

# The Stereotyping Representation of Kensi Blye's Character in Television Crime Drama Series NCIS: Los Angeles

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**THE STEREOTYPING REPRESENTATION OF KENSI BLYE'S  
CHARACTER IN TELEVISION CRIME DRAMA SERIES NCIS:  
LOS ANGELES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The research discussed a stereotyping representation of Special Agent Kensi Blye, one of the female characters in the crime drama series 'NCIS: Los Angeles series'. In the crime drama genre, a very masculine genre, the notion of a female character having masculine traits was common. Another issue was how the other male characters in the television show saw Kensi Blye. Their willingness to openly accept that Kensi Blye had more masculine traits than her feminine traits would be discussed. To analyze the representation of Kensi Blye, the three-dimensional framework was used as the approach. The research data were gathered from the utterances expressed by Kensi Blye's co-workers about Kensi. The textual analysis would be the analysis of obtained data using a social actor network. Then, the resulting data would be analyzed using the feminine and masculine traits to find out how the other co-workers represent Kensi Blye's character. The finding suggests that as the only female field agent, Kensi Blye seems to have a strong character, but in certain situations, her male co-workers still question her femaleness. The stereotyping of femaleness in female characters is inevitable even in the masculine genre of television cinema.*

**Keywords:** crime drama, feminism, gender stereotype, representation

## INTRODUCTION

The gender issue is very common in everyday life. Almost every day, people are forced to deal with gender issues, whether it is a stereotyping of female or male counterparts. The problem with gender issues especially stereotyping, is commonly constructed by the society where they live in. In the education field, previous research has found that stereotyping can lead members of stereotyped groups to disidentify from some domains or schools altogether and to perform worse during learning and test-taking (Appel & Weber, 2017). The issue related to gender is also linked to ethnicity, poverty, and sociocultural practices that sometimes slow the advancement of women (Low & Binns, 2016).

Gender stereotyping issues can be found in everyday lives. Not only in real life, through the

media use on a day-to-day basis, the discussion of gender stereotypes also lead to building a certain frame in the society (Zenquis & Mwaniki, 2019). Stereotyping often happens to females and is done by a male of the opposite sex or other females who have a different point of view. The feminine and male marking is always based on gender (Caldarone, 2017). Previous researchers have used to look into the gender issue, the relation between the female traits and the masculine traits that can sometimes be embodied in a female character which become 'problem' for the opposite gender. The type of stereotyping is circulated in fundamental media aesthetics: modes of perception, the production of affect, and strategies of storytelling and genre (Coulthard et al., 2018).

Stereotypes are consensual beliefs about the attributes of people belonging to a social category, and the content of such beliefs is consequential in daily life

(Koenig & Eagly, 2019). A stereotype is usually used in categorizing groups of people in order to understand the type of person the society classified them. Nelson (2009) has argued that this kind of classification is primarily divided into three primary dimensions: age, race, and gender. Gender stereotype categorizes men and women based on their character traits, the masculine and the feminine. Gender stereotypes are preserved through many ways such as media (advertising, film, cinema, etc.), general repetition and sanctions for those who do not follow. An example of gender stereotypes is the common statement that differs men and women like men are messy; women are neat.

In media, gender stereotype plays a significant role in drawing attention. The focus on masculinity in news coverage, for instance, signals to female candidates that masculine messages will grab the media's attention, while messages reinforcing feminine qualities may not receive much media attention (Bauer & Santia, 2021). In line with the effects that women's descriptive or substantive representation in parliament have on citizens' political engagement and their attitudes towards political institutions (Verge, 2021). Meanwhile, the attention drawn from shaping a female character in a crime drama is typically another issue. Thus, it will be discussed further in the research.

There are many types of genres in television shows such as drama, news, reality show, talk shows, situational comedy, and music programs. The drama genre has sub-genres such as police procedural drama, crime drama, and psychological drama. The crime drama is a popular and favourite genre since it is enduring cinematic entertainment. Watching crime dramas can give the experience of the feeling of 'first-hand' encounter with crime (or criminality). Because crime dramas seek to attract large audiences and followers, programming tends to reflect cultural beliefs, societal sentiments, and circulate cultural images of gender (Cavender & Deutsch, 2007). It is likely that crime drama also gives exposure to the participants with an anchor to talk about identities and subjectivities (Wimshurst, 2018). Thus, it will give a new perspective for people about crime and criminality along with the identities and subjectivities.

The growth of crime drama is started from the introduction of crime fiction, a genre in a novel, with a detective storyline written by Edgar Allan Poe. It is a first-time crime narrated and re-told as it is. The ideological concept of punishment also gives an attitude toward the crime (Scaggs, 2005). Based on this 'detective story', television crime drama's basic storyline is produced. The ideal concept of crime drama is about how the crime happens and how it is solved. This basic concept is still being used now, but it is given another genre twist so it will not bore the audience (Scaggs, 2005).

The television crime drama is usually presented as a fictional of real-life crime that happens in society. There is a thin-blurred line between the fictional recreation and the one that happens in real-life. For

some audiences, the crime in television crime dramas seem so real, and they often refuse to watch it because it looks gory. Barthe, Leone, and Lateano (2012) have also claimed that television crime series are responsible for misinforming undergraduates about aspects of the criminal justice system. However, not every crime drama in television explicitly presents crime; other crime drama genres focus on solving a crime by the crime solver and the crime solver's personal life. Recently, TV crime dramas also self-consciously created engagement to the audiences with the issue of gender studies and feminism, such as the agency, female complexity, and expertise; trauma culture and rape; gender justice and violence against women (Coulthard et al., 2018).

With the feminist movement, the television industry starts to give the spotlight to the female character in film and cinema. In crime drama, females are allowed to have the character as a crime solver (Indradjaja, 2016). At the beginning of the female emergence in the masculine genre, female characters are not entirely accepted. The female characters are often introduced as the sidekick and as a prop since the common representation of crime solvers in crime drama are usually male, white, and very masculine. DeTardo-Bora (2009) has found that most women in crime TV dramas are depicted as white, younger, single, and appeared in their early 30s (in Garland et al., 2018). With this kind of findings, it can be concluded that although the portrayals of female law enforcement officers have improved, female characters continue to face issues of discrimination and victimization (Garland et al., 2018).

It is true that as television crime drama continues to develop, the way crime drama genres represent female crime solver also evolve. The sidekick and prop type is changed into the pure partner and crime solver. Both male and female crime solvers have an equal portion on how they solve the crime. Although, at the same time, they are still often accepted as 'one of the boys' (Wilson & Blackburn, 2014). They are also still portrayed in a stereotypical manner even when they become the heroine (Garland et al., 2018). Moreover, Gill (2016) has also stated that although feminism has attained new visibility and popularity, alongside all these different iterations of contemporary feminism is equally popular misogyny.

There are several studies on crime drama series and the issue of gender and stereotyping in television drama. The female character in television drama often represents differently from the male character. The case can be seen in the character of Clarice Starling (a female FBI agent) in the movie entitled *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Compared to her male counterparts, she saves the day, defeats the perpetrator, and protects the intended victim before backup arrives. Her heroic efforts make her promoted to the rank of Special Agent Starling, cementing her place in the FBI. However, the positive depiction does not stand alone as she also is depicted as naive and ill-equipped for a male-dominated career (Garland et al., 2018).

Even though gender inequality remains an important challenge across societies, many believe it to be long gone. In fact, there are still major gaps as women are underrepresented in leadership positions, earn less money, and hold fewer seats in parliaments than men. Thus, the gender inequality issue still needs to be raised in public as the gender system is still in power. This also becomes the main focus in observing how media, especially in the crime drama, is still in a long way to depict the female character as a 'capable' heroine despite the gender (Anisman-Razin, Kark, & Saguy, 2018).

The feminine desire sometimes transforms or 'becoming' and experiences self-transformation. Female characters 'become' similar to the male character (Burns, 2016). The female character in the male world as a female detective in crime drama television shows how female characters can compete in the male world. Other research about crime drama is the studies on television crime drama *Castle*. The leading detective in this crime drama series is a female character named Kate Beckett; She is the lead detective. The development of female characters in popular culture is somehow represented through Kate Beckett, who is very positive for women. She is represented as a strong female character, the perfect of 'having it all' woman.

The crime drama series *NCIS: Los Angeles* is one of the crime drama series that does not only focus on how the crime happens but also how to solve it. The show also has a silver lining in each of the characters' personal lives and values, giving the show a genre twist. *NCIS: Los Angeles*, shortened from Naval Criminal Investigative Service in Los Angeles branch, is a crime drama series about a team of intelligence agents that serve to solve crime happening to or done by the United State Navy. The team members are Special Agent G. Callen, Special Agent Sam Hanna, Special Agent Kensi Blye, and LAPD Detective Liaison Marty Deeks. The team also has two-computer analysts, Eric Beale and Nell Jones, who are in charge of the computer analysis and technological support. The Los Angeles branch is under the Operational Manager Henrietta Lange and is often visited by the Deputy Director Owen Granger from Washington DC. The character Kensi Blye in *NCIS: Los Angeles* crime drama series is the only female in the field team. This situation does not affect her capability as a crime solver and her partner; she is determined to solve the crime daily.

Gender stereotypes can be found through media such as advertorial campaigns, movies, and cinema. Gender stereotypes consist of beliefs about psychological traits and characteristics of men and women that define the attitudes on masculinity and femininity (Brannon, 2017). The conceptualization of gender roles and stereotypes tend to relate to each other, especially when people associate behaviour of men and women, which inevitably is associated with one gender. Women were stereotyping dates back to the beliefs that appeared during the Industrial Revolution

that separated men and women based on their working area. Men work outside their homes while women work at home managing the household (Brannon, 2017). The concept of stereotype is introduced with the idea to provide an explanation of how people are actually influenced by and considered making sense of the messages. The stereotype is a system of classification in this modern definition focused on the inherent portrays by using certain traits (Kidd, 2016).

An approach proposed by Norman Fairclough, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is used to analyze the representation of Kensi Blye as a female crime-solver in the crime drama series *NCIS: Los Angeles*. In this research, the three-dimensional framework is suitable for research related to social and cultural changes. The three-dimensional framework involves three layers of discussion, which are the textual layer, the discourse layer, and the sociocultural layer (Fairclough, 1995).

## METHODS

Representation is the production of meaning through language to 'make sense' of the world, people, object, or event (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013). Representation could be found anywhere in media, namely television, print media, and online media. For example, in the discussion about gender representation in media coverage about a natural disaster, female performs as nurturers whereas male performs as protectors (Ali, 2014). Media representation also has significant power to shape opinions and influence public response to communities or groups around the world (Li & Zhang, 2021). To observe the portrayal of Kensi Blye in the television crime drama series *NCIS: Los Angeles*, the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used. The three-dimensional framework is used since the concept has three levels, the textual level, the discourse level, and the sociocultural level (Fairclough, 1995).

In analyzing the representation of Kensi Blye in the television series *NCIS: Los Angeles*, the data would be the written transcript of the selected episodes in seasons three and four. At the textual level, the transcript of these selected episodes would be classified based on the speakers - the other characters in the series - that said some utterances about Kensi Blye's character traits. The categorized utterances are then classified based on the stereotypical words said by the speakers for further analysis. Then the categorized utterances are analyzed using the social actors' network (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Social actors can be represented based on their quality, called impersonalization. There are two types of impersonalization which are abstraction and objectivation. Objectivation happens when social actors are represented by reference to a certain place or a thing that is closely associated with their person or with the action they are represented (Van Leeuwen, 2008). While abstraction happens when social actors are represented by the quality

assigned to them in their representation (Harris, 2006). However, this research will analyze the textual data using abstraction representation of social actors rather than using objectivation representation.

The next level is the discourse level, where the result of the analysis on social actors' networks in the previous level is now again analyzed using some feminine concepts. CDA is a framework employed in discourse studies to analyze social issues with explanatory power (Li & Zhang, 2021) and is a powerful tool to question the construction of power between ruling (stereotype in power) and subaltern (Donoghue, 2018). In response to the feminist demand, the cinema industry begins to give females the roles of less stereotypical and much-developed characters. This less stereotypical characterization shows females in cinema as not non-dependent but more independent, highly active and powerful. Garland et al. (2018) have shown that a female heroine—more recently, as it is discussed<sup>21</sup>, is portrayed as sav(ing) the day, eliminate(ing) the perpetrator, and rescue(ing) the intended victim before backup arrives.

The last level of the three-dimensional framework is the sociocultural level analysis. In this level, the coded utterances are analyzed for their parts in constructing the representation of Kensi Blye. The stereotypes representation of females can sometimes be influenced by an explicit assessment of gender stereotypes, that is, the examination and expectations about personality traits such as compassion and warmth (Bauer & Santia, 2021). The idea of women (female) is not entirely having masculine traits but also has to balance between the masculine and the feminine traits. The representation of Kensi Blye is produced by people around and surrounding her; her partner and co-workers are analyzed whether they see Kensi Blye as only a strong female character or does she also need to be seen as having feminine traits.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Kensi Blye's fellow agents see her as a powerful female agent with very distinct and notable masculine traits; they often question Kensi Blye's femaleness. As an NCIS field agent and being the only female agent in the field, Kensi Blye needs to perform equal to the other agents, all of whom are male. She continues to perform her strong physical ability in the matter of criminal cases they are working on, such as when she needs to chase down the criminal. Sometimes, she needs to physically have one-on-one combat with the criminals, who are mostly male. Gender inequality towards female and male characters can be found in everyday lives, such as in female leaders' lives. These female leaders have been experiencing gender inequality unconsciously, similar to the female character in the television crime drama, which portrays female characters as distinct with masculine and feminine traits (McLaren, Star, & Widianingsih, 2019). Kensi Blye is known for her stand-out ability and attitude, with many masculine

traits for a female. Being the only female field agent among other male agents does not discourage her. However, the other male agents sometimes question her femaleness. How Kensi Blye is 'becoming' like the other male detectives, in her physical ability and endurance, shows that females can have masculine traits (Burns, 2016). Public debate on how the role of a female in the media, such as television, is almost similar to the public opinion about the female role in the game industry. The female characterization is not always female as a character with full-loaded feminine traits, but as a character with more masculine traits with a sprinkle of feminine traits (Biscop, Malliet, & Dhoest, 2019).

On one impromptu undercover duty for a case, Agent G. Callen asks Marty Deeks about Kensi Blye's old fashion habit. To Callen's knowledge, Kensi Blye has a 'bad habit' with her gym bag in the back of her car. Kensi is said to have a 'messy' gym bag, an unorganized gym bag. Callen wants to use Kensi's 'messy' gym bag as a decoy for a bag of money for drugs trade with the criminal. The term 'messy' used by Callen to describe Kensi Blye's gym bag is the type of impersonalization. This type of impersonalization is the abstraction meaning the social actor is represented by the quality assigned to her in the representation (Van Leeuwen, 2008). For Agent Callen, it is considered an abnormality for Kensi Blye to own a 'messy' gym bag. For Callen, who is male, the fact that Kensi Blye is female should be very neat and in order when it comes to organizing her bag. It should be something unconsciously done by females to be in a very neat and organized way. Whereas for Kensi Blye, being female does not have anything to do with how she organizes her things. By implying to Callen, "Why? What's wrong with my gym bag?" (Season 4, Episode 21, scene 5), Kensi shows how she is confused with Callen's association of her gym bag with a bag of money. The gender implication is inevitable for a television character with both female and male characters as lead on the show. Both characters have their own signature opposing character traits (Byrne, 2015).

Kensi Blye often says to her partner, Detective Marty Deeks, about how she wants to have her own "homegrown" herbs. As for Marty Deeks, what Kensi Blye wish about "homegrown" herbs is something impossible which he refers to on several occasions when Kensi Blye comes to the office, acting strange, and annoyed. As a good and caring partner, Marty Deeks tells the other guys to stay cool and not question Kensi about why she feels annoyed. When Kensi comes to her senses, she implies to her co-workers that she once again killed another houseplant and that this time it was a cactus. Then, Marty Deeks has said to Kensi Blye that she is a 'notable plant killer'. The term used by Marty Deeks to represent Kensi Blye, 'notable plant killer' is an abstraction type of impersonalization (Van Leeuwen, 2008). It highlights the changes in gender-based norms that females should be impersonalized of having a nurturing sense of female behaviour

(Harack, 2016). For both Marty Deeks and Callen as male agents, they have the common knowledge that Kensi Blye as a female, must have nurturing traits. Supposedly, Kensi Blye should not be a plant killer, but she should be able to take care of the plants.

In some moments, Marty Deeks sometimes visits Kensi's house and vice versa. Instead of coming to a very clean and neat house, Marty Deeks comes to a very unorganized house. Marty Deeks seems amazed at the situation and often repeatedly says that Kensi Blye is a 'hoarder'. The term 'hoarders' expressed by Marty Deeks is an abstraction of impersonalization in social actor networks (Van Leeuwen, 2008). It is unlikely for a female to be called as a hoarder. Most females should have a very clean and organized house, unlike Kensi Blye. It should be in female character traits that females should maintain their cleanliness and organized house.

Kensi Blye is known to have some kind of casual respect for vehicles, especially her agencies' vehicles. She always insists on driving her agencies' car and would almost never ask Marty Deeks to drive the car. Even when Kensi is scheduled to switch partners with Callen, Kensi insists on driving them to a crime scene. Callen comments about Kensi's driving that her driving is 'one hell of a driving skill' to Sam Hanna, looking dizzy and nauseous. Callen describes that Kensi is driving high speed and switching lanes at a swift pace. Even though Kensi herself is not a very skilled driver, she refuses to hand over her car keys to her partner at any circumstances. Callen's impression 'one hell of a driving skill' is not a complementary statement but rather a statement that shows how bad Kensi's driving skill is. The term used by Callen to describe Kensi's driving ability is the type of abstraction of impersonalization (Van Leeuwen, 2008). For Callen, Kensi's driving should be more responsible and not switch lanes at a fast pace as most females do. This scene indirectly shows how Kensi is portrayed "as highly incapable, unsuited to be heroes because they are helpless in emergencies" (Inness, 1999).

The expectation of Kensi Blye's co-workers about her in certain situations sometimes tends to question her femaleness. The fact that Kensi is a very dedicated field agent, having equal capability as the other male agents would not be enough. Kensi's co-workers are mostly male, and they often see Kensi as female with masculine traits. Her masculine traits are associated with her duty as a federal field agent by her co-workers, and she must have feminine traits in her personal life. The associated communal traits with women are organized, nurturing, and neat. These traits are some of the basic traits that most females have. For Kensi's co-workers' knowledge, she should also have those traits.

It seems that Kensi Blye's co-workers, especially the male ones, cannot detach themselves from the typical gender stereotypes about females. Even though they admit that Kensi is an impeccable and dedicated agent who has the equal ability as they are, they feel that something is missing from Kensi.

There are expectations and assumptions that feminine traits of nurturing, well-organized, and neat should be carried on by those whose gender identity is female (Brannon, 2017). Thus, this is in line with the idea that Kensi Blye becomes 'one of the boys' as she fails to fulfil her co-workers' ideas of being a good female (Garland et al., 2018).

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the CDA approach, the textual data analysis of the utterances spoken by Kensi Blye's co-workers has implicit intention as the product of the speakers' social cognition. The three-dimensional framework by Norman Fairclough used to analyze the utterances shows the correlation between the sociocultural level and the textual level. Seen from the utterances spoken by Kensi Blye's co-workers show the implicit intention of the speaker. The analysis of the utterances in the discourse level indicates bridging between the cognitive knowledge of the society influenced the speaker social cognition. Whereas in the sociocultural level, the society's conceptual mind influences society's perception.

From the findings and discussion, the representations of Kensi Blye produced by her co-workers are not as what Kensi projected herself. Kensi Blye may be a courageous agent when it comes to solving criminal cases, she considers herself as a strong female character, yet her co-workers see her as a typical female. Even though Kensi Blye wants to be seen as physically strong, brave, and independent, the way her partner and other male co-workers seem to keep seeing her as 'female'. For Kensi's male co-workers on their social cognition, Kensi should have feminine traits behind her masculine traits. It is obvious for the other male agents to see Kensi doing something physical and masculine in the line of duty but other than that. Kensi is still seen as a female who is supposedly nurturing, neat, and preserves any kinds of feminine traits. This is due to the conceptual mind in the society that eventually influences the social cognition of Kensi Blye's co-workers.

However, in the crime drama *NCIS: Los Angeles*, Kensi Blye is not represented as a powerful female character, but in some cases, her male co-workers still demand her feminine side, not only feminine as Kensi needs to look beautiful but the kind of feminine as her being female. The question about her femaleness arises when she is confronted with a situation that is common to most female, and her co-workers obviously think that as a female, Kensi would definitely do like what most female does.

In the masculine genre, such as crime drama, the essence of being female is still questioned. The opinion of being female in the masculine area would not stop the questions of how 'female' the female is. It seems that the men in the masculine genre accept female masculinity but are still questioning about the femaleness in her. The stereotyping of femaleness

will not easily go unquestioned even in the masculine genre. Thus, to be accepted as capable, Kensi faces the pressure to show she has feminine and masculine qualities at the same time.

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