

How does law and  
order svu portray  
women?



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## **Contents**

### **1. Introduction**

This study examines the representation of women on Television which is one of the most litigious topics surrounding the medium and is strongly dissected in this day and age. I will be conducting my research specifically on portrayal of women in “ Law and Order: Special Victims Unit.” The examination should reveal whether the depiction of female characters on Law and Order is positive or negative.

#### **1. 1 Women On TV**

Joseph (2004) argues that women were underrepresented on network dramatic shows in 1950s to the 1970s and when they did appear, they were frequently seen in token or stereotyped roles. Although representation of women have changed greatly in the last two decades as we are progressing into a more contemporary society, the question is, has it really changed modern representations of women or it merely replicates gender stereotypes (Dobash et al. 1998). In recent years, “ Xena Warrior Princess” and “ Buffy The Vampire Slayer” pioneered the strong leading female characters in fantasy genre. Magoullick (2006) elucidates the positive reviews of Xena and Buffy demonstrate the extent to which these women characters resonate with female viewers longing for strong role models, or even just strong female roles on television. However, these characters were based in fantasy and science fiction genre. Still, programmes like Cagney and Lacey, Cats Eyes and Juliet Bravo paved the way for future strong female characters which were popular police/detective dramas depicting strong women.

## 1. 2 Law & Order: Special Victims Unit

Currently in its 13th season, Law and Order: SVU first aired in 1999. The detectives on the team solve sexually motivated crimes and child abuse cases, which includes an exceptionally strong female lead character Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) and other popular female characters such as Amanda Rollins (Kelli Giddish), Assistant District Attorney Alexandra Cabot (Stephanie March) and Assistant District Attorney Casey Novak (Diane Neal). Law & Order: Special Victims Unit offers a unique blend of characteristics placed within a masculine detective genre with strong main female lead along with a male partner, Detective Elliot Stabler portrayed by Christopher Meloni. The episodes often feature real life crime stories and create episodes based on crime stories “ripped from the headlines” (Green 2009, pp. 2). Law & Order: Special Victims Unit is one of the most successful and popular spin off series of “Law and Order” franchise which has won many awards as well as the 2006 Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series for Mariska Hargitay (Emmys, 2006) who describes female audience’s reaction to her character “Olivia Benson” in Green’s book “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit: The Unofficial Companion”:

“As the show got more popular, I received so many emails from so many survivors. They were identifying so much with my character, identifying with this lion, this strong powerful (Olivia Benson). And then I had thirteen-year-old going, ‘I want to be you; you are my role model.’ Hundreds of emails going, ‘I want to be a cop when I grow up.’ And I thought this character has touched something deep in so many women and provided a safe place to go... I felt I had a responsibility.”

(Green 2009, pp. 90)

### **1.3 Relevance Of The Research**

Women representation on television has significant value to female audiences because they view strong characters as role models. Singh, Vinnicombe and James (2006) studied career-minded women who keenly draw on role models from different aspects of like, television being one of them. They discovered that women used female characters from Television as role models such as Buffy, Alias and Xena: The Warrior Princess.

Analysing this aspect of female characters on “ Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” will provide me with the tools to examine the codes used in the portrayal of women.

Research has been conducted on Law and Order: Special Victims Unit in the past i. e ethnic minorities, victimization of women. For example Britto (2007, p40) has deconstructed that portrayal of women are overplayed on crime drama series as offenders and victims with the help of content analysis in her article “ Does “ Special” Mean Young, White and Female? Deconstructing the Meaning of Special in Law & Order: Special Victims Unit.” Furthermore, there has been extensive research on representation of ethnic minorities, male and female on Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. However, my research will focus on the female characters such as Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay), Amanda Rollins (Kelli Giddish), Assistant District Attorney Alexandra Cabot (Stephanie March) and Assistant District Attorney Casey Novak (Diane Neal) and deconstruct the codes employed to characterize them.

## **2. Literature Review**

Theoretical framework will direct my research in a focus manner whilst facilitating a proficient and comprehensive analysis. It will provide a major foundation for my investigation. As “ representation of women” is such a diverse topic, I will focus and limit my research with the help of theoretical framework to achieve an accurate conclusion.

### **2. 1 Representation Of Women On TV**

In order to build my research, the history of women representation would greatly aid in my investigation. Consequently, D’Acci’s (1994) meticulous exploration of Cagney and Lacey, which aired from 1981 to 1988 and widely recognized as an innovative treatment of working women would provide the perfect groundwork for the investigation. While researching this book, D’Acci had unprecedented access to the set, to production meetings, and to the complete production files, including correspondence from network executives, publicity firms, and thousands of viewers. In this book she examines the development of women characters and the representation of feminism on prime-time television. This would provide me thorough knowledge of what goes behind making a drama series with female lead characters and will equip me with the right tools to compare the representation of female characters on Law and Order: SVU. Furthermore, it contains other example from the history of American television which would be beneficial for my research. Brunsdon, Charlotte and Spigel’s (2007) book “ Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader” provides a detailed examination extending across television, media and screen studies which looks into representation of feminism as historical categories and political identities.

This book gives a valuable analysis of women working behind the camera and in-front of the camera as well as female audience and their response to television in their daily lives. I would be able to evaluate the depiction of women on Law & Order: SVU in regards to historical and political viewpoint.

The representation of females on the television screen has been a subject of much discussion since the television became commercially available in the late 1930s. In 21st Century, even though television produces programs like Pan Am, Charlie's angels, The Playboy Club with female lead characters, they are still viewed through a very patriarchal ideology (Ingham, 2007).

Dominick's (1979) article "The portrayal of women in prime time, 1953-1977" concludes that female characters appearing on prime-time television from 1953-1977 were underrepresented on television and were frequently seen in stereotyped roles. This article will help me setting the groundwork for my research as I can put female characters on Law and Order: SVU side by side with previous characters. Further research (Elasmar, Kazumi and Brain, 2009) showed that women were more likely to be shown playing minor roles and playing characters of housewives and involved in a romantic relationship. I would need to further explore the depth of women representation on television which will allow me to conduct adept research.

Gill's (2007) work on "Gender and Media" looks like an interesting book for my research which explores the contradictory character of contemporary gender representations. Gender and the Media is also concerned with the theoretical tools available for analyzing representations. A range of approaches from semiotics to postcolonial theory are discussed, and Gill asks how useful notions such as objectification, backlash, and positive images are

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for making sense of gender in today's Western media which relates to my current study.

Melanie (2011) cross-examines the construction of feminism and femininity in cinema and television from a wide variety of female centric programs such as chick flicks, reality shows and drama. This book will provide me with the understanding of the relationship between feminism, femininity, and visual culture and tools to analyze images of female representation in media.

## **2. 1. 1. Narrative – Writing The Woman**

In order to relate characters and peak interest of the audience, formulation of the character through narrative is of uttermost importance. The character and narrative in the text have an emotional connection and resonate with the reader if they identify with the character. Hence, analysis of female representation in Law and Order SVU through their characterization in the narrative would allow me to deconstruct the signs from the text.

Furthermore, specific aesthetic and narrative strategies used by the producers to create characters also append to feminism and female representation (Geetha, 2007). Mulvey's (1975) groundbreaking article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' would greatly aid in exploring the relation of narrative structure in construction of female characters in Law and Order: SVU where she unravels the narrative and visual techniques in cinema and puts forward the male cinematic gaze that objectifies the female character, hence, turning her into a spectacle, 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (1975, 19). Mulvey (2009) revisits her theory in 'Visual and Other Pleasure' by applying her feminist theory to more contemporary work concerning film spectatorship. She also talks about 'young modern woman' of the 1920s in <https://assignbuster.com/how-does-law-and-order-svu-portray-women/>

terms of images and narratives employed in Hollywood and European films which will be relevant to assess portrayal of women in Law and Order: SVU.

In regards to narrative and women representation in media, Teresa de Lauretis's (1984) work would facilitate my research in the right direction as she investigates the structural representations of woman in cinema. De Lauretis (1984) disagrees with Mulvey's (1975) theory of women representation as being permanently subjective and affirms that it is in a consistent stage of self-progression. De Lauretis believes that narrative structure draws upon the character's aspiration in social and cultural context and reproduces subjectivity. De Lauretis argues that female characters are formulated to incline towards femininity and conventionally portrayed as 'ideal image' perceived by men (1984, 143). De Lauretis's conclusion of women's oppression by employing techniques of cinematic narration would provide a diverse perspective in representation of women in Law and Order: SVU.

## **2. 2 Women & Crime Genre**

The characteristics of gender have been reallocated in modern era in crime dramas where the female and male personalities are synthesized. The transformation also saw the shift of feminine traits of 'emotions, compassion and bond' between traditionally masculine traits of 'heroism, vigor, and power' giving rise to "alternative action hero" (Feasey 2008, p. 67). In 1970s and 1980s, crime genre progressively began depicting women in significant characters embarking on TV revolution. Snauffer's (2006) book called "Crime Television" would aid in my research tremendously as it would be idyllic to find out the history of crime genre as it was dominated by men

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(Maureen 1988, p. 2). Since the beginning of television, crime dramas have been a prime genre of TV. According to Snauffer (2006), crime television has proven to be a fascinating reflection of changes and developments in the culture at large. In the '50s and early '60s, the square-jawed, just-the-facts detectives of *The Untouchables* and *The FBI* put police work in the best light possible. As the '60s gave way to the '70s, however, the depictions gained more subtle shading, and *The Streets of San Francisco*, *The Rockford Files*, and *Baretta* offered conflicted heroes in more complex worlds. This trend has of course continued in more recent decades, with Steven Bochco's dramas seeking a new realism through frank depictions of language and sexuality on television. In chronicling these developments and illustrating how the genre has reflected our ideas of crime and crime solving through the decades, author Douglas Snauffer here provides essential reading for any fan. This work provides a comprehensive history of detective and police shows on television which will contribute to my research immensely. Turnbull (2013) in her book ' *The Crime Drama: TV Genres*' provides a historical study of the crime drama series as a genre which presents a number of case studies to clarify major concerns in the course of the genre. This book will facilitate my argument as it looks at female led crime drama series from around the world such as *The Wire* and *The Killing*.

Crime dramas generally feature subject matter related to public sphere with male dominance, however, the addition of female characters into crime genre has enabled to pursue a dynamic approach concerning gender bending transgressions, domestic issues and other feminist concerns (Feasey 2008). Nevertheless, women weren't always depicted as strong willed and

independent on TV. Cavender (1999) examines the depiction of women crime victims by comparing episodes from reality crime program. He analyzed that women talked about their victimization; however, men spoke more often and presented master narratives about the crimes. In both seasons, the program imagery emphasized feminine vulnerability to violence from strange, devious, and brutal men and masculine technical expertise and authority as women's protection from such violence. His analysis would be helpful in further studying the crime genre as well as involvement of women. Humphries (2009) examines women, violence, and media presentations through the lens of feminist criminology. This book contains chapters on "Gendering Constructions" which lays the foundation for the volume and examines media presentation of gendered violence, female killers on Law and Order and women in media. This book will give me tools to analyze the media text meticulously.

In crime genre, male protagonist used to focus on solving the crime neglecting the public concerns during the process. Though, attitudes started to change when women were portrayed unconventionally as brave, independent and intelligent characters breaking away from the societal norm resulting in shaping a new feminist archetype (Aisenberg, 1994). In her book 'Ordinary heroines: Transforming the male myth' Aisenberg (1994, p. 240) believes that female representation has progressed into equal active crime-solving characters with slight borrowing from conventional masculine traits such as Dana Scully's (Gillian Anderson) character in 'The X Files' who was a powerful and independent professional woman even though FBI agent roles were profoundly male-dominated.

Cuklanz and Moorti (2009) examine a wide variety of text to delve into the representations of gendered violence against women and formulation of gender. They believe that Law and Order SVU featuring lead female characters engage in stereotypical representation of women showcasing violence against them including inherent misogynist communiqué. Cavender and Jurik (2012) inspect the optimistic side of representation of women on TV as they analyse 'Prime Suspect' starring Helen Mirren as policewoman Jane Tennison in popular British drama series where her 'character disrupts the conventions of the traditionally male genre' (p. 65). They focus on the portrayal of gender and law enforcement in the show featuring modern social tribulations where women play the central character. On one hand, 'Prime Suspect' has become a cult hit for being an exceptionally feminist show in a traditionally male dominated crime genre. On the other hand, it is still not devoid of gender politics where Tennison's character shown as a successful woman is pigeonholed into an old lonely and friendless career woman. Cavender and Jurik (2012) work will provide the framework to deconstruct the meanings and connotation in depiction of women in Law and Order: SVU in relations to social norm.

There has been a dramatic rise in representation of women detective in modern text whether be film or television which used to be dominated by men (Mizejewski, 2004). Whilst examining Jodie Foster's character Clarice on 'The Silence Of The Lambs', Mizejewski believes that "traditional Hollywood cinema has been unconsciously organized along these lines: men looking and taking action, women being looked at. The conventions of framing, lighting and editing in portrayal of women all play to these dynamics" (p. 7).

Tasker (2007) believes women representation has progressed tremendously in recent years with transformed and empowered gender egalitarianism; however, there is still substandard issue. ' Gender is a key constructor and differentiator of character in ensemble workplace dramas' (Allen 2007, p 48). The meticulous examination of Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) in ' Reading CSI' by Michael Allen, a popular crime drama including the relationship of characters to their narratives and response of fans would provide great depth and widespread view which I can apply to Law and Order: SVU during my research.

### **1. 3 Female Heroine**

Gunter (1986) argues that women are represented in a stereotypical manner associating with the character's traits they typically exhibit. In comparison with men, their characters were subjugated by personal relationships and family issues. However, this began to change in the 1970s when women were portrayed in more dynamic roles. Knight (2010) believes that it wouldn't have been possible without Sigourney Weaver's character Ellen Ripley in Alien (1979) franchises which has become an avant-garde symbol. Ellen Ripley signified the first final girl archetype, a term coined by Carol J. Clover in the book ' Men, Women and Chansaw: Gender in the Modern Horror Film' (1992), who conquered and triumphed against an evil villain " without any help or rescue from a man" (p. 98). Knight (2010) and Clover (1992) examinations of women representation would aid in decoding the signs in Law and Order: SVU. Anthony (2009) believes that the progression in women portrayal on television and films was because women had taken over the market and were able to acquire positions as Producers and Directors.

Consequently, women were portrayed in more heroic roles which cancelled out the notion of women as victims, resulting in a positive ideological advance" (p. 80).

Inness's (2004) "Action Chicks" is a groundbreaking collection of essays providing a new look at female action icons such as Xena, Buffy, Lara Croft and so on. These essays take a look at how recent depictions of women in action films, TV shows, comic books, and video games reflect a changing acceptance of women in traditionally male heroic or tough-guy roles. This highly specialized and scholarly study is suitable for my research and would enable me to view Law and Order: SVU in different light. In order to analyze the representation of women in Law and Order: SVU, I will construe if the women embody four essential constructing features which are body, attitude, action and authority in a tough hero (Innes, 1998). Brown (1996) has the same belief of women portrayed as action heroes stating, "female action heroine's body is represented by using same codes as a male hero in regards to object and subject in action films" (p. 56). Goodwill (2011) agrees with Brown's statement that new female action hero possesses positive "masculine" characteristic which were preserved for men only, breaking away from orthodox "feminine" attributes. With the fusion of traits, earlier archetype of the hero has been amended in popular culture containing both masculine and feminine traits which will enable me to interpret female traits presented in Law and Order: SVU.

Hill (1999, p 38) states, 'action heroines are the new type of protagonists in action genre who are smarter and tougher than conventional female heroines and even their male counterparts'. This new breed of action

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heroines contravenes not only cinematic but cultural gender codes of women being submissive and tangential characters and transform traditional cinematic depiction of women. Noble (1999) produces an innovative framework to create new epitome of heroism for women in her book "The Sound of a Silver Horn: Reclaiming the Heroism in Contemporary Women's Lives". She puts forward certain qualities that a female hero should possess to transform her and the world such as strong-minded, valiant and a risk-taker. Harris's (2004) groundbreaking work would provide a framework for my research where she looks at intricate representation of girls in recent history. Siehlohr's (2000) anthology investigates generic codes used in gender in regards to national identity in European films. She also examines how representations of women are effected by particular national milieu. This provides a baseline to investigate influences of societal factors on representation of women in Law and Order: SVU. Hanson (2007) proposes alternative ways of viewing classic and contemporary Hollywood heroines and the associations of gender with genre. She investigates representation of women as investigator and heroine in the variable context of the film industry which will enable me to apply the same approach to my research. She confers meticulous attention to the production of narrative, actions and perception as well as negotiation of feminine self and desires across the past.

Jacey's (2010) book about "The Woman in the Story: Writing Memorable Female Characters" would be of significant value on this topic. She states that by creating a heroine, the screenwriter has to consider all kinds of differences, from character development to gender issues in the

development process. This would allow me dig deeper into the depiction of female characters on Law and Order: SVU such as Olivia Benson's character as a Detective and Alexandra Cabot character as a District Attorney.

According to Knight (2010), female action heroes extensively influence individuals in society and also reveal a lot about our society. Her analysis on female action here would help me understand Olivia Benson's character on Law and Order: SVU as she is seen as a role model and a super heroine to a lot of women.

Furthermore, I will examine Buffy which was a very popular show with very sharp and provocative commentaries on gender. In *Undead TV*, media studies scholars tackle the Buffy phenomenon and its many afterlives in popular culture, the television industry, the Internet, and academic criticism (Levine and Parks, 2007). Stuller (2010) illustrates the triumph of female hero in contemporary mythology which has cracked through male dominated environment and divulges into the crucial role of female crime fighters in popular culture.

## **METHODOLOGY:**

Litosseliti (2002) book on "Gender, Identity and Discourse Analysis" will provide me with the tools to employ discourse analysis to the media text for my research. I will conduct a discourse analysis on Law and Order: SVU to find out why Olivia Benson is considered a positive role model. Benson has been taken up as a feminist icon by artists and bloggers because she's the type of person who triumphs over adversity, stands up against injustice, and never blinks when she's staring down a bad guy. Furthermore, it will aid me in examining other female characters re-presented as victims and criminals.

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Research has shown that violence against women is a serious public health and human rights concern (World Health Organization 2000) and that the concurrent presentation of women as sex objects and victims in various forms of media increases acceptance of violence against women (Malamuth, 1996). As television has the widest audience of any medium (Gunter & Wober, 1992), it is of uttermost importance to have an improved representation of women on television.

I will draw primarily upon the discourse analysis of Law and Order: SVU to examine the meanings behind the representations of women as victims to more positive and hopeful depictions. Marion (2008) argues that the contemporary portrayals of women within popular culture are shaped by two major trends: the mainstreaming of pornography and its resultant hypersexualization of women and girls, and the commodification of those images for a global market. Wood (2000) book will provide both the practical steps for doing discourse analysis and the theoretical justifications for those steps. This book shows students how the social world revolves around talk and text. This book will aid in my research a great deal as it presents actual examples, covers data collection methods and strategies for data analysis, and addresses issues of reliability and validity.

Tolson's (2006) book "Media Talk: Spoken Discourse on TV and Radio" investigates distinctive forms of mediated speech on TV and radio through discourse analysis. Media Talk is the first book to provide a comprehensive review of this important work. Lorenzo-Dus's (2008) "Television Discourse" examines the specific forms and structures of talk across media genres. This book will provide me an in-depth knowledge of the discourse analysis on TV

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as it examines four defining characteristics of the current broadcast landscape: Storytelling, Closeness, Conflict and Persuasion. This would allow me to analyse the characters on Law and Order: SVU and find out if they are portrayed positively or negatively. Even though the women on L&O: SVU are tough and strong, there are still some problematic issues in their representation. They are re-presented as victims or offenders in a lot of episodes. For example, Detective Olivia Benson is frequently victimized throughout the show, including her being stalked in Seasons 1 and 3, and more recently she is sexually assaulted while undercover in a prison. Furthermore, there were several suggestions in episodes on how the female detective pays a lot of attention to her appearance. An in-depth research would allow a more precise and comprehensive investigation on the topic.

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