

THINK LIKE A MAN, ACT LIKE A LADY: INFUSING STEREOTYPICAL FEMININE ROLES IN DOING LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a “gendered concept”. Most positions of authority in different workplaces have traditionally been dominated by men; it is therefore unsurprising that the mentality of “think leader, think male” persists. Women occupying roles with real power and responsibility in professional white-collar organisations are a relatively new phenomenon. Thus, it might take a while for women in positions of authority to gain equality with men in terms of the number of representations. Women are not only facing inequality in the workplace, they are also being under-represented across the whole media genre. Television is the most realistic form of media, where majority of audiences are young women. However, female fictional characters on television are seldom depicted in powerful leadership roles. In this paper, the concept of gendered leadership focuses on the stereotypical role(s) for women leaders that Jessica Pearson’s portrays in the first season of Suits. Qualitative data was primarily obtained from watching the drama series Suits. This study employs the method of multimodal discourse analysis through the lens of discursive leadership. Specifically, this study analyses the linguistic devices and discursive strategies through a detailed micro-analysis of Jessica Pearson’s interactions with her colleagues in Pearson Hardman. Significant clips were identified, duration of the clips noted and the interactions between Jessica Pearson and her subordinates, specifically with Harvey Specter and Louis Litt, at Pearson Hardman, transcribed. Utilising Kanter’s (1977) classification of stereotypical roles for women leaders, the study finds that Jessica Pearson portrays the Mother role and rejects the role of a seductress. The Mother role symbolises the conventional position of authority often found within the domestic and private sphere of the family. Women leaders who portray the Mother are described as warm, caring and approachable. Conversely, Jessica Pearson portrays the opposite side of the Mother role, the firm, strict and ‘tough-love’ side. The study concludes with recommendations for future research.

Key words: Gendered leadership; Workplace interaction, Discourse; Stereotypical roles; Women leaders

INTRODUCTION

“Hire a female” is the answer to efforts to find the formula for what makes effective leaders and figuring out who has the ‘right stuff’ (Sharpe, 2000). A study conducted by Sherwin (2014) which investigated women’s leadership effectiveness proved that women are more effective leaders than men. An article entitled ‘The New Gender Gap’ stated that “men could become losers in a global economy that values mental power over might” (Bloomberg Business Week, 2003). However, women occupying roles with real power and responsibility in professional white-collar organisations are a relatively new phenomenon (Holmes, 2006). However, Kent and Moss’s (1994) study on the effects of sex and gender role on self and group perceptions of leader emergence, found that although women were somewhat more capable of emerging as leaders than men, gender role had a stronger effect on emergent leadership than sex.

Most organisations continue to reinforce the masculine stereotypes whilst de-emphasising the feminine values in doing leadership because feminine values are considered to be irrelevant to organisations (Vasavada, 2012). Individuals are simultaneously balancing “do(ing) gender” and creating personal identities as well as meeting the expectations of the organisation in their respective workplaces. The concept of gender is relevant in influencing one’s behaviour, as well as interpreting others’ behaviour in every workplace interaction (Holmes & Schnurr, 2006). People at the workplace are, albeit at times unconsciously, aware of the gender of the people they are talking to and they bring to every workplace interaction their familiarity with societal gender stereotypes as well as the gendered norms that men and women are expected to conform.

Studies on gender, language and leadership in popular media utilising multimodal discourse analysis are currently lacking especially one that looks into the leadership portrayed by a female character in television whom holds a position of power. Therefore, this study aims to address the gap in the literature by examining the stereotypical role(s) for women leaders that Jessica Pearson’s portrays in the first season of *Suits*, which was aired on the USA Network in the summer of 2011. Jessica Pearson is a fictional character in *Suits*. *Suits* is a legal drama set in a fictitious New York law firm, Pearson Hardman. Jessica Pearson is an attorney, a managing partner and a co-founder of Pearson Hardman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Holmes (2006, p.34) asserted that the concept of leadership is “gendered”. Leadership is often linked to masculinity on the grounds that the majority of leaders have been men which has resulted in the prevailing mentality of “think leader, think male” (Holmes, 2006, p.34). Thimm, Koch and Schey (2003) suggested that men appear to be the ‘default’ gender occupying positions of authority. Carbone and Megargee (as cited in Kent & Moss, 1994) found that men more often emerge as leaders than women; a phenomenon attributed to the internal and external obstacles that limit the emergence of women leaders. Sung (2011) stated that performing leadership based on stereotypical gendered norms does not guarantee a positive evaluation because, as

Holmes (2006) suggested, the desirable quality of performing leadership has been associated primarily with masculinity because leadership has been conventionally performed by men. This is the reason why women leaders are caught between cross-pressures to “Think like a man, act like a lady, and work like a dog” (Newton, as cited in Baxter, 2010, p.42).

According to Dewan and Myatt (2008), communication is an imperative aspect of leadership, and leaders can motivate and inspire their people and promote discipline, responsibility and strategic alignment through communication (Froschheiser, 2008). However, Holmes (2006) identified that our ways of communicating and speaking are gendered. The literature on gender and communication reveals that men and women have distinct communication styles (Vasavada, 2012). Schnurr (2009) asserted that a masculine speech style is often achieved through the dominance and one-at-a-time formation of the speaking floor, the construction of extended speaking turns, common use of interruptions and the use of need statements and imperatives when giving directives such as ‘I need this...’ and ‘check that out’. On the other hand, integral aspects of feminine speech style include the use of politeness strategies, avoidance of conflicts and the use of supportive feedback and minimal responses (Tannen, 2004). Other common features include the use of interrogative instead of imperative forms of directives; modal verbs such as may, might, could and would; hedges (von Hippel, et al., 2011), such as probably, perhaps and sort of; paralinguistic features such as hesitations and pauses; and the inclusive pronoun we. The use of disclaimers such as ‘I think’, ‘I guess’ and ‘maybe’ and tag questions such as ‘... don’t you’, ‘...right?’ and ‘isn’t it’ are also classified as feminine speech styles along with the mitigated, hedged and indirect forms for giving directives downwards (Holmes, 2006).

Women are not only facing inequality in the workplace, they are also being under-represented across the whole media genre (Azad, 2012). The media is a powerful tool that reinforce and build our understanding of women’s role and leadership because the media representations of gender and leadership shape the ways in which audiences perceive the social world and what constitutes suitable gendered behaviour (Kruse & Prettyman, 2008; Sung, 2011). Ibrahim et al., (2017) concurred stating that media is the most pervasive and most powerful tool that can shape behaviour as well as influencing the way women and men are viewed (Wood, 1994).

According to Cavender, Bond-Maupin & Jurik (1999), the media disseminates gendered images that, as stated by Ibrahim et al., (2017), reinforces existing stereotypes, attitudes, expectations, and values which could pose as a challenge for women’s advancement in organisations and societies. In her book entitled *Gendered media: The influence of media on views of gender*, Wood (1994) asserts that media communicate images which emphasise and propagate a somewhat unrealistic, stereotypical and limiting perceptions of the sexes. Wood (1994) went on to detail out the three ways in which the media epitomise gender; representation, stereotypical portrayal and depiction of relationship.

Women are underrepresented in terms of quantity (Martinez-Sheperd, 2006; Ibrahim et al., 2017) across the media genre which resulted in the reinforcement of the false perception that men are the cultural norm and women are insignificant or worse, indiscernible. The absence of women resulted in the marginalisation and the reinforcement of women’s inferior status in various spheres of life (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Women are also being portrayed in the media in stereotypical ways that “reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender” and in the case of women the stereotypical portrayal is shallow and narrow and women’s daily activities and interests are limited to the confines of home and family (Ibrahim et al., (2017).

Elasmar, Hasegawa and Brain in Martinez-Sheperd (2006) summarises the portrayal of women over the last few decades. In the 1980s, women are portrayed as a working individuals. In the 1990s, women, while still being underrepresented, are depicted as holding lower status (more inferior) than men in terms of position. Women were synonymous with dealing with domestic issues during the 90s. In recent years, the representation and portrayal of women in media has improved but the dominant social value of masculinity versus femininity is still prevalent. The relationship depicted in the media between men and women further emphasise traditional roles and even normalise violence against women (Wood, 1994). Across the media genre, men are typically pictured positively as being rational, independent, assertive, spirited, combative and competitive (Ibrahim et al., 2017). It is uncommon for women, to be depicted as rational, active and decisive as opposed to being dependent, sensitive, emotional, romantic, caring, submissive, indecisive and bossy. Female fictional characters on television are seldom depicted in powerful leadership roles.

Women leaders, be it in the real world or in the media, are frequently given the “dubious accolade” as compared to male leaders (Baxter, 2010, p.37) and for that reason, women leaders often adopt a limited number of identity roles which enable them to legitimately conduct their professional roles. According to Kanter (1977), the Mother, Pet, Iron Maiden and Seductress roles are the four stereotypical roles or ‘role traps’ for women leaders. The ‘Mother’ stereotype is socio-emotional women leaders are anticipated to provide emotional support and care for their subordinates. The ‘Pet’ is not seriously treated as an equal, while the ‘Iron Maiden’ is expected to exhibit tough, uncompromising and assertive behaviour. Last but not least, the ‘Seductress’ is perceived as utilising her sexual/feminine allure to exert influences over senior men in organisations. In this paper, the concept of gendered leadership focuses on the stereotypical role(s) for women leaders that Jessica Pearson’s portrays in the first season of *Suits*.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs the method of multimodal discourse analysis through the lens of discursive leadership. Specifically, this study analyses the linguistic devices and discursive strategies through a detailed micro-analysis of Jessica Pearson’s interactions which construct her leadership style(s). Discursive leadership was chosen as the framework since it provides an optimal resource for examining the communicative practices involved in the management of meaning and the communicative construction of reality (Torres & Fyke, 2013). Although this study is firmly positioned within the practice of discursive leadership, the

researcher utilises the method of multimodal discourse analysis to examine the stereotypical role(s) for women leaders that Jessica Pearson's portrays in the first season of *Suits*.

Multimodal discourse analysis is utilised by looking at the way Jessica Pearson communicates and interacts with her subordinates through her use of speech styles, gestures, and facial expressions. Television series attracted mostly female viewers and the visual, sound and movement highlight social values and popular images of personalities and culture (Ibrahim et al., 2017). The dialogue in television series have the power to create images of gender through the language used effectively imprinting a long lasting impressions in the minds of audience by emphasising the prominence and dominance of masculinity and femininity. According to Ibrahim et al., (2017), language and images portrayed in television forms opinions which leads to the formation of though patterns of society.

The multimodal discourse analysis approach is used here in an effort to gain fresh perspectives on and understanding of the complexities of performing leadership at micro-level interactions (Choi & Schnurr, 2013). According to Waters (2013), Jessica Pearson depicts the characteristics of a commanding and strong female lawyer, and is deeply respected by her male subordinates. Moreover, Jessica Pearson is the epitome of a strong female leader character on television (Baines, 2013). Jessica Pearson has positioned herself as a leader because, according to Hammargren (2007), law firm partnership is the primary leadership role in the legal community. The depiction of women attorneys on television has increased in parallel with the increment of women in the legal profession (Waters, 2013).

The data collected in this study were qualitative in nature. The source of data for this study was from primary data which is the American legal drama, *Suits*. In this study, season 1, consisting of twelve episodes, was chosen as it serves as a foundation for audiences to understand the storyline and getting to know the characters and their relationship dynamics with each other. The researcher viewed all the episodes of season 1 of *Suits* to identify clips to determine Jessica Pearson's leadership style(s). Jessica Pearson's leadership at Pearson Hardman was observed through her daily interactions, facial expressions and body language, specifically with Harvey Specter and Louis Litt. It is pertinent for Jessica Pearson to be present in all the scenes identified. The duration of each important scene was noted to ease the process of transcription and the interactions between Jessica Pearson and her subordinates were manually transcribed at this stage. Next, the researcher went through all the transcribed interactions to choose which clips to analyse in order to examine Jessica Pearson's leadership as portrayed in the first season of *Suits*. The clip which the researcher selected was from Season 1, Episode 1: *Pilot* & Episode 10: *The Shelf Life*.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The Mother Role

The Mother role symbolises the conventional position of authority often found within the domestic and private sphere of the family. Women leaders who portray the Mother are not perceived to be a sexual threat to men and are described as warm, caring and approachable (Baxter, 2010). However, the analysis of excerpt 1 shows that Jessica portrays the opposite side of the Mother role, the firm, strict and 'tough-love' side.

Excerpt 1: *Suits* Season 1, Episode 10: *The Shelf Life*

Duration: 00:04 – 00:54

Context: Jessica, Harvey and Louis are attending a charity dinner on behalf of Pearson Hardman. It is a formal, black-tie event and the three of them are standing together, with Jessica standing between Harvey and Louis, surrounded by a crowd of other attendees.

1	Harvey	[Overlapping chatter] I just don't understand.
2	Louis	Yeah, there's a lot of things you don't understand.
3	Harvey	Everyone is wearing a black tie.
4	Louis	And, you're wearing a grey tie.
5	Harvey	This is acceptable at a black tie affair.
6	Louis	There's nothing wrong with the tie that I'm wearing.
7	Harvey	Thank you. [Taking two glasses of champagne from the waiter and offers one to Jessica].
8	Jessica	Yes, please.
9	Waiter	Champagne, sir?
10	Louis	Is it? From the region? In France? Because if it's not, it's called sparkling wine, and I don't really drink sparkling wine.
11		Forget it.
12	Harvey	Forgive him.
13		His parents really wanted a girl.
14		Never got over it.
15	Louis	Wait a minute.
16		You can taste the difference.
17		I'm not being a snob.
18	Harvey	Not a snob? You sound like Frasier's brother.
19	Louis	Niles Crane was completely misunderstood.
20	Jessica	Okay, boys, you don't want me to give you a timeout now, do you?

21	Harvey	Look, I'd be willing to stand in a corner if you agree to paddle his bottom.
22	Louis	That's hilarious.
23		I'm just saying that if they want us to donate to their charity, they might as well step it up.
24		You know, make me want to give away my money.
25	Jessica	Your money? You're here representing the firm, Louis.
26		And we've always been committed to giving back to the community.

Harvey and Louis's rivalry and obvious dislike of each other are apparent from their continuous bickering from line 1 to 19. Throughout their conversation, Jessica remains silent. Finally, in line 20, after showing an expression as if she is bored of their conversations, Jessica interrupts while Louis is still speaking, saying "Okay, boys, you don't want me to give you a time-out now, do you?" Jessica's utilisation of interruptions is an indication of masculine speech styles. However, Morris (2005) asserted that both men and women use interruptions as interruptions serve different purposes under different circumstances. Nevertheless, men do tend to employ interruptions more than women (Morris, 2005).

Jessica also utilises a feminine speech style in her use of tag question 'do you' in line 20. It is interesting to note that Jessica refers to both Harvey and Louis as 'boys' instead of saying 'gentlemen', which indicates that she either perceives them as immature for picking fights with each other or that she has asserted the authority of a stern 'mother' (Tannen, 1994) which she is enacting to stop her 'children' (her 'boys') from quarrelling. Jessica uses the inclusive pronoun 'we' in line 26 which shows solidarity between Louis, Harvey, and herself almost as though they are a family.

Taking Holmes's (2005) definition of the Mother role as a combination of authority and care-giving, Jessica does both simultaneously, although her way of care-giving is subtly camouflaged by her firmness and decisiveness. The stereotypical association of authority with leadership allows women leaders to employ the role of the Mother to enact power in the workplace (Baxter, 2010). The 'Mother' stereotype is socio-emotional as women leaders are anticipated to provide emotional support and care for their subordinates, instead of relying on their professional competencies (Baxter, 2012). Holmes (2005, p.7) stated that women leaders seldom portray the role of the Mother because "mothers are not unambiguously powerful figures in our society". This stereotype hinders women leaders from being respected for their independent, professional and unique abilities because they are expected to accommodate colleagues and subordinates. Nevertheless, the role is regarded positively and commands a certain degree of respect, which is why Jessica's portrayal of the role is effective in earning the respect and consequently the approval and commitment of her predominantly male and a few female subordinates, which assist her in doing leadership.

Jessica Pearson is not only a superior to Harvey and Louis, she is also an incredible lawyer, a fierce boardroom executive, and a "mother figure" to her two subordinates. Jessica Pearson, as a leader inspires loyalty and frequently taught Harvey as well as Louis to win cases without crossing the moral line. She has on several occasions put herself between warring employees (especially between Harvey and Louis) to keep the peace or stop a beat down. Throughout *Suits* season 1, Jessica Pearson, being a woman leader in a male dominated law firm, not only successfully manage a law firm by infusing a stereotypical feminine role of being a "mother figure" to her mostly male employees, she has also manage to instil in her employees the meaning of family and loyalty by emphasising feminine values in doing leadership, a feat that is thought to be male centric.

The Seductress Role

According to Baxter (2012, p.95), the role of the Seductress overtly "foregrounds the enactment of sexual and gender identities". However, the role can offer women leaders a voice, in a male-dominated organisation, if utilised in a false-flirtatious way with male colleagues to accomplish good working relationships (Baxter, 2010). Nevertheless, it could back-fire if the display of the role undermines the professional competence of women leaders (Baxter, 2012). Jessica, however, is shown in excerpt 2 to reject this 'scandalous' role.

Excerpt 2: *Suits* Season 1, Episode 1: *Pilot*

Duration: 37:56- 38:18

Context: It is after working hours and Jessica is on her way to the elevator, wearing a black, body-hugging, full-length evening dress, when she bumps into Harvey who has just stepped out of the elevator onto the main floor of Pearson Hardman. Harvey does not realise that Jessica is walking towards him because he is texting on his cell phone.

1	Jessica	Harvey
[They both stop]		
2	Harvey	Ok, I have two words for you, absolutely beautiful
3	Jessica	[Having just called an elevator] You think you're the only one who can charm a client?
4	Harvey	Categorically stunning
5	Jessica	How's the new kid working out?
6	Harvey	Regally hot
7	Jessica	You are an idiot [Walks toward an open elevator]
8	Harvey	Jessica Pearson...
9	Jessica	Good night Harvey!
[Harvey carries on walking and texting]		

Harvey does not notice Jessica at first but when she mentions his name, in line 1, he responds with a genuine surprise and directly compliments Jessica in line 2, "OK, I have two words for you, absolutely beautiful". Harvey ignores Jessica's questions in lines 3 and 5, but instead he continues to compliment her with a series of empty adjectives such as 'beautiful' in line 2, 'stunning' in line 4, and 'hot' in line 6, which are aspects of feminine speech styles (Lakoff, 1975), to describe her looks. Jessica however, ignores his compliments. In line 5, Jessica exudes confidence when she says, "You think you're the only one who can charm a client?"

In line 7, however, a little annoyed that all of her questions are unanswered, she says "You are an idiot" to Harvey. She jokingly refers to Harvey as an idiot potentially because of how close they are. Harvey, in line 8, with a flirty intonation says "Jessica Pearson" but Jessica continues to dismiss the seductive and flirty remarks by saying "Good night, Harvey" in line 9 and then stepping into the elevator. Harvey's potentially flirty remarks might not have been intended to harass Jessica, but regardless, Jessica rejects being associated with the role of the Seductress by ignoring Harvey's comments.

Jessica always dresses impeccably, but during office hour she would wear a professional feminine assemble which, although relatively sexy, exudes power, and this is known as 'power dressing' (Alipio, 2013). It is almost as if this is the first time that Harvey has perceived Jessica as a woman and realised her beauty. Although the interactions are conducted in a humorous manner to index that this is a comedy act rather than a genuine intimate relationship, nonetheless a certain ambiguity remains (Baxter, 2010). Jessica's rejection of the Seductress role is potentially because her apparent attractiveness might increase her chances of being typecast as a sex object which will take attention away from her professional competencies (Gutek & Morasch, 1982; Sinclair, 1998). Baxter (2010, p.92) asserted that the role of the Seductress is "outdated and inappropriate" terms to describe women leaders especially in today's age of political correctness Furthermore, playing the Seductress can have damaging effects given the strict sexual harassment legislation in the workplace (Baxter, 2012).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the representation of Jessica Pearson as an effective leader in Suits challenges the association of a specific leadership style with one gender and contests the popular assumptions about gender differences in leadership which are maintained by gender stereotypes (Sung, 2011). Individuals at the workplace, such as Jessica Pearson, are simultaneously balancing "do(ing) gender" and creating personal identities as well as meeting the expectations of the organisation in their respective workplaces. The concept of gender is relevant in influencing one's behaviour, as well as interpreting others' behaviour in every workplace interaction. At the workplace, individuals unavoidably enact their gendered roles, adopt recognisably gendered stances and construct gender identity in interacting with colleagues at work. Women leaders such as Jessica Pearson, as Holmes (2005, p.18) stated, are "broadening the notion of what counts as acceptable leadership behaviours and combating the erasure of women's way of leading" by successfully climbing the corporate ladder, and staying there, by incorporating and balancing between their wide-ranging speech styles and being adequately feminine and masculine in performing effective leadership. The findings from this research have instigated potential future research topics. A fruitful area for future research is to examine the leadership styles of women leaders in other male dominated organisations and professions.

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