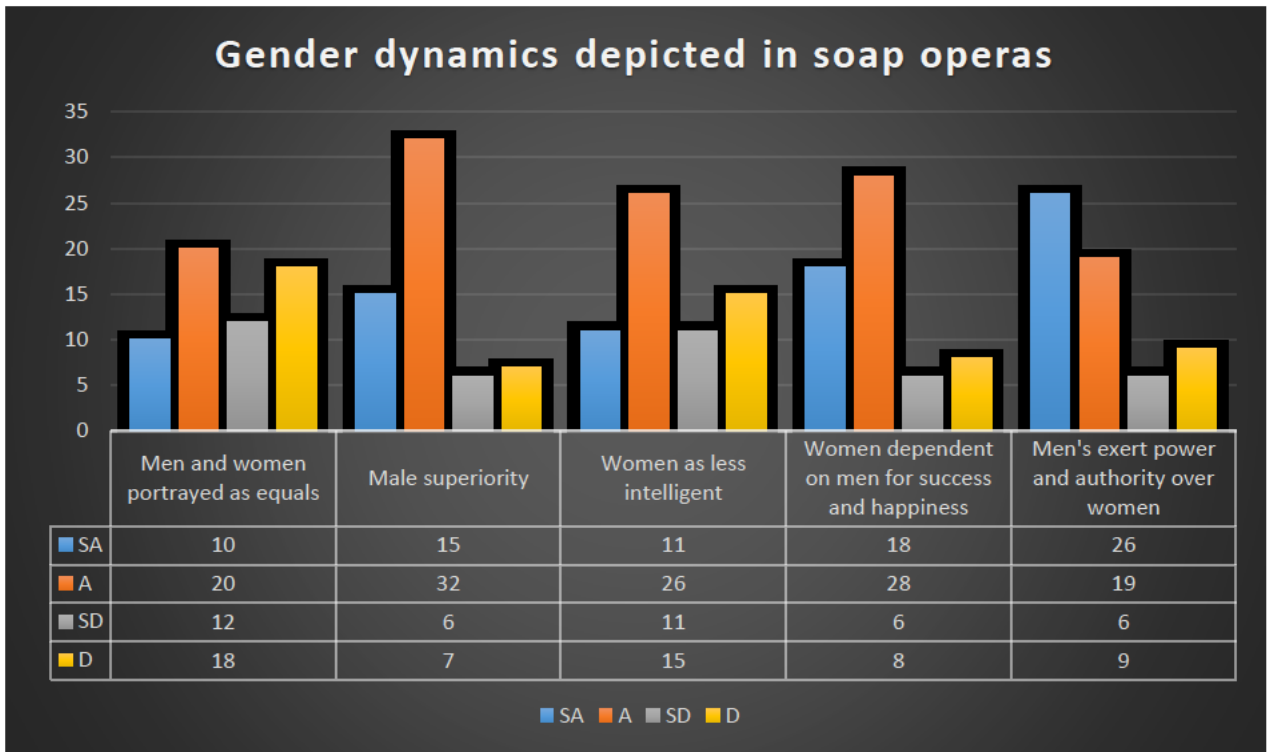


Figure 7-3 Respondents' perception of gender dynamics in Soap Operas

The above figures show a deadlock (50/50) concerning the portrayal of women as equal to men. However, to the rest of the questions, participants perceived women as depicted negatively and dependent on men. What stands out from the chart is that women are depicted as less intelligent, women depend on men for success and men have power and authority compared to women.

What setting are women characters associated with in soap opera?

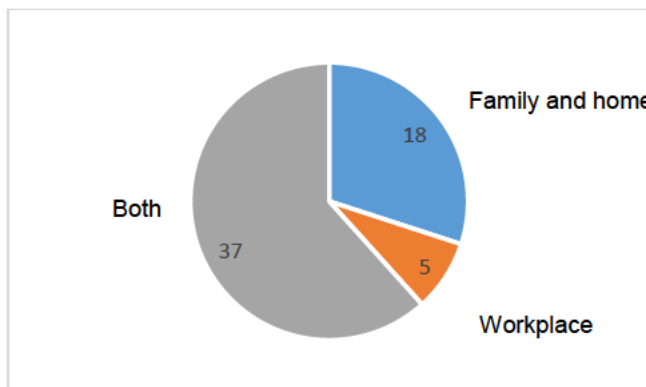


Figure 7-4 Setting associated with women in soap operas

More viewers felt that women are depicted on both home and workplace (37), while 18 felt that they are mostly associated with business and workplace and 5 felt that they are confined to family and home setting.

What roles do women play most of the time?

Each variable was raised individually on this issue to enable those who agreed with it to select it, followed by the raising of another variable to repeat the same process.

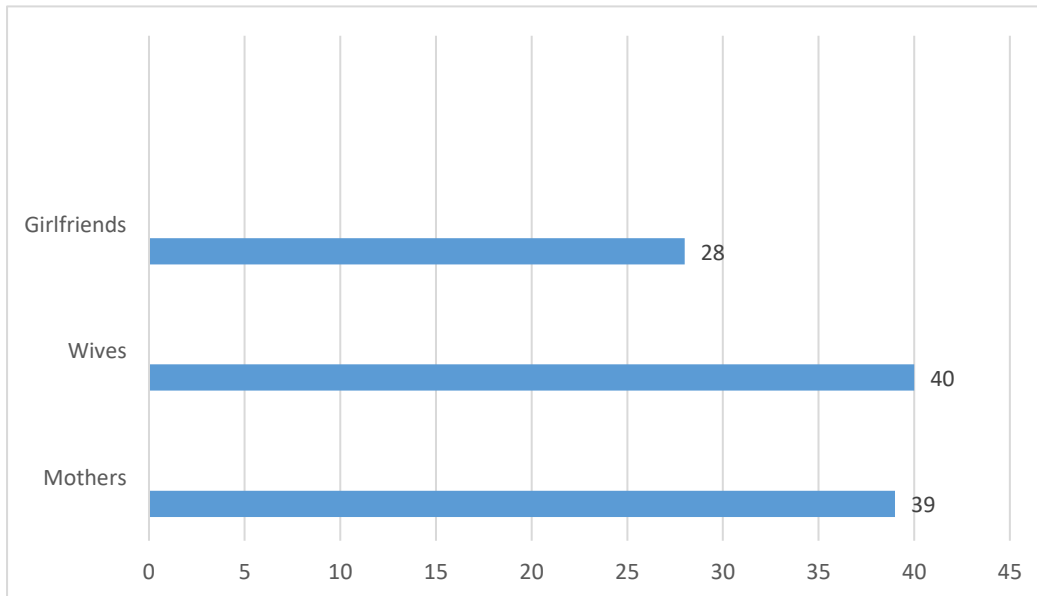


Figure 7-5 Popular roles identified with women

The participants identified the portrayal of women as wives, mothers and girlfriends.

What behavioural patterns are associated with women at home?

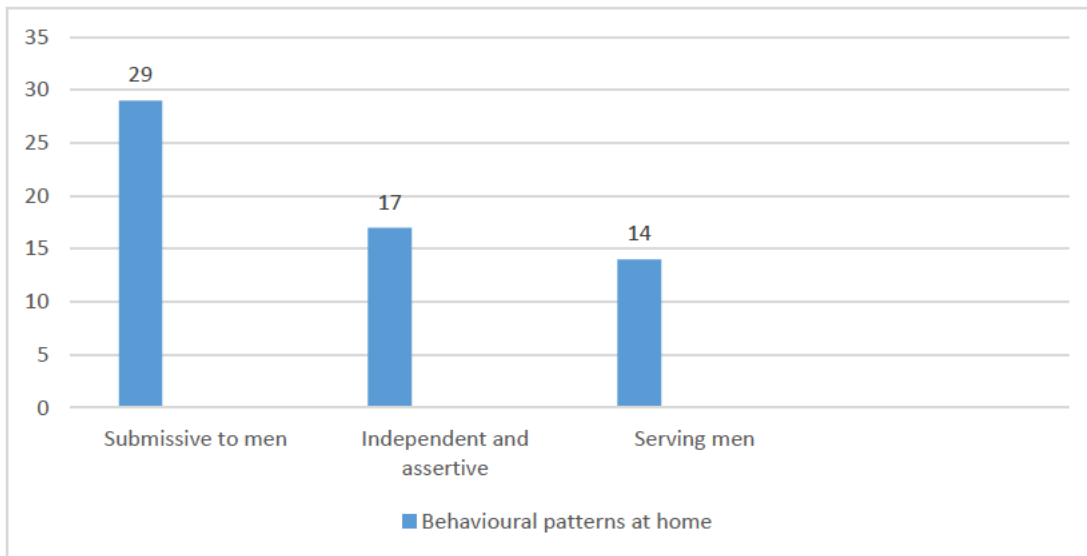


Figure 7-6 Behavioural patterns identified with women

Most participants felt that women are submissive to men (29), while 17 felt that they are independent and assertive and 14 felt that women serve men.

Do soap operas have any women role models?

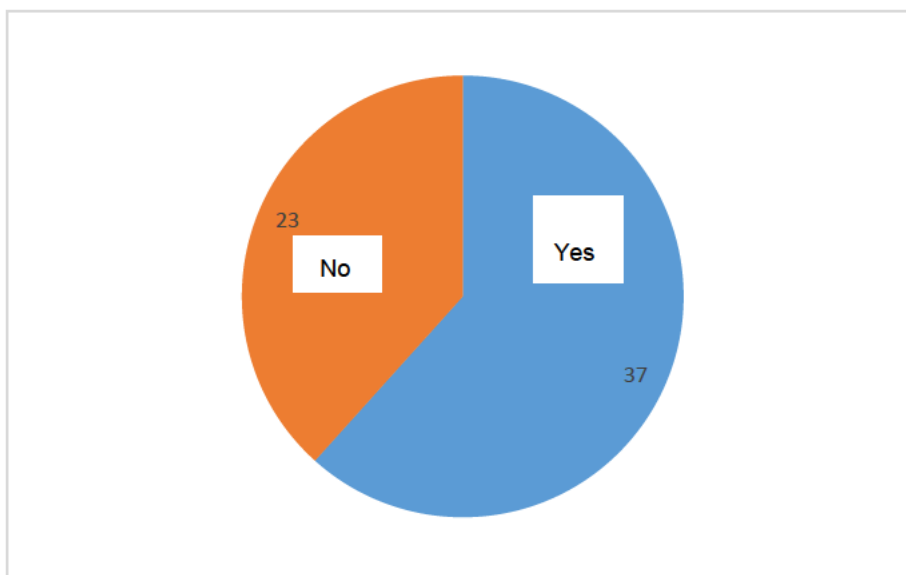


Figure 7-7 Presence of role models in Soap operas

37 participants agreed that there are role models on soap operas, while 23 felt different.

Are women portrayed positively and with dignity?

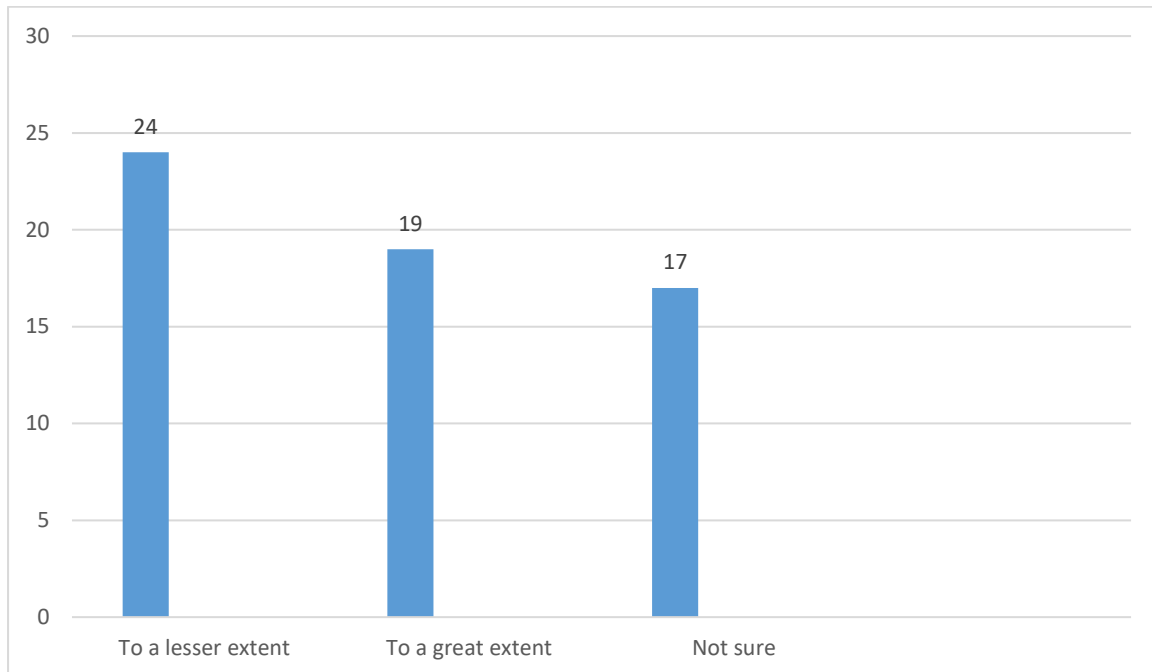


Figure 7-8 Nature of Women's portrayal (positively and with dignity?)

24 participants were of the view that women are portrayed less positively and with less dignity, while 19 participants believe that women are portrayed positively and with dignity. However, 17 participants do not have a clear position on this matter.

Does it matter how women are portrayed in soap operas?

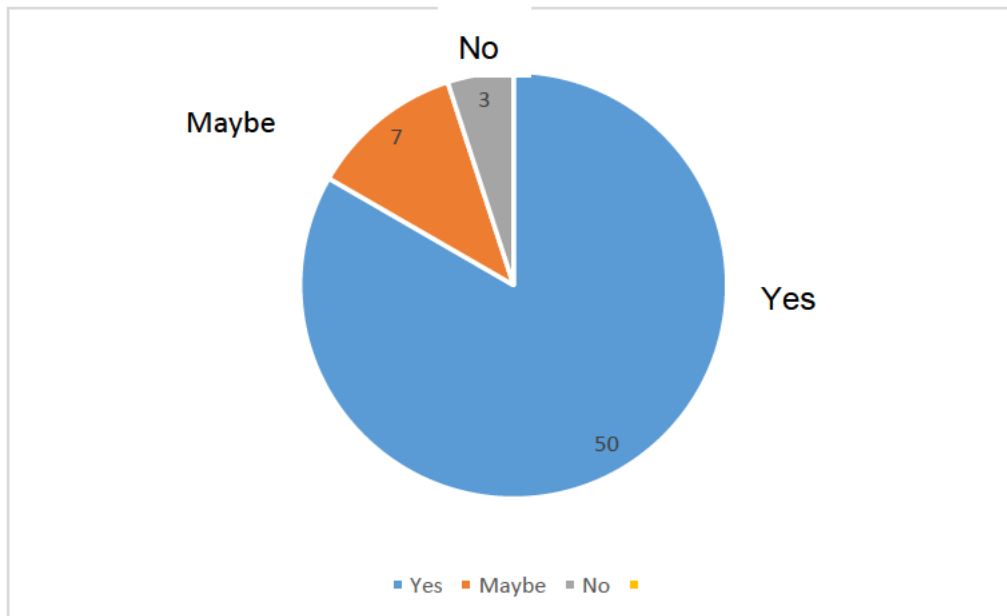


Figure 7-9 Does the nature of women's portrayal matter?

The diagram above illustrates that most participants (50) consider the representation of women in soap operas to be substantial, while 7 participants expressed uncertainty regarding its relevance, and only 3 participants found it to be insignificant.

What roles do you perceive women play more in soap operas?

Table 7.4 Status of roles played by women in relation to men

	SA	A	SD	D	Not sure
Women play leadership roles	16	23	5	12	4
Women play supporting roles to men as leaders	20	29	3	4	4

Women are dependent on men to make decisions	11	30	11	7	1
Women have integrity and strong personalities on their own	22	22	6	7	3
Women play roles that earn them respect	18	22	10	5	5
Women play roles that are insignificant, roles that belittle, mock or ridicule them	11	22	13	7	7
Women characters hold occupational positions that are highly esteemed in the society	19	23	5	9	4
Women characters play roles and occupations that are not of much benefit to the society	9	16	18	9	8

In summary, the table reveals a contradiction in the opinions of the participants. Specifically, 39 individuals expressed a pleasant view of the depiction of women in leadership positions, while 49 individuals said that women were more commonly shown in roles supporting males. Furthermore, women are regarded to possess traits such as honesty and strong personalities (44), and they are also seen as performing roles that command respect and dignity (40), while projecting social position and high esteem (42). From a pessimistic standpoint, women are perceived as dependent on men (41), and their responsibilities are considered socially insignificant (33). The discrepancy about questions is resolved in the qualitative data analysis part of the study, wherein participants offered justifications for their perspectives.

Identify gender stereotypes that you feel are endorsed in soap operas

Table 7.5 Popular stereotypes identified by participants

	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
Women are portrayed as intellectually weaker than men	38	18	4
Women are portrayed as suitable caregivers and nurturers at home	52	4	4
Women are portrayed as pursuing professional excellence and development	37	13	10
Women are portrayed as competent in domestic roles more than corporate roles	34	16	10
Women are portrayed as belonging to the kitchen, with a primary function to cook and bear children	35	19	6
Women are emotional, therefore unable to make sound decisions in the workplace	32	18	10

The data above indicates that women's representation in television is influenced by prevalent gender stereotypes. The most prominent stereotypes include women being depicted as nurturers (52), cognitively inferior to males (38), and confined to domestic roles such as the kitchen (35). However, women are also seen as actively striving for professional success and growth (37).

Does the manner in which women are portrayed on television affect how the society views and treats them?

Table 7.6 Views on effects of women's portrayal on society

Response	No. of respondents	%
Definitely	34	57
Probably	23	38
Not at all	3	5

The table above indicates that there is no definitive consensus on whether the portrayal of women has an influence on society's perception of them. Out of the total, only 34 individuals believed that it does, while 23 individuals saw it as a possibility. Conversely, a mere 3 individuals expressed a notion that it does not.

Does the manner in which women are portrayed affect how they view themselves?

Table 7.7 Effects of women's portrayal on them (women)

Response	No. of respondents	%
Yes	32	53.3
Maybe	20	33.3
No	8	13.3

The above findings also show no absolute perspective from the participants as 32 express that women are affected by the nature of their depiction, 20 are indecisive and 8 think that nature of portrayal has no effect on women.

Does the portrayal of women in television encourage women to explore their full potential?

Table 7.8 Depiction of women and their potential

	No. of respondents	%
Yes	34	57
No	13	22
Maybe	13	21

About the topic of whether television's portrayal of women fosters women's potential, 34 participants expressed agreement, 13 disagreed and the remaining 13 were undecided.

8.4 Roles and representation of women in soap operas: A qualitative analysis.

Mapokgole (2020), alludes that feminist theory demonstrates that the portrayal of black women on soap operas throughout history has resulted in their invisibility. He further contends that the portrayal of black women is said to be in violation of the obligations outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. The study does not specifically examine the race of women, but it emphasises the importance of these assumptions in relation to the portrayal of women, regardless of their skin colour. The CEDAW is a global treaty that serves as a comprehensive set of rights for women. It is a crucial international agreement that provides guidance to the United Nations Women in their efforts to promote gender equality and empower women and girls. It is unfortunate that the articles in CEDAW do not include any provisions that expressly focus on the media as a social institution and its impact on gender relations in a broad sense. However, Article 5 contains components that could be seen as pertaining to media practices. It specifies that:

State parties are therefore obliged to work towards the modification of social and cultural patterns of individual conduct in order to eliminate prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women (CEDAW, 1981).

The forthcoming discussions will focus on the interaction between the media and society, specifically examining gender dynamics as portrayed in television soap operas. These conversations aim to determine the extent to which the media influences human rights concerns related to women and their societal standing.

Soap opera plots revolve around interpersonal relationships in domestic and professional settings. Consequently, they can be viewed as a fictitious battleground where men and women engage in an ongoing struggle for power and fulfillment across different domains. Du Plooy and Ndayi (2019), on their study on *Generations: The Legacy*, found that representation of business and economic participation in this soap opera reinforces patriarchal attitudes. An enduring debate over power dynamics in soap operas posits that men wield greater authority than women, resulting in a persistent state of female subordination to men (Czarniawska, Eriksson-Zetterquist, and Renemark, 2013). The concept of gender equality depicted in soap operas was disputed during focus group deliberations. Participants expressed the view that soap operas still depict women as oppressed and submissive, particularly in terms of their vocations and workplace dynamics. Nevertheless, one participant expressed the belief that this perception is outdated, as women now hold positions of equal status and authority as men:

but then, on a positive perspective, in the past women were shown as very submissive, now they show them as boss lady- people who lead and own companies, like managers or CEOs, things that didn't happen before (Interview respondent 3).

However, this viewpoint was just one perspective among many that argued that women are still subject to discrimination and prejudice. The following are the negative perceptions of women in terms of power, authority, and status that were identified through the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and the interviews:

- i. When women are in power, there is always going to be a man in the background responsible for her elevation, meaning that women are incapable to attaining power and climb to superiority on their own.
- ii. Women get into powerful positions by compromising something on their side and dignity, such as using their bodies and physical appearance.

- iii. When in leadership/powerful positions, women lack ability to remain in leadership, as there is always going to be something that will make her lose her dignity, this pulls women down to level of submission.
- iv. If a woman is powerful, she is portrayed as a villain – such as a gangster who is disliked by the community (examples given was that of Lindiwe in *The River*, and Harriet in *The Queen*. These shows are not under SABC, and therefore not under study).

Landers (2018) argues that soap operas, although being commonly associated with a feminine genre and their aim to challenge male-centric narratives, face difficulties in establishing a feminine discourse. Soap operas are subject to criticism for maintaining patriarchal ideals by presenting nuclear families in a normalised manner. In addition, this symbolism is further applied to roles in which women exhibit maternal characteristics, such as overseeing and nurturing the community (Landers, 2018). The following subsections contextualise the perceptions of participants regarding the roles performed by women in soap operas. Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify themes that emerged from the coded perspectives of the participants.

8.4.1 Theme 1: Women's domestication

The term 'role' refers the responsibility and functions that characters play and portray in soap operas. It can also encompass the social nature of the role, whether dominant or subordinate. Character roles are also about their value and how they are perceived by those who view them; judgement and description a particular role attracts from the viewer's perspective. Despite a slight shift from domesticated to a more liberated women noted in textual analysis chapters, the participants perceive women portrayed at both home and workplace settings. From focus group discussions, women portrayal as housewives came in strongly particularly on *Skeem Saam*, where most women are normally shown at home and doing 'wifely' or 'womanly' duties. Examples cited were MaNtuli, Mapitsi and Meiki, who are identified with cooking and mothering most of the time, despite having a work-related life outside home. Domestic setting is a communal area where women have been stereotyped in television genres (Ojomo and Adekusibe (2020). A study by Eisend (2010) shows that the odds of women being depicted at home versus at work are approximately 3.5 times higher than for men (Ojomo and

Adekusibe, 2020). Ibrahim et al. (2017:2) concurred by stating that “women in the world of television are presented in the role of domestic help, a wife, a mother and being portrayed as submissive and engrossed in common family affection and duties while men are depicted as employed, spirited and combative.”

This portrayal aligns with the patriarchal mentality, which regards men as more deserving of all types of power in society. The division of the public and private worlds in patriarchal ideology serves as a means of justifying this hierarchical structure (Howard, 1988). Howard (1988) posits that the concepts of romance, femininity, domesticity, and motherhood collectively form the foundation of patriarchal ideology. Interview respondent 10 stressed that storylines that confine women to a domestic setting has made women in society to develop a gold-digger mentality associated with marriage. The narrative suggests that women get married to rich men, in that way marriage is seen as an escape route from poverty to a better life. However, there is a negative effect to that because it discourages them [women] and offers then limited options from which to explore life. A participant from FGD 4 elaborated on how women’s success in soap operas is associated with their domestic roles as ‘wives’ to powerful or prominent men. In this way, the respondent felt that women are portrayed as not having much value as individuals, and as women, therefore need to be married.

Personally, I don’t feel they add value because more than 50% suggest that women must have men in their lives. MaNgcobo in *Uzalo* was powerful, able to manage her business at the time but for her to reach there, she didn’t start everything from scratch. She married first and found that power to have everything that she didn’t have before. So, she didn’t empower herself, she had to be married first and get a man then she became powerful. The other thing I just thought is that some soapiers show us how oppressed women are. I remember in *IMbewu*, Ngcolosi’s wife, Mazulu, her husband couldn’t have children through her, and that led to her being forced to sleep with her brother-in law, she was not given chance to digest or refuse the issue (FGD 4 respondent 4).

Despite many questionnaire respondents feeling that women are now more depicted in both home and workplace, expansion from these questions in interviews and focus groups confirm that women are still tied to their domestic duties, particularly marriage and living in the shadow of their husbands. In FGD 2, a dialogue suggested that financial dependence is a key to keep women in their domesticated position, different participants held different views as reflected below:

- Respondent 4:** When women lead businesses like MaNgcobo, I don't see that as a right thing.
- Facilitator:** So you prefer women to be kept in their feminine position of being mothers, wives, girlfriends?
- Respondent 4:** Not like that mam, they can have power, but they must not overuse it...
- Facilitator:** Being a strong woman and still maintain who you are, that you are a woman? Don't try to be a man at home, you mean that?
- Respondent 4:** Yes, because **a man doesn't like a woman who are above them.** (my emphasis).
- Facilitator:** Why must women live to please men?
- Respondent 6:** It's not about pleasing. We also please women financially, so we look after them.
- Respondent 11:** So women must always depend on men?
- Respondent 4:** No, not depend on men. But give them their space
- Respondent 11:** So you are saying that financially we must always bow to or depend on you guys? So, if I need money, I ask a man, when I want to do something big, I must say "baba can I do 1 2 3? Ha no!
- Respondent 5:** Can I ask this one thing, let's say someone you are in a relationship with does nothing for you even though he is financially ok, how would you feel about that?
- Respondent 11:** That's where I need to upskill myself as a woman, so that I don't depend on anyone, I cannot depend on anyone.

The preceding dialogue may not specifically address the domestication of women in soap operas or television, but it does highlight the viewpoints that viewers relate to as they observe these storylines in soap operas. It highlights the underlying patterns of gender relationships in real life and examines how viewers perceive and engage with these dynamics when portrayed in soap operas.

Participants also noted that even working women always find a way to their domestic duties, while men's world solely remains the workplace. An example was given about Mrs. Kgomo's role on *Skeem Saam*, with participants feeling that her depiction hardly focuses on her at work but puts emphasis on her as Mr. Kgomo's wife. The following screenshots of Mrs. Kgomo confirm this:



Skeem saam season 11

Figure 7-10 Women as servants: Mrs. Kgomo serving her family

On the above image, Mrs. Kgomo is portrayed serving lunch while her husband and son do nothing at home, except being served.



Figure 7-11 Domestication of women: Mrs. Kgomo brings lunch for Mr. Kgomo 1



Figure 7-12 Domestication: Mrs. Kgomo brings lunch for Mr. Kgomo 2

In the photographs above, Mrs. Kgomo is not portrayed at her place of employment, but rather at her husband's office, delivering him lunch, in accordance with societal expectations for women to serve men. In summary, participants were asked for their last reflections on women's roles in general. A small number of respondents conveyed their opinions using a single word as to summarise how women are domesticated in soap operas. The diagram below captured these:

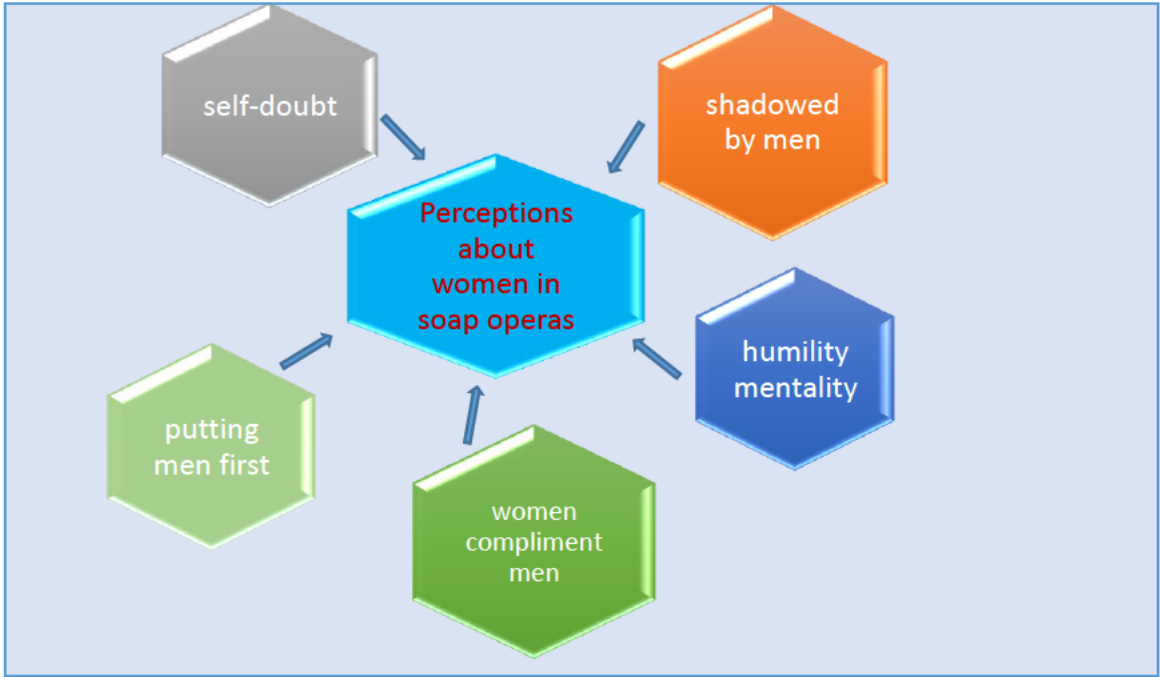


Figure 7-13 Contributing factors to women's domestication

One respondent from Blose (2020:37) raised similar concerns about men keeping women on a tight leash:

Soap operas show that men themselves are insecure when their women are successful. So, they try by all means to make them doubt themselves and their capabilities just so that they as men won't feel so insecure with their women's successes. We see this all the time on soap operas and it's true that it happens even in real life.

8.4.2 Theme 2: Seduction and sexual objectification

Sexual objectification based on the female body is the most common and obvious form of patriarchy and sexism (Maryani and Ratmita, 2023). The character of Melita in *Skeem Saam* was associated with the concept of a seductress which leads to her sexual objectification by the men she seduces. Interview respondent 3 commented on how women are forced to turn their bodies into tools to gain the power that they lack, particularly in the workplace. Intania and Widarini (2022) intensify this view as they state that curves, breasts and buttocks, long hair and beautiful facial makeup are a reference for the media to make women objects of pleasure in entertainment shows. Melita's body moves; facial expressions are dominated by the sexual seductive impression that degrades her human values. Her scandals with Mr. Kgomo are mostly characterised by her openly seducing him in order to get a job. Through all this, the focus is on her body movements, which she uses to lure Mr. Kgomo, who finds pleasure in all this. The following images affirm this perspective.



Figure 7-14 Melita's seductive look

Melita's semi-exposed breasts, her facial expression fits the definition of a seducer offered by Intania and Widarini (2022). Having continuous images of women like Melita in television impacts on women's image and dignity, as they get called derogatory names. Furthermore, romance and sexual matters on television have an impact on both men and women's expectations and sexual roles in relationships (Gamble and Nelson, 2016). Television programming communicates to viewers that the male sexual role involves active pursuit of sexual activity to prove one's masculinity, whereas the female sexual role involves objectifying oneself for men's enjoyment and being virtuous by not being sexual (Gamble and Nelson, 2016). In the absence of sexual pursuit from Mr. Kgomo as a man, Melita objectifies herself, thus being unvirtuous.



Figure 7-15 Melita's seductive impression

In the image above, Melita literary offers herself to Mr. Kgomo, who does not object but plays along instead. His compliance in the process suggests that the media fails to challenge such stereotypical views about women but endorses them.



Figure 7-16 Melita's seductive look 3

Melita does not only seduce Mr Kgomo, but also runs to Dr Hlongwane when in financial need, this questions her integrity and carries injustice to women's portrayal as asserted by respondent 8 FGD 4:

Melita in *Skeem Saam* is another example of women not being portrayed well. All she does is to hunt for a man to get a job or comfortable life, even if it destroys other women's marriages. I don't think this is the best way to project women. It seems like suggesting that women have no power, but their bodies.

8.4.3 Theme 3: Subordination and submission

Women are viewed as willing to compromise their dreams and play a supportive role to their partners instead, and this happens without force or coercion. Interview respondent 1 analysed Mapitsi's character and argued that:

Based on just when T'bose got a job offer.... first it was Mapitsi who got a job offer but decided to stay and sacrifice her career to stay with her family. Then when T'bose gets an offer to go overseas, [he] didn't think twice, didn't think about family, didn't think about Mapitsi that she chose him, both of them actually and the child. But Mapitsi stayed and looked after their child and waited for him regardless of the length of time he left them for. It shows that she is the kind of a woman who says "I'm going to listen to my man, be submissive and listen to what he says, whether he goes or something, I will sit here and wait for him."

The above articulation suggests that women adopt a submissive role in relationships with their partners, with limited decision-making capacity. Quantitative analysis of responses from questionnaires showed that respondents agree that women play a supportive role to the leaders (who are often bosses at work, or husbands at home), 49 respondents concurred with on this supposition. A respondent from FGD 4 said that “most soap operas portray women as submissive to men, sometimes they are forced not to follow their careers”. However, interview respondent 3 expressed a different view about some women in *Skeem Saam*. He posited that *Skeem Saam* has done better in terms of elevating women’s status in different spheres. Examples of such women as cited by the interviewee were principal Thobakgale, Meiki and Elizabeth. Thobakgale’s role as a principal adds a positive nod for women, Elizabeth being a doctor while in most cases women are nurses added another one. The respondent viewed Meiki’s character as powerful at home to an extent that her husband, Professor Maputla has nothing to say because Meiki’s voice is more authoritative.

Uzalo’s portrayal of women was perceived differently to *Skeem Saam* by interviewee 3 on this aspect, he argued that from the beginning it had put men (particularly Nkunzi) on dominating position. The character of Nkunzi was identified as the main source of women’s domination as he exerts his authority on all of them. He destroyed MaNgcobo’s business, derailed Gabisile’s path to self-empowerment and dethroned Nomkhosi of Indlende’s chieftaincy. According to the interviewee 3, all these suggest that women are heavily subordinated by men in *Uzalo*.

Another interview respondent (9) shared the same sentiment that portrayal of women on *Skeem Saam* hurts but shows women’s daily struggles. She also asserted that *Skeem Saam*’s storyline relates to how most young girls are brought up by their mothers. “It gives a sense that women can never be above men, no matter how hard they try to prove themselves, there will always be those people who bring them down” (Interview 2023). Most *Skeem Saam* regular participants strongly felt that women are put on a disadvantaged position because of how they relate to men in their lives. They (participants) argued that men become women’s downfall regardless of how powerful a woman is, issues pertaining to men and relationships will be her demise.

Alongside the concern of submissive behaviour and male domination, most questionnaire respondents cited that they cannot identify any role models from the women they see on soap operas, quoting dependence on men among other reasons as a major problem. Viewers had varying perceptions of *Uzalo* characters on this aspect. They see the prominent role that women are assuming and how they are successfully achieving their aspirations. While *Uzalo* may not have the same formal qualifications setting as *Skeem Saam*, except for the police station, viewers recognise that the female characters in *Uzalo* are more emancipated, goal-oriented, and ambitious. One respondent alluded to the following about *Uzalo*:

I usually watch *Uzalo*, what I like about it is that women are able to live without a man. For example, Nonkanyiso, we all know her story; she had Sbonelo who used to do things for her, but as the time went on, Sbonelo wanted polygamy. Nonkanyiso she decided to be independent and build her own business, which shows that women are portrayed as able to live without men. And Nosipho did that, she realized that depending or remaining under Nkunzi's hand always sending her back and forth, saw that it is better than she stands on her own feet (FGD 4 respondent 3).

This presents a distinct perspective from what extant literature suggests. Also, there are several studies particularly in India and Pakistan (Iqbal and Abdar, 2016, Ahmed and Khalid, 2012, Abbasi, 2019, Mehra, 2019), which saw soap operas as having a potential for women empowerment. For *Uzalo*, the depiction of empowered women can be seen as a new trend as it only started in Season 8 with Nosipho starting her money-lending business, her management of the business hub, and all the other women who ran their businesses under the hub. The current season also features some women in power (Njinji and MaMlambo), though they used underhanded tactics to own a business and a football team. In agreement to the view expressed above, another respondent saw *Uzalo* as showing women's abilities to start businesses, just like men.

To add on what the speaker has just said, *uZalo* is based on a township setting, KwaMashu, stealing of cars which are things we see in other countries' soapiers- showing that even here in South Africa, even women can own business, as we see MaNgcobo and Gabisile, we can see that women also have power, it's just no attention is paid to them as most of the time businesses are started by men and women take over (FGD 4 respondent 4).

Concisely, participants did not completely agree that *Uzalo* depicts women as dominated by men, but they also identified a new trend that shows women standing up for themselves.

8.4.4 Theme 4: Status and significance of women's roles

This theme emerged from discussions on occupations in the workplace. The conclusive motion is that women are associated with occupations that are less important to the society and less respectable compared to those of their male counterparts. This lowers the status and dignity of women, even though there are significant moves to elevate them in some roles. Women are offered low status jobs while men take the most prestigious ones in soap opera narrative. The association of women with jobs such as personal assistants (PA), receptionists, cleaners was scrutinised with regards to the connotations it carries about women's abilities and capabilities. One respondent argued that:

most PAs in soaps are women, I have never come across a male PA, and with nurses too, you barely find a male nurse, males are always doctors and then females are nurses, I don't know why (interview respondent 5).

The participants distinguished between men and women when it comes to jobs. Reference was made to Mr. Maputla, a university professor while Mrs. Maputla owns a supermarket, although most of the time she appears at her home and hardly at her supermarket. Another comparison was made between professor Maputla and Mrs. Kgomo. They both work at Turfloop University, but Maputla is a professor while Mrs. Kgomo is a counsellor. The participants in FGD 3 felt that this creates a wedge between men and women because being a university professor carries more social significance and status than being a university counsellor.

Looking at Turfloop High School, participants also felt that women character roles are also not respected after the change from a female principal to a male one. They argued that:

at school female teachers have no dignity even the kids do not respect them, not only their male colleagues, but also kids, especially Mam Rosena, the kids do not mind throwing papers at her while she is busy teaching if they don't feel like seeing her. I think women are still *belittled* (Interview respondent 3).

During FGD 4, participants noted that women in high-status positions are frequently shown negatively or achieve their status through marriage to influential men. An example was provided, featuring MaNgcobo from *Uzalo*, who gained influence through her marriage to Nkunzi, the most feared and notorious individual in KwaMashu. Harriet, a character from *The Queen*, exemplified how women may attain social prominence by virtue of their husband's societal standing. Lindiwe in *The River* exemplifies a lady who achieved social advancement through her cunning and manipulative methods, reminiscent of a gangster. The same principle applies to Mam Sonto (played by Connie Chiume) from *Gomora*.

The discussions revealed that SABC soap operas do not portray women in a higher social standing, while soap operas and telenovelas from DSTV networks present a contrasting view on women's social position and status. With status and significance comes dignity. To what extent do soap operas represent women with dignity? The responses to this question show an agreement between questionnaire respondents, interviews and focus group discussions. Majority of questionnaire respondents (40%) felt that women's dignity on these programmes is upheld to a lesser extent, while 32% felt otherwise, and 28% indifferent on this matter.

The aforementioned perspective was validated in FGD 2, when participants confirmed that the portrayal of women as less strong than males results in a subsequent lack of dignity. The notion was disputed by some participants who acknowledged that women are depicted with a modicum of dignity and authority. However, the presence of rivalry between women and men frequently undermines this dignity because men win this battle most of the time. Another participant contended that certain stories depict women as dignified and powerful, yet their authority is always restricted by the presence of a man (FGD 2 respondent 6). Interviewee 10 highlighted that during the early seasons of *Muvhango*, Thandaza earned a great deal of respect due to her careful business skills and leadership, especially when MMC was still known as Mukwevho Milling. Despite the death of her husband Edward, who had the title of Bakwevho prince, Thandaza continued to occupy the position of CEO, and she was both loved and revered by Bakwevho people. Nevertheless, no other woman has experienced such treatment, as women have consistently been shown in roles that fail to adequately demonstrate respect and value. The interview respondent also used

Thathe as an example where only a male child is considered the next chief in line without any debate or consideration of princesses as potential successors.

8.4.5 Theme 5: Dependence vs independence

Another dimension about representation of women in soap operas was their dependence on men for success and lack of independence in most life spheres. This concept was reflected when participants were asked if they have characters that they view or look up to as role models on the soap operas that they watch. Responses to this question led to a quick audit into what traits viewers associated with women characters that they consider as role models in these soap operas.

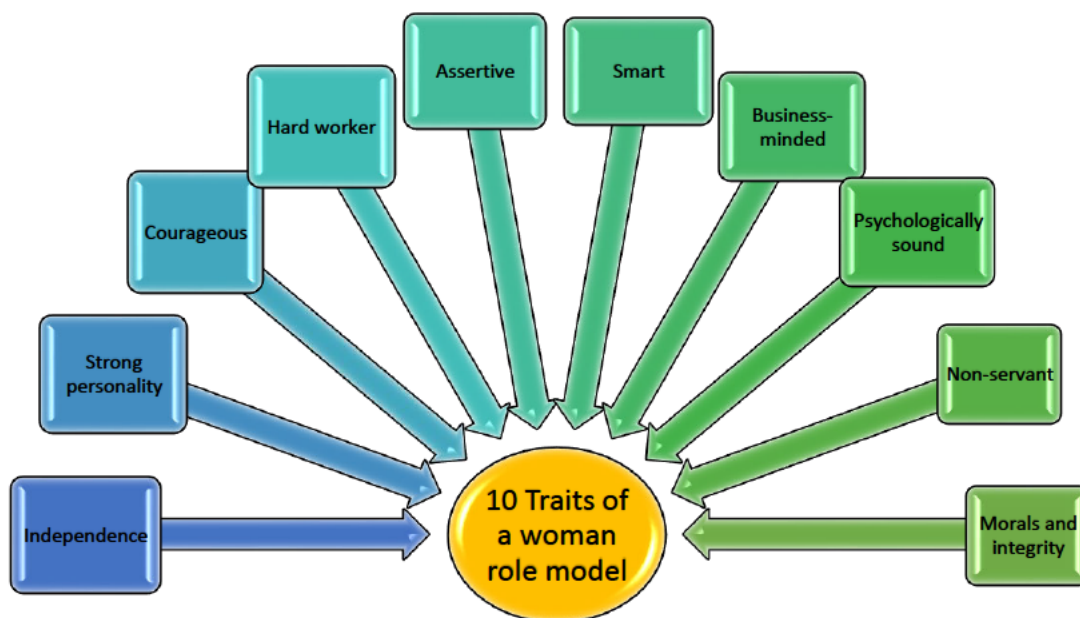


Figure 7-17 Personality traits associated with women role models by viewers

The term *independence* is mentioned eleven times more frequently than any other significant idea identified by the participants. This indicates the tremendous emphasis they place on the value of this attribute in a woman they perceive as a role model. The results indicate that most participants do not perceive female role models in soap operas due to the scarcity of independent women characters. The characteristics depicted in figure 8-16 were identified as the preferences of viewers, particularly habitual watchers of soap operas, for female characters on television programming.

This aligns with the perspective of one participant, who argued that soap operas often depict women as without purpose or significance if they are not associated with a certain prominent man in the narrative. She contended that:

I think the way they portray us it's like it's suggesting that we do not respect ourselves as women. We cannot stand on our own, we cannot not have a man in our lives. It's like we are put under pressure to feel like we cannot be single, you have to be in a relationship, and you can't stay without a man, you need *ukujola* (FGD 1 respondent 5).

From FGD2, the issue of independence came up again as one respondent looked at MaNgcobo's character, citing that she is her role model, she expressed that:

most women can learn from MaNgcobo, she is independent, she knows how to scare men, she can command a man what to do, because in most cases it's the other way round, but MaNgcobo knew how to command a man..., which shows that she is powerful and I could say that she is my role model (FGD 2 respondent 3).

8.5 The perceived effects of women's images in soap opera

Texts are a result of their pervasiveness and the popular perception that they help shape people's everyday perceptions of the world (Burton, 2010). Theorists approach media influence on society in diverse ways. Some strongly maintain that the media not only reflects the society, but also affect it (O'Shaughnessy, Stadler and Casey, 2016). From focus group discussions, four main perspectives emerged about the media-society relationship. The diagram below summarises these, followed by a brief discussion of each perspective.

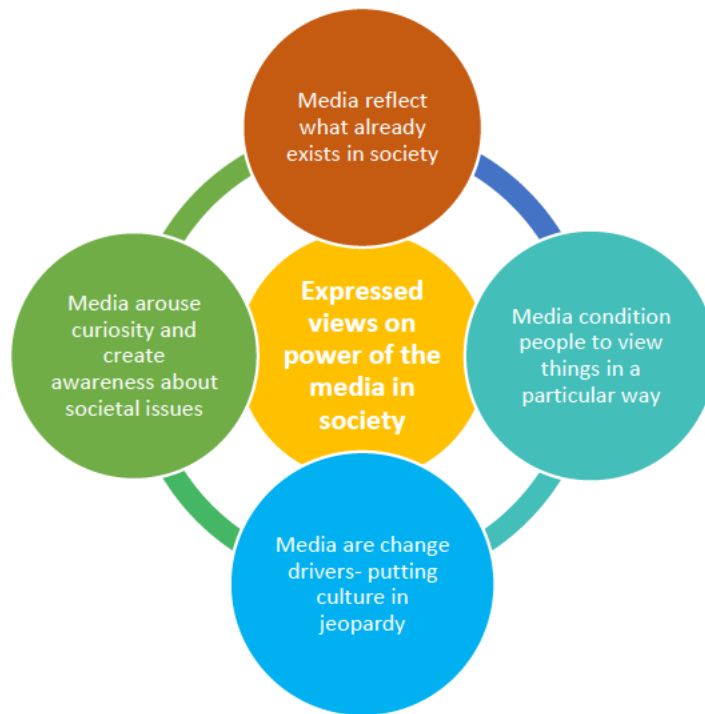


Figure 7-18 Media influence on society

Focus group discussions and interviews revealed that the media reflect what is already in the society. This view can be linked to the reflections model as discussed by O’Shaughnessy, Casey and Stadler (2016), which assumes that media-society relationship is built upon the media’s position to mirror the world and its perspectives for the public. One focus group participant said:

I think I agree with the gentleman, the media have a responsibility for whatever they broadcast or show because we cannot lie and say we are not influenced by the media, so they do have a role because they are the mass media so they impact on masses of people in a short time, so we must admit that they have influence (FGD 2 respondent 2).

McQuail (1977) asserts that the mass media are an instrument of social power, and as a result, their effects are important to consider the process of learning through the media, a process which is often incidental, unplanned, and unconscious for the receiver and almost unintentional on the part of the sender. Fourie (2001) also argues that the media constructs, presents and even dictates what reality is, as well as what is normal and natural. One respondent from FGD 3 maintained that media are powerfully influential and likely to be used as reference point by some people who watch television, as they may “watch and copy, almost everything from lifestyle to the

way people think and their expectations in life” (FGD 3 respondent 7). The participants believe that media users are somehow trapped on the media-spider-web that they cannot escape, even when they are not conscious of its influence over them. One respondent expressed that:

sometimes I also find myself imitating my favourite actors, I find myself saying “that’s on par”, I didn’t learn that at home, I watched it somewhere. Even the way of behaving, like how the lady who does PR in a corporate company, I live and dream it as I see it on TV. How she turns with her chair and all that, now that I’m going for in-service training, I want a turning chair, I saw that corporate world on tv, I also wanna be that. So, I can say they have an effect, definitely (FGD 3 respondent 6).

The next assertion raised by participants is that the media conditions people to view things in a particular way. Gerbner et al (1980) quoted in (Valkenburg, Peter and Walther, 2016) assert that the more time people spend living in the television world, the more likely they are to accept the social reality portrayed on television. This agrees with how participants perceived the power of the media in their lives as they contend that whether aware or unaware, the media shape their views and thoughts on certain social matters:

we must also remember that television is there to programme people, so the way they portray things is important. It doesn’t help to portray something negative just because it’s happening, which is programming us as viewers/audiences. Just the other speaker said that some people will become homosexual because of what they watch, not because they are, they are programmed by what we watch (FGD 2 respondent 3).

The third perspective brought forward is that media arouse curiosity and create awareness on current trends. One respondent specifically argued that the media affects viewers because today’s generation lives a lot by watching their role models and trends, so what they see happening, such as the manner of dressing up- barely dressed women influence the youngsters to also want to copy that, so people live through media-driven trends most of the time. This view was supported by respondent 4 in FGD 1, who argued that:

we must accept that the media shows us what is happening or what is likely to happen in the future. For example, some families have issues with homosexual relations, especially in rural communities. Then the media is trying to show them that it is there, it exists, it will exist, and people must expect it around them or from themselves, be aware that it is coming, it is at their door!

A debate erupted from this point, as some participants felt that media portrayal of life is questionable and cannot be accepted as pure because of producers' commercial interests. Respondent 5 (FGD 1) claimed that the media, particularly soap opera producers are not being responsible, and that they produce compelling texts that put them in an unequal position with the viewers. She reckoned that:

media are not responsible because they show something that they know for sure will sell but not bearing in mind the consequences. Take the homosexuality issue, yes, it's coming, and people need to be aware about it. But the media somehow makes people accept it and conclude that being gay is right. But there is someone who is gay but will try to remain a guy because of people around him, but when it keeps on coming up, one ends up accepting it. Even a person who was not sure whether they feel it or not, he/she will end up being gay. There are things that are ok hidden because people will end up accepting things that are not right.

This argument can also be comprehended through the lens of agenda setting theory, which pertains to the news media. For instance, Vu et al. (2019) demonstrate that media can influence the importance of news material for the audience, effectively shaping public opinion. Based on the respondent's statement, viewers of soap operas are prone to being influenced by the script of the show. This script is like the agenda in news since it involves the sequential development of issues within each episode. Incorporating specific social relational themes, such as the LGBTQI+ community into soap opera plots can draw attention to the issue, even if it is not widely recognised or supported by other members of society.

The last perspective raised is that the media bring about change that challenges culture and conventionality. To solidify this view, mediatisation theory suggests that growing media authority and the integration of media into all cultural practices evoke cultural change, yet the outcome of this is variable and dependent on the context in question (Hjarvard and Petersen 2013). The topic of cultural change came up in FGD 2, where the issue of LGBTQI+ community and childbearing started. The participants alleged that the media sets trends and is capable of driving change towards culture. However, this was raised with much concern that the conventional and natural relations between a man and a woman are changing, and so are childbearing matters, and the media are at the focal point for this new way of life. This played out in *Uzalo's* episode where Nosipho managed to get pregnant with Mondli's child without sexual

intimacy between them. One respondent expressed this concern, arguing that the media producers are slowly destroying African culture through some storylines in their products:

I thought that commenting on the point of the previous speaker (11) that the people who control the media are slowly destroying African culture. Because you cannot portray in the media what the lady said that you can have a child by taking a sperm from a stranger, because a child's identity is important in his/her life, there are things that may appear in child that demand something done by the real family (FGD2 Respondent 13).

A fraction from the group felt that media coverage of such must be kept concealed and not dominate television particularly. Others felt that there is no point of objecting to these because they are enlightening and preparing the society to accept changes as they come. The final argument was that the media challenges the status quo and should be embraced because it is part of people's lives forever, but people should consume media content critically and cautiously.

Why everything can't be laid bare so that everyone can be free to date whom they choose? We must run away from the truth? Forget about culture, we love it, it has been instilled in our emotions, but the way we live now and before is not the same. It's good for people to watch TV so they can be prepared and avoid confusion. Be aware that in your prime years in Nquthu things are different, you will come across people living different lifestyles, what will you do to them? (FGD2 Respondent 6).

During this debate, it became evident that the participants are aware of the influence of media, and it can be inferred that the portrayal of women in soap operas and other popular TV shows has a lasting impact on their perceptions of social relations and overall life.

Researchers have connected the mediatisation theory to change that is imposed by the media and communication. The theory dates to Baudrillard (1994), who asserted that media symbols such as images, sound, advertisements form simulacra, which are semblances of reality that not only seem more real than the physical and social reality but also take its place (Hjarvard, 2008). The media are any entry point for any change in society and they play a key role in constructing and defining, contesting and reconstituting national, ethnic and other cultural identities (Gillespie, 1995). The media, therefore, have a significant role in minimising the plight of gender injustice in society.

Branston and Stamford (1999) contend that the media plays a significant role in shaping people's perception of identities and groups. This influence can have tangible consequences on individuals' lives. This is partly attributed to the media's capacity to repeatedly depict certain identities and ideas while excluding others, thereby creating a sense of unfamiliarity or even danger. Soap operas are perceived to have a cognitive impact on women and society. All 10 interview participants agreed that soap opera characters, storyline, and narrative can place pressure on women with regards to how they perceive themselves. The events depicted in these shows serve as a means of imparting specific knowledge that individuals may not be conscious of. Additionally, they raise awareness about the everyday issues and obstacles that women are likely to encounter. Below is a compilation of the key terms that arose during the interviews when media effect's theme was addressed.



Figure 7-19 Keywords on effects of women portrayal on society

To make sense of the above concepts, the table below summarises what the participants said in relation to the above concepts.

Table 7.9 How portrayal of women influences the society (created by the researcher)

Concept	Explanation
Injustice	Women are portrayed unjustly; there is a lack of positive portrayal. Images and characters are tied to traditionalist perspective.
Expectations	Women portrayal raises expectations about what women should do or not do.
Status quo	Media normalise the ideas that already exist in society. They can be influential particularly because their stories are relatable, they can change perspective and educate as well.
Influence	Media are influential as some see them as realistic and take some as role models- they can be tempted to adopt the portrayed characters.
Cognition	Viewers take soap operas seriously, what you see, how women are treated on television. "You look at yourself and see the same possible to you. It can work as motivation to us women in south Africa at large, it comes as a lesson on how we can overcome such challenges in life". (Interview respondent).
Judgement	Soap opera characters influence expectations and attract judgements towards women.
Awareness	They take character and use it as a guide in terms of how they go about in life and how far they can go- that influences them a lot.

Another aspect that was unpacked under the *effects* theme was how women might be affected by the dominant images of women they see on soap operas. Table 8.8 reflects that 53% of respondents thought that soap opera images do affect how women view themselves, 33% raised that it may be the case but not sure, and the last 13% felt that this does not happen. This variable was also raised during interviews, and similar opinions were noted. Most respondents established that these images and characters

affect how women view themselves in many ways. The responses lead to a theoretical concept in media studies called *interpellation*. This concept is originally known from Althusser (1998), who wrote extensively on *ideology*, emphasising the role of economy, class, and media in endorsing ideologies. He argued that ideologies hail people and offer a particular identity, which they accept as natural or obvious (Lee, 2015). Fiske (1998) argues that:

the role played by the media and language in this constant construction of the subject, by which we mean the constant reproduction of ideology in people. Althusser uses the words *interpellation* and *hailing* to describe this work of the media. These terms derive from the idea that any language, whether it be verbal, visual, tactile, or whatever, is part of social relations and that in communicating with someone we are reproducing social relationships (Fiske, 1998:1271).

Interview responses indicated that there is a certain level of interpellation when it comes to how women identify with the characters they watch in soap operas. They also discussed and related to incidents from these shows, offering advice to one another based on what they observe. Interview respondent 1 expressed the following:

...when you have been watching soap operas, (I like Facebook), so people tend to post things/views after watching something, say in *Ladies House* for example. They discuss people in the soap and guide each other [on] how to copy or simulate their behaviour to what they have seen and mostly people would agree on something really bad than on the right one. Maybe 2 or 3 who correct and say 'hang on guys, this and this is wrong, you see. So, the other ladies also agree given the same situation, they would have done the same, you know. I think it affects women and how they see things, accepting that something on TV. I think they don't realise that what's on TV is to educate them. They say that's the way to live.

This implies that soap operas are not merely seen as entertainment programmes, but rather they possess a sense of realism that viewers connect with. This suggests that they are deeply ingrained in the lives of some women in society. Hall (1997) contended that many feminist analysts have conceptualised the relationship between text and audience in soap operas. These analysts explore how the narrative and addressing techniques employed in soap operas shape a female-subject stance and its associated ideological impacts. Soap opera, as a genre, is deeply ingrained in the daily lives of viewers and is closely tied to cultural verisimilitude (Gledhill, 1997). To show how 'relatable' soap opera images and characters are, interview respondent 4 argued that:

I can say most of the soap operas **do make women change or see the world in another perspective***. In most cases I will make an example by this... mostly women in soap operas usually follow a wealthy man...a man with money, car...they tend to think if they have this person/man, their lives will be fine... you see. They would be following a bigger life than them, soap operas portray such things, where women will not take step by step process of developing herself/her life, but they say 'because I saw there...so and so can move from rural areas and find a men, and her life changes for the better...so what is the point of finding a job instead of a man? So, if I go to Jo'burg for example and find a man/blesser, I will be fine. (**my emphasis in bold*)

The above passage suggests that viewers relate soap opera characters to real life instances and situations, to a point where they see themselves in the actors' situation. To allow a fictional text to let you "see the world in another perspective" suggests that soap operas are influential and able to penetrate viewer's cognitive space.

8.6 Cultivation of women's potential in soap operas

The discussion on soap opera narrative's ability to portray and cultivate women's potential, revealed that soap opera characters and storylines to a certain extent inspire women to explore their capabilities. Also, a sizeable portion of participants also believed that women are still exposed to stereotypical, submissive, and traditional perspectives, which undermines their potential and development. Nevertheless, the opinions of those who felt that soap operas fail to positively depict or encourage women's potential carry more weight than the former perspective. The reason for this is that the majority, represented by 57%, did not express their opinions in a substantial manner to demonstrate their level of certainty. On the other hand, the minority that disagreed, accounting for 22%, presented a plethora of terminology and ideas to bolster their level of certainty in their perception. The remaining 21% responded indifferently to the question. The following maps depict concepts that were derived from a meticulous investigation of the participants' statements, to ascertain whether soap opera narratives recognise and cultivate women's potential and development or not. The following map was developed to capture the ideas of those participants who claimed that soap operas did not recognise and cultivate women's potential and abilities. The map provides a summary of terms or words they used in their responses, which carry their concerns about women's representation on this regard.

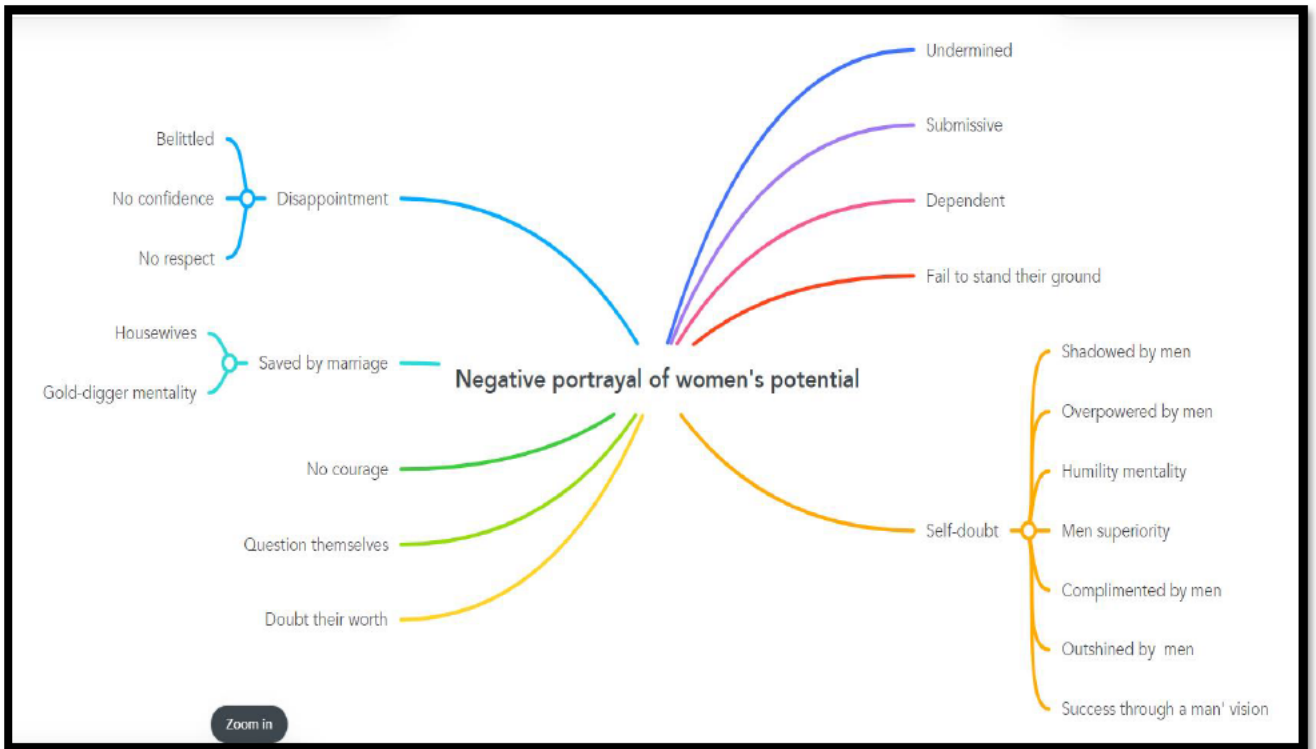


Figure 7-20 Negative traits showing women's lack of potential in their roles

Several expressions and words from the list above were repeated throughout the questionnaires and interviews. The words *submissive* and *dependent* appeared twice, while *men's superiority* also appeared twice. Additionally, the word *self-doubt* appeared three times. Participants referred more to *Uzalo* as an example of unequal relations and characteristics that undermine and question women's abilities. Nkunzi is preferred as the leader of Indlende rural village over Nomkhosi, whose deceased father held the position of chief for a considerable period. The council (which is dominated by men) and the community members, openly opposes the idea of having a female leader and instead backs Nkunzi, even though they are unaware of his background. Another example is the police station; a distinct gender hierarchy is evident, as males occupy authoritative roles such as the captain and police commissioner. Only the Trailblazers and K-Mask FM have a strong presence of women's voice and authority in *Uzalo*. The topic of women's subjugation was consistently raised during the focus group discussions. Most women in the group concurred with this view, as most of them raised their voices in support, with respondent 11 (FGD1) adding that:

Even if a woman starts or leads something for herself, men always want to have a share in it. Remember when MaNgcobo in *Uzalo* started her own club, Nkunzi wanted to have a share, there was a fight about it and Nkunzi ended up burning it down, to see that women are portrayed as powerless and I hoped MaNgcobo would take steps about it, but she did not. She continued being Nkunzi's partner and forgot about her independence. So, women show powerlessness because of men.

Muvhango was identified by a participant in FGD 3 as a soap opera that promotes a mind-set of female humility through its depiction of Venda cultural values, notably in the Thathe region. Susan's character was analysed through the lens of the belief that women must challenge certain cultural norms to fully realise their capabilities. Susan's nursing career was confined to the hospital corridors, limiting the opportunity for her abilities to be highlighted. Nevertheless, Susan's narrative took a different turn when she made the decision to end her marriage and assumed the role of Thathe's mayor. Participants indicated that producers understand women's potential but are hesitant to consistently portray it.

Participants provided feedback on the cultural practice of women bowing when they encounter individuals in positions of power, typically men. They believed that this solely applies to women, which diminishes them and compels them to submit, implying that women are incapable of asserting themselves. Media is intended to play a part in conveying the beliefs, traditions, customs, and values of a society to the next generation of the same ethnic group (Maseeme, 2021). Interview respondent 9 asserted that culture can serve as a means of subjugating women and keeping them under the authority of men. *Muvhango* features several images that convey the notion of male superiority and female inferiority, as perceived by the participants. The obedience of women in these images serves to uphold the existing social order of the Venda culture.



Figure 7-21 Vanda cultural practice- women bowing

Participants emphasised that the portrayal of women at Mukhwevho-Mudjalifa Construction (MMC) is distinct from Thathe setting. Women at MMC are depicted as developing their potential through their occupational roles, even though they face ongoing challenges from men. Consequently, MMC has appointed CEOs of both genders, so demonstrating *Muvhango's* capacity to acknowledge and portray women's competence beyond the confines of their domestic sphere. Participants also identified positive characteristics that represent the potential of women. Interview respondent 6 for example, stated that observing many women advocating for their rights, and displaying their ability in the corporate world would inspire confidence in many others. This observation indicates that soap operas possess the capacity to foster women's empowerment within society. The images below exemplify women's acknowledgement at MMC and Thathe.



Figure 7-22 Khumo stands tall at MMC boardroom- women's potential

Participants acknowledged Khumo's courage to face men at MMC to a point of plotting their downfall, even though she used evil schemes and this was for her own interests. Nevertheless, participants identified her as fearless and action-driven, which are traits associated with men. However, Khumo's rebellious behaviour can be associated with Eve in the Mary/Eve dichotomy as she challenges the expected feminine norms of humility and submission.



Figure 7-23 Susan as the Mayor of Thathe- women's potential in soap operas

Susan's character was of interest to most women in focus group discussion 3. Her character resembles a woman who is in control, after being a 'nobody' for years in the soap opera. They defined her as a go-getter who defied odds, thus giving women the needed confidence boost in both media depictions and. During Women's Day celebrations 2022, the fan-favourite *Muvhango* actresses Candy Magidimisa, Maumela Mahuwa, and Constance Sibiyi are celebrating Women's Day by paying homage to their characters Susan, Vho-Hangwani, and Sharon Mukwevho (*The South African*, 2022). According to this news network, Candy Magidimisa commented on her role as Sharon, stating that Sharon's complex emotions is intriguing as she started as a small character, a waiter who now transformed into the manager at Waterside and has intentions to own the restaurant. The actress-singer Maumela Mahuwa said the following about her on screen character:

Susan is a helpful reminder that a woman doesn't always have to have her life in complete order. I admire strong-willed women like Susan, who do not allow their circumstances to determine their future. Despite all the hurdles thrown her way in her marriage to a polygamous chief, she forged her way to be a professional nurse and gained confidence, stature, and courage (*The South African*, August 2022).

Pastor and actress Constance Sibiyi stated that Vho-Hangwani possesses a determined and unwavering character, displaying strong determination and concentration. Sibiyi added that she appreciates Vho-Hangwani's efforts in debunking the prevailing stereotypes surrounding women who are married to members of the royal family as she advocates for principles of female autonomy. (Seleme 2022). In addition to what Mahuwa and Sibiyi said about powerful women characters, participants in the study suggested a list of attributes that they associate with empowered and empowering women in soap operas. Figure 8-23 below provides a summary of these attributes.

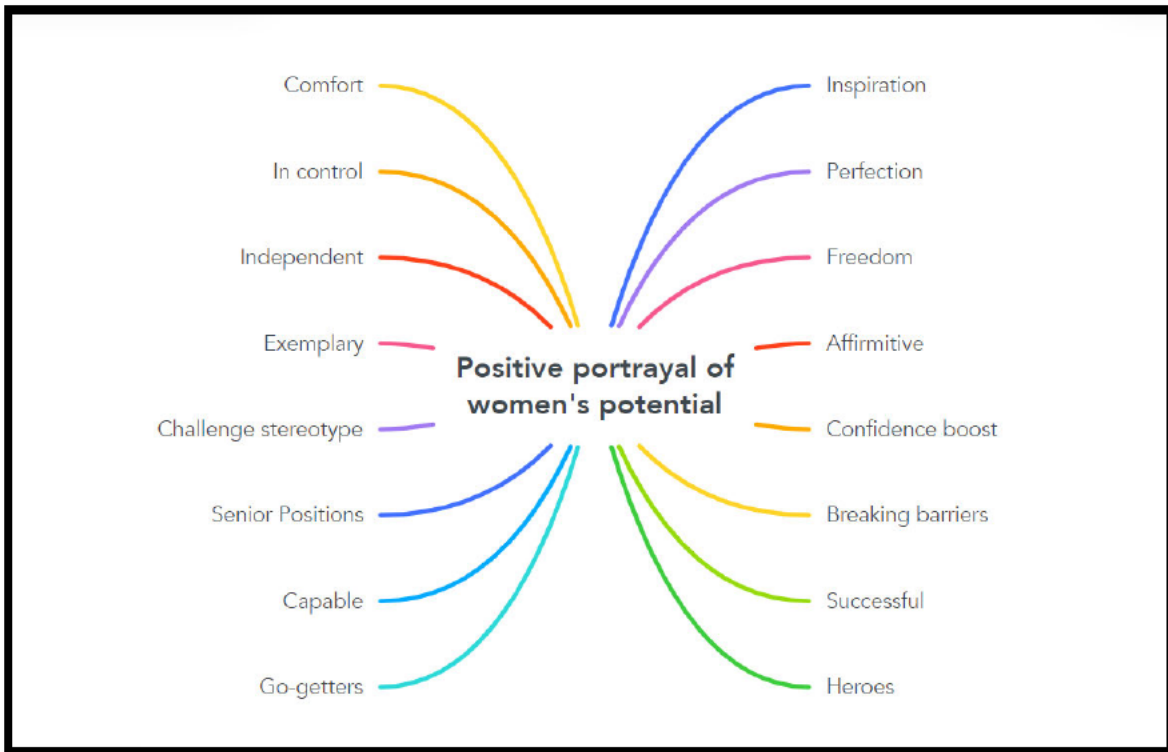


Figure 7-24 Positive traits showing women's potential in their roles

Muvhango provides some room for the acknowledgment of women's potential and their empowerment in the corporate world and community governance. At MMC, several women rose to leadership. For example, Mpho (chairwoman of the board), Gugu (once a COO), Rendani (CEO, though short-lived). At Thathe village as well, Susan is the mayor, these serve some notable strides for women to escape the pressure of serving men, though it does not come without challenges. Most women in *Muvhango* are ambitious and fight for their position and recognition in spaces where they appear, thus suggesting a paradigm shift from the conventional representation of women in soap operas.

Based on the perceptions from the participants, soap operas offer a compass through which women can navigate their way out of patriarchal ideological chains. Some participants felt that there are some inspirational women characters on television, who do things in perfection thus providing a voice for women who often feel undermined. One respondent added that "if we can see many women fight for their rights, show their abilities in the corporate world, many will have confidence in themselves" (interview respondent 10). This perspective suggests that what viewers see on screen

becomes a point of reference to warrant fight for justice concerning women's issues and daily struggles. This re-iterates a statement by Brunsdon (2005) that the ambivalence of soap opera is still present, but it can also be concluded that they show how the woman can overcome the patriarchal oppressions in a good, humoured way. Using internal and external realism, the soap opera creates a believable reconstruction of current events that affect women and their families (Weller, 2013). The following statements from a participant agree with Brunsdon:

I believe that people in this generation are trying by all means to change the stereotype around women, meaning that they would have to explore their full potential and go against the image that has been portrayed about women to break or change the stereotype (FGD 4 respondent 3).

Furthermore, it might be contended that soap operas illuminate specific social gender dynamics, enabling women to confront and equip themselves to surmount these challenges. Iqbal and Abdar (2016) assert that women in television are shattering barriers that were once believed to be insurmountable. In support of this view, a questionnaire respondent added that some individuals may feel compelled to demonstrate our capacity to be leaders and manage large corporations. Soap operas possess significant potential to influence the audience by portraying an empowered contemporary woman, thereby contributing to the process of societal transformation (Iqbal and Abdar, 2016). The upcoming subsection discusses a few examples of what is seen as a shifting patterns based on some women's roles and positions on the soap operas studied.

8.7 Paradigm Shift: Changing gender dynamics in soap operas?

The observations indicate that there have been subtle alterations and adjustments observed in certain episodes and narrative of the examined soap operas with regards to women's' roles. Although this movement may seem minor and unimportant, it is crucial to record it to chart future advancements. Textual analysis chapters revealed varying degrees of change in gender dynamics, providing evidence to support the claim that the traditional role and portrayal of men and women is being challenged by a rising, influential, and knowledgeable female presence (Mwaura and Oiruria, 2017).

8.7.1 The ascent of women to positions of prominence.

The soap operas have seen many shifts, both in terms of nature and intensity. In the case of *Uzalo*, a significant transformation has occurred with regards to women, who have become increasingly powerful and are posing a threat to men in some respects. Mam Njinji's character serves as a notable illustration. She has assumed control in KwaMashu as the most dreaded and respected woman, following in the footsteps of Nkunzi, who has departed KwaMashu to pursue his leadership in Indlende. Another trend has emerged where women are assuming control over their lives and transforming their circumstances for the better, independent of male assistance. Noted examples include a business hub that was managed by a woman, with most enterprises within the hub being owned by women. Women have played a prominent role and made substantial contributions to the community, both at the hub and in the operation of Trailblazers, a youth empowerment program. *Uzalo* highlights a significant and unsettling change when Mam Njinji and her daughter Nomaswazi embrace a life of crime, a domain traditionally dominated by men.

8.7.2 Empowered women and parenting men.

Within the television series *Skeem Saam*, a parallel trend has been observed, wherein young women have assumed agency over their life and transitioned from the role of girlfriends to that of professionals and businesswomen. Khwezi and Pretty serve as exemplars. This represents a notable change in thinking that indicates progress and consistency in women, who are frequently depicted as reliant on males. Another notable change in *Skeem Saam* was the portrayal of men's role in parenting, specifically Magongwa and Babeile. The portrayal of men as single parents in the media challenges traditional gender roles and signifies a notable change in societal norms. However, out of the three soap operas being analysed, *Skeem Saam* appears to be making the least progress in terms of this fundamental change, as most of the female characters still exhibit strong stereotypes.

8.7.3 Female leadership.

Furthermore, women have ascended to prominent leadership roles, with Susan assuming the office of mayor in Thathe and Rendani serving as the CEO of MMC.

Throughout the existence of the *Muvhango*, both positions have consistently been held by men, until Rendani became the second woman to assume the role of CEO, following Thandaza. Despite these advancements in women's representation, it is challenging to fully celebrate them due to the presence of numerous factors that indicate the contrary. The leadership of women is frequently questioned and causes unease among many, which indicates that women are still not widely perceived as capable of assuming leadership positions. Susan and Rendani encounter many types of discrimination, and their leadership is seen with disdain. Occasionally, individuals find themselves in situations where they are predisposed to failure and poor decision-making due to emotional entanglements, romantic enticements, and other related concerns. The soap opera makes progress in its depiction of women, but regresses by highlighting the flaws and ultimate downfall of female leadership. The subsequent subsection focusses on the theoretical implications that arise from these findings regarding the portrayal of women in the media and its resulting effects.

8.8 Theoretical implications of the findings

The SABC is required to deliver content that caters to minority groups, including considerations of race, gender, social and economic status, and language, in accordance with the PSB mandate. The proponents of the social responsibility normative theory advocate for media to collectively represent all social groups and reflect societal diversity by providing media users with access to various viewpoints (Pitout and Ndlovu, 2001). The themes interrogate the representation of women as a social group in soap operas. Each theme exposes the inequitable representation of women, thereby challenging the broadcaster's social responsibility regarding gender issues. The social responsibility theory urges media to uphold the democratic framework of the country by displaying a variety of perspectives that enhance the visibility of women and facilitate discourse, critique, and public expression (Govender, 2015).

The findings suggest that media representations of women are likely to shape and affect societal attitudes and impressions of them. The media has a societal responsibility to rectify prevailing preconceptions about women rather than perpetuating them. Boswell (2002) asserts that the media has major influence and

corresponding responsibility in moulding public perceptions of reality. The mass media can serve to maintain the existing quo, encompassing racial and gender parity, while also functioning as a catalyst for transformation towards a more just and equitable society. The media profoundly impacts women's opinions, societal roles, and the standards of acceptable gender roles. These assertions suggest that the media have not upheld the dignity of women as a societal collective. Govender (2015) contends that the insufficient representation of women's substantial contributions to society, along with sexualised and stereotypical portrayals of women, may encourage audiences to perceive women as lacking strength and influence.

The challenges faced by women in contemporary media culture necessitate careful reporting on issues related to their leadership and social status. This arises from the prevalence of female violence and disparities in access to opportunities in South Africa, resulting in oppressive conditions for women. Omotoso (2019) argues that the media landscape perpetuates the oppression of women, necessitating a response from feminists to these issues. Omotoso asserts that feminists can achieve this by analysing, evaluating, and, when necessary, substituting traditional concepts of moral philosophy. This will significantly contribute to the elimination of ignorance, distortion, and oppression stemming from the historically male perspective often disseminated by the media.

Governments, educational institutions, and non-governmental organisations bear the responsibility of eliminating all manifestations of discrimination against women. Furthermore, the mainstream media bears significant responsibility in this matter. The media significantly influences the distribution and interpretation of information, innovation, and news (Narayana and Ahamad, 2016). The study's findings indicate that, despite some progress in women's empowerment portrayed in all three soap operas, the roles allocated to female characters are characterised by domestication, subordination, dependence, and restricted social position. Narayana and Ahamad (2016) emphasise the importance of producing and disseminating media content that displays women leaders, who bring diverse life experiences to their leadership roles, including the management of work and family responsibilities as mothers, professionals, managers, and entrepreneurs, thereby offering role models, especially for young women. These elements are evident in the soap operas under consideration;

however, they are not as pronounced or underlined as those that perpetuate women's marginalisation. The findings align with Govender (2015), whose analysis revealed that while the depiction of women in magazines is advancing, it continues to be constrained by the dominance of stereotypical portrayals in magazine content.

Based on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Three, the ensuing ramifications of the study's findings are emphasised. The content and representation in soap operas have insufficiently guaranteed media accountability by not delivering equitable, gender-balanced, and gender-sensitive entertainment. Moreover, this lack of accountability reinforces feminist media theory's claim that media have reduced women's importance in public debate (McQuail, 2010). This requires continuous and thorough scrutiny of media to uncover the cultural frameworks that underpin media representations sustaining hegemonic power structures (Vivid, 2022). Ultimately, soap operas impact viewers, shaping their attitudes, particularly about social and professional aspirations. The upcoming chapter examines these implications in formulating a model for women's empowerment in media content and imagery.

8.9 Conclusion

The chapter commenced with an examination of viewership trends of soap operas, which indicated that women exhibit greater interest compared to men. This was supported by the fact that a larger number of female students actively participated in all the data gathering methods employed. This affirms the enduring consensus that soap operas are targeted towards a female audience, a notion that has been supported by various scholarly investigations of the genre (Kuhn, 1984, Gledhill, 1997, Gerathy, 1991, Biswas and Laskar, 2021). The debate on participants' opinion of gender dynamics in soap operas revealed a prevalence of negative perceptions towards women, as indicated by the offered attributes. The traits were utilised to evaluate the portrayal of women in soap operas and the predominant dynamics of relationships between men and women. The study focused on the perceived roles of women in the family, workplace, and community, and presented its findings through thematic analysis. Most of the topics expressed concerns and discontent with the portrayal of women on television soap operas. Simultaneously, there were also seen

slight changes that accommodate strong female characters in the television shows *Uzalo* and *Muvhango*.

Through the examination of the media effects, it is evident that participants had a strong awareness of the impact of media material on their cognitive space and behavioural patterns. Participants demonstrated the efficacy of modelling, as most of them could identify with the portrayed female characters and wish to imitate them, particularly MaNgcobo from *Uzalo*. This emphasised the significance of portraying women who have authority and influence, as these portrayals are seen as empowering to female viewers. Rogers (as referenced in Dines, 2003) warns about the little influence women have in soap operas. Women are constantly subjected to an all-pervasive instructor, which has a position of power that demands obedience without question (Dines, 2003). While these minor instances of male authority and female submission may seem inconsequential individually, they collectively contribute to a significant impact (Dines, 2003). The study's results align with this perspective since participants readily recognised the prevailing power disparity between men and women in soap operas. Furthermore, there is concurrence between the inferences drawn in the chapters on textual analysis and the participants' judgements regarding the paradigm shift. Participants also recognise that there is a slight move to enhance the portrayal of women as powerful individuals, highlighting their capabilities, despite the prevailing adverse depiction.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions, recommendations, and potential changes in perspective by bringing together the discussions from the preceding chapters, the literature studied in chapters two and three, the textual analysis conducted in chapters five to seven, and the findings from the data assessed in chapter eight. The study's objectives are re-examined to gain a deeper understanding of how the research findings are relevant to them. There are various justifications for undertaking research, including testing existing ideas and hypotheses, identifying trends and patterns, and exploring and describing a phenomenon. The study endeavoured to address all three objectives but primarily focused on identifying trends and patterns that are relevant to the portrayal of gender dynamics in media throughout society. This chapter begins by presenting a concise overview of the findings and potential conclusions. It then discusses the possibility of a change in the identified trends and patterns. A few recommendations and precautions that are necessary to address the issue of media representations of women and gender in general are also provided in this chapter. This chapter also presents a proposed model for promoting women's empowerment and recognition in the media. Lastly, it highlights areas for future research that are important but have not yet been explored.

9.2 Conclusions and implications of the findings

The primary objective of the study was to examine the portrayal of women in television soap operas, focussing on the roles they assume. The study aimed to analyse the stereotypical and ideological implications associated with women's representations in soap operas and assess their impact. The prevailing literature and data findings show that women are still depicted unfairly in the media, despite the noted shifts in some respects, as recorded under "paradigm shift" discussion of the study. The studied material focused on gender stereotypes and inequality, and these themes were also identified during the textual analysis of the three soap operas. The analysis aimed to scrutinise the status of women in domestic, professional, and societal contexts. In all

these domains, women continue to occupy a disadvantaged position in contrast to men.

This is a worrisome issue, especially when considering documents like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA), which emerged from the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. The BDPA identified the media as one of twelve crucial areas of concern for the progress and empowerment of women. As per the Beijing Declaration of 2015, the media is believed to have a responsibility in freeing people's minds. However, it is more commonly seen as contributing to the problem rather than providing a solution. The South African government is dedicated to gender equality and acknowledges the significant role the media plays in transforming social discourse. This is exemplified in the following words:

As we grapple as a society to address the scourge of GBV and unequal gender dynamics, a key sector that is often overlooked is the media and creative industry. These industries hold the power to influence how we view ourselves and society at large” says Anne Githuku Shongwe, UN Women Representative for UN Women's South Africa Multi-Country Office (SAMCO) (Republic of South Africa 2020).

The above statement reiterates that media is a powerful socialisation tool that needs to use its liberty responsibly. Theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall have written extensively on the relationship between the media and ideological endorsements, which leads to certain groups in society accepting their domination as natural. Literature review and research findings concur that media are instrumental in shaping people's identities and relationships, as they provide a compellingly relatable content. Soap operas were established as one of the most popular television programmes, put by those who love and enjoy them in a position of influence and their characters as models for their behaviour and lifestyle. The following subsection revisits each objective and offers conclusions based on the findings.

9.2.1 Objective 1: Examining the ways in which women are represented in soap operas through roles and status of the women characters

During data analysis, five themes emerged in the process of examining the perceived roles and representation of women in soap operas. Domestication of women was the first theme identified; under this theme the main perceptions from the participants were that women are still confined to home spaces and womanly duties, even when they are working. According to the findings, this is the root cause for women to endure low social status when compared to men. This supports literature view that soap opera story is dense with patriarchal values, with women always cast as victims and oppressed groups, with story patterns that portray women as second-class citizens. (Sulistijanto, Bungin and Haryono, 2023). However, there were cases that were brought up suggesting that women are not simply complying with the powerlessness and subordination. Few women characters were quoted as examples of women portrayed as challenging the status quo from all three soap operas under study.

Another aspect that came up was the objectification of women. Some women are often portrayed as seductresses and objects of male sexual pleasures and voyeurism. Main character for this theme was only identified in *Skeem Saam*, in that way limiting its popularity, but its existence cannot be ruled out. Men using their power to keep women subordinated and dependent, while women were perceived as using their bodies to elevate themselves to a level of men also came up. Sexual objectification of women was perceived as the cause of loss of dignity and respect for women, as exemplified by Melita of *Skeem Saam*. It became clear that the selected operas lack capacity to display women's power without being elevated by men, hence marriage and relationships were identified by participants as an area were women feature. Limitations on roles assigned to women on screen poked several questions about what soap operas consider to be worthy or of value about women. In their large numbers, participants agreed that there are role models on television soap operas; however, the quality of discussion during interviews and focus groups revealed that there is a lack on this area, based on a few attributes that they consider for whom they see as a model. It can therefore be argued that soap operas are still stagnant in terms of fully celebrating and exhibiting 21st-century women's abilities, as they still confine women's characters to positions determined by patriarchal ideology standards.

9.2.2 Objective 2: Exploring the stereotypical and ideological connotations carried by soap operas through the female characters

The study's findings confirm existing knowledge that women's roles are heavily embroiled in stereotypes. Women's lack of capacity to lead appears throughout all three soap operas under study, in varying degrees. It is argued that one important indicator that a society has achieved gender equality is the presence of equal numbers of women and men in leadership positions (Eagly and Sczesny, 2009). If South African reality were to be judged by its cultural products, such as soap operas, it could be concluded that we are far from gender equality. Every sphere that displays leadership in all three soaps has utterly declared women as per the stereotype that women are not leaders. It is stated that, as the number of women in management roles increases and organisations place a greater emphasis on diversity, a subsequent change in perceptions of women as leader-like is expected (Duehr and Bono, 2006). Perceptions are key in determining what opportunities are suitable for women or men, and the media are key in determining perceptions.

It is evident from this study that perceptions already put women in a compromised position concerning leadership and decision-making. The examples used to demonstrate this conclusion were the established male authority in all spheres of work in *Skeem Saam's* Turf High School and University of Turfloop Turf hospital. KwaMashu police station as the main workplace in *Uzalo* was also identified as establishing male authority and marginalising women, so is Nkunzi's power and authority in the whole township of KwaMashu. In all these places women appear playing men-supporting roles which make them appear less significant compared to the men they support. These are stereotypical because they carry assumptions that women cannot hold leadership or dominant positions in society. These gender stereotypes, sometimes shown through cultural practices in storylines, contribute to gender inequality in a subtle manner disguised as entertainment (Blöse, 2020).

The lack of leadership capacity of female characters in the selected soaps directly leads to another stereotype that women are inferior to men. This is shown in many ways, from women occupying less challenging or less mentally stimulating jobs compared to men to reporting to men about decisions to be made. Most women in

these soap operas are treated as men's tools to achieve their goals, which makes women play more men-supporting roles than independently performing their tasks, particularly in the corporate sector. This view is backed by Nehanda (2020) who argued that:

if filmmakers are not representing women as victims, they are depicting them in domestic spheres. We see them as mothers, housewives, and cooks. This is as a result of the society's cultural values which mainly place women within marginal traditional roles, which surprisingly, is at variance with the modern-day realities of contemporary African women (46).

At MMC, women are assigned lower responsibilities and are compelled to report to men. For instance, the CEOs have predominantly been men, with women occupying these positions infrequently. Every influential woman in *Muvhango* fulfils a function that is both influenced by and influences the vision of males. For instance, Rendani briefly assumed the position of CEO to support and improve the status of the Mukwevhos. Gugu had to report to Tenda, who held the position of board chairperson. Imani, however, had the responsibility of satisfying and safeguarding her husband James in all her interactions as the MMC architect. These scenarios portray women in a way that promotes their submission and subordination, which the media presents as a typical behaviour.

The soap operas in the study also perpetuate common stereotypes, such as the portrayal of women being limited to roles focused on loving and serving. This can manifest in many ways, such as the types of employment they have or the companies they operate within their community. Most women in soap operas are involved in conflicts related to their children. For instance, Suzan had to temporarily stop working to protect Vutshilo from the danger posed by Tenda. Her responsibilities as mayor were overshadowed by her need to prioritise her son, while Chief Azwindini remained mostly unaffected by the circumstance. Gabisile has also made the most unfavourable choices by attempting to shield her son from legal consequences because of his promiscuous behaviour. Hangwani had to abruptly abandon all other tasks and provide support to Rendani during her intense spiritual ordeal. The only issue with this is that soap operas portray it as a woman's responsibility to fix their children's problems, while men prioritise pursuits such as running a company or community. Despite the prevalence of disadvantaged portrayals of women, there were occasions in the soap

operas where these depictions were contested, as strong female characters arose in each of the shows.

9.2.3 Objective 3: Assessing probable effects carried by the representations of women in soap operas.

The study's third objective was to evaluate the impact of soap opera characters, plots, trends, and events on viewers, as perceived from their perspective. The fundamental inference is that media content possesses the capacity to influence those who engage with it in diverse ways. Various theories on the effects of media and communication were presented to illustrate the varied ways in which viewers are influenced by media messages. Andeso (2019) argues that the influence of media is significant, since it teaches adolescent girls and boys about societal issues and appropriate behaviour when they watch soap operas. Understanding media effects is critical for society, as Andeso (2019) argues that audiences can identify with the circumstances and situations shown in soap operas, which play a significant role in disseminating ideas.

The study demonstrated the strong applicability of stereotype theory to soap operas, as women's positions are intricately linked to pre-established gender stereotypes. Viewers of these programs run the risk of perpetuating prejudices and identifying themselves with the characters. Put simply, soap operas that contain stereotypes portray characters in a way that conforms to certain preconceptions, which may discourage viewers from critically analysing them under the pretext of it being mere entertainment. Most participants in the research mentioned various concepts and lifestyles they have picked up from soap operas. Female participants expressed that soap operas have the potential to shape ideas and expectations towards women in society. Moreover, soap operas are considered 'relatable' according to other interviewees, who asserted that they could identify with one of the characters. The issue lies in the fact that viewers' motivations, such as engaging in characters' lives vicariously or perceiving them as substitute companions, can be seen as negative influences that continue to uphold the genre's male-dominated beliefs and behaviours (Stern, Russell, and Russell, 2007).

The findings indicate that soap operas have a significant role in shaping societal expectations towards women, hence influencing society's perception of women and

their prescribed behaviours. Soap operas serve as a measure by which society evaluates women and places pressure on them to conform to specific behaviours or accept certain forms of treatment, as seen in soap operas. The final component of effects observed pertains to the cognitive impact, in which ladies assert that they utilise soap opera characters as a benchmark to delineate the extent to which they can progress in life. This is an urgent issue, as these imaginary individuals and storylines have the potential to deceive women or establish unrealistic patterns and habits that do not support women's empowerment and progress.

9.3 Proposed model for women's acknowledgment and empowerment in the media.

The fourth and last purpose of this study was to create a model that recognises and empowers women in the media business and content creation. Media have a crucial role in society beyond being mere sources of entertainment. Given their widespread appeal and substantial expansion, they have the potential to actively contribute to various aspects of social transformation. During the apartheid era, the media played a crucial role in maintaining the apartheid ideology until alternative media emerged and began opposing the government's racially discriminatory tactics. The media had a crucial role in confronting racial inequality, which in turn helped establish a democratic state that South Africa has been benefiting from for the past 30 years (Fourie, 2008). This statement highlights the ability of the media to provide or revoke authority as needed. Despite South Africa's democratic system and the existence of rights and freedoms in various areas, women, who make up a significant portion of the country's population, continue to experience various forms of discrimination. The latest census data from 2020 indicates that the overall population of South Africa is 62,027,503, with males accounting for 48.5% and females accounting for 51.5%. (Source: Statistics South Africa, 2022). Although women constitute slightly more than half of the population, they continue to be under-represented in positions of authority and power. The recognition of gender equality as a fundamental concept is enshrined in South Africa's Constitution. The Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill specifically advocates for a 50% representation in decision-making roles, as reported by Statistics South Africa (2022).

Given the context, it is necessary to create a paradigm that guarantees the media's recognition of women and their active involvement in empowering them through their content and products. The media, by propagating gender discrimination and degrading women, are comparable to apartheid in terms of their negative impact. Therefore, it is crucial to focus attention and make targeted efforts to address this issue. The model presented below (9.3) acknowledges the need of ensuring that women are portrayed respectfully and fairly in the media, recognising this as a fundamental human right. This paradigm advocates for the recognition and empowerment of women in the media, which should start with acknowledging their fundamental human rights. Recognising women is intricately linked to comprehending and conveying the progress made by women in the media. This will put an end to the extensive history of women being marginalised on our screens. Therefore, media content must be based on thorough research. It should accurately depict and potentially shape national advancements and achievements in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has designated Deputy Chief Justice Mandisa Maya as the Chief Justice of South Africa, starting from September 1, 2024. This appointment represents a noteworthy achievement for the country (Lambley 2024). The news media have praised this as the inaugural appointment of a female in the history of South Africa. This demonstrates that society has gained trust in the leadership and ability of women. As a social institution, the media should accept the responsibility of embracing these advancements to respect women. The model also urges the media to actively monitor and consider the impact of their content on the audience, thereby promoting responsible and accountable entertainment. In line with this assumption, it is imperative that women's voices and perspectives are amplified in media circles. This can only be achieved if women are provided with platforms that enable them to access resources for creating alternative material, while simultaneously ensuring accountability and responsibility. The purpose of this is to prevent women's expression and platform from being perceived as anger, opposition, or a kind of gender discrimination against men. The country is progressing towards the empowerment of women. However, the media is lagging in their support of this movement by only highlighting a narrow range of empowered and empowering women.

The proposed model is based on the feminist media ethics approach, which emphasises the importance of being sensitive to issues related to news and entertainment representations, as well as addressing complaints about discrimination in the workplace (Steiner, 2020). The model also incorporates elements of liberal feminist ideas, which suggest that gender inequality arises from restricting women and girls' access to civil rights and the distribution of social resources, such as education and work (Mohajan, 2022). The model posits that achieving equal and equitable gender representation in the media necessitates the recognition of women's rights and a reassessment of women's inclusion in media business and production to ensure their voices are heard.

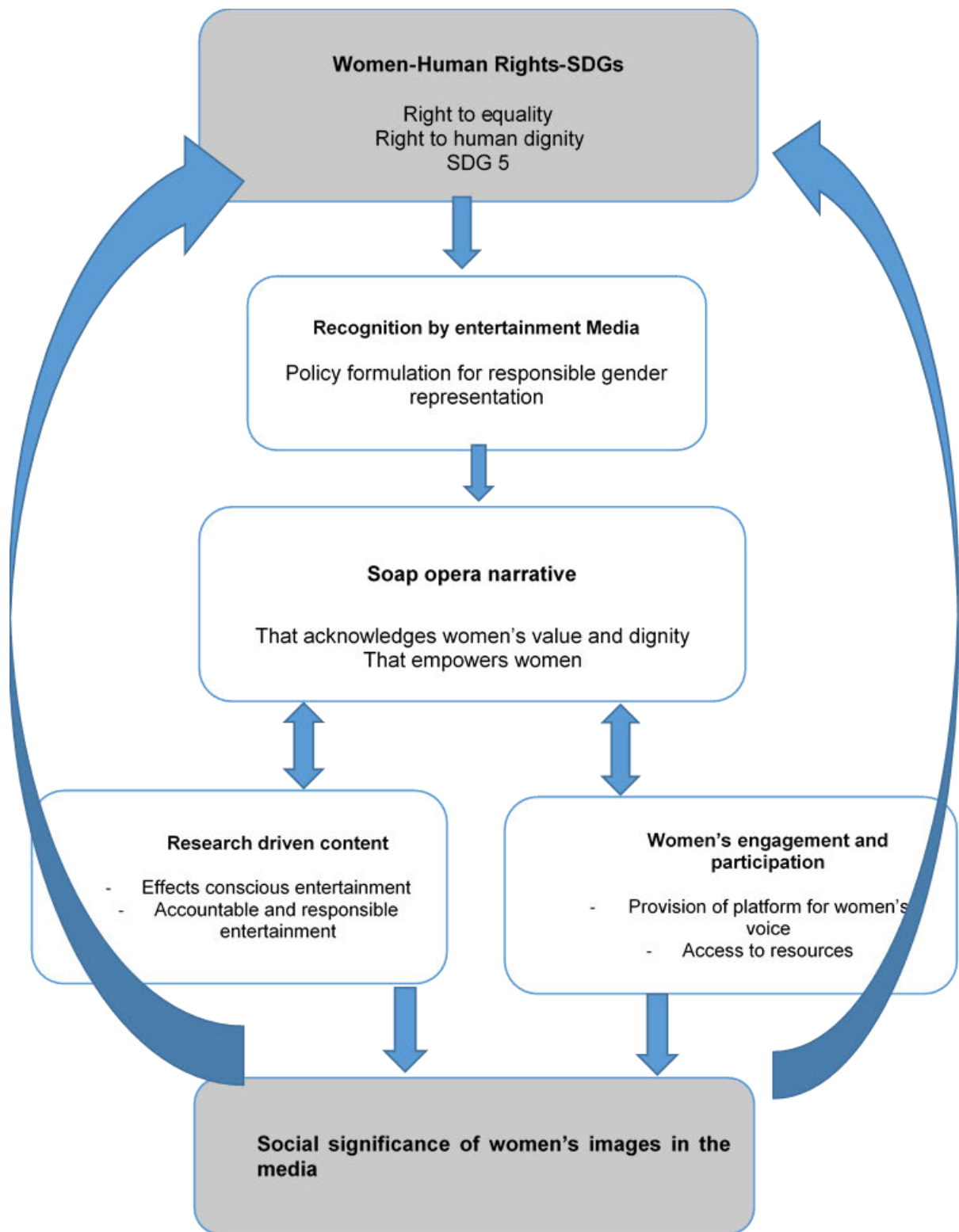


Figure 8-1 Proposed model for women acknowledgement and empowerment in the media

9.4 Recommendations

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of objectives established by the United Nations to address many inequities in global society. For all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to hold importance and relevance for society, it is essential for the media to take an active role. The media's duty extends beyond providing information and raising awareness; it also includes promoting fairness and producing responsible artistic and functional content. Existing discussions on the role of media in the SDGs have primarily been around the limited awareness and comprehension of how media content can hinder progress in achieving gender equality. The media in Africa plays a significant role in contributing to the accomplishments of the Sustainable Development Goals (Chatterjee, 2020). This research has extensively shown, especially in chapter two and chapter eight that media material should not be assumed to be insignificant, since it can profoundly impact viewers. To achieve sustainable development, especially in terms of gender equality, it is necessary to thoroughly examine and analyse media content to identify ways in which the media may contribute to advancement. Some may contend that this idea signifies a curtailment of the media's artistic autonomy, yet exercising freedom with a sense of accountability and caution might enhance our society. The role of the media in sustainable development is significant, as it defines and appreciates the responsibilities of the media in situations when they are inevitably involved in societal events and processes (Christians et al., 2010).

The concept social responsibility should not be perceived as a means of restricting the freedom of professionals, but rather as a means of acknowledging their influential role in society and promoting the responsible and advantageous exercise of this influence. The persistent depiction of women in an unjust, unfavourable, and degrading position has a significant impact on their sense of self and how society perceives them, thereby necessitating a thorough reassessment. Mwilu (2010: 1) asserts that:

The lack of respect for women that leads to rampant violence against them is fed by media tendencies to portray women in sexually demeaning ways. There is a serious need to prioritise and regulate the interrogation of media messages, so that whatever power they have to create and sustain meanings is not wielded at the expense of women and girls ... with rape statistics as high as South Africa's, any portrayals that glamorise the sexual objectification of women should be

discouraged with the resolve and seriousness they demand. Any efforts to counter rape need to take account of what the media are promoting as normal.

The above passage alludes to the importance of media images and their effect on society, thus intensifying the need for accountability from those who produce them.

The soap operas being discussed belong to the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which is a public service broadcaster (PSB). Public service broadcasters possess a distinct mandate that distinguishes them from commercial or private broadcasters. The SABC is expected to adhere to the fundamental principles that regulate any PSB, including independence, distinctiveness, public funding, and accountability. These principles have a direct or indirect impact on the actions of the broadcaster and the type of content they aim to provide. Research indicates that the SABC has not successfully adhered to these values and, consequently, has made a modest shift towards commercialisation (Abboo 2008). The process of commercialisation has endangered the integrity of programming since the focus has shifted from being accountable to the audience to prioritising sales and increasing ratings. The majority of SABC's soap operas get elevated ratings, indicating their widespread appeal. The crucial inquiry to be posed is if these programs demonstrate the broadcaster's responsibility to its audience or if they provide a larger share of advertising revenue, hence supporting the broadcaster. The concern with ratings and the aspiration to enhance viewing may have an adverse impact on the content. Afrika raises this point in his study of *Muvhango*, stating that:

The Series Writer hinted that the character of Gugu was going to be developed into Thandaza's replacement as a powerful woman in the series. However, due to pressures to increase viewership, Gugu's character is now involved in a murder plot – a move that made it impossible to redeem her character and make her a shero (Afrika 2021: 184).

This is a political economy issue that necessitates attention in connection with the broadcaster's financial approach. Popularity and high ratings should not supersede the societal needs that Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) should prioritise accountability. Furthermore, the legislation that regulates the SABC does not sufficiently guarantee the institution's autonomy from the government or its responsibility to the public (Abboo, 2008). To ensure accountability, it is necessary to

establish programming regulations and codes of practice that particularly address the creative content of a Public Service Broadcaster (PSB). It is necessary to supervise fictional and entertainment programs to guarantee that producers do not misuse their artistic freedom. As to the SABC editorial policy (2020), material must be devoid of any form of prejudice and stereotyping, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, or any other factor. Broadcasters are urged to establish their own internal rules for addressing discrimination and stereotyping. Additionally, the policy specifies that:

Given South Africa's past, and the role of public service media in healing divisions, it is imperative for the SABC not to broadcast programmes that promote discrimination or stereotyping on the grounds of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or disability. To this end, the SABC is committed to avoiding language, expressions and images that reinforce stereotyping, and offend communities or individuals....The SABC is further committed to reflecting diversity positively and undertakes to provide content that is devoid of stereotypical representations in respect of persons with disabilities, gender, race and sexual orientation and any other South Africans who have often been marginalised, or represented in narrow and stereotypical terms ([SABC Editorial Policies 2020.pdf](#)).

Based on the study's results, it is necessary for SABC to strengthen their editorial policies, specifically regarding soap opera content, since it dominates the broadcaster's program offerings.

A significant development has occurred through the efforts of the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF). The National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) is authorised by the Department of Arts and Culture to distribute funds for the advancement, creation, promotion, and dissemination of films (NFVF website). NFVF has recently formed a partnership with SWIFT to safeguard and promote the interests of women in the South African film and television industry (NFVF 2021). This relationship is highly beneficial, but it would be even more helpful if the focus extended beyond industrial challenges to include an examination of the nature of the imagery produced by the sector, with a special emphasis on gender perspectives. The most recent study published by NFVF on this matter was in 2018, which solely addressed the involvement and contribution of women in the position of producers. In addition to this background, the study recommends that the television industry of South Africa must establish detailed training route for all content creators to build both fair and

constructive media portrayals of women. The programs should emphasize both gender sensitivity and media portrayal effects alongside storytelling diversity. The industry can establish content creation standards which prioritize equity through providing training for creators to develop better approaches to production. These recommendations develop media platforms to promote gender equality and guarantee positive portrayals of women in soap operas and other media formats enhance social views and actual circumstances.

9.5 Opportunities for further research

Extensive research has been carried out on South African soap operas. However, this study adopted a more comprehensive method by analysing the portrayal of women through textual analysis and comparing primary material. The analysis has scrutinised the way female characters are depicted based on the roles they assume. Additional investigation can be conducted to specifically analyse the depiction of men in soap operas, exploring the preconceptions perpetuated by male characters and their resulting impacts. The study specifically examined soap operas produced by SABC. The researcher believes that conducting a comparable study on soap operas, dramas, or telenovelas produced by non-SABC networks might yield different findings. Such research would contribute valuable insights to this field of study. Another constraint of the study was its exclusive emphasis on data obtained from the viewers. Efforts were made to obtain insights from producers and writers, but they were not fruitful. Engaging in discussions with producers for future research is an essential measure to gain a deeper comprehension of their realm, their artistic methodology, and their stance on crucial issues in society.

9.6 Conclusion

The South African media industry experiences a significant level of independence, especially in the field of arts and entertainment. Producers of fictional content have more freedom and are less restricted by policies or regulations when it comes to their products and content. Nevertheless, this good for libertarianism, but, but it has a capacity to jeopardise other implemented measures aimed at addressing socioeconomic disparities and injustices related to gender and other demographic

characteristics. The portrayal of women is seen as unfair to women since it neglects to demonstrate the values, abilities, and accomplishments of women in the 21st century. This issue requires the attention of policymakers and regulatory agencies as it undermines the considerable progress that the country has made in promoting gender equality. A 2023 KPMG Report on Women Leadership alleges that South Africa has surpassed other countries in terms of integrating women into high-level leadership positions. Much of this progress is primarily due to increased female representation in government-owned entities or institutions, private entities still have more room for improvement (Kapur, 2023). Media images and programs should accurately depict these advancements, rather than portraying a backward shift.

Fiction producers, artists, and entertainers contribute to society by enhancing people's comprehension of socio-political and cultural issues that they may be unfamiliar with. They can motivate the people to act, which can lead to the creation of change that will rectify societal injustices. Soap opera creators should reassess the worth of their work while examining the condition and requirements of society. The current era is marked by persistent apprehension around the potential for violence and mistreatment specifically targeted against women and girls. News sources indicate that daily, 11 women lose their lives, and 118 women experience the horrific crime of rape (Koko, 2023). The media is recognised as a crucial factor in reporting on GBVF to promote prevention and social unity (Maphanga, 2022). The media can go beyond mere monitoring and reporting on concerns by taking a proactive approach to prevent them. This can be done by displaying and honouring women's accomplishments and emphasising their worth through various media offerings.

The society cannot both get gratification from the media's portrayal of women as sexual objects in advertising and soap operas, and at the same time, expect the media to effectively address cases of women being exposed to abuse. This research has definitively proven that media can both positively and negatively educate and motivate viewers. Soap operas portray women as devoid of value and integrity, and in certain instances, they are depicted as mere objects that men can use for their personal pleasure. The gender identities portrayed in soap operas can be seen as a manifestation of societal structures. Nevertheless, the researcher argues that these

imaginary works inadequately depict the genuine worth and dignity of women, hence reducing their value and honour.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: interview Questions for viewers

A. General

Please tick (x) the box next to your favourite soap opera

Muvhango Skeem Saam Uzalo

A1. How often do you watch this soapie?

A2. What do you enjoy most about it?

B. Portrayal of women and their roles

B1. How do you feel about the roles that women play in this soapie?

B2. How does this soapie portray women in relation to men?

B3. What assumption/s do you think this soap opera makes about women?

B4. Does the soap opera portray women as having a good social status? Please elaborate.

B5. Does this soapie portray women as having power at home, workplace, or society? Please elaborate.

C. Effects on viewers

C1. As a viewer, does the manner in which women are portrayed in this soapie, affect how you view them generally? Please elaborate.

C2. Can you say that television programmes such as soapies can affect how women view themselves- their role or their status, or their behaviour, or their ambitions? Please elaborate.

C3. To what extent do you think the role and characters played by women on television affect how the society views women? Please elaborate.

Thank you for your participation; it is highly appreciated.

Please note that your views are anonymous, as no names will be recorded.

Appendix B: Focus group discussions with viewers

1. General media issues

1.1 Gender inequality is a reality in our society, and the media has a role and responsibility to portray all genders in a fair and balanced manner. Do you agree with this statement? **[To probe further]**

1.2 Do you think that media has power to influence our opinions about men or women? **[To probe further]**

1.3 Television is a highly influential medium due to its visual appeal. Do you think viewers find it easy to model or copy behaviours that they see on television? **[To probe further]**

2 Television interests and viewership patterns.

We have a number of soap operas in South Africa, and their viewership ratings are high.

2.1 Tell me about the soap opera/s that you watch

2.2 Why do you watch/like or enjoy them?

2.3 Do you watch them frequently or once in a while?

2.4 In your opinion, what makes soap operas so popular?

2.5 Is there any element of reality in soap opera content and narrative?

[To probe further]

3 Now let us talk about women portrayal on television and soap operas.

3.1 What do you think of roles assigned to women on television? Do they earn them status, respect, and dignity?

3.2 Are roles played by women on soaps of any value to the society?

[To probe further]

3.3 Do soap operas make a distinction between occupations suitable to men and those suitable for women?

[To probe further]

3.4 What behaviours are often associated with women in soap operas?

Thank you for your participation; your contribution is highly appreciated.

Appendix C: Self-administered online questionnaire

Please select your gender

Male

Female

Age

18-25

26-35

Above 35

1. How often do you watch television soap operas?

Once in a while

About half the time

Most of the time

Always

2. Which SABC soap opera do you watch from the list below?

Skeem Saam

Muvhango

Uzalo

Generations

Other- specify name _____

3. How would you define the soap operas that you watch?

Informative

Educational

Entertaining

4. How do you find gender portrayed on television soap operas?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Men and women are portrayed as equal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Men are portrayed as superior to men	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are portrayed as less intelligent compared to men	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are shown as dependent on man to succeed or achieve set tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Men have more power and authority than women	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. What setting are women characters often associated with on soap operas?

Family

Corporate and business

A balance of family and corporate setting

6. Women are often portrayed as

Mothers

Wives

Girlfriends

7. At home, women are often portrayed as

Serving men

Submissive to men

Independent and assertive

8. Do you have any woman role model in soap opera or any television programme?

YES

NO

If **YES**, what makes this woman character a role model in your view?

If **NO**, explain why you feel that there are no women role models in television programmes

9. To what extent do you think that women in soap operas are portrayed positively and with dignity?

To a greater extent

To a lesser extent

To a certain extent

10. Does it matter anyway how women are portrayed on soap operas?

YES

NO

Not sure

If you responded YES to the question, explain why think or feel that way

If you responded NO to the question, explain why think or feel that way

11. What roles do you perceive women playing in soap operas?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree
Women play roles of leadership	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are suitable as support system for men	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are dependent on men	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women have integrity and strong personalities on their own	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women play roles that earn them respect	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women play more roles that mock, belittle and ridicule them	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women hold occupations that are highly esteemed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Occupations held by women are portrayed as less important for the society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. Stereotypes: identify the gender stereotypes that seem to be suggested or upheld by soap operas

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Women are intellectually weaker than men	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are better as caregivers and nurturers at home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women are more interested in love, romance, and marriage more than professional excellence and development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women perform better only on domestic roles	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Boardroom is not a place for women	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Women belong in the kitchen and childbearing is their primary function	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. Effects and Impact of soap operas: Does the way women are portrayed on television affect how the society views and treats them?

1. YES

2. NO

3. Maybe

14. Do you think that portrayal of women on television affects how you personally view women?

1. Definitely

2. Not at all

3. Probably

15. Does the portrayal of women on television encourage women viewers to explore their full potential?

1. YES

2. NO

If your response on the above question was YES, explain why you feel that way

If your response on the above question was NO, explain why you feel that way