“THE MELISSA MCCARTHY EFFECT”:
FEMINISM, BODY REPRESENTATION AND WOMEN-CENTERED COMEDIES

A Dissertation in
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by
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Abstract

Immediately following its release in 2011, *Bridesmaids* was met with enormous critical praise as a woman-centered and feminist comedy. This praise was due to the largely female cast of characters in a major film comedy, a rarity in Hollywood. Women face sexism at every level of Hollywood, especially in comedy, so the success of a woman-led movie within the comedy genre was significant. Reviewers described the triumph of *Bridesmaids* as a game changer, claiming it would open the door to other woman-fronted comedies. This potential was labeled the “*Bridesmaids* Effect” (Friendly, 2011) by reviewers.

However, while some comedienes may have benefitted from the success, I argue that the influence may be more accurately described as a “Melissa McCarthy” effect. This is particularly significant because though there have been several notable and successful female comedians before Melissa McCarthy, very few would be considered fat and feminist. The presence of fat women is not accurately reflected in mass media (Henerson, 2001). Though the visibility of actresses like McCarthy is a notable trend, McCarthy’s representation is still ideologically complicated through her slapstick and gross-out comedy and the masculine roles that she plays.

This dissertation examines Melissa McCarthy as a “text” in the circulation of meanings that is the Hollywood movie comedy genre, the economic incentives of such films and their future in the industry, feminist and post-feminist debates and discourse, and representations of the body in the films and other supplemental texts. Melissa McCarthy provides an illustrative case study for understanding the impact and importance of a film not just by critically engaging the potential cinematic meanings in the film itself, but also its political economic significance as
illustrated in paratexts such as marketing and reviews. I analyze McCarthy’s popular comedy
career from *Gilmore Girls* to *Ghostbusters*, as well as paratexts including promotional literature,
fan and anti-fan material, critic reviews and industry interviews. I argue in part that McCarthy’s
role in *Bridesmaids* was informed and enabled by a particular mix of her own professional
background and the industrial context of the film. Her later work in films such as *Identity Thief*
and *Spy* often fragmented the “Megan” character into more crass or more mainstream versions.
In addition, the resulting impact that *Bridesmaids* and McCarthy has had, as of this writing, on
the opening of new gendered roles and portrayals in film comedy is mixed.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Female fight club. We grease up, we pull in.”

When actress Melissa McCarthy’s character in the film Bridesmaids, Megan, suggests a female fight club for a bachelorette party theme, it is both shocking and funny. It is a perfect representation not only of Megan, but also of McCarthy coming into this breakthrough role, as well as the movie’s perceived impact on the industry. Following its release in 2011, Bridesmaids was met with enormous critical praise as a female and feminist comedy. For example, Mary Pols (2011) of Time wrote, “This might be a turning point in feminism and comedy, provided that both sexes can embrace it” (para. 1). The New York Times’ Manohla Dargis (2011) added, “The movie is smart about a lot of things, including the vital importance of female friendships. And it’s nice to see so many actresses taking up space while making fun of something besides other women” (para. 6).

The praise was due to the largely female cast of characters in a major film comedy outside the romantic comedy (rom-com) subgenre. These reviews would lead one to believe that this film was the very first comedy outside of the romantic comedy sub-genre to have a large female cast; however, there have been some before it. Some examples of such films include Mean Girls, Bring It On, Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion, Clueless, Hocus Pocus, A League of Their Own, Sister Act, and Heathers. However, not all these films promote positive female relationships: in fact, Heathers and Mean Girls are about tearing other girls down, killing, or almost killing them. There have also been a number of female comedy stars prior to McCarthy. These include Fanny Brice, Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Carol Burnett, Whoopi Goldberg, Tina Fey, and Amy Poehler, just to name a few from recent entertainment history. Despite this, there are so few female-led comedies in the modern film era that these films
and funny women in general have been written off as outliers (Kohen, 2016). This dismissive attitude within the patriarchal entertainment industry minimizes the impact of earlier female comedic pioneers and followers. The following chapters examine in part the degree to which just the presence of women on screen is sufficient to label a movie as feminist, or, if not, what the factors are that may influence the appropriateness of that label.

Women face sexism at every level of Hollywood, so the success of a female-led movie within the comedy genre is especially important because of the scrutiny women have faced for this genre in particular. One example of this is an often-cited (Lang, 2017) argument against women is the infamous Vanity Fair (2007) article by the late Christopher Hitchens, where he claimed women were not funny. He was not the only one infamous for such claims: the late Jerry Lewis was as well (Kilday, 2017).

In the introduction to her book, We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy, Kohen (2012) claims that the hope for Bridesmaids was that it would prove people like Hitchens wrong. She notes that for women comedians, “It’s just that every success is called an exception and every failure an example of the rule” (p. 5). With each generation and new comedy style, new challenges are presented to these women. This patriarchal attitude that every new representation of women comedians is an exception to the rule can also explain why reviewers seem to have forgotten about past female comedies and comedians. But devaluing or erasing previous successes may also speak to the stereotypes of women in Hollywood, of women comedians, and ways we can understand McCarthy – including her pre- and post-Bridesmaids work – and any potential enduring legacy of McCarthy and Bridesmaids. McCarthy and her films are especially noteworthy for a couple of reasons. One is they challenged sexist tendencies in Hollywood creative participation – particularly the role of women not just as stars, but also as
screenwriters, producers and directors, just to name a few roles. The other has to do with the physical humor that McCarthy exemplifies, its relationship to her body, and the transgressive and regressive ideology that this relationship may connote. In comparison to her predecessors McCarthy’s success is unique. Yet her career still illustrates in many ways the complex effects of a patriarchal film industry from many different angles.

The Hollywood Industry

The dominance of patriarchy can be seen throughout the history of the film industry. There were a number of women in early cinema who were not only successful, but also trailblazers within the industry, including Mary Pickford, Alice Guy, and Lois Weber. However, their successes lack of recognition in much of Hollywood received histories – illustrated by the unfamiliarity to most of Guy and Weber, or remembrances of Pickford and Ida Lupino as primarily actresses rather than as studio executives or directors – reflects a gendered collective amnesia in the industry. This amnesia and patriarchal conformity influence multiple levels of the industry including genre. This is especially an issue within the comedy genre. Casting directors have long pigeonholed women into playing roles in certain subgenres (like romantic comedies) while actors and critics cite women’s allegedly unfunny nature when a movie flops, or as an unusual exception when it succeeds. Additionally, men disproportionately occupy high-profile creative and management roles in Hollywood. Contradictions emerge when we compare audiences to producers: Women make up a slight majority of film goers: 51%, but, in 2018, only 18% of producers of the top 100 grossing films were women; similarly, only 15% of writers, and 4% of directors, were women (Facts to Know About Women in Hollywood, n.d.). Men clearly dominate Hollywood at the leadership level. “People don’t assume a woman to be the natural leader of a group,’ says Caitlin Tegart, comedy writer and sketch teacher at New York’s Upright
Citizen’s Brigade. ‘Maybe they’re not chosen as head writer or director as quickly’” (Patalano, 2011, para. 5). Hollywood is even overrepresented by men in terms of film reviewers and critics. According to Lauzen, male critics, especially white male critics (Lang, 2018), make up a vast majority of critics in all outlets of the industry, including entertainment magazines and websites, trade publications, general interest magazines and sites, and radio outlets. Further, “Films with male directors and writers receive greater exposure as male critics are more likely to review these films than films with female directors and writers” (Lauzen, 2013, p. 2). This is an important point because the audience is likely to consume reviews, even if they never see the movie. Reviews will influence their impression of the movie and, if reviewers tend to avoid reviewing these types of movies, it impedes an opportunity to gain an audience.

**Fat Representation**

It has been established since at least Susie Orbach’s 1978 work that “fat is a feminist issue.” It continues to be an issue, as illustrated by the book’s longevity (Orbach, 2016). Body shape and gender are often framed in ways that reinforce ideological beauty ideals, and can in turn be reinforced by race, class and nationalism. Gendered body types can also be associated with assumptions about sexuality, body control, and social approval. And body types can be sources of comedy. With Melissa McCarthy, another notable aspect of her performance motif – and something that, as this project will argue, reviewers tend to focus on – is her relationship to her body. Reviews such as Dargis’ called McCarthy’s performance in *Bridesmaids* “excellent” (para. 5), and argues that her portrayal comes close to being a “radical” (para. 6) one for filmic female representation. McCarthy was an Oscar nominee for best supporting actress for her role in that film and did win a couple of second-tier awards such as the MTV Movie Awards and New York Film Critics Online (IMDB Pro, n.d.). She has indeed been successful since her role...
in *Bridesmaids* becoming the star of several high-profile and successful film comedies and arguably the main star of a successful broadcast network television program, *Mike and Molly*, which aired from 2010-2016. McCarthy is now a Hollywood star praised for her screen charisma, comic timing, and ability to carry a studio blockbuster without the looks or sex appeal of a traditional Hollywood A-list actress. However, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter four, some reviews of the movie would describe, even in brief mentions, the body shape of the actress, or would allude to it through descriptions of her bodily performance. “The bridal party is staffed by comics, including Melissa McCarthy as a scene-stealing plus-size sister-in-law with few inhibitions” (para. 6), wrote reviewer Craig Mathieson (2009).

As discussed, there have been several notable and successful female comedians before Melissa McCarthy but very few that would be considered fat. Previous examples of other fat woman comedians are Sophie Tucker and Totie Fields, who were known for vaudeville and stand-up/television respectively, and Roseanne Barr, who was primarily on TV. Race also is a strong intersectional element. When examining fat women in comedy movies in the years prior to *Bridesmaids*, Queen Latifah and Mo’Nique are two actresses that were known for their unruly persona that McCarthy brings to the big screen. Though Queen Latifah started as a musical artist, not a comedian, she easily made the transition to the big screen, starring in films such as *Chicago* (for which she was also nominated for an academy award), *Bringing Down the House, Taxi, Beauty Shop* and *Last Holiday*. Mo’Nique became well-known as a raunchy performer on the standup-comedy concert film *The Queens of Comedy*, coupled with a tamer title role in the UPN television situation comedy (sitcom) *The Parkers*. She later starred in *Phat Girlz* and *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins*. She also won an academy award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in the drama, *Precious*. 
Though Queen Latifah and Mo’Nique, like McCarthy, represent fat, unruly women on screen, it is further complicated by their race. As Mizejewski (2007) explains in her analysis of Queen Latifah’s work, “race in particular enables the unruliness of this character and intersects with class ideals” (para. 1). Queen Latifah played powerful women in many of her film roles, even in some blockbuster movies but her and Mo’Nique’s work is arguably undervalued in film recollections of the 2000s, perhaps doubly affected by patriarchy and whiteness. This arguably is illustrated by Rebel Wilson’s 2018 claim to being the first fat woman to star in a romantic comedy, when promoting her film, Isn’t it Romantic, not initially acknowledging Queen Latifah in The Last Holiday or Mo’Nique in Phat Girlz (Rogo, 2018). Some of the characteristics of McCarthy’s particularly raucous characters – such as Megan in Bridesmaids with her unapologetic sexuality and outspokenness – were seen previously in the performances and characters of fat African American comic actresses.

Overall, the presence and diversity of fat women is not fully represented in mass media. In fact, the proportion of underweight people represented on TV far surpasses the reality.

Data from a study of commercial TV collected by researchers at Michigan State University indicate that 3 percent of female characters would be considered obese, compared to 25 percent of women in the real world. Thirty-six percent of females and 12 percent of male characters on TV possessed an underweight body type even though only 5 percent of the male population and 2 percent of the female population would be considered underweight. (Henerson, 2001)

The author of the above quote, Henerson (2001), talked to Diane Bliss, head of the Plus-Size Task Force under the National Women’s Committee of the Screen Actors Guild at the time of the Gilmore Girls premiere. Bliss says that she is given hope by actresses like Camryn Manheim,
Liz Torres, Melissa McCarthy, Sherri Shephard, and Kathy Kinney. Though these are only a few representations in supporting roles it is promising that the number of depictions of obese women could be heading in the right direction. In her interview with Henerson, Bliss described a negative example of obese representation. The role of the witness in *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo* who makes the courtroom shake as she walks through it (and starts eating pudding when she takes the stand) is a role that was boycotted by obese women in the industry. Eventually they cast a man to play the role.

Though the visibility of actresses like McCarthy are a great change, and a 180 from the representation in *Deuce Bigalow*, McCarthy’s representation is still ideologically complicated. Through gross-out and slapstick comedy, her body and appearance are often used to make jokes and play on fat stereotypes, raising questions about what, or whom, is exactly the target of humor. This as well as masculinist ideals may undercut any potential feminist messages of her work. Texts are ambivalent: are we laughing at McCarthy instead of with her?

Understanding the “text” of Melissa McCarthy in the circulation of meanings that is the Hollywood movie comedy genre, the economic incentives of such films and their future in the industry, feminist and post-feminist debates and discourse, and representations of the body are the main focal points that this dissertation will examine.

**Project Rationale**

Research on film tends to focus on just one angle, such as the film as a text, stars or performance studies, political economy, or even the promotional culture around a film. Some scholars, such as Jonathan Gray (2010a), however, have challenged these traditional areas of study. Gray studies paratexts, or the texts that surround a movie or show, such as merchandise and promotions. Gray (2010a) quotes film scholar Charles Acland about the limitations of much
of film scholarship: “The problem with film studies has been film, that is the use of a medium in order to designate the boundaries of the discipline” (p. 4). It is this same train of thought that fuels my dissertation. The impact on and within our culture comes from the film industry as a whole – its gatekeeping, distribution, marketing, reviews, awards – not just the creative content we see on screen. It comes from the people that create the films, the people that decide what gets made, how widely they are released and promoted, and ultimately what is available. And the impact spreads to how we consume the films, in the theater or at home. Even consumption of the paratexts such as the promotions for a film can carry meaning about what Hollywood values.

While Gray was implying that we need to also consider the paratexts, Acland (2003) himself studies exhibition. The political economy of the modern film industry, then, adds another perspective that can be studied in isolation, or with a combination of other aspects of film studies. For example, the opening weekend box office results have become an important statistic in the movie market. It is this opening weekend that signals the potential future success of the movie to the companies that produced the movie. The weight placed on this short time period is not only a marker for the industry, but also for the audience. Potential movie viewers are well aware of these important box office statistics. They can see the opening weekend gross on their smart-phone apps which are readily available in the palm of their hands. Marketing will even convert box office successes into further movie promotion by adding dialogue into their ads such as “The number one movie of the year!” as Jurassic World did for their home video release ad (Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2015). The connotation of “number one movie” does not mean it is the highest rated by film critics or the movie that has received the most Academy Awards nominations and wins, rather, it refers to the highest grossing movie of the year.
My methods are more holistic, and this leads to an analysis that attempts to approximate the viewing and consuming experiences of audiences who are reading reviews, watching trailers, and go into a film viewing knowing something about the actors and genres. Beyond the boundaries of academic studies, as socio-cultural and aesthetic entities, all mechanisms of a film exist simultaneously and influence each other. The results of these influences and sometimes even the direct interactions are visible to everyone including viewers of the film. Considering all aspects of the piece of entertainment from trailer to merchandise and taking into consideration exhibition, distribution, criticism and media conglomerate interaction, therefore, offers holistic perspectives of any given film. Though this is true for any film, blockbuster, Hollywood movies – and their paratexts – are the most prominent within popular culture. Though many blockbuster films may not be worthy of artistic awards, their place in popular culture is a major player in the development of an impact on our culture as a whole. A film that is watched by millions will have greater cultural influence than an unpopular documentary or art film. In addition, such films tend to be reviewed widely, are heavily promoted, and generate significant fan discourse via social media, all of which add to their potential impact and visibility. And, although in this current historical film moment, comic-book based action-adventure movies seem to dominate, other genres, like comedies, are also significant texts that are part of Hollywood studios’ release strategies.

Melissa McCarthy provides an illustrative case study for understanding the impact and importance of a film not just by critically engaging the potential cinematic meanings in the film itself, but also paratexts such as marketing and reviews. As a rising star over the past number of years, McCarthy movies have also become their own sub-genre. With each one of these movies comes an industry narrative that can help us understand why a movie was created and can even
tell us about the people who created it (i.e. directors and producers). McCarthy’s rising stardom is accompanied by a narrative of her on-screen persona, the boldness of which seems to decrease as the popularity of a movie increases. Then, of course, with her ongoing popularity there are endless paratexts of all kinds including promotional literature, fan and anti-fan material, critic reviews and industry interviews.

There are many stars in many genres that I could have chosen to study, but my interest was sparked by the praise of McCarthy’s breakout film, *Bridesmaids*, and the claim that it was a turning point for feminism and a big step forward for women in comedy. *Bridesmaids* had immediately joined the rotation of favorite movies that I watch repetitively with my closest friends along with *Mean Girls* and *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion*. It was then that I realized the scarcity of comedies with women leads. I was intrigued by the claim that *Bridesmaids* would open the door to other female-led comedies. Like others commenting on the movie, I thought the success of *Bridesmaids* would lead to a plethora of other women-led comedies. I expected development in the way that *28 Days Later* boosted a resurgence of the living dead genre in movies and TV.

However, following movies made in the post-*Bridesmaids* years, this hoped for “*Bridesmaids* effect” (Friendly, 2011) may be more accurately described as a “Melissa McCarthy Effect”. Certainly some actresses, such as Rebel Wilson and Amy Schumer, may have benefitted from *Bridesmaids*’ wake, but the most prominent film comedies featuring women were ones with McCarthy herself as a top-billed star. Much of her films have been understood as gender breakthroughs, and critics have often framed much of McCarthy’s work through a feminist lens. This is a narrative that plays out through her movies and any subsequent films in
which the creators of *Bridesmaids* (such as director Paul Feig and producer Judd Apatow) take part.

Though the lack of screen presence and industry influence from women across Hollywood was already apparent, what came to light in the years since *Bridesmaids* was the larger issue of a lack of power experience by women in Hollywood. Power was in the hands of too many men that were dominating women through sexual harassment and assault. Through the Me Too movement and the Time’s Up movement it became even more apparent that the issue was widespread. When revealed, it came as no surprise to many, but it was the first time that victims of these crimes were given a platform. It is unclear what relationship *Bridesmaids*’ success has in encouraging or facilitating women to gain more power – or, maybe, at least more voice – in the industry. But, regardless, *Bridesmaids*, and the enduring success of McCarthy, may be post-2000’s markers in the larger movement for women’s rights outside the Hollywood industry.

Analyzing McCarthy’s work through a feminist framework will offer tools to examine this narrative. It will not only contribute to our understanding of McCarthy in terms of where her work stands within the spectrum of feminist studies, but it will also provide an illustration of how important it is to take into consideration the texts surrounding a film instead of just the film itself when discussing the symbolic construction of film meanings. Again, for the mediated constructions of McCarthy, such meanings involve the nature of Hollywood stars and success, the nature of comedy, portrayals of women in media, issues of the body, and how feminist ideals may be evoked and circumscribed. The importance of this understanding beyond academic literature is to understand how all these different texts and paratexts construct meanings of
McCarthy and/or her work to mediated audiences. Through such paratextual complexity and channels constructions are built.

**Organizational Flow of this Dissertation**

This dissertation contains six chapters that analyze the career of Melissa McCarthy, including her place in the history of women in comedy, the messages and reception of her films, and her representation of fat and often-rowdy women. Also explored is the impact of the industry on McCarthy and the general complications of viewing her work through a feminist lens. These chapters build on the work of others but bring together concepts and analysis techniques that have previously been considered separately.

The next chapter engages relevant scholarly literature that helps inform this project. Chapter two further describes the history of women in comedy, as well as introduces the major influences for each area of research that I will use throughout the paper. These include paratexts, political economy, cultural studies, and women’s studies. In this chapter I will also discuss the materials that I used to conduct my analysis and my methodology.

Examining McCarthy’s early work with a focus on her sitcom career is the goal of the next chapter, chapter three. There is a particular focus on her roles and fat representation, and the mix of often unruly characters that developed in her improv training at The Groundlings with her somewhat muted and conventional characters on programs such as *Gilmore Girls* and *Mike and Molly*. Thus, explored in this chapter is her career development and the increasing prominence of her characters and the development of her on-screen persona.

Chapter four examines *Bridesmaids* and its complicated feminisms. This includes instances of feminism and sexism within the industry aspects of the movie. The chapter also surveys the unique marketing approach to the movie, and how the movie was framed as feminist
prior to its release. Critical reception is also weighed in relation to industry aspects. McCarthy’s role in the movie is also important to include in the discussion of complicated feminisms of the movie.

Flowing from the examination of *Bridesmaids* is Chapter five, discussing the perceived impact that it had on the industry and subsequent films. This includes a review of McCarthy’s stardom in the blockbuster films that followed in the years after *Bridesmaids*. The most in-depth analysis is of the McCarthy movies directed by Paul Feig, which also have been the most profitable. The analysis of the movies includes an in-depth look at many different aspects of the movies from marketing to critical reception.

Chapter six concludes the dissertation. Here I summarize the arguments in the previous chapters and compare the claims for *Bridesmaids* to those that were claimed for *Thelma and Louise* when it was first released. I then recount the impact of McCarthy’s and Feig’s career on the comedy genre and the state of the Hollywood industry as a whole, as well as the next steps that are being taken and the potential impact of these steps for women in Hollywood.
Chapter 2:  
Women in Comedy  
History, Feminism and Fat Representation

Introduction

_Bridesmaids_ was labeled by some as a “rom-com.” (Schreiber, n.d., p. 2). Romantic comedies (rom-coms) in film, as genre theorist Geoff King notes, have two main features: “First, it is a format in which romance is the main and foregrounded element of the narrative, rather than occupying a secondary position. Second, the romance is generally treated lightly, as a matter of comedy rather than of more ‘seriously’ dramatic or melodramatic relationships.” (King, 2002, p. 51). _Bridesmaids_ may appear to be a rom-com at first glance, particularly because of the wedding backdrop and the relationship the main character develops with a police officer, but in fact romance is relegated to a subplot and the main story is about friendship between women. As actress Ellie Kemper noted about the film in 2019, “it’s not really about the bride and groom; it’s more about the bride and her friends” (Entertainment Weekly, 2019). Despite other generic similarities, this focus on non-romantic female friendships is what differentiates _Bridesmaids_ from movies like _Runaway Bride_. For the purposes of my analysis I would not neatly classify it as a rom-com. However, the perceived genre label of _Bridesmaids_ – and how the industry talks about it – has implications for how we might view its impact as a progressive film. Women, for instance, have a fair amount of representation on-screen in romantic comedies, and therefore if this is the understanding of what _Bridesmaids_ is, then, it flows with, rather than against, generic convention.

However, outside of romantic comedies, men dominate the comedy genre. From another genre perspective, _Bridesmaids_ pushes the boundaries into the men’s territory of buddy comedy and gross-out humor. It adds, then, to a long list of historically ‘unruly’ women from “carnival
in medieval and early modern Europe and the burlesque and music-hall traditions on which early film comedy drew as one of its major sources” (King, 2002, p.131) to Mae West and Whoopi Goldberg.

Such historical trends, genre analysis, and feminist work on film, comedy and body type can help us to understand the contributions of McCarthy, Bridesmaids, and the trends in gender-based film comedies that followed. Below I will introduce the different areas of study that impacted my research. To understand the work that McCarthy has done and the influence of her style first we need to understand the struggle women had to endure to gain the opportunity to be present in the comedy world. I have also included an explanation of my use of feminism and the often contested, post-feminism, as well as the importance of McCarthy’s body representation in the analysis of my texts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the methodological assumptions and techniques of this project.

The History of Women in Comedy

To understand why people might call Bridesmaids a feminist comedy or claim that it could have opened the door for other female comedies, we must understand what it took to get to this point in the first place. The historical discussion of women and comedy comes from several different disciplines including theater (i.e. Carlson, 1991), literature (i.e. Bilger, 2002), history and culture (i.e. Lavin 2004), feminist studies (i.e. Fraiberg, 1994) and approaches. The issue of equal representation of female comedians in film is one that draws a large spectrum of opinions. For example, Kohen (2012) approaches her study of female comedians through journalism and interviews to discuss different themes and issues of women in comedy throughout history. Her work provides a good basis upon which to continue the discussion of McCarthy. Kohen raises the issue of a double bind that when women comedians are successful it appears to be an
exception to the rule rather than a mark of progress or a pattern of success. With this as the case, then, “progress” is individualized, and for each generation and new comedy style, new challenges are presented to women in comedy.

The problem for women in comedy has its origins off-screen. Many comedy stars get their start in stand-up comedy before they hit the big (or small) screen. Kohen (2016) starts her history of the female comedian with a narrative about Elayne Boosler, a popular female comedian from New York in the 1970s, and her experience with Johnny Carson’s *The Tonight Show*. Kohen explains that Carson’s approval of a stand-up comedian could secure a career. However, Carson did not like female comedians and is quoted as saying:

> I mean, if a woman comes out and starts firing one-liners, those little abrasive things, you can take that from a man, I think it’s much tougher for women. You don’t see many of them around. And the ones that try are sometimes a little aggressive for my taste.

(Quote taken from Kohen’s Vulture article, para. 3, originally printed in *Rolling Stone* in 1979)

Though Boosler did appear on *The Tonight Show* when popular singer Helen Reddy was guest hosting, an attempt at a return with Johnny Carson did not go as smoothly. Boosler refused to use the jokes written by Carson’s staff. Boosler claims that after her performance, Carson said, “I don’t ever want to see that waitress on my show again” (para. 4). Kohen explains that this type of experience for female comedians is not rare. In fact, at the time of Boosler’s performance it was common across the industry. Access to the stage, and ultimately television, was limited for women and they were pushed into all-female comedy nights where the audience typically consisted of women and gay men.
Though there was a number of popular transgressive female comedians throughout history like Sophie Tucker (Overbeke, 2012), Marlene Dietrich (Gemünden & Desjardins, 2007), Lucille Ball (White, 2016) and Mae West (Curry, 1991) their popularity was not obtained without difficulty in a patriarchal society. Their comedy had to match a societal standard or be met with resistance or censorship. It is perhaps telling that IMDB’s list of the “100 Greatest Movie Comedic Actresses” (Hores, 2018) lists actresses mostly known for television or supporting roles in the top spots: Lucille Ball, Imogene Coca, Gracie Allen, Phyllis Diller, and Bea Arthur, for example.

Even when success in films is achieved, pointed comedy about issues such as gender, race, and ethnicity may need to be explored. Actresses, particularly actresses of color who start in standup, later to move into television and movies, may feel pressured to alter their persona and act in ways that male comics do not. Kohen describes that African American Whoopi Goldberg, for example, was known for her grim material in her stand-up routines but this persona rarely came through in the roles she played on television or movies. Other feminist female comedians like Janeane Garofalo, Kathy Griffin, Margaret Cho, and Sarah Silverman, who also have controversial comedy styles, eventually found their comic voice on cable television instead of in film or on the mass-audience broadcast networks. Kohen adds that the turn from mass media to more niche audiences like those on YouTube and other previously marginalized and alternative platforms, formerly occupied by female comedians, have now become the norm. Thus, culture and technology caught up to strategies of female comedians. But while technology has most certainly made it easier for all kinds of media to reach their desired audiences, many channels cater to a niche audience. This presents the issue of selective exposure (Klapper, 1960) whereas only those who seek female comedy or feminist comedy content will be exposed to it.
There is still a dearth of representation of women in mainstream media. This is especially true for female comedians in modern Hollywood movies, as seen by the gap in years between the last recognizable comedy (excluding the female dominated subgenre of romantic comedies) starring a mostly female cast, *Mean Girls* and *Bridesmaids*. It is important that female comedians, and women in general, take part in mainstream media such as Hollywood movies because these are still consumed by the largest audiences and, therefore, hold great cultural value in the representations they portray.

**Political Economy**

Regardless of the particular technologies for distribution and access, media products are simultaneously artifacts and commodities that are both created by artists and manufactured by workers, and present a vision for interpretation and an ideology for consumption to an active public of interpreters who may also be consumers targeted by advertisers or product placements and a commodity audience that can be measured and sold to advertisers. (Wasko & Meehan, 2013, p. 153)

Film is a business in which decisions are often made for economic reasons, but still, nevertheless, such decisions have cultural and ideological implications. Film scholarship is often informed by political economy. Labor trends in film are also impacted by political economic factors. Though women do not face the same obstacles as performers, at least hopefully to the same degree, as they did in the 1970s and before, they face other obstacles for other roles. For example, while on-screen work may be available to high-profile performers, above-the-line creative positions like director, and management positions like producer, are still tough to land: “‘[The problem] is something that women face in a lot of occupations, which is that people don’t assume a woman to be the natural leader of a group,’ says Caitlin Tegart, comedy writer and
sketch teacher at New York’s Upright Citizen’s Brigade. ‘Maybe they’re not chosen as head writer or director as quickly’” (Patalano, 2011, para. 5).

Thus, representations of women are not only an issue on-screen but also behind the camera, and even with critics, as mentioned in the previous chapter. A study of the top 240 films of 2011 (Lauzen, 2012) examined the jobs that arguably have the most impact on the message that the audience receives. These jobs included directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers. The job category with the highest percentage of women is producers at 25%. The percentage of women in the rest of the job categories is significantly lower.

The lack of women’s influence in the creation of media influences the depiction of women on screen. As summarized in Baehr and Gray (1996), due to the lack of women’s influence in the creation of media and perhaps perceived economic truisms, the media’s integration of women is at best mixed. While women’s roles in film and TV may be visible, they also lead to objectification or limited to stereotypical portrayals such as family roles. The industry perceptions of women therefore complicate their reception in comedic roles.

Genre is a big part of this. The economic incentives for the modern, high concept, film industry are different than what they were during much of the history of U.S. film and classical cinema (Wyatt, 1994) and such incentives encourage the privileging of certain kinds of films over others. The perceptions of ancillary markets may privilege some genres over others. While film may still be considered the main text of many franchises, it is not the only source of related financial income. Instead, Hollywood makes money from ancillary markets such as television (Meehan, 2008), home video (Wasser, 2008), video games (Nichols, 2008), and music (Smith,
It is the need for these other aspects to do well in addition to the film that fuel certain kinds of films over others.

Film is also part of a worldwide market. Outside the US, India and China create the most films but “much of their exports are limited to those countries’ emigrant populations abroad” (van Ginneken, 2007, p. 4). This means US films dominate the box office overseas. One reason for this is the studios’ ability to turn out movies that are “high concept,” meaning “that it must be possible to ‘pitch’ the (appeal of the) movie in only one unique image and only one alluring sentence to everyone involved, taking no more than the equivalent of thirty seconds, the length of a television spot” (van Ginneken, 2007, p. 11). High concept films translate easily across cultures. The use of high concept in film can generate the same types of films over and over and Hollywood tends to stick to what they know will make money. Think of the Marvel movie franchise. This can generally block the way forward for anything new, and can influence the visibility of women on screen, especially within certain genres like comedy where men have dominated in the past. More female-oriented genres may be seen by the industry as not particularly high concept, nor as licensing friendly, nor as popular at the global box office.

Though we can see this high concept strategy at work with McCarthy because many of her roles are comedically similar and often focus on the outrageous nature of her character (wacky woman steals a man’s identity) and/or situation (unassuming woman becomes a spy) it is also easy to sell because McCarthy, as a star, has proven a success. Some, like Ashley York (2010), claim that it is a trend that may not necessarily endure, nor reward all women-centered films equally. She claims women’s films in the post-2000 era have elements of chick flicks from the past, the narrative goal of these new films is to obtain blockbuster status and compete in the world market. York mentions women’s films such as *The Devil Wears Prada, Sex and the City,*
and *Mama Mia!* and compares them to previous popular blockbusters like *Jaws, Independence Day,* and *Titanic* claim ing that these new “women’s blockbusters” or more specifically “millennial women’s blockbusters” are marketed in the same way. However, York also describes this as a trend. She explains that if the trend continues on the path of the traditional blockbuster, films like *Sweet Home Alabama* and *13 Going on 30* will not have the same marketing power as *Sex and the City* and *Mamma Mia.* We can speculate the pressure to have a big hit may influence the content of McCarthy’s blockbuster films throughout her career so far. It is also interesting to examine the path that McCarthy took to get to where she is given how challenging it is for women to thrive in the industry, particularly women who do not meet stereotypical Hollywood standards of beauty.

**Synergy and paratexts.**

In relation to political economy the term synergy is used to “refer to the economic opportunities represented by [a media organization’s] ability to own and control all of those manifestations” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 19). Political economists often emphasize how such techniques limit the diversity of texts and emphasize monetization and commodification over social justice. However, Gray (2010a) and Jenkins (2006) refer to this process as 360-degree storytelling or transmedia storytelling worlds and highlight how synergy facilitates the building of creative meanings within and across media. The concept of synergy, paratextual meanings, and transmedia storytelling illustrates, then, the differences in scholarly perspectives between cultural studies and political economy. While political economy illustrates the economic control and uniformity of such strategies, cultural studies generally focus on highlighting the creative or ideologically polysemic nature of such (para)texts. Gray (2010b) refers to promotional culture as part of the art of the product. And that beyond the conglomerates’ synergistic goals, these
promotional paratexts are “active sites for the creation, consumption, and enjoyment of the narrative” (p. 308).

More specifically Gray (2010a) defines a paratext as an additional text of any form that surrounds a main text, such as a book, movie or television show. Paratexts are made easier by ownership patterns, but also involve partnerships and business deals with other firms. In the case of the text of a star such as McCarthy, a paratext can be anything including her movies, television shows or episodes, performances, news articles, and other forms of mediated discourse about her. Also, for each movie or piece of work there are reviews, marketing and other discourse such as fan and anti-fan discussion that create a meaning on their own. Anyone can enter the world of the metatext through any paratext and depending on which one it is, it would control his or her perception of the main text, be that a movie or McCarthy herself and any perception can be held as a frame through the remainder of her work. Some of the main paratexts of the film industry involve marketing: the trailers and film posters of movies, for example. They also include reviews of films. Gray argues that such paratexts are not ideologically neutral but may mitigate or accentuate the ideological messages of films, including messages about gender and the body, which will be emphasized in later chapters.

Postfeminism and Feminism(s) in the Popular

As introduced in Chapter one, McCarthy’s film work has often been framed as feminist by critics and fans, but these feminist claims are complicated. Her work may include feminist messages, but her work may also communicate masculinist ideals, limited or constrained versions of feminism, and even anti-feminist messages. Thus, this study draws from feminist media studies analysis (i.e. Hollinger, 2012; Brunsdon, 2013) to sociological discussions of labor (Conor, Gill & Taylor, 2015) and an examination of neoliberal and consumer culture (Gill, 2008;
Radner, 2010). Postfeminism plays a role in the analysis of McCarthy’s work because of the diverse and contradictory messages that postfeminism represents itself. Postfeminism is a complicated concept with multiple different interpretations and definitions. I will breakdown the definitions below.

Although postfeminism is a notable area of study within feminist studies it does not have one, unified definition, I find Rosalind Gill’s definition of postfeminism most useful to my analysis. Other scholars such as Angela McRobbie and Susan Douglas also nuance and complicate the meanings of postfeminism, as discussed below. Scholars have argued about what it means based on different backgrounds and examples. The “post” in postfeminism implies that postfeminism is what comes after feminism. In this case, that would refer to the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s (McRobbie, 2004b). That time period of feminism is also generally known as the second wave. This means that third wave feminism and postfeminism exist within the same time period, which started in the 1990s. Third wave, although a new period with different goals, is still a continuation of a nebulous political movement that allows for certain indulgences such as “listening to Katy Perry and getting a bikini wax” (Butler, 2013, p. 42) but still acknowledges feminism. Sometimes third wave and postfeminism are used together in scholarly work along with other contemporary terms (Butler, 2013). A further breakdown of postfeminist concepts is needed to define it.

Gill (2007) claims that there are three popular accounts of postfeminism, one “epistemological or political position in the wake of feminism’s encounter with ‘difference’”, two “an historical shift within feminism”, and three “a backlash against feminism” (p. 148). Gill argues that these analyses of postfeminism alone are too narrow, but pieces of these main arguments may be incorporated into broader definitions. There seems to be a particular criticism
of backlash argument among most scholars. The backlash lens on postfeminism is most prominent in Susan Faludi’s work (1993) (as cited in, McRobbie, 2004b; Gill, 2007; Douglas, 2010; Butler, 2013) and is discussed by many that aim to define and explain postfeminism. Backlash is summarized in these pieces as being a deliberate attack on the progress of feminism. Some, such as Tasker and Negra (2007), reason that this argument is too simplistic, suggesting that the nature of postfeminism is more complicated than that and includes culture, politics and feminism.

McRobbie (2004b) explains that the majority of postfeminist messages appear in popular culture but even in her definition she struggles with a conflict in the presentation of these messages. While postfeminist messages do appear to undermine the previous feminist work, at the same time, she believes it is not a malicious response to the work of feminism because it incorporates feminism into its message. However, some postfeminists believe that the work of feminism from the second wave was successful in achieving equality of the sexes. Therefore, McRobbie claims that feminism is still “taken into account” (p. 255) but is no longer thought to be an active or necessary fight at higher levels of authority and is presented as such. McRobbie refers to this conflict within postfeminist messages as “double entanglement” (p. 255).

Other scholars deal with the issues of defining postfeminism by creating their own term to describe the phenomenon. Susan Douglas does this in her book, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism’s Work is Done* (2010). In this case, postfeminism is replaced by the term “enlightened sexism” which she adapted from Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis’s “enlightened racism”. Though postfeminism has a different name in her piece, and she sees it as profoundly regressive, she discusses many of the same issues as other postfeminist scholars, such as unrealistic representations in media, hypersexualization in the media and the conflicting ideas
that women have the power to choose to be sexual but that having sexual power and purchasing power is greater than having political or economic power. Douglas also claims that enlightened sexism is directly related to neoliberalism, which is only linked by some other scholars (for example, Butler, 2013). Like neoliberalism, Douglas claims, postfeminism focuses on consumption as a solution to social problems and highlights the individual rather than community and coalition building. The difference in Douglas’ argument from other postfeminist pieces is that she seems to blame the rise of postfeminism (or enlightened sexism) on the media as an entity, while others do not name the media as the cause of postfeminism but rather, merely point out that it is present in the media. Douglas also does not believe that there is any true connection to feminism; in fact, enlightened sexism is antithetical to feminism.

These works offer a general idea of where postfeminism comes from and what it generally stands for but, as a result of their disagreements, they still do not provide clear identifiers of postfeminism that enable one to consistently find it within the media. Gill (2007) suggests that we think of postfeminism more as a “sensibility.” Through the use of these sensibilities that Gill provides it is easier to use them as a guideline to critique media rather than trying to follow what has been set in place by the previously mentioned main texts. Some identifiers she provides are:

The notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (p. 147)
Gill provides many great examples of some of these sensibilities in her own piece which she says they are made up of a number of interrelated themes. These and other theorizing about postfeminism will inform tropes and themes in the work of and discourse about McCarthy.

At the time that *Bridesmaids* was released, it was perhaps the start of a period in media culture that began to present what Gill (2016) calls feminist visibilities. This period could also be described as a presence of feminist topics in media culture that regained popularity. Here, then, we see the usages of the word “feminism” in popular media. In her examination of a feminist issue of a magazine, Gill describes the signifiers of feminism, how feminism is used as a “‘cheer word’ – unimpeachable, but also devoid of substance” (p. 623) – and used to celebrate all things female. It is about embracing the feminist identity but instead of discussing feminism, it does not go beyond the “courage” of those that claim this identity.

As Gill explains, these claims to feminist identities do not give an equal representation of all feminisms and attention is given only to some issues, rather than all issues of feminism. Many of these safe and less controversial discussion points of feminism in the media revolve around celebrities. Gill specifically mentions a few examples of this, including the recent discussions of the gender pay gap for Hollywood actors and actresses and Emma Watson’s role in the HeForShe campaign, as well as stars that have made feminism part of their identity such as, “Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus, Lena Dunham, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lawrence, and Benedict Cumberbatch” (p. 618).

Going deeper into the visibilities of popular feminism we can look to Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer’s (2017) comments on the meaning of popularity. Using the traditional sense of the word, they describe popularity as an entity that “brings our cliques, exclusions, and backlash, which brings us back to the popular as a terrain of struggle for power”
These different feminisms compete in the mainstream media for our attention. Though there may be quite a few feminisms in the public eye “the terrain of popular feminism is currently occupied by the individualist feminism of neoliberal consumer culture. (Catherine Rottenberg 2014)” (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017, p. 884). And, as Gill explained in her description of feminist visibilities, this postfeminist way of thinking is related to the neoliberal feminism discussed here. It is feminism expressed by what women wear and consume.

Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer comment on popular feminist Andi Zeisler’s (2016) critiques of a marketplace feminism and liken it to the term “commodity feminism” which has been around for decades but Zeisler describes the use of the term feminist as something used “to lavish praise for anything that isn’t overtly degrading, demeaning or exploitative to women” (p. 32).

Though Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer argue that this presence of popular feminism goes beyond postfeminism and commodity feminism and claim that there is a true understanding within this popular feminism that there is a need for feminism and a recognition of inequality, these popular feminisms do not take the extra step to significant political action and instead remain complacent to allow the “inequality to be profitable” (p. 886) (essentially having a similar outcome to postfeminism in any case). It is here where Bridesmaids’ success becomes complicated to situate. The economic success of the film was framed as important to other films in hopes that it would show industry leaders that female fronted comedies can be successful.

**Feminist and Postfeminist Humor**

How might we understand some of these conceptualizations of postfeminism and popular feminisms relate to elements of comedy? Robyn Stacia Swink (2017) discusses the difference between women’s comedy or humor and feminist humor by borrowing from Joanne R. Gilbert...
(2004) to explain that the two terms are often conflated. Swink describes that women’s humor has a straightforward definition of “humor that is produced by and/or for women” (p. 17) while feminist humor is more complex. Swink uses the definition of feminist humor presented by Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish (2011):

[F]irst, feminist humor is oppositional, as it criticizes the current state of gender inequalities and hegemonic stereotyping. Second, as an expression of empowerment, feminist humor relates to the capability for empowerment and freedom to express critical thoughts. Consequentially, feminist humor often refers to the ability to create humor that mocks men and hegemonic masculinity. Finally, feminist humor requires access to an outlet that is a “stage” or a medium, through which this kind of humor is expressed and spread. (p. 255)

Swink also uses Shifman and Lemish’s (2010, p. 6) defining characteristics, including the focus on gender differences rather than a feminist emphasis on gendered hierarchy; and leisure and consumption instead of politics or work and emphasizing women as sexually empowered and proactive.

**Fatness, Feminism and Framing**

Since film and television actors have a physical body and therefore literally “embody” a character, their physical characteristics are relevant. This may be especially true for film comics, since an actor’s body type may become a source for humor. But how this humor is enacted and understood is gendered, and therefore how humor is embodied by actors on film is an issue relevant to feminist analysis.

Although amplified and perpetuated by Hollywood (i.e. Fouts & Burggraf, 2000; Himes & Thompson, 2007), issues of the body and fatness are more general socio-cultural issues that
influence the meaning of film stars’ bodies (i.e. LeBesco, 2004; Wann, M. 2009; Cooper, 2010; Monaghan, Colls, & Evans, 2013) particularly within a neoliberal society (Guthman & DuPuis, 2006; LeBesco, 2011). I use the term “fat” rather than other descriptors throughout the paper because it is the accepted term in the areas of fat studies among different disciplines (Cooper, 2010).

Fat Studies is different to dominant obesity discourse in that it is critical; it seeks to expand the understanding of fatness beyond the narrow confines of medicalisation or pathology, which is why the term ‘obese’ is frequently censured; it often incorporates a social model which shifts the focus of interrogation away from the fat body itself and more towards positioning and contingent systems and structures; and it provides a platform for identifying, building and developing fat culture as well as extending alliances between activism and the academy. (Cooper, 2010, p. 1020)

Perceptions and cultural practices of fatness are ideological. Within such a society we are primed to think that obese people are an economic drain to our society costing us more for health insurance (LeBesco, 2011). As LeBesco also explains, our society thinks of obese and overweight people as improper “consumers” of health care. Our society is focused on preventive practices which often involves consuming products and services. This is the very same marketplace that advertises to the population unhealthy and often more affordable, easier to obtain alternatives.

In the 1970s, feminist writer Susie Orbach (2016) famously claimed that “fat is a feminist issue” (for her reflections on the impact of her work, see Orbach, 2018). General studies on fatness and obesity consider both men and women but work such as Orbach’s that focuses specifically on girls and women (see also Rice, 2007; Murray, 2008) is particularly helpful and
supports my assumption that fatness on film is also a feminist issue (Bell & McNaughton, 2007; Wann, 2009; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Warin, 2015), especially in relation to the scarcity of representation and reinforcement of the ideal body type in patriarchal Hollywood.

Melissa McCarthy’s physical comedy, body and appearance are often framed as playing a significant role in the development of her characters. For this reason, it is important to look at the history of these specific issues with past female comedians. For example, Kathleen Rowe, a film and cultural studies scholar, wrote about Roseanne Barr in 1990 specifically discussing her appearance and how it affected her acceptance. Women’s Studies scholar Mizejewski (2014) writes how a woman is believed to be able to be pretty or funny, but not both. All the female comedians that Mizejewski discusses find a way to use their bodies to differentiate themselves from the concept of hegemonic beauty in order to be funny. For example, Sarah Silverman uses self-deprecating Jewish jokes, Tina Fey disguises herself behind glasses which for some represent a sexy librarian image, and Kathy Griffin deems herself a “fag hag” for the gay male audience. It is clear that all these women, as well as other female comedians, appeal to distinct audiences but they do all have the use of their body in common.

Mobley (2014) discusses concepts of the fat actress from a performance studies perspective. She explains how Western philosophy has led to a culture where fat is a socially accepted bias and how this anti-fat attitude impacts the presentation of certain performances. While most of Mobley’s book is about theatre portrayals, she does include a discussion of Kirstie Alley and Melissa McCarthy as television stars in Fat Actress and Mike & Molly respectively. Mobley presents the evidence that sexual otherness is a component of Western philosophy and that women’s sexual power is linked to their “voracious appetites” (p. 9). Mobley explains that this can be traced back to Eve in the Bible, but it exists in present-day discourse as well such as
food commercials geared toward women that allow them to “‘be bad’ and indulge” (p. 10). This all leads to a culture that embraces fat stigmatization and the thin ideal. Even the science behind obesity reports is exaggerated. Mobley claims that due to the background this fat bias is specifically a white woman’s problem.

Throughout Alley’s television programs and in the early part of McCarthy’s show (the latter to be discussed in the next chapter) they both played into cultural stereotypes of fat people. These stereotypes portray these fat women “as out of control, sexually voracious, verbally outspoken, psychologically damaged, and unable to contain themselves emotionally or physically (p. 124).” Mobley terms this type of entertainment “fat-face minstrelsy” (p. 123) and defines it in comparison to the comedy of 19th century blackface minstrelsy that was “visual and vulgar” (p. 124). Both Alley and McCarthy seemed to embrace, or at least tolerate, these stereotypes for humor at various points of their career.

Mobley explains that the difference between blackface and fat-face minstrelsy is that blackface was performed by white actors that had the ability to remove it after the performance. A fat actress that is actually fat does not have the ability to remove herself from her body once the performance is done. Alley, who was not always fat, showed Jenny Craig commercials during her program that could be a reference to her ability to “wipe off the fat-face” and return to her once skinny self. McCarthy on the other hand – again at particular points in her career -- is more comparable to the point of time that African American’s began to wear the blackface themselves, just as a comedian like Totie Fields (mentioned in the previous chapter) used to make fat jokes about herself. This is a way for fat comic actresses to portray themselves, for humor, as others see them.
A stereotype is also an easy plot device. For example, within comedy, supporting characters are often included for comedic purposes or used as a “narrative prosthesis to add a dimension of characterization to the slim main characters” (Rodan & Ellis, 2016, p. 10).

Narrative prosthesis is a theory (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000) about disability representation. Disabilities are often stereotyped in these narratives or used as a prosthetic. Narrative prosthesis is used by Rodan and Ellis to describe how obesity is presented as a disability including mentions of this device being used in *Gilmore Girls* and *Mike & Molly*, both of which will be discussed in the next chapter. Similarly, Rachel Guldin (2010) analyzes how fat child actors “perform fatness” through food- or body-based names (Ham, Chunk), their obsession with food, and their grotesque body (as visualized or auralized through sloppiness and flatulence), all of which are used as sources of humor in children’s films and contrast with slimmer main characters.

This perpetuation of stereotypes was also studied previously in the 1990s (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000) with *Friends* and *Mad About You*, two popular shows at the time. Looking particularly at the language used toward women that were not only considered heavy but also average in size they found that these women received more negative comments than women who were thin. Not only did the dialogue included reinforce fat stigmatization and the thin ideal, but the reactions to such jokes from the audience, 80% of which were positive, also provided a secondary reinforcement to fortify the impact.

Comedy and representation of gender (King, 2002) is closely related to fat representation because being fat is not considered to be a norm of femininity. King refers to inversions of gender roles as carnivalesque, he explains that these inversions are “double-edged potential of
comedy, to both reinforce and undermine established norms” (p.130). We must be aware of the norm to understand the departure from the norm.

So, when the outside influences and perceptions of fatness collide with their representation on screen, particularly within the comedy genre, interpretations could be varied. As Murray S. Davis (1993) claimed, and was summarized in Swink (2017), “Comedic texts are particularly ambiguous and open to interpretation because humor is frequently predicated on disrupting expectations or playing with conceptual inconsistencies, leading to dramatically different interpretations of the humorous content” (p. 6). Swink uses the example of Dave Chappelle and why he left his show, he claimed that he could no longer see the difference between those that were laughing with him or at him and was afraid that he was perpetuating black stereotypes.

The double-edged sword of McCarthy’s comedy is compounded when physical comedy and gross-out comedy are paired with a fat actress. Not only does this pairing perpetuate fat stereotypes but physical comedy also has a history of being considered a low-brow comedy (King, 2002) and is valued less within culture. Also, the fat stereotypes distract from or even negate feminist messages just as they did for Roseanne Barr (Lee, 1992).

Methodology

As previewed before in my rationale, rather than choosing between influential works like the often-contrasted approaches by Gray (2010a, 2010b) and Meehan (1991), or cultural studies and political economy, I prefer to attempt a balance between the two. While some political economists like Meehan (1991) do focus on specific examples like Batman (1989), most of them focus on larger economic trends or characteristics of industry and companies as a whole. Similarly, cultural studies work may downplay the importance of such trends. I would like to
combine the detail of the cultural approach to texts and paratexts with the political economic approach. A few others have done this (Hardy, 2011; Waetjen & Gibson, 2007) and I will use their work to guide mine. This approach will help in the analysis of promotional paratexts, the text itself, and the consideration of McCarthy’s place in the industry. This balance of importance given to both the fan, non-corporate media text, or a close reading of the text and the political economic activities, offers a more holistic analysis of a piece of media. I will also consider fan texts as a paratext like Hardy (2011) does. The difficulty in this combined approach, as Hardy points out, is the blurring of the line between corporate and non-corporate promotions. The blurring of the line, however, is precisely the reason why these two areas of material should not be separated, they are too closely related.

This work will be influenced by non-popular texts and paratexts (i.e. Gray 2010a, 2010b) such as movie trailers and critic reviews since, in many cases, these are consumed by more people than the main text. This analysis will strive to provide the level of detail that celebratory cultural and fan studies provides (i.e. Jenkins, 2006) while also focusing on the importance of the commodity (i.e. Meehan, 1991; Proffitt et al., 2007) and this combination plays a major role in overall criticism and conclusions of my work. The best way to accomplish this level of analysis is to have a narrow data field which is why I chose to focus on only one actress.

To analyze McCarthy’s films and television shows, I will approach it first in a traditional film studies fashion, analyzing the text. However, instead of just solely analyzing each film or television show individually, I will also be looking for particular images and messages about body throughout her collection of work. In this analysis it is important to take into consideration the body of work on the cultural implications of fatness, and in turn, how fatness is then performed. To discuss this performance, I will draw from Mobley’s (2014) scholarship in
performance studies where she began to discuss McCarthy’s work. I will use prior work completed about comedians with similar body types in the past (Baehr & Gray, 1996 & Mizejewski, 2014) as well as contemporary examples to make a comparison to McCarthy.

For the analysis of industry promoted texts such as trailers and movie posters I will refer to both Gray (2010a) and Meehan (1991) to explore the importance of the messages created with synergy and the paratexts and their place within the political economy of Hollywood. Here, like with the analysis of the films and TV shows, I will not provide an exhaustive review of each piece of promotional media, but rather pay particular attention to those with feminist or post-feminist messages, commentary about McCarthy’s body, or that illustrate the influence of the industry on audience perception. Directly related to these areas of promotion are interactions with the fans, especially fan comments and postings that discuss feminist, or anti-feminist, issues in regard to McCarthy. To support this area, I will draw upon work from Jenkins (2006) and Gray (2003, 2005). Considering a wider political economic lens, texts such as Box Office Mojo will be used in conjunction with explanations of the high concept film. This larger discussion will rely on support from political economic scholars such as Wasko (2003) as well as those that have written about the history of women in the industry (Kohen, 2012). I will join the political economic work with traditional film studies work (Wyatt, 2002) on auteur style to help explore motivations of the creators.

Though I have a means of basic analysis for each text, most importantly, my overall analysis of these texts and paratexts will be done through a feminist lens. Even with the focus on McCarthy alone, there is a lot of text to cover. I will review all texts as a whole, but when it comes to breaking down the text, rather than providing an exhaustive analysis, only the messages
that relate to feminism or postfeminism in some way will be addressed. This approach will be carried through all the texts that will be used for analysis.

By using feminism as a lens, I hope to shed light on the industry intentions and implications for the way they promote McCarthy’s films as feminist. I plan to deduce different sources whether from, the main texts, marketing, reviews, or actor interviews. I will also show a parallel relationship between McCarthy’s self-promoted feminism and that of her characters. I expect these areas to greatly overlap with each other and that there will not be a clear answer, but this will support the discussion of the complication of postfeminism.

Texts

I will only focus on McCarthy’s work due to several unique factors in the development of her career. The first reason is the claims of feminism related to Bridesmaids. This is not a claim that is made by reviewers for every movie. Second, though McCarthy is not the only one to have success after Bridesmaids, she is the most successful in terms of popularity of her subsequent comedy films. At the time of writing this paper there is no comedy actress in a comparable situation. Third, McCarthy is also unique in Hollywood due to her age and her body. These qualities combined with her success have carried a popular feminist narrative throughout her films.

I conduct my analysis chronologically starting with McCarthy’s television success focusing mainly on Gilmore Girls, Samantha Who?, and Mike & Molly. For this analysis, in order to truly understand the infrequent, but popular, supporting role of McCarthy in Gilmore Girls, I watched every episode of all seven seasons. I also watched the Netflix revival, Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life. For Samantha Who? I watched the first few episodes and a random sampling of the remaining episodes. For Mike & Molly I watched the first season and a random
sampling of the other episodes, with particular attention to those that were created after McCarthy’s success in *Bridesmaids*. In addition to analyzing the main text of the shows I read numerous newspaper, magazine, trade journal and blog articles as well as critic reviews to examine the language used to describe McCarthy and her characters.

McCarthy’s television success was followed by her breakthrough role in *Bridesmaids*. I examine *Bridesmaids* in detail. In addition to watching the movie several times for analysis, I also look at the paratexts, and the political economy of the movie. The paratexts include promotional materials and reviews for multiple sources. The texts for political economic analysis include Internet Movie Database (IMDB), for production crew background, industry interviews for background on the particular movie as well as the production crew, and statistics from Box Office Mojo.

Though McCarthy had many movies and television shows post-*Bridesmaids*, I chose to focus on her blockbuster movies. These are the movies that had the biggest budget, release and profit. The top movies happen to be directed by Paul Feig, who also directed *Bridesmaids*, so this relationship is also examined. Again, the blockbuster movies were chosen over McCarthy’s smaller self-produced movies or over her more artistic efforts as well as her television projects, due to their popularity and potential cultural impact. These movies are *The Heat*, *Spy*, and *Ghostbusters*. I also include a shorter discussion for *Identity Thief* and mentions of her roles on *Saturday Night Live* and other significant movie cameos. Additional texts used are the same as the previous chapters combined, including, newspaper, magazine, trade journal and blog articles, critic reviews, IMDB and Box Office Mojo. This chapter also includes the examination of anti-fan discourse from various sources but summarizes comments on YouTube and Twitter.
The next chapter begins this textual engagement by examining themes in McCarthy’s pre-*Bridesmaids* work, noting how her dual presence in fairly edgy improv comedy and mainstream venues such as *Gilmore Girls* foreshadowed, and perhaps even enabled, the complicated nature of her comedy as symbolized by her breakthrough character Megan in *Bridesmaids* and her post-*Bridesmaids* work that walked a tightrope between the conventional and the edgy.
Chapter 3:
“Am I Crying or Laughing?”
A Conflicted Reading of McCarthy’s Sitcom Television Performances

Introduction

Sookie: “Am I crying or laughing?”

Lorelai: “Laughing.”

Sookie: “Good!”

(Sherman-Palladino, Palladino & Ortega, 2002)

The lines above are taken from a Thanksgiving episode of Gilmore Girls where Lorelai and Rory – the mother and daughter who are the program’s title characters – show up to the house of their friend and inn’s chef Sookie St. James well into her holiday celebration. The Gilmores find Sookie intoxicated from indulging in a few margaritas while her in-laws took to frying up any food they could fit in the turkey fryer (a distressing event to chef Sookie), and even suggested they add a few non-food items. After yelling across the yard about an in-law who broke a souvenir from Belgium, Sookie turns to her friend Lorelai and asks, “Am I Laughing or Crying?” This is a good way to define McCarthy’s comedic character journey, for we might ask ourselves, should we be laughing or crying about the contradictions in McCarthy’s rise as a visible and celebrated comedian? McCarthy is a very talented comedian who does indeed make many people laugh but her physical comedy and character situations can be seen as perpetuating fat stereotypes and stigmatization. I agree with Kindinger’s (2016) confliction of being a Melissa McCarthy fan. It is complicated, especially given the historical role that fat women often play in film comedies, and how McCarthy’s performances often both mirror, but also comment on and subvert, that role: Kindinger writes, “women’s fatness is understood as a failure to control the female body; therefore, stigmatization and public denouncement is seen as a method to control
women’s bodies by shaming them into invisibility. As I write this, I realize that this is why I laugh and I cherish McCarthy’s comedy – she is anything but ashamed or invisible” (para. 3). The very reason we can laugh and feel pleased with McCarthy’s accomplishments and her feminist action of being a uniquely visible, unashamed and unapologetic fat actor and woman is at the same time problematic in its perpetuation of fat bias, if only due to the scarcity of her representation.

The presence of fat bodies on TV for lead characters, particularly female fat bodies, is scarce compared to their prevalence in reality. “Whereas 1 in 4 women in reality are obese, the television figure was 3 in 100; whereas 5% of all women in reality are underweight, nearly 1 in 3 portrayed on television were underweight. More generally, half of women in reality are average or underweight, as compared with 87% of television women” (Greenberg et al., 2003, p. 1343).

In this chapter I examine McCarthy’s early career, with a specific focus on her sitcoms, including *Gilmore Girls*, *Samantha Who?* and *Mike & Molly*. I also briefly examine film projects McCarthy did during this time period. The focus of this chapter highlights what could be perceived as fat stereotypes for McCarthy’s characters and how these stereotypes are viewed and discussed by reviewers. Except for her title role in *Mike & Molly*, her sitcom characters did not directly or centrally deal with body issues in the stories. These early years of McCarthy’s success foreshadows the contradictions that she came to exemplify in being an unapologetic fat actress.

**Gilmore Girls and Post-Network Television**

McCarthy had a few minor roles early in her career and a good standing with The Groundlings, a popular improv theater in Los Angeles, starting in the late 1990s. The Groundlings likely displayed early signs of the kind of complicated/exaggerated characters that McCarthy would specialize in. As one fellow Groundling, Jim Rash, noted, “Whether they’re
lovable losers, or overly confident losers, or just fantastic brassy women, she knew how to play them” (Kelley, 2015, para. 5). The combination of the positive with the (potentially) negative – “loveable losers,” “fantastic brassy” – especially signals that early tension of mixed characterizations. Later characters such as the title character McCarthy played in 2016’s *The Boss* were based on her Groundlings’ work (Mandell, 2016), and the Groundlings also provided common ground with *Bridesmaids* creative personnel Kristen Wiig, Annie Mumolo, Maya Rudolph, and Wendi McClendon-Covey.

However, the role that first made McCarthy publicly recognizable was best friend and co-worker, Sookie on *Gilmore Girls*. *Gilmore Girls* was a dramedy that originally ran from 2000-2007 on The WB network, later known as The CW after a merger with UPN (Baldwin & Golsblatt, 2006). The program itself was mainly about Lorelai’s relationship with her daughter Rory. Lorelai grew up in a privileged upper-class home in Hartford, Connecticut but when she became pregnant at the age of 16, she did not want to marry her boyfriend as her parents wished. She fled to a small Connecticut town, Stars Hollow, to start over and create a life of her own. The first episode (Glatter, 2000) begins with her daughter Rory, now 16 herself, getting accepted to an elite private school, Chilton. When Lorelai realizes she does not have enough money to pay for the school on her own, she is left with no choice but to borrow money from her wealthy parents, Emily and Richard Gilmore. Emily and Richard agree to loan the money under the condition that Lorelai and Rory have dinner with them every Friday night (instead of the occasional holiday). This sets the stage for seasons of comic relief and drama highlighting the lifestyle clashing between the Hartford elite and the middle-class Stars Hollow. Although much of the focus of the program was on Lorelai and Rory, the community that the program portrayed was also important to the program’s appeal. As Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly* wrote,
“Stars Hollow is a smallville of eccentrics” (2003, para. 3). Quint (2016) much later concurred, writing, “Gilmore Girls wouldn’t bring us nearly as much joy if it weren’t for the endless cast of quirky side characters” (para. 17).

One review that came out prior to the show’s launch mentioned that words like “charming” and “sleeper hit” were already being used to describe the show (Alleman, 2000, para. 4). The show was a “locus of critical commentary throughout its seven-year run” (Diffrient, 2010, p. xxii). However, it was not the most popular show of its time: “it regularly ranked around 120 in the Nielsen ratings (out of roughly 160 shows, making it one of the least watched television series in North America)” (Diffrient, 2010, p. xxi). Despite the low ratings overall, Sherman-Palladino did capture and maintain the appeal of a small audience and especially attracted women 18-34, a desirable audience for advertisers (Ryan, 2004). On a small network, *Gilmore Girls* was one of The WB’s most successful shows (Stern, 2012). It had a loyal following that included a long-run in syndication and a high-profile podcast written about in the *New York Times Magazine* (Mlotek, 2015), and, most notably, a revival that was created as a Netflix series in 2016 titled, *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*.

Being on a smaller network like the WB, gave show creator Amy Sherman-Palladino an advantage because she was able to maintain control of much of the show. She was quoted as saying, “When you’re on network television, you’ve got advertisers and high expectations for ratings. I’m on the WB, and as long as they appeal to the demographics that mean the most to them, they’re pretty happy. They’re not as big as ABC. They’re not even in as many markets as ABC. So, they cannot possibly compete on the same level that ABC does, because they’re not even seen by as many people. It’s not the same ball game” (“Interview with Amy Sherman-Palladino.” Onion AV Club as cited in Tobias, 2005, para. 36).
The control held by Sherman-Palladino in this situation was not only over the script but the creative talent of the show as well. The creative cast can be seen as feminist from the start because it was created by women in powerful positions including show creators, writers and directors; Sherman-Palladino was in fact described as a “sunny feminist” (Tucker, 2003, para. 1). In addition to Sherman-Palladino, Susanne Daniels was instrumental in getting the show approved as then President of WB network (Lavery, 2010). According to Lavery, women held 92 out of the 172 writing credits for the show “(By comparison, 62 of 203 writing credits on a landmark feminist show like Buffy the Vampire Slayer were credited to women)” (p. 10). Also, 67 episodes of Gilmore Girls was directed by women (Lavery, 2010). Having women in the roles of Network President, Show Creator, Writer and Director does not always guarantee a feminist outcome of the show itself, or a sweeping change in the industry, but the act of obtaining these positions is an example of popular feminism beginning to challenge some aspects of the status quo.

Regardless, scripts were revered for the feminist moments (Bradley, 2016) and its intelligent literary and cultural references (Lavery, 2010). The ups and downs of the show have been discussed in a few different pieces, including its mixed messages of feminism (Calvin, 2008; Lavery & Diffrient, 2010; Stern, 2012). Despite the lack of consistent feminist messages, there is no doubt that the makeup of the cast and focus of the script were overwhelmingly female. This was something that had not been seen since the variety shows of the 50s and 60s (Calvin, 2008).

Still, even with all this control, Sherman-Palladino had some restrictions. For example, “Gilmore Girls was the ‘first advertiser advocated show’ funded by the Family Friendly Programming Forum (FFOF), a group consisting of major U.S. corporations, who offered up a
million dollars to fund ‘family-friendly’ script development at the WB” (Rawlins, 2010, p. 19). Sherman-Palladino also had to give in to network executives to include the character of Luke, the diner owner, who was originally supposed to be a woman. “Network executives, whom she did not name, said there was a lack of testosterone on the program and strongly encouraged her to add a central male figure” (Stern, 2012, p. 174). One may wonder what the show would have been like without Lorelai and Luke’s relationship. For example, perhaps being forced to include Luke so prominently in the show to appeal to the male audiences and create a love story obsession (Stern, 2012) took focus away from not only Lorelai and Rory’s relationship (the whole point of the show), but also the potential development of other relationships, such as the one between Lorelai and Sookie. In this way, in addition to some aspects of the show, we may say that Sherman-Palladino’s actions approached a feminist intervention because she worked around the requests of patriarchal Hollywood.

The Supportive and Competent (and Clumsy and Romantically Awkward) Sidekick, McCarthy’s Sookie in Gilmore Girls

Sookie: “You think we’ll still be friends when we’re dead?”

Lorelai: “I will if you will.”

(Sherman-Palladino & Babbit, 2003)

McCarthy’s first major role on TV was in many ways a stereotypical sidekick role. On Gilmore Girls, Melissa McCarthy plays Sookie, the best friend to Lorelai (Lauren Graham) and a chef at the Independence Inn that Lorelai manages. In season three they realize their dream to become co-owners of their own inn, the Dragonfly Inn. Sookie did appear quite a bit on the show and had a more developed character than some of the other townsfolk. McCarthy stands out among the other cast as a clumsy perfectionist and she can keep up with Graham’s fast talk and
get some laughs. In one episode, for example, Sookie obsesses over discovering why one food critic seemed to give her “magic risotto” a so-so review.

Sookie: “I narrowed it down and I found a party that had ordered practically everything including…”

Lorelai: “The magic risotto.”

Sookie: “Yes, the risotto, and a Riesling, ha! A Riesling.”

Lorelai: “Why not just drink battery acid.”

Sookie: “Exactly! It changes the entire flavor of the dish, and the fact that Brian [the server who waited on the critic] even served it makes me think Celia [Brian’s girlfriend who kicked him out] is a little bit better off without him.”

(From season 1, episode 4 as cited in Smith, 2015)

Later, Sookie is so upset that she tracks him down with the same dish but a different (non-Riesling) wine.

Sookie was there for Lorelai no matter what. In addition to being a confidant, having girls’ nights, and helping to remedy hangovers, Sookie went above and beyond to make Lorelai happy. For example, she made a five-tier wedding cake for Lorelai’s first engagement and when the wedding was called off at the last minute Sookie pretended she had not yet made the cake so Lorelai would not feel guilty (Sherman-Palladino, Palladino & Babbit, 2001). Sookie is also involved in Rory’s life, spying on her date with her first boyfriend (Sherman-Palladino, Kohan & Flender, 2000), and helping Rory get ready for a dance and for her high school graduation. But we really see the best friend shine through when she tells Lorelai like it is, like when she pushed her to ask her parents for help in the pilot or when she suggested that Lorelai might like Luke (Sherman-Palladino, Palladino & Katleman, 2001). Of course, Lorelai is there for Sookie too, for
example when Sookie is pregnant with her first child and knocks on Lorelai’s door in the middle of the night. Sookie asks Lorelai how she got Rory out and Lorelai lets Sookie rant but then shows her a box of things that she kept from when Rory was born (Sherman-Palladino, Palladino & Long, 2003). But the support in their relationship comes disproportionately from Sookie, a characteristic that flows with the stereotype of a loyal fat sidekick.

Sherman-Palladino’s show and representation of the women in Stars Hollow, including Sookie, seems almost progressive when compared to much of gender portrayals on television, but there are ideologically troublesome elements of the program, especially focusing on Sookie. Much of how Sookie is portrayed is to be admired: there are no explicit fat jokes, or significant commenting on the weight or body type for Sookie’s character. Professionally, she is successful and competent and is a supportive friend. These are admirable traits that, in isolation, could be called feminist, but there are residual associations of body type to character traits.

Recall from the previous chapter that, with fat characters, common humorous tropes include obsessions with food, physical clumsiness, descriptions of body shapes (even if not in the main text itself), and particularized relationship issues (Mobley, 2014; Rodan & Ellis, 2016; Lee, 1992). The first issue with Sookie is her career, her devotion to it, and the resulting strong association with food. As a chef she is “professionally food obsessed” (Mintz & Mintz, 2010, p. 238). We certainly see this in the above-described sequence involving her “magic risotto.” Other illustrations, from the series: when she is constantly picky with the produce that Jackson brings to the restaurant; when Jackson, Sookie, Lorelai and Michel all sleep with the zucchinis after a forecasted frost to make sure they have zucchini soup for the inn opening; when Sookie is placed on bedrest and Luke takes over the kitchen at the inn but Sookie does not trust Luke and has Jackson sneak her tastes of what he is making; and when Lorelai catches Sookie in the middle of
the night before her wedding working on her own wedding cake, Lorelai walks into the kitchen of the inn and sees Sookie there in her wedding dress messing with her wedding cake:

Lorelai: “What are you doing?”

Sookie: “Daffodils! Am I insane? You can’t have daffodils on your wedding cake! What was I thinking?”

Lorelai: “Stop what you’re doing right now.”

Sookie: [Continuing to take things off her wedding cake.] “There’s too much pink.”

Lorelai: “Sweetie, there’s not too much pink.”

Sookie: “Pink is for girls! Jackson’s not a girl. Jackson doesn’t like pink. I have all this pink it’s like saying to you, ‘Hey screw you! You want a say in this? Well, grow some ovaries.’”

Lorelai: [Stopping Sookie from doing anything else to that cake.] “Hey, ho, honey, hey! Put the pastry bag down.”

Sookie: “I can’t, I have to fix this.”

Lorelai: “Sookie, down. Now step away from all things edible.” [Pauses, as Sookie steps away.] “Hey, what happened?”

Sookie: “I don’t know.”

Lorelai: “When I left you, you were fine.”

Sookie: “I know. And when I went home, I was fine. And when I went to bed, I was fine. And then I had this dream where suddenly my dress is really, really short in back, you know? So, I bolt out of bed and I put my dress on, it looks ok, but then I panic, what if I’m remembering the dream wrong? What if my dress isn’t screwed up, what if it’s my veil? So, I put on the veil then I remember I’m serving salmon puffs, salmon puffs. Look,
completely wrong, so I had to rush over here and try to find another first course. And then, I look and these daffodils, just something snapped and that’s when you walked in here.”

(Sherman-Palladino and Stevens).

Certainly, part of the humor of the program is the neuroses of the characters, but with food and eating, Sookie contrasts to Lorelai and Rory. They are also food obsessed – in particular with junk food – but never gain any weight or have any other issues with their bodies. Their bodies are, according to an analysis of the food symbolism in the program, “magically disciplined from within” (Mintz & Mintz, 2010, p. 239).

The second issue was perhaps taking advantage of McCarthy’s skills as a physical comic. This stereotype of a clumsy fat character is present at multiple points throughout the series. In the first episode we are introduced to Sookie after a loud crash of pots and pans brings Lorelai to the kitchen of the Inn and we see Sookie on the floor. We quickly learn that this is not the first accident Sookie had because Lorelai yells to the kitchen staff that they are supposed to be watching her. Then we find out Sookie has stitches for a different accident that happened a few days prior because they started to bleed after her fall in the kitchen. Later in the same episode Sookie is excited when she learns that Rory got into Chilton and she throws a towel behind her which lands on a burner and catches fire. One of the kitchen staff swiftly smothers it with a pot cover, reiterating that this type of accident happens often, and they are prepared to handle it. In the episode “Rory’s Dance” from Season 1, there is also the memorable scene where Sookie is helping Rory get ready for a formal at school and accidently sprays herself in the eye with hairspray (Sherman-Palladino & Glatter, 2000). Another example is when Lorelai collected donations at her house for the town-wide rummage sale. The living room is full of garbage bags
which Sookie proceeds to fall into, twice (Sherman-Palladino, Arata & Green, 2001). Further, there is her very physical explanation to Lorelai, Emily, Richard and Richard’s mother of how she got a rip in her chef’s jacket. The movements were very reminiscent of Chris Farley (Sherman-Palladino, Lawrence, & Babbit, 2003). Not only do such instances flow with a fat stereotype but they can also be seen as masculine because they do not easily fit into traditional feminine Hollywood norms.

The recurring clumsiness of Sookie is noted by reviews and reinforced in their narratives. Early reviews of the program that mention McCarthy describe her character as “accident-prone” (McDonough, 2000, para. 4), “klutzy” (Barney, 2000, para. 5) and “clumsy,” (McGarrigle, 2000, para. 5) One review of McCarthy’s performance in the show described her character as “bubbly, slightly scatterbrained but good-hearted and a fabulous cook” (Alleman, 2000, para. 1). At least one review of Gilmore Girls was not-so-subtle in a reference to weight: Sookie was described as the “tubby chef” (Morago, 2003, para. 7).

The third issue is the representation of Sookie’s dating life and relationship with her boyfriend-turned-husband, Jackson. She is awkward and shy around Jackson during their flirting and early dating stage (Spiro, 2001); in fact, when she first asked him if he wanted to have dinner sometime, she did not specify a time and let weeks go by before she contacted him again. Their first date was actually a double date with Lorelai and Jackson’s intolerable cousin Rune. At the start of their first date there was also an awkward exchange, with them both saying hi back and forth for a total of seven times before Lorelai interrupts them.

An article from the Toronto Star (“Tokenism takes on weight,” 2001), in reviewing the increased prominence of fat-women characters in TV that season, criticizes the development of Sookie’s character as incapable when it comes to navigating her own love life in these early
episodes of the show: “Turned out that Sookie is so pathetic, she can't even do her own face. To the rescue comes Lorelai, who gives her a hideous mother-of-the-ethnic-bride hairdo, the kind only TV fat girls always wear on their first date” (para. 21).

Even throughout her relationship with Jackson, Sookie is desexualized and their relationship is also food associated, again playing into a fat stereotype and working against any progressive feminist representations. As one analysis argued, Sookie and Jackson:

Conduct their courtship and marital romance almost entirely through the language of produce. In the early stages of their flirtation, for instance, Jackson accuses Sookie of “sneaking around behind [his] back” because she covets another man’s strawberries and jealously barks at her, “You disgust me. . . . I hope you’re happy together!” (“Kill Me Now” [1/03]). Later, Jackson’s hydroponic tomatoes inspire this eroticized (and marital!) exchange in the Dragonfly Inn’s kitchen: Jackson asks, “Do you want another piece?” and Sookie purrs throatily, “Do I,” telling the assembled staff, “Leave us, please” (“Tippecanoe and Taylor, Too” [5.04]).

(Mintz & Mintz, 2010 p. 238)

Despite Sookie’s character development throughout the seasons, she remains a secondary character, a loyal and cheerful sidekick to Lorelai. We can think of Lorelai and Sookie as having a Lucy and Ethel relationship from I Love Lucy (Castelluccio & Walker, 1998) where Sookie supports Lorelai in her many crazy endeavors and is always there by her side to provide support. However, Sookie is still presented in a way as to not upstage Lorelai. In this way, she exemplifies the classic female sidekick who adds comic relief while driving the main plots by listening and counseling the main characters. But, in this case, her body shape – although not an explicit focus and with some complexity – still flows with many tropes of traditional fat humor.
Gilmore Girls is a text with a complicated relationship to feminism. It rarely makes discussions of fatness explicit, and Sookie is an admirable character that often encourages identification. Nevertheless, particular characteristics of Sookie complement the traditional role of large-bodied supporting characters in comedies, and elements of Sookie appear in later McCarthy characters such as Molly in Mike & Molly. Of course, there cannot be an expectation for a single show to “fix” all issues of gender representation at once. But, on the other hand, the notable presence of Sookie in the program’s narrative – and the lack of Sookie-like characters on much of television and popular culture – speaks to the problem of the lack of representation of women (and their issues) on screen.

Always a “Chubby Best Pal”

McCarthy continued to take other roles during Gilmore Girls’ run. Two of the films she was in, Pumpkin and The Nines, were met with tough criticism. Some reviews did praise McCarthy for her ability to let her acting talent shine through even with poorly written scripts. A review for The Nines says McCarthy “achieves moments of charm and spite” (White, 2007, para. 8). Despite the occasional notable review, McCarthy was still playing supporting roles and, with no space for her characters to develop, descriptions of her characters fell back on stereotypes and token descriptions in ways that were more blatant than in Gilmore Girls reviews. The praising review above also highlights her body by labeling her as “The plump, appealing McCarthy” (para. 8). Reviews for Pumpkin described McCarthy’s character as the “chubby best pal” (Alexander, 2002, para. 19) and “the sensitive heavyset Cici” (Blank, 2002, para. 7). And again, for the Back Up Plan McCarthy is praised for her performance, but with the non-threatening, and perhaps body-trope referencing, description of being “delightfully kooky” (GoodyKoontz, 2010, para. 9).
Perhaps a bit more expansive, but still limiting in its scope, was McCarthy’s role on the short-lived ABC television show *Samantha Who?* that ran from 2007 to 2009 on ABC. The premise of the program is that a mean-spirited, party girl, Samantha (played by Christina Applegate), suffers a head trauma that results in her forgetting much of her past, but also acquiring a personality change that is much more empathic. Plots focus on her discovering and reconciling her less-than-ideal previous persona. Again, McCarthy played friend (here named Dena) to the title character. McCarthy said about the role and how it compares to Sookie, “At first I was afraid they were going to be pretty similar because they’re both pretty bubbly and kind of high-energy. But the more I get into *Samantha Who?* I think it's the possibilities of Dena that make them very different. It started right with the pilot: She's lying to the family of a woman who's in a coma!” (Deeken, 2007, para. 7). McCarthy’s character Dena knew Samantha when they were kids but had not been a part of her life since 7th grade; however, Dena worms her way into Samantha’s amnesia-laced life. She confesses the lie in the pilot when confronted by Samantha’s other party-girl friend Andrea:

Ok Samantha you’re going to find this so funny later. We are not that close now, but we were, up until 7th grade when you became more popular and I became less and less. Much less. And uh, I heard what happened and I went to the hospital and everybody thought we were still friends. And your poor mom, she was just so happy you had a friend. So, I just kept coming back. See it’s pretty funny.

(McNeill, 2007)

Although still the bubbly best friend, McCarthy’s character Dena has a little more confidence than the more reserved Sookie in *Gilmore Girls*, albeit her confidence is a little misplaced and the character slightly off. Here she is, for example, describing her romantic strategy, something
that has a slight twist that likely transcends Sookie’s own brand of quirkiness: “But Todd is so nice. I mean if he were my boyfriend, I would lock the door and never let him out of the house. [pauses as the two other girls look at her] Which was a problem [I had] before, it is not now” (McNeill, 2007). Dena is certainly a nicer person than Samantha’s other friend Andrea, and Dena often seemed to offer Samantha the most level-headed advice. But lines like this and her availability to suddenly be best friend to a woman that was not in her life before paint Dena as a loner, a stereotype of a fat person. Although the program received significant critical acclaim (Applegate was nominated twice for an Emmy, and Jean Smart, who played Samantha’s mother, won in 2008 for Best Supporting Actress), the program only lasted two seasons, likely not long enough for Dena’s character to develop. However, continuing the theme of critics highlighting body types even if programs do not, one reviewer at the time wrote that, in contrast to “slinky Andrea,” “McCarthy’s chubby Dena preaches the gospel of nice” (Weintraub, 2007, p. E1).

**Climbing to Co-Stardom in Mike & Molly**

**Introduction to Mike & Molly.**

An obvious breakthrough in McCarthy’s career is when she lands a lead role on the major broadcast network CBS for the sitcom Mike & Molly. In an interview about her first leading position, McCarthy describes what it is like to move from sidekick to leading lady. She says, “I’m used to coming into a scene with some killer crazy story or line and then getting out of there. But that’s not what I’m doing now. I’m the sponge for all the craziness instead of being the crazy” (Justin, 2010, para. 5). Mike & Molly is about the relationship between two people who fall in love, a Chicago police officer, Mike, and a schoolteacher turned writer, Molly.

In the first episode of the series Mike and Molly meet at an Overeaters Anonymous group. It takes a few attempts for Mike to work up the courage to ask her out after failing to do
so at two group meetings and a visit to Molly’s classroom to talk about his job to her students. It is not until he is called to her house for a robbery that he awkwardly asks her between getting the details of what is missing. The remainder of the series follow the development of Mike and Molly’s relationship from first meeting to adopting a baby just before they find out that Molly’s also pregnant.

Many critics and the TV industry expressed admiration for the show; in fact, it was nominated for a total of eight Emmys and won two, one in 2015 for cinematography in a multi-camera sitcom and one, importantly, for McCarthy herself: in 2011 for lead actress in a comedy series. Some saw Mike & Molly as a reason to celebrate, that TV seems to be remembering “that fat people are human after all” (McNamara, 2010, p. 14). Others liked the show because it depicted people that looked real, in realistic situations (“Melissa McCarthy: ‘Mike and Molly’ true to life”, 2011). For example, with Molly as a schoolteacher and Mike as a police officer in a major city, they did not have enough money to get their own house and instead live with Molly’s family. Thus, it countered the traditional upper-middle and upper-class bias of much of scripted network television.

Commentary about the program was not without criticism, however. Some argued the show to just be a fat comedy: “Fat jokes may be taboo or strongly discouraged at home and at work, but they’re the bread and butter, the meat and potatoes of ‘Mike & Molly,’ the new CBS sitcom that stars two overweight characters” (Carr, 2010, para. 1). Another reviewer summarized a conference with McCarthy’s co-star Billy Gardell and ended her piece questioning the place of fat jokes in comedy:

One critic finally ventured to address the fat-focused discussion, asking “There’s been a lot of discussion about weight today; we didn’t ask the Big Bang guys [in the preceding
panel] about being nerds…what do you think about that?” The cast believes the show’s humor is independent of the weight issue. “I dunno, we’re fat. The show’s funny. Not much else to say,” Gardell said. A respectable response, but Gardell went on to admit that he joked about his weight (among, however, other subjects, like his dysfunctional family) as a “defense mechanism” while growing up. This points to a larger issue - that in American culture, fat is funny. That is, it’s still funny. And it’s this fact that indicates the tenuous territory Mike & Molly faces as it attempts to be the next big comedy by separating “big” from “comedy.” (Domanick, 2018, n.p.)

Barnhart (2010) interviewed Chuck Lorre, one of the creators, about the show. Barnhart claimed that Lorre thought it was a distraction to even think of Mike & Molly as a fat comedy. Lorre said that he thought of the show as more of a bromance until he thought of the Overeater's Anonymous angle. Co-creator Mark Roberts also insists that the show is not about overweight characters but real characters (Roe, 2010). Roberts did not feel that the other people on TV were believable. McCarthy admitted that she initially wanted no part of the show. She was convinced to at least read the script because it was steady work near her house and it was written by Chuck Lorre who was well known for The Big Bang Theory and Two and a Half Men (Ryan, 2010). McCarthy stated that she liked that it seemed sensitive to the couple’s issues and it depicted a more realistic middle and working-class family.

Unfortunately, any reprieve the show has in an accurate representation of the middle or working class is overshadowed by the constant fat jokes. And though the fat insults may have eased off over time they did not disappear, and they started out strong. The first episodes completely revolve around fat jokes at Mike and Molly’s expense (Mangan, 2010). The first episode contains many fat jokes about Mike (played by Billy Gardell), a Chicago cop and some
insults about Molly as well. To illustrate how they are delivered and where they are coming from, I will recap the jokes from the pilot (Roberts & Burrows, 2010). We are first introduced to Mike eating lunch with his partner, Carl (played by Reno Wilson) in a diner. Here their waiter calls Mike a “large man” and comments on the fact that Mike only ordered a hot dog and asks why, and says to Mike that the meal seems “insufficient for a man of your tremendous girth” when Mike explains that he is trying a new diet to lose a couple of pounds the waiter recommends he try moving to his country where “everyone is fashionably thin due to lack of food.” Mike’s partner inquires about this new diet. When Mike tells him he read it in Modern Bride at the dentist’s office, his partner says, “Hey that’s none of my business, but you better get married quick because you’re starting to show.” In response Mike hurled an insult at Carl about him living with his grandmother then Carl says, “I would shoot you right now, but I don’t have enough chalk to outline your body.”

When we first meet Molly, she is in her family living room on the elliptical and her mother sits there eating a big piece of chocolate cake in front of her.

Molly: “Mom do you have to eat that in front of me?”
Mom: “Oh I’m sorry baby do you want a bite?”
Molly: “What do you think I’m doing on this machine here, making butter?”
Mom: “Oh baby why are you punishing yourself? Face it you’re a big boned girl, you’re always gonna be a big boned girl.”
Molly: “Bones don’t jiggle mom.”

(Roberts & Burrows, 2010)

Later in the scene Molly’s sister tells her she is “never gonna meet a cute guy at chub club,” in reference to the overeaters anonymous meeting that Molly is getting ready to attend. Then
Molly’s mom says to her sister, “Why don’t you take her to one of those lesbo clubs? They seem to like the beefy gals.”

At the overeaters anonymous meeting Mike’s makes self-deprecating jokes like the one about finding the 3lbs he lost under his arm after he took his shirt off, and his explanation of his fear of being alone. He even goes as far as to say that the cats in his vision of his lonely future are only there because “they made the mistake of wandering into his gravitational field.” After the meeting when Molly comments on how funny she thought Mike’s share was, he says, “Yeah I thought if everyone’s laughing they won’t try to kill and cook each other.” Molly asks Mike to come visit her fourth-grade class to talk about his job and when he does, one of the kids asks him, “How can you be a cop and be so fat?”

Toward the end of the episode when Mike is feeling upset that he blew his chance to ask Molly out, he also almost blows his diet. Carl stops him and gives him a hug, but then says, “Sweet Jesus, it’s like hugging a futon.” On the way to a call, Carl is trying to encourage Mike by suggesting he move to Japan to be a sumo wrestler. Carl continues after they realize they had been called to Molly’s house about a robbery:

Carl: “God couldn’t bring Molly to the mountain, so he brought the mountain to Molly.”

Mike: “I’m the mountain, right?”

Carl: “You’re the freakin’ Himalayas, get in there!”

(Roberts & Burrows, 2010)

We can see from the pilot that even when Mike and Molly’s friends and family are trying to support them, or at least they think they are trying, they are actually insulting or diminishing of their efforts. For example, Molly’s mom telling her to give in because she is just big boned, or Carl giving Mike a hug to encourage him to stick to a diet but turning around an insulting his
weight calling him a futon. The show moved away from the reliance on fat jokes as it developed but it was built on this as a foundation and left the door open for fat jokes throughout the series.

Fat representation.

In stark contrast to Sookie in the *Gilmore Girls* utopia where weight is never the topic of conversation, we have Molly who has a consistent plot of trying to lose weight to fit into the social norm. *Mike & Molly* is a double-edged sword because it of its more realistic portrayal of class and the true challenges fat people face on a day-to-day basis (including the jokes from others) but its humor, at least early in the program, is so fat-oriented that much of the progressive elements are often literally laughed away.

For example, the jokes in *Mike & Molly* are not presented in an ironic way. We are often not laughing at the ignorance of the people making the jokes like Molly’s mom or Carl (like we would be at Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*), instead the show invites us to laugh with the ridiculers, and therefore at Mike and Molly because of their fatness. In the context such fat bias appears normal (or socially acceptable).

When the program aired, other contextual factors potentially reinforced the negative messages about fat people that the fat jokes invited, including other cultural representations and explanations at that time. For example, if we consider how many weight loss and weight loss makeover reality shows there are and were at the time *Mike & Molly* was on air – *The Biggest Loser, Celebrity Fit Club, Too Fat for 15*, and *Thintervention* – the consistent and multi-program negative view of fat bodies enculturates viewers to think in particular ways about the fat body and potentially to even act certain ways toward those bodies. Outside of media we are still taught that fat is unhealthy and preventable by the individual. For example, examining the framing of obesity as an epidemic is another way that these ideals are enforced. The use of the word
epidemic is problematic in itself because it is often associated with something negative, something that can be caught (LeBesco, 2011).

Returning to the role of narrative prosthesis (Rodan & Ellis, 2016), in *Mike & Molly* we are presented with this issue of obesity as something abnormal that needs to be fixed, a disability that needs to be overcome. Critic Beato (2010) argues that obviously *Mike & Molly* is a better representation than other television shows because the characters in the show are presented as people. Yet despite any realism presented, the script never discusses social or political issues about fatness, including its relationship to social class and the availability of nutritious and high-quality foods (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2008).

Again, the portrayal of Mike and Molly, even with the high percentage of fat jokes in the early seasons, is contradictory. Certainly, casting fat actors is arguably more sensitive than actors that could be wearing the weight stereotype as a costume, of a “fat face minstrel” or an exaggeration of what other people see, such as the flash-backed Monica on *Friends* or the “Fat Bastard” character in *Austin Powers* movies. Gender also plays a role. Molly has an even fatter husband than her, so it is a socially acceptable relationship (Mobley, 2014). And negative reviews of the program did not always call for more progressive portrayals of fat people. An online blog post published in *Marie Claire* – “Should Fatties Get a Room? (Even on TV?)” (Kelly, 2010) – was one of an especially problematic assessment of the program. The post was met with a backlash of counter reviews asking what *Marie Claire* was thinking to publish such a piece and has since been removed from the site. Based on responses still available, apparently Kelly’s article was in response to a CNN article by Lisa Respers France (2010a) in which she wrote on the importance of having fat characters on TV and in movies. France writes in a response to Kelly’s article that she knew there would be negative comments but what she got on
her original article was “just the beginning” (2010b, para. 6). The initial popular backlash against the Kelly post was from Jezebel writer, Sadie Stein (2010). Stein shares some excerpts from Kelly’s article:

My initial response was: Hmm, being overweight is one thing - those people are downright obese! And while I think our country's obsession with physical perfection is unhealthy, I also think it's at least equally crazy, albeit in the other direction, to be implicitly promoting obesity! Yes, anorexia is sick, but at least some slim models are simply naturally skinny. No one who is as fat as Mike and Molly can be healthy. And obesity is costing our country far more in terms of all the related health problems we are paying for, by way of our insurance, than any other health problem, even cancer. (para. 3)

So anyway, yes, I think I'd be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other ... because I'd be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything. To be brutally honest, even in real life, I find it aesthetically displeasing to watch a very, very fat person simply walk across a room - just like I'd find it distressing if I saw a very drunk person stumbling across a bar or a heroine [sic] addict slumping in a chair. (para. 5)

Now, don't go getting the wrong impression: I have a few friends who could be called plump. I'm not some size-ist jerk. And I also know how tough it can be for truly heavy people to psych themselves up for the long process of slimming down. (For instance, the overweight maintenance guy at my gym has talked to me a little bit about how it seems worthless for him to even try working out, because he's been heavy for as long as he can remember.) But ... I think obesity is something that most people have a ton of control over. It's something they can change, if only they put their minds to it. (para. 7)
Stein writes, “She then offers some earnest tips on diet and exercise and finishes, ‘What do you guys think? Fat people making out on TV - are you cool with it? Do you think I’m being an insensitive jerk?’” (para. 8). Kelly issued an apology after she received over 1,000 comments on the story and 28,000 emails (Garcia, 2010). Editor in Chief for *Marie Claire*, Joanna Coles, originally stood by Kelly stating that "Maura Kelly is a very provocative blogger," and "She was an anorexic herself and this is a subject she feels very strongly about" (Chernikoff, 2010, para. 3).

Kelly’s reaction to the show and her apology with an explanation of being a victim of anorexia, suggests that we need better representations of all body types in media. Perhaps she too is a victim of the lack of variety of body types represented in media. And the scare tactics about the obesity “epidemic” spread fear instead of support. Kelly is not the only one that feels the show is promoting an unhealthy lifestyle (Stuever, 2010).

Due to the reactions of the fat representation of the show, it is no surprise that when *Mike & Molly* was canceled that a false rumor quickly spread indicating that the cancellation was due to the fact that Melissa McCarthy had lost too much weight and, therefore, ruined the premise of the show (Evon, 2016). A story that at its core was built on a couple trying to lose weight could no longer go on if one of them achieved this goal. In reality it was more likely canceled because the six-year contract was up and it was not doing well enough to keep McCarthy, now movie star, on board with the salary they would have to pay her. But this rumor does not center the program’s fate on the political economy of television, rather the rumor was about the cultural meanings of fatness. The ambivalence of the show’s attitude toward fatness supports these interpretations and creates a space for commenters like Kelly to express their viewpoints.
Feminism in *Mike & Molly*?

The fact that the start of McCarthy’s of a television contract for *Mike & Molly* coincided with her becoming a movie star was beneficial for both McCarthy and the show. The show gained increased attention and McCarthy became a greater focus of the show. The fourth season took a new direction to allow McCarthy to play Molly a little more loosely. In the first episode of the season Molly quits her job as a fourth-grade teacher, she literally climbs out the window of her classroom to escape the kids, and starts her career as a writer (VanDerWerff, 2013). Even prior to the shift to focus more on McCarthy, there was a great importance of McCarthy as a lead actor on *Mike & Molly* because fat actors are men in many shows (McNamara, 2010). In fact, *Mike & Molly* was originally conceived as a buddy show with two men as the leads. It is impressive then to shift focus more on the fat female character over the man and certainly feminist to show a woman follow her dream and bust through the parameters set for her sex and class. It is also an act of popular feminism that the program was changed to represent more progressive elements, perhaps because of the increased influence that McCarthy gained following her success in *Bridesmaids*. Some critics like VanDerWerff (2013) agree that it is a stretch from the original character, there were hints of this possibility from the first episode when Molly cannot explain why she became a fourth-grade teacher, and we hear her yell at her class, not once but twice, for them to shut up. While the representation may be a welcome change, it is one of so few that it holds a large responsibility in its depiction.

The problem now, like always, is that sitcoms only provide so much depth. In this case the show still revolves around the characters trying to lose weight. The ambivalence toward the character’s weight struggles and the typical joke related to weight then is a continuation of the fat stereotype, as studied previously by Fouts & Burggraf (2000). And because this show is a
traditional sitcom taped in front of a live studio audience, the literal laughs from the audience reinforce the preferred audience subjectivity toward these jokes and the stereotypes they evoke, just as in the previous shows studied by Fouts & Burggraf (2000), *Friends* and *Mad About You*.

**Conclusion**

**Genealogy of production.**

After discussing both *Gilmore Girls* and *Mike & Molly* more in depth as McCarthy’s more successful television shows, we can see a big difference in character development between network and show type. Though both had their flaws, there was most certainly a difference in the way the characters were able to be developed on the WB versus CBS. *Gilmore Girls*’ Sherman-Palladino had more control over the show to create a more artistic piece and it allowed for better development of the relationship between the women on the show. *Mike & Molly* was more restricted due to its structure of a 30-minute sitcom and had to appeal to a wider audience given its airing on a Big Four network. Ultimately, however, Lorre’s ability to redo the show to focus more on the development of McCarthy’s character – and perhaps the greater influence of McCarthy as a bigger star and as a lead helped create a greater presence of feminist ideals on screen for McCarthy’s character in particular.

There is a significance to what Rawlins (2010) referred to as the genealogy of production. It is “conducive to understanding the show’s alignment with quality” (p. 47). As Rawlins points out, “Series creator, writer, producer, and director Amy Sherman-Palladino and her partner, Daniel Palladino, worked as producers for *Roseanne* on ABC from 1988-1997. Rebecca Rand Kirshner worked as a writer for *Buffy* and *Freaks and Geeks*. Jane Espenson was a writer and producer on *Buffy* and *Angel*” (p. 47). We can do the same for *Mike & Molly*: Chuck Lorre was also a writer and producer for *Roseanne*. Don Foster who, according to IMDB was on the crew
for *Roseanne* as a writer, editor and creative consultant. *Roseanne*, of course, was another program featuring a fat woman title character, set in a working-class household, and that often challenged the conventional class- and gender-based ideals of commercial television (Lee, 1992).

Rawlins explains the importance of genealogy of production because it is often known by the viewers of the show and is called upon in discussion. Though it takes many people to run a show, often show runners like Sherman-Palladino and Chuck Lorre (and other some strong influences from the creative team) are treated as a kind of auteur. This status gives viewers an expectation of quality and style based on previous work. It may also give them power to bring in actors like McCarthy and present female focused narratives as Sherman-Palladino did or fat-focused narratives as Lorre did.

Though we see that even in a post-network era, where a popular show runner such as Sherman-Palladino has more control, she does not have complete control. In a more recent article Sherman-Palladino admitted to fans that she had to fight for McCarthy to play the role of Sookie because of her lack of experience (Locker, 2015), and as mentioned earlier in the chapter she also had to fight executives against creating a central male figure in *Gilmore Girls* (Stern, 2012).

**No room for the fat body on TV.**

While there may be some representations of fat characters present in media, there are not enough to move beyond the narrative prosthesis stereotypes and any depictions rarely discuss social or political issues. The lack of representation is obvious from the reviews we see of McCarthy’s work. For example, the point-of-view that is presented by the critic Wiser (2010) from the *Chicago Sun-Times*. First, as her examples of Chicago sitcoms tell us, fat actors have been present on television for a long time and this is not a new and emerging idea. However, she is able to easily name all of the Chicago-based shows (which is the city she claims to have the
greatest representation of obese characters on TV, such as *Roseanne* and *Biggest Loser*) showing how few there are. Second, the article points out that this presence of fat characters dominates sitcoms and not dramas that take place in Chicago, thus relegating fat actors to play mostly comedic roles. And last, only one of the actors she mentions is a woman. The examples of fat women characters in main roles are so few and far between that it is easy to forget about them.

Even networks in the post-network era remain in control of many aspects of a show as shown through Sherman-Palladino’s confession that she had to beg for McCarthy and gave in to network execs when they pushed for a male character (Luke). The difficulty of opportunities for fat actresses is what makes these few shows bare so much responsibility in their representation. If there were as many shows that featured fat actresses as there were shows about police then one such show would not matter as much. Just as we do not expect the ridiculous antics of *Reno 911* to be a full-spectrum representation of police since other programs often add other dimensions (if still not a completely reflective image of actual police work). Even when representations are nuanced, often paratexts such as reviews and commentaries about the programs highlight body shape and even arguably engage in body shaming.

The next chapter will focus specifically on the film milestone in McCarthy’s career: *Bridesmaids*. We continue to see the concern for reception of male audiences for executives on a greater scale. But we also see how her movie character Megan reflected some of her training and experiences in improv. Ultimately, the feminist messages in *Bridesmaids* are in many ways more explicit, and more complicated, than they were in her television portrayals like *Mike & Molly*. 
Chapter 4:
“Chick Flicks Don’t Have to Suck!”: The Complicated Feminist Messages in the Production, Promotion and Reception of *Bridesmaids*

Introduction

*Bridesmaids* is a complicated and conflicted text. Although some reviewers (i.e. Williams, 2011; Stevens, 2011; Dargis, 2011) called the film feminist because of its all-female cast and a premise and acting style that allowed a certain degree of raunchiness (uncharacteristic of a women-centered comedy), the text and paratexts of the film nevertheless send conflicting messages about the feminisms present. The desire to market to a male audience, a strategy suggested by Judd Apatow and Paul Feig, challenges the feminist space which spills over into the promotion of the film. Fortunately, and perhaps ironically, this same challenge allows Melissa McCarthy to develop her unique character in the film to offer the audience something rarely seen: a mix of confidence, body positivity, assertive sexual desire, and a moral center (expressed in a key moment in the film) in a fat woman. In turn, the reception of this distinctive representation, as will be shown, was both celebrated and contested.

*Bridesmaids* was a successful film comedy, released as part of the early summer movie lineup on May 13, 2011. Distributed by a major studio, Universal, the movie opened in 2,918 theaters (*Bridesmaids*, n.d.; *BoxOfficeMojo*). It reached second place on opening weekend, behind Marvel Studios *Thor* and easily recouped the movie’s budget of $32.5 million within the first week making just over $26 million the first weekend and $36 million for the first week (*Bridesmaids*, n.d.; *BoxOfficeMojo*); it became Apatow’s highest grossing movie up to that point (McClintock, 2011). The movie was also a critical success, receiving a critic score of 75 on Metacritic (*Bridesmaids*, n.d.) and 90% on Rotten Tomatoes (*Bridesmaids*, n.d.).
This chapter will explore some of the backstory of *Bridesmaids*, including a basic outline of the film’s narrative as well as its creative personnel, including the crew and its mix of CIS-men executive producer and director who combined with women scriptwriters and a mostly women-oriented cast. It will then go on to discuss how this crew dynamically impacted the outcome of the marketing campaign in various ways, including the presentation of trailers and posters, and the word-of-mouth outreach to entice people to watch the movie. Discussion of the critical reception of the movie will follow along with a return to the influence of the production team over the creative talent. Finally, there will be a discussion of the role Melissa McCarthy played not only to the discursive reception of the movie but in contributing to the feminist messages of the movie and their complications.

**Plot**

*Bridesmaids* stars Kristen Wiig as Annie, a woman in her 30s who is down on her luck. After losing her boyfriend and cake business – the latter in the Recession of 2008, the movie implies – Annie is struggling to find herself. The sad state of her life is revealed to the audience beginning with the awkward sex scene between her and crassly manipulative womanizer Ted (John Hamm). The first words in the film are:

Annie: [having sex] “I'm glad you called.”

Ted: “I’m so glad you were free.”

Annie: “I love your eyes.”

Ted: “Cup my balls.”

(Apatow, Mendel, Townsend & Feig, 2011)

When Annie’s best friend, Lillian (Maya Rudolph), gets engaged to her boyfriend, Doug, and asks Annie to be her maid of honor, Annie is afraid of losing her best friend. She acts out on
this fear as her life continues to unravel. She loses her job in a jewelry store and her apartment, has to move back in with her mother, and spoils a would-be great relationship with a police officer she met when she was pulled over.

Annie’s financial hardships and self-pity coupled with her bad decisions and inexperience make for an awful maid of honor. In the film’s most infamous scene, she spectacularly ruins dress shopping by bringing the group to a questionable Brazilian steakhouse from which everyone gets food poisoning. She gets drunk on the way to the bachelorette party and gets them all kicked off the plane. She destroys the lavish decorations at the bridal shower when she is shown up by rival bridesmaid, Helen (Rose Byrne), the well-off wife of Doug’s boss Helen not only arranged for an over-the-top wedding shower (involving puppies as party favors), but also bought tickets to take Lillian to Paris. Annie, by contrast, gave Lillian a box full of childhood memories they made together. In the end, Annie realizes that she can pull her life together, and is able to comfort Lillian when she has wedding anxiety, makes friends with Helen, and re-kindles her romantic relationship with the police officer.

Annie and Helen are joined by three other bridesmaids: Lillian’s cousin Rita (Wendi McClendon-Covey), Lillian’s coworker Becca (Ellie Kemper), and Doug’s sister Megan (Melissa McCarthy). While all play an important role in the story and the comedic entertainment, no performance is matched by McCarthy’s, as critic reviews, that will be expanded on later in this chapter, illustrate. Overall, Megan is unafraid to be herself and seems to be the only one who is confident and happy of those in the group of Bridesmaids. It is McCarthy’s character, Megan, who has the catalytic scene in the movie: she confronts Annie to stop feeling sorry for herself and begin turning her life around.
The Masculinist Backstory of *Bridesmaids*

The film was directed by Paul Feig, whom was best known at the time for his work on the cult TV show *Freaks and Geeks*, although he also directed several episodes of NBC’s *The Office*, a program featuring an obnoxious and clueless man who often would say sexist things to his female subordinates. The movie was produced by Judd Apatow, known for his involvement with movies such as *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* – as producer – and *40-Year-Old Virgin*, as director.

Prior to *Bridesmaids*, Apatow’s movies largely starred men and were labeled as “bromances,” focusing on the relationships between (often juvenile-behaving) men protagonists with women having marginal roles and often as an object of degradation (Boyle & Berridge, 2014); for a discussion of the influence of bromances in television, see Nettleton, 2016). He was associated in particular with such films as a producer; these include *Superbad, Stepbrothers, Pineapple Express,* and *Get Him to the Greek,* all featuring the relationships between two or more men (or young men in the case of *Superbad*) as the main dynamic. In fact, at one point he was called “The King of Bromance” (Walker, 2009). In the films that did feature women, some were not pleased with his representation of them. Bukszpan (2015) explained some have thought him to be “a casually misogynist relic…for depicting female characters as huffy, indignant prigs” (para. 1). Arguments can be made for the mistreatment of characters like Veronica Corningstone in *Anchorman* (Semigran, 2015) and the unrealistic representation of Trish in *40-Year-Old Virgin* -- as well as the overall role of women to be “to ratify the nerd fantasy found in each of the writer/director/producer’s grasping male losers” (Bowen, 2008, para. 2).
Most of the backlash toward his treatment of women, though, came from *Knocked Up*. “*Knocked Up* is a little more cleverly written than your average sitcom, but the same tired clichés about men and women are trotted out,” wrote one critic (Woodend, 2007, para. 4). Among the most pointed comments was from actress Katherine Heigl who played the lead role in *Knocked-Up*. In a *Vanity Fair* article, she revealed how she felt about the movie; “It was a little sexist,” she says. “It paints the women as shrews, as humorless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving guys. It exaggerated the characters, and I had a hard time with it, on some days. I’m playing such a bitch; why is she being such a killjoy? Why is this how you’re portraying women? Ninety-eight percent of the time it was an amazing experience, but it was hard for me to love the movie.” (Bennetts, 2008, para. 12)

However, others took the middle of the road defending Apatow’s viewpoint:

Apatow writes men with far more insight and acuity than he writes women. As a result, his portrait of contemporary gender relations is unbalanced: Crude and hilarious in Guyville, he seizes up when he gets to Ladyland and allows himself to take refuge in comfortable clichés. It’s not that *Knocked Up* is misogynistic—if anything, Apatow is uxorious to a fault, scrupulously respectful of chicks and the chick stuff they do. He just doesn’t seem to get exactly what that stuff is. (Stevens, 2007, para. 2)

It might be reasonable to assume that Apatow, as a cisgender man in Hollywood, would not write women characters with perfection. This is that problem with the patriarchal aspects of Hollywood that was discussed in the first chapter: men are telling most of the stories. Apatow, though, is a particularly complicated case. His success, and his approach to gender representation and gender-based humor, influenced the genre as a whole.
One characteristic of Apatow’s comedies, besides the male focus, was also their crude humor, often paired with traditional views of “settling down” and the primacy of family (The 40-Year-Old Virgin). In a profile on Apatow for The New York Times Magazine Rodrick (2007) writes, “Both of the films Apatow has directed [at that point The 40-Year-Old Virgin and Knocked Up] offer up the kind of conservative morals the Family Research Council might embrace — if the humor weren’t so filthy” (para. 4). Virgin, for example, includes comic discussions of masturbation and an uncomfortably specific sexual health clinic group session.

This mix of stereotypical sendups, family values and crude humor seemed to be attractive to certain audiences and economically lucrative. Rodrick notes the impressive performance of Apatow’s early movies: he goes on to discuss the empire the Apatow was building in his career leading up to Knocked-Up. Citing that movies that Apatow was involved with had “grossed nearly $700 million at the box office. The number moves closer to a billion once DVD proceeds are included” (para. 13).

Given this, and Rodrick notes, Apatow also may have had an influence on cinematic comedy style, especially when factoring in the movies he produced, which also focused on juvenile men acting badly toward women and engaging in gross-out humor. This began with Anchorman that focused on more self-deprecating humor than punchline or physical comedy. In another piece from The New York Times Magazine Adam Sternbergh (2011) claims this new style of comedy he calls “the jokeless comedy” and was created by both Apatow and Todd Phillips (Hangover and Old School). This kind of comedy has replaced jokes “with a different kind of lure: the appeal of spending two hours hanging out with a loose and jocular gang of goofy bros. (Also: ritual humiliation. Humiliation is a big part of it, too.)” (Sternbergh, 2011, para. 6). Sternbergh claims that this kind of comedy has taken over Hollywood and although
Bridesmaids was able to join the list, the current popular “jokeless comedy” is inherently rooted in bromance.

With the vast success of his formula it was surprising to some that he embraced a comedy focused heavily on female relationships. One critic, though, saw Bridesmaids in conversation with earlier Apatow films: “[T]hough he has vocally defended his record on female characters, it's hard not to view Bridesmaids […] as his mea culpa to the women of America. Presumably, he'd like to put to rest charges that the women in his films are underdeveloped vehicles for male transformation” (Lewit, 2011, para. 1). Though the relationships in Bridesmaids focused on women instead of men, the movie still has the marking of an Apatowian comedy, to be discussed further below.

The Cast and Crew

The script for Bridesmaids was co-written by two female, first-time screen writers Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo. Wiig was, of course, well-known especially for a long-time tenure as a comedic actor on NBC’s Saturday Night Live. Wiig met Mumolo at the famous Groundlings improv group in Los Angeles where they were both writers and actors (Dawes, 2012). They started the script after Wiig played a small role in Apatow’s Knocked Up, and he liked her so much he said that he would produce a movie for her (Dominus, 2011) if she wrote a script.

It took four years from the first table read of the script to get the movie on the screen (Beck & Jenel Smith, 2011). It was a hard process for Wiig and Mumolo who had never written a script before (Dawes, 2012) but it would pay off, earning them an Oscar nomination for their work on the script.
Many of the cast and crew knew each other prior to casting the movie. Wiig and Mumolo were not the only ones from Groundlings; Wendi McLendon-Covey, Maya Rudolph and Melissa McCarthy were all part of the improv group. Paul Feig knew Ellie Kemper from directing episodes of The Office. In addition to working with Apatow on Knocked-Up, Wiig also worked with Paul Feig on the film Unaccompanied Minors. Feig and Apatow worked together on Freaks and Geeks.

It may have been that the particular networking connections of the director and scriptwriters facilitated the casting of so many female actors, and especially broadened the casting process beyond those primarily known for films. Bridesmaid’s cast and crew realized that for the studios (patriarchal Hollywood) to consider casting women comedians on screen a “gamble” because it was not a proven formula for success. And perhaps especially innovative, and risky, was bringing women into a “bromance”-type dynamic, one that features multiple women in key roles. Wendi McLendon-Covey said in an interview about the movie, “I hope that other studios will start taking a gamble on funny girls because we’re interesting. There are a whole lot of girls out there who aren’t afraid of making themselves look stupid, who aren’t vain, who can do what the boys are doing” (Beck & Jenel Smith, 2011, para. 3).

There was significant hope, and perhaps therefore pressure, from the industry for Bridesmaids to do well because there had not been a movie even remotely like it in so long. Stewart (2011) interviewed McCarthy, “‘I don't think there's anything else like it,’ she says. ‘You're lucky if you maybe get one funny woman in a movie. To have six, I just think it could be a game-changer’” (para. 34). Bridesmaids Director Feig admits, “‘If I screw this up, it's gonna be an excuse for more people not to make movies like this for women. It drove us to work really hard’” (Stewart, 2011, para. 29).
The standout during the auditions apparently was McCarthy. As noted in the previous chapter, although McCarthy was best known for her fairly conventional character on *Gilmore Girls*, she arguably had significant experience playing more idiosyncratically gendered characters for *The Groundings*. This complicated and even contradictory history of sexual representation apparently came through in the audition process. In an interview for *GQ* Feig said, “We would always do an improv section during the auditions, and quickly we realized, ‘Holy shit, this woman is on fire.’ The mistake a lot of people make in casting is they get so tied to the words and the character they wrote that they don't see when somebody is better than what they have on the page. Melissa came in with this character that was just a force of nature” (Penn, 2011, para. 3). In another interview he said “‘It took me a few seconds to figure out that what she was doing was even funny because it was so different from what we had seen before,’ Feig said. ‘And then you're like, this is the craziest, funniest thing I've ever seen’” (Lancaster, 2015, para. 6). “[S]he came in with a version of the character that wasn’t really on the page. It was written as this nervous weirdo who’s kind of tagging along and wanting to be best friends with Annie. Then Melissa came in and laid down this powerful character who’s at first sort of ambiguous in her sexuality until you realize she’s kind of man-hungry and a force of nature” (Tobias, 2011, para. 7). Arguably, then, it took an actor of McCarthy’s performative style, eclectic skills and history of diverse representation to elevate a potentially one-note characterization on the page. The mixed and unpredictable element of McCarthy’s character will be developed more later in this chapter.
**Marketing and Promotions**

“Synergy works because hype creates meaning” (Gray, 2010a, p. 4).

For the movie to do well and possibly open doors for other women in Hollywood, people of course had to be willing to pay to see the film. As with any mainstream Hollywood film, to get people to the theaters marketing is key. As Cucco (2009) explains, because movies are an experiential commodity, no one knows the quality of the commodity before anyone can consume it. In reference to De Vany’s (2004) work on Hollywood economics, Cucco describes the wide-release strategy to accommodate the most audiences on opening weekend (more on opening weekend below), a strategy that is highly dependent upon marketing: “This distribution strategy makes spectators go to watch a movie because they are influenced by advertisements or because they want to emulate other people’s behavior” (p. 223).

Film promotions do more than just spread the word about a movie’s release. Gray (2010a) discusses the importance of such promotional film texts – “paratexts”—not only as part of the text of the film but as their own texts that serve to frame potential meanings for audiences. Gray argues that, “films and television programs often begin long before we actively seek them out, and that their textual histories are every bit as complex and requiring of study as are their audience, creative, or economic histories” (p. 47). In Gray’s (2010a) discussion on trailers he refers to John Ellis’ work, “John Ellis writes of them offering a ‘narrative image’ in which everything can be assumed to be there for a reason, and ‘can be assumed to be calculated. Hence everything tends to be pulled into the process of meaning’” (p. 48). In other words, trailers are cut to include or exclude specific information on purpose. Sometimes different trailers for the same movie are used to market to different audiences. Gray mentions this in his book and uses the example of *The Bee Movie* for which the more general audience was marketed to but also to
Jerry Seinfeld fans. A more recent example would be *Straight Outta Compton* which used different trailers to target different audiences based on race (Hooton, 2016). As we will see below, with *Bridesmaids* there appears to be different promotional strategies for different audiences.

With *Bridesmaids*, it could be that some in the industry felt that marketing was especially important given what was viewed as a potential gender breakthrough if the movie was successful. As will be discussed in a later section, there was a call for people in the industry to go see the movie to help boost the important opening weekend and overall box office numbers, which may have further placed pressure on an effective marketing campaign. And, in fact, the film’s publicity campaign won a marketing award in Australia: “The success of the campaign was confirmed not only by box office success, but also viral and word-of-mouth activity, campaign awareness levels, and social media chatter” (Bulpeck, 2011, para. 3). Part of this acclaim, and apparent effectiveness, may have resulted from its combination of a bi-modal audience-targeting strategy that also explicitly highlighted, and even helped to constitute, the hybrid genre (bromance and chick flick) of the film.

**The trailers.**

There seemed to be a divide in the approach to marketing between different trailers and posters to depict the appeal of both more masculine and feminine traits of the movie and the potential audiences. The first *Bridesmaids* trailer, released in early 2011 (‘Bridesmaids’ trailer, 2011), reinforced the gross-out and action comedy parts of the movie, much like producer Apatow’s previous buddy comedies, or bromances. One review of the trailer labeled it as “a fair shade bluer than your average female-centric comedy” (‘Bridesmaids’ trailer, 2011). The first trailer starts out with upbeat music and a scene of Lillian asking Annie to be her maid of honor.
It might seem like any other wedding movie at first if it were not for Annie’s unsure, nervous laughter at the prospect of Lillian’s wedding, and her casual chugging of wine directly from the bottle. We then are told in a large graphic that the movie is “From the Producer of ‘Knocked-Up’ and ‘The 40-Year-Old Virgin’” which signals to the audience that this film will not easily fit into the genre of a wedding movie and signals an unusual (for the time) gendered hybridity. Of the three trailers discussed here, this is the only one to mention The 40-Year-Old Virgin, arguably the most masculinist of the films listed by the trailers (ones discussed below also list Superbad). Also signaling this is the main background music in the trailer, AC/DC’s “Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap” – this is the song that plays during the tennis match in the movie – and kicks in during the trailer when Lillian is about to introduce Annie to the rest of her bridal party. We get a brief introduction to each character. Annie drives up to this beautiful house for an engagement party in her clunker of a car that the valet has trouble getting to start. We meet Lillian’s cousin Rita, the tired housewife; Lillian’s co-worker Becca, who starts to cry at the thought of being alone when she learns Annie is single; Lillian’s future sister-in-law Megan, who boldly announces that she is “going to climb him like a tree” after she learns a man at the party is single; and the perfect Helen, who insults Annie’s outfit by asking her if she came from work.

The lyrics of “Dirty Deeds” begin when the women are all together about to enter the Brazilian Steak House. Here they discuss their drastically different ideas for the bachelorette party and decide on Vegas. This segues into the flight to Vegas where Helen gives Annie pills to relax her because she is a nervous flyer. She then becomes too relaxed and drunk and causes a scene. The intense guitar riff for “Dirty Deeds” plays in the background. The music and lyrics pick back up again for a montage which includes the girls walking down the plane runway, a spinning car in front of a police car, fireworks, puppies with bowties, a couch belly flop, a tennis
ball to the chest, a radar gun, a laser-light-show dance, a nose boop, throwing liquid chocolate, a dance on the side of the street, the bride falling on her face, a date rejection. The trailer ends with an especially Apatowian note (and McCarthy-esque focus), as Megan belches loudly in a bridal salon where the girls go to try on dresses as she says, “I want to apologize. I’m not even confident of which end that came out of” (Bridesmaids, n.d.; Apple Movie Trailers). This trailer speaks to Apatow’s audience and the audience that enjoyed movies like The Hangover, and promises crazy, and crass, antics of the bridesmaids in the events that led up to the wedding.

However, the second trailer seems as though it was made for a completely different audience. It focuses more on Annie and her relationship with Lillian rather than a montage of crazy events. The background music is more upbeat and lighter, featuring Macy Gray’s “Kissed it” and P!nk’s “Raise Your Glass” which are not as hard rocking, or as masculinist, as AC/DC. The pace of this trailer is more leisurely as we are introduced to the characters. Annie and Lillian are in a café eating breakfast and Annie is talking about the awful situation she is in in her life, her debt, and her awful roommate. Then we hear that Lillian gets engaged and she asks Annie to be her maid of honor. Then there is a voiceover of Lillian saying “You’ll love the rest of the bridesmaids” and we see a couple shots of them smiling and Helen saying “I’d be more than happy to handle the bachelorette and the shower” but Annie says “I think I can handle it.” The next shot shows them heading into a restaurant in a sketchy part of town. And Helen points out “Oh look you can get a check cashed next-door.” Then, after eating, we see the dress fitting scenes where everyone gets food poisoning from the sketchy restaurant, with Annie trying to deny that the restaurant she picked made everyone sick. Then we hear her express concern over losing Lillian and her own life getting further out of control as she gets pulled over by a cop. We see the group cheering as they discuss the bachelorette party over the phone. This cuts to the
group moving onto the plane together and we witness Annie’s drunken episode. As with the first trailer, it still shows the tire squealing, the women walking down the plane runway, but it also shows Annie and Lillian in the café again saying that they will marry each other while they both have food stuck to their teeth. It shows a deleted scene about a date that Annie was set up on where the guy’s son eats one of her birth control pills and it ends with all the bridesmaids dancing. With the focus on Annie and Lillian’s relationship the trailer points to a more traditional romantic comedy, or what the marketing refers to as a “chick flick.” It is also telling that, of the three trailers, this is the only one that does not give Megan the last (crass) word, but instead ends with Annie and Lillian.

The restricted “red band” trailer (TrailerTeasersClips, 2011) approaches the movie a different way – it begins not as hard hitting as the first trailer with the rock music. With songs like Alexandra Burke’s “Broken Heels” and P!nk’s “Raise Your Glass” it conveys upbeat excitement but not classic rock. The wedding events are the highlight of this trailer early on. It starts with Lillian asking Annie if she will be the maid of honor. This is followed by Alexandra Burke’s “Broken Heels” as music to the women walking down the runway to the plane. We see an aerial shot with a title card that says, “From the producer of Knocked Up and Superbad.” We briefly meet some of the bridesmaids with a voiceover from Lillian, but the characters’ humorous qualities are not displayed like they are in the first trailer. We can guess from Helen being told that she is pretty, that she is, well, pretty. From Megan saying “Blue and blue we’re like twins” to Annie at the engagement party illustrates that she is socially awkward, but no line, at this point, about her sexual desire. Then we meet Becca who tells Rita, “I can’t wait to be married and to have kids.” And Rita responds, “The other night my youngest said he wants to order pizza. I said no we’re not ordering pizza. He goes, mom why don’t you go fuck yourself.
He’s nine.” Then there is a title card that says “The Parties” where they are talking about the bachelorette, this is similar to the other trailers. But the next clips that are paired with the title card “The Dresses” show more of the dress scene. We see some of the women starting to get sick and gag, belch and pass gas. The next title card says, “The Hook-Ups” and shows Annie having awkward sex with her hook-up buddy Ted. A title card follows that says, “The Speeches” and shows speeches from the engagement party, this is where we start to see the rivalry between Annie and Helen in the movie. The final title card, “The Memories,” is shown with P!nk’s song and we see a montage similar to the first trailer with the women dancing, the car spinning, Annie drunk on the plane, the aggressive tennis match, and Megan flopping on the couch. But the last 20 seconds of the trailer amps up the raunch, and it does it by featuring Megan. We hear a quote from Megan that does not end up in the theatrical cut for the movie: “We’re gonna get with all these men, this is gonna be a damn fuck-a-thon.” The trailer then features Megan interacting with Air Marshal John where she blocks him from going back to the seat and she says, “You want to get back in the restroom and not rest.” Then she puts her leg up and slaps it saying, “You feel that steam heat coming? That’s from my undercarriage.” After a shot of Annie and Lillian laughing in the café and the title of the movie “Bridesmaids,” we see Megan and Air Marshal John again where Megan winks at him and when he asks her to stop, she says, “I’ll stop winking” and then winks again.

The restricted trailer shows some of the more explicit scenes that could not be in the general audience trailers, and in fact some of the more explicit dialogue (“fuck-a-thon”) that was not in the initial theatrical release at all. That this explicit trailer features more of McCarthy’s Megan, and the fact that ends with her sexuality, is telling about the role of the character in the film, and her potential cinematically innovative nature, especially her sexual assertiveness.
The posters.

There are two different styles of poster for Bridesmaids, one has a brick background and the other a white background (see Figures 4-1 and 4-2; all the posters discussed here can all be found on the IMDB (Bridesmaids, n.d.) page for the movie).

Figure 4-1: Brick background

Figure 4-2: White background

Both poster versions have almost identical information. Both read, “From the producer of Knocked Up and The 40-Year-Old Virgin” on the top of the poster in small print (the brick poster also lists Superbad). Both have “Bridesmaids” across the top in bold letters. They each have the same photo featuring the bride Lillian in a white wedding gown and her five bridesmaids in differently styled bright pink, short dresses. They all have a serious and tough look on their faces and lean on each other in a masculine style. Each poster says, “Save the Date” on the bottom, though one has the month of release while the other does not. The major difference between the
two posters above is the background (and corresponding colors of white or pink text). The brick background gives the poster a tougher edge, presumably going for a more urban, rock ‘n’ roll look. The other poster is a more traditional color appeal to the romantic comedy genre. Nevertheless, with both posters, the stance, gaze, and facial expressions of the women characters in both posters signals a very atypical pose and gaze compared to what usually characterizes women-targeted ads (Goffman, 1979).

![Bride Wars poster](image1)

![27 Dresses poster](image2)

Figure 4-3: *Bride Wars* poster  
Figure 4-4: *27 Dresses* poster

The use of pink in the posters was claimed to be a well-considered choice, as indicated below. It also is a common color for posters for romance movies featuring a man and a woman. Other examples of movies that have a version of their poster in pink and white would be *Dirty Dancing, Pretty Woman, Four Weddings and a Funeral, 10 Things I Hate About You, Miss Congeniality, The Wedding Planner, Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason, He’s Just Not That Into*
You and two wedding movies that came out within the few years before Bridesmaids, 27 Dresses and Bride Wars (see Figures 4-3 and 4-4; (Bride Wars, n.d.; 27 Dresses, n.d.). The costume designer for Bridesmaids, Leesa Evans, said that in choosing the bridesmaids costumes, they wanted to reference, and send up, the traditional and clichéd pink dress for the poster (Crook, 2012). In another interview she noted, “We did two distinctly different sets of dresses, one set for the film and one for the poster. For the film, the wedding gown and bridesmaids’ dresses were meant to have been selected by ‘Helen’… For the poster we were just having a bit of fun with more of a stereotype wedding contrasted with the edgy ... poses from all the ladies” (Magsaysay, 2011, para. 8). In terms of the style of the dresses, some of them are form-fitting, or short-skirted, or with low-cut fronts (or all three), signaling a daring style for the typical bridesmaid dresses. Although a photo of a bride with bridesmaids in white and pink seem on the surface to be conventional, the color choices of the poster were chosen deliberately to poke fun of the stereotypes and combined with the cut of the dresses, the facial expressions and poses, and (in one poster) a brick background to again signal something unexpected in terms of the movie’s genre.

A second set of posters feature quotes from reviews but are similar to the originals otherwise. The poster with the brick background features the quote, “Chick flicks don’t have to suck!” (see Figure 4-5) in a bold hot-pink with “Bridesmaids sets the bar for any R-rated comedy this year,” below that. Another quote reads, “These are smart, funny women. They are each given room to create indelible characters.” And a third says, “Bridesmaids reaches levels of hilarity and heart that movies like these haven’t reached in over a decade.” The poster with the white background features the quote, “Better than The Hangover,” (see Figure 4-6) referencing the especially crass-humor, male-dominated comedy hit of 2009. The second quote is, “Hilarious
and heartfelt… the must see comedy of the summer.” Below the quotes appear star ratings, two five-star and one four-star rating.

The choice to feature the quote, “Chick flicks don’t have to suck!” speaks to an audience that would believe that women’s films, or “chick flicks” would not be worth the time to consume. Though Wiig said they actively tried to avoid creating a chick flick (Vellante, 2011) some of the marketing material seemed to assume that some audiences may perceive that a film with primarily female comedians about a wedding as just that. The use of words like “suck,” emphasize its R rating, and referencing The Hangover, the posters position the movie as more in the raunchy bromance genre than in the typical rom-com wedding flick. Feedback from test screenings suggest this approach may have been necessary:
@zoeythegreat: “The movie was super funny!” … “Oh, and don’t let the name
‘Bridesmaids’ fool you — Kristen Wiig was at her best and it wasn’t sappy or too girly.”
(Sciretta, 2010, para. 5)

and

CrowbarMark from a November 11th New Jersey Test Screening: Great film. Really funny. Thought it was going to lean more towards the chick flick genre but it definitely appeals to males as well. Everyone’s really funny especially Melissa McCarthy. I heard people saying that Apatow was there but I did not see him. Not surprising as most of the filmmakers have been showing up at the Paramus screenings lately. …I didn’t mind the length of the film. Every scene had something hilarious or engaging about it. Knocked Up was 131 minutes or so wasn’t it? Melissa McCarthy was awesome but Kristen Wiig is so appropriate as the lead. So many funny women in this. However, I didn’t care much for the *beep* scene. It seemed a little too easy. (Sciretta, 2010, para. 7)

Both quotes speak to the genre bending nature of the film: the bromance with a veneer of chick flick. “Don’t let the name… fool you” and “Thought it was going to lean more towards the chick flick genre” both confirm what may have been an anxiety of the marketing dilemma of the film, the multi-audience trailers, and the mixing of iconography in the posters. The second quote also signals the breakout nature of McCarthy’s performance.

Additionally, there are the individual posters for each of the bridesmaids and the bride, each one labeling character type and/or narrative role. Lillian is “the blushing bride,” Becca is “the innocent one,” Rita is “a real mother,” Helen is “little miss perfect,” Annie is the “maid of dishonor,” and Megan, perhaps signaling that her character is tougher to pigeonhole, is “the wild card” (Figure 4-7; Bridesmaids, n.d.; IMDB).
The “wild card” and the clips of her in the trailers strongly hint that Megan will be key to “crassifying” the rom-com elements of *Bridesmaids*. In addition, the use of “wild” can also be linked to Mobley’s (2014) description of the fat actress and cultural stereotypes of fat people. These stereotypes portray these fat women “as out of control, sexually voracious, verbally outspoken, psychologically damaged, and unable to contain themselves emotionally or physically” (p. 124). Although this poster, and the trailer, certainly play up these stereotypes with the Megan character, these paratexts simplify the characters’ role in the movie’s narrative – a role that complicates the character – as will be discussed later in this chapter.
**Attendance as Social Responsibility**

As the producer Robert Evans put it, a film “is like a parachute jump; if it doesn’t open, you are dead” (De Vany, 2004, p. 28).

After a movie is released in theaters, the first indication of economic success is the opening weekend box office numbers. Cucco (2009) argues that the opening weekend for the Hollywood blockbuster is important for several reasons. The first is, according to Cucco’s analysis of box office numbers, that the revenue usually drops by an average of 40% in the second week. Returning to the earlier discussion of the importance of advertising to get people to the theaters, particularly on opening weekend, it is recalled that movies are an experiential commodity. Certainly, advanced published or online reviews are available before a movie opens – the potential impact of which can be somewhat mitigated by a film’s marketing – but word of mouth among peers is not. The strategy used to take advantage of this lack of evaluative information is to release the movie as wide as possible to get as many people in the theater opening weekend as there can be. It is also ideal to build opening weekend numbers because there may be those potential viewers who ignore information from public reviews, and instead use box office numbers as a tool to determine which movies to see (Cucco, 2009).

Knowing the significance opening weekend would play for *Bridesmaids*, women in the industry, even those who had no connection to the women in the film, networked to make sure they got as many people as possible to go to opening weekend, including Glennis McMurray, founder of theGLOC.net (Gorgeous Ladies of Comedy) (Patalano, 2011, para. 10). One article listed influential women in the industry who viewed the film as especially key: “Actress and writer Mindy Kahling (‘The Office’) asked her male fans on Twitter to take their girlfriends. Screenwriter Ellen Rapoport emailed her buddies urging them to get out to the movie’s debut.
Writer-producer Kirsten Smith invited friends to a showing at the Arc Light Cinema in Hollywood” (Sperling, 2011, para. 2). Rebecca Traistor (2011a) of Salon called it a “social responsibility” to go see Bridesmaids to make sure it did well, and that Hollywood continues to make comedies with women in them.

The idea in attending Bridesmaids as a social responsibility would be to send Hollywood a message, through box office receipts, that there is an audience for movies that are for and about women. One such call to action originated from Kirsten Smith, a producer and the screenwriter (Legally Blonde and The House Bunny), who was quoted saying:

I know you get a lot of emails about donating money to worthy causes, but I’d like to draw your attention to one in particular: The Chick Flick, …It is currently on the Motion Picture Association of America’s list of Endangered Species and it faces extinction if we don’t act now. (Traister, 2011, para. 3)

Traistor’s acquaintance who forwarded also added her own message to that email chain:

I encourage each and every one of you to see ‘Bridesmaids' this weekend, not just because it's hilarious, but because we MUST show Hollywood that women DO want movies that are not vapid romcoms or something about shopping ... A lot is riding on this movie. So please bring your girlfriends, boyfriends, husbands, and neighbors out in droves. And please, if you feel moved, encourage others to do so, as well. (Traister, 2011a, para. 5)

In addition to the low number of female-driven films, comedies in particular, part of the response in the call to action was backed by the reaction to a piece in The New Yorker about Anna Farris where the author called out Hollywood on the sexist practices saying, “Studio executives believe that male moviegoers would rather prep for a colonoscopy than experience a
woman’s point of view, particularly if that woman drinks or swears or has a great job or an orgasm” (Friend, 2011, para. 4). This is in reference to the skepticism surrounding Farris’ movie *What’s Your Number?* that was coming out in fall 2011.

According to Traistor, calls to see the movie were also expressed by producer Lynda Obst (*Sleepless in Seattle, How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*) who wrote, “Seriously, we have to see this movie this weekend. If you are a woman, like women, or simply don’t hate them… if we don’t go, they won’t build them anymore” (para. 13). And also Farrin Jacobs, an editorial director at HarperCollins Children’s books, who said, “Seeing the movie and thinking about the Anna Faris article, and knowing that if this movie didn’t do well, that would be it for at least the next couple of years for the life of female comedies, I’m trying to get everybody I know to see it,” said Jacobs. “Also, it's funny” (para. 14).

Such calls focused on the women-centered or “chick-flick” nature of the film and the cross-over potential of such genre of male audiences. This contrasts with the marketing campaign, which emphasized (at least in some materials) the movie’s “bromance” comic stylings. McCarthy’s crass sexual references and grotesque body emissions that were featured prominently in trailers targeting a male audience.

These calls to action are certainly political acts, but they are complicated by the fact that a movie is a commodity, though such calls are arguably beyond simply buying a t-shirt to show that one is a feminist. In the above reactions and public statements, there is an awareness of the inequality in Hollywood and a hope that support for the movie will be a catalyst for change. For this reason, it is more than commodity feminism, it is popular feminism in the way that Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) described. The chapter will return to issues of feminism below.
Critical Reception: Focus on the Ensemble and Gross Out

As noted earlier, the film was largely very well received by critics, being specifically praised for its all-female comedian lineup. Several reviewers again noted the genre-bending nature of the film, as a “divorce from chick-flick norms,” as a reviewer for NPR put it (Taylor, 2011). Another reviewer says, “the film exudes a certain tension between laser-accurate, universal girl moments and over-the-top Apatowian comedy” (Angelo, 2011, p. 26T). Many reviewers also explicitly claimed it was a feminist movie, and one that would appeal to men as well, and they root such labels in the hybrid mix of rom-com and bromance. For example, “It's a feminist laugh-o-rama that'll have women high-fiving one another and won't scare off male audiences. The wedding-film genre will never be the same again” (Bobbit, 2011, para. 8). One wrote, “At long last, we have a smart comedy with dumb jokes—a giddy feminist manifesto that responds to the perennially circulated head-scratcher ‘Can women really be funny?’ with a whoopee-cushion fart” (Stevens, 2011, para. 1). In the presence of these emerging feminist visibilities (Gill, 2016), we see the successful Bridesmaids movie become a catalyst for the discussion of feminism in Hollywood, as something that “won’t scare off male audiences” but still leads to a politically charged “high-five” and is a “manifesto.” However, the conversation focuses on the apparent novelty of all female comedy lineups using the gender equality trope and claim that women can do anything men can, such as gross-out humor and comedy.

Some argued beyond genre, that the story in Bridesmaids goes deeper than the toilet humor present in a few scenes. It explores topics that are not present in typical wedding comedies or chick ficks. As Gaul (2011) says in his review, it “exposes the pressure on young women to stop being single and get married, to put on a needlessly expensive wedding, and to believe that having a picture-perfect life is possible” (para. 3). The movie also navigates a
complicated relationship between friends. For example, the scene where Annie finds Lillian in her old apartment, anxious about the wedding, is both a key moment in the film’s narrative and a quiet celebration of women supporting each other. The scene of Annie making a cupcake alone in her apartment is a contemplative moment about agency and meaning not found in many mainstream Hollywood films. These thoughts will be revisited below in the discussion of feminism in the movie.

While some aspects of the movie were celebrated, the inclusion of gross-out humor was not as well received by all and, as discussed below, the inclusion of what could be interpreted as a masculinist element was a departure from the original script. One reviewer even called the crassness, “unnecessary,” “an afterthought: a transparent attempt to appeal to the lowest-common denominator, and to men” (Lemire, 2011, para. 4). Others felt that it did not complement the women’s characters, and that perhaps the scatological humor plays as especially nasty when applied to women characters:

Frankly, the only time Bridesmaids loses its footing is when it acts like The Hangover in drag. Guys and gross make a better fit. Who needs to see bridesmaids puking up lunch and shitting their pants? (Travers, 2011, para. 2)

And,

… the unholy vision of a bride-to-be squatting on a street curb while food poisoning expresses itself beneath the folds of a puffy white Parisian dress - why, that's a new one. (Biancolli, 2011, para. 3)

Also, one that in particular highlighted not just McCarthy, but her body type and the gross-out humor that seemingly is semiotically associated with it:
Comedy of humiliation is one thing; a fat lady shitting in a sink is another. (Longworth, 2011, para. 4)

Clearly, though, the mixing of genres – whether celebrated as equalitarian or denigrated as male-audience pandering – was a theme in many reviews, as it was in the marketing materials. This hybrid nature will be grounded in two final examinations: the mix of, and conflict among, the creative personnel; and the role of McCarthy’s Megan in *Bridesmaids*, including some of the character’s and film’s aspects that could be considered feminist.

**The Clash of the Producer and the Writer**

As mentioned previously, it took a long time to get the project made and to receive the financing and approval for the movie. Getting Judd Apatow, a producer who had previous success in the genre with male-centered comedies, was key to getting a green light for the movie and to delivering a sizable audience. After *Bridesmaids* Apatow was hailed by some as a feminist (Rapkin, 2011), though Apatow claims he does not see gendered comedy himself, that it is just about whether something is funny or not (THR Staff, 2011).

However funny the movie may be, as noted previously there was a concern early in the film’s development that the male audience may not be attracted to it. Paul Feig expressed in an interview, “It's hard to get female-based projects off the ground… the minute we called this *Bridesmaids*, we said, clearly this is not going to be a destination movie for men” (Yabroff, 2011, para. 3). As shown by previous box office results and reiterated by Yabroff (2011), women will attend gross-out bromance comedies (like those that Apatow worked on in the past). However, men are not as willing to attend the chick-flick-themed wedding comedies that usually only pull in about half as much in profits as the male counterpart (Chozick, 2011). For example, *The Hangover*, a male-centered wedding comedy, grossed $467 million dollars worldwide. *Bride
* Wars only grossed $114 million worldwide. Knowing this, Apatow and Feig tested their male audience extensively to make sure that this female version of gross out was as entertaining.

Apatow claimed the male market could be reached if advertised correctly. As explained in one interview:

[Apatow] believed it was important to place commercials during not just women-friendly shows but also male-targeted programming like the NBA playoffs. "It is a tricky marketing challenge to tell men that this movie is just as much for them," he said. "They have to find that out just by hearing that it's funny. As soon as they know it's funny, they don't care. They're ready to go." (THR Staff, 2011, para. 5)

Undoubtedly, Apatow had an influence on the *Bridesmaids* script and suggested much of the gross-out, raunchy humor that pushed reviewers to question the necessity (Dominus, 2011). Rapkin (2011) says the bridal shop “scene was interpreted by many as a blatant olive branch offered directly to Everydude: a crass excuse to get anyone with a Y chromosome to buy tickets to something called *Bridesmaids*” (para. 6). Another observer wrote,

If Apatow was going to make a movie with Kristen Wiig, he made it clear, he wanted to capture the outrageousness that had made her a television star. “No, we’re not going to sit and talk,” Mumolo remembers Apatow saying about one scene of sedentary dialogue. The two female writers were occasionally wary about some suggestions made by Apatow and Feig — like a scene in which the bride and most of the bridesmaids come down with violent food poisoning. What were Wiig’s reservations? She shot a look. “Just that it was a huge scene about women vomiting” and defecating in their pants. “We wrote the script, and we didn’t really have anything in that tone, and it seemed to be such a big statement,” she says. Apatow assured her that if it did not
work, they could cut it. Wiig and Mumolo — a writing partner from her Groundlings
days — ultimately agreed that it did work. (Dominus, 2011, para. 20)

Reviewers picked up on this. One noted, “The screenwriters told my colleague Sara
Stewart this was producer Apatow’s brainstorm — he seems to believe that women among
themselves behave every bit as grossly as men. Maybe it’s the romantic in me, but I’d sure like
to think this is not really true” (Lumenick, 2011, para. 9). Another wrote, “We want to see girls
behaving badly — though preferably without the vomit and poop scenes that Apatow reportedly
shoehorned in for fear of losing the guy demographic. That stuff played just fine in Knocked Up,
but it’s not needed here” (Taylor, 2011, para. 7). Here, one could argue that there are gendered
assumptions in the review, essentialist views of how men behave and how women behave.
Nevertheless, potentially a key character in the tightrope between chick-flick and gross-out was
McCarthy — although her character also ended up complicating stereotypes of the over-sexed,
out-of-control fat body.

**Reading McCarthy in Bridesmaids**

“If Bridesmaids does crossover to male audiences, part of its success will be due to Melissa
McCarthy as the blunt, libidinous, completely un-self-aware bridesmaid Megan.” (Yabroff,
2011, para. 10)

“Honestly, I've always felt that Melissa is hands down one of the most incredible performers
I've ever worked with. I've heard people over the years say, ‘I really like her on “Gilmore
Girls.”’ In the back of my mind, I was always saying, ‘Just you wait.’ When we were
making *Bridesmaids*, I secretly delighted in knowing that vintage McCarthy was about to be
unleashed upon the world, and I was excited to tell the world, ‘Hold on to your ass.’” – Maya
Rudolph (Penn, 2011, para. 16)
Prior to learning how *Bridesmaids* would affect the industry and impact future women’s films, it was clear from the reviews that McCarthy stole the movie. She received much praise. For example, “[T]he biggest and ballsiest scene-stealer of all is Melissa McCarthy as Lillian's future sister-in-law…McCarthy is fearless and commanding in the role: Just try watching anyone else when she's on screen” (Lemire, 2011, para. 11). And, “Mike & Molly/Gilmore Girls’ Melissa McCarthy might be the female Chris Farley with perfect comic timing mixed with physical humor” (Maker, 2011, para. 5).

In comparison to more misogynist portrayals of fat women in TV and film, McCarthy is a feminist figure. Unlike many actresses who have gained weight and then lost it, McCarthy owns her body and does not change despite criticism. In fact, she has addressed negative comments about her appearance directly when asked in interviews and handles it well, sometimes telling off the reporter that called her grotesque saying that she did not think that he should be there writing about movies (Brown, 2019).

McCarthy’s character is both popular feminist and postfeminist in the representation. Her character is popular feminist because she is successful and confident despite her social stigma of being fat. McCarthy’s choice in how to play Megan was pivotal in her role and the movie (Gilbey, 2015); her role was opposite that on *Mike & Molly* where weight was the focus.

Megan’s cheerful obliviousness to how she is received by those around her is a lesson not merely in comic abandon, but in the euphoria of freeing oneself from the judgment of others. From her first scene, where she scans an engagement party ravenously for available men, rejection simply never occurs to her. To its credit, the film never laughs at her: the joke is in her confidence and how it overpowers those around her. If Megan wants something, she puts in old-fashioned elbow-grease to get it. (Gilbey, 2015, para. 5)
This is especially important as a step forward given the historically uneven distribution of fat jokes directed toward women (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000 and Fouts & Vaughan, 2002).

We may consider certain behaviors of McCarthy’s character, Megan, postfeminist because of the strong sexuality presented. According to McRobbie (2004b; 2007), strong sexuality is a popular trait of postfeminism. And, the way it is described in a review uses the postfeminist descriptive term “female empowerment.” “When McCarthy lifts up her leg and starts caressing her calf in an attempt to recruit an air marshal into the Mile High Club, it plays like a triumphant, albeit really odd, moment for summer-movie female empowerment. (That air marshal, by the way, is played by McCarthy's husband, actor Ben Falcone)” (Chaney, 2011, para. 10).

And what is revolutionary about Megan is that she gets that guy. She is not standing by watching someone else get the man or picking a man that others have already torn apart as Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) discuss in Giovanelli and Ostertag (2009) analysis.

The physical comedy is played well, and Megan’s lines are great such as, “I’m glad he’s single cause I’m gonna climb that like a tree” or “I want to apologize, I’m not even sure which end that came out of.” But it is her character development and how she plays true to who Megan is that sets her apart. We see this best in the scene where Megan gives Annie a pep talk, arguably the key scene in the movie’s narrative. She goes to visit Annie, because Annie was not answering her phone and demands to be recognized as Annie’s best friend. She maintains the physical comedy, tackling Annie and hitting her, but does it with a purpose (“I'm life, Annie, and I'm biting you in the ass!” she says as she literally does so). Through this talk we learn that Megan’s success was self-made and she admitted that kids gave her a hard time in high school, but it just pushed her to work harder. And now she is very successful in her job for the government. She
mentions that she owns six houses. But it is this role – a role that pushes Annie toward self-actualization, something normally reserved for the best friend or even a boyfriend – that is unusual. The scene is funny, but it also offers Megan a humanity and agency that is not often offered to fat women comic characters. Complications of the feminist message.

But, still, even with her success in *Bridesmaids* reviews are consistent with reviews of her earlier work, McCarthy faced the use of descriptive terms in reviews that focused on her size, some overly demeaning. For example, Moore (2011) wrote that McCarthy has “the portly Zach Galifianakis role” and plays “a gonzo big girl” (para. 10). Bang (2011) called McCarthy “a plus-size force of nature who always – but always – speaks her mind, and behaves as if she possesses a supermodel’s body and sex appeal” (para. 11). Certainly, in some scenes McCarthy’s size, as discussed below, perhaps added to stereotypes of the corrupted fat body, but the character’s body type was also not something other characters joked about or even commented on. However, several reviewers did comment on her size, because it is not the norm in Hollywood. In an interview with *People*, in response to being called “America’s plus-size sweetheart,” McCarthy said, “It’s like I’m managing to achieve all this success in spite of my affliction … Would you ever put that in the headline for a male star?” (Coyne, 2014, para. 7).

Reviewers frequently compared McCarthy’s style to male comedians. One reviewer wrote about McCarthy saying she had to “embrace physical comedy in a way that is routine for the Jack Blacks and Kevin Jameses of the world but far rarer for a woman” (Chaney, 2011, para. 9). McCarthy’s use of this type of humor, whether she intends it to be or not, is discussed as a feminist aspect, an effort to make Hollywood more egalitarian. The same can be said of the praise given to the gross-out scenes in the movie; a style not normally found in women-centered
comedies. But this is relative to other mainstream Hollywood films. Compared to the other comedies available, *Bridesmaids* is, again, feminist by comparison.

Because of the rarity of this comedy being performed by female comedians perhaps viewers associate McCarthy’s performance of this bodily humor as masculine. In addition to not conforming to feminine ideals, this could possibly detract from the value of a woman playing this role if it is just seen as a woman playing a man’s part. The rarity of this representation draws attention to these characteristics even if it is not directly intended.

In an article for *Dame* Laura Bogart (2014) writes in response to *Bridesmaids* and expresses concern over the plane scene where Megan corners the air marshal as he is coming out of the bathroom:

> that fat women’s bodies are inherently disgusting, especially when displaying sexual desire, and courting desire in turn. Visibility alone was no longer enough. I’m left longing for stories about fat women that don’t tumble off the wrong side of that thin tightrope between laughing with and laughing at. (para. 5)

The audience is meant to laugh at that moment where McCarthy’s character is strongly sexual. For some it may be perceived as funny because she is not a supermodel. Her character is representing the stereotype of the “sexually voracious” attitude (Mobley, 2014, p. 124).

Therefore, it and many of the other physical comedy moves that McCarthy does throughout the movie (i.e. plopping on the couch, claiming she never bloats, belching, associated sex with food in one of the last scenes) are indirectly fat jokes and reinforce stereotypes of the fat body as comically disgusting, as Bogart claims. This argument is bolstered, perhaps, more by some of the promotions than in the movie itself. The first trailer ends with Megan belching in the wedding-
dress scene: “I want to apologize: I’m not confident of which end that came out of,” are the final words of the trailer.

In addition to the plane scene, the audience laughed at other moments in *Bridesmaids* like when Megan said she was “going to climb that like a tree” about a man at the engagement party, but Bogart’s (2014) reaction was to purse her mouth. This thin line between laughing at and with someone that it normally ridiculed in our cultural is hard to overcome. It is reminiscent of the incident that Dave Chappelle, an African-American comedian, had when he reacted to a white man in his audience laughing too hard at the Pixies skit on his show, where he played a pixie in black face that tried to convince black people to act in stereotypical ways (Barshad, 2016). It made him wonder “if the new season of his show had gone from sending up stereotypes to merely reinforcing them” (Farley, 2005, para. 4).

**Conclusion**

“You’re your problem Annie and you’re also your solution.” – Megan in *Bridesmaids*

*Bridesmaids* is criticized for its imperfect representation of women, but the true problem was not that the representation was not perfect, it was that it was the only one that represented women in a comedy that was not also profoundly in a rom-com genre. Overall, the movie is feminist by comparison to what was available in patriarchal Hollywood. This goes hand-in-hand with the issue of McCarthy’s representations on TV discussed in the previous chapter. With so few representations of fat women in media, women in comedy, and women in Hollywood, there is too much pressure placed on the few examples that do exist. *Bridesmaids* was just one movie and cannot be solely responsible for changing the industry.

As Gill (2016) explains, sexism is often framed in the media as an individual issue rather than a structural or systemic one “let alone as connected to other inequalities or located in the
broader context of neoliberal capitalism” (p. 615). We can adapt this to this situation, for example the literature focuses on the lack of female comedies or female comedians on screen. The majority of the time it fails to see that it is an industry problem behind the camera as well.

It is clear in the reviews that part of the success of Bridesmaids was due to the complexity of the script, its genre-bending nature, and that it was a script written by women and featuring a women ensemble. However, the audience testing and strong suggestions by Apatow to include the gross-out scenes despite protests from Wiig, one of the creative women behind the project, illustrate the heavy presence of male influence in the industry. Some of the marketing especially highlighted these aspects and used McCarthy as a way to do it.

The fact that Bridesmaids was discussed through a feminist perspective is positive, but it also matches the climate of visibility that Gill discusses. Just as the feminism of the film is relative to other women-centered films, McCarthy’s representation was, and is, more feminist when compared to the way white, fat women are portrayed in Hollywood. McCarthy’s character was complex, and added elements normally not found in typical Hollywood women characters. And, though some think McCarthy’s character was empowered because she does not hold back in her performance (Kindinger, 2016), this alone is not enough, as arguably the sexuality of the character could be read polysemically, to celebrate as unique, to offer as evidence of postfeminist sexual empowerment, or to ridicule a body type. Regardless of any obstacles, there needs to be a continuation to push further and take action not just for one movie but for the industry, that results in not only to empower women, but to give women power. The next chapter will explore the initial impact on the Hollywood industry due to Bridesmaids, or “The Bridesmaids effect.” It will also focus on McCarthy career and contributions to the comedy genre and the representations of fat women on screen.
Chapter 5:
A Woman Can’t Do That! A Tale of Sexism at the Movies Starring Melissa McCarthy and Directed by Paul Feig

Introduction

In regard to Bridesmaids’ influence in Hollywood, producer Lynda Obst said, “It had the biggest impact of any women’s movie that I can remember in my career” (Traistor, 2011b, para. 5). Though Bridesmaids had little-known stars, it was very successful with male and female audiences, domestically and internationally. It paved the way for other movies led by female casts, not only for comedy, but other areas as well. Producer David T. Friendly (producer of Little Miss Sunshine) claims in his Hollywood Reporter piece (2011) that the opening weekend box office success from Bridesmaids had studios wondering, “Where’s our Bridesmaids?!” (para. 1) and acknowledges the impact it has had on his developing relationships for projects.

The two female-centered comedies to come to light soon after Bridesmaids were Bachelorette and Pitch Perfect. Bachelorette had a hard time living up to the standards of Bridesmaids and was not a hit, only making a fraction of what Bridesmaids achieved. Bachelorette made $448,000 domestically and $11,948,000 worldwide (Bachelorette, n.d.), which compares unfavorably to the $169,107,000/$288,383,000 figures respectively for Bridesmaids. Pitch Perfect did well in the theater but as Moss (2013) states, it was not the same kind of movie that Bridesmaids was, as the content was only rated PG-13 and was really more of a musical comedy where women already have a strong presence. The next year, attempts at gross-out comedies post-Bridesmaids like The To-Do List and The Hot Flashes did not realize the same victory at the box office.

As I mentioned earlier, of course there were a number of successful female comedians and writers to emerge prior to Bridesmaids (think Tina Fey and Mean Girls for example) but
Bridesmaids is the first R-rated female-centric comedy to become a blockbuster movie (Cohen, 2012) and it proved hard to rival with its success. Many critics hoped the success of Bridesmaids would create a “Bridesmaids Effect” (Friendly, 2011), opening the door to other R-rated female fronted comedies. As Moss (2013) explains, Hot Flashes was directed by Susan Seidelman (Desperately Seeking Susan) and it is not insignificant that she was able to find private investors for her indie film and that it was released in 12 theaters considering she had not done a wide release movie since the 80s. But despite the appearance of an impact of Bridesmaids on the Hollywood conscious, the movie’s success seemed instead to turn into the “Melissa McCarthy Effect”: the most positive benefits were to her singular career. It was McCarthy who truly had the doors of the entertainment industry opened to her as she began to climb the ladder to A-list stardom one film after another. She has starred in a number of blockbuster comedies and started her own production company, called On the Day Productions, with her husband Ben Falcone.

Still, McCarthy’s post-Bridesmaids’ career has had bumps. According to Harris (2016), despite McCarthy’s success, critics would often give her bad reviews and by 2016, some critics claimed that her career was on the edge of failure and that she always had the same role. Harris alternatively suggests that perhaps her unorthodox look compared to others in Hollywood may be what distracts from a focus on her acting, or maybe it is her success as a woman is somehow threatening. As Harris writes,

No other woman or man unaided by a franchise in the last five years has emerged from nowhere to become such a completely dependable movie star, appearing in one successful film after another and regularly creating product that turns a profit, while maintaining a successful foothold in TV as well. (para. 3)
And despite critic complaints about McCarthy’s movies, she started her career post-*Bridesmaids* with better success than her male colleagues, Will Farrell and Seth Rogen, at the start of their careers (Stewart, 2013).

By 2019, less than a decade since *Bridesmaids*, McCarthy had accrued a number of nominations and awards from major associations, popular choice awards, and many smaller organizations (Melissa McCarthy Awards, n.d.). These awards include an Academy Award nomination for her supporting role in *Bridesmaids*, an Academy Award nomination for her lead role in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, a Golden Globe nomination for her lead role in *Spy*, several nominations and two wins for Primetime Emmy’s for appearances on *Saturday Night Live* and her performance as Molly in *Mike & Molly* (wins were for *Mike & Molly* in 2011 and *Saturday Night Live* in 2017). According to *Variety* (McNary, 2017), in 2017 McCarthy received the Powerhouse award given by the Artemis Women in Action Film Festival. A spokesperson for the festival explained that the goal of the festival is to “redefine the image of women, not just on screen, but in culture as well …Melissa has epitomized female action heroes in countless films, she has always embraced characters who are physically empowered – even when they make us laugh” (para. 5).

In her immediate post-*Bridesmaids* career, McCarthy was cast as the title character in *Identity Thief* which capitalized on her character from *Bridesmaids*. However, in the several years after that, her mainstream Hollywood comedy movies were with her *Bridesmaids*’ director, Paul Feig. Her other comedy films stemmed from her own production company but were not as widely released or as heavily marketed. It is almost as if her career took split paths. One is where the crassness and sexuality of Megan and the characters that began to develop during McCarthy’s time at Groundlings have a place to grow (albeit to a more niche audience), mainly
in her own production company. Then there was the mainstream, arguably toned-down versions of Megan as directed by Feig. One might even say that these roles backpedaled toward the sweet and silly roles of Sookie from *Gilmore Girls* and some earlier representations of Molly from *Mike & Molly*. Below I will explore a few of the blockbuster films in more detail to see the “devolution” of Megan through time and how this impacts the feminist representation of McCarthy’s character. In particular, attention will be given to *The Heat*, *Spy*, and *Ghostbusters* – three films starring McCarthy but all also directed by Paul Feig – arguing the films contrast and how sometimes slight variations in McCarthy’s characters can send different messages about women, body shapes, sexuality, unconventional behaviors, and film genres.

**Becoming a Box Office Star**

Post-*Bridesmaids*, McCarthy was in high demand as a star and made multiple TV appearances on *Saturday Night Live*, including her high-profile recurring portrayal as the Trump Press Secretary Sean Spicer (Andrews-Deyer, 2017). She has also held numerous small roles and cameos in movies such as *This is 40*, *The Hangover Part III*, and *Central Intelligence*. The first starring vehicle to be released after *Bridesmaids* was *Identity Thief*, with established co-star Jason Bateman. After *Identity Thief*, McCarthy starred in *Tammy*, the first movie for her production company, On the Day Productions. On the Day also backed many other McCarthy projects including *The Boss*, *Life of the Party*, *The Happytime Murders*, the television show *Nobodies*, and “the first Warner Bros Pictures Group film to premiere on HBO Max” (Fleming, 2019, para. 1), *Super Intelligence*.

The tables below (see Table 5-1, 5-2, and 5-3) show the domestic and worldwide box office numbers as well as the profits adapted from Boxofficemojo.com (Melissa McCarthy, n.d.) and includes all of McCarthy’s movies from 2011 to 2019 for which she had a major role.
Table 5-1: Domestic (unadjusted)

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<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>Theaters</th>
<th>Lifetime Gross</th>
<th>Theaters</th>
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<td>Bridesmaids</td>
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<td>2,918</td>
<td>$169,106,752</td>
<td>2,958</td>
<td>5/13/11</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>The Heat</td>
<td>$39,115,043</td>
<td>3,181</td>
<td>$159,582,188</td>
<td>3,184</td>
<td>6/28/13</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Identity Thief</td>
<td>$34,551,025</td>
<td>3,141</td>
<td>$134,506,920</td>
<td>3,230</td>
<td>2/8/13</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Spy</td>
<td>$29,085,719</td>
<td>3,711</td>
<td>$110,825,712</td>
<td>3,715</td>
<td>6/5/15</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Tammy</td>
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<td>$84,525,432</td>
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<td>7/2/14</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>The Boss</td>
<td>$23,586,649</td>
<td>3,480</td>
<td>$63,285,885</td>
<td>3,495</td>
<td>4/8/16</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>The Life of the Party</td>
<td>$17,886,075</td>
<td>3,656</td>
<td>$53,059,911</td>
<td>3,656</td>
<td>5/11/18</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Happytime Murders</td>
<td>$9,532,425</td>
<td>3,256</td>
<td>$20,706,452</td>
<td>3,256</td>
<td>8/24/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Worldwide</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
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<td>-----</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bridesmaids</td>
<td>$288.4</td>
<td>$169.1</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>$119.3</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Spy</td>
<td>$235.7</td>
<td>$110.8</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>$124.8</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Heat</td>
<td>$229.9</td>
<td>$159.6</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
<td>$70.3</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ghostbusters (2016)</td>
<td>$229.1</td>
<td>$128.4</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>$100.8</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Identity Thief</td>
<td>$174.0</td>
<td>$134.5</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>$39.5</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>$100.5</td>
<td>$84.5</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
<td>$16.0</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Boss</td>
<td>$78.8</td>
<td>$63.3</td>
<td>80.3%</td>
<td>$15.6</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Life of the Party</td>
<td>$65.9</td>
<td>$53.1</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>$12.8</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>St. Vincent</td>
<td>$54.8</td>
<td>$44.1</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
<td>$10.7</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Happytime Murders</td>
<td>$27.5</td>
<td>$20.7</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
<td>$6.8</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5-3: Profit ranking in millions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Production Budget</th>
<th>Worldwide Gross</th>
<th>Profit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bridesmaids</td>
<td>$32.5</td>
<td>$288.4</td>
<td>$255.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Heat</td>
<td>$43</td>
<td>$229.9</td>
<td>$186.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Spy</td>
<td>$65</td>
<td>$235.7</td>
<td>$170.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Identity Thief</td>
<td>$35</td>
<td>$173.9</td>
<td>$138.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ghostbusters</td>
<td>$144</td>
<td>$229.1</td>
<td>$85.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tammy</td>
<td>$20</td>
<td>$100.5</td>
<td>$80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Boss</td>
<td>$29</td>
<td>$78.8</td>
<td>$49.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Happytime Murders</td>
<td>$40</td>
<td>$27.5</td>
<td>-$12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (Budget info not available for Life of the Party)

Through this feminist political economic critique of the film industry, we can see that though McCarthy’s movies post- *Bridesmaids* have not been as successful with the bottom line as *Bridesmaids*, most have been profitable. According to Box Office Mojo (Identity Thief, n.d.), *Identity Thief* did well, opening with $34.5 million. And most of McCarthy’s self-produced movies had strong opening weekends (*Tammy* $21.5 million, *The Boss* $23.5 million, *Life of the Party* $17.8 million, *Happy Time Murders* $9.5 million). However, it was the movies that she did with director Paul Feig that did well consistently. These include *The Heat*, *Spy* and *Ghostbusters* (2016). *The Heat* was released the same year as *Identity Thief*, in the post-*Bridesmaids*’ glow, but *The Heat* was much better received – 65% versus 19% on Rotten Tomatoes (The Heat, n.d.; Identity, Thief, n.d.) – and did a bit better box office. The Feig directed McCarthy films
generally received the biggest budgets and most critical attention and that’s why I have chosen to
discuss those films in more detail in addition to a brief discussion of *Identity Thief*. In addition,
these numbers illustrate that female-fronted comedies can be lucrative. In fact, the net profit
margin for most of McCarthy’s movies are in the 70-80% range.

**A preamble to later Feig films: Identity Thief.**

Given its timing and her prominence in the film, as well as being a major vehicle for her
that was not directed by Paul Feig, *Identity Thief* (Abdy, Bateman, Stuber & Gordon, 2013) is
notable in McCarthy’s post-*Bridesmaids* career trajectory. In this box-office success, McCarthy’s
character emphasizes the selfish-crass nature of her persona.

She plays a con artist named Diana who steals Sandy Patterson’s (Jason Bateman) identity. Sandy, who was living paycheck to paycheck, gets an offer to leave the firm and get
away from his bully of a boss to make five times his current salary. But before he can do it, he
gets tricked by Diana into giving out his personal information for fraud protection. Diana uses
the stolen cards to buy everyone at a bar drinks and then assaults the bartender when he disses
her. She gets arrested and does not show to her court date. Diana, having done all this in Sandy’s
name, causes Sandy to get arrested for missing a court date. Though the officer believes Sandy
after seeing the mugshot, there is nothing he can do because the Denver police do not have
jurisdiction in Florida. Sandy goes to Florida to get Diana and clear his name. The road trip from
Florida to Denver is full of many obstacles, and through it all there was a lot of violence and
slapstick and gross-out humor, but Diana and Sandy build a strange friendship by the end.

In addition to constantly swearing, as McCarthy does in many of her “edgier” roles,
Diana has a signature throat punch that goes with other violent slapstick moves like kicking
Sandy in the crotch or whacking the skiptracer that was after her over the head. There are also
many gross out elements, the first of which is how she puts on Sandy’s deodorant after she stole his rental car and was searching through his suitcase. Although there are other little strange moments like this – such as her smelling the skirtracer’s beard and saying it “smells like sandwiches” – the most infamous scene involves Diana sleeping with a man name Chuck that she met at a bar. It is a crazy, over the top, loud scene. This is Diana’s first meaningful interaction in the movie, she originally started talking to Chuck because she was going to con him. Her plan was to drug him and take his money, but right before she did, he started crying in anticipation of them sleeping together because his wife just died. Chuck calls Diana beautiful and says Sandy was lucky to have her. This makes Diana decide to sleep with Chuck. This is one of the few times we see Diana happy for a moment.

There are a few other times we feel pity for Diana, like when the bartender tells her that the people at the bar are not her friends. He says that they are only cheering her on because she is buying them drinks, but then she punches him in the throat which causes her to get arrested. Or when the girls in the makeup store are laughing at her, as she is lying to the employee that is helping her. We see a shred of humanity in her too when she is about to steal Sandy’s wallet and car but has a change of heart once she hears his daughter’s voice. We see this again later when she admits that she was in foster care. There is a tug back and forth for the audience between liking her and knowing we should not. Almost every redeeming moment had some kind of counteractive reaction. This understated brewing hatred can also complicate how the audiences feels when they hear a fat joke.

There are subtle fat jokes in the movie like the couple of times Diana tries to run from Sandy and cannot run very fast. The first time she tries to run away on the highway and Sandy catches up to her easily when she asks, “What are you, a Kenyan?” But there are also more
obvious references to Diana’s weight. For example, in the restaurant when Sandy says he asked her to eat less food because he only budgeted a few dollars per meal, the waitress automatically assumes that it is because of Diana’s weight and says, “What is wrong with you? This is a beautiful woman!” Diana uses this assumption to her advantage, as discussed below. Reviewers picked up on this crassness, including the fat humor. Below is an excerpt from one review, that discusses this scene:

Is it O.K. to still point out that Identity Thief is disturbing? In one scene, Diana has rough sex with a potential mark (Eric Stonestreet) she meets in a bar. Their interaction veers between the nastily comic — “Hey, look at the big people having sex!” — and the sad, since both are lonely and, we’re told, intimacy is rare for them. But there’s also an undercurrent of punishment. Not rape, but something in that general ballpark of misogyny. (This is a movie in which the worst insult hurled at a man is that he’s a “vagina.” There’s a feminist essay in there somewhere, especially since it is Diana who employs the word.) The morning after, Diana is in pain, complaining to Sandy that her date might have torn something. Across Bateman’s pleasantly bland features flickers a look that suggests Sandy is not displeased to think of Diana’s womanhood being damaged. It’s just a movie, with a dramatic arc that’s supposed to make all that mean stuff drift away into the ether as friendship is born, but it’s that look that hangs around like a bad smell. (Pols, 2013, para. 6)

The most biting review came from Rex Reed (2013), in which he attacked Melissa McCarthy personally and with fat-shaming language, calling her “cacophonous, tractor-sized” (para. 2), “a screeching, humongous creep” (para. 2), “female hippo” (para. 2), “grotesque” (para. 2), “a gimmick comedian” (para. 3), and “obese and obnoxious” (para. 3). This is a particularly harsh
review and though the movie was certainly not a masterpiece, Reed did not address the possibilities of why McCarthy may be playing in such a role, as discussed in another review:

> There are limited opportunities for overweight women to act, particularly in starring roles, without their size being a significant part of the character arc. The real shame of Identity Thief is the waste it makes of McCarthy's great talents. Despite the film's dismal reviews, most critics acknowledge her comedic talent and timing. Her efforts, however, come too little as Identity Thief’s filmmakers waste no opportunity to portray McCarthy in a grotesque manner, relishing every chance to humiliate her with an ill-conceived script, half-assed direction, and a truly unfortunate wardrobe. (Gay, 2013, para. 3)

Unlike Bridesmaids, McCarthy has limited contact with other women in this movie, thus limiting any potential feminist messages about female friendship and connectedness that reviewers found in Bridesmaids. The first conversation with a woman that we see is with the waitress in a restaurant where Diana makes up a story about how her “husband” (Sandy) was a firefighter that was in an accident where he “injured his male parts” and now he takes his anger out on her and Diana starts crying as she goes on in her story. After hearing the story, the waitress brings her free food. Diana stops crying as soon as the waitress walks away and Sandy says, “Do you know what a sociopath is?” There was no meaning in her interaction with the other woman, only to get what she wanted for herself.

The second interaction she has with a woman/women is Sandy’s wife and kids but conversation is minimal. She does talk to Sandy’s wife and says nothing happened on the road trip between her and Sandy,

> “I put it out there, but he did not pick it up. And you there’s… It’s surprising. ‘Cause I… I don’t know if you’ve heard of the Bermuda Triangle, which is kind of here [point down
her body and back up to her chest] and here. And it’s… You know… Once you go in it’s real hard to come back out. You know? Because some people don’t want to. Because some people don’t want to. Some people just get lost in there, emotionally. I just wanted you to know that he was a perfect gentleman. And he did not lay a finger, you know, on, or in me. Okay.”

Sandy’s wife just looks at her in shock and disbelief that she is saying this but does not respond verbally. It is a joke because Sandy would not find her attractive anyway. Diana is not supposed to be a threat to the wife even though she thinks she is.

The crassness we get from Diana is the same crassness we see with her character Megan in *Bridesmaids* though amplified and not quite as balanced with admirable qualities, or potentially emancipating elements such as gendered friendships and community. But the crassness of the humor also becomes seen by some critics as an essential part of her film persona. Gilbey (2015) calls McCarthy’s shamelessness “one of the qualities that audiences crave in her, the equivalent of Tom Cruise’s smile or Jennifer Lawrence’s sassiness” (para. 8).

Being shameless is not quite the same as a smile or even being sassy. It seems more of a fundamental quality to a character, and riskier as well. In several of the post-*Bridesmaids*’ roles, McCarthy’s characters do not show a lot of the sympathetic characteristics that we saw in Megan and this “dark Megan” persona is even further sharpened later in *Can You Ever Forgive Me*, McCarthy’s most complicated and dramatic role to date. We see here a return to a sad a lonely character that was foreshadowed as part of McCarthy’s persona with Diana’s lack of female friendships. In fact, McCarthy’s character, Lee, torpedoes all relationships, including a potential romantic one with a woman character. Though not a blockbuster movie in terms of release
patterns or marketing, it nevertheless earned McCarthy a nomination for an Academy Award for her performance and adds a poignancy to these baseline characteristics.

The Heat

The Heat (Chernin, Topping & Feig, 2013), is a buddy-cop movie starring Melissa McCarthy and Sandra Bullock, and was the second high-profile role after Bridesmaids and finished its theatrical run as an impressive economic success. The Heat’s IMDB page (The Heat, n.d.) states that the movie was released June 13, 2013 and produced by Twentieth Century Fox in partnership with Chernin Entertainment and in association with TSG Entertainment, Ingenious Media, Big Screen Productions and Ingenious Film Partners and according to Box Office Mojo (The Heat, n.d.), opened in 3,181 theaters. It made $39.1 million on its opening weekend.

In the film, Bullock plays the uptight Special Agent Ashburn from the FBI who is arrogant and loathed by her fellow agents. McCarthy plays Detective Mullins, the Boston streetwise cop who has an unorthodox and foulmouthed approach to her work. Ashburn comes from New York to Boston to find a drug lord, Simon Larkin. Ashburn, who is up for promotion if the case goes well, is forced to put up with the unconventional ways that Mullins conducts her police work. While McCarthy’s character in Identity Thief took a dive off the deep end into a sexually aggressive and a hard to like character, her character in The Heat comes closer to a remake of a well-rounded and complex Megan from Bridesmaids. Mullins, like Megan, is self-assured, confident, and still socially awkward with some aggressive sexuality though slightly less crass.

With completely opposite policing styles, Mullins and Ashburn comically butt heads through the majority of the film. After narrowly escaping an assassination attempt, they realize that someone must be working with the drug lord, Larkin, from the inside and they team up to
save Mullins’ family. Ultimately, they are able to take down Larkin and his operations. Though Mullins’ persona is only “playing” crazy (i.e., shooting an empty gun at the genitals of a perp, while Megan put an actual gun in her brother’s carry-on) she comes off as more dangerous and cold at first and warms up throughout the movie to be more likeable overall, though still a bit aggressive in her relationship with Ashburn.

As with Bridesmaids, The Heat had significant creative input from women, input that may have shaped the film in ways that avoided previous gendered characteristics. The Heat was written by Katie Dippold, a writer from Parks and Recreation. Dippold met Feig when he was a director for Parks and Recreation (Riley, 2015). The script was quickly picked up by producer Jenno Topping at Chernin Entertainment. This was not Topping’s first movie with a female-centered cast; she also produced Charlie’s Angels in 2000 which was the first successful action movie with female leads (Gardiner, 2016). In an interview Topping says,

We spent a lot of time on that movie, talking about how we could portray women, even though it was an action comedy and a tentpole movie. How we could push the envelope, portraying women in a way that they had not been portrayed in before.

Even with – or perhaps because of – the strong story of female friendship that supports the movie in The Heat, the filmmakers had to resist pressure from the studio to give Bullock’s character a love interest. Though it may have gone against conventional movie-making wisdom, Topping felt that “the lack of male main squeezes key to the appeal of the movie about a pair of mismatched cops” (Lang, 2013, para. 2). The writer added,

“Male figures aren't relevant one way or the other to Sandy and Melissa's journey in this film,” Topping told TheWrap. “The very thing that appealed to us the most was the riskiest element of the movie. We had all the naysayers saying you're going to cancel out
your audience, because men aren't going to want to see a movie about two women being
cops and women won't want to see women playing cops and not wearing pink fluffy
dresses.” (para. 3)

In this way, perhaps because of a woman writer and the gendered freedom that McCarthy’s
color character allowed, The Heat was able to avoid the previous solution of “cops in pink fluffy
dresses” that characterized Bullock’s earlier woman-cop movie, Miss Congeniality.

**Marketing for The Heat.**

The marketing for the movie plays and reads like any other mismatched cop comedy by
focusing on the difference of the two characters in the trailer and playing up the action and
explosion of the movies in the trailer and on the poster. VanHooker (2017) calls the mismatched
buddy movie “the male equivalent of the rom-com,” and “a guide to navigating the complex
world of male friendship.” This comparison makes sense given the scarcity of films featuring
female relationships without at least a romantic subplot. *The Heat* is the first mismatched
comedy of its kind to feature a female friendship. The casting here is also logical given
McCarthy’s previous film, the mismatched buddy/road comedy *Identity Thief* and Bullock’s
romantic/buddy comedy, *The Proposal* (2009) (although both of those featured a woman and a
man). However, it would not be fair to say that *The Heat*, and whatever kind of nickname we
would call this currently small subgenre, is the women’s version of a buddy movie. Despite the
marketing and the genre conventions, *The Heat* does not just turn VanHooker’s analogy back
around but it turns it on its head because it is more complex than the relationship between the
two women, it is also how they navigate their profession, one dominated by men. Although those
moments are subtle, and the film does not take on the issues directly, it is a significant amount of
workplace critique for a comedy, as critics noted and will be discussed in a later section.
Trailers for The Heat.

The trailer on Apple Movie Trailers (The Heat, n.d.) begins by introducing Sandra Bullock’s character Ashburn and her skill at the job but lack of comradery in the field. Her boss says, “you are a solid agent but you’re not a team player, none of the other agents like you.” The clips show the field agents making faces and ignoring her orders. A title card flashes that says, “From Paul Feig the Director of Bridesmaids.” The choice to use Feig in the title card leads the audience to expect more of the bad and funny behavior from women that they saw in Bridesmaids.

When we are introduced to McCarthy’s character, Detective Mullins, she is driving recklessly, and she hits a perpetrator with her car. Meanwhile, another perpetrator in her backseat is screaming “She’s crazy!” as M.I.A.’s “Bad Girls” starts playing. This song may have been chosen for many reasons, perhaps for the lyrics, “Live fast, die young. Bad girls do it well,” reference to Mullins style of policing. This is reminiscent of the movie Bad Boys, which can lead the viewer to expect ridiculous explosions. The juxtaposition of the scenes chosen to introduce these characters clearly illustrates their opposite approaches to policing. This is an homage to the original buddy cop movie, Lethal Weapon, but with a twist given two previous roles of the unfeminine cop character Bullock played in Miss Congeniality, and of course the “wild card” persona McCarthy established in Bridesmaids. With the traditional approach to advertising such a buddy cop film, it is clear that the targeted audience for the marketing campaign was men.

The trailer is not without nods to the fact that women are taking the lead in this film. The upbeat rap from a female rapper fits well with the image of Mullins on screen. But in addition to focusing on the lyrics, anyone who knows the background of M.I.A. could see this as a feminist statement as well. Some believe the song to at least in part be referencing the laws against
women driving in Saudi Arabia (Riek, 2015) for which M.I.A. is suggesting to blatantlly break. And while this could fit perfectly with Mullins style of policing, it also can refer to women in law enforcement and the portrayal of women in law enforcement in the movies, breaking the rules of the buddy cop movie and allowing women a chance at the wheel.

The trailer also has title cards for Bullock and McCarthy, emphasizing their star power for the film. Each card is followed by a few shots of each star in the movie. Special Agent Ashburn is shown as she is about to interrogate a drug dealer when she meets Mullins and assumes Mullins is there to be interrogated, not that she is an officer herself. Mullins responds, “I am an officer and that’s my perp.” Ashburn replies, “Could you just close the door on the way out?” with a wink. Mullins retorts, “I’ll shut the door on you. Will you come lay down here, put your head in the door, and I’ll slam it about 157,000 times?” After McCarthy’s title card she gets more of a montage that includes her walking into a building opening both doors at once, slamming her hands on a car, and pulling a perp by his collar out the window of his car. Then she is shown yelling at another officer, “I’m gonna make you bend over and I’m gonna reach up your pocket and get the keys to your house. And then I’m gonna drive there and stab you with your own badge. That’s what I’m gonna do.” He looks back at her speechless. The approach to introducing each character complements their characters’ demeanor in the movie: both are arrogant and proud of their policework, but Bullock is more uptight, and McCarthy does not do things by the book.

The trailer then displays a title card that says, “Any questions?” followed by a montage of Ashburn and Bullock on their journey to catch the local drug lord. This montage clearly presents the movie as a comedy by the way Ashburn skids across the floor with a gun in an attempt to quickly slide into the action. It shows how Ashburn will be pulled into Mullins’ way of doing
things when they accidently drop the perpetrator they are questioning from a second-story balcony. But it also shows the relationship that develops between the two women with two scenes of them drinking together and a scene in the bathroom where Mullins is trying to give Ashburn a makeover, so she does not stick out so much in the crowd.

The red band trailer shows more of the swearing that is in the movie. It has the same director title card and same song, M.I.A.’s “Bad Girls,” but it focuses more on the R rated content including the scene where Mullins is looking for the Captain’s balls and a short clip of her own mother flipping her off. It also had more guns and explosions than the regular trailer. In addition to the title cards for the stars, there is one for the release date. Though the final cut of the movie is different than what we see in the trailer, the movie still delivers on what is promised in the ads. More about the feminism in the movie will be discussed below.

**The Heat Movie Posters.**

The IMDB page for *The Heat* shows many images from the film including a number of posters. The posters used in the United States all featured the stars’ names and some version of a tag for Paul Feig being the director of *Bridesmaids.* But the most interesting poster is the one that looks like a throwback to a 1970’s action film (see Figure 5-1) This is a great choice in juxtaposition to other movies from that time. As King (2008) quotes, Mizejewski stated, “women disappeared from the ranks of heroes after 1975 because ‘the testosterone-heavy 1970s American box office was no place for the woman investigator’” (p. 242). The poster seems to correct this historical invisibility.
The throwback 70’s poster uses the popular montage technique of the time and is composed of “several shots from the film to form a single image” (Lowbrow, 2014, para. 1). According to Lowbrow, this is used to sell the movie in the same way that a trailer does by showing different parts of the story. The poster is clearly emphasizing the movie’s violence, but the image of McCarthy draws attention as well because it appears to portray her as being slimmed down. This is not the only poster that appears to alter her image; less forgiving is the photoshopped version for the United Kingdom promotions (see Figure 5-2) where McCarthy is almost unrecognizable and clearly digitally slimmed (Percival, 2013). Perhaps this is due to The Heat being her first major movie post-Bridesmaids and her potential lack of name recognition outside of the US. The movie did only make 30% of its profit overseas (see chart earlier in this chapter), a low figure for a major studio blockbuster.
In addition to the photoshop disaster, the poster names Sandra Bullock’s character the good cop and McCarthy’s character the “mad cop” instead of the “bad cop.” This is again paying homage to the original mismatched buddy cop movie, *Lethal Weapon*, perhaps hailing the male audience for the movie, but also a nod to McCarthy’s big-screen persona. McCarthy’s character is a bit reminiscent of the roughness of Gibson’s character in the first *Lethal Weapon*. However, in Mobley’s (2014) discussion of fat-face minstrelsy, a fat stereotype that she mentions is when a character is “out of control” (p. 124), just as, again, McCarthy’s *Bridesmaids* poster deems her as “The wild card.”

Overall, unlike *Bridesmaids* that catered the advertising to both sexes, *The Heat* is a straightforward mismatched buddy cop movie, which seems to be more male targeted. As Fallon (2013) describes in their article, over the years, despite having a handful of films that starred a female duo or ensemble, the subject matter was always “girlie” (para. 6). The author gives the examples of *Beaches, Thelma and Louise, Romy & Michele’s High School Reunion, Baby Mama* as the buddy films. But buddy cop movies are male driven and therefore this movie, despite having two female leads, is also male-audience driven in its marketing. This (and how Hollywood explained the success of *The Heat*) had implications for future women-centered films, but not necessarily progressive implications. In an interview Linda Obst said, “You sell a movie to men because women will go anyway—you won’t lose a single female viewer. The advertising is selling it as a classic buddy cop movie with only a couple winks at the fact that it stars women” (Fallon, 2013, para. 16). While on the one hand this is great, and a sort of equality achievement in Hollywood it is also problematic,

So if the film’s a hit—and it will be—the starved female audience who will turn up to *The Heat* because they’re clamoring for a film for *them* won’t be given credit, and
therefore more female-driven comedies won’t be greenlit. “There will be more McCarthy movies, more Bullock movies,” Obst says. “Look back to Bridesmaids. It was really funny and did well internationally and created new stars. It proved that there was a female market. Instead, the story became that the movie overperformed. Like 50,000 scripts turned up on managers’ desks for two weeks, but no one was willing to take a shot on them.” In other words, expect the only careers to get hot off The Heat to be Bullock’s and McCarthy’s themselves. Obst says it best: “It’s pretty bloody depressing, isn’t?” (Fallon, 2013, para. 17 & 18)

Critical reception of The Heat.

The Heat received a Rotten Tomatoes Critic score of 65% (The Heat, n.d.) and a Metacritic score of 60% (The Heat, n.d.). Both solid if not spectacular scores, with more than half of the critics favoring the movie. It may also signal the possible impact of Bridesmaids that Moss (2013) claims allowed acceptance for people like Sandra Bullock to play in this type of “wacky comedy about female friendship” (para. 8). Bridesmaids, in fact, was referenced in reviews for The Heat. Bartyzel (2013) sums up the purpose of the movie,

The Heat questions the idea that a female version of a buddy cop film must be different than a man's, just as Bridesmaids questioned the notion that women wouldn't be felled by explosive bowels. Both comedies battle with and expand typical portrayals of women on the big screen, and act as a reminder that male and female experiences aren't diametrically opposed. (para. 8)

While the presence of women in the film and in the making of the film is acknowledged and praised, Bartyzel explains that this victory also “comes with an unfair expectation of activism” (2013, para. 9). Showing women on screen comes with an assumption of “added social
responsibility — even though many actresses struggle to find speaking roles, let alone good characters, in Hollywood. In one fell swoop, a movie like The Heat is expected to transcend its genre, be a feminist icon, right other imbalances, and fix any perceived thematic weaknesses of the past” (para. 9). The Heat is a buddy cop movie, a storyline that has been played out hundreds of times with men in the leading roles. This rare representation of women in this genre came with high expectations for it to be different, representative, less violent.

Other critics were not as positive about The Heat as a legacy of Bridesmaids, and specifically focused on McCarthy’s characters, her physical style of comedy, and the meaning of unconventional bodies. The Feminist Spectator (2013) refers to McCarthy’s character as a “sexual virago” (para. 12) and calls it out as a trope for her characters as well from Bridesmaids and Identity Thief. The reviewer argues, “McCarthy pulls off the comedy, as one man after another is brushed off with a gesture, a casual remark, and a turned back. But I worry that part of what seems ‘funny’ here is that a woman who looks like Mullins could ever really be sexually attractive. The film invites a laughing at even as it proposes that we laugh with Mullins’s indifferent romantic life” (para. 13). Though McCarthy characters in Bridesmaids and Identity Thief are stronger sexual depictions of her persona, the same issue of laughing at instead of with is a potential problem across all the films. This is reinforced in The Heat not only by the presentation of McCarthy’s character as “sloppy and foul-mouthed” (Rizzo, 2019, para. 4), but also be the juxtaposition of her character to Bullock’s “neat and uptight character who is always in control” (Rizzo, 2019, para. 4). As Rizzo says, “the message may be subtle but it still comes across loud and clear” (para. 4).

There are also complaints from other reviewers of prejudice and fat jokes (Kearns, 2013). Though there may not be too many direct fat jokes, the most obvious one being the recurring
insult hurled at McCarthy calling her a Campbell’s Soup kid, there are plenty of indirect ones. For example, in just the first few minutes of meeting Mullins she runs out of breath chasing Rojas, she eats a bun free hotdog messily in her car during a lunch break, and then she cannot fit out of the door when she parked in a tight space at the police station and proceeds to clumsily climb through the open windows of a cruiser. Later when Mullins and Ashburn visit a person of interest, Tatiana, Mullins sinks down into the couch and Tatiana refers to her as a “Bull in China Shop” after she kicks in the bathroom door. And though both women have jokes playing off their appearance it seems that the audience could be laughing in a different way at Mullins’ claims that she does not need to dress sexy. In the club bathroom scene Mullins rips Ashburn’s clothes to make her look more attractive and less uptight. As Ashburn goes to return the favor for Mullins, Mullins claims she does not need it: “I put out my sexuality through motion. When this starts goin’ it’s all… You’ll get it.” Ashburn responds, “So I have to look like this, and you get to look like that?” and Mullins says, “I know it’s not fair.” Though Mullins presents McCarthy’s confident persona here, again, just like the plane scene in Bridesmaids or the scene in Identity Thief where Diana talks to Sandy’s wife, this confidence in her appearance can be backhanded. At face value we can take Ashburn’s comment as jealousy that Mullins does not have to alter her appearance, but it is also an insult – “You get to look like that?” There seems to be more room for interpretation here in comparison to the superficial criticism that Ashburn receives from the DEA agent telling Ashburn she should shave above the knee next time she wears shorts.

Feminism in The Heat.

Despite backlash from some critics who wrote that The Heat was too harsh, there are identifiable moments of feminist progress and representation, as Ashley Fetters (2013) writes for The Atlantic, pulling from Neal King’s content analysis of portrayals of policewomen from
1973-2008. Fetters uses King’s summary of the common tropes found in the 291 films he analyzed to explain why *The Heat* is different. The popular tropes Fetters refers to and King writes about are, “female cops are the newest, least experienced officers on the force” (para. 5), “female cops are detectives who hunt serial killers—and they do it from a distance, or undercover” (para. 7), “female cops don't use violence” (para. 11), and “female cops just want to be loved” (para.13). With well-established careers, hands on investigation, a fair heaping of violence, and a lack of romantic relationships Special Agent Ashburn and Detective Mullins break all these tropes. Holmes (2013) writes, “It’s made with a delightful combination of self-awareness about the fact that it’s a rare buddy-cop movie about women and total commitment to being a buddy-cop movie, not a female-buddy-cop movie” (para. 3).

In comparison to *Bridesmaids* where the main character is a former bakery owner, a somewhat disappointing depiction of a more feminine job (Papermag, 2011), the career representation in *The Heat* is more advanced in the representation of equality in the workplace. Even with a comedic focus, the film does not gloss over issues of the workplace for female law enforcement. In a piece written by Dr. Molly Kerby on her blog she says the movie is a “postmodern/postmodern-feminist statement” (para. 12) claiming, “Instead of dwelling on the never-ending discrimination of women in male-identified jobs, sexism in the workplace, and obsession with bodyism (particularly females) the movie constantly, and consistently, faces it head on.” In other words, even though it is there the women ignore it “as if it was yesterday’s news” (2013, para. 14).

Outside of the different career representations in *Bridesmaids vs The Heat* the focus on female relationships, though different in each movie, is still valuable in both. The representation of this kind of relationship in a different sub-genre, say wedding comedies vs buddy cop
comedies, is a step in the right direction toward representation of women in Hollywood as a whole. Despite the imperfections of *The Heat* and the flawed feminist messages, still as Billson (2013) says, “we must treasure *The Heat*, because it's a rare bird. There are more movies in which male cops are partnered with dogs than there are female buddy cop movies” (para. 1).

**Spy**

*Spy* (Chernin, Feig, Henderson, Topping & Feig, 2015) is the first movie where McCarthy is the main attraction, without an equally billed co-star, such as Jason Bateman in *Identity Thief* or Sandra Bullock in *The Heat*. Feig (*Bridesmaids* and *The Heat*) returns to direct McCarthy again. After McCarthy experienced a step down in the reception of *Tammy*, which received a 24% critic score on Rotten Tomatoes, Feig’s experience in direction was welcomed back by the critics. *Spy* is Feig’s homage to James Bond movies and had a warm reception with a 95% score on Rotten Tomatoes. McCarthy plays Susan Cooper, a CIA analyst who works from a desk as the information source and voice in the earpiece for Agent Bradley Fine (Jude Law), whom Susan is in love with from afar. However, Bradley and the other agents’ identities are compromised so the CIA needs a new agent to help take down a Bulgarian nuclear arms dealer (Rose Byrne) and Cooper assumes the role. Throughout the movie we see Susan followed by fellow analyst and friend Nancy (Miranda Hart), who is a key support person for Susan and the most developed friendship. Susan is also followed around by Agent Ford (Jason Statham). Ford does not think Susan is capable of being a spy and that he can do a better job. He repeatedly gets in Susan’s way and she saves him over and over, though he thinks he is saving her. This movie shows a change in McCarthy’s character in comparison to Megan from *Bridesmaids* and Mullins for *The Heat*. As McCarthy continued to be crass and out of control in her self-produced films, i.e. *Tammy*, McCarthy’s character in *Spy*, Susan Cooper, goes back to more of a Sookie or early
Molly character. We only see her be sexually spontaneous at the end of the movie and otherwise her love life is non-existent. We also only see offensive language used as a persona after she was drugged by a nuclear arms dealer. In general, her character is a polite and socially aware, if surprisingly competent, spy.

According to *Box Office Mojo* (Spy, n.d.), *Spy* was released June 5, 2015 and opened in 3,711 theaters. It had a similar makeup to the production team as *The Heat* – Twentieth Century Fox and Chernin Entertainment – but Paul Feig himself was also a producer with his company, Feigco Entertainment. *Spy* opened to just over $29 million opening weekend and, according to *Box Office Mojo* (Spy, n.d.), *Spy* did well overall, making more than $235 million worldwide. In addition, with a budget of $65 million the profit is exceptional. However, as the writer, Feig said in an interview that the box office take was surprisingly not good enough (Chitwood, 2018). Though Feig said he already knows how he would start the story for a sequel, the lead production company, Fox, just was not interested. Feig mentions spy movies like the *Kingsman* franchise make more money, in large part because of the appeal of such male-dominated films for the global box office. According to *Box Office Mojo* (Kingsman: The Secret Service, n.d.) the first *Kingsman* film racked in over $414 million worldwide with a $85 million budget. Overall American comedy does not have as great of a reception overseas as other genres (Ritman & Roxborough, 2016). *Hollywood Reporter* quotes Sean O’Kelly of U.K. sales and distribution banner Carnaby International, who said, “We’re finding many people purely looking for action-comedy” (Ritman & Roxborough, 2013, para. 5). The same article claims that in addition to differing humor domestically vs. internationally, now comedies have to be star-driven, whereas jokes used to be able to carry a comedy. Sims (2016b) explains that blockbuster movies typically take in more than 60% of their profits overseas and gives the 2016 examples of movies such as
Captain America: Civil War and Zootopia. But the same year, comedy star Will Ferrell’s movie Daddy’s Home only made 30% of its profits overseas and Amy Schumer’s Trainwreck, a hit in the domestic box office, made less than 30% overseas. Sims points out that even Central Intelligence, 2016’s most popular comedy, only took in about 40% of its earnings overseas. This is despite co-star Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson presumably being one of the most popular movie stars seeing as he was the highest-paid actor of 2016 (Robehmed, 2016).

Promotions and marketing for Spy.

Spy had an interesting ad campaign, partnering with the “dating” app tinder. The ad popped up in place of a match and users were given the chance to “swipe right” for free tickets to a special screening of the movie, as shown in the screen capture below (see Figure 5-3; Hod, 2015).

![Spy promo](image)

Figure 5-3: tinder Spy promo
In an interview with TheWrap, Fox Studios president of marketing Marc Weinstock said, “Tinder was a perfect match for our audience. They’re very strong in the 17-34 [demographic]. What could be better for a first date than a hilarious comedy?” (Hod, 2015, para. 3). According to TheWrap, 27,000 people signed up for 15,000 available tickets in 50 different markets. However, in addition to having access to see the movie early, viewers were asked to tweet about it. “The event generated more than 17 million impressions on social media, all with the hashtag #Spytacular” (Hod, 2015, para. 4). This was one of the early film advertising campaigns on tinder. The event was advertised in the app as well as on YouTube from 20th Century Fox.

The video advertisement for tinder focused on relationships and suggested the movie as a date (20th Century Fox, 2015). The video starts with Agent Cooper at dinner with Agent Fine when he gives her the cupcake necklace; the voiceover says, “You’ve acquired the perfect assets.” Then we see the scene where Agent Ford is hanging off Cooper as they dangle from a helicopter and she shouts, “Get your hands off my boobs” and he responds, “I’m saving you.” Over a few introductory shots of the party where Cooper meets arms dealer Rayna Boyanov where here the voiceover says, “Now you need the perfect rendezvous.” Ford says to Cooper, “What are you going to do, seduce ‘em?” and she responds, “Why is that so hard to believe?” We then see Cooper laughing and Boyanov tell her she has lipstick on her teeth. The next part of the ad talks about tinder. The voiceover says, “Tinder presents the spy who swiped me. On May 11th find a match using your tinder app and swipe right for Spy and a chance to attend one of 53 screenings across the country.” During this voice-over there is a demonstration of the use of the tinder app and pictures of the movie characters being swiped right. We then see the clip of Aldo grabbing Cooper’s chest followed by a couple of explosions. The voiceover says, “Action” as we see a couple of clips of Ford fighting and Ford saying, “leave the action to me.” Then we hear
“Comedy” and see Cooper fighting and trying to jump and slide over a car hood as she falls to the ground and says “Ow. Mother Butler!” It ends with the tinder and movie logo as the voiceover says, “Tinder and Spy, going deep under covers.” The end screen shows a poster for the movie as well as some ads about the site like making your own spy identity. The clip of Cooper falling off a scooter and saying “Damn it, who puts a roof on a scooter? What are you? The Pope?”

The choice of the more sexual clips for the tinder partnership ad makes sense given that tinder has a reputation for being a hook up app (Sales, 2015). However, scenes that were chosen create a strange message in juxtaposition. It features Ford more prominently than he is featured in the movie. Though we can laugh at the line “Leave the action to me” because we know Jason Statham is self-aware of his reputation for being in ridiculous action-comedy movies. The focus on the sexual harassment that Cooper encountered is odd when taken out of context of the movie. In addition, the Cooper action scenes we see are physical comedy. This is what McCarthy is known for, but the ad leaves out the strength of her character. When looking back at McCarthy’s repertoire it is misleading to advertise the movie as sexually voracious. While her character in Spy can be wild and mouthy once she finds her confidence and is able to let her cover go, she is not as confident and sexually aggressive as Megan was in Bridesmaids, and ultimately a more conventional personality: much of the humor of the movie juxtapositions an unassuming person with the ability to be a high-level international spy. Though it makes sense that this trailer would be geared toward to the tinder audience it seems odd that the trailer would pull from McCarthy’s unorthodox reputation to be sexually voracious, like with Bridesmaids and Identity Thief but then deliver something from her character more along the lines of Sookie from Gilmore Girls or Molly from the earlier seasons of Mike & Molly.
Spy, critical reception.

With some unique marketing approaches and the way the trailer presents as a true Bond parody, it may have been unclear how McCarthy was actually going to play in the film and what her character would be like. Critic Patricia Treble (2015) said McCarthy’s “film selections are a tad uneven, to say the least. For every Bridesmaids and St. Vincent, there is The Heat and Tammy” (para. 3), but she was pleased with McCarthy’s performance. Tremble was not the only critic who had issue with McCarthy’s previous appearances. Ann Hornaday (2015) from The Washington Post writes, that in previous movies McCarthy was “pigeonholed as a girthy, slightly gross tomboy” (para. 8). And “I’ve never been much of a McCarthy fan, someone who I think has gotten into a rut of playing the same over-the-top manic character” (Compton, 2015, para. 5).

However, many of these critics liked her performance in Spy, apparently precisely because it was more conventional and less the “crazy wild card.” Compton notes about Spy, “She is toned down considerably here and the results are much better” (Compton, 2015, para. 5). Another critic wrote, “Hollywood is gradually figuring out what to do with Melissa McCarthy. Following her breakout performance in Bridesmaids (2011), she played obnoxious characters in Identity Thief and The Heat, but this espionage comedy from Bridesmaids director Paul Feig gives her a softer, more agreeable, and no less funny character” (Jones, 2015, para. 1). Yet another: “Feig appears to adore McCarthy. He doesn’t treat her like a clown. When she works with him, she can risk being obnoxious because he comes up with sensible environments for her excesses or, in an uptight Sandra Bullock, the ideal foil” (Morris, 2015, para. 8). There seems, then, to be this theme of McCarthy’s unruliness needing to be maintained and her energy formed in a certain way.
No matter how well McCarthy does in her career and how well-meaning critics may be, the parallel drawn between her comedy and her body seems inescapable. In one review, McCarthy’s comedies were reflected on as a sign of the times, that it was progressive that a fat woman was allowed to be sexual, and done so in a more muted way:

With writer-director Paul Feig’s glossy, globetrotting spoof “Spy,” we reach a new and more comfortable middle zone in the strange, double-edged phenomenon of Melissa McCarthy’s movie-star career. McCarthy is keenly aware that some people will always view her as a joke – a brash, trash-talking but essentially sexless person who resembles Santa Claus’ wife (as Jason Statham’s hard-boiled spook character observes in this movie). This may be more than balanced out, to be sure, by those in the audience who identify with her and root for her joyously. Personally, I’ve often found her comic persona overly aggressive, cranked to 11 too much of the time, but that’s a different question from her cultural significance. McCarthy’s seemingly unlikely rise to stardom is more important than any of her individual projects; it belongs to a much broader cultural pattern of tolerance and acceptance that encompasses same-sex matrimony and “Modern Family” and Caitlyn Jenner and a whole bunch of other stuff.” (O’Hehir, 2015, para. 1)

Hornaday (2015) refers to Spy as “a cultural bellwether” (para. 9) because she believes that McCarthy is no longer relying on “ungainly, graceless slapstick” (para. 8) – a not-so-coded phrase for weight-based comedy – and McCarthy instead, “seizes the opportunity to be so much more, including but not limited to glamorous, crafty, smart, funny, brave and surpassingly loyal to her female colleagues” (para. 9). Hornaday also refers to how the film performed well while put head-to-head in theaters with the male-centered Entourage, the theatrical film based on the HBO raunchy buddy comedy.
Though some reviewers would like to claim that there are no fat jokes in *Spy* (Jender, 2015), the fat jokes are there they are just not blatant. For example, the relationship (or lack-there-of) between Cooper and Fine: she lusts after him but he is clueless, giving her a cheap and ugly cupcake necklace as a gift. As one reviewer puts it, “There could be any number of reasons why Fine doesn’t lust after Susan, but “Spy” makes it seem like he wouldn’t even entertain the thought” (Jacobs, 2015, para. 2). As Jacobs points out, we feel pity here for Cooper as well as the other times that there is an implicit fat joke. One illustration of this is the desexualization of her character through the disguises and weapons that they choose to give her, i.e. cat lady and hemorrhoid cream. I agree with Jacobs: the thing that worked for McCarthy in *Bridesmaids* was the fact that she was confident and we never felt sorry for her. That is missing in *Spy* and it does seem an ideological step backwards for McCarthy’s career, despite the increased praise for the more “sensible environment” of *Spy*.

**Feminism in Spy.**

While it is usually great news that critics enjoy a movie, being pleased with McCarthy’s more palatable role and fitting in with the status quo just does not seem truly in the spirit of much feminist media criticism, especially given the character’s insecurities in this film. Though she does overcome them, in that regard it is the polar opposite of McCarthy’s character in *Bridesmaids*. Her pining after Law’s character and taking a back seat to the action and their relationship due to his suggestion, ultimately sacrificing her own capabilities to support his blundering moves. It seems the film would have been much stronger as a feminist statement without that dynamic even if, again, she actualizes her potential at the end. While the characterization could be believable for the given situation, given how the audience knows
McCarthy’s capabilities as an actress, it seems to constrain her too much and ties in her achievements with a conventionally gendered personality.

Despite the many flaws with the script and character, there is still some threads of popular feminism present. Like McCarthy’s other films it is not always stated explicitly, but rather it is more about the presence of women on screen to a higher degree that one sees in mainstream films, and especially in the spy genre (parody or not). Spy is “transgressive” because “the hero, her boss, her sidekick and the villain are all women. The movie makes no comment about this. It simply is” (Keizer, 2016, para. 2). Even the villain, played by Rose Byrne, “is trying to compete in a man’s world” (Włoszczyńska, 2015, para. 11). “‘The villain role is thrust upon her,’ Feig said” (Włoszczyńska, 2015, para. 12). The film itself “revolves around female power” (Treble, 2015, para. 2) not just in the storyline, but in the presence of the actresses who are “well over 30 and do not possess impossible Hollywood figures” (Treble, 2015, para. 2).

There is also a “female-disempowerment backstory” (Edelstein, 2015, para. 2) because as we see from Cooper’s training tapes, she would have made a great field agent. Instead she was reduced to an analyst because she was wooed by agent Fine and persuaded into working for him. However, Cooper overcomes this and takes her place in the field, but it is also notable that it takes a very unusual circumstance (Fine’s disappearance and the burning of other agent’s identities) for her to be given this opportunity.

**Ghostbusters**

*Ghostbusters* (Pascal, Reitman, & Feig, 2016) showcased many wonderful female comedians but it also brought with it an unprecedented gender-based backlash for a film comedy (Adams, 2016; Sims, 2016a). In a discussion for *Deadline*, Feig reveals what led to the remaking of *Ghostbusters*. He was approached several times by Amy Pascal, former co-chairperson of
Sony Pictures Entertainment and now owner of her own production company, Pascal Pictures. Feig finally agreed because he remembered how much of an effect *Ghostbusters* had on him when he saw it and the impact that it had on the industry; it was “the first time you saw comedy could have scope and stakes and special effects” (Fleming, 2016, para. 4). And because he worked with funny women, he thought what better way to approach this than make a female reboot?

Pascal was a great match as producer for the all-female reboot. Having previously produced *A League of Their Own* and *Little Women*, she was no stranger to a large female ensemble. It was for such movies that she won a Crystal Award from the Women in Film organization. She has consistently been named to *The Hollywood Reporter’s* Women in Entertainment Power 100 list, including being number 1 in 2003 (Plotkin, 2009) and 2009 (THR Staff, 2009).

Feig partnered with Katie Dippold (*The Heat*) again to write the script. The film begins by following Erin Gilbert (Kristen Wiig), a physics professor at Columbia University. She is struggling to fit into the elite crowd at the university and about to have her tenure review when someone approaches her about a ghost in a historic building in New York City. This is how Erin discovers that her co-authored book about ghosts – a previous research area of hers – was relisted online. Worried about the book affecting her tenure she approaches her previous friend and co-author, Abby Yates (Melissa McCarthy), in an attempt to get it taken down. Abby has continued her research of the paranormal at a small community college. Abby is more casual and easygoing than Erin, but not disheveled compared to McCarthy’s previous characters, especially Megan and Tammy. Perhaps the PG-13 rating holds McCarthy back from any representations of the sexuality and offensive language present in her previous roles with Feig as director, but the script
also does not highlight McCarthy’s character nearly to the extent the ensemble-based *Bridesmaids* did. But, even compared to other milder work, she does not play her quirky persona as well as she did say as Sookie in *Gilmore Girls*. In fact, the only part of her persona that is really obvious is the clumsiness. Again, part of this lack of success of this character can be blamed on the script, which will be discussed later in this section.

While visiting Abby, Erin meets Abby’s eccentric colleague, Jillian Holtzman (Kate McKinnon). Abby agrees to remove the book from the internet until after Erin gets tenure if she introduces them to the man who claimed to see a ghost. They all go to the museum to investigate where they see a real ghost. They manage to capture it on video and post it online. All three women subsequently lose their positions at their respective institutions and start a service of their own to help people with paranormal entities. This is how they meet the fourth ghostbuster, MTA worker Patty Tolan (Leslie Jones). Patty comes to them as their second customer and starts hanging around the group offering her knowledge of the city to help catch the ghosts. She also has access to a car (her uncle’s hearse) that the group can use to move their ghost catching equipment; she becomes part of the group through their attempts to catch the ghost. In addition to the four ghostbusters all cast with women, gender reversal also occurs with the hiring of a dimwitted, but eye-candy assistant played by Chris Hemsworth.

From a film industry perspective, the professional relationships in the creation of this movie are complicated given the failed attempts to create a *Ghostbusters* sequel in the past. Sony, the distributor for *Ghostbusters* and the parent company of production company Columbia Pictures, was hacked during the production of the movie. The hack revealed information about a prior attempt at a *Ghostbusters 3* (The Ghostbusters III Blog, n.d.) that was discussed. It also produced an email that many used to claim Amy Pascal was racist. She was then fired by Sony
but still had a severance deal with the company that allowed her to continue to produce the Feig *Ghostbuster* movie. Other troubles included a rumor based on a released email that threatened litigation against Murray (Gilman, 2014), and that the budget for *Ghostbusters* was cut after the Pascal was fired (Owen, 2016). It is speculated that this may have affected the marketing budget.

Despite what was going on with the Sony hack, the headlines for the 2016 *Ghostbusters* reboot focused on another controversy: the trolls that were trashing the movie online. Feig said that from the very start of the project, include himself and the actresses cast, were attacked in very stark terms online:

>I’d never been attacked personally, on this level. When I see them going after my cast, whose only crime is that they were hired by me to do something … they’re being attacked personally about what they look like, who they are, physical things about them. Then, all bets are off. In this project’s history with the Internet, I was getting f*cking hammered from Day 1. Death threats, and then just horrendous attacks. But I kept my head down, all through production. Because 90 percent of the people I was being contacted by on the Internet were huge supporters. People with kids, who were excited, who had daughters who were so empowered, they were making their own *Ghostbusters* costumes and props. But mixed in was this horrendous vitriol. (Fleming, 2016, para. 17)

Even before the movie was released there were 6,500 user reviews on IMDB which Stephanie Merry (2016b) from *The Washington Post* claims is “interesting” (para. 1) considering the movie had not even opened yet. She said, “It's the action comedy that whiny trolls claim they hate because it's bad, rather than because it stars women” (para. 3) But she did not really believe that to be true, so she did some comparisons herself:
Of the 6,654 voters, 3,842, or 57.7 percent, gave the movie one star. A vast majority of the reviewers are men: 4,268, compared to 509 female voters. And the disparity between the way men and women vote is interesting. For example, in the demographic of users aged 18 to 29, 1,669 men averaged a 3.1 rating, while 243 women averaged 7.1. Even a stereotypically female-centric movie like "Pride & Prejudice" or "27 Dresses" doesn't have that kind of stark divide. (para. 4)

These early reviews only included a small percentage of IMDB’s power users, because the movie had not come out yet. The “down-voting” of Ghostbusters perpetuated through the marketing as well, continued in the next section.

Marketing and promotions for Ghostbusters.

The trailer for Ghostbusters 2016 was subsumed by a fan-based paratextual narrative soon after it was released, a narrative that reflects the nature of the trolling discussed above. Fans of the original movie were so upset by the trailer that at the time of its release it became one of the most disliked videos on YouTube. It remains on the top 50 most disliked videos list and it is the only movie trailer on the list (YouTube, 2018). Among the comments -- and even the many otherwise civil criticisms -- about the film, it was hard to ignore the vile misogynistic comments like the ones listed in another piece by Stephanie Merry in The Washington Post (2016a, para. 8):

“Women are just incapable of being funny. What a terrible idea.”
“Feminists ruin the world.”
“Shouldn’t they be in the kitchen?”
“Did this just become a chick flick?”
“I’ll call the real Ghostbusters instead”
“Congrats Sony, you’ve killed another beloved franchise. ‘I know! We’ll get a bunch of unfunny comedic nobodies and put them together in an even more childish and
immature version of an already childish and immature comedy! We’ll sell it to Social Justice Warriors and feminists, since they control SUCH A LARGE PORTION OF THE SERIES DEMOGRAPHIC. What could possibly go wrong?!”

As Merry says, disliking the YouTube trailer became a sort of game. But the one harassed the worst in the bunch was Leslie Jones, an African American comic actress. She was attacked by racist trolls online (Bryant, 2016 & Silman, 2016). In fact, the attacks were so excessive that there was a timeline of events published (Silman, 2016). The harassment against Jones in particular started when,

Milo Yiannopoulos, the alt-right commenter and professional troll who has spearheaded many an online harassment campaign, posted a negative review of *Ghostbusters* on Breitbart that dissed Jones’s “flat-as-a-pancake black stylings.” A number of his followers and other members of the alt-right community began to troll Jones with sexist and racist comments and hateful memes. The tenor and frequency of these hate-tweets ramped up when Yiannopoulos began tweeting at Jones directly as well as sharing fake tweets pretending to be from Jones. (para. 6)

Twitter representatives responded the same night by suspending the accounts that were responsible for the harassment and it seemed to die down for a short time until just over a month later Jones’ personal website was attacked. In reference to Gill’s (2016) Post-postfeminism, it appears the greater the visibility of the women, the harder the forces of hatred and misogyny push back. The response from feminists, like for previous female comedy movies, was to turn the act of attending the movies into a political one (Hornaday, 2016).

The trailer positions itself self-reflexively as a remake of a beloved classic. As Feig admitted later, the callbacks to the original *Ghostbusters* were probably a bit heavy. This is the
first thing that happens in the trailer. A slow piano playing the theme song from the original and text saying “30 years ago four scientists saved New York,” “This summer, a new team will answer the call”. There is even a callback to the original *Ghostbusters* symbol. This is misleading because as the movie carries the plot, it has absolutely nothing to do with the original movie. How it has been described is as a “reboot,” a story of ghostbusters being told in a different universe where the previous stories did not exist.

McCarthy’s character is very physically clumsy in the movie and we see it a little in the trailer where she accidently touches something that is hot. Despite being a reference to one of McCarthy’s favorite SNL performers Chris Farley -- with the line “Ow, that’s gonna leave a mark!” (as Leslie Jones’ character slaps a ghost out of her) -- we can see even from the trailer that most of the actually physical comedy is played by Jones in the role of Patty (a role originally thought of for McCarthy (McHenry, 2016)). McCarthy plays more of a straight edge scientist throughout the film and it may be disappointing to realize most of her physical comedy in the film was shown in the trailer.

*Ghostbusters critical reception and feminism.*

Prior to the movie’s release it received much online fan criticism but many professional critics upon its release thought it had shortcomings as well. Much of this had to do with the removal of potential feminist sensibilities from the film given its blockbuster-sized budget and marketing. Alyssa Rosenberg (2016a) from *The Washington Post* criticized the idea that equality for women in Hollywood meant doing the same thing as men. She explains that the story of doubting the women throughout the movie could be so closely related to feminist struggles, but the movie did not do anything with it and she blames it on the size of the production. In some ways, she is taking the theme of the mainstreaming of McCarthy and emphasizing its ideological
blandness. She wrote, “It’s proof that the more prominent and well-funded a movie about women gets, and the greater the hopes for its box office are, the less specifically female (or black, or gay, or whatever) that movie is allowed to be” (para. 7). Rosenberg also claims that she is “dismayed by the idea that the uproar around ‘Ghostbusters’ has pushed feminists into championing Paul Feig’s remake, an intermittently funny movie that largely wastes a good cast and what ought to have been a much sharper set of concepts” (para. 3). Or even more disappointing that “its box-office success or disappointment may have meaningful implications for other, more truly innovative, more explicitly feminist and certainly more funny movie projects” (para. 10). This expression seems to be a turn from original championing of the Feig’s work on *Bridesmaids*, and of McCarthy in *Spy*.

Rosenberg is not alone in wishing for more from the film. Caryn James (2016) from *Hollywood Reporter* agreed that the script left much to be desired. There was a lack of development of female relationships and female issues in the film. She cites examples like sexism in academe and the shallowly explained background of Wiig and McCarthy’s friendship. Garber (2016) says the movie is “almost painfully—aware of itself” (para. 6), calling attention to the previous *Ghostbuster* movies and perhaps being too tied to that male-based concept. Lawson (2016) says that the performances from McCarthy and Wiig “further deaden an already lifeless movie” (para. 3). Lawson adds that their poor performance most likely had to do with a poor script with pressure from the studio to focus on special effects and pay homage to the original. Lane (2016) said “McCarthy has her sharpest exchanges with a hapless deliveryman” (para. 4), a brief scene. Lane suggests Feig may have had a hard time directing this movie in comparison to his others because of its PG rating while his previous McCarthy movies were rated R. Overall it seems Feig has pushed McCarthy so far into a mainstream corner that he has gone beyond
suppressing her wild persona to a likeable blockbuster character, and in this case marginalized her to other characters such as McKinnon’s Jillian.

Even Feig himself criticized the movie a year after its release. In an interview he states that he believes,

[S]ome of the difficulty with Ghostbusters stemmed from people taking it so seriously. …even the people who wanted to support it. I think that hurt us a little bit because we became so much of a cause. A summer audience is like, “Well, fuck you. I don’t want to go to a cause. I just want to watch a funny movie.” It’s a great regret in my life that that movie didn’t do better. I love it and I know it’s not a perfect movie — none of my movies are — but it was only supposed to be there to entertain people. Since then, it’s settled into being a movie. The greatest moment was when we won the Kid’s Choice Award, beating Star Wars and Captain America. It felt like kids were just watching it and not bringing all the baggage. (Fox, 2017, para. 7)

Ironically, likely what Feig was referring to was not any “causes” found in the messages of the film itself, but rather the pre-release trolling that made the existence of the film a gendered cause.

With a Rotten Tomatoes score of 74% (Ghostbusters, n.d.) and a Metacritic score of 60% (Ghostbusters, n.d.), many critics praised the movie, saying the normally women in ensemble movies are in limited roles but, “With the new Ghostbusters crew, we are presented with a range of women: geeky scientists, quirky engineers, and tough historians” (Sarkeesian, 2016, para. 5). In spite of heavy criticism about the movie, Feig does not regret is the inclusion of women in STEM fields. In an interview he expressed his delight with the results, “I get contacted by women and girls who are now interested in science and women will write me and say, ‘If I’d had this movie when I was a kid I’d be an engineer by now’” (Derschowitz, 2017, para. 6).
Despite the backlash, underwhelming box office, and potentially watered-down message, the film did arguably have some popular feminist elements – or at least empowering elements – to it. Below are photos from the *Ghostbusters* Los Angeles premiere that shows Kristen Wiig meeting some young girls dressed in ghostbuster costumes (see Figures 5-4 and 5-5). As one observer describes this scene, “They were part of a dance troupe that performed during the event, and the look on their faces while meeting the former Saturday Night Live star spoke volumes. …[T]hese snaps of Kristen high-fiving and laughing with a group of elated-looking little girls is more than enough to silence any sexism. How excited do they look to meet a superhero role model?” (Stephens, 2016, para. 1).

Figures 5-4 and 5-5: Kristen Wiig meeting young performers
Conclusion

Though this journey has been great for both Feig and McCarthy’s careers, it is to the detriment of McCarthy’s persona that was subsumed to the mainstream in *Bridesmaids*. With each subsequent Feig project McCarthy signed on for it erased the parts of Megan’s persona that made it both bold and likeable and reduced the McCarthy persona back down to where McCarthy was when she was playing Sookie on *Gilmore Girls*. And McCarthy still must deal with subtle fat jokes despite reaching a pinnacle point in her career.

Through the journey away from *Bridesmaids*, despite having Katie Dippold as a female writer on *The Heat* and *Ghostbusters*, these movies, as well as *Spy*, at some level add gender equality to male-oriented genres, but seem to push less of a feminist perspective and, at worst, are just a reiteration of men’s films. *The Heat* is a replica of buddy cop comedy genre where the movies are played over and over by men, *Spy* is an homage to James Bond, a heavily masculine movie series, and *Ghostbusters* was a remake of a movie from the 1980s that featured an all-male cast of ghostbusters.

However, they were all self-aware of the fact there were women in place of what would usually be a man. This is brilliant and problematic. Brilliant, because it seems as though Feig figured out a way to play Hollywood by providing them with answers to sub-genres or franchises that have done well in the past but still allowing for the door to open to more women in comedies. It is problematic because this does not allow for stories that truly belong to women. Stories that are written and directed by women about their own experiences, rather than comedies of gender reversal.

Beyond that, none of these films did quite as well as *Bridesmaids* and the studios began to think it was an anomaly (Fallon, 2013). With few comedy movies starring women many felt
that they had to attend these films for political reasons, despite the quality of the movie itself. And despite the effort of many women that attended these films their efforts are brushed to the side because it is assumed that they would go anyway (Fallon, 2013).

In a 2016 article on Deadline (Grobar, 2016), Feig revisited the fact that so much pressure was put on Bridesmaids to succeed to open the door a little more for women in the industry. He revealed that while they thought Bridesmaids would be a failure, it was a success. Much to his relief, as he felt it would be his fault if it stopped progress toward women gaining access to film in Hollywood. But just as disturbing, he said producers approached him and asked him if he really wanted to be pigeonholed as a women’s director. His response to that was, “Do you pull Scorsese aside and say, ‘Mmm…you’re working with a lot of men…”” (para. 5).

His work landed him an award for distinguished artist for the year 2017 from the American Film Institute Conservatory Directing Workshop for Women. The program mentors women each year with the end goal to “increase the number of women working as directors and showrunners” (N’Duka, 2017, para. 1). Feig was also the first male honoree at the Athena film festival (Sage, 2016). Feig said it was not his goal to be the one to “make all the female-led movies” (Bahr, 2016, para. 22). “Hollywood, however, is not governed solely by the bottom line, but also by ‘comps’. It wants proven stars and proven properties. That limits the talent pool and leaves less room for originality” (Bahr, 2016, para. 25).

So, indeed perhaps there is a little truth to “The Bridesmaids Effect” referred to in the beginning of this chapter. Bridesmaids did open the door for other female comedies post-Bridesmaids. However, many of the successful films have been Feig’s movies and also starred McCarthy. McCarthy has made quite a few movies on her own as well. Therefore, a more appropriate title for what is going on would be “The Melissa McCarthy Effect.” The Melissa
McCarthy Effect includes her on-screen personas, the style of her humor, her economic success, and her influence as a film star. McCarthy’s roles often bridge the gap between the masculine and feminine. This is done through her physical humor and the genres she plays in. The success is not without a cost. In comedies, McCarthy reined in her wild and unique representations, perhaps to be more palatable within a patriarchal industry or, at least, to fit in with conventional predictions of box-office success. We see an uneasy recreation of aspects of Megan in later McCarthy characters, with some being more tragic (Identity Thief), some being slightly more palatable even with still strong echoes of Megan (The Heat) and others being much more conventional, even “Sookie- or Molly-esque” (Spy, Ghostbusters). (Arguably, the most creative later manifestation of the “Megan-esque” was her Oscar-nominated turn in the mainly dramatic Can You Ever Forgive Me?) We see patriarchal influences not only in McCarthy’s post-Bridesmaids roles – the range of unconventional women main characters is constrained – but also in the lack of risk-taking behavior in Hollywood’s decisions to continuously hire men, like Paul Feig, in creative roles and to more easily approve comedies that play to a male audience such as buddy cop movies, spy films, and remakes. The door to women’s comedy on the big screen has only been opened to a select few. Though we have seen some success in front of the camera for women, it is the work behind the camera that needs to catch up.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Reviewing McCarthy’s Comedy Career So Far

To reiterate why I chose to do this project, I was intrigued by the excitement over *Bridesmaids* and that people were calling it feminist. I was especially intrigued by the claims that this one movie was going to open the doors for women in comedy. Through my research, however, I found that within the patriarchal film industry it was not that simple. It was McCarthy who has had the most visible success in Hollywood coming out of that film. Certainly, McCarthy’s characters are unconventional representations of women, and there is much to admire in the tenacity of, confidence of, and embrace of women in characters like Megan. Her mix of experience in improv and in more conventional television seemed to create room for a breakout persona; other performers may follow a similar path. Perhaps McCarthy’s economic and critical success helped to lead the way for others like Amy Schumer. Her partnerships with Feig show how Hollywood insiders can diversify genres. However, I found several major issues that I will mention here and expand on below. First, throughout McCarthy’s work there are some themes that seem to counter the claims of feminism, such as perpetuating fat stereotypes. There were also challenges from the industry executives against the creative leaders that prevented projects from being implemented with more feminist values. In turn, it seems there was an underlying desire to make McCarthy more marketable to a larger audience and in this effort her persona was pushed back into a comfortable representation for those that may have been otherwise threatened by her unorthodox representation of her gender and presentation of her body. Further, the need to obtain male spectatorship for profit and any success in doing so – as well as backlash trolling that can occur when a film is “too feminist” – overshadows the efforts of women to champion these women’s films.
Perpetuating fat stereotypes.

Many of McCarthy’s roles discussed in this project simultaneously push boundaries and perpetuate stereotypes. Though the representation of the fat body is needed in media, there are so few instances of it that McCarthy’s representations stand out. Despite the number of appearances from McCarthy, it does not create normalcy for the fat body because she is just one person. These appearances are further complicated by the fact that they are comedic roles and do not have the ability to deal with social issues in depth, and in fact perpetuate stereotypes of the fat body through both explicit and implicit fat jokes. Furthermore, there is a lack of availability of roles for anyone in Hollywood that does not fit physical norms.

Despite the realism that show co-creator, Mark Roberts likes to claim is in Mike & Molly (Roe, 2010), the substantial reliance on fat jokes, even if only for a short period of time in the series, sets the tone for the series in its entirety. These fat jokes overshadow any potential that the show had to show the real struggles of working class, or fat characters, because they are just seen as a joke.

Though many of McCarthy’s movies and shows have moved away from the use of fat jokes, there are still fat stigmas that are perpetuated throughout many of her characters’ narratives. One example of this is Sookie’s obsession with food (Mintz & Mintz, 2010) in Gilmore Girls, her clumsiness throughout the show and her lack of relationship experience (Mobley, 2014). We also see these relationship issues in Samantha Who? in which McCarthy must lie to get a friend and her theoretical relationship with Samantha’s boyfriend is troublesome given that she expresses she would lock him up, presumably to keep him for herself. Tied to these relationship issues is the issue of desexualization of her characters. The food association of Sookie and Jackson’s relationship in Gilmore Girls is one example but another is Spy with the
ridiculous disguises they give her that make her look like Mrs. Claus and lack of acknowledgement of Agent Fine that he could even possibly have a relationship with Susan.

Whether intentional or not, these tropes are picked up on by reviewers and used to shorthand a description of McCarthy’s character into a stereotype. This is a trend that started in McCarthy’s earlier movie career like with *Pumpkin* and *The Backup Plan* where the reviewers use physical descriptors to draw a picture of her character. Unfortunately, it is a trend that continues despite how much her career grows. We see more blatant prejudice in articles like the *Marie Claire* piece “Should fatties get a room?” (Kelly, 2010) on *Mike & Molly* or Rex Reed’s (2013) abysmal review of *Identity Thief*. If reviewers are making such conclusions for McCarthy’s characters, one might assume that many in the audience may do the same. The problem then is that it is hard to tell if they are laughing with or at McCarthy.

In 2019, with McCarthy as an established superstar, there have been other portrayals of fat women as central characters, in particular the Jillian Bell film *Brittany Runs a Marathon* and *Shrill*, the Netflix series starring SNL actress Aidy Bryant. Although neither of these are particularly blockbuster media entities, their existence and ability to nuance issues of body and gender may owe something to McCarthy’s characters and success.

**Gender and the creation of media.**

The presence of women on screen and women in the crew off screen is one form of feminism related to McCarthy’s work that was discussed in this paper. However, despite the appearance of a popular feminist victory in many of McCarthy’s shows and movies, it was found that many of the creators had to fight for their voices to be heard and still had to make sacrifices. Even still, some of the roles that McCarthy played were originally written for men, taking away
authenticity in the portrayal of a woman’s experience. This makes these representations feminist by comparison to what is otherwise offered as representation.

The visibility of women in *Gilmore Girls* was exceptional and on a smaller network, with show creator Amy Sherman-Palladino having significant creative control. Sherman-Palladino was able to hire talent like McCarthy, even with initial pushback from producers, but she was still met with challenges in other areas. For example, network executives pushed Sherman-Palladino to include more testosterone-laden themes and characters (Stern, 2012) so as not to alienate the male audience, creating the character of Luke. In *Bridesmaids* Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo were talked into including gross-out moments by “Bromance King” (Walker, 2009) and producer, Judd Apatow. Also, the placement of McCarthy in roles meant for men such as Diana in *Identity Thief* or Molly in *Mike & Molly* points to issues of reign of masculinity in Hollywood; these were roles that had to be repurposed, not written initially for women. And in McCarthy’s most economically successful roles, there was the presence of a Hollywood man, Paul Feig (who in turn was championed by Judd Apatow).

Though the influence of these changes still allowed for successful media. The arch of Luke and Lorelai’s love was popular over many seasons of *Gilmore Girls* and through Apatow’s style we got McCarthy’s Megan, with a mix of confidence, body positivity, assertive sexual desire, and a moral center. Still, there is missed potential to develop the narrative of women in both *Gilmore Girls* and *Bridesmaids*. We can see the success of going against gender stereotypes in *The Heat* for which it had been suggested that the creators were canceling out their audience “because men aren't going to want to see a movie about two women being cops and women won't want to see women playing cops and not wearing pink fluffy dresses” (Lang, 2013, para. 3).
Feminisms in McCarthy’s work.

Discussing the feminism in McCarthy’s work is complicated because it exists on different levels in the creation of and in the text/paratexts of the shows and movies. McCarthy’s work is popular feminist because of her presence on screen, not only as a woman, but a fat woman. Calling McCarthy’s humor women’s humor is a little complicated since the genres she plays in, the bodily humor she uses, and even some of those roles that she plays are masculine. Because she is a woman navigating these fields, it can play as women’s comedy also. The question of whether the content in her films is also feminist, is even more complicated. Some movies are more clearly post-feminist due to some of their messages, such as *The Heat* where the sexist environment is simply accepted. *The Heat*, however, also has feminist humor because of the way that McCarthy takes charge and how she insults the men in the department, including their boss, and mocks their masculinity.

Overall, though McCarthy’s work has elements of feminism in text and in the presence of women on screen and behind the camera, it is not feminist in a way results in a systemic change for women as a whole or even across the industry. In this regard the reviewers that first called *Bridesmaids* feminist, it was part of a feminist visibility (Gill, 2016) or a popular feminism (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer’s, 2017). The very act of suggesting that it was a social responsibility to attend and consume these women’s films is promoting popular feminism. The movies and shows do not discuss any feminist issues or take part in any political action.

The devolution of Megan.

As McCarthy and Feig’s partnership grew so did the budget of their movies, but as the budget grew so did the impact of the patriarchal industry through the control of the content and ultimately the taming of Megan. McCarthy’s persona was cut down to a point that she was
beyond palatable, and just plain boring. In *The Heat* Mullins was a shell of Megan, making as many threats but not carrying through, and there was not the same development of female friendship that we saw in *Bridesmaids*. While *Spy* brings back the importance of the female relationship with the friendship between Susan and Nancy, and even Susan and Rayna, the importance of these portrayals is weighed down by Susan’s lack of confidence and the fact that we never felt sorry for her. Though many critics praised this character as the best of McCarthy’s work, particularly in comparison to her more crass representations in other films, the character is more reminiscent of Molly from *Mike & Molly* and Sookie from *Gilmore Girls* and reinforces previous reviewers’ comments on what can be perceived as essentialist views of gender stereotypes. Then there was *Ghostbusters* where McCarthy’s character matched or even surpassed the palpability of Susan in *Spy* and fell flat.

As discussed in the previous section, it is challenging for creative talent to get the upper hand in Hollywood. Feig was able to do so by playing to subgenres that have done well in the past, like buddy cop movies or spy movies. Through his success he was able to bring many women to the screen both in front of and behind the camera; however, like with *Gilmore Girls* and *Bridesmaids*, where through creative restrictions, we do not get to hear and see women’s own experiences.

**Erasing the female audience.**

Having McCarthy play in subgenres dominated by men like buddy cop, *Bond* homages, or even doing a female reboot of *Ghostbusters* perhaps superficially expands the boundaries of women, but not as much as the creation of unique feminist-centered genres might. Putting women in a visible role that is normally played by a man is more of a feminist visibility (Gill, 2016) than a feminist action. As explained in the previous section, though Feig was able to have
success in bringing women on screen through this strategy, it ultimately plays to the male audience. Upon reviewing the marketing campaigns for Feig’s movies in the previous chapters we see that after *Bridesmaids*, all the subsequent films were marketed to men. Even when there are nods to a feminist sensibility present in the movie, the pressure to cater to the male audience can distract from this. Given that the trailers can stand alone as their own text (Gray, 2010a), we see this push to obtain a male audience throughout the work as well.

Though the movies were not perfect, female audiences made it a social responsibility to see these films as a way of trying to tell the industry that they want more content for them. This political move took away the enjoyment of the movie for some. Even more harsh is the reaction of *Ghostbusters* fans to the reboot with an all-female cast. In return, women pushed back even harder and championed the mediocre film even more. But all of this was misplaced effort because none of these films did quite as well as *Bridesmaids* and the studios began to think it was an anomaly (Fallon, 2013). Beyond that, the lack of risk-taking behavior is still present in Hollywood’s decisions and the door to women’s comedy. They are still in it for the money and that includes the continued catering to the male audience.

To reiterate what Linda Obst said, “You sell a movie to men because women will go anyway—you won’t lose a single female viewer” (Fallon, 2013, para. 16). But because it is assumed that women would buy tickets anyway, regardless of the success of the movie, “the starved female audience who will turn up to *The Heat* [or any movie] because they’re clamoring for a film for them won’t be given credit, and therefore more female-driven comedies won’t be greenlit” (Fallon, 2013, para. 17).
Future Research

Though this project was an in-depth look at the texts, paratexts, and industry surrounding one star, Melissa McCarthy, there are many aspects of the paper that can be expanded on in future research. First would be the inclusion of other female comedians who do not fit the Hollywood stereotype that have emerged since McCarthy’s stardom such as Rebel Wilson and Amy Schumer. In addition, McCarthy’s career itself is far from over and scholars may wish to revisit her impact on the industry in the future.

Scholars interested in intersectional women’s studies may also wish to do similar in-depth studies on the comedy genre for women of color. Other researchers may also wish to expand the study of the state of women in Hollywood to other genres and media as well. There is a lot of movement in Hollywood right now to help change that landscape for women, as I will discuss below.

Industry Impact

*Bridesmaids* as a Millennial *Thelma and Louise*?

In a review for *Bridesmaids* Chin (2011) says “When a female-centric movie with a colour spectrum outside the usual palette of fairy-dust pink manages to achieve commercial success, it is, therefore, a cause for much celebration and introspection” (para. 2). In praising *Bridesmaids* for doing just this, Chin calls attention to *Thelma and Louise* saying this was the last time a movie featuring women in this kind of narrative had received as much critical praise. What some thought would be a sign of change in the movie industry for *Thelma and Louise* ended up not playing out much better than the ending of the movie itself. One of the stars of *Thelma and Louise*, Geena Davis, bluntly stated 16 years later, “It hasn’t changed at all” (Noveck, 2017, para. 4). As discussed in the previous chapter, what some thought would be a *Bridesmaids* effect, turned into a Melissa McCarthy effect. For several years
following *Bridesmaids* McCarthy had success on the big screen (though not to the same capacity as *Bridesmaids*) and it appeared that she was the only one to really benefit from *Bridesmaids*. Though McCarthy, too, was affected by a patriarchal industry which constrained her on-screen persona. The initial optimistic prognosis was soon countered. In a 2013 interview producer Lynda Obst says,

> Look back to *Bridesmaids*. It was really funny and did well internationally and created new stars. It proved that there was a female market. Instead, the story became that the movie overperformed. Like 50,000 scripts turned up on managers’ desks for two weeks, but no one was willing to take a shot on them. (Fallon, 2013, para. 17)

Perhaps, though, after seven years and several attempts there may be some cautious indications of success. One industry analysis noted in 2018 that “Movies are finally catching up to the possibility that women can be wild and funny on their own terms” (Erbland, 2018, n.p.). And it is true to an extent that *Bridesmaids* did open the door for some female comedies like *Trainwreck, Bad Moms, Rough Night, Girls Trip*. However, there is no clear progressive pattern. None of these films matched the box office success of *Bridesmaids*. The reality is, even with successful films, it is more like they "inch open the door but they don’t throw it wide open," as Martha Lauzen of San Diego State University's Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film said (Zuckerman, 2013, para. 4). Looking at 2019, there have been some interesting developments with films like *Booksmart*, the high-school comedy featuring two girl characters in raunchy situations, with one being a non-thin actress (Beanie Feldstein) and directed by Olivia Wilde. However, despite rave reviews, the film only generated $24 million in the global box office (Book Smart, n.d.).

This discussion of *Bridesmaids’* gendered filmmaking legacy is reminiscent of the discussion of *Thelma and Louise* in the 90s; an excerpt from a piece on *Thelma and Louise* from 1991 reads claims, “What the success of Thelma & Louise with male audiences suggests is that
if you write the parts right and execute them with conviction, the sex of the players is no object” (Greenberg et al., 1991, p. 22). This was clearly true for Bridesmaids as well. There is no data for an international release for Thelma and Louise, but we can see the data from McCarthy’s movies compared to their male counterparts. The thing is that despite the success of movies like Bridesmaids and Spy they did not do as well worldwide as The Hangover or Kingsman: The Secret Service (Jones, 2017 & Medina, 2018).

In addition to finances being a huge part of Hollywood decision making the makeup of the industry itself has a big impact on what we see. The industry is controlled by men; according to Jones (2017), all 18 CEOs of major Hollywood studies are male. There may be some truth to this claim that “fun films about real female characters are never going to get green-lit as easily as their male-fronted equivalents” (para. 16). Jones illustrates their point by quoting producer Michael Shamberg from the 2011 New Yorker profile of Anna Faris: “‘If you make a guys’ comedy, you can get girls,’ he said. ‘But if you make a girls’ comedy the guys will go, ‘That’s just chick stuff’” (para. 16).

**Is Feig the new Ridley Scott?**

In the early Star Wars era Ridley Scott created Alien. Though the movie was nothing like Star Wars it may have had a better chance at playing out due to its setting in space (Brooks, 2009). The movie was led by the character Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver. A heroine in the lead role of a science fiction movie was not common. The movie did well, though not nearly as well as Star Wars. (Alien is 294 on the Box Office Mojo all-time adjusted list, whereas Star Wars is number 2). This movie launched Scott’s career and a few of his movies have female leads that some believe made an impact on cinema; he also directed the gender-bending G.I. Jane.
In a way Feig’s career does appear to somewhat mimic Scott’s, but Feig has fully embraced the “director of women” title and seems to, at least as of this writing, made this his calling. When asked if he felt guilty that he, a man, must step in and provide these roles for women Feig said,

I do feel weird about it. Selfishly, I loved it. I’m thrilled that I get to do this because I love doing it but there should be more women directors because the imbalance is just too great right now and there’s no real reason for it. I’m slowly getting to a position where I can possibly hire directors so I want to try to get as many female directors working as I can but the whole industry as a whole needs to catch up. The goal for me was not to be the only guy who gets to do female-led comedies. I’m happy I get to but the excuse for Hollywood shouldn’t be, “Oh that’s what he does, and so he’s the only one who can do it.” That’s silly.

(Lattanzio, 2015, para. 13)

And while he is happy to fill this position, it seems that he thinks it is crazy that it is something to be celebrated in the first place. “It’s an amazing sign of progress, but I think it feels a little silly to be celebrating it… It’s good, but it’s not enough. And this should have happened years and years and years ago” (Sperling, 2015, para. 2).

Feig also acknowledges that issue is not just in front of the camera and he hires women for his films as well (Riley, 2015). And he works with them in detail. For example, the relationship he developed with Kate Dipold, the writer of The Heat that was discussed in the previous chapter.

Feminism in Hollywood Outside Comedy

Though Bridesmaids may have only inched open the door in Hollywood for other R-rated female-fronted comedies, outside of comedy, Bridesmaids has been part of an overall culture that
has pushed back against the patriarchy in Hollywood as a whole. For example, in 2017, the three top-grossing movies all had female leads. These were Daisy Ridley in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, Emma Watson in the live action *Beauty and the Beast*, and Gal Gadot in *Wonder Woman* (Fuster, 2017). According to Fuster, it had been 59 years since the last time this happened with Mitzi Gaynor in *South Pacific*, Rosalind Russell in *Auntie Mame*, and Elizabeth Taylor in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Though women did not consistently hold the main roles in the top movies for the years following *Bridesmaids* they took a stand in other ways like through the Weinstein scandal in which multiple women took down media mogul Harvey Weinstein by exposing multiple instances of sexual abuse. This led to a watershed moment in the industry where multiple people in power, mostly men, were toppled because of their histories of sexual abuse. In the entertainment industry these include Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K., Matt Lauer, Russell Simmons, Gary Goddard, James Franco, Jeremy Piven, Stan Lee, Bill Cosby, Tom Brokaw, R. Kelly, Morgan Freeman, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Cuba Gooding Jr. (Chicago Tribune, 2019).

**Me Too**

These actions reignited the Me Too movement originally started by Tarana Burke in 2006. “Burke coined the phrase ‘Me Too’ as a way to help women who had survived sexual violence” (Chicago Tribune, 2019, para. 1). The Me Too movement moved beyond highlighting issues of patriarchy in Hollywood and encouraged survivors of sexual abuse to share their stories and expose their abusers in other industries such as politics, the restaurant industry, the newspaper industry, higher education, professional sports, and the opera (Chicago Tribune, 2019). Though the efforts of the Me Too movement are still playing out at multiple levels, the efforts of the women survivors, the “silence breakers”, of a few high-profile cases were
highlighted as these women received *Time Magazine*’s person of the year (Chicago Tribune, 2019).

**Time’s Up**

Time’s Up is the action plan movement that followed Me Too. This non-profit organization would provide support to correct the gender power imbalance and issues of sexual assault not only in Hollywood but for blue-collar workers as well (Buckley, 2018).

As the *New York Times* article states, it began with:

— A legal defense fund, backed by $13 million in donations, to help less privileged women — like janitors, nurses and workers at farms, factories, restaurants and hotels — protect themselves from sexual misconduct and the fallout from reporting it.

— Legislation to penalize companies that tolerate persistent harassment, and to discourage the use of nondisclosure agreements to silence victims.

— A drive to reach gender parity at studios and talent agencies that has already begun making headway.

— And a request that women walking the red carpet at the Golden Globes speak out and raise awareness by wearing black.

(para. 3-6)

The watershed moment that led women and men to reveal their harassers and rapists was epic. A visual display of solidarity may be appreciated by some but only means so much if no action is taken to right the wrongs and fix the situations that led to this power imbalance in Hollywood in the first place. While all elements of Time’s Up’s mission were/are wanted and needed the most important one then is “a drive to reach gender parity at studios and talent agencies” (Buckley,
2018, para. 5). Despite both the progress of such movements as Me Too and Time’s Up there are still structural disparities in the film industry regarding gender.

**We Still Need More Women Behind the Camera**

To paraphrase Marcie Bianco (2017), women do not need to be empowered, they need to have power. While it is great to see women on screen more than before and to see some women of different body types and ages, it is not enough. We need the creation of the movies, at all levels, to have additional participation from women. Only then will we see movies in which women truly hold the power, instead of just being empowered. As Bianco said, “the missing link between hope and change is power” (para. 10).

While discussing *The Heat*, Martha Lauzen said, “Social change occurs very slowly in big businesses” (Lang, 2013, para. 20). We saw this happen with *Bridesmaids* already, with many projects being put on hold to see how *Bridesmaids* would perform and despite its success, it did not see many of these projects come to light (Whipp, 2015). As noted in the introduction of this project, men outnumber women across the board in most roles (Facts to Know About Women in Hollywood, n.d.).

If we recall the roles that McCarthy was in that were originally conceived for a man to play like her role on *Mike & Molly*, (Barnhart, 2010) or her role in *Identity Thief* (Fleming, 2011) or that once she auditioned for *Bridesmaids* that her improv carried much of the role (Penn, 2011). If more women were writing, directing and producing as well as acting, imagine what roles would be available for McCarthy, women like McCarthy and women in general. “We need roles like Bond’s, or Jack Ryan’s, or Captain Kirk’s that are designed to be occupied by a rotating series of women. Borrowing Bond’s tux might be a fun fantasy. But real power means a role we don’t have to give back to the men” (Rosenberg, 2016b, para. 8).
Bridesmaids Does Not Have to be the Next Thelma and Louise

Despite disagreement on whether Scott’s characters were revolutionary (Brooks, 2009), we can argue that indeed there was no sweeping change after Thelma and Louise or Alien. Though Bridesmaids and Feig’s other films seem to be taking a similar path there are things that can be done to extend the impact. Namely, those that have the power currently, like Feig, can hand the reigns over to women or use their power to help women climb the ladder in Hollywood.

Steps toward gender equality behind the camera can begin to be realized by organizations like ReFrame for which Feig is a member (Anderson, 2018). ReFrame uses a peer-to-peer approach, in which ReFrame Ambassadors engage with senior, industry decision-makers at Partner Companies to implement ReFrame programs. Its goals are to provide research, support, and a practical framework that can be used by Partner Companies to mitigate bias during the creative decision-making and hiring process, celebrate successes, and measure progress toward a more gender-representative industry on all levels.

(ReFrame Sponsors, n.d.).

Feig is an ambassador for ReFrame which means when he finds a woman, he knows can do a job, he advocates for them to be hired (Anderson, 2018). Those film and television projects that are successful in reaching gender parity receive the ReFrame stamp. Feig earned this for his 2018 film, A Simple Favor. The stamp is determined by a point process where the film needs to achieve at least 4 points, 2 of which need to be earned by having women in top spots including directing, writing, and lead roles (ReFrame Stamp 2019 Submission Form, n.d.). McCarthy has also been able to receive the ReFrame stamp on Life of the Party, a film produced by her own production company.
What Will Come From It?

Will the potential to move away from a patriarchal Hollywood to a more feminist one open the door for more women in the industry? With women in the top creative spots, it also means the potential for a greater representation on screen. It means the possibility for the roles and stories that are more representative like *Bridesmaids*. It means the opportunity of seeing more actresses like McCarthy that do not fit the traditional Hollywood mold. With this comes the eventual normalization of different body types, ages, genders, etc. This visibility is the only thing that could rid McCarthy’s movies of the double-edged sword of visibility of a fat body in comedy. With normalization, when we laugh in the theater we can be laughing with McCarthy and not at her.

Additionally, if we give more women the chance to create and star in films, we take the pressure off each film that has several women starring or working behind the scenes. There would be no pressure to go see Feig’s next comedy movie just because it is an act of support for Hollywood to make more woman-centric movies. Instead we can attend a woman-centric movie because it is a great movie.

And most importantly, to paraphrase Jenno Topping’s retelling of her conversation with Nina Jacobson, with enough representation we can allow women to be as mediocre as the male directors, and not have a pressure for each move they make to be fabulous (Gardiner, 2016).
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