

OWN: Oprah’s Chicken Soup for the Soul in an Age of Angst

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“I want to use television not only to entertain, but to help people lead better lives.” – Oprah Winfrey

No individual has shaped the American zeitgeist over the past thirty years more than Oprah Winfrey. With a unique brand of entertainment that was part therapeutic, part spiritual Winfrey used her television platform to reach the hearts and minds of the American public. Winfrey gracefully transcended race unlike any black celebrity before or since her. At its peak, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (ABC), which won 47 Daytime Emmy Awards, averaged 42 million viewers a week. Millions of white women adopted Winfrey as the African-American sister or best friend that they never had. For African-American women (and men), Winfrey was the ultimate embodiment of racial uplift. Winfrey rose from poverty in Mississippi to become the first black female billionaire in North America. Although critics have accused her of pandering to white viewers, she never lost support within the African-American community. The National Museum of African-American History and Culture (NMAAHC) opened the “Watching Oprah” exhibition in June 2018. “Just as Oprah Winfrey watched TV coverage of the Civil Rights Movement and was shaped by the era in which she was born and raised, she has gone on to have a profound impact on how Americans viewed themselves and each other in the tumultuous decades that followed,” says the museum’s founding director, Lonnie Bunch.

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In the final room of the NMAAHC exhibition, visitors will find the famous black custom-made Atelier Versace gown that Winfrey wore to the 2018 Golden Globe Award ceremony. On January 7, 2018, she received the Cecil B. DeMille Award. Winfrey delivered a rousing speech that sounded like a campaign speech. "I want all the girls watching here to know that a new day is on the horizon," said Winfrey (Izadi). Weeks earlier Winfrey made news when she tweeted a *New York Post* article that called her the Democratic Party's best candidate to defeat President Donald Trump when he runs for reelection in 2020. Following her Golden Globe speech, the news media, social media, Hollywood elite, and close friends ran wild with speculation that she could be gearing up to run for office. Four months earlier Winfrey hosted a segment of CBS's *60 Minutes* titled "Divided," in which she spoke to a panel in Grand Rapids, Michigan, composed of seven people who voted for President Trump and seven who did not. The panelists discussed their feelings about Trump's response to the racial unrest in Charlottesville, Virginia; his efforts to end Obama's health care program; his stance on immigration restriction; and other topics. One of the panelists expressed fear that the nation was on the verge of another civil war. Could an Oprah Winfrey presidency be the antidote to cure the nation's ills? Currently, Winfrey says that politics is not in her future. Indeed, she may be most effective in her present-day role as the nation's unofficial "Healer-in-Chief."

This article assesses Oprah Winfrey's impact and effectiveness as Healer-in-Chief through the use of the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN). Since leaving her syndicated daytime series in 2011, Winfrey has served as the Chief Executive Officer of her 24-hour cable network. OWN grants Winfrey a platform to promote her views on self-help and healing; religion and spirituality; women's empowerment; and the family which she has used to build a billion-dollar brand over the past three decades. OWN attracts viewers from all social backgrounds; however, the network's largest audience is African-American women and men. Much of the programming is geared toward African-American viewers. My research focuses on the most dominant themes found in OWN's programming: self-help, spirituality and religion, and women's empowerment. The same three themes emerged from the biographies and scholarly works on Oprah Winfrey and selected episodes from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that I reviewed.

My research also includes the results of surveying 146 African-Americans from the Washington Metropolitan area between the ages of 18 and 64. The surveys were completed between May and June 2018 using Survey Monkey. Respondents shared

their views on the OWN network and the prospects of her political career. 72.41% of the respondents were African-American women and most respondents were over the age of 45. The largest group (34.48%) was between the ages of 55 and 64. The majority of respondents were college educated. 37.50% had master's degrees, and 18.75% had a doctorate degree. 90.34% of respondents categorized themselves as Oprah fans. 55.17% watched *The Oprah Winfrey Show* occasionally when it aired. 19.31% and 13.79% of them watched the series weekly and daily, respectively. 11.72% of respondents never viewed an episode. 46.21% of all respondents watch OWN occasionally. Of the total number of respondents, 33.79% watch weekly, 6.21% daily, and 13.79% never watch the network.

Oprah Winfrey and Self-Help Television

The Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) debuted in 80 million American households in 2011. OWN is a 24-hour cable television network and the second network founded by a black woman (Cathy Hughes launched TV One in 2004). Winfrey took over as OWN's Chief Executive Officer and Chief Creative Officer in July 2011. The network has offered a variety of programming which includes new series hosted by Winfrey, reality series, original dramas and sitcoms, and primetime soap operas. Self-help themes permeate many of the network's non-scripted series. On January 17-18, 2013, OWN's *Oprah's Next Chapter* featured an exclusive, worldwide two-night interview with disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong. After years of denying that he had used performance enhancement drugs to win seven consecutive Tour de France titles after overcoming cancer, he confessed to Winfrey. The interview was therapeutic in that it allowed Armstrong the opportunity to admit to his flaws, take responsibility for his failure, and ask for forgiveness. Eight months later disgraced actress Lindsay Lohan appeared on *Next Chapter*. Lohan, then 27, admitted to Winfrey that she was a recovering alcoholic who had done cocaine 10 to 15 times. She blamed herself and not her parents for her poor choices. OWN eventually aired *Lindsay*, an eight-part docuseries from March-April 2014, about Lohan's rehabilitation recovery.

Other memorable episodes of *Next Chapter* have included interviews with Rev. Al Sharpton and Jason Collins. Sharpton blamed his polarizing persona as a race-baiting provocateur and past obesity on his inability to properly deal with the bitterness he had bottled up from growing up poor and fatherless in a racist society. In her sit down with openly gay NBA player Jason Collins, the now retired athlete

shared his experience of conquering the fear of coming out to the world about his sexual preference. *Oprah: Where Are They Now* includes interviews with past celebrities who have overcome obstacles. Her former daytime competitor Ricki Lake shared stories of overcoming obesity, sexual abuse, and divorce.

Oprah's Masterclass is less therapeutic in nature and more focused on motivational life skills from the nation's most successful celebrities. On this program, the celebrity narrates his or her own story. Rather than dwell on their successes the point is to document the trials they faced on their way to the top of the mountain. The show's tagline is "use your life as a class." One episode that stood out to me dealt with Tyler Perry, one of the most successful television and film writers and producers in Hollywood. His multiple scripted series and primetime soap opera *The Haves and the Have Nots* (2013-) are responsible for much of OWN's sustainability. He reveals on *Masterclass* that he began writing as a form of catharsis to heal from his alcoholic father's physical abuse and the sexual abuse inflicted upon him by others. Before he had blockbuster films, he was writing Christian plays which used comedy to address the painful experiences of his past. His initial plays were flops. Perry credited his faith in God for his fortitude. He uses his brand of entertainment as a form of therapy to allow others to heal from their pain. Faith, family, and forgiveness is his mantra.

The Roots of OWN's Self-Help Philosophy

Born to a teenage single mother in rural Mississippi in 1954, Oprah Winfrey's life has been one long story of overcoming tremendous odds, reinvention, and self-improvement. Her mother was a maid and her father was a barber. From the age of nine, she was molested and sexually abused by an uncle, a cousin, and a family friend. By 14, Winfrey was sleeping with older boys and pregnant with her son Canaan who died stillborn. Her mother Vernita Lee sent her to live with her father Vernon in Nashville, Tennessee. Oprah excelled academically and socially in this new environment. She won the Miss Black Tennessee beauty pageant, secured a part-time job at a local black radio station, and was awarded a full scholarship to Tennessee State University by the age of 17 (Johnson-Sterrett 30). Two years later Winfrey became the first black female anchor, earning \$15,000, at Nashville's CBS affiliate WTVF-TV.

In 1976 she became the co-anchor of the 6 o'clock news on Baltimore's WJZ-TV. Winfrey's emphatic manner of reporting did not sit well with the station's

producers. She was demoted and made the co-host of the station's half-hour morning talk show *People are Talking* (30). The morning show gave her the freedom to relate to guests the way she does best. Winfrey moved to Chicago in 1983 to become the new host of *AM Chicago*, a half-hour morning show on WLS-TV. Three years later, the program was expanded to an hour, renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and nationally televised in six million homes. The show's popularity can be attributed to Winfrey's uncanny ability to use her personal struggles to connect with viewers and audience members. In 1986 she shared her past experiences of sexual abuse with the audience. She dedicated episodes to allow rape victims to tell their stories and to educate viewers on the multiple forms of sexual violence. Sujata Moorti refers to these episodes as "Cathartic Confessions" and "Emancipatory Texts." According to Moorti, "The act of giving voice to pain contains the potential to transform these television programs into cathartic events for participants" (83). In addition to her battles with sexual abuse, Oprah frequently shared her struggles with her weight and diet. She introduced her audience to Bob Greene, a weight-loss guru and her trainer, with whom Winfrey published a weight-loss book (*Make the Connection: Ten Steps to a Better Body—and a Better Life*) and produced an exercise video (Razza 41-43). On Winfrey's February 14, 2005, episode, "Oprah's Boot Camp," she and Greene presented a guide to achieve a total body makeover in 12 weeks.

Winfrey's story suggests that she and, by extension, her fans, are responsible for creating their realities. This message extends beyond weight loss. It pertains to getting off welfare, earning a college degree, starting a business, or breaking down racial barriers. Janice Peck says, "By endorsing the individual's ability to recognize and overcome her problems, talk shows have incorporated the Enlightenment equation of knowledge and power and extended it to the therapeutic equation of self-knowledge and individual 'empowerment'" (Peck 18). The "therapeutic ethos" found in daytime television in the 1980s-1990s was rooted in the teachings of Sigmund Freud who argued that a "paralysis of the will" prevented a person from succeeding in life. Winfrey not only relied upon a therapeutic model; in her early years, she applied the framework of the "recovery movement" originating from the 1930s Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program. AA, which was based on Protestant religious principles, used a 12-step process to help alcoholics empower themselves to overcome the causes of their addiction. The AA model was adopted in the 1960s to help those struggling with their weight or drugs.

Winfrey's success and emphasis on responsibility was a byproduct of President Ronald Reagan's endorsement of conservative values and the traditional family in the 1980s. "The family-centered diagnosis of the cause and cure for personal malaise operated as a central frame of intelligibility in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* throughout the tenure of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Alcoholism, drug abuse, addiction, divorce, domestic violence, child abuse, crime, and poverty were laid at the doorsteps of the so-called dysfunctional family" (Peck 83). Episodes titled "Pros and Cons" and "Homeless People" featured guests who blamed themselves for living on the street or having to rely on welfare to support their families. Winfrey and the audience encouraged them to rely on themselves, not the government, to pull themselves up by their bootstraps (Peck 139). In 1994 she announced the creation of a program to help 100 families cycle off of welfare in two years. The next year she aired an episode called "Is Affirmative Action Outdated?" which presented white panelists preaching to a white audience about the danger of racial quotas used to promote diversity. Peck has called Winfrey a neoliberal who embraced the Clinton era's brand of Reaganesque conservatism. However, it can also be argued that Winfrey was inspired by and following in the traditions of self-help practices resonating in the black church and black mutual aid societies dating back to the Antebellum and Reconstruction.

Fighting to Be Healed

The Oprah Winfrey Show featured professional psychologists, therapists, life coaches, and spiritual advisors. The "Oprah Effect" helped to make financial advisor Suze Orman a household name. Winfrey did the same for Dr. Phil McGraw and Iyanla Vanzant, who both now have series on OWN. McGraw launched his daytime series, *Dr. Phil*, in 2002. Since 2011, episodes have been airing on OWN and in syndication worldwide. McGraw's episodes involve a sit-down interview with a troubled individual. The studio and television audiences view video footage of the individual misbehaving. Family members, who are usually to blame for the person's dysfunctional behavior, join McGraw and the individual on the stage to provide further testimony. McGraw may also bring on other professional experts to diagnose the problem. Unlike Winfrey who empathizes with her guests, McGraw offers a no-nonsense version of tough love (Nussey 57). McGraw's guests and live audience members tend to be white.

Iyanla Vanzant (born Rhonda Eva Harris) has been called the rowdy black sister that Winfrey always wished she had. Vanzant was raped at nine and became a mother by 16. She spent years in an abusive marriage before divorcing with three children in tow. She was on welfare for a time. Vanzant lost her home to foreclosure, nearly went bankrupt caring for an adult daughter who died from colon cancer, and contemplated suicide. Her setbacks fueled a remarkable comeback which led to a law degree, ordination as a Yoruba priestess and New Thought minister, six books on the *New York Times* best-sellers list, and the top-rated reality series on OWN, *Iyanla: Fix My Life* (2012-). Vanzant initially caught the public's attention in the 1990s. She appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* 20 times between 1998 and 1999. Her star faded after a disagreement with Winfrey led the two to sever ties for 11 years. Vanzant and Winfrey publicly made amends in 2011 on one of the final episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The series premiere of *Fix My Life* was a two-night episode featuring reality star and domestic abuse survivor Evelyn Lozada. Future seasons included gut-wrenching sessions with the victims of the 2016 Pulse Nightclub Massacre, men who were raped or molested as children, disgraced African-American Olympic hero Debi Thomas and the bipolar rapper DMX. Vanzant's therapeutic techniques include meditation, breathing exercises, mantras, and unconventional exercises like wearing masks or holding bricks that symbolize mental barriers blocking individuals' happiness and freedom. Most of the show's guests are black men and women. Vanzant's approach is the opposite of Winfrey's. She is loud, outspoken, fiery, and has no problem calling her guests names if it takes that to wake them up. "I am not going to fight you for your healing," she says. If tough love fails, Vanzant will pray for her guests, hug them, and offer a shoulder on which to cry.

Other OWN series that fall into the self-help category include (1) *Released*, a docuseries on newly released black prisoners; (2) *Flex and Shanice*, a reality series about a black celebrity couple putting their lives back together after bankruptcy; (3) *Black Love*, a docuseries consisting of candid interviews with famous and unknown black couples about the secrets of success in their marriages. (4) *The T.D. Jakes Show* features Bishop T.D. Jakes, senior pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas, Texas, who meets with guests sharing stories of personal struggle and remarkable triumph.

Survey respondents were asked the following question: What do you think about the self-help methods and messages promoted by Oprah and on OWN's programming? Only 11.35% of the respondents prefer OWN's self-help

programming. One respondent said, "I think they are helpful and with good intent. At the end of the day, everything doesn't work for everybody, but it's great to see people overcome the challenges that they face" (see Table 1).

Keywords from Written Comments	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Great	18	12.86%
Helpful, relevant	41	29.29%
Informative, interesting	15	10.71%
Inspirational	10	7.14%
Positive	14	10.00%
Not relevant	8	5.71%
Never or Seldom Watch	14	10.00%
No Opinion	20	14.29%

Table 1. Respondents' Assessment of Self-Help Methods and Messages Promoted by Winfrey and OWN Programming (Answered: 140; Skipped: 6)

Oprah Winfrey as a Spiritual Guru

If you are not able to or do not attend church on Sunday mornings at 11:00 AM, you can tune into OWN's *SuperSoul Sunday* series. The hour-long series features Winfrey engaging in inspirational conversations with best-selling authors, uber-successful leaders, pastors, and spiritual guides. The conversations are typically filmed outside, surrounded by trees, on a beautiful sunny day. Vanzant sat down with Winfrey for one episode. Vanzant described prayer as an "orgasmic" experience that connected her to God. Many of the show's conversations center on spirituality as much as religion. Wayne Pacelle, the president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, spoke about humans achieving spiritual awakening through their connection with animals. A Brooklyn megachurch pastor, A.R. Bernard, told Winfrey that millennials who say that they are spiritual, not religious, are just hungry for a connection with God.

Winfrey's *SuperSoul Sessions* are televised recordings of day-long motivational lectures from celebrities, change makers, and wisdom teachers. One of the speakers was Angela Davis. Not the famous black power activist, but a black fitness evangelist. Davis, 42, told the audience that she once suffered from depression and

doubt. Her husband encouraged her to trust in God, believe in herself, exercise, and spread her gospel to others. She told everyone in the audience that they were the apple of God's eye and born with a purpose. All they have to do is follow the yellow brick road of faith. Mega-influencer Tony Robbins appeared on another episode. Winfrey sat in the audience for this soul session. Robbins asked the crowd to stand and recognize (applaud) Winfrey for all that she has overcome—in terms of suffering—and how much she has accomplished despite suffering. Robbins says, “The majority of people in our culture have low energy because they just fit in. Because if you stand out like Oprah, you become a target. So you have to decide. Do I want to fit in or do I want to be what God meant me to be which will naturally stand out?” (Robbins). Television viewers and live audience members are supposed to leave these sessions empowered to improve their lives. A survey respondent remarked, “Reality TV, unfortunately, reduces complex issues to soundbites and I fear a lot of participants do not achieve the change they desire.”

John Gray, a black former associate pastor at Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, and now pastor of Relentless Church in Greenville, South Carolina, offered one of the most entertaining and timely speeches. Gray is the star of *The Book of John Gray*, an OWN reality series about his family and his gift for helping others. Gray's *SuperSoul* speech, titled “The Bridge,” was a hybrid of a sermon, a TED talk, a motivational speech, stand-up comedy, and a musical performance. He used many of the same buzzwords and phrases found in *Iyanla: Fix My Life* such as “We gotta learn to heal.” The purpose of his message was to tell listeners how Americans can meet in the middle, putting aside their differences. Gray's message was tailor-made for the angst many are feeling since the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. “How do we heal? I know that we're broken. And how can you not be broken when we're in the age of alternative facts. That's like saying I got fat from eating alternative snacks.” (Gray)

Gray told the story of Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman. Jesus built a bridge with this lady who *did not* come from where he was from and *did not* believe in his ideology. Gray portrayed this Samaritan woman as a black woman from the hood and Jesus as the figure with a British accent. The woman by the well had a “ratchet” friend named Shaniqua. Gray said this version of the story appeared in the NIV (Negro International Version of the Bible). The mostly white audience burst into uncontrollable laughter. The camera panned over several black women nodding their heads in agreement. Gray went on to say that Jesus did not judge or shun this woman. He loved her. “I am not talking about romantic love. I am talking

about a real love.....a Whitney Houston kinda love. I Will Always Love Youuuuuuuuu!" The audience rose to their feet to applaud his rendition of Whitney's hit record. A black woman shouted out, preach! "I am trying guuurl," said Gray (Gray). Gray's sermon was an aspirational depiction of the church of Oprah. In Winfrey's America 11:00 on Sunday morning was no longer the most segregated hour. It was inclusive and all were invited to the party.

The Gospel of Oprah

When *The Oprah Winfrey Show* began in 1986, the most-watched daytime talk show was *The Phil Donahue Show* (1970-1996). Winfrey's early episodes relied on what could be considered "shock TV" to compete with and surpass *Donahue*. She visited Utah's Bunny Ranch brothel for one episode. Other episodes focused on topics like penis size, group sex in prisons, and cheating husbands. In 1998 her show slipped to second in the ratings behind the lewd *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991-2018). At the same time, she starred in the film adaptation of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*. Winfrey described her work on the film as a spiritual awakening. When she returned for the 1999-2000 season, her series went from being called "Shock TV" to "Change Your Life" television. Not only was there more emphasis on self-help but also religion and spirituality. She concluded one of these early new episodes with low lights and New Age music playing in the background. She told the audience, "I am defined by the world as a talk show host, but... I am a spirit connected to the greater spirit" (Garchik).

Winfrey's spiritual journey has been evolving since her childhood. Her grandmother took her to church every Sunday when she lived with her in Mississippi. She served on the junior usher board. She was raised not to question God and taught that behavior not approved by the Bible was sinful. Following the death of her baby, she became a more devout Christian. By the time she graduated from college and began her broadcasting career, Winfrey's devoutness started to wane. Winfrey began having casual sex, experimenting with LSD and cocaine, and indulging in junk food. She engaged in a long-term affair with a married man, disc jockey Tim Watts. The affair led her to bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts. She still attended church but only because that is what she thought black people were supposed to do. One Sunday she was attending Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, Maryland. Rev. John Richard Bryant was preaching when she had an awakening. "Why would God be jealous of anything I have to say? Or be threatened

by a question that I would have to ask?” (Mansfield 29). After moving to Chicago, she joined Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s congregation at Trinity United Church of Christ but left in the mid-1990s.

Stephen Mansfield traces Winfrey’s spiritual evolution in his 2011 book *Where Has Oprah Taken Us?* He points to her “gushing support” of Rhonda Byrne’s book *The Secret* (2006), which teaches that individuals are responsible for their decisions and thoughts, as a sign that she had become a disciple of the New Age Movement. New Agers are individuals who take a holistic approach to the divinity and the place of human beings in the universe. New Age spirituality developed in the U.S. and other parts of the West in the 1970s. The roots of this spiritual movement originate with Americans gaining awareness of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions of the Far East during World War II. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, American youth belonging to the Beat Movement and Counterculture began finding more solace in these Far Eastern religious practices than traditional Christianity. Transcendental meditation became popular in the 1960s (Eskenazi 98).

Winfrey, who rejects labels, has never identified herself as a New Ager; however, she began publicly referring to herself as a spiritual person in the 1990s. “I have church with myself: I have church walking down the street,” she said. Her television studio evolved into the “Church of O.” On her webpage, there is a “spirit” link that directs readers to articles on spirituality. On some episodes, Winfrey encourages the audience to open their minds and to be open to accepting all spiritual beliefs. She uses the catchphrase “it’s not about religion.” Mansfield sees Winfrey’s stance on religion versus spirituality as a reflection of the people that she chooses to have in her life as mentors and life coaches. He says her spiritual advisors include Marianne Williamson, who rebrands Christian concepts in her book *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*. Williamson is a presidential candidate for 2020. There is Eckhart Tolle, author of *A New Earth: Awakening Your Life’s Purpose*, which Winfrey described as one of the most important books in our generation. There is Gary Zukav, co-founder of the Seat of the Soul Institute and author of *Seat of the Soul*. All of these people appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

We must not overlook Winfrey’s spiritual awakening while filming Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a Civil War era story about a group of black women haunted by a poltergeist. *Beloved* addresses the religious and spiritual viewpoints of black women during slavery. Winfrey became a strong advocate for Morrison’s literature and heavily promoted her once overlooked work in her famous “Oprah’s Book

Club” episodes and reading list. Several works by Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise*) evoke themes of African spirituality (Zauditu-Selassie). OWN's non-scripted series promote a holistic view of religion and spiritual awakening combined with self-help ideology.

Only 12.06% of survey respondents prefer the faith-based programs instead of OWN's other programming. One survey respondent says, “The spiritual messaging I've noticed has been open enough to be inclusive of a myriad of beliefs. I think this is a positive and respectful way to include such messaging so as not to alienate particular groups of people or perpetuate harmful dogma.” By contrast, another respondent warns, “I just find that there are some ideologies and philosophies I have to discern based on my foundation of belief. It's encouraging for the temporary feel good, but not always beneficial for the long term” (see Tables 2, 3).

Answer Choices	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Self-Help	16	11.35%
Master Classes	26	17.73%
Religious and Spiritual	17	12.06%
Sitcoms	11	7.80%
Reality Series	15	10.64%
Scripted Dramas	49	34.75%
Primetime Soap Operas	8	5.67%

Table 2. Type of Programming Preferred on OWN (Answered: 141; Skipped: 5)

Keywords from Written Comments	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Encouraging	41	29.29%
Informative	19	13.57%
Inspirational	11	7.86%
Positive/Respectful	17	12.14%
Dislike/Not My Thing	15	10.71%
Never or Seldom Watch	22	15.71%
No Comment	15	10.71%

Table 3. Impressions of the Religious and Spiritual Programming on OWN (Answered: 140; Skipped: 6)

Lean In

Oprah Winfrey has a well-documented history of empowering women and girls. Notable examples include her groundbreaking book club featuring countless female authors who are introduced to her college preparatory leadership academy for girls in South Africa. A 2017 poll from public opinion research firm Perry Udem listed Winfrey among the top four feminists in America. Her Golden Globe speech serves as one of the more memorable moments of the Me Too Movement. As far back as her ABC years, Winfrey has advocated for women. Whether it was weight loss, getting off welfare, starting a business, or overcoming abuse, she has been a leading advocate for feminist values. The term, feminist, is complicated as it relates to black women. Who can forget Sojourner Truth asking white first-wave feminists fighting for suffrage, “Ain’t I a woman” at the 1857 Women’s Convention or the black women of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority being made to walk in the back of the line at the 1913 Suffrage March in Washington? The leaders of the second wave Feminist Movement, in the 1960s and 1970s, were more concerned with problems facing middle-class white women. Black women, in response to this lack of intersectionality, formed their own brand of feminism. Frances Beale published her groundbreaking pamphlet, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” which was later included in Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970). Beale’s argument harkened back to Mary Church Terrell’s 1904 description of black women: “Double Handicapped.” By the late 20th century, black feminism evolved to include womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker in 1983 to describe bonds formed between black women who embrace the culture, spirituality, and femininity together. Winfrey played Sophia in the film adaption of Walker’s seminal novel, *The Color Purple*. Although Katrina McDonald and Constance Razza view Winfrey as the “sister outsider” and “everywoman” who does not relate to the majority of black women, this has not diminished her support in the African-American community. Furthermore, OWN’s programming especially targets black women. These series come at a time in which countless black women, from Congresswoman Maxine Waters to *The Atlantic*’s Jemele Hill, are being disparaged in the media and by political leaders.

Winfrey’s support of women is exemplified in two OWN series where women take on influential roles: *Greenleaf* and *Queen Sugar*. The former series centers on a fictional first family of a megachurch in Memphis, Tennessee. Bishop James

Greenleaf (Keith David) is the founder, senior pastor, and CEO of Calvary Fellowship World Ministries. Bishop Greenleaf's eldest daughter Grace (Merle Dandridge) takes over in the pulpit after he becomes sick with Parkinson's disease. Grace's role as Calvary's senior pastor in her father's absence speaks to how far women have come in the black church. Although we see prominent female pastors today like Bishop Vashti McKenzie and the late Apostle Dr. Betty Peebles, this is a recent phenomenon. Male leaders asserted that "black men should reclaim their manhood" through church leadership, writes Bettye Collier-Thomas in *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (124). Collier-Thomas reveals the efforts of women to assert agency and claim power in the face of discrimination. *Greenleaf* depicts the 21st century emergence of black women ascending to leadership behind the pulpit and all other aspects of the church.

As the Bishop Greenleaf's health deteriorates, his wife, Lady Mae (Lynn Whitfield), takes on a more significant role at church and home. Upon learning of his infidelity, Lady Mae divorces him and pursues her own career as a pastor. She eventually assumes full leadership of the church. The Bishop's youngest daughter Charity (Deborah Joy Winans) overcomes a weight problem and an unsatisfactory marriage to a closeted gay man to pursue a career as a Gospel singer and a fulfilling romantic relationship. The Bishop's daughter-in-law Kerissa (Kim Hawthorne) is the headmistress of a prestigious private school and the brains in her household. Winfrey's character Mavis is single and owns a nightclub. Women play pivotal roles on the Board of Trustees at the Bishop's church (Calvary Fellowship World Ministries), and they handle the finances at the rival church, Triumph. Former *Destiny's Child* member Letoya Luckett plays the wealthy villain and one of the series' primary antagonists Ms. Rochelle Cross.

Loosely based on the novel *Queen Sugar* by Natalie Baszile, the televised adaptation follows the efforts of three young adult siblings (Charley, Nova, and Ralph Angel Bordelon) to save their father Earnest's (Glynn Turman) 800-acre sugarcane farm in rural Louisiana following his sudden death. Charley, who manages her husband Davis' basketball career for a living, has her world rocked to the core after he is accused of participating in the gang rape of a younger Latina escort at a hotel. Charley files for divorce and relocates to Louisiana with her teenage son Micah (Nicholas L. Ashe), eventually becoming the first black woman in the state to own a sugar mill. Nova is an herbal healer and socially conscious journalist who writes about the racially biased corruption in the New Orleans' police department and the local justice system. She speaks on panels with scholars.

Tina Lifford plays the family’s matriarch, Aunt Vi, a small business owner who is married to a much younger man.

Queen Sugar is created, produced, and directed by African-American filmmaker Ava DuVernay. DuVernay has shifted the paradigm in filmmaking with her beautifully crafted films *Selma* (2014), *13th* (2016), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018), and by hiring only minority women to direct all episodes of *Queen Sugar*. In addition to working with DuVernay, OWN has opened its doors to African-American screenwriter and producer Mara Brock Akil, creator of multiple past series about strong black heroines. OWN began airing Akil’s latest series *Love Is* in June 2018. OWN also began airing *Mind Your Business*, a new self-help series hosted by Mahisha Dellinger, for female entrepreneurs.

Survey respondents were asked to share their thoughts about OWN’s depiction of African-American women and women’s empowerment. Most comments were overwhelmingly positive and complimentary. Respondents described females on OWN as empowering, realistic, accurate, respectful, strong, independent, refreshing, awesome, wonderful, amazing, uplifting or diverse. Most said the programs avoided stereotypes, but one person said they were too stereotypic, and another respondent said characters were “too ante-bellum.” One respondent observed that most shows featured middle-aged, educated, wealthy or religious women. She continued, “I don’t see my generation 27 to 49 being depicted.” Another respondent complained that the male characters were not strong. That person advised, “[T]here needs to be an equal showing of strong black women and men that support each other and their families” (see Table 4).

Essence of Comments (Keywords)	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Positive, Accurate, or Varied Depictions	112	80.00%
Negative or Stereotypical Depictions	9	6.43%
Never or Seldom Watch OWN; No Access	8	5.71%
No Opinion	10	7.14%

Table 4. Assessment of Depictions of African American Women on OWN (Answered: 139; Skipped: 7)

Family Matters

The Oprah Winfrey Show placed a great amount of emphasis on the family. OWN's programming continues this pattern. Episodes of *Dr. Phil* usually involve dysfunctional white families coming together to save a wayward child. On OWN, the portrayal of the African-American family is quite varied. Many of the reality series show loving families working together to overcome trying times. For example, *Welcome to Sweetie Pie's* (2011-2018) followed the ordeals of Miss Robbie (Montgomery), a former backup singer for Ike and Tina Turner, and her relatives to run their soul food restaurant chain in St. Louis. *For Peete's Sake* (2016-2017) focused on the family of celebrities Rodney and Holly Robinson Peete. Episodes addressed sensitive issues like their son's autism. *Released* (2017) dealt with challenges newly released prisoners faced in attempting to reconcile with family members.

Queen Sugar generally receives positive reviews for its nuanced yet, overwhelmingly, positive depiction of a strong black family in the South. The Bordelon family juggles fighting off a racist white family trying to steal their lucrative sugarcane farm and their own family dramas from divorce to lupus. *Greenleaf* and *The Haves and Have Nots* can be far more polarizing. *The Haves and the Have Nots* features the fictional Harrington family in Savannah, Georgia. David Harrington (Peter Parros) is a corrupt, wealthy judge and former lieutenant gubernatorial contender married to Veronica (Angela Robinson), a snobbish, treacherous Ivy League-educated attorney. Veronica displays much of her wickedness towards her gay adult son Jeffery (Gavin Houston) whom she views as a punishment from God for a past abortion. Veronica blames Jeffrey for David's infidelity and later tries to burn David to death by pouring a flammable liquid around his bed. David survives and asks for a divorce. Jeffrey stabs Veronica, but the blade gets lodged in her breast implants, saving her life. The real star of this soap opera is an upscale escort named Candace Young (Tika Sumpter) who hails from a working-class family. The family on *Greenleaf* lives in a luxurious mansion equipped with servants. Every member of the Greenleaf family is involved in the ministry. Yet, sadly, there is much to abhor and little to admire. Adultery, financial corruption, secret homosexual relationships, pedophilia, rape, violence, and murder threaten to destroy the family and their church.

Most survey respondents view OWN's depiction of the African-American family as representative of the diversity in real-life. One person said, "It doesn't feed into stereotypes, and it allows us to focus on issues happening in black families that are usually kept secret." Another respondent observed that there are not enough

shows to illustrate the “numerous realms of what the black family may look like.” Someone else said the shows were atypical because they included largely well-to-do families (see Table 5).

Essence of Comments	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Positive, Diverse, Pro-Family	98	71.01%
Negative, Stereotypical Depiction	10	7.25%
Mixed: Some Good, Some Bad Portrayals	5	3.62%
Never or Seldom Watch	13	9.42%
No Opinion	12	8.70%

Table 5. Impressions of the Depictions of the African American Family on OWN (Answered: 38; Skipped: 8)

Can Oprah Make America Great *Again*?

While some may find fault with her views and methods, OWN’s success affirms Winfrey’s role as the nation’s leading guru—for better or worse—in this complicated age of President Donald Trump that is characterized by angst and division. OWN offers therapy and self-help advice in various forms. OWN empowers all people, regardless of their class, race, gender, sexual preference, or religion, to live a purposeful life. OWN provides hope to its viewers. OWN provides a safe haven for the religious and the spiritual. OWN addresses the concerns of feminists, womanists, and everyone in between. OWN uplifts traditional family values. OWN builds bridges that encourage us to put aside our differences, meet in the middle, and value each other’s humanity. OWN builds bridges that encourage us to love each other unconditionally. While this audacious brand of hope may sound Pollyannaish, it just might be the kind of chicken soup that is necessary to heal a wounded country. However, does this qualify Winfrey to run for the White House in 2020 or 2024? Of the 139 persons who responded to this question, only 62 or 44.60% would be willing to vote for Winfrey if she ran for president in 2020. Tables 6 and 7 contain a breakdown of reasons survey respondents would or would not vote for Winfrey if she were a presidential candidate. Seventy-seven (55.40%) would not vote for her. By contrast, 98 out of 141 persons (69.50%) affirmed that Winfrey has a greater impact on America as Healer-in-Chief.

Essence of Comments	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Truthful, trustworthy, like a moral compass; better than incumbent	14	22.58%
Relatable, in touch with people	19	30.64%
Able to bring people together, good listener, sensitive	10	16.13%
Would seek wise advisers & empower others to help	2	3.22%
Positive role model & competent business professional	3	4.83%
Diplomatic. Would be effective on world stage	4	6.45%
Would represent all people. Has cross-over appeal	2	3.22%
It's time for an intelligent, assertive woman or another person of color	8	12.90%

Table 6. Reasons Some Respondents Would Vote for Winfrey as President in 2020

Essence of Comments	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
Insufficient political experience	43	55.84%
No public platform; position on issues is unknown	5	6.49%
Too caring and compassionate for a gutter fight	4	5.19%
Would not be able to bring people together	2	2.59%
Lacks interest; should not waste time and money	6	7.79%
Prefer a married (male) president with children	2	2.59%
America doesn't need another celebrity president	5	6.49%
Should not jeopardize current role, which is powerful and has broad, positive impact	10	12.99%

Table 7. Reasons Some Respondents Would Not Vote for Winfrey as President

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