

# The Social Cognitive Theory and Female Empowerment in Grey's Anatomy

Anastasia Panas<sup>1</sup> and Jessica LaBrie<sup>#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Central Catholic High School, USA

<sup>#</sup>Advisor

## Introduction

Reality differs for each individual, since reality is influenced by individuals' experiences and ideals. Mackenzie Cato and Francesca Carpentier define reality as “not merely something that exists ‘out there’, but it is also (re)constructed by the social and sense-making activities of human beings” (Cato and Carpentier). For example, people are influenced by what they watch on television making it an agent in the social construction of their reality. In particular, they may, “incorporate this [television] reality into their own personal views which in turn can influence their personal development” (Cato and Carpentier). This is because their ideas are not fully developed; so dominant images in the media and television shows have the potential to be the overwhelming concept influencing young people such as adolescents. This idea is supported by the social cognitive theory which states that, “audiences are likely to model behavior seen in mass media- if that behavior resulted in positive outcomes, as opposed to behavior that is unrewarded or elicits punishing effects” (Cato and Carpentier). This means that positive depictions of characters in the media will elicit positive reactions from the viewers of this media. Additionally, Michelle Ortiz, a doctoral student, and Jake Harwood, a professor in the Department of Communications at the University of Arizona who also has a PhD, delve deeper into the social cognitive theory stating that “through observations individuals can internalize cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to situations that they do not experience directly. Once learned, individuals can emulate these responses in similar situations” (Ortiz and Harwood). This emulation of the practices depicted in the show is called abstract modeling. When combining these two definitions of social cognitive theory a strong definition of the social cognitive theory is able to be established and is used by researchers when analyzing content based on the parameters of the theory.

## Literature Review

Michelle Ortiz and Jake Harwood conducted research that applied the social cognitive theory to determining if mediated intergroup contact has an effect on intergroup attitudes. They hypothesized that television exposure to positive intergroup interaction involving an outgroup member will be associated with more positive attitudes toward the outgroup. An outgroup is the marginalized group such as gay or black people while intergroup is the superior group such as straight or white people. In the parameters of this study, the outgroup was gay members of society for the analysis of *Will & Grace* and black members of society for the analysis of *The Real World*. The outgroup characters were Will, from *Will & Grace*, and Nehemiah from, *The Real World*. In order to apply the social cognitive theory to this study, participants' perceptions of each outgroup character were assessed based on their viewing of the individual shows. Lastly, participants were asked about “their willingness to engage in a series of behaviors with outgroup members” (Ortiz and Harwood). From this analysis they were able to determine that “exposure to *Will & Grace* significantly predicted low social distance toward gay people, and exposure to *The Real World*: Austin was associated with less social distance toward Blacks” (Ortiz

and Harwood). This confirms the hypothesis since the participants are growing closer to the outgroup by viewing these two selected programs, and confirms that the social cognitive theory can be applied to determining if mediated intergroup contact has an effect on intergroup attitudes toward an outgroup (Ortiz and Harwood).

Other professionals conducted content analyses of shows rather than eliciting participant responses. Two of these researchers are Kimberly A. Powell and Lori Abels, who wrote in an academic journal, *Women and Language*, that was in publication for 25 years, utilized the social cognitive theory to conduct a content analysis of the children's program *Teletubbies*. The goal of this content analysis was to determine if the gender roles in the show were depicting female characters in a positive or negative light. For example, in *Teletubbies* the group of four teletubbies is always led by the males. The majority of the time when they are doing an activity such as lighting up, "Tinky Winky (male) leads the activity, followed in turn by Dipsy (male), Laa-Laa (female) and Po (female)" (Powell and Abels). In addition to leadership the show also displays the negative gender roles of dependence in relation to the female teletubbies. Po is treated as the little girl who needs to be coddled and taken care of. This represents the stereotype and negative gender role that women are dependent on their male counterparts and that they need to be cared for. Additionally, there is a component of this show with actual people in it and Abels and Powell also found evidence of gender roles in these scenes as well. "The videos show boys and fathers being active building a rock wall and playing basketball, and girls and moms braiding hair, cooking and washing dishes" (Powell and Abels). The issue of stereotypes arises again in these scenes as it tells female viewers that they belong in the house while men belong outside doing things. In conclusion, after the completion of this content analysis they found that the female characters in *Teletubbies* are depicted in a negative manner because they are depicted as lesser than their male counterparts.

Similar to Powell and Abels' study about children's television, the study done by Mackenzie Cato and Francesca Renee Dillman Carpentier, who both have PhDs and are journalism and mass communication professors, also seeks to determine how the depiction of the female characters affects the way they empower their female viewers. Unlike the Powell and Abels' study, this study focuses on the adolescent Television Program *The Girls Next Door*. Additionally, the results of this study differ from those of the previous study. While Cato and Carpentier find that the female characters are portrayed in a negative manner, they find that the female viewers are still empowered to employ behaviors similar to theirs. According to the social cognitive theory, this is because the negative things the female characters are doing is counteracted by the positive outcomes these actions receive. For example, these female characters present their key source of identity and power through their sexuality. The female characters are seen exploiting their sexuality throughout the show in order to get ahead in life (Cato and Carpentier). When female viewers see these characters growing in power because they exploit their sexuality, they begin to think it is okay. This therefore empowers them to do the same thing. This shows that negative depictions of female characters lead to female viewers being empowered to do things that are wrong or conform to gender roles.

While many popular television programs have been analyzed under the parameters of the social cognitive theory, this theory has yet to be applied to *Grey's Anatomy*. *Grey's Anatomy* is a popular medical drama "about a group of newly credentialed M.D. 's in what the network calls 'the toughest surgical-residency program west of Harvard,' at the fictional Seattle Grace Hospital" (Lipka). This is one of the most popular shows on television as according to the *Grey's Anatomy* book, "How to Save a Life: The Inside Story of Grey's Anatomy" "the premiere episode earned an 11.1 rating among adults eighteen to forty-nine— the equivalent of fourteen million viewers. It was the most-watched midseason drama since the premiere of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* twelve years prior" (Rice). This success has continued as *Grey's Anatomy* averages about 15 million views per episode (Epstein). Consequently, a show with this large of a fan base warrants research as this show is affecting millions of viewers each week.

While many experts have conducted research in relation to the social cognitive theory and its relation to female empowerment, no researchers have attempted to apply the social cognitive theory to medical dramas,

specifically *Grey's Anatomy*. This consequently raises the question: are the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* depicted in a positive way that allows them to empower their female viewers? Answering this question would help to spread the application of the social cognitive theory to another genre of television, medical dramas. This will also help to improve women's perception of how they should act. If the female characters are empowering viewers, these viewers will be encouraged to do good things in the workplace as well. Therefore, helping to close the gender gap in the workplace as women will push themselves to achieve on a high level similar to the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy*. Additionally, if females are not empowered, then people will know that female depiction is a problem in *Grey's Anatomy* that must be addressed. I am going to answer this question by first conducting a content analysis of seasons 1-15 of *Grey's Anatomy* similar to the research of Cato and Carpentier and the research of Kimberly and Abels to determine whether or not the female characters in the show are depicted in a positive manner. When conducting this content analysis, I will be analyzing each episode within the parameters of the social cognitive theory. Additionally, I will conduct a survey similar to Ortiz and Harwood; however, I will use my survey to confirm the findings of my content analysis and the social cognitive theory. This survey will inquire whether participants believe the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are depicted positively or negatively and if participants are empowered by *Grey's Anatomy*. In conducting this methodology, I hypothesize that I will discover that the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are being depicted in a positive manner which does allow them to empower their female viewer base.

## Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

This research was carried out using a mixed method approach consisting of a content analysis and a survey analysis. A content analysis was used to determine if the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are depicted in a positive manner. This data will provide the basis for the analysis as it provides the framework for determining the first part of the social cognitive theory. Unlike Ortiz and Harwood, I am going to analyze female characters as a whole because the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are ever changing therefore an individual analysis would elicit inaccurate data. Similar to Powells and Abel, my content analysis will rely on the comparison between the depiction of males and females in order to determine if female characters are depicted in a positive manner. Additionally, a survey was used in order to confirm the findings of the content analysis by asking participants questions specific to the social cognitive theory and their opinions as viewers of the show. This will elicit a human perspective from the research, which is the area where other papers regarding female empowerment and the social cognitive theory are lacking, since other researchers rely solely on the content analysis of the television show. The combination of these two methods was used to determine whether *Grey's Anatomy* empowers female viewers by gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. The content analysis portion of the method, which will occur simultaneously to the implantation of the survey, consists of two parts: analyzing each episode and tallying the data that I will discuss later in my method section. Both steps of the content analysis will also occur simultaneously.

### 3.2 Content Analysis

For the content analysis, I watched seasons 1-15 of *Grey's Anatomy* on Netflix. I excluded season 17 because it was affected by Covid-19. This resulted in the season's plot differing from a typical season, therefore it does not fulfill all of the portions of my content analysis. Additionally, I excluded season 18 because it will not be completed by the end of my research, providing me with incomplete data which could skew the results. Lastly, I excluded season 16 because of time constraint as I only had three months to conduct my method. Even without

season 16, I will still have a sufficient amount of data, and if a significant trend change were to occur in *Grey's Anatomy*, it presumably would have happened by this point in the show. In order to organize my data gathered from the content analysis, I created a chart which broke down the data by season to assist in determining whether the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are depicted in a positive or negative manner.

**Table 1.** Content Analysis Chart

	Number of female department heads	Number of male department heads	Number of surgeries lead by a female	Number of surgeries led by a male	Number of times women hold their own in an argument	Number of times men hold their own in an argument
Season 1						
Season 2						
Season 3						
Season 4						
Season 5						
Season 6						
Season 7						
Season 8						
Season 9						
Season 10						
Season 11						
Season 12						
Season 13						
Season 14						
Season 15						

The first and second column of **table 1** tallied the number of department heads that were displayed in the show each season. Each time a new department head was introduced, I would add a tally to the corresponding gender's column. This will allow me to decipher whether the leadership in the hospital is predominantly female or male. Additionally, I kept a second chart in which I would note the name and position of each department head to allow me to keep track of them in each season. This chart was also broken down by season, allowing me to easily discern which characters were making up the department heads in the tally. To see a template of this chart, see **Appendix B**. Column three and four in **table 1** kept a tally of the number of males/females leading each surgery. For this study, the lead surgeon was classified as the person/people who have their hands on the patient and are operating on them. This does not include residents who are helping to suction or assist as they are not performing the surgery on their own. Within the parameters of this study, the only way a resident can be classified as the lead surgeon is if they are the one operating while the attending is suctioning, watching off to the side, or not present in the operating room. This tally is used to help determine if females are depicted positively as it will show that women can hold the same responsibilities of saving a life that men can. This can be seen if the female characters are leading the same number or more surgeries than the male characters. Finally, the last two columns of **table 1** tally the number of men/women holding their own in an argument. In this study, "holding your own" in an argument is classified as getting the last word in an argument between a male and a female or getting the thing he or she was arguing in favor of in relation to arguments between males and females. "Holding their own in arguments" shows that the female characters are independent enough to fight for their beliefs. Additionally, if an argument seemed very large and important, I would

include some details and the episode it was in on a separate sheet for important events, in the event I wanted to use the details of the fight later in my research (**Appendix A**). Lastly, I noted any major accomplishments that women achieved on the sheet with the major arguments to again help determine whether or not the female characters were being depicted in a positive manner. These were noted similarly to the arguments, with a description and the episode number the accomplishment occurred in.

### 3.3 Survey Analysis

For the survey analysis, I surveyed students at my high school in the Merrimack Valley, in order to confirm the findings of my content analysis. All of the participants were informed that this was a completely anonymous survey and that they could stop filling out the survey at any moment if they felt uncomfortable or did not wish to continue. Additionally, no reward was given for participating in the survey which eliminated the limitation of people participating just for an incentive. However, one limitation of my survey was the criteria a person had to meet in order for their response to be valid. Participants had to be both female and a viewer of the television drama *Grey's Anatomy*, since I am looking at the way *Grey's Anatomy* affects the empowerment of females. This limited my participant number as almost a third of the people who filled out my survey did not fit the criteria for the study. However, this survey is used in combination with my content analysis, so the smaller number of participants will still be able to provide me with an accurate confirmation of my content analysis results, and confirm the credibility of the social cognitive theory. The first two questions in my survey asked participants the gender they identify with and if they have ever watched *Grey's Anatomy* before. These questions helped me to identify whether a participant met the criteria of the study. Next, I asked participants which season of *Grey's Anatomy* they were on. This allowed me to gauge what parts of the show they have seen and which parts they haven't; because if my content analysis shows that the depiction of female characters changes over the 15 seasons I am analyzing, the answers participants provide to the following questions will vary based on the season they are on. The next question I asked participants was, "do you think the female characters on *Grey's Anatomy* are depicted in a positive manner?" This question will help to establish the first part of the social cognitive theory that says the characters in a show must be depicted in a positive manner in order for the viewers to be empowered in a positive way. Therefore, if participants answer yes to this question, they should answer yes to the question about empowerment which comes later in the survey. To follow up this question I asked participants to explain their answers to the previous question. This will help me to elicit a human perspective and connect participants' thoughts to their quantitative responses. The last question in my survey asked participants if they felt empowered to do good things by the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy*. This will help to show whether female viewers are empowered by the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy*. Additionally, when connecting the question about depiction and the question about empowerment I should be able to confirm or debunk the credibility of the social cognitive theory in relation to medical dramas as well as determine whether the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* empower their female viewer base. To see a list of all my survey questions, refer to **Appendix C**.

## Results

### 4.1 Depiction of female characters

After analyzing seasons 1-15 of *Grey's Anatomy*, I was able to examine a change in the depiction of female characters over time. I discovered this by adding together the number of department heads (DH), the number of surgeries led (SL), and the number of arguments won (AW) for each gender. I then divided this by the total number of tallies for both males and females in each season (TN). Finally, I multiplied each number by one

hundred in order to provide data in the form of whole numbers making it easier to visualize. This was then developed into my two equations that became the framework of my content analysis data, female depiction score (FD) and male depiction score (MD).

$$\text{Female Depiction (FD)} = \left( \frac{DH + SL + AW}{TN} \right) 100$$

$$\text{Male Depiction (MD)} = \left( \frac{DH + SL + AW}{TN} \right) 100$$

Figure 1. Depiction Equations

After placing each season's data into the equations in figure 1, I was able to calculate the Female Depiction Score and Male Depiction Score for each season which is included in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Depiction of Male Characters vs Female Characters

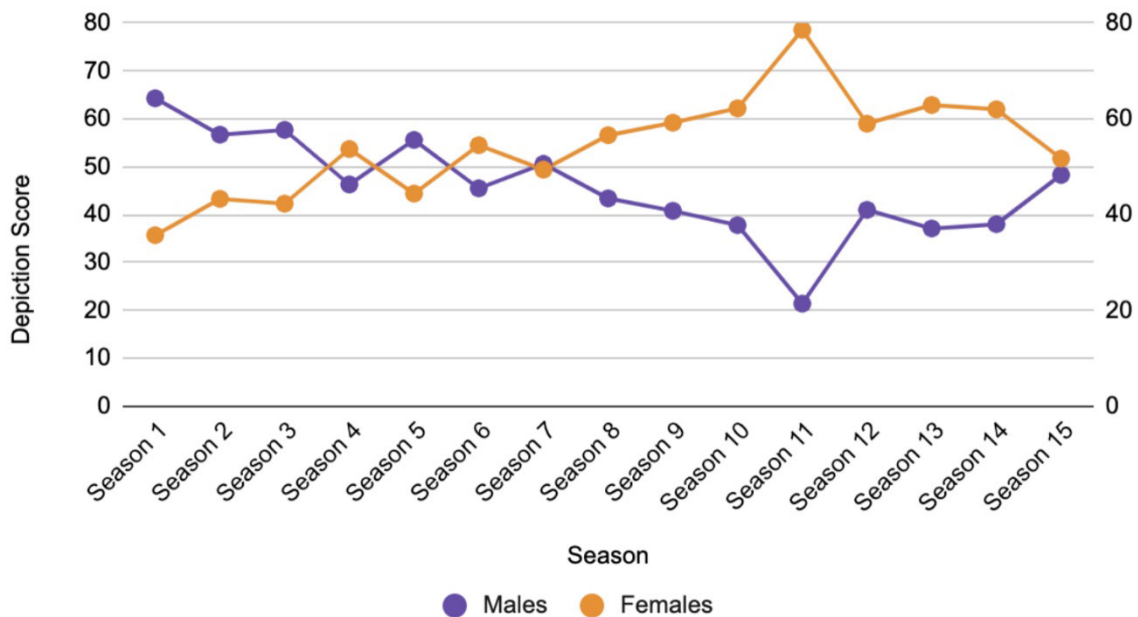


Figure 2. Depiction of Males Characters vs Female Characters

As seen in figure 2, the depiction of female characters is ever changing in seasons four through seven. It is not until season eight however, that the trend makes a total change. From this point to the end of my research, female characters are depicted in a positive manner. Women were depicted most positively in season 11 because they had an FD score of 78.6. This is higher than any other season for both male and female characters. In this season, women are leading the hospital in department heads as five out of the seven department heads in the hospital are women. Additionally, women are excelling in the operating room this season. For example, Meredith is on a streak in which she has had ninety good outcomes in a row. This means that in the last ninety patients she has seen, she has not lost a single one. In addition to Meredith's success, Amelia is able to remove an inoperable tumor from Nicole Herman's head, consequently saving her life. Additionally in season 12, women continue to progress in leadership as Miranda Bailey becomes the first female Chief of Surgery in the hospital's history. On the other hand, females are depicted worst in season 1 as their FD score is 35.7. While this displays that female are depicted negatively, they are still doing some good things in this season. For example, Izzie and Alex are left to run the floor alone, however Alex never answers his pages, so

Izzie must run the entire floor on her own as an intern, and she succeeded in doing so. While portions of the qualitative data show female characters doing good in this season, the success of the male characters in the first three seasons out-way this resulting in the overall data presenting female characters as being depicted negatively in seasons one through three.

## 4.2 Female Viewers Perception of Female Characters on Grey's Anatomy

The first part of the survey asks participants to identify whether they believe the female characters in Grey's Anatomy are depicted in a positive or negative way. Of the 47 participants 28 believed that female characters are depicted positively in *Grey's Anatomy*. One participant said, "They are depicted as independent and hard-working individuals. They also stand up for themselves in many different scenarios. Additionally, they hold high positions in the hospital." Another participant wrote, "The women are very inspirational when they fight for what they believe in rather than simply agreeing because the other person is a man." These responses allowed me to elicit a human response to the characters in the show. To see an entire list of participants responses, refer to **Appendix F**. Additionally, 2 participants believed the female characters were depicted in a negative way, and 17 participants were unsure of whether they are depicted in a positive or negative way. Therefore, as hypothesized in the beginning, in order for the social cognitive theory to be accurate, at least the participants who reported believing that the female characters are depicted positively should also be empowered to do good things.

## 4.3 Empowerment

To analyze my survey responses, I calculated the percentage of people who were empowered by the show based on the season they are on. Therefore, I divided the seasons into three groups based on the depiction of females from the content analysis: seasons 1-3, seasons 4-7 and seasons 8-the present. As hypothesized by my content analysis results, participants who watched seasons 1-3 should not be empowered by the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* because they are depicted negatively in these seasons. Additionally, those who watched seasons 4-7 should be divided on whether they are empowered because the depiction of female characters is constantly changing throughout these seasons. Lastly, those who are on season 8-the present should be empowered by the female characters because they are depicted positively in the show during these seasons.

Figure 3: Participants Empowerment

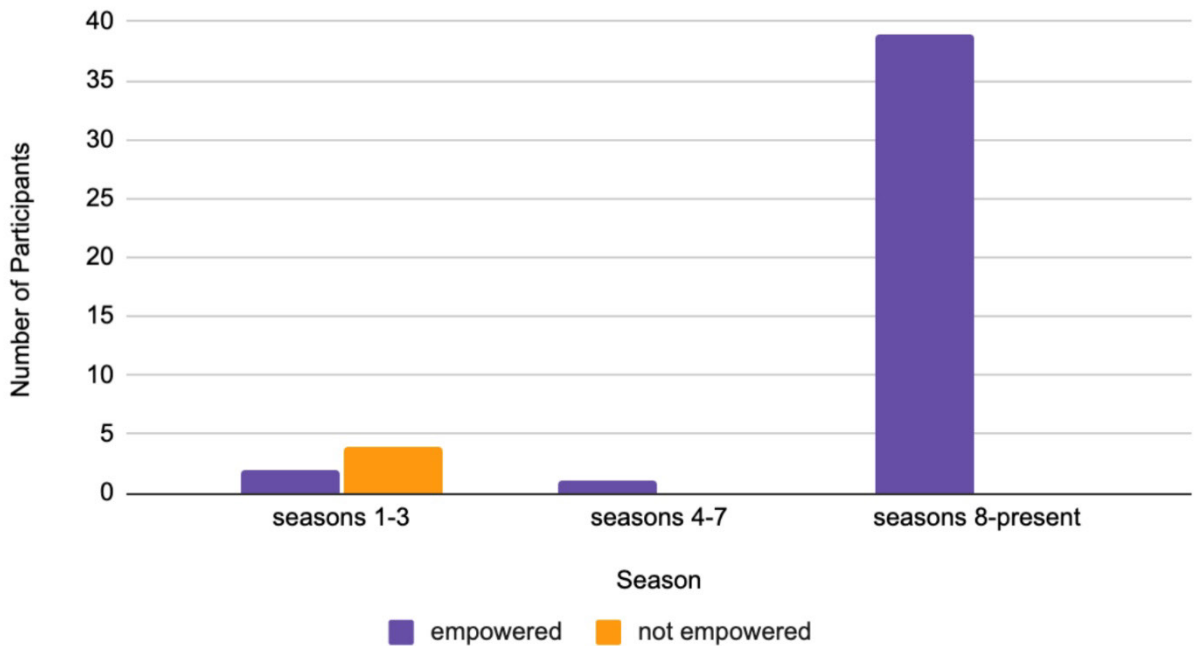


Figure 3. Participants Empowerment

Figure 3 confirms the findings of the content analysis as the majority of participants were not empowered during seasons 1-3. The analysis of season 4-7 is limited as only one participant responded as being on a season in this range however since this is not a large-scale study conclusion can still be drawn based on the specific season this participant is on. This participant was on season four so, this coincides with the findings of the content analysis since the female characters were depicted positively in season 4. The survey's biggest sample size came from seasons 8-the present, and out of the 40 people who watched these seasons, 39 reported that they were empowered by the female characters, and the other participant chose not to answer this question. Overall, when looking at the show as a whole, 91.3% of participants were empowered to do good things because of the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy*.

#### 4.4 Social Cognitive Theory

The social cognitive theory states that if the characters are depicted positively then viewers should be empowered. Therefore, if participants respond that the characters are depicted positively, they should also indicate that they are empowered by the characters.

Table 2. Relating the Depiction of Female Characters to Empowerment of Female viewers

Depicted positively and empowered:	54.3%
Depicted negatively and empowered:	4.3%
Might be depicted positively:	32.6%
Depicted positively and not empowered:	4.3%
Depicted negatively and not empowered:	0%
Might be depicted positively and not empowered:	4.3%



As shown in **table 2**, it can be concluded that the social cognitive theory is correct even when being applied to a medical drama as the majority of participants, 54.3%, believed the female characters depicted positively were also empowering.

## Conclusion

The goal of this study was to determine whether or not the female characters in the television drama *Grey's Anatomy* empower female viewers by applying the social cognitive theory to the show. This theory states, if the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are depicted in a positive way, then female viewers will be empowered to do good. Therefore, by conducting a content analysis of the show, I was able to conclude that the female characters in the show are depicted in a positive manner in seasons 8-15 since the FD was higher than the MD in **figure 2**. This allowed me to then conclude that female viewers of this period in the show would be empowered to do good things based on the social cognitive theory. While I have the ability to draw this conclusion based on the social cognitive theory, I wanted to confirm this conclusion by surveying female viewers of *Grey's Anatomy* in order to elicit a human perspective. The survey confirmed that the majority of female viewers of the show believe the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* either are depicted in a positive manner or might be depicted in a positive manner as shown in **table 1**. This split changes when asked about empowerment as almost all participants reported that they were empowered by the female characters in *Grey's Anatomy* as shown in **figure 3**. Four participants reported not being empowered by the female character however all of these responses came from participants who are on season 1-3 which is when female characters are depicted in a negative manner. Therefore, with the help of the survey, I can conclude female characters began to be depicted positively between season four and seven and have continued to be depicted positively throughout the show, therefore empowering female viewers at my school to do good things like the characters in the medical drama. This differs from much of the current research in other genres of television such as children's programs as the females in these shows were not depicted in a positive manner. This conclusion also differs from my initial hypothesis as I did not predict a change in the depiction of the female characters.

## 5.1 Limitations, Further Research, and Implications

There are some limitations to this conclusion as given the time constraint applied to this research, I was only able to watch each episode once. If there was more time, I would watch all the episodes at least twice to ensure there was no error in my tally for my content analysis. Additionally, I was constricted to the students at my school for participants, so the group of participants is not regionally diverse enough for these conclusions to be applied on a broader scale than high school students at my school. However, this sample size still allows me to apply the conclusions to the region of people studied. With this in mind, further research could be done to determine if these conclusions apply to other females of various ages and backgrounds. This further research could utilize my survey in order to gather data from a wider variety of *Grey's Anatomy's* female viewers. However, researchers could add questions about participants' age and background to ensure that the survey reaches a diverse population. In addition to looking at a wider variety of female viewers, researchers should also begin applying this analysis to other popular medical dramas in order to determine if these shows are also portraying the female characters positively. Another direction further research could take is studying how female viewers respond to the empowerment they receive from *Grey's Anatomy*. Researchers could study viewers to see if watching the show has affected the way they act especially in the workplace.

With the knowledge that the female characters are depicted positively in *Grey's Anatomy*, this research can be placed back into the field of research as it fills the lack of knowledge of the application of the social

cognitive theory to medical dramas in the context of female empowerment. It fills this gap by establishing that the social cognitive theory can be applied to medical dramas, and provides an example for how to apply it. This research established that the content analysis does not have to provide solely qualitative data to establish conclusions similar to the research of Powells and Abel and the research of Cato and Carpentier. Instead, researchers can use the quantitative content analysis that I established with the use of my tallies and equations. This will help to make the result more objective rather than subjective. Lastly, this study applies a human perspective to this discussion of the social cognitive theory and female empowerment since, until now, studies have not used a survey to acquire a human perspective when conducting this research. The research of Powells and Abel and the research of Cato and Carpentier allowed the social cognitive theory to speak for itself; however, with the addition of the human perspective, this study was able to strengthen the value of the research found from the content analysis that applied the social cognitive theory to *Grey's Anatomy*.

Additionally, this newly found data on *Grey's Anatomy* will help continue to promote female empowerment and allow women to strive to do great things. For example, since female viewers at my school are seeing other females excelling in the workforce in *Grey's Anatomy*, they will also be empowered to excel in their individual endeavors. Additionally, since the depiction of female characters changes over the course of the show, this analysis provides a blueprint for improving female depiction in other medical dramas. This could be integrated over time similar to the trend change in *Grey's Anatomy* as it did not affect the overall storyline or plot of the show. By doing this, it will allow females to see positive depictions of women no matter which medical drama they watch, allowing many women to be empowered to do good things.

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