
A Dissertation in
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by
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ABSTRACT

In the post-recessionary era, we see the emergence of new women-centric sitcoms (and dramedies) that feature elements of economic hardship tied to the anxieties felt by most in our society as a whole. Increasingly, many of these programs have moved away from the traditional workplace-based sitcom toward the work-related sitcom/dramedy, in which the characters are more often in need of work than actually employed. Feminist scholars have argued in the past that workplace sitcoms have been a bastion for more feminist-minded portrayals of career-oriented, independent women (Dow, 196). Newer work-related comedies instead often highlight themes of unstable or insecure employment or organizational status. In many cases, women characters are framed as the most economically unstable, which is a change from previous portrayals. With the move away from workplace-based sitcoms, we see fewer and fewer of these organizationally-stable, often strong, women characters on television.

This dissertation investigates these post-recessionary televisual trends concerning women in (and out of) the workplace through the examination of nine situation comedies (and dramedies), spanning nearly 600 episodes in total, from four different networks. The nine programs examined are Community, Parks and Recreation, The Office, 30 Rock (all from NBC), 2 Broke Girls (CBS), Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23 (ABC), Enlightened, Girls, and Veep (the latter three from HBO). My study examines how post-recessionary anxiety has given rise to an increasing number of women characters being shown outside of the workplace, or at best struggling to stay afloat in their already-existing, unstable jobs. I argue that with the decline of workplace-based sitcoms and the influx of women-centric, work-related sitcoms, strong women characters and situations where these women can flourish are increasingly being replaced by characters and situations that represent the continued cultural shift to the anxieties and ideologies typical of postfeminism and justified by a post-recession economy. Additionally, my project
aims to answer, what exactly are the (post)feminist messages being put forth in today’s work-related sitcoms about women (and, by proxy, men) as organizational and economic beings in this post-recession era?

To answer this question, although feminist textual analysis is a constant tool throughout the dissertation, I apply different methods to analyze the programs: the application of a “viewing strip” (a concept borrowed from Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983/1994), toward a network in which four related programs in a row aired; the employment of character analysis, toward two comedies that applied the broadest use of humor and archetype characters; and the examination of “paratexts” (a term borrowed from Gray, 2010), in the case of controversial and polarizing programs. In the process of employing these different approaches, I uncovered two separate phenomena regarding portrayals of working women and the critical response to these portrayals. The first phenomenon I have dubbed “Post-Recessionary Sexism.” This term extends Douglas’s (2010) concept of Enlightened Sexism to today’s post-recessionary backdrop and its new manifestations of nuanced sexism and patriarchy, including the trivialization of sexual harassment in the workplace. “The Critical Double Standard” is my label for the second phenomenon. The concept stems from the highly-gendered nature of critic reviews surrounding women protagonists. Together, both Post-Recessionary Sexism and The Critical Double Standard paint a telling picture of how working women of post-recessionary sitcoms (and dramedies) are being portrayed and perceived.
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CHAPTER 1:
‘IS EVERYONE HERE AS TRAPPED AS I AM?’: INTRODUCING THE STUDY OF TELEVISUAL PORTRAYALS OF WORKING WOMEN IN POST-RECESSION COMEDY

As a feminist, I believe that patriarchy is alive and well, that women’s attempts at self-definition and self-determination continue to be marginalized, silenced, and stymied in myriad ways (despite descriptions of contemporary times as “postfeminist”), and that popular culture and television play key roles in that process. –Bonnie J. Dow, 1996, pp. xi-xii

I’m trapped. I can’t live here forever. I need to make money. Your work is your life. Life is your work. When you’re treated like shit, that’s all you are. You have to stand up for yourself or you’re nothing. You’ll lose whatever humanity you have left. You have to fight. But what am I fighting for? To keep this sick job where we spy on our fellow workers? And look for ways to rip them off? Is everyone here as trapped as I am? Is she trapped? Is he? Is he? –Amy Jellicoe, Enlightened, 2011, Season 1, Episode 8

A New Dawn for Working Women on Television—But Perhaps a Step Back

The white noise of a television screen flickers on. With it, the words “HBO Entertainment” appear in the center. Then, just as quickly as it begins, the white noise surrounding the words fade to black—accompanied by the familiar crescendo noting that an HBO program is about to start. All that is left is the branding, which lingers a moment longer for the viewer to take in. Soon, this too fades away and, with it, the series begins. As the word “Enlightened” appears on a white screen, a woman can be heard sobbing. The title screen fades and we see the source of the cries—a woman hunched over in a bathroom stall, the camera only allowing us to see the crown of her head as she weeps to herself. She slowly lifts her head and reveals an expression of pure anguish. Tears and streaks of mascara run down her face. Her
mouth quivers as she continues to sob. This is the moment in which we meet Amy Jellicoe for the first time. This is the first time we see her suffering—but it will not be the last.

As Amy continues to cry in the stall, two of her women co-workers walk into the bathroom. Amy hears them and stifles her whimpering, keeping her presence unknown. The women begin gossiping about a woman who had an affair with the boss and is now getting fired for it. The look of distress on Amy’s face quickly turns to a look of rage; it becomes apparent that the women are talking about her. Amy storms out of the stall, curses the women, and marches down the hall, hell bent on confronting her boss. Along the way, she is met by her assistant, Krista, who tries to stop her. She tries to reason with her by telling her, “You look insane!” This is the first time someone calls Amy “crazy”—but it will not be the last.

Amy finds her target, her boss Damon, as he is about to get on the elevator accompanied by two company vendors. Amy confronts him, uncaring about the audience that it draws. She begs him not to transfer her from her own department. Her rage fades for a moment as she laments over the notion of losing her department. In this moment, as Amy is distracted, Damon sneaks back onto the elevator with the vendors. As Amy opens her eyes to see Damon has left, they once again fill with rage. She confronts him again in front of the elevator door, only to be cut off when the door shuts in her face. The smugness on Damon’s face lasts only for a brief moment. The elevator will not descend. The doors begin to open, slowly. Amy is there, prying the doors apart with her fingertips. As she struggles with the doors, she exclaims, “Damon! Fuck you, motherfucker! I will destroy you! I will bury you, I will kill you, motherfucker!” This is the first time we see her full rage—but it will not be the last. (“Pilot,” Enlightened, HBO, 2011)

…

Amy Jellicoe was successful and career-driven. She ran her own department within a larger corporation, one for which she dedicated 15 years of her life working. However, as this
scene and subsequent plot developments indicate, it becomes clear that, even with these years of
dedicated service, Amy was vulnerable, and one false move could bring her career crashing
down. All the while, this is framed comedically—often framed as a result of her own self-
centered and irrational nature rather than an inherently patriarchal workplace. After finally giving
in to being heavily pursued by her boss, Damon, she is the one who is ultimately punished for his
abuse of power. Damon continues to prosper while Amy is stripped of her department and her
dignity, and is reassigned to the bowels of the corporation—a basement department filled with
those deemed unworthy of other roles in the company. Such is the plight of the successful
woman negotiating the ever-changing parameters of expectations and potentialities in the
precarious world of post-recessionary American popular culture.

The treatment of Amy Jellicoe in HBO’s Enlightened is one version of the various
contradictory and often problematic depictions of women characters in today’s post-recessionary
television workplace. Her plight, her dilemmas facing this pressure-filled workplace, is
increasingly the subject of comedies and dramas in the media scape of contemporary television.
This dissertation will examine such depictions in Enlightened and other similar television
comedies: Community, Parks and Recreation, The Office, 30 Rock, 2 Broke Girls, Don’t Trust the
B---- in Apartment 23, Girls, and Veep. I argue that Amy is just one of many women protagonists
who struggle to find job (and financial) stability while their men counterparts—often behaving
very badly or, conversely, as final sources of wisdom—always get by unscathed, either mentally
or financially. Amy’s example is illustrative of several televisual tropes in the above programs
that this research project explores: the continued tolerance of—and comically instrumental use
of—sexual harassment, the precarious nature of women in the workplace that often is attributed
to women’s own flawed personalities, and the exaggerated reactions that undermine women’s
workplace skills. Tropes are found in other portrayals that may vary depending on different
political economic contexts (commercial broadcast versus premium cable), and different types of
protagonists (younger versus older characters). But many ideologically-charged themes run constant, a result of not just enduring gendered tendencies of television comedy, but also ideological pressures exerted by the context of these post-millennial portrayals that have been affected by—and constantly allude to—the US recession.

Metaphorical Trends on Television and the Focus of this Exploration

The depiction of Amy Jellicoe is endemic of a larger issue, specifically found in the latest women-centric work comedies of the era following “The Great Recession” (of 2007-2009), whereby women characters are shown struggling to make ends meet both in and (mostly) out of the workplace. In the post-recessionary era, we see the emergence of new women-centric sitcoms (and dramedies) that feature elements of economic hardship tied to the anxieties felt by most in our society as a whole. Increasingly, many of these programs have moved away from the traditional workplace-based sitcom toward the work-related sitcom/dramedy. In the former (programs like The Mary Tyler Moore Show and Murphy Brown), the dominant setting of the program is one unchanging workplace (such as a TV station or network, in the previous two examples). Much of the program focuses on workplace dynamics among the same co-worker characters in which continuity and employment stability is assumed. Feminist scholars have noted that, traditionally, workplace-based sitcoms have often featured central women characters; more so, they have argued that, historically, workplace sitcoms had been a bastion for more feminist-minded portrayals of career-oriented, independent women during the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Dow, 1996). This contrasts with the newer work-related comedy/dramedy, in which the characters are more often in need of work than actually employed. These work-related comedies may sometimes have scenes in a workplace but, even in such cases, the most often-portrayed workplace is not as predominant; instead, the program is more likely to highlight themes of unstable or insecure employment or organizational status. In
many cases, women characters are framed as the most economically unstable, which is a change from previous portrayals. With the move away from workplace-based sitcoms, we see fewer and fewer of these organizationally-stable, often strong, women characters on television.

This dissertation investigates these post-recessionary televisual trends concerning women in (and out of) the workplace through the examination of nine situation comedies (and dramedies), spanning nearly 600 episodes in total, from four different networks: NBC, CBS, ABC, and HBO. My study examines how post-recessionary anxiety has given rise to more women characters being shown outside of the workplace, or at best struggling to stay afloat in their already-existing, unstable ones. I argue that with the decline of workplace-based sitcoms and the influx of women-centric, work-related sitcoms, strong women characters and situations where these women can flourish are increasingly being replaced by characters and situations that represent the continued cultural shift to the anxieties and ideologies typical of postfeminism. Additionally, my project aims to answer, what exactly are the (post)feminist messages being put forth in today’s work-related sitcoms about women (and, by proxy, men) as organizational and economic beings in this post-recession era?

To answer this question, although feminist textual analysis is a constant tool throughout the dissertation, I apply different methods to analyze the programs: the application of a “viewing strip” (a concept borrowed from Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983/1994), toward a network in which four related programs in a row aired; the employment of character analysis, toward two comedies that applied the broadest use of humor and archetype characters; and the examination of “paratexts” (a term borrowed from Gray, 2010), in the case of controversial and polarizing programs. In the process of employing these different approaches, I uncovered two separate phenomena regarding portrayals of working women and the critical response to these portrayals. The first phenomenon I have dubbed “Post-Recessionary Sexism.” This term extends Douglas’s (2010) concept of Enlightened Sexism to today’s post-recessionary backdrop and its new
manifestations of nuanced sexism and patriarchy. Both my own term as well as Douglas’s will be fully explained in the next chapter. “The Critical Double Standard” is my label for the second phenomenon, which I discovered (and named) while analyzing the reviews from critics as paratextual examples. The concept stems from the highly-gendered nature of critic reviews surrounding women protagonists. This term is further elucidated in the third case study of this research project. Together, both Post-Recessionary Sexism and The Critical Double Standard paint a telling picture of how working women of post-recessionary sitcoms (and dramedies) are being portrayed and perceived.

**Project Rationale**

As noted above, the US recession serves as a cultural backdrop to these programs. According to The National Bureau of Economic Research, the recession officially hit the United States in December 2007. As defined on their website, “[a] recession is a period of falling economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales” (2010, para. 2). Lasting a year and a half, this recession was considered to be the worst since the Second World War. In June 2009, the non-profit economic research organization declared that a trough took place, thereby officially starting the post-recessionary era. In an interview, Nobel laureate and famed economist Paul Krugman (2012) remarked:

> It is frustrating, but it’s frustrating because there are 4 million Americans who have been out of work for more than a year. There’s a whole generation of students who are graduating who can’t find jobs, or can’t find jobs that are making use of the education that they’ve acquired at great expense. Those are the people to be concerned about. (para. 15)
This post-recessionary anxiety that Krugman describes goes well beyond the discussion surrounding society and the economy in general—it extends into onscreen manifestations as well.

These issues of economic uncertainty, unemployment, and underemployment are central to the new breed of work-related sitcoms in the post-recessionary era. Most likely a result of the implications stemming from neoliberalism, the shift in programming onscreen—again, from the workplace-based to the work-related—parallels a shift in televisual imagery whereby characters are no longer as concerned with being employed but instead are focused more on simply being employable. In her study on the implications of neoliberalism within reality TV makeover programs, Sender (2006) critiques US society’s ever-increasing, neoliberal framework whereby economic hardship is no longer deemed a result of systemic problems but rather from “…a personal failing” (p. 146). More so, she argues the following: “If neoliberalism involves both self-monitoring and increased adaptability in new economic and geographical circumstances, shame could be seen as the quintessential neoliberal affect, offering a highly efficient means to govern at a distance” (Sender, 2006, p. 143). Taking Sender’s critique of neoliberalism and the need for “personal transformation” into consideration (p. 132), I cannot help but think that neoliberalism, coupled with post-recessionary anxiety, is a driving catalyst behind this televisual shift concerning issues of economic hardship, whereby women characters are shown not working in one set workplace but instead are struggling to sustain themselves financially (and wanting to find ways to become employable rather than employed). Thus, it is important to determine if (and how) this struggle with personal, financial well-being translates to the disempowerment of the women protagonists of these programs in general. Additionally, many news outlets referred to The Great Recession as “The Great He-cession,” claiming that more men than women lost jobs (Fortini, 2009; Rampell, 2009; Cordes, 2009; Rodino-Colocino, 2011). Interestingly, we see the opposite playing out on television, perhaps a way to compensate for this perceived crisis in masculinity.
To better contextualize this perceived crisis in masculinity that began in the pre-recession period, extended through the recession, and continues on throughout this post-recession era, there are several crucial factors that are worth mentioning here that helped give rise to today’s current climate. First, it is important to note the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq during this time. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research (2008), the Iraq War had gradual repercussions on the US economy, such as the total cost of the war exceeding $1 trillion (at that time) and impacting the number of jobs available; however, war was not the issue mainly attributed to bringing about the recession. Instead, the 2008 housing crisis was primarily to blame, as homeowners were forced to decrease their spending and consumption due to the loss of housing wealth. The cut back in consumption yielded job loss and, thereby, further exacerbated the aforementioned decrease in spending and an already-weakened housing market.

Adding to this already-perceived emasculating cultural context, the issue of addressing women’s rights began to make more of a prominent appearance, starting with the release of Pentagon data concerning sexual harassment in the military. In March 2008, a survey conducted by the Pentagon revealed that “one-third of women in the military and 6 percent of men said they were sexually harassed” (2008, para. 1). During the several months leading up to November, women’s rights continued to be placed in the spotlight during the 2008 Presidential Election where abortion rights were a topic of continual debate. Coupled with women’s rights, activists and lawmakers around the US were also pushing for gay rights. During his presidential campaigning, then-Senator Barack Obama advocated for a repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (Eleveld, 2008), an official US policy implemented during the Clinton administration that initially aimed to decrease discrimination against members of the military who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual—but actually had the opposite effect whereby discrimination increased. As such, all of these factors—the wars, especially the housing crisis, the new data on sexual harassment in the military, and the push for both women’s and gay rights—are important to keep in mind as they all
symbolically represent why there was a perceived crisis in masculinity that began in the pre-
recession and continues to be felt in the post-recession era. Again, a perceived crisis in
masculinity is one possible reason for the backlash that appears to be playing out onscreen
concerning the decline of women in the workplace (situation comedy).

Furthermore, as traditional workplace-based sitcoms are waned out in favor of the newer,
work-related sitcoms, also lost is one of the few outlets for (relatively) feminist-minded women
characters on television. Feminist scholars have noted the importance of promoting onscreen
positive role models for young girls and women (Dow, 1996; Kutulas, 2005; Gill, 2009; Douglas,
2010). The lack of such significant onscreen figures has implications for real girls and women,
especially in the cultural construction of gender dynamics as well as the messages being taught to
young girls, in particular, from media. Some of these gender dynamics include the various roles
assigned to women and men in the (gendered) workplace. Similarly, some of these media
messages revolve around the sources of self-worth in girls and women, where beauty and
physical appearance is more often valued over intelligence and skill sets. Like other feminist
media studies scholars, Gill (2009) is also concerned about the harmful implications of
postfeminism standing in for feminism onscreen, whereby consumerism and self-sexualization
are promoted over women’s solidarity and agency. Coupled with this onscreen confusion for
audiences, especially girls and women, many individuals tend to conflate third-wave feminism
with postfeminism. Some of these individuals include scholars—this ultimately adds another
layer to the confusion as there are conversations occurring around postfeminism as both a cultural
phenomenon and a scholarly perspective. Given the backdrop of postfeminist media culture and
economic insecurity, the loss of confident role-models and gain of postfeminist images—and the
resulting tolerance of organizational inequity and harassment—could have dire consequences for

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1 From my own experiences with teaching undergraduate students about media and feminism, I
have been reminded time and again that television, especially, is a central source of how people make sense
of their own self-worth, identity, and degree of agency.
what can be expected and tolerated at workplaces. It is important to examine the types of characters that emerged in these newer, post-recessionary-influenced, work-related sitcoms—as it is possible that in the passing wake of the traditional workplace-based programs, we will be left entirely without strong, career-driven women on sitcoms and dramedies.

**Organizational Flow of this Research Project**

This dissertation is comprised of seven chapters that explore the overall post-recessionary shift in television programming from workplace-based to work-related sitcoms (and dramedies). These seven chapters extend the work of previous scholars, especially those grounded in (feminist) television studies and political economy, but they also make significant contributions toward understanding the changing nature of the post-June 2009 (televisual) workplace. This introductory chapter has provided an overview of the dilemma regarding the portrayals of women characters, especially in regards to issues of economic stability and also in terms of social commentary on the state of women in the workplace today in television comedies.

The next two chapters serve as this project’s literature review and explanation of method and methodology, respectively. Chapter 2 highlights existing scholarship that has helped shape and given rise to this project as a whole. Emphasis is placed on several areas of key literatures, such as the history of gender on television, the history of feminist television criticism, and various conceptualizations of the term “postfeminism.” Chapter 3 explains how this project serves as a feminist intervention toward traditional textual analysis. It also summarizes how I came to group my three case studies and which specific texts are analyzed and why.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 each take a separate approach toward analyzing and understanding the role (and treatment) of women characters in televisual workplaces (or lack thereof). Chapter 4 focuses on analyzing four back-to-back, workplace-based sitcoms on NBC. These particular workplace-based sitcoms are mostly women-centered and feature middle-aged women
protagonists. They represent some of the few traditional workplace-based sitcoms left on television with a heavy emphasis on women characters, including middle-aged protagonists. Additionally, this “viewing strip” includes programs both preceding and pushing through The Great Recession. As such, it is critical in understanding the progression (or regression) of women characters in workplace-based to work-related programs.

In Chapter 5, I examine two work-related sitcoms, one from CBS and the other from ABC. These two post-recessionary-influenced sitcoms showcase economically-unstable, twenty-something women struggling to make ends meet in New York City. Emphasis is placed on character analysis in this case study, one that extends the work of Sedita (2006) and Wood (2009). With these two particular sitcoms, I will introduce hybrid archetypes that provide an updated fit in this post-recessionary era. Additionally, it is in this chapter where we will first see manifestations of Post-Recessionary Sexism.

Chapter 6 explores an amalgam of the previous two case studies, as manifested by three recent, women-centric HBO texts that serve as a blend of both workplace-based and work-related programming. Furthermore, these texts feature both middle-aged and twenty-something women protagonists. In this case study, I examine the original texts as well as their paratexts, in the form of critics’ reviews. Here, The Critical Double Standard will come into play, as well as a few more instances of Post-Recessionary Sexism.

This research project concludes with Chapter 7, where I highlight the significance of my findings as a whole and how they comment on the current status of women characters in television comedies today. In the process, I reflect back on how all three case studies, despite their differing methodological techniques, showcase working women, ranging in age from the early twenties to the early fifties, who are struggling to find their own place within a stable work environment. For each of them, this struggle is only intensified due to issues of financial stability, especially against the backdrop of post-recessionary anxiety, and the glass ceiling.
We’ll see, then, that Amy Jellicoe is not alone in her struggles, but this particular community of “broke girls” has implications for the cultural construction of the gendered office.
CHAPTER 2:

CONCEPTUALIZING POSTFEMINISM: BUILDING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK THROUGH THE HISTORIES OF GENDER ON TV, FEMINIST TV STUDIES, AND DEPICTIONS OF TELEVISUAL FEMINISMS

There is no consensus among media scholars or feminists about the definition of ‘postfeminism.’ Part of the term’s instability is its adjacent boundaries with a number of related, and themselves relatively unstable, terms. Feminism, antifeminism, third wave feminism, and postfeminism share in the first term’s historic vagueness. –Jane Gerhard, 2005, p. 39

Introduction

The term “postfeminism” was coined in the October 17, 1982 cover story of The New York Times Magazine, “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation” (cited in Weber, 2010). In that feature, author Susan Bolotin interviewed young women, many of whom vaguely concurred with the goals of the feminist movement but did not call themselves feminists. Weber (2010) argues that the interviews “revealed how deeply the term feminist was perceived to be tainted by political rhetoric that denigrated conventional (heteronormative) gender, sex, and sexuality options for women” (p. 126). In this early meaning, then, postfeminism was framed as a reaction against feminism. As feminist media scholars such as Gill (2007a; 2007b), Douglas (2010), and Dow (1996; 2006) have observed, postfeminism—influenced by this early conceptualization but also debated and nuanced as a theoretical concept—has become increasingly prominent in our culture. Given its increasing prevalence, it is imperative to examine how postfeminism operates within television in particular. I focus my efforts on this medium because, based on my observations from teaching undergraduate students since August 2010, television serves as one of the primary vehicles for emphasizing, even celebrating, postfeminist messages.
However, as is often the case among (feminist) scholars and as the opening quotation to this chapter highlights, the term’s meaning is contested. Before delving into some of postfeminism’s conceptualizations, I want to first address and discuss several key literatures, including the histories of gender on television and feminist television studies, both of which inform this research project. More specifically, my theoretical framework has been comprised of the following: various conceptualizations of postfeminism from scholars including Douglas (2010), Gill (2007b), and McRobbie (2004; 2008); updated versions of “the liberated woman” and “new sensitive man” archetypes as discussed by Kutulas (2005); and an incorporation of both feminist and non-feminist work within television studies, such as scholarship from D’Acci (1994), Dow (1996; 2006), Negra (2009), Tasker (2007), Vavrus (2000), and Newcomb and Hirsch (1983/1994), Gray (2010) and Mittell (2010), respectively; and also within political economy, from scholars including Smythe (1954), and Wasko (2001). Given the troublesome history of gender on television, it is no surprise that there was a need for the development of feminist television studies. This development gave rise to initial feminist television criticism that focused on non-feminist and feminist portrayals. However, given the emergence of postfeminism on television, it only makes sense that there is also a growing need for television scholarship on postfeminist media depictions. All of these areas will be discussed in the following sections. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with my own take on postfeminism in relation to the cultural backdrop of these programs, one that I call “Post-Recessionary Sexism” and one that guides much of this particular research project.

The History of Gender on TV

Representations of gender on television have always been problematic. For broad snapshots of gender trends on TV in its earliest days, it is helpful to look at research from quantitative scholars Gunter (1986, 1995) and Head (1954), along with political economy scholar...
Smythe (1954). According to Gunter (1995), four decades of research, beginning in the mid-1950s, revealed that initial gender portrayals were fraught with stereotypes. In fact, a significant number of findings, from multiple content analyses, elucidated that depictions of women on prime-time television were both disparaging and simply imbalanced, in terms of both frequency onscreen and the types of character roles assigned, compared to depictions of their men counterparts (Gunter, 1986). One concern that stemmed from this 40-year duration of research was the underrepresentation of women on television. For instance, in terms of situation comedies, men tended to outnumber women by a ratio of two to one (Gunter, 1995). In regards to televised speaking roles, it was found that from the 1950s to the 1970s, “only 20 to 35 per cent of characters were female” (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 47). In the 1980s, more women were filling leading roles, yet there was still double the number of men who appeared onscreen (Gauntlett, 2008). Alternatively, from the mid-1950s to as late as the mid-1990s, soap operas were the primary venue on television to show equally numbered portrayals of women and men (Gunter, 1995).

More specifically, what were the roles (and discourse) historically assigned to women and men on television? Conclusions drawn by Head and Smythe are useful to consider here. In 1952, Head found that nearly 70 percent of leading prime-time characters were men (Head, 1954). Stated another way, the roles assigned to men and women tended to vary according to (gendered) power dynamics. Smythe (1954) concluded the following:

The largest single occupation for women in the television world, as in the real world, was that of housewife, and in this pursuit, women on television were only slightly underrepresented as compared to the whole population (37 per cent against 42 per cent). (pp. 152-153)

Smythe’s analysis of gender portrayals on television was conducted in the mid-1950s, when “a woman’s place” was thought to be in the home. However, for the succeeding four decades,
gender portrayals tended to remain traditional in scope. Gunter (1995) argues that the primary action of most situation comedies and soap operas occurs through character discourse, which often times focus on familial, romantic, and other interpersonal relationships and the problems that arise from these types of relationships. In essence, this once again reifies stereotypes that are traditionally assigned to women. As Gunter (1995) asserts, “[t]hus, in these programmes even when women are shown outside the home environment (e.g. at work), their conversations tend to revolve around domestic matters” (p. 14). Hence, there was an abundance of gender-role stereotyping on television during the mid-1950s until the mid-1990s. As such, men and women tended to fill the same respective roles, that of the dominant and that of the subordinate.

The History of Feminist TV Studies

Initial feminist inquiry of television began to develop during the second wave of feminism. In both the US and the UK, women were pushing for changes in legislation, which sparked an early feminist interest in the televisual landscape (McCabe & Akass, 2006). Scholarship on gender helped act as a guiding force in these initial queries. In particular, this type of scholarship elucidated the many ways that “gender gets produced and circulated” (McCabe & Akass, 2006, p. 108). Additionally, as McCabe and Akass (2006) conclude, the emerging field of British cultural studies afforded a broadened engagement and, therefore, a stronger connection between feminism and television. In fact, the critical cultural studies approach toward feminist television criticism brought about a new focus: “Such work identified never before discussed generic forms like soap operas and sitcoms as well as talked about how the viewing experience gets determined by, but also determines, a gendered sense of self” (McCabe & Akass, 2006, p. 109). Furthermore, as Haralovich and Rabinovitz (1999) argue, feminist television scholars were heavily influenced by approaches to analysis used in film and media studies, as well as in literature studies, and these influences were reflected by the scholarly
criticism that they were producing. Simply stated, Haralovich and Rabinovitz are highlighting the multi-disciplinary nature of feminist television studies.

The origins of feminist television criticism proceeded with two separate but equally important goals: one geared toward the medium of television itself, and the other aimed at the existing practices of critical scholarship pertaining to television (Brunsdon & Spigel, 2008). As D’Acci (2002) points out, the initial beginnings of feminist television criticism concentrated on portrayals of femininity. Feminist scholars took it upon themselves to fight the equating of women with traditional femininity, often highlighting the historical connections of modern constructions to earlier forms of mediated culture. As Brunsdon and Spigel (2008) clarify, “[t]he feminist critical engagement with television can be traced back to media workers, and in particular to women who wrote for women’s magazines” (p. 4). Advice columns, which have their own derivations from 19th century how-to manuals on domestic chores, offered a venue for “nascent critiques of the housewife” in women’s magazines (Brunsdon & Spigel, 2008, pp. 4-5). Feminist television scholars later analyzed portrayals of masculinity, and from there went on to examine non-heteronormative sexualities, and how these subject positions combined with race, class and other facets of one’s identity. D’Acci (2002) explains that scholars began to realize that they simply could not study gender alone, thereby recognizing the importance of accounting for intersectionality. For the latter task focusing on scholarship, feminists critiqued the two-sphere dichotomy in media scholarship that defined women’s public and private lives as being separate entities (Brunsdon & Spigel, 2008), often in the process privileging the politically-charged public sphere while devaluing the “depoliticized” private sphere. Feminist television scholars, then,

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2 Here I am using the term “intersectionality” in the feminist sense of the word. As Crenshaw (1989) and others like Collins (2000) have noted, this term aims to understand why certain individuals feel more privilege/oppression than other individuals, especially when it comes to the intersection of various identities traits such as gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.
conducted their critique upon the premise that the “personal is political.” As Brunsdon and Spigel (2008) assert, “[f]eminists took issue (often implicitly) with the existing critical work on television that disregarded femininity, gender, and sexuality in discussions of the ‘political’” (p. 7). In order to broaden the societal definition of “political,” it came as no surprise that highlighting the complexities of daytime programming, most specifically the soap opera, was one of the first aims of feminist television critics (Brunsdon & Spigel, 2008). This type of programming allowed scholars to apply the necessary critiques of the two-sphere dichotomy.

Feminist scholars also considered other key areas of analysis. For instance, Mumford (2003) identifies five main areas of interest for traditional feminist television criticism: women employed in and by the television industry; the physical presence of women onscreen; the television programs themselves; individuals watching the programs; and finally, the discourse that accompanies television programming. Mumford (2003) explains that the common thread among feminist TV studies, regardless of the five main areas, is an association between how social constructions of gender operate in the everyday lives of viewers and how gender is portrayed on television. As she concludes, “…when we watch, we are not simply being entertained in some neutral way; we are having a political and ideological experience as well, and both our viewing practices and our ways of making sense of what we watch are articulated within a particular political and social context” (Mumford, 2003, p. 87). Feminist television studies, then, is important because it attempts to understand the full scope of ideological implications, particularly in terms of meanings about women, that television as industrial, textual and viewing practices offers to viewers worldwide.

**Changing Times, Changing Focus: From Domestic Dramas to Lifestyle Feminism**

Although the legacy of the scholarship on gender and television and early feminist work is significant and has informed this research project, much recent feminist television and media
scholarship has been especially influential, particularly work published starting in the 1990s. As Brunsdon, D’Acci, and Spigel (1997) discuss in their edited volume *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, initial feminist television scholarship was “interested in television as something more than a bad object, something that offers a series of lures and pleasures, however limited its repertoire of female roles” (p. 1). Thus, especially since the 1970s, scholars examined the ways that various television genres contributed to female pleasure, including genres that were deemed and often devalued as “feminine,” such as the soap opera.

But beginning with the 1980s, television scholars examined more non-traditionally feminine genres, such as situation comedies and detective programming (Brunsdon, D’Acci, & Spigel, 1997) to see how notions of femininity, especially for women characters, were constructed. Two famous examples of contributions from this past scholarship are D’Acci’s 1994 book, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*, which mainly looked at the construction of femininity on the 80’s prime-time police drama (D’Acci, 1994); and Dow’s 1996 book, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*, which analyzed *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *One Day at a Time* (1975-1984), *Designing Women* (1986-1993), *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998) to understand how television has “contributed to the cultural conversation about feminism in this country at different historical moments over the past twenty-five years” (Dow, 1996, p. xiv). Dow’s landmark contribution inspired other scholars, like Kutulas (2005), to examine how the televisual archetype of “the liberated woman” (also known as “the new woman”) has changed over the years. Dow, in this way, inspired scholars to shift toward understanding how depictions of feminism, not femininity, played out on television.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that Dow exemplifies a scholar who bridges the gap between studying depictions and discursive contradictions of lifestyle-feminist and later postfeminist media culture, as will be examined.
Liberating the women of sitcom.

During the late 1960s, various social movements, including that of second-wave feminism, impacted American society. In keeping with the times, television programming began to reflect, if in limited and slants ways, the social changes that were taking place. Dow (1996) discusses how one sitcom, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, represented these changes: “…it challenged a tradition of female roles on US television that had largely relegated lead female characters in situation comedies (sitcoms) to stereotypical roles defined by familial relationships (wife, mother, daughter), feminine occupations (teacher, nurse, secretary), and/or feminine concerns (husband-hunting)” (p. 379). No longer were women characters restricted to the domestic setting. In fact, while there were also domestic sitcoms that attempted to reflect these changes in perspective, it appeared that workplace sitcoms were better suited for exploring issues of gender, and for understanding the range and limits of television’s representations of women’s progress (Kutulas, 2005). This was mainly due to the versatility of this sitcom type, where liberation could be depicted but still feminism could be contained and, in essence, no real threats were posed to televisual male hegemony (Kutulas, 2005). Coupled with this, sitcoms had the ability to “…defuse the anxiety and controversy attached to social change” (Dow, 2005, p. 382). All in all, it seemed to be the perfect place on television to capitalize on the commodification of feminist ideals, a concept labeled “commodity feminism” by Goldman (1992, p. 131).

In the 1970s, workplace-based sitcoms featured women characters who ventured outside of their homes but also typically with ideologically non-threatening elements. They depicted women in search of careers and who did not abide by the traditional roles of mothers and wives. However, as Kutulas (2005) explicates, these shows portrayed co-workers as being more like a family. This was seen as granting women characters access into the work force by “…implying its dynamic was cozy, familiar, and gendered” (Kutulas, 2005, p. 220). These “liberated” women made it quite clear verbally that they were tired of being subservient to their men counterparts,
but men were portrayed as ultimately being in charge. In such ways, Kutulas (2005) notes that “…television liberation was different from feminism. Workplace television helped to stigmatize feminism as extremist and mean” (p. 221). (This anti-feminist theme becomes even more prominent in postfeminist discourse, as we will see.) Furthermore, the “new sensitive man” entered the picture to ensure that these liberated women characters did not cross the imaginary boundary into feminism. This man character was described by Kutulas (2005) as “…a media creation, a man himself liberated from gender stereotypes and open to his feelings, genuinely interested in women as people, nurturing and warm, a man not afraid to cry” (p. 223). Together, these two archetypes of the not-too-strident working woman and the sensitive man can still be seen on television, influenced by and representing societal trends.

**The containment of politics: Television’s depiction of lifestyle feminism.**

Since the 1970s, television networks have remained consistent in their efforts to portray liberated, not feminist, women. One way this is manifested is through very limited constructions of race and class. Dow (2005) notes that “[w]ith rare exceptions, television offers visions of feminism that are white, middle- and upper-class, and heterosexual, and the medium prefers to represent feminist progress through lifestyle rather than politics” (p. 392). As this quote also states, this televised feminist was often defined by portrayals of her “lifestyle”—including jobs and the workplace—rather than by activism. The “liberated woman” can be seen working in men-dominated vocations. When single, she is no longer just striving toward marriage, and mothers and wives are shown working outside of the domestic realm. However, television still portrayed these women as emphasizing the desire for romantic relationships, an issue that did not seem to be as much a priority for television men (Dow, 2005).

In these ways, television networks used feminism to address their own interests (seeming in-tune with changing times; offering portrayals non-threatening to advertisers) and appease the
majority of viewers through a proclivity toward depicting this “lifestyle feminism.” In *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks (2000) clarifies lifestyle feminism and highlights its limitations:

> Lifestyle feminism ushered in the notion that there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women. Suddenly, the politics was slowly removed from feminism. And the assumption prevailed that no matter what a woman’s politics, be she conservative or liberal, she too could fit feminism into her existing lifestyle. Obviously this way of thinking has made feminism more acceptable because its underlying assumption is that women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture. (hooks, 2000, pp. 5-6)

A similar point is made by Dow, who brings in television’s contribution to reifying lifestyle feminism. Dow (2005) argues that entertainment television often finds ways to de-politicize topics to allow them to fit more easily within existing frameworks, particularly capitalist patriarchy. As such, when it came to portrayals of feminism, entertainment television tried to focus on the positive element of liberated women *individually* being able to triumph in a “man’s world” (Dow, 2005, p. 392), and downplayed the implications of patriarchy as a societal problem. This is, again, to say that lifestyle feminism gave television networks an easy way to commodify feminism, while not bringing attention to the fact that they only offered highly de-politicized versions.

Over the years, women characters have continued to represent progress in some respects but their depictions still remain troublesome; understanding such changing and often contradictory dynamics is an important contribution of feminist television scholarship. McRobbie (2008) argues that “[t]elevision is possibly the most powerful…media, and it has been feminist television studies which has most thoroughly responded to…” these limited images of feminism (p. 534). Additionally, as Dalton and Linder (2005) observe, “[w]omen have
undoubtedly come a long way from the earliest days of television, when most played mothers or spinsters on situation comedies, but the multilayered critique of gender in sitcoms remains an important political project” (p. 5). As such, one of the main aims of this research project is to heed Dalton and Linder’s call to examine where “liberated” women and “sensitive” men in (workplace) sitcoms stand today.

**From Lifestyle Feminism to Postfeminism**

**Enter neoliberalism.**

Lifestyle feminism provided networks with a way to portray de-politicized, non-threatening versions of feminism on television. Women characters were depicted as “liberated,” but only from the household rather than patriarchal influence on a whole. Thanks to lifestyle feminism, they were able to make the easy transition, televisually, from their domestic to work families. As Dow (1996) pointed out about *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the lifestyle-feminist character of Mary Richards (played by Mary Tyler Moore) was a career woman, but one who worked and gained individual success within “a man’s world” (p. 54). In referencing Herman Gray’s (1994) work on the televisual discourse associated with African-American individuals, she notes that parallels could be drawn between how African-Americans and liberated women were being represented. Heavy emphasis was placed on African-Americans and liberated women, respectively, struggling as a result of *individual* issues, not *societal* problems. Dow (1996) elaborates further: “The implications of such representations is that *access* is the major problem for women; that is, given the same opportunities as a man, a woman’s success or failure from that point on is solely a matter of individual choice and/or ability” (p. 38). For viewers, this meant that liberated women characters were shown wanting to succeed based on cultural norms established by patriarchy—doing what was considered men’s work in a man’s world.
Starting in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, televisual depictions of feminism began to change such that the label “lifestyle feminism” no longer quite captured the dynamics of portrayals. The highlighting of working women struggling as a result of their own problems, not those institutionalized by capitalist patriarchy, was indeed present. However, consumerism and materialism, two primary characteristics of the concept of neoliberalism, began to play much stronger roles within these depictions. As Giroux (2012) argues, “[n]eoliberalism is a philosophy which construes profit making as the essence of democracy and consuming as the only operable form of citizenship” (par. 19). In addition, television began to become more self-reflexive about feminism and its recent history—most notably the ideas of “second-“ and “third-waves” of feminist distinction. With the combination of neo-liberalism and feminist labels added to lifestyle feminism, we start to see the beginnings of a new construct, postfeminism.

Press and Strathman (1993) note that postfeminist depictions carry some of the features from lifestyle-feminist portrayals, only these features are re-packaged. Reiterating a point made earlier, depictions of lifestyle feminism displayed women achieving individual success within “a man’s world,” without threatening the existing patriarchal framework that has long endured. As such, portrayals of lifestyle “feminism” on television usually had women achieving success at the expense of not having a family life. According to Press and Strathman (1993), “[t]he mass media first promoted this impoverished version of feminism, then gleefully reported the discontent with that version as ‘postfeminism’” (par. 30). Making a similar point, Tasker and Negra (2007) explain, “[p]ostfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated” (p. 1). Press and Strathman thus contextualize this change in the larger relationship of media to feminism by arguing that mass media has long been the primary venue of distributing messages of anti-feminist sentiment to the public and that media’s ideological mission to do away with feminism has been carried out in three major ways:
through symbolic annihilation, through portrayals of de-politicized versions of “feminism” on television, and through the commodification of any feminist remnants (often segueing with sexualization) leftover from the de-politicization process (Press & Strathman, 1993). For Press and Strathman, the then-new movement of postfeminism did all three. The early-identified themes of anti-feminism, de-politicization/individualization, and commodification are themes that are emphasized by later scholars critiquing postfeminism. And postfeminist representation, with roots in the 1980s, became increasingly more prevalent in televisual portrayals through the new millennium.

**The growth of postfeminist television portrayals.**

Early depictions of postfeminism on television regularly featured the same basic characteristics. These included feminism as a textual marker, happiness being tied to consumerism, a marked sense of individualism, and a focus on the workplace. Dow (1996) discusses the conditions that contributed to this shift toward postfeminist television. In her discussion, she brings to light an important feature of postfeminism, which is that it tends target as it depicts a certain demographic:

Television advertisers, who for years viewed the white, middle-class homemaker as their primary target, understood by the 1980s that women were in the workplace to stay. The enthusiastic pursuit of the working-women audience in 1980s television was aided by the development of a new genre of working-women’s magazines, including *Working Mother*, *Working Woman*, *Savvy*, and *Self*… The broadcast networks’ loss of viewers to cable, as well as the decreasing number of women watching daytime television, also increased the pressure to attract an upscale female audience for prime-time fare… (Dow, 1996, p. 96)

Thus, networks started developing prime-time genres, such as the prime-time serial (e.g. *Dallas*, *Knots Landing*, *Dynasty*, and *Falcon Crest*), the professional serial drama (e.g. *Hill Street Blues*, *Cagney & Lacey*, and *The Ref*).
St. Elsewhere, and L.A. Law), and postfeminist family television (e.g. thirtysomething, The Cosby Show, Family Ties, and Growing Pains), that integrated tropes from the soap opera. In regards to the latter genre of “postfeminist family television” specifically, Dow references Andrea Press’s (1991) coined term, which described the mix of progressiveness displayed by working women onscreen coupled with the counterbalance of these same women characters situated within postfeminist depictions of the nuclear family. Referencing the prime-time serials in particular, Dow (1996) states that “[f]or many culture watchers, these dramas, with their lavish sets, displays of wealth, and battles over power, have come to exemplify the zeitgeist of the 1980s” (pp. 96-97).

As such, this paved the path for certain characteristics of postfeminism, such as the heavy emphasis on individualism, materialism, and consumerism. Furthermore, even though many women were depicted as holding power, their power usually stemmed from ties to a man family member and rarely posed a threat to patriarchal ideology (Dow, 1996). It is important to note that this televisual contradiction is another crucial trait of postfeminism, one which I will certainly discuss in further detail throughout the rest of this research project.

Each of these three genres added to the overall climate of postfeminism on prime-time television. For instance, the prime-time serial revolved around romantic relationships serving as the main problem in programs’ narratives and heavily emphasized traditions such as marriage and reproduction (Dow, 1996). Additionally, women who held power on these prime-time soap operas were typically perceived as being evil or manipulative. Likewise, as Dow (1996) points out, there is a strong omission of women bonding, as most women characters are seen betraying one another, “and the happiest women…are those who know their place and support their men…” (p. 97). These characteristics, like many emblematic of postfeminism, reinforce patriarchal ideology by continuing to segregate women and inhibit solidarity. The professional serial drama conjoined tropes from the soap opera with legal, medical, and police programming (Dow, 1996).

On these programs, women were shown feeling the repercussions of being successful. For
example, some had to deal with emasculated husbands, while others resorted to the abuse of prescription drugs. Regardless of the coping mechanism, “[t]he women characters’ problems are distinctive, however, in that they stem from an implicit (but sometimes explicitly stated) conflict between careerism and personal health and happiness, a powerful postfeminist theme” (Dow, 1996, p. 98). Finally, postfeminist family television, which includes both drama and the situation comedy, depicted working women who also fulfilled the traditional role of tending to the domestic realm. In these programs, the home is positioned as an escape for women and the stresses of their careers, particularly in how it allows women to achieve the most satisfaction from tending to their families (Dow, 1996).

As Douglas (2010) argues, there was a shift in the early-to-mid 1990s concerning the perception and representation of women, both on and off television. This was, of course, after the media had made “some adjustments” to address the effects of second-wave feminism (Douglas, 2010, p. 21), offering many televisual depictions that appeared feminist on the surface. However, upon closer inspection, these texts tended to present contradictory messages concerning women. Gill (2007a) alludes to the importance of looking at these contradictions:

…it would be entirely false to suggest that the media have somehow become feminist, have unproblematically adopted a feminist perspective. Instead it seems more accurate to argue that the media offer contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions. In this postfeminist moment…feminist ideas are simultaneously ‘incorporated, revised, and depoliticised’, and, I would add, attacked. (p. 268)

She concludes that such mixing of the feminist and anti-feminist is what makes “contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist” (p. 269). Thus, this depiction of contradictory messages is a crucial one to consider when analyzing the implications of postfeminist texts.

Feminist scholars posit that 1990’s television programs positioned second-wave feminism as the main culprit of many women’s suffering. More specifically, Gerhard (2005)
discusses how viewers, particularly young women, embraced this less-intimidating (read: further de-politicized) version of feminism on television, compared to the televiusal depictions of lifestyle feminism during the 1970s. Douglas (2010) asserts that “[a]s this logic goes, feminism is so 1970s—grim, dowdy, aggrieved, and passé—that it is now an impediment to female happiness and fulfillment” (p. 12), reifying what Faludi (1991) called a “backlash” to feminism. Negra (2009), in fact, argues that such backlash tropes are indicative of postfeminism. Since then, the state of prime-time television has only continued to embrace postfeminist rhetoric and imagery.

The late 1990s and early 2000s gave rise to gynocentric, postfeminist television dramas that featured a sense of retreatism on the part of the women protagonists. This is to say that a typical woman character was depicted as either going back home to her family and where she grew up, or having to resolve family issues in some other way (Negra, 2009). Broadcast networks developed some of primetime’s biggest hits, such as Gilmore Girls and Judging Amy, around this concept of a protagonist being unsatisfied, giving up her career, and leaving the city life behind only to return to the place where she was raised (Negra, 2009). Furthermore, the early 2000s continually placed emphasis on the sexualized images of midlife women, especially mothers, or what many refer to as the “yummy mummies.” While these and the other examples of traits provided throughout this section are emblematic of postfeminism, it is important to note that these trends in no way exhaust the postfeminist depictions seen on television throughout the aforementioned decades.

**Post-Millennial Conceptualizations of, and Scholarly Debates about, Television**

**Postfeminism**

Within feminist media studies, agreeing on a common definition of “postfeminism” has proved to be a difficult task among scholars. While scholars may not concur with one another on
a single, shared meaning, it is important to note, at the same time though, that their definitions do not conflict with but rather tend to complement one another for the most part. In her article, “Sex and the City: Carrie Bradshaw’s Queer Postfeminism,” Gerhard (2005) argues that “[p]art of the term’s instability is its adjacent boundaries with a number of related, and themselves relatively unstable, terms. Feminism, antifeminism, third wave feminism, and postfeminism share in the first term’s historic vagueness” (p. 39). Confusion around defining “postfeminism” may also stem from the difficulty in feminist and media scholars trying to agree on a shared meaning of “feminism” (see also Lotz, 2001). As we will see, other complementary definitions vary in their focus on the degree to which postfeminism is a progressive concept to any significant degree. In her book Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism’s Work is Done, Douglas (2010) centers in on one implication of the absence of a single, shared meaning as well as an issue of the term’s implication:

Some, myself included, have referred to this state of affairs and this kind of media mix as “postfeminist.” But I am rejecting this term. It has gotten gummed up by too many conflicting definitions. And besides, this term suggests that somehow feminism is at the root of this when it isn’t—it’s good, old-fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy. It’s just much better disguised, in seductive Manolo Blahniks and an Ipex bra. (Douglas, 2010, p. 10)

While Gerhard discusses the term in relation to those privy to feminist scholarship, Douglas recognizes that those outside of feminist (media) studies might be unfamiliar with the term’s connotations (and denotations). As such, Douglas (2010) proposes a new term, “enlightened sexism,” to more accurately describe the characteristics and meaning behind her version of “postfeminism.” This is a term that she adapted from critical media scholars Jhally and Lewis’s (1992) term “enlightened racism,” which was coined to describe how racism still has a prominent role in media but only in more subtle forms (Douglas, 2010, p. 307). Similarly, Douglas (2010)
discusses that sexism exists but in more clever ways put forth by mass media, particularly television. This is where her definition of “enlightened sexism” (or, for many other scholars, postfeminism) comes into play.

As Douglas (2010) defines it, “enlightened sexism” is a process that works to make girls and women not only accept patriarchy but, more disturbingly, find it to be pleasurable (p. 12). For Douglas,

Enlightened sexism is a manufacturing process that is produced, week in and week out, by the media. Its components—anxiety about female achievement; a renewed and amplified objectification of young women’s bodies and faces; the dual exploitation and punishment of female sexuality; the dividing of women against each other by age, race, and class; rampant branding and consumerism—began to swirl around in the early 1990s, consolidating as the dark star it has become in the early twenty-first century. (Douglas, 2010, p. 10)

This process of “enlightened sexism” is particularly problematic for Douglas as it reflects sexism, ageism, classism, heterosexism, and racism in the manner that it targets the specific demographic of middle-to-upper-class, heterosexual, white young women (Douglas, 2010, p. 11). Even worse, this process appears feminist on the surface but Douglas (2010) instead argues that, in its intent, “…it is dedicated to the undoing of feminism” (p. 10). In order to more fully grasp an understanding of Douglas’s definition, I know that it is important to recognize its characteristics and messages. By outwardly seeming feminist, enlightened-sexist (or what I consider to be postfeminist) media depictions function to “kindly remind” women viewers one of two things: either that there is no longer a need for feminism(s), or that feminism is truly the source of oppression and suffering for women.

The former implies (or states outright) to viewers that equality has already been achieved so women (and men) can stop campaigning for it. As feminist scholars have realized, the danger
in this message lies in forcing a halt in any progression made toward women gaining true gender equality and ignoring current injustices. The characteristic of “enlightened sexism” being strongly associated with consumerism comes into consideration here: since there is no longer a reason to fight for feminism, which an enlightened sexism view claims has already been achieved, then women can focus their efforts elsewhere, like taking part in the consumption of commercial culture. Douglas (2010) points to the example of the television series *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000): “…90210 was an important early building block of enlightened sexism because it insisted that true, gratifying pleasures for girls, and their real source of power, came from consumerism, girliness, and the approval of guys” (p. 31). Here Douglas pinpoints a dangerous implication of enlightened sexism: the media, again television in particular, teach girls and young women that their self-worth stems from their appearance; that is, if I want to empower myself, then I should buy such and such product. Feminist media scholars realize that this contributes to girls and young women having a false sense of empowerment and agency, as the politics behind feminism is removed and has instead been replaced with the promotion of consumerism and the preservation of capitalist patriarchy. That such a view also flows with the economic incentives of advertising-based television and other media systems both incentivizes its placement as well as depoliticizes the resulting gender portrayals.

The second message, where feminism is positioned as the culprit of women’s suffering, serves to play up the negative connotations of feminism(s) and feminists. The reasoning here is simple: if one sees what feminists “truly” stand for and all the hurt that they have caused, then that individual would probably not want to join the feminist movement. As critical scholar bell hooks (1994) asserts, “…I repudiated the notion of a ‘new feminism’ and saw it being created in the mass media mainly as a marketing ploy to advance the opportunistic concerns of individual women while simultaneously acting as an agent of antifeminist backlash by undermining feminism’s radical/revolutionary gains” (p. 86). Despite being said 16 years earlier, hooks’s
statement sets a precedent for Douglas’s viewpoints on the conflicting messages put forth by media. Furthermore, she observes that, compared to the placement of explicitly feminist voices in media, “[t]he patriarchal-dominated mass media is far more interested in promoting the views of women who want both to claim feminism and repudiate it at the same time” (hooks, 1994, p. 87). Although in this case hooks is referring to pundits such as Camille Paglia, the point also may apply to fictional television characters like Carrie Bradshaw of Sex and the City. For both Douglas (2010) and hooks (1994), mass media, especially television, depoliticizes feminism, via postfeminist depictions and messages, in order to shape strong women characters in consumption-friendly ways and ensure that dominant ideologies are maintained and promoted.

Thinking further about what Douglas describes as integral parts of “enlightened sexism,” I could not help but notice that she attempts to touch upon the variety of postfeminist elements that many other feminist media scholars have spent their days writing about, analyzing and deconstructing, and all-around trying to grapple with. Unlike Douglas (see also Gill, 2007b) who tries to focus on the compilation of these elements, other scholars have opted to examine only specific elements in-depth. Given this and thanks in part to Douglas, I must explain how I have come to organize this particular section. As a helpful way to guide readers along in the remainder of this section, I have organized the many definitions of postfeminism (or what Douglas calls “enlightened sexism”) into broad categories where, depending on the scholar, certain elements are highlighted over others as being more or less problematic for viewers. These four categories are as follows: anxiety about female accomplishments and gains; division instead of unity; branding and consumerism; and sexualization and/or sexual subjectification. On a final note, I would like to add that I perceive these categories to be only a means toward organizing a wealth of otherwise nuanced definitions concerning postfeminism. As such, these categories are by no means “rigid” in any sense of the word; on the contrary, if anything, they are fluid most particularly in the overlap of scholars’ definitions across categories.
Anxiety about female accomplishments and gains.

Feminist media scholars (Faludi, 1991; Dow, 1996, 2005; Vavrus, 2000; and Ouellette, 2002) have written extensively about the various levels of anti-feminism that contribute to manifestations of postfeminism onscreen. Despite varying in their degree of perceived anti-feminism, they ultimately allude to anxiety around female accomplishments and gains. This is to say, further complicating meanings of postfeminism is the term’s relationship to “backlash,” which is a reference to Faludi’s (1991) famous book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Although postfeminism (at least as this project will conceptualize) is not equated to, and in many ways is antagonistic to, feminism, it is also not a pure anti-feminist position, either. As Dow (1996) expresses, “…some discourse that has been labeled ‘backlash’ is more fittingly labeled ‘postfeminist,’ a distinction recognizing that some discourse which questions certain feminist issues and/or goals assumes the validity of other feminist issues and/or goals” (Dow, 1996, p. 87). In her famous contribution to television studies, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*, Dow (1996) argues that “I have no doubt that a backlash exists—the New Right alone provides ample evidence for that claim—…but I am also convinced from my own experience…in the classroom…that shifting attitudes toward feminism do not always represent a rejection of women’s liberation as much as an adjustment to it” (p. 87). For Dow, televisual depictions of feminism (read: postfeminism, really) reflect adjustments made as a result of networks addressing the effects of second-wave feminism. She argues that “[w]hat postfeminism represents, I think, is a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained” (Dow, 1996, p. 88). Such a conceptualization is complementary to discussions above, such as those of Douglas and hooks. But by attributing the emergence of postfeminist culture to Betty Friedan and her 1981 book, *The Second Stage*, Dow (1996) makes a distinction between who she calls “postfeminists” and “antifeminist backlashers”:...
The main distinction lies in the latter group’s refusal to acknowledge the value of liberating women in society; instead, for this particular group, the women’s movement was harmful for everyone, especially women, and should not have occurred (p. 93). Unlike Douglas who seems to feel that consumerism and false empowerment are the two main implications of enlightened sexism, I see the main dilemma for Dow, in terms of postfeminism, being that it reworks what second-wave feminism has achieved. Given her strong background in rhetoric, Dow (1996) is most concerned with the manipulation of feminist rhetoric used within these postfeminist representations:

This is the ultimate rhetorical sleight of hand committed by postfeminist rhetoric, and it produces postfeminist thought’s most powerful framing device: Patriarchy is gone and has been replaced by choice, resulting in several premises that create the postfeminist worldview. Among them: Second-wave feminists chose to emphasize certain issues at the expense of other issues (and media selection and interpretation of movement activity had nothing to do with this). The problems that women face today are a direct result of the choices that they made (and not the result of the lack of support for those choices from government, employers, partners, etc.). (Dow, 1996, p. 95)

A primary example that the feminist media scholar provides of a postfeminist sitcom is the television series, *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998): The series protagonist is unhappy and unsatisfied in her lack of having a meaningful and intimate relationship, is not married, and does not have any children; in essence, she exemplifies how postfeminism is manifested onscreen and how feminism is depicted as a negative implication of women’s liberation (Dow, 1996). Again, this statement reifies that second-wave feminism is positioned as the underlying source of suffering for women today, but in a way that also encapsulates feminist discourse.

Thus far, I have discussed Douglas (2010) defining postfeminism as “enlightened sexism,” where consumerism and false empowerment are most problematic in her eyes. I have
also explored Dow’s take on the term, which stems from Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey’s work, where the defining characteristics of postfeminism include a reworking of second-wave feminism and the depoliticizing of feminist politics (Dow, 1996). At the same time, Dow does not see postfeminism as being a complete rejection or demonizing of feminism as a backlash metaphor would indicate. I would now like to examine a third definition, where the women’s movement has proven successful and feminism can now be Other-ed.

In her article, “Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal,” Ouellette (2002) states the following: “Ally McBeal constructs postfeminism not as a change in feeling among women who lived through and allegedly rejected feminism, but rather as a flexible subject position for a new era in which the women’s movement is presumed successful, but feminism is ‘other’ and even threatening to contemporary femininity…” (p. 316). By positioning feminism as the Other yet presuming it to have been a successful movement, this notion of postfeminism depicts, for viewers, that feminism is outdated. Ouellette (2002) elaborates on this point:

Whereas commercial television has been critiqued for rendering feminism the cause of personal unhappiness among career women and ‘irrelevant’ to all other women…Ally McBeal constructs feminism as an antiquated mindset rooted in a militant, dowdy, and controlling ‘victimization’ mentality. On Ally McBeal, privileged professionals still personify the taken-for-granted gains of the women’s movement, but the storylines present feminism as a dated obstacle to young career women’s experiences, choices, and desires. (Ouellette, 2002, p. 317)

Again, it is the final part, where feminism is a “dated obstacle,” that stands as the defining characteristic in the way that Ouellette conceptualizes postfeminism.

Like Ouellette, Vavrus (2000) has also examined postfeminism within Ally McBeal. In her article, “Putting Ally on Trial: Contesting Postfeminism in Popular Culture,” she makes several calls for action, including the “regular critique of postfeminist solipsism” and disputing
postfeminism, as it is created in and by media (Vavrus, 2000, p. 426). Throughout her piece, Vavrus (2000) refers to postfeminism as “postfeminist solipsism,” thereby placing emphasis on postfeminist rhetoric’s tendency to “…generaliz[e] about women using particular women’s voices and concerns to the exclusion of others” (p. 413). It is important to note that Vavrus’s term is adapted from what feminist poet Adrienne Rich calls “white solipsism,” which refers to the presence and dominance of assumed whiteness in our society (Vavrus, 2000, p. 413). As such, Vavrus sees postfeminist solipsism as a problem in the manner that it describes the world from the (assumed) position of white, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual women, which brings us to the next category.

**Division instead of unity.**

Through their scholarship on postfeminist television, Douglas, Dow, Ouellette, and Vavrus have offered nuanced definitions of “postfeminism,” where they ultimately agree in their conceptualization of the term as having generally negative implications for viewers, especially women. Other scholars have also agreed upon the negative consequences of “postfeminism” for viewing audience, but they have taken a different approach in explaining what they have determined as being the essence of the term. For instance, many feminist scholars, such as Tasker and Negra (2007) as well as Levine (2008b), have noted the prominence of individualism in today’s media culture. Within their edited volume *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Tasker and Negra (2007) conceptualize postfeminism as not only undermining the goals of feminism and eroding its gains, but they take their argument a step further by commenting on how women can overcome future struggles should they arise: through consumerism as a means of individual empowerment. Similarly, Levine (2008b) sees postfeminism as a “dominating discursive system” (p. 376). Furthermore, Levine acknowledges that it is through discourse that emphasis is placed on individualism; simultaneously, this same
discourse refuses to recognize the ongoing struggles that women still face today. Similarly, in her article, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” McRobbie (2004) describes postfeminism as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined” (p. 255). Like most scholars, she envisions postfeminism as anxiety around female accomplishments and gains. However, she focuses heavily on the individualist nature of postfeminism in relation to portrayals that show feminism is no longer needed. McRobbie (2004) continues that “[i]t proposes that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (p. 255).

Related to issues of individualism in general, it is important to discuss how women are being divided (and sometimes pitted against each other) based on race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and age. Douglas (2010) points out that enlightened sexism aims to target young, white, straight, middle-to-upper class women. Referring to postfeminist advertising in particular, Gill (2009) states the following: “Others excluded from the empowering, pleasurable address of midriff advertising are older women, women [with disabilities], fat women, and any woman who is unable to live up to the increasingly narrow standards of female beauty and sex appeal that are normatively required” (p. 104). Similarly, following D’Acci’s (1994) work on Cagney and Lacy, Dubrofsky (2002) argues that postfeminism is embodied by “a personalization of social and political issues” (p. 268), since women can now “choose” to re-claim pre-feminist roles thanks to all the perceived progress that has been made.

**Branding and consumerism.**

Coupled with this segregation of women due to both notions of individualism and intersectionality, there tends to be a heavy emphasis on branding and consumerism as means for women to achieve (individual) empowerment. Examples here would include Victoria’s Secret,
The Spice Girls, and *Sex and the City* once again. As Kite (2011) argues, “[i]n the case of Victoria’s Secret, a push-up bra and thigh-high boots are made to stand for ‘empowerment’ in a way that objectifies feminism and femininity simultaneously through its commodification of the female form” (p. 38). With their well-known slogan of “Girl Power,” The Spice Girls rose to fame back in the 1990s. What makes The Spice Girls uniquely postfeminist, as opposed to feminist, is their reification of commodity feminism. This is to say, rather than using themselves to promote feminism, the British pop group used (and continues to do so, as recently as 2012) feminism to promote their Spice Girls brand. In regards to *Sex and the City*, Isbister (2008) points out the following:

Feminist readings of fairytales have contributed to the emergence of postfeminist popular culture, replacing the transformative narrative ideals of ‘true love’ and ‘happily ever after’ with new gendered ideals centred in part on transformations of the self, female empowerment and self realisation. In *Sex and the City* these ideals are intersected with other images of promised satisfaction, such as consumerism. *Sex and the City*’s protagonists negotiate the complexities, contradictions and anxieties of feminist ideals packaged into a consumable commodity by the postfeminist fairy tale. (p. 2)

In other words, consumerism is the encouraged route to take for empowering women in many popular portrayals of women onscreen. Tasker and Negra (2007) assert that postfeminism works to “commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer” (p. 2). Like Gill (2007a), they also recognize that this type of empowerment for women is celebrated throughout postfeminist media culture (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 4). In discussing MTV programs geared toward young women, Douglas (2010) explains that irony, as a crucial element of enlightened sexism, works to perpetuate conspicuous consumption while simultaneously enveloping sexism as being merely ironic for viewing audiences.
Before moving on to discuss the sexualization (and sexual subjectification) of girls and women, it is worth noting here that, like Douglas, Gill and Scharff (2011) also conceptualize postfeminism as being comprised of multiple yet related themes:

Elsewhere, we have suggested that a postfeminist sensibility includes the notion that femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a ‘makeover paradigm’; a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference; the marked ‘re-sexualization’ of women’s bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference” (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 4).

I have opted to place their definition, which calls for conceptualizing postfeminism as a “distinctive sensibility” that is comprised of the aforementioned themes (Gill, 2007b, p. 147), as the transition between branding and consumerism and sexualization/sexual subjectification since, as Gill (2007b) argues, they are strongly related especially against a backdrop of irony which allows for the contradictory messages of postfeminism.

**Sexualization and/or sexual subjectification.**

Like Douglas (2010) who has a problem with the “renewed and amplified objectification of young women’s bodies and faces” and the “dual exploitation and punishment of female sexuality,” Gill (2007b; 2009; and with Scharff, 2011) has written tirelessly on the subject matter, especially in relation to (midriff) advertising. For Gill (2009), the harmful implications of postfeminism often manifest for viewers as sexual subjectification: “Not only are women objectified as they were before, but through sexual subjectification they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen” (p. 107). In essence,
women are not only taught to conceptualize power through their physical appearance and sexuality but, more importantly, they are encouraged to put themselves through the processes of objectification as means to obtain a (false) sense of agency. In advertising, Gill points to the example of what advertisers have dubbed ‘the midriff,’ or a young, straight woman who entices straight men through a pronounced emphasis on her sexuality—and all because she “chooses” to do so. She keenly highlights the appropriation of “choice” rhetoric that historically has been used by feminists in their push to help women attain reproductive rights. Similarly, Gill recognizes that, at the end of the day, women are only striving for sexual (or pseudo) agency, as no real change toward gender equality is taking place. Instead, the only thing that actually changes is that companies rake in profit for proudly “supporting” and displaying women who have “chosen” to sexualize themselves as means of empowerment. At the same time, though, that women are shown outwardly displaying their sexuality in media, they are also shown either being frustrated with relationships or punished for being inappropriately sexual. A classic example of this can be found in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) with the character of Samantha Jones (played by Kim Cattrall). As Gerhard (2005) states, Samantha is “the character that is at once the most sexually adventurous and the most vulnerable to fears of growing old alone” (p. 46). Furthermore, while Samantha enjoys exploring her inner (and outer) sexual side, it is telling that she is not the main protagonist of the dramedy. Ultimately, when it comes to postfeminism being manifested as a means to gain (sexual) agency through sexual subjectification, Gill (2007b) concludes that “[t]o a much greater extent than men women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen” (p. 164). In essence, she is alluding to the processes of self-surveillance and self-discipline that societal pressures deem necessary for girls and women to maintain their physical appearance, which often translates to their perceived self-worth.
An anomalous definition.

Up to this point, then, scholars have only offered more complementary, rather than conflicting, definitions. Given this, it is important to acknowledge that one scholar, Lotz, seems to offer a more conflicting definition, one that distinguishes itself from the rest. In her article, “Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes,” Lotz (2001) steers away from the negative connotations that have been wrapped up in the term’s meaning. Rather, she sees the need for and usefulness in “…reclaiming the term as a descriptor that delineates recent developments in feminist theory and representations” (Lotz, 2001, p. 106). Following the work of Ann Brooks, Lotz (2001) agrees that postfeminism reflects the intersectionality of feminism with post-colonialism, postmodernism, and post-structuralism (p.113). As such, she asserts that scholars should be less dismissive of the term and instead find the utility in applying the term to better understand theoretical shifts within media representations.

What I find particularly worrisome is that Lotz seems to occasionally conflate the third wave of feminism with postfeminism, which seems to be the case with public opinion as well. However, like many other scholars (see Heywood and Drake, 2003; and Gamble, 2006), I conceptualize the third wave of feminism as the period from the late 1980s to the present day where women of color, of different socioeconomic statuses, and women with non-heteronormative sexual preferences started to speak back to the predominantly white, middle-to-upper-class, straight women of the second wave. In essence, the third wave marks today’s ongoing women’s movement, one that aims to account for issues of intersectionality (or factors, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, etc. that simultaneously impact a person’s identity, way of thinking and general behavior which, in turn, can help explain why some individuals experience more oppression or privilege than other individuals). Again, given this, I tend to disagree with Lotz’s take on postfeminism. Nevertheless, it is important for me to keep
an open mind as I continue this project; therefore, throughout the remainder of this project, I will be embracing more of the definitions that frame postfeminism as being ideologically regressive. At the same time though, I will be sure to be mindful of points raised by those definitions that situate postfeminism as being more ideologically progressive.

Before continuing on to explain my own conceptualization of the term, I would first like to address and articulate how scholarship on postfeminist television is distinguishable from prior feminist television criticism. Over the past 40 years, feminist scholars have analyzed television programming and have put forth criticism concerning their observations. However, there has been a change in the focus of these analyses and this change, in particular, is what I would like to address here. As I previously stated, traditional feminist television criticism examined the ways that various TV genres contributed to female pleasure. For instance, these scholars looked at more traditionally “feminine” genres, such as the soap opera. During the decade of the 1980s, television scholars began to branch out and look at more non-traditionally feminine genres, such as situation comedies and detective programming (Brunsdon, D’Acci, and Spigel, 1997, p. 9). In essence, previous feminist television scholarship has looked at women-centered genres, or rather those considered “feminine,” and has interrogated other genres to see how notions of femininity, especially for women characters, were constructed. However, Dow’s (1996) work encouraged feminist television critics to analyze the ever-changing depictions (and containment) of feminism on television. Given both this and the changing times, scholars today, like Douglas and Gill, are now focusing their efforts on understanding the many depictions of “enlightened sexism” on television. This, in turn, is where we see scholarship on postfeminist television factoring in today.
Wading through the Muddied Waters of Post-Recessionary Sexism...

Over the course of four years, I have been forming and honing my own definition of “postfeminism” as means to more appropriately describe the contexts, concerning liberated women in work sitcoms, which have been unfolding before my eyes on television. When I initially began to explore the representations of women in work-based sitcoms, particularly NBC’s *The Office* and *30 Rock*, I noticed that ambitious, career-minded women were more often than not symbolically punished and, thereby, thrust back into more traditionally-accepted roles for women on television, such as expectant mothers and non-authoritative positions. It is interesting to note that I defined “postfeminism” back then as being more reflective of this symbolic punishment: it was a way to contain the advancement and progress of women in the workplace yet, simultaneously, deflect attention away from this punishment by making it seem that these women characters, not societal injustices and institutional discrimination, were to blame for downfalls in their careers.

However, this definition no longer aptly describes the most current trends seen on television today. Instead, a honed definition is needed due to, and as a reflection of, the changing times, especially that of the new post-recession era. More recently, the post-recessionary climate has been giving way to a different manifestation of postfeminism, one where *both* women and men are struggling to make ends meet or secure stable work environments—one that I call “Post-Recessionary Sexism.” While economic uncertainty sets the backdrop for Post-Recessionary Sexism, there are a few more underlying themes in this new iteration of postfeminism. One of these themes revolves around the gendered difference that plays out in how women are continually seen taking whatever means necessary (i.e. blackmail, guilt trips, even trickery) to find employment and advance their careers—while men get by because of their knowledge and varied skill sets. Furthermore, there seems to be televisually-constructed differences in mindset: women characters are seen indulging in stereotypical behavior, such as nagging, complaining,
and ungrateful individuals. To contrast, men characters are seen as being cool, calm, and collected since no action is really deemed worthy of firing, including sexual harassment, as men have “special skills” that warrant a blind eye toward gender discrimination. This perhaps leads into the next recurring tenet of this new iteration of postfeminism: women often seek or heed the advice of men, even if the men characters are not necessarily financially better off than their women counterparts (and sometimes they are even worse off). The final marker of Post-Recessionary Sexism is that serious issues, such as rape and sexual harassment, are downplayed through the use of “comedy” most often (but not always) in the workplace—by both men and women characters.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I set out to discuss the existing scholarships, concerning postfeminism on (prime-time) television, that help to inform this research project. In order to do this, I elucidated the histories of gender portrayals on television and feminist television criticism, leading up to and including a discussion of televisual portrayals of lifestyle feminism. Both of these histories, especially the latter, contribute to my overall theoretical framework for this project and, given this, it was important to explain the trends that have been focused upon in both of these particular literatures. From there, I went on to explain how, starting in the late 1980s to early 1990s, “lifestyle feminism” was no longer sufficient in its ability to capture and describe the prevalence of television portrayals that were unfolding before viewers’ eyes. Rather, certain characteristics entered the picture and became more commonplace within these portrayals, adding momentum to what would have otherwise been described as lifestyle feminism. These characteristics included feminism being a textual marker, happiness being conflated with consumerism, a sense of individualism on the part of women protagonists, and a continued emphasis on careers and the workplace. In essence, these characteristics of “postfeminism” were manifesting against a
backdrop of neoliberalism. Next, I outlined key scholarly conversations in postfeminism and television scholarship. While the literature on postfeminist media is extensive, it is important to note that I only focused on the work of feminist television scholars here. My primary goal in this part of the chapter was to establish the main trend that most feminist television scholars conceptualize postfeminism as a bad thing. Despite this agreement on the concept as a whole being negative for women’s progress, the term itself is somewhat troubled. This is to say, there are so many nuanced, yet complementary at times, definitions of the term that the notion, again as a whole, is left muddied. On top of this, there seem to be two conversations occurring: one that regards postfeminism as a cultural phenomenon and the other as a scholarly perspective. As such, I feel the term is particularly worrisome since public opinion is that postfeminism is occurring and feminism is dead; in actuality, I believe the third wave of feminism is alive and well (as well as conversations from the second wave). Once again though, things get muddied as even scholars, such as Lotz, tend to conflate the third wave of feminism with postfeminism.

Finally, I concluded this chapter with my own take on postfeminism, one that I label “Post-Recessionary Sexism” and will help inform the rest of this project. Taking chapters 4, 5, and 6 as a collective, we will see a shift from traditional postfeminism to Post-Recessionary Sexism over the course of both textual categories (i.e. work-based versus work-related) and especially over time (before, during, and after the recessionary period). As such, readers are encouraged to keep this shift in mind throughout the remainder of this project.
CHAPTER 3:

A FEMINIST INTERVENTION: EMPLOYING FEMINIST TEXTUAL ANALYSIS TO EXAMINE TELEVISUAL DEPICTIONS OF WORK, ECONOMIC VIABILITY, AND POSTFEMINISM

Feminist textual analysis then, by examining ways in which [television programs] embody and construct patriarchal ideology, by undercutting these ideological operations and by offering alternative ways of looking at [television programs], may be regarded as an intervention within ideology. –Annette Kuhn, 1994, pp. 92-93

Self-Reflexivity, Activism, and Feminist Methodology

Reflecting on past research to inform the present.

Self-reflexivity is the cornerstone of feminist methodology (Lather, 1988; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Wasserfall, 1993; Bloom, 1998; Avishai et al, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Given this, I strive to practice self-reflexivity throughout this research project. In particular, I make every effort to acknowledge and address my biases, and also consider the implications that different interpretive choices might have on my research and vice versa. Some of these implications might stem from my initial academic interests in representational issues; thus, it is crucial for me to acknowledge and discuss how I have arose to my current interests which are embodied by this project. It is important for me to divulge the paths that I took to arrive at this current moment in time, as they have greatly influenced how my research has evolved to its most recent manifestation. My development as a scholar has led me to where I am now.

When I first embarked on my academic career back in 2007, I was heavily invested within the realm of film studies. My master’s thesis, entitled “Horror Global, Horror Local: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Torture Porn, J-Horror, and Giallo as Contemporary Manifestations of the Horror Genre,” examined horror films from the United States, Italy, and Japan, while paying
close attention to feminist sensitivities and cultural specificities. At the time, I had noticed that
the lines between national and global cinema were often blurred due to the overbearing effects of
Hollywood. As such, it made me question whether a national cinema still even existed or
whether it had since been replaced by a global cinema. Keeping this in mind, I explored the
cultural differences in post-1990s horror films and analyzed how each country’s particular genre
represented women. Ultimately, I concluded that, even though there were some similarities (such
as anxieties that arise from the modernization of women in traditionally-patriarchal societies), the
differences were still too great overall. National cinema in the horror genre still did exist as the
films from each respective country exhibited anxieties and fears that were culturally-specific. In
other words, these particular anxieties and fears were far too distinct to be collapsed into a
transnational category.

At the early start of my doctoral program, my research interests continued to evolve and I
became focused on applying feminist theory to other culturally-specific films. For instance, my
chapter in Media Depictions of Brides, Wives, and Mothers (DeCarvalho, 2012) applies feminist
philosophy to Deepa Mehta’s Canadian-Indian film, Water (2005), and another piece of mine
engages both the fluidity and realities of gender in Siddiq Barmak’s Afghan film, Osama (2003),
which was the first feature film to come out of post-Taliban Afghanistan. My research at this
point, then, focused on gender, but in particular non-US contexts with film.

However, this focus in international film studies began to shift in May 2010, when I
found myself troubled at what was happening to my favorite character on one of my favorite TV
shows: Jan Levenson (played by Melora Hardin) on NBC’s The Office (2005-present). Jan was a
character who immediately appealed to me; she began as an ambitious, career-minded woman
who not only held a position of authority but who also excelled at what she did. As the boss of
Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell), Jan fulfilled the role of being the corporate office’s main
representative. Any fan of the television program would know that, unlike the Scranton branch’s
absurd characters, the Dunder Mifflin corporate office is comprised of mostly rational ones. As such, Jan was portrayed at first as a rational individual who remained composed while handling any work-related problems. Thus, one could only imagine my surprise when I started witnessing her downward spiral from week-to-week. The worst part was seeing her thrust into a new (more traditional gender) role via the most clichéd female stereotypes. As a fan, I noticed her behavior becoming the source of “crazy humor”: obsessive over Michael and bizarre sexual proclivities; someone more unstable than in Scranton.

In order to fully understand the portrayal (and transformation) of Jan Levenson’s character, I decided to conduct a textual analysis of the first six seasons. My rationale for choosing textual analysis, in particular, was because it is widely accepted as the ideal method for looking at issues of representation within film and television studies. As means to examine the context and portrayal of Jan’s character, I opted to employ a feminist methodology to help guide my understanding of this particular character’s position and representation within the program. The integration of a feminist perspective toward textual analysis revealed a strong capitalist patriarchy at work both within the program’s diegetic world and in terms of its position on a major broadcast network, as well as in the nature of the workplace-based situation comedy in general.

Previous research showed that Jan Levenson’s character was not an anomaly, but was in fact emblematic of the “liberated woman” archetype (see, for example, Dow, 1990; Dow, 1996; Spangler, 2003; Kutulas, 2005). In particular, this televisual archetype went back to the start of 1970’s workplace sitcoms where women were shown to be independent and working. At the same time, it was understood that these women characters’ first venture outside of the domestic realm needed to be in a “cozy” work environment where co-workers stood in for family members. Given the backdrop of postfeminist media culture, I found that this archetype had been modified to reflect the change in times. Rather, I discovered a thematic pattern where the program’s
career-minded and ambitious women characters were symbolically punished for straying from societal norms. The specific televisual pattern was as follows: (1.) The career-minded woman is seen striving toward a career; (2.) She is then heavily pursued by a man co-worker and begins a relationship with him; (3.) The woman is soon shown being either incapable or irrational; (4.) As a result, the woman loses her job, transfers, or has to take a maternity leave; and lastly, (5.) The man gets to keep his job and is often promoted. I focused my efforts on discussing this pattern in relation to primarily Jan Levenson and Pam Halpert (who is played by Jenna Fischer), as these two characters additionally took on the maternal role during their forced subjugation to more traditional gender roles. However, this pattern was also applicable to the program’s two other career-minded and ambitious women characters, Karen Filippelli (played by Rashida Jones) and Holly Flax (played by Amy Ryan). Given this example, I now realize that my findings, which were presented at the ninth annual meeting for the Union for Democratic Communications, would have been completely different without the use of a feminist methodology. Furthermore, the exploration and analysis of this televisual pattern, concerning career-minded and ambitious women in *The Office*, ignited a spark of curiosity in me that wished to understand whether this phenomenon was emblematic of more than just this one example of a work-based situation comedy. This cultural problematic, then, formed the foundation of the current research project.

**Employing a feminist methodology as a reification of feminist activism.**

As a feminist media studies scholar, I am continually reminded of the importance of doing feminist research which, in itself, aims to further the goals of equality and justice. More specifically, my own feminist research objective has been to elucidate the onscreen injustices done to women, particularly those who are career-minded. Given my objective, close readings of these cultural texts have been a necessity and have been made possible through the use of textual analysis as a method. According to Harding (1987), a research method can be defined as “…a
technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence” (p. 2). Within text-based critical media studies, a research method requires researchers to gather evidence about cultural texts, more specifically televisual ones in my case, in order to deconstruct their ideological meanings and better understand how individuals might interpret them. Textual analysis, as a research method, calls for the interpretation, interrogation, and critique of the many elements that help to shape a cultural text. Some of these elements might include dialogue, visual imagery (and cues), plots and narrative arcs, concluding “moral lessons,” and character development. Kellner (1995) argues that texts are polysemous in nature and, therefore, require “…a set of critical or textual strategies that will unfold their contradictions, contestatory marginal elements, and structured silences” (p. 112). For Kellner, these critical practices should include “…paying attention to the margins, to seemingly insignificant elements of a text, as well as to the specific ideological positions affirmed” (1995, pp.112-113). Given this, genre codes and conventions, as well as paratexts, might be additional elements that serve as points of consideration and exploration in textual analysis. Kellner argues that what is not being said in cultural texts is just as important to analyze as what is being said. This is a praiseworthy point to make and one that certainly deserves attention. Despite making this argument however, Kellner and other cultural studies scholars continue to overlook elements that affect, pertain to, and reflect intersectional identities. For example, Kellner does not really address the issue of the scholar’s standpoint, or even the issue of patriarchal overdetermination. Rather, as the next section will discuss, traditional cultural studies scholars often fall trap to patriarchal assumptions, without realizing this to be the case. Some of these assumptions, including the authorial voice, attack mode, and the de-emphasis of gender, will be addressed in the next section. As such, traditional textual analysis is not without its limitations as a research method.
The shortcomings of conventional textual analysis.

Before continuing on to discuss feminist methodology in particular, I must first explore the limitations of conventional textual analysis, illustrating why a feminist intervention to the traditional method was both necessary and important in this research project. As Baehr and Gray (1996) note, research done on media content concerning gender roles and stereotypes has found that, irrespective of the medium under scrutiny, media content is dominated by men. This dominance is manifested in many ways, most particularly by the roles provided to onscreen men (versus onscreen women). For instance, men characters tend to be more active, authoritative, and dominant; on the contrary, women characters are relegated to roles deemed passive, submissive, and subordinate. This subordination includes putting off their own needs, which are often shown being less important than that of their men counterparts. In other words, viewers are exposed to the same traditional gender roles, time and again, where men are given active and independent roles, while women are assigned more passive and dependent roles.

Furthermore, in addition to issues of gender representation, scholars have noted that part of this dilemma of having men-dominated media content, which involves either the assignment of limited roles to women or the perpetuation of gender norms through clichéd stereotypes, stems from media ownership issues. As Wasko (2001) points out, feminist scholars have noted that there is a lack of women involved with cultural production, and also a tendency by media producers to disregard women spectators. This, in turn, affects the stereotypes being put forth: “Feminists argue that it is not surprising that media stereotypes reflect dominant social values, in that media producers are influenced by these stereotypes” (Wasko, 2001, p. 132). Feminist political economists, like Wasko, continually remind me of the scandalous lack of women involved in media ownership, to say nothing of other important positions within the industry as a whole. An increase would likely help combat the heavy infusion of gender assumptions, which
tend to be multifaceted, in texts because of the patriarchal elements built into the system (or in this case, the men-dominated media industry).

Sadly, the reinforcement of patriarchy in and by the media industry does not stop there; instead, its implications are far-reaching. Whether intentional or not, scholars often exacerbate the situation by re-creating modes of patriarchal thinking within the academy. Going back to Kellner’s earlier point about “seemingly insignificant elements,” there are several facets of traditional textual analysis that tend to perpetuate this mode of patriarchal thinking and analysis. Within the area of media and cultural studies in particular, Gallagher (2006) acknowledges that the academy continues to be a place where a male-dominant framework has a heavy presence. As such, she argues that there is an imperative for the positioning and assertion of an academic voice that is both characterized by feminism and exists outside the confines of the masculinist binary thinking that tends to define and dominate much of Western scholarship. Given that the method of textual analysis requires interpretation, some scholars have pointed out the problematic implications of textual critics who “magically extract the meaning of texts” (Madianou, 2005, p. 48). There is a level of privilege, on the part of the researcher in relation to the researched, which needs to be addressed. Furthermore, Hawkesworth (2006) argues that how one goes about interpreting a text is just as important as what makes that text worthy of scrutiny and exploration. Thus, it is important to recognize the interpretive lens that researchers use toward analyzing a cultural text. Often times, the lens used can lead to issues of gender being either dismissed or ignored. Additionally, textual criticism involves not just criticizing or attacking the text, but also understanding texts’ appeal, creativity and affect, elements that are highly gendered. In her article, “Putting Away Childish Things: Looking at Diana’s Funeral and Media Criticism,” the late Janice Hocker Rushing (1998) examined the paparazzi’s aggressiveness in covering Princess Diana, and their potential culpability in her death. She advanced this argument, though, to media criticism about Princess Diana, asserting that media studies scholars share common (critical)
practices with them. Rushing (1998) argued that the whole concept behind certain “attacking” modes of media criticism and deconstructing texts is deeply masculinist and problematic: “Simply put, it is that the critic uses methods to investigate the text(s) like a hunter employs the weapon to down the prey” (p. 158). What is implicit, throughout her article, is the notion that the masculinist perspective is dominant within the academy and, therefore, (predominantly men) critics tend to “destroy” texts, rather than “empathize” with them, the latter involving a sincere attempt to understand what makes texts emotionally powerful and popular. In other words, the actual process of textual analysis, by media studies scholars, tends to serve as a manifestation of patriarchal thinking within the academy and as an extension of the wide-reaching grip of the men-dominated media industry. With this in mind, I will now turn my efforts toward discussing how a feminist intervention (of textual analysis), or rather the use of a feminist methodological approach, has helped me to overcome the limitations that I have just laid out above.

**A feminist intervention toward textual analysis.**

As Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) state, methodology can be conceptualized as being a link between method and epistemology, one that molds how scholars theorize and carry out their research. According to DeVault (1996), a feminist methodology is distinguishable from other methodological approaches due to the commitment that feminist researchers have to three shared goals. First, we strive for a methodology that, similar to the process of excavation, will move emphasis away from the traditional focal point of men’s issues as means to uncover the viewpoints and voices of all women. Second, we strive for a methodology that reduces damage and manipulation throughout the gathering and exploration of research. Third and finally, we strive for a methodology that will buttress research concerning women, research that will improve the lives of women and enable social change. As DeVault (1996) makes clear, feminist methodologies aim to destabilize the many power dynamics that are in place, such as those
between researchers and who or what they research, those among academics, or those among members of society. I would like to note another crucial point that DeVault (1996) makes, which is that “[f]or the most part, feminist researchers have modified, rather than invented, research methods” (p. 31). This affirms Harding’s (1987) initial argument that there is no distinctive method of feminist inquiry. In other words, rather than creating new methods, feminist researchers have focused their efforts on creating pivotal scholarship about epistemology and the research process. These are both important points to remember, as they have informed me that methods rarely change; rather, the approaches to them are where flexibility lies.

A feminist methodology, in particular, has allowed me to supplement the conventional method of textual analysis. By centralizing the issue of gender and embracing subjectivity over “objectivity,” better attention can be paid to how patriarchal ideology is manifested both in the media industry and in the academy. Many critical cultural critics might look at issues of gender, but not necessarily as a continued source of oppression and not necessarily from a feminist lens. As Kuhn (1994) explains, feminist textual analysis in particular allows for an alternative in how one reads films, one that may be considered to be a feminist intervention toward patriarchal ideology. Kuhn’s argument here can be extended beyond filmic texts, to other kinds of cultural texts such as televisual ones. In addition to being an intervention to ideology in general, employing a feminist methodological approach to textual analysis can intervene patriarchal modes of thinking within the academy:

For if the broad sweep of media monitoring is directed primarily towards giving women a ‘voice’ in the world of media, the intense focus of feminist textual analysis has developed at least partly with the intent of giving a ‘voice’ to women within media scholarship itself… (Gallagher, 2006, p. 26)

Furthermore, Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) explain that feminist scholars question more than just the androcentrism that tends to be present throughout the traditional research process; rather,
they interrogate the dominant, deductive approach to scholarship and highlight the importance of understanding knowledge from various standpoints, thereby minimizing the creation and preservation of hierarchies. These new ways of building knowledge include embracing a feminist epistemological framework, which incorporates the standpoints of both the researcher and the subject(s) of study. No longer is subjectivity dismissed as being “unprofessional”; instead, it is acknowledged and addressed. If methodology can be thought of as theorizing about a research method, which itself can be thought of as a tool, then it is important to recognize that epistemology can be thought of as a “theory of knowledge” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Referring back to Rushing (1998) once more, a key part of her argument was that academic critics have a tendency to distance themselves from texts as a result of the traditional conceptualization of professionalism, which often translates to researchers striving for “objectivity” within their work. In essence, Rushing was alluding to the epistemological problems that many media scholars face today. Hence, a feminist epistemological framework has allowed me to account for issues of intersectionality, address issues of privilege, and acknowledge subjective biases, the latter of which stem from my passions for wanting to address gender issues in televisual texts and for teaching my own students how to apply a feminist cultural studies lens to analyze mass media. According to Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2007), this acknowledgement is a key part of doing feminist research:

...feminist scholars and researchers profess that by discarding positivist assumptions of the value-free researcher, the actuality of an objective reality, and the realizability of universal, fixed, and objective truth, we do not lose the ability to build knowledge…Rather than being removed from your passions, your research project may be derived from them, or at least from your interests, which have been shaped by many things. (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 14)
Furthermore, a feminist epistemology has guided me in my discovery (and building) of knowledge through the use of applying a feminist methodology (read: intervention) toward textual analysis, thereby affording me the means to properly interrogate postfeminist texts.

Given the nature of postfeminist texts, such as television sitcoms, the application of a feminist methodological approach has never been more important, at least in my eyes. By creating an alignment between my method of textual analysis and my methodology (and epistemological framework) of feminism, I have been able to assign increased agency to women spectators, onscreen characters, and researchers alike. As Wasko (2001) asserts, feminist theory has increased over recent decades and, with it, feminist media criticism has evolved to keep up with this growth. Initial feminist criticism highlighted Tuchman’s notion of “symbolic annihilation,” or the institutionalized underrepresentation and Other-ing of women in media. In today’s society, different mass media, particularly television, are finding more subtle ways to manipulate feminist rhetoric and further the dehumanization and/or trivialization of women all in the name of profit. For that reason, I feel it is more crucial than ever to promote and use feminist textual analysis as means to elucidate the clever deception behind capitalist-patriarchal ideologies, both in (and by) mass media and the academy.

**Analyzing postfeminist sitcoms through the use of a feminist methodology.**

The employment of a feminist methodological approach informs my specific research on postfeminist sitcoms in three key ways. First and foremost, the integration of reflexivity, which is a crucial characteristic of feminist methodologies, has impacted my research process as whole. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) emphasize the importance of self-reflexivity as a way to both minimize researcher bias and provide accountability in academic work. Ultimately, “…reflexivity can serve as a methodological tool for deconstructing power through the entire research process” (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2007, p. 496). Given Rushing’s (1998) observations
on media and cultural studies scholars’ tendencies to destroy the texts that they are studying, the inclusion of self-reflexivity in my work has forced me to examine and address my own biases as a precautionary measure, one that (hopefully) has prevented me from giving way to the total destruction of postfeminist texts. My intention, as a scholar, has certainly not been to destroy a text, but rather it has been to elucidate patterns that I have seen running throughout televisual texts on a weekly basis. Given the content and messages put forth by the postfeminist sitcoms at hand, particularly the contradictions that influence the mediated constructions of career-minded women and mix anti-feminist sentiment with portrayals of women in organizations, a feminist methodological approach has kept me in check by continually reminding me of my intentions to be open to alternative interpretations and elements that may make texts popular, even if ideologically troublesome. Referring back to what Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2007) state about researchers selecting projects that hold meaning in their lives, I am fully aware that I selected postfeminist, workplace-based sitcoms, in particular, to examine because of my own struggles in dealing with the tensions that arise from being both feminist and career-minded. Again though, my intentions have not been to destroy a text but to instead explore ideologies working beneath the surface level in the context of patriarchy and capitalism. By examining the content that many viewers are consuming each week, I have been able to initiate important societal and cultural dialogues.

Another way that a feminist methodological approach has informed my work on postfeminist texts is by providing me with the necessary foundation to give a “voice” to onscreen women characters in postfeminist sitcoms. Dow (1996) recognizes that sitcoms are the primary vessel for women to be represented on television and the source of the most memorable feminist characters. Moreover, “…there is a doubleness to the perceived meaning of the sitcom; it is discussed, at once, as an affirmation of women’s progress and as a reminder of the problems such progress has created” (Dow, 1996, p. 139). Gennaro (2007), who elaborates on Dow’s work on
sitcoms by looking at the television series, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), draws in on the “postfeminist” aspect and the concept of dualism. In essence, the HBO program undermines its interrogation of societal norms by perpetuating those same norms. By exposing the injustices done to women onscreen but also recognizing the occasional affirming portrayal, I have been equipped to spread awareness about the continued need for feminist movements. From my direct experiences and discussions with students in the classroom, I am continually reminded that what individuals see on television is usually interpreted as being either reflective of the society that we live in (that is, as “reality”), or just meant to be consumed for entertainment’s sake, the latter assuming no significant consequence. As hooks and McKinnon (1996) argue, popular culture is a real factor in the day-to-day lives of individuals, as many self-identities in a society’s youth are molded by portrayals in popular culture. Furthermore, popular culture provides us with a patriarchal mirror which distorts the perception of self (Kristeva, 1982). Therefore, a feminist intervention to textual analysis, coupled with a feminist epistemological framework, has provided me with the methodological tools needed to critique the messages being passed on to viewers, thereby assigning more agency to viewers by way of elucidating common televisual patterns. Additionally, a feminist intervention no longer allows the content of these postfeminist sitcoms to be dismissed for simply depicting “reality,” where career-minded women eventually just want to abandon their drive and embrace the “mommy” role. Rather, these postfeminist sitcoms are now being held accountable for their role in upholding capitalist patriarchy, or recognized for their complexities, including moments of ideological contradiction.

A final way in which a feminist methodological approach has informed my research on postfeminist texts, such as television sitcoms, is by providing insight for the types of questions being asked by me and other scholars who carry out critical cultural studies work within the male-dominated space of academia. As Gallagher (2006) asserts, the imperious patriarchal mindset that has been overshadowing the realm of media studies, and the media industry itself, has forced
feminist cultural critics to carve out new areas for dialogue, to rewrite existing narratives, and to articulate terms from a different perspective—that of the Other. By using feminist methodology, I hope to engage dialogues, within the academy, concerning the implications of postfeminist sitcoms. Walters (1995) argues that feminist media criticism needs to challenge existing boundaries, yet stay true to posing questions that are emblematic of feminism in how they interrogate social hierarchies and “cultural processes” (p. 159). I believe that these questions should be extended to the “processes” of the academy where feminist scholars continue to be marginalized and silenced. Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) argue that, within the academy, feminist intellectual thought is often marginalized or made to seem subordinate compared to other types of intellectual thought, and Jones (2003) adds that feminist theory and politics are often trivialized, dismissed, or ignored within cultural studies in particular. Instead, there is a “…tendency within the cultural or media studies approach to relegate feminism to the sidelines as simply one way of thinking about textual or visual meaning” (Jones, 2003, p. 3). Additionally, my own research on postfeminist sitcoms has allowed me to spark new conversations within feminist media and cultural studies scholarship in particular. Tasker and Negra (2005) astutely point out the threat that blossoming postfeminist media culture has toward traditional feminist criticism; specifically, they recognize that postfeminist culture thrives on a neoliberal framework, and its sense of individualism has contributed to the undoing of a shared sense of community among feminist academics and activists. Again, given the nature of postfeminist texts, many (feminist) media scholars have opted against recognition of these texts, which also may reflect tensions between scholars who critique post-feminist cultural trends and those who embrace at least some elements of these trends. Rather than ignore the inevitably-growing presence of postfeminist depictions, I have faced these texts head-on in this research project by examining their content and by providing spaces, within academic circles and my classroom, for discussion.
A few concluding thoughts on post-feminist media culture.

Postfeminist texts spread messages that commodify feminist ideals, manipulate feminist rhetoric, and ultimately send contradictory messages to viewers concerning feminism. The conventions that define sitcoms, in particular, afford these messages an ideal space for manifestations of postfeminism, because as film critic Ella Taylor argues “[c]omedy is a more flexible form than drama because it can create multiple, conflicting, and oppositional realities within the safe confines of the joke” (qtd. in Dow, 1996, p. 37). In regards to my own research on postfeminist sitcoms, I believe a feminist methodological approach has provided the necessary feminist intervention toward textual analysis, thereby allowing me to overcome any limitations or shortcomings of the traditional method for a feminist project. This particular methodological approach has enabled me to account for issues of intersectionality, address my own subjective biases (particularly when it comes to the often times antithetical nature of postfeminist texts), and assign agency (in the form of a “voice” and the kinds of questions being asked, respectively) to both onscreen female characters and feminist media scholars. Most importantly, it has helped me reify my commitment toward furthering the goals of feminisms, through the incorporation of self-reflexivity in both my academic writing specifically and my research process as a whole, and the initiation of new conversations societally, culturally, and academically.

Within the above-delineated methodological assumptions, this research project will apply a feminist textual analysis to workplace and work-related sitcoms. Some assumptions and techniques will apply to all chapters but, in addition, specific chapters may use a more focused method specific to the goals and texts of that chapter. The next section expands on some of these project-specific methods; further detail will also be provided within each case-study chapter.
Methodological Details

A summary of my texts.

For this project, I examined nine television programs, more specifically work-oriented situation comedies, from the broadcast and premium cable networks. These texts were grouped into three categories. The first category is the more traditional workplace sitcoms which are mostly women-centered and feature middle-aged women protagonists, ones that specifically have been “branded” as NBC’s Thursday night (exclusively workplace-based) line-up. These programs are Community (2009-present); Parks and Recreation (2009-present); The Office (2005-present); and 30 Rock (2006-present). In Community, a study group comprised of both college-aged and older individuals works together to achieve their various goals (via multiple assignments). Like most workplace-based sitcoms, the co-workers (or cohort, in this case) act like a substitute family. Parks and Recreation follows a group of workers, led by the Deputy Director, at a local government department as they strive to better the fictional city of Pawnee, Indiana. In The Office, an anonymous (and mostly unseen) documentary crew films the trials and tribulations of employees working at a regional branch of Dunder Mifflin, a paper supply company. Finally, 30 Rock follows a group of writers who struggle to create funny content for a fictional variety television show called TGS (formerly known as The Girlie Show). Simultaneously, they also try to deal with corporate pressures from their parent companies, General Electric, and then later Kabletown (read: Comcast).

For my second textual category, I closely examined the emerging subgenre of broadcast sitcoms about twenty-something women, featuring protagonists often dealing with economic hardship and that specifically highlight gender in their title. With this in mind, I investigated the following sitcoms: 2 Broke Girls (CBS, 2011-present) and Don’t Trust the B---- in Apt 23 (ABC, 2012-present). In 2 Broke Girls, two twenty-something women (one streetwise and the other a former trust fund baby) become friends through working at a local diner. Don’t Trust the B---- in
Apt 23 follows a twenty-something woman who relocates from the Midwest to New York City for her dream job, only to find that her new job is gone when the company is shut down. To make ends meet, she takes a job as a barista and rooms with Chloe: a female con artist who loves to party.

Lastly for the third category, I analyzed three television programs from the premium cable channel HBO. In 2011 and 2012, HBO debuted three series that feature women protagonists, with two of the series being analogous to the NBC formula (middle-aged women, workplace-based), and one being analogous to the second category (twenty-something women in economic uncertainty). One of the series, Veep (2012-present), is emblematic of all of the qualities that comprise a traditional workplace sitcom, even if set in the extraordinary setting of the Office of the Vice President of the United States. The other two programs are more reflective of typical programming put forth by premium cable channels, particularly HBO, as a blend of comedy and drama, or better known as a dramedy. These two series are Enlightened (2011-present) and Girls (2012-present). In the former series, a woman returns to work after a three-month period of seeking treatment following a mental breakdown at her office. However, she returns to find that she is demoted and that her new office is located (quite literally) in the basement of her building. The latter series follows four twenty-something women as they struggle with the burdens of both work/finances and their various relationships/friendships. These programs thus are similar in theme and concept to the other texts, but their context (premium cable) is different.

In particular, I looked closely at issues of gender, work, economic viability, and also depictions of (post)feminism within these work-based/work-related sitcoms (and dramedies). Given that workplace sitcoms have historically been the venue for more progressive (if circumscribed) portrayals of women, I began to wonder about the implications of the post-recession shift in programming from the work-based sitcom to the work-related sitcom and
dramedy. Workplace comedies are being accompanied by work-related comedies, specifically programs highlighting issues of employment and economic survival, and not set in one stable work environment. We see this in broadcast television with CBS’s 2 Broke Girls (2011-present) and ABC’s Don’t Trust the B---- in Apt 23 (2012-2013), both fairly traditional (in style) comedies. On premium cable networks, we see more explicitness and hybridity. HBO’s Enlightened and Girls would be two cases in point here.

My project rationale.

Simply stated, my rationale for wanting to make this research project a reality was two-fold. Broadly speaking, I wanted this research project to elucidate the recent changes in programming when it comes to the depictions of the workplace in the new post-recession era. As I previously noted, workplace sitcoms have historically been the place to find more feminist-minded messaging. However, if today’s current workplace sitcoms are waning and instead are being replaced by work-related (not work-based) sitcoms and dramedies, what are the implications for viewers here? As a viewer myself, what does it mean for me to turn on the television only to see fewer and fewer women being shown in (stable) workplace environments? What message does this send to viewers, particularly women viewers, who are now seeing twenty-something women replace middle-aged women characters as protagonists? In previous workplace sitcoms, women characters were also more financially stable. So, what does it mean when the newer programs depict twenty-something women who are struggling financially but are not seen necessarily in the workplace? Hence, this research project also focused on the generational conflicts and class differences at work in today’s post-recession era (sitcom) programming. Finally and more specifically, it was my aim that an examination of these half-hour scripted programs—the NBC Thursday night workplace lineup, the economically struggling
twenty-something sitcom, and the HBO dramedy—would offer a range of how television has changed—or not changed—in its representations of women in society since Dow’s examination.

**Methodological techniques.**

Like other mediums, television is distinguishable based on its conventions and structure. While the storylines of films, for example, usually run around two hours, television programs are driven by storylines that are delivered within the relatively-short time frame of an episode, ultimately comprising a serial narrative that might run over the span of years. The oldest text that I analyze, which is NBC’s *The Office*, debuted in 2005 and is currently in its ninth and final season. Given the number of years, seasons, and especially episodes that this sitcom alone has had, it only makes sense that I have distinct methodological focal points for each text chapter as a way to manage the overwhelming number of episodes from not only this sitcom but rather all nine programs combined. As such, for my case-study chapter on the traditional work-based sitcoms, I organize my exploration around a viewing strip that is comprised of the four NBC sitcoms. For my analysis chapter on the CBS/ABC sitcoms, I mostly examine the texts themselves, but also emphasize character archetypes. For my case-study chapter on the HBO dramedies, I concentrate on the programs’ controversies and their “it’s not TV, it’s HBO” quality TV appeal; I also bring in reviews and critical commentary, all as means to study their paratextual features. This is to say, my chapters vary both by textual groupings but also by their methodological emphasis. It is my hope for this project that this variety not only makes writing about nearly-600 episodes more manageable, but that it also keeps things a little bit more lively for my readers.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Before delving into my first case study, I would like to take a moment here to reflect on feminist standpoint theory as it helps elucidate my own relationship with the selected texts. In
her discussion of women’s experiences, Harding (1987) states that “[n]ot only do our gender experiences vary across the cultural categories; they also are often in conflict in any one individual’s experience. My experiences as a mother and a professor are often contradictory” (p. 7). Given this, she argues that “[t]hese fragmented identities are a rich source of feminist insight” (Harding, 1987, p. 8). Furthermore, these “fragmented identities” are important to consider when carrying out our own research—this is where feminist standpoint theory is especially crucial to think about. In general,

Standpoint theory directs researchers to identify research problems within the daily reality of marginalized groups—groups whose life experiences have been put into the margins of scholarly works—and to take these groups, such as women, people of color, the poor, the elderly, lesbians and gay men, persons with disabilities, out of the margins and place their day-to-day reality in the center of research. (Swigonski, 1993, p. 172)

When understanding things from the lives and experiences of women, feminist standpoint theorists have noted that simply being a woman does not necessarily provide a feminist perspective of the world (Hennessy, 1993). Rather, they consider it to be a “socially produced position” that might not be readily available at first to all women (p. 14). As a feminist media studies scholar, I am fortunate enough to have learned about the principles of feminism six years ago and am incredibly thankful at the ways these principles have enriched my own life and have provided me with increased self-agency; at the same time, it is important for me to acknowledge that I am still learning how to implement and reify these principles within my own life on a daily basis. As hooks (2000) once stated, “Feminists are made, not born” and I am continually learning ways to make myself a better feminist every day.

Thinking further about feminist standpoint theory, I understand that it is important to recognize that our various perspectives—which have been shaped by our lived experiences and own self-identities—shape the kinds of questions that we might ask, especially in relation to our
own research. Therefore, as both a feminist but also a woman (and member of the marginalized group that I am analyzing through my dissertation), I want to reflect back again on two more items before finally moving onto the next chapter: my personal ties to the selected texts in this dissertation but also my unique subject positioning. As mentioned much earlier in this chapter, my initial impetus for wanting to research portrayals of women in the workplace was to, as a loyal viewer, make sense of the “transformation” of one of my favorite characters on NBC’s *The Office*. Hence, I already had a pre-established connection with this particular text, and something similar could be said concerning the remaining three NBC sitcoms, as well as the three HBO sitcoms (and dramedies). In regards to *2 Broke Girls* and *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, this was not the case, however, as I had selected and viewed these programs specifically with this dissertation in mind.

Similar to my acknowledgement of where I previously stood with these texts at the start of my research project, it is just as important for me to acknowledge my unique subject positioning. While it is true that I fall under the age group of the target viewing audience for these sitcoms and dramedies, I must be candid in stating my unconscious tendency to distance myself from relating to onscreen characters. On some level, this may have been a result of being badly burnt by having once related to Jan Levenson’s character and then witnessing the horror of her downward spiral as a source of humor for audiences. Or perhaps it was my career path into academia that made me unable to see myself in the onscreen characters, many of whom are struggling to find footholds into their desired careers. In any case, I am grateful for my unique subject positioning—as both a dedicated viewer and a feminist media studies scholar—because I feel that it ultimately provided me with meaningful insight on how to bridge the gap between enjoying a program while simultaneously deconstructing it.
CHAPTER 4:

‘COMEDY NIGHT DONE RIGHT’...BUT FOR WHOM?: THE PORTRAYAL OF INDEPENDENT WOMEN IN NBC’S THURSDAY NIGHT WORKPLACE-BASED SITCOMS

Of course, "must see TV"—one of those annoyingly successful campaigns that worked so well in the 1990s that it was almost as if NBC had subliminally controlled your mouth to say the words—is now a relic. Meaning it only slips out occasionally, even when you don't mean it to. Perhaps that's why NBC has very cleverly employed some re-branding to its new Thursday night lineup, which it will now call "Comedy Night Done Right." – Tim Goodman, 2007, para. 2.

NBC’s Thursday Night Brand and The Workplace-Based Viewing Strip

Thursday nights on NBC: From “Must See TV” to “Comedy Night Done Right.”

On March 24, 2005, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) debuted The Office (2005-present), an American adaptation of the award-winning British situation comedy of the same title. Drawing in 11.2 million viewers for its series premiere, the sitcom aired immediately after Donald Trump’s hit reality TV program, The Apprentice (2004-present) (Timms, 2005). The initial success from its debut prompted the network to air the program as part of its regular Tuesday night lineup, hammocked between Scrubs (2001-2010) and Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (1999-present). Unfortunately, the second episode of The Office proved less successful than its initial debut, as it only brought in 5.9 million viewers on that following Tuesday (Deans, 2005). In January 2006, NBC decided to move The Office from Tuesday to Thursday night in hopes of reviving the "Must See TV" Thursday night lineup, which previously had dominated prime-time television with its back-to-back comedies.

When The Office first aired as part of the “Must See TV” Thursday night lineup in early 2006, it accompanied Will & Grace (1998-2006), the short-lived Four Kings (2006), and My
Name is Earl (2005-2009) (MacMedan, 2005). Later in that same year, NBC made the decision to once again try to re-vamp its Thursday night programming. This time, it opted to showcase the following lineup: My Name is Earl, The Office, Scrubs, and 30 Rock (2006-2013), the latter being the network’s latest situation comedy at the time. Another noticeable difference was that NBC finally retired its famous Thursday night “Must See TV” slogan. Instead, NBC re-branded its Thursday night with the slogan, “Comedy Night Done Right”:

What's particularly interesting is how NBC crafted this package. When ‘The Office’ premiered, almost no one thought it would survive, much less live up to the lofty comedic heights of its British inspiration. And though the ratings dictated that it would likely be canceled, NBC and its entertainment president, Kevin Reilly, believed that the shortened freshman season had promise and that with the right push the series would catch on. Few shared that belief despite the quality that emerged in those first six episodes. But Reilly and NBC were right, and the second season established it as the rightful successor to Fox's ‘Arrested Development’ as the best and funniest broadcast network comedy, a title it solidified in the second season. (Goodman, 2007, para. 8)

Accompanying this shift in branding, and as reflected by the quote above, there was also a shift from popularity to quality on NBC. The Office, in particular, was emblematic of this latter shift due to its unique mockumentary format. Filmed with only a single camera, The Office omits a laugh track and often breaks the fourth wall by having characters directly address this camera, especially through its talking-head sequences. As Darowski (2012) argues, it is likely that these non-conventional standards made it difficult for The Office to find an audience at first, especially since “NBC had a very specific style for its sitcoms, which it had been following for decades by

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the time *The Office* premiered” (p. 243). Given this, the series is arguably more cinematic than traditional sitcom in style.

Coupled with its mockumentary style, *The Office* has other unique elements such as its usage of knowing silence and knowing laughter (versus the traditional laugh track) as the humor of discomfort, the portrayal of the workplace as being often unpleasant, and the prominent role of women workers within the series. Kocela (2009) discusses the program’s use of knowing silence: “Reviewers of *The Office* had made much of the fact that the producers’ refusal to employ a laugh track enables long, uncomfortable silences to serve as the punch line of many of the jokes” (p. 165). As such, knowing silence is used in place of the laugh track, which so often results in knowing laughter. Furthermore, while many workplace sitcoms merely focus on characters and the tasks they have to complete, *The Office* differs in its addition of depicting the Scranton branch of Dunder Mifflin as the undesirable workplace. Reifying this for viewers, in one episode, a character makes the following statement to the unseen camera crew: “Right now, this is just a job. If I advance any higher in this company, then this would be my career, and uh...well, if this were my career, I’d have to throw myself in front of a train” (Season 1, Episode 3). Additionally, the prominence of women workers within the series is a unique and almost unprecedented one.

While the series once featured a man (Michael Scott) as its main character, the cast of *The Office* has been comprised of many women characters, such as Pam Halpert (née Beesly), Jan Levenson, Angela Martin, Phyllis Vance (née Lapin), Meredith Palmer, Kelly Kapoor, Erin Hannon, Holly Flax, and Nellie Bertram. At the time that *The Office* debuted in 2005, no other sitcom within NBC’s “Must See TV” lineup (nor even later in the “Comedy Night Done Right” lineup) would feature as many women characters as part of a single main cast.

Slowly gaining momentum, NBC’s new Thursday night lineup of “Comedy Night Done Right” experienced continued changes over the years; however, it stayed consistent with its devotion to back-to-back comedies, including mostly situation comedies but also a dose of reality
TV, at times, with a celebrity version of *The Apprentice* (2004-present). In April and September of 2009, NBC added two more situation comedies to the “Comedy Night Done Right” lineup, with the debut of *Parks and Recreation* (2009-present) and *Community* (2009-present), respectively. By mid-October 2009, the 8-10pm slot of the Thursday night lineup was comprised solely of back-to-back workplace sitcoms: *Community, Parks and Recreation, The Office,* and *30 Rock*. While other programs debuted and were short lived on NBC’s Thursday night, these four programs in particular seemed to remain in some order or another as part of “Comedy Night Done Right.”

**Methodological focus: NBC Thursday night lineup as a viewing strip.**

As mentioned in the last chapter, each case study in this project features a different methodological technique both to offer different ways to organize themes around gender, work, economic changes and comedy in sometimes hundreds of different episodes of these programs, and to highlight different dynamics in programs with often quite distinct programming contexts and target audiences. For this first case study, I will be applying Newcomb and Hirsch’s Cultural Forum Model—and especially their ancillary concept of a “viewing strip”—to my examination of four prominent situation comedies, those mentioned above, from NBC’s Thursday night “Comedy Night Done Right” lineup from the late 2000s; again, these include *Community, Parks and Recreation, The Office,* and *30 Rock.*

Newcomb and Hirsch’s (1983/1994) Cultural Forum Model highlights how television may raise social and cultural issues, and allows these issues to be visible and circulating. Their model draws significantly from Raymond Williams’ concept of “flow.” For Williams (1974/2004), this concept refers to the organized sequence that allows narrative structures (of multiple programs) and advertising to blend into one another to create a steady constant stream of television. One example that Williams examined was the “flow…within a particular evening’s
programmes” (Williams, 1974/2004, p. 97). Specifically, Newcomb and Hirsch emphasize the importance of analyzing a “viewing strip” as one manifestation of Williams’ concept. They argue that their model has led us into a new exploration of the definition of the television text. We are now examining the ‘viewing strip’ as a potential text and are discovering that in the range of options offered by any given evening’s television, the forum is indeed a more accurate model of what goes on within television than any other that we know of. By taping entire weeks of television content, and tracing various potential strips in the body of that week, we can construct a huge range of potential ‘texts’ that may have been seen by individual viewers. (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983/1994, pp. 509-510)

Conceptualizing Williams’ concept of flow as “flow strips” (p. 509), Newcomb and Hirsch offer television scholars a framework to examine television as a “cultural forum,” one that acknowledges the specifics of the medium itself but also recognizes the cultural significance of analyzing the medium’s polysemous nature (1983/1994, p. 506). For them, their Cultural Forum Model works to understand the most telling aspects of television, which Newcomb and Hirsch argue is to analyze viewing strips that contribute to but also represent “television as a whole system” (1983/1994, p. 508). They conceptualize this “whole system” as one that offers yet simultaneously reflects ideological messages. Thus, one way to gain a thorough understanding of how television operates within American culture, in particular, is to analyze flow or viewing strips and explore how they function as contributors to the greater system (or forum) in place.

Part of the motivation of the strip concept is to more realistically capture how viewers may watch television. This certainly may include channel switching, but could also include watching several programs on the same channel, which is especially likely for traditional broadcast network television, particularly for series that have been strategically scheduled in a programming block by a network to appeal to roughly the same demographic. Programming strategies such as “lead-
in,” “lead-out,” and “hammocking” are designed to maximize the continuity of audiences as programs change (Turow, 2011). Thus, while concentrating on the ideology and meanings in one program is valuable, often viewers will not just watch one program, but will watch accompanying programs on the same channel, especially, again, if these programs are promoted to have similar appeals (i.e., “Comedy Night Done Right”). Although Newcomb and Hirsch used these concepts to emphasize television’s vibrancy and diversity, the viewing strip concept does not inherently lead to this conclusion. Comparing programs on the same evening or programming block may not only reveal differences, but also continuity in themes and tropes found throughout an evening’s viewing of television across programs.

Applying the Cultural Forum Model to this first case study, I will be re-creating one night of NBC’s “Comedy Night Done Right” lineup as a means to comprise my own viewing strip. Given that my interests lie in the post-recession era (from June 2009 to present day), I have opted to re-create the 8-10pm prime-time slot of Thursday, October 22, 2009 on NBC (see Table 4-1). My particular viewing strip includes the following situation comedies and their respective episodes:

Table 4-1: Thursday Night Lineup for October, 22, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>NBC</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Episode/Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00PM</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>S1, E6 - “Football, Feminism, and You”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30PM</td>
<td>Parks and Recreation</td>
<td>Parks and Recreation</td>
<td>S2, E6 - “Kaboom”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00PM</td>
<td>The Office</td>
<td>The Office</td>
<td>S6, E7 - “The Lover”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30PM</td>
<td>30 Rock</td>
<td>30 Rock</td>
<td>S4, E2 - “Into the Crevasse”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to October 22, 2009 being a date that succeeds the latest recessionary time period, I am also interested in this particular night as the episodes are especially gender-oriented. As previously discussed in chapters 2 and 3, this research project is informed by feminist theory and scholarship. It attempts to understand the full scope of ideological implications that television
offers to viewers worldwide, particularly in terms of meanings about women. Thus, I am curious to examine how this heavily gender-oriented aspect might impact the messaging of the overall viewing strip. On this particular night, then, what sorts of messages about work and gender would loyal NBC viewers receive?

It is important to note that I did not analyze only these four episodes. Rather, this case study is informed by the viewing, note taking, and analysis of the programs as a whole. In order to gain a true understanding of how the themes and the characters present in the viewing strip relate to the series themselves in their entirety, I analyzed each sitcom up until the writing of this chapter (in April 2013). This included three and a half seasons (or 81 episodes) of Community, four and a half seasons (or 88 episodes) of Parks and Recreation, eight and a half seasons (or 195 episodes) of The Office, and all seven seasons (or 138 episodes) of 30 Rock. In total, I analyzed 502 episodes for this chapter alone.

Before continuing on to the analysis of my viewing strip, I would like to first address two more items: my rationale for choosing these four texts out of the many programs that have been a part of NBC’s “Comedy Night Done Right,” but also how they embody the textual grouping for this specific case study. My reasoning for selecting these four situation comedies is two-fold: first, these programs have combined longevity with positive reception from critics. Unlike many of the other programs that help or have helped to comprise the “Comedy Night Done Right” lineup, these four programs have not been short-lived. Instead, they each have enjoyed multi-season runs (with at least four seasons); in fact, 2013 saw the end of two programs, one lasting seven seasons (30 Rock) and another nine seasons (The Office). The two others have aired for, as of this writing, four seasons (Community) and five (Parks and Recreation). They have also each
received critical acclaim⁴. Each is shot in a single-camera set up that allows for more advanced production techniques than is possible in the live-on-tape three-camera sitcoms such as Two and a Half Men and 2 Broke Girls (the latter discussed in the next chapter). Second, these four programs have contributed to the Thursday night lineup being comprised not only of situation comedies but solely workplace-based ones. Given that workplace sitcoms have historically been the venue for more progressive (if circumscribed) portrayals of women, I am also interested in noting the recession and post-recession shift in programming from the work-based sitcom to the work-related sitcom and dramedy. Thus, it will be particularly useful to analyze a viewing strip of only work-based sitcoms as means for comparison with the analysis of the other case studies in this project. On a final note, it is worth mentioning that, in addition to employing a distinct methodological technique, each case study also features its own textual grouping. In this case, most of the programs embody the traditional workplace sitcom that are mostly women-centered and feature middle-aged women protagonists, not unlike traditional gendered workplace comedies in the past such as The Mary Tyler Moore Show and Murphy Brown, both of which have been highlighted by such scholars as Dow for being especially noteworthy in their portrayal of the working woman.

Introducing the NBC Lineup

A working Community.

In the fall of 2009, NBC debuted Community, a situation comedy that focuses on the academic and social lives of seven individuals who formed a study group at Greendale, a fictional community college in Colorado. The sitcom is especially well-known for its self-reflexivity, including highlighting genre characteristics and paying homage to various films such as Goodfellas (1990), Pulp Fiction (1994), and Mean Girls (2004). Additionally, while the sitcom

⁴ The highest Metascores (the weighted average of the aggregate of critic reviews as compiled by Metacritic.com) for each of the sitcoms fall under the Metacritic.com category of “Universal Acclaim”: 88 for Community; 83 for Parks and Recreation; 85 for The Office; and 84 for 30 Rock.
would typically fall under the college sitcom subgenre, the television program itself has elements of a workplace-based sitcom. While college sitcoms such as *A Different World* or *Greek* typically take place at a residential university or college, and feature mostly college-aged characters heavily involved in the social life of the university, this sitcom differentiates in its setting, a local community college, which houses a mixed demographic of both traditionally college-aged and older individuals. Furthermore, *Community* portrays characters that are continually seen “working” full-time, not in the traditional sense but instead as students. The “study group” of the seven main characters primarily centers around their study lounge, rather than in the characters’ dorm rooms as in most college-based sitcoms. In their study-room setting, the characters in *Community* are shown working toward the achievement of a common goal (via multiple assignments, and often in the same classes), where they are continually interrupted by their boss (or dean, in this particular scenario). Like most workplace-based sitcoms, such as *The Office*, the co-workers (or cohort, in this case) act as a second family, with characters serving the same function in domestic sitcoms as weird uncles, cousins, nurturing aunts, and of course romantic possibilities. Thus, in many respects, such as its heavy deployment of intertextual references and its use of workplace sitcom tropes, *Community* stands apart from other situation comedies.

Despite its differences, from the perspective of someone who is both a feminist and a loyal fan of the program, I find striking similarities in its display of postfeminist messaging (DeCarvalho, 2011). As will be argued, the sitcom’s discourse both manipulates feminist rhetoric and plays up negative connotations of feminism, which serves to reify postfeminist notions. Similarly, the program’s televisual imagery sends conflicting messages to viewers, which ultimately deals postfeminism (and patriarchal ideologies) the upper hand.

The NBC sitcom follows seven characters who, in the first season, come together in hopes of passing an introductory Spanish course offered by Señor Chang (played by Ken Jeong). Each of these characters represents a different character type in both the college and workplace
sitcom: a disbarred lawyer, Jeff Winger (played by Joel McHale) represents the too-cool-for-school guy (and de facto leader of the group); a high school dropout, Britta Perry (played by Gillian Jacobs) is depicted as being the feminist/humanitarian/activist; a former addict of prescription drugs, Annie Edison (played by Alison Brie) represents the neurotic overachiever; an all-around eccentric, Abed Nadir (played by Danny Pudi) is known for being the oddball pop culture guru; a former high school varsity quarterback, Troy Barnes (played by Donald Glover) portrays the dumb jock; a devout Christian, Shirley Bennett (played by Yvette Nicole Brown) is an African-American, single mother of two young boys; and a significantly older white man, Pierce Hawthorne (played by Chevy Chase) portrays a wealthy bigot. Their study group was a plan initially concocted by Jeff as a way to make sexual advances toward Britta. However, eventually the study group gets acquainted and realizes that, while some hate to admit it, they actually grow to be close friends.

**Exploring Parks and Recreation.**

*Parks and Recreation* debuted on NBC on April 9, 2009. The workplace-based sitcom follows a group of employees at a local government department as they strive to better a fictional town in Indiana called Pawnee. Led by their extremely competent and dedicated Deputy Director, Leslie Knope (played by Amy Poehler) and her libertarian, manly boss, Ron Swanson (played by Nick Offerman) who is also the Parks Director, the group is filmed and interviewed by an anonymous film crew as they experience obstacles to their work (and personal) lives while carrying out various projects for their department. Over the seasons, the employees comprising this group fluctuate slightly. However, for the most part and in addition to Leslie and Ron, the group is comprised of a mix of local government employees. Ann Perkins (played by Rashida Jones) is a local nurse, who in later seasons takes on the additional responsibility of being appointed the public relations director for Pawnee’s health department. Tom Haverford (played
by Aziz Ansari) is a sometimes superficial administrator for the Parks and Recreation department. April Ludgate (played by Aubrey Plaza) serves as an assistant to the Parks Director, Ron. Local musician Andy Dwyer (played by Chris Pratt) is a former boyfriend of Ann and eventually April’s spouse, who later is made an assistant to the Deputy Director, Leslie. Ben Wyatt (played by Adam Scott) is Pawnee’s Deputy City Manager, who later serves as Leslie’s campaign manager and eventually marries her. Chris Traeger (played by Rob Lowe) is Pawnee’s hyper healthy and upbeat City Manager. Savvy Donna Meagle (played by Retta) and put-upon Jerry Gergich (played by Jim O’Heir) are two employees of the Parks and Recreation department whose specific job titles are never disclosed to viewers. Early episodes also featured Mark Brendanawicz, the Pawnee City Planner and former flame of Leslie who later has a relationship with Ann. A characteristic of the program is the even wackier nature of the Pawnee residents when compared to Knope and her co-workers.

**Meet The Office.**

In NBC’s long-airing show, an anonymous documentary crew films the trials and tribulations of employees working at a regional (Scranton, PA) branch of Dunder Mifflin, a paper supply company. The series depicts this particular branch as being one filled with abnormally-strange individuals. For seven seasons, viewers followed along with the antics of Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell), the regional manager. As the non-self-reflexive and popularity-seeking boss, Michael, a former salesperson, strives hard to entertain both himself and his employees. His actions, often racist, sexist, politically-incorrect and insensitive, if usually without malice, represent the absurdly-crazy nature of this workplace environment. Juxtaposed to the other regional branches as well as to the corporate office located in New York City, Dunder Mifflin Scranton stands alone in being depicted as an office full of asinine individuals. Unlike *Parks and Recreation*, the quirkiest characters in the world of *The Office* are those who work in the office:
Michael the inappropriate jokester; Dwight the salesperson with strange views, tastes and rituals; Creed the creepy senior; Meredith the promiscuous alcoholic; among others. Only the love interests Pam (the receptionist, later in sales) and Jim (an underachiever in sales) seem relatively “normal” in the Scranton branch. Outsiders are often portrayed as more “normal” and serve as audience surrogates by reacting to the humorously ill-fitting Scanton employees. In addition to Michael Scott, who represents management, this branch is comprised of several other departments: the sales team, the accounting department, the quality assurance and customer service members, the reception area, the warehouse supervisor, and finally, the Human Resources representative. At the end of the seventh season, Michael moves to Colorado, leaving vacant his position as regional manager. In the subsequent seasons, a variety of characters are shown off and on fulfilling that responsibility until Andy Bernard (played by Ed Helms) permanently assumes the title.

Welcome to 30 Rock.

In October 2006, NBC first aired, what was at the time, its latest workplace-based situation comedy known as 30 Rock, which was created, written, and produced by woman comedian Tina Fey. Seven seasons later, the Emmy-Award winning sitcom aired its final episode in January 2013. The program itself was well known for parodying NBC’s status as a struggling network, frequently poking fun at both the network’s merger with Comcast (known on the program as Kabletown), the largest cable television provider in the United States, and the intrusive nature of product placement and integration. In addition to this political-economic context, Fey used self-aware irony and satire as means to address her own experiences as a middle-aged, white, woman comedian trying to establish herself within the heavily men-dominated television industry. As a self-proclaimed feminist, Fey incorporated feminist sensibilities within the program. In particular, the sitcom’s central protagonist, Liz Lemon
(played by Fey herself), was the head writer on the sitcom’s fictional variety show. As a character on the show, Lemon was well-known for her feminist convictions, particularly as a third-wave feminist. In fact, some episodes specifically address the issue of feminism. In “Rosemary’s Baby” (Season 2, Episode 4), Lemon hires Rosemary Howard (played by Carrie Fisher), her childhood, feminist role model as a writer on TGS only to realize that her notion of feminism is too radical to incorporate into the writing of the fictional variety program. Another example can be found in “TGS Hates Women” (Season 5, Episode 16), where Lemon tries to teach a young woman that she does not have to use her sexuality to gain power. In the end, Lemon is the one who learns the lesson to not judge a book by its cover, as the young woman’s demeanor was a mere façade put on to help her hide from her abusive ex-husband. In both examples, Lemon aims to incorporate more feminist sensibilities into TGS but ultimately ends up reinforcing capitalist patriarchy and reifying postfeminism on television (DeCarvalho, 2012).

NBC’s workplace-based sitcom followed a group of writers who struggled to create humorous content for a fictional variety show called TGS (formerly known as The Girlie Show). Simultaneously, they also tried to deal with corporate pressures from their parent company, at first General Electric and later Kabletown. The head writer, Liz Lemon (played by Fey), interacted daily with her staff of writers and her arrogant and sexist boss, Jack Donaghy (played by Alec Baldwin). While TGS started as a program that featured Jenna Maroney (played by Jane Krakowski), Donaghy, who was at the time the newly-appointed Vice President of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming at General Electric, opted to increase the show’s diversity and star appeal. Thus, Donaghy hired film star Tracy Jordan (played by Tracy Morgan), despite his infamously-known capricious nature. Since the fictional variety show aired on NBC, most of the jokes revolved around the network as a floundering one at best. Furthermore, the show-within-a-show premise allowed viewers to have sort of a behind-the-scenes look at the politics of television programming.
The remainder of this chapter is broken into two parts. In the first main section, I examine four episodes, one from each of the four work-based sitcoms, from NBC’s Thursday night lineup in the order that they appeared on the night of October 22, 2009. Each subsection provides a discussion of how each episode comments on issues such as women (and men) as organizational and economic beings, gender dynamics in the workplace, and (post)feminist messages. In the succeeding section, I analyze the overall messages of the viewing strip as a whole. In particular, I comment on recurring themes from that Thursday night, again specifically addressing issues relating to gender, the workplace, and economic uncertainty. Finally, I close this chapter by offering readers some concluding thoughts, especially in how these themes from the night relate to the programs as a whole.

**Analyzing the October 22, 2009 Flow of NBC’s Work-Based Sitcoms**

**Disciplining the feminist in *Community*’s “Football, Feminism, and You.”**

On October 22, 2009, “Football, Feminism, and You” aired as the sixth episode in the sitcom’s initial first season and was watched by 5.18 million viewers (Gorman, 2009); it also served as the lead-in episode for NBC that evening. In this episode, Dean Pelton (played by Jim Rash) uses Jeff’s picture, without his permission, on Greendale promotional materials. Once Jeff finds out, he urges the dean to reconsider using his image, which will be distributed and posted throughout the campus and the local community. Dean Pelton agrees, but only on the condition that Jeff convinces Troy to play football for Greendale. Annie, who has been infatuated with Troy since high school, is upset once she learns that Troy might go back to his “old” ways of being an arrogant jock. Meanwhile, Shirley asks Britta to accompany her to the bathroom. When Britta declines, Shirley quickly gets offended and instead has Annie accompany her to the restroom. As such, Britta is left confused as to why Shirley is upset with her. This prompts Britta to feel bad and she tries to get on Shirley’s good side for the remainder of the episode. It is
important to note that there are three main storylines (A, B, and C) in this episode: Storyline A, which both opens and closes this episode, focuses on Troy, Annie, Jeff, Dean Pelton and their Greendale football problem; Storyline B features the dilemma between Britta and Shirley; and Storyline C follows Dean Pelton and Pierce as they both try to come up with the perfect mascot for Greendale. In particular, I will be discussing Storyline B in-depth as it revolves around the sitcom’s feminist-minded character.

Upon declining Shirley’s initial trip to the bathroom, Britta inquires to Jeff why Shirley is even offended. His response is that “[girls] go in groups. Did you learn nothing from standup comedy in the 90s?” (Winston & Russo, 2009). Britta’s reply: “I’m familiar with the concept. I’m just—alright, fine. If it’s important to Shirley, I’ll go with her next time. I’m willing to try more mainstream feminine stuff.” This scene depicts Britta as being an insensitive feminist, who is too detached from her femininity and “normal” women to understand why Shirley’s feelings were hurt. In order to make amends with Shirley, Britta decides to temporarily give up her non-conformist ways (in terms of gender roles). Thus, she decides to take a trip to the restroom and invites Shirley, who is excited to have been asked to accompany her. Once they are in the restroom, Britta goes into a stall while Shirley re-applies her lip gloss. Shirley tells Britta about how a stranger took her parking spot. Britta sides with the stranger, saying that he probably did not see Shirley waiting for a spot or that he might have had his own turn signal on to indicate that he was waiting for the spot and Shirley did not see him. Frustrated and as a way to change the subject, Shirley tries to ask Britta about her family but Britta is quickly dismissive of this question. Shirley then mentions that her own mother is coming for a visit and that they were planning on getting makeovers; however, she does not appreciate Britta’s response:

**BRITTA** *(while still in the stall):* Makeovers. They sure have us programmed. *(In a robotic voice)*…I am a female pleasure unit. I require a new coat of paint.

**SHIRLEY** *(mumbling under her breath):* Just something I thought might be fun.
BRITTA: Here’s something I think might be fun. Let’s find out the number of make-up companies that are owned by women. (*She exits the bathroom stall and starts to talk while in mid-laugh.*) I’ll save you the trouble. It’s zero. But of course you’re saying, ‘Britta, aren’t you a hypocrite? You’re plastered with glitter and goo, from head to toe, just like the rest of us.’ Well, I also pay income tax and pull over for the cops but that doesn’t mean that I support a country that oppresses its citizens—(*Shirley drowns out her voice by turning on the hand dryer.*)

Like the initial scene, Britta is once again positioned as the Other in the manner that she portrays what many mistakenly believe to be the stereotypical feminist; her “strident, off-putting” nature posits the audience against her. She engages in a mild political economic critique (corporate ownership), ridicules other women (“pleasure unit”), and even dismisses her own potential hypocrisy. As Zucker (2004) points out in her work on people who do and do not identify themselves as being a feminist, many people fear the label “[d]ue to the overwhelming negative portrayal of feminism and feminists by the popular media…” (p. 425). We see, then, the common post-feminist trope of the non-normal, not fun, and insensitive feminist, which is to say the Other within this televisual world. This idea is further reinforced by the humor of the scene, in which Britta does not grasp even the basics of female bonding, the norms of women’s bathroom conversations, and how she is affecting Shirley. Visuals also reinforce Britta’s strangeness. The camera strongly encourages viewers to identify with Shirley, who is placed in the foreground (see Figure 4-1). Contrastingly, Britta is not seen but instead is only heard for a good portion of the scene. Thus, viewers are televisually positioned to sympathize with Shirley, whom they can clearly see is hurt by Britta’s harsh (non-traditional) statements. When Britta comes out of the bathroom, viewers only see her face through her reflection in the mirror. Once she starts ranting about make-up companies, the camera follows Shirley as she walks around Britta to get to the hand dryer. Britta is suddenly placed in the foreground, while Shirley can be seen in the
background purposely starting the hand dryer to drown out the sound of Britta’s voice. During this scene, Britta is positioned as one who is ranting and self-absorbed, as she is largely talking to herself in the mirror rather than to Shirley. It is interesting to note that, while Shirley is the one who is visibly upset in this scene, I would argue that it is really Britta who is cast as an outsider in how the camera encourages viewers to identify with Shirley.

Britta’s positioning as the unreasonable, insensitive feminist activist is reinforced throughout the episode. In another scene, Shirley, Britta, Annie, and Troy are eating lunch in the cafeteria. Shirley gets up and Britta asks if she is going to the bathroom. Referencing how Britta behaved in the earlier bathroom scene, Shirley declines (in a stern voice): “You know what? I’m good.” Britta is embarrassed at being rejected and so explains Shirley’s response to the group as “she probably just, you know, had to go number two.” Later, viewers see that Britta is waiting for Shirley outside of the restroom. From the tone of her voice, viewers can tell that Britta is bitter about Shirley rejecting her companionship. Shirley confesses that she was not trying to upset Britta, who defensively replies that her feelings were not hurt and that she does not need companions to accompany her to the restroom: “I was just trying to throw you a bone because I like you.” Shirley is not too pleased with this response.
**SHIRLEY**: Oh, well you can keep that bone. Listening to a story about a stranger pissing me off and taking a stranger’s side. And then you can’t talk about your own business but you insinuate my momma’s a robot because she and I want makeovers. That is the Ladies’ Room, Britta. A place where ladies go to share, listen, support each other, and discretely eliminate waste. And I like you too, even like that you’re a little hard. But if you can’t learn to be soft in there, you need to pee alone.

**BRITTA** (in near tears, while Shirley starts to walk away): I’ve peed alone my whole life. Women have always hated me. I don’t even know how it started. Maybe it was when I got boobs before everyone—

**SHIRLEY**: Shhhhh! Not out here. In there (as she nods to the bathroom).

Comparing this scene with the prior one, I notice that Britta is the one who is initially placed in the foreground this time. This, thereby, leaves Shirley in the background while viewers take notice that Britta is upset. However, once she gets on the defense, the camera closes up on Shirley who walks toward Britta. The camera places Shirley in a superior position while she is standing and literally talking down to Britta, who is sitting with her arms crossed in a chair. She is clearly “schooling” Britta on not just what the bathroom is for, but on toning down her feminism (i.e., the robot reference). In this episode, it is important to note the contrasting nature in one’s public performance of identity: how Britta “should act” in the semi-public “office” space versus the private space of the women’s bathroom. Once Britta starts to break down, the two characters are finally placed on an equal plane.

Later, Annie asks Shirley to accompany her to the bathroom; instead, Shirley looks toward Britta to accept the challenge in her stead. A nervous Britta enters the bathroom and is obviously placed out of her comfort zone. Surprised to see Britta instead of Shirley, Annie asks, “Why do we inflict so much pain on ourselves for men?” Britta quickly replies: “I don’t (in a loud, angry tone)...know, Sweetie (in a soft tone, realizing her initial harshness).” Maybe...it’s
because men make the world go round? Kleenex?” Once Annie starts crying over Troy, Britta’s (liberal) feminist convictions kick in again: “Ohh, Annie! Screw him! There are guys out there that would kill to be with you and if Troy isn’t one of them, that’s him failing your standards. You got that?!” Annie internalizes this and then thanks Britta for making her feel better.

Overhearing, Shirley comes in to congratulate Britta, comically pushing aside Annie in the process.

This final scene, for this particular storyline, stands as a microcosm for the entire episode. In the beginning, Britta comes across as overly harsh due to her feminist side. This essentially positions her as the outsider. Britta and Shirley coming together in solidarity could have been the early beginnings for a consciousness raising circle of sorts. However, instead of Britta successfully informing Shirley of women’s issues, she instead conforms to societal expectations in order to “fit in” with Shirley. In fact, it is not until Shirley shows her the “correct” way that Britta as a woman should act, according to hegemonic societal views on women’s mannerisms, that Britta starts to become accepted. For nearly each time that her feminist side comes out, viewers only see that she causes pain. Her feminist convictions seep in throughout the entire episode, including the ending where she comforts Annie. While Britta is continually depicted as the stereotypical feminist throughout the episode, it is not until this final scene that one of her feminist arguments is accepted and even then it is nothing groundbreaking—simply telling Annie to choose a partner who will treat her well. The more radical arguments, such as issues of political economy and performing femininity (i.e. the robot comment from the bathroom scene with Shirley), went ignored and were not validated by Shirley, who represented the voice of the “moral lesson” for this subplot. As Tasker and Negra (2007) astutely point out, “[a]s we might expect of a popular mode, postfeminism also constructs feminism as other, as extreme. It is the supposed difficulty of feminism, its rigidity and propensity to take things ‘too far,’ that a middle of a road, middle-class postfeminism rejects” (p. 19). Simultaneously, there is a combination of
both feminist but mostly anti-feminist sentiment occurring before viewers. On a symbolic level, Britta shifts from the role of a critical, feminist-minded individual to the more accepted role of the nurturing, maternal figure—this relates back to the traditional notions of women’s labor as affective labor. This goes back to the tendency of postfeminist discourse within culture to position feminism in an inferior and/or undesirable state for the most part, while not explicitly labeling these portrayals as such.

The themes in this episode are indicative of the series as a whole. Viewers observe as Britta’s feminist rhetoric is continually contradicted by her non-feminist actions (read: the sitcom’s visual imagery). Aside from Britta’s own rhetoric and actions, her status as a feminist character is continually put down (and even sexualized) via the other characters. Throughout the series, she is referred to, by other characters, as the following: a lesbian, Brittels, kitten, a bitch, a liar, cranky, cold, atheist, passionate (“which I find stupid but entertaining” – Jeff), a buzzkill, a hurricane, needlessly defiant, and Sourface. Through the character of Britta, the sitcom uses negative stereotypes to encourage viewers to dismiss her character as being one who unnecessarily makes a big deal out of everything, particularly when it comes to women’s issues. Aronson (2003) asserts that “Stereotypes against feminists have been powerfully advanced by the antifeminist movement and the media…” (p. 917). Furthermore, a postfeminist media culture manifests itself in the manner that Britta’s rhetoric and actions are continually in conflict with one another. Gill (2007a) aptly states that “[i]t is precisely the contradictoriness of contemporary representations of gender in the media that makes the field so difficult and challenging” (p. 2), thereby reifying postfeminist messages for viewers of the Thursday night lineup.

Patriarchal authority and women’s solidarity in Parks and Recreation’s “Kaboom.”

As the sixth episode in the second season of Parks and Recreation, “Kaboom” aired at 8:30 EST immediately following Community. With an audience of 4.98 million viewers
(Gorman, 2009), this episode featured two guest appearances: one from Rob Scheer as Keef Slertner, the mastermind behind KaBoom!, a non-profit organization that builds children’s playgrounds; and a second from H. Jon Benjamin as Scott Braddock, the attorney for Pawnee.

In this episode, Leslie and the department join Keef and his KaBoom! charity in working together to build a community park in one day. While at first skeptical at the estimated completion time, Leslie eventually becomes a believer once the park is built. This, in turn, inspires Leslie to devise a way to finally fill in the pit behind Ann’s house (the main dilemma of the program during the first two seasons), which sets off a string of problems that Leslie eventually must face and solve in the remainder of this episode as a way to return things to normalcy in Pawnee. Throughout this episode, there are two main storylines. Storyline A focuses on Leslie trying to fill in the pit, while storyline B concentrates on Andy trying to win back Ann’s affection.

As the episode opens, Leslie is verifying recent credit-card purchases, via speakerphone, while her colleague, Tom, listens. Tom starts to poke fun at the items that Leslie has purchased, some of which include subscriptions to both Netflix and Blockbuster online to ensure that all episodes of *Gossip Girl* are within her reach, tuition for majoring in a Potions degree at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Jessica Simpson hair extensions, a man pillow shaped like Daniel Craig, and “also something called bucket of cake” (Muharrar & McDougall, 2009). Her embarrassment at having Tom eavesdrop causes her to report her credit card stolen and have it canceled immediately. This opening scene is an important because it depicts how Leslie, although quirky, does not fit the traditional TV stereotypes of feminists, many of whom are shown being only one-dimensional.

In the next scene, Leslie and her colleagues are shown as part of the KaBoom! effort to build a park in one day. It is significant that Leslie and Ann are shown working together. In

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5 Within the world of the program, Rob Scheer plays the role of the creator of KaBoom!. However, he is not representing the real-life creator of this actual organization.
contrast, the men from the Parks and Recreation department are all shown individually: Jerry is shown sleeping while standing up; Ron crankily tightens bolts on a slide; and Andy confesses that he only attends these types of events for the free food and as another attempt to try to re-connect with Ann. Ron is the only one of the recurring men characters shown actually doing work, but he is always by himself. On the other hand, Leslie and Ann are both shown working and are always together, thereby reifying feminist solidarity through their solid and supportive friendship (which is an underlying theme for the sitcom).

Throughout this park scene, Keef is shown speaking to (and motivating) Leslie and Ann about their work with this building of the park. It is crucial to note that Keef is trying to convey to Leslie how to get things done in an efficient manner, by explaining to her the importance of KaBooming problems and “teaching a man to KaBoom” (derived from the “teach a man to fish” adage). With this seed planted, Leslie reconvenes with the Task Force in charge of solving the issue of getting the pit behind Ann’s house filled. Leslie runs the Task Force, and her subordinates include Mark, Tom, Jerry, and Ann. The ever-present anonymous film crew captures Leslie’s main frustration with working in government, which consists of having to deal with all of the bureaucracy involved with trying to complete work assignments. Energized from Keef’s words and actions, Leslie tells her team that she wants to “KaBoom” the problem with the pit. When he notices that Leslie is not happy with the suggestions that he and his team members have been giving her during the meeting, Mark asks to speak with Leslie alone. In private, he explains exactly how she can get the pit filled in immediately (see Figure 4-2). Once he knows that Leslie is willing to do whatever it takes to complete the task, he advises her on how to get the job done:

**MARK**: Would you break the rules?

**LESLIE** (*in a lower tone*): I won’t murder.
MARK: That’s good to know. But it’s actually very simple. If you wanna fill in the pit, just go fill it in. Don’t ask for permission. Ask for forgiveness.

Leslie is confused at first, since she is so accustomed to following the rules. She inquires about who she needs to ask permission from to not ask for permission. To this, Mark replies: “It’s you. You have to be bold.” Leslie has been working on solving the pit problem for quite some time, yet all it takes is the advice from both Mark and Keef, two men characters, for her to finally figure out the solution (i.e., literally carrying out Mark’s plan). While Leslie does not need her best friend Ann’s help on filling in the pit, she seeks it nevertheless for moral support. Women’s solidarity is shown as Ann offers to help Leslie out despite knowing what Leslie is talking vaguely about. This image of women’s solidarity continues into the next scene when they are shown holding hands as the pit is being filled in.

In a later scene, Ann is shown in her regular work environment, the hospital, after Leslie’s plans to fill in the pit are thwarted by Andy sleeping (and living) in the pit; he is hurt as a result of the dirt being dropped onto his “home” while he is there sleeping under a tarp. While recovering, Andy misconstrues Ann’s care of him as her having feelings for him, as most of their old relationship entailed her taking care of him. This B story is complicated in a subsequent
scene when Ann is forced to tell Andy all of the things that Mark, her new partner, has but that he lacks. Out of the seven items on Ann’s list of appealing qualities, the first five are monetarily related. Mark’s characteristics include “…a job, a car, a steady income, an address, a second pair of shoes, table manners, the ability to say ‘tampon’ without giggling. Mark has his life together.” To avoid “misleading” him any further, Ann volunteers to find another nurse to take care of him.

Later, Leslie is reprimanded by Ron, her male superior, who is upset after getting yelled at by the City Manager because proper channels were not followed to seek approval for the fill-in attempt. Despite this, Leslie does not seem to regret her “bold” risk (read: shortcut) at work until she learns that she cannot apologize to her friend Andy (as directed by the city attorney) because “it implies guilt.” This is quickly exacerbated when Leslie becomes even more upset upon learning of Andy’s intent to sue the government of Pawnee. Once again, women’s solidarity comes into play as Leslie confides in Ann, who helps her to secretly meet with Andy. What is noteworthy here is that Ann puts aside her own situation with Andy, one in which she has been trying to distance herself from him as means to move on with her own relationship with Mark.

In her meeting with Andy, Leslie learns that Andy is struggling financially. This is the first time, during this episode, that a character speaks candidly about issues of economic uncertainty. In later comedies like HBO’s *Girls* (2012-present) set in the post-recession era, women characters are more likely to be the ones to disclose this type of information and so it is especially striking that a man character is doing so here. Similarly, it is interesting to recognize why Andy is intent on earning money—and fast. In essence, he wants to win back Ann’s affection, and misunderstands her earlier comment about Mark: “I want Ann back, and she said she really needs a guy with a lot of money.” He adds, “…[Ann] said she likes Mark because he’s a grown-up with a bank account; I put two and two together. $100,000, I can probably get a bank account.” With this in mind, Andy wants to make money by suing Pawnee. Leslie disapproves and says some inspirational words about avoiding short cuts (since Andy is essentially in the
position he is because of her own shortcut at work). To this Andy replies, “Fine. I’ll get a job. Ann will respect that. I can make six bucks a day playing guitar in the street. I can’t make six bucks a day [under his breath, humorously deriding his guitar playing].” Despite her inspirational words, Leslie realizes another shortcut that will probably benefit both of them. For Andy, this would entail doing something nice for Ann; for Leslie, this means completing two obstacles at work—filling in the pit and avoiding a lawsuit against her own town government.

Leslie’s shortcut, which consists of her and Andy conspiring to trick Scott (representing the town of Pawnee) into filling the pit, is accompanied with a return to normalcy within the diegetic world of Pawnee. Women’s solidarity is part of this return to normalcy, as Leslie and Ann are shown standing together once more as they watch the pit being filled in for good this time. They later stand proudly on the filled-in pit, ecstatic about their latest accomplishment. The final scene, while the credits roll, involves Leslie speaking again to the anonymous camera crew from her office desk. Candidly, she explains how “amazing” she feels about taking “risks” (really, shortcuts) to complete tasks at work.

The themes of feminist solidarity but also the voices of men as reasonableness and advice are found not only in this episode but spanning the arc of the entire series. This juxtaposition of these two themes offers contradictory messages to viewers. On the one hand, Leslie is a strong feminist character, perhaps the most well-rounded, self-declared feminist character on television, who thrives on strong female friendship. Yet, while she goes to Ann for help executing tasks, Leslie more often than not turns toward men when looking for advice to solve her problems. In regards to the feminist solidarity between Leslie and Ann—and at some points, Leslie and April to a lesser degree—it is constant throughout the program. While Leslie seeking the advice and guidance of men is a common theme throughout the run of the series, the men themselves are interchanged as time progresses—Mark initially, who was later succeeded by Ron, Chris, and Ben (the latter three of these men all served as Leslie’s superior at some point). There are a few
instances, however, where these men characters suffer their own neuroses/weaknesses and are aided by Leslie.

**Abuses of power and post-feminist relations in *The Office*’s “The Lover.”**

At 9 pm, immediately following *Parks and Recreation*’s “Kaboom,” *The Office* aired “The Lover” as the seventh episode in its sixth season. This episode drew in the largest number of viewers for NBC and its 8-10pm period with 8.52 million viewers (Gorman, 2009). “The Lover” opens with the return of Pam (played by Jenna Fischer) and Jim (played by John Krasinski) to the office from their honeymoon. While the couple is still exhibiting signs of an emotional high from their recent wedding and trip, Jim learns that Michael has started seeing a new love interest—Pam’s mother, Helene. Despite Jim telling Michael not to disclose this information to Pam and to stop seeing Helene, Michael is convinced that Pam will just want him to be happy. Thus, he opts to tell Pam which sends her over the clichéd edge and triggers chaos ensuing throughout their work day. In this episode, storyline A involves the dilemma between Pam and Michael, while storyline B highlights the workplace relationship between Jim and Dwight (played by Rainn Wilson) and storyline C looks at the differences between Pam and Erin (played by Ellie Kemper), her replacement as the branch’s administrative assistant.

Michael welcomes the returning Pam and Jim by pretending to be blind and greets Jim (joking that he is Pam) by feeling his breasts (see Figure 4-3). From his office desk, Michael explains his persona to the anonymous camera crew: “Blind Guy McSqueezzy. How do I describe it? It is a character I’ve been workshopping whose lack of vision gets him into all sorts of trouble. The women in my improv class absolutely hate him [*as he groans and reaches out to feel the invisible pair of breasts in front of him*]” (Eisenberg & Stupnitsky, 2009). Michael’s behavior here symbolizes a consistent trope of the sitcom (and not just this viewing strip), notably Michael’s perpetuation of sexual harassment in the workplace, played for laughs and as indicative
of Michael’s cluelessness about what is appropriate. Similarly, despite being the boss, Michael stays consistent, in this episode and throughout the series, as typically being the source of distractions at the branch since he is rarely seen doing actual work. Despite both of these quite problematic behaviors over several seasons, Michael is never demoted or fire (at least not for long). As Birthisel and Martin (2013) argue about gender representation in *The Office*:

> Though the show’s satire does effectively ridicule facets of patriarchal authority and hegemonic masculinity in the American workplace through its mockumentary production style and use of ‘excess as hyperbole,’ the lack of repercussions for offending characters and stereotypical portrayals of women in the workplace undercut the [sic] *The Office*’s transgressive potential. (Birthisel & Martin, 2013, p. 64)

In the context of a mockumentary sitcom, satire and irony plays a key role in excusing these workplaces violations. Is Michael’s behavior the normalization of, or a satire of, sexism in the workplace? The serial nature of the “joke,” one could argue, wears down the point of critique, especially given that over the years Michael’s humanity in other ways is portrayed. Thus, a loyal viewer of this episode of *The Office* may identify with or at least excuse Michael’s transgressions. This is characteristic of “enlightened sexist” television comedies generally. As Douglas (2010) explains, given that satire is a form of irony, it is significant to point out that sitcoms often perpetuate “…the deployment of ironic sexism” (Douglas, 2010, p. 14), which Douglas argues only serves to undermine the advancement of (onscreen) women.
Once Pam and Jim settle in, the Dunder Mifflin workday proceeds as per usual, starting with the normalized antics between Jim and Dwight. Given that Jim was recently promoted to the position of co-manager and now has his own office, Dwight is intent on eavesdropping on Jim (thanks to a bugged wooden Mallard that he presented as a gift) in order to uncover dirt on the new co-manager. He hopes it will serve as leverage in getting Jim fired from the promoted position that he felt was more rightfully his. Meanwhile, in the C story, Pam questions the judgment of Erin, who now holds Pam’s former position as receptionist. As a treat for her co-workers, Pam brought back some sweets from her honeymoon in Puerto Rico and wants to place them on the receptionist counter. However, Erin is insistent that she needs to ask Michael’s permission in putting out the candy before allowing Pam to do so. This interaction between Erin and Pam is an important one as it, in a way, juxtaposes the “old Pam” versus the “new Pam.” Erin represents “old Pam” in that, by nature, her position as administrative assistant affords her little power in the workplace. Pam only escaped this organizational disempowerment, in “Two Weeks” (Season 5, Episode 21), when she finally stood up for herself and demanded that she be made a salesperson. Interestingly enough, it is only through Pam’s desire for more, in terms of career goals that a door is opened for Erin to be hired to fill Pam’s old position. This opposition
between Erin and Pam is a part of a larger postfeminist trend on the program as a whole—the lack of solidarity amongst the women of the sitcom.

In a later scene and accompanied by Michael, Jim is drinking coffee in the kitchen. Michael initiates conversation, disclosing to Jim that he has “recently taken a lover.” This is another instance of inappropriate behavior, on the part of Michael, in the workplace. More so, Michael is not only speaking about Jim’s mother-in-law but is also disclosing how he is dating the mother of one of his subordinates. Jim advises Michael to never tell Pam and to break up with Pam’s mother. Jim then discovers Dwight’s listening device. Although now even more inappropriate (as Dwight’s boss), Jim is inclined to continue playing pranks on Dwight and uses Andy to help him, without Andy realizing this to be the case. As is often the case, Dwight, as the Scranton branch’s top salesperson, isn’t really shown working in this episode. Rather, he is essentially seen ingratiating himself with Michael and trying to spy on his new boss, Jim. This contrasts with Pam, who is often seen working at her desk.

Once Pam learns who Michael is dating, she vents her frustration through disobedience. During a conference room meeting, she chants, “No more meetings! No more meetings!” and calls for an end to the pointless meetings that Michael so often holds. Michael confronts Pam in front of everyone in the conference room, scolding her after learning that Pam’s mother is upset because Pam had called her mother after finding out about the secret romance. As the below dialogue illustrates, Michael’s line of defense against being verbally attacked by Pam in front of her co-workers and his subordinates is to leverage his position of authority:

**MICHAEL:** I don’t like the tone here. This is a place of business. You are to listen to others, you are to give others respect, and you are to keep your personal issues out of it.

**PAM (while laughing):** Oh, my God, you are ridiculous!

**MICHAEL (visibly upset with a bright red face, with an angry tone):** Do not talk to me that way! I am your boss, and I may someday be your father, so get out.
When that line of defense does not work for him, Michael later seeks the help of Toby (played by Paul Lieberstein), who serves as the HR representative for the Scranton branch. In particular, Michael complains to Toby about possibly being “…the victim of a hostile work environment with this whole Pam situation,” prompting Toby to volunteer to speak with Pam. Interestingly, unlike most endings to episodes of situation comedies, there does not seem to be any real closure and return to normalcy, as Michael leaves for the day while Pam still refuses to speak with him.

This episode acts as a microcosm of the sitcom. Pam’s scolding of Michael was only able to occur within this fictional workplace environment, whereby her boss would never fire her under any circumstances, including her most recent display of disobedience. At the same time, Michael’s inappropriate behavior, foremost secretly dating the mother of an employee and subsequently using his power of position to essentially order the aforementioned employee to accept it, is a far cry from how most bosses in true-life settings would act. These themes of the outspoken, disobedient worker and the completely inappropriate boss are found throughout the series. Additionally, the plotline of positioning Pam and Erin against each other (even in this minor disagreement over the candy) is indicative of the larger scope of the series in which women characters are more often than not at odds with one another (a common postfeminist element), rather than demonstrating women’s solidarity.

**Sideling feminist ideals and foregrounding patriarchal problem solving in 30 Rock’s “Into the Crevasse.”**

Following the airing of The Office’s episode, “The Lover,” 30 Rock ran “Into the Crevasse” as the second episode in its fourth season. The episode was watched by 6.68 million viewers and featured a guest appearance from Will Arnett. In this episode, the recent release and success of Liz’s book, Dealbreakers: A Girl’s Guide to Shutting It Down, prompts anger among her men colleagues, including Tracy and TGS’s producer, Pete Hornberger (played by Scott
Adsit), since both of their wives have read the book. Throughout the episode, Liz tries to balance the success of her new book with the hostility that she receives at work. On top of this, Liz must also figure out a way to appease Jenna, whose passive aggressiveness concerning a new TGS actor is also contributing to the unpleasant work environment. Meanwhile, Liz’s boss, Jack, has his own problems to deal with—mostly stemming from his feud with Devon Banks (played by Arnett). In total, there are three episodic storylines: the primary one pertains to Liz, Dealbreakers, and Tracy; storyline B focuses on Jack, Banks, and the eventual government buyout of General Electric (and also includes Jack receiving help from the male writers); and the third storyline involves Jenna’s point of contention with Liz.

Into the Crevasse opens with Liz admiring the recent release of her book, which is prominently placed in a store window display (right next to the latest book, The Cigarette Diet, from Dr. Spaceman, a recurring character played by Chris Parnell). The book is based on a popular TGS skit in which the catchphrase, “It’s a Dealbreaker, Ladies,” is applied to various unacceptable male attributes. As the program is set in the well-to-do world of network television, it is illustrative of the class assumptions of the program—and starkly discordant with the then-national recession—that some of these are about men’s economic acceptability. This is made clear immediately at the start of the episode. Upset at the book’s content especially the part about “if your man is over 30 and still wears a nametag to work, that’s a dealbreaker,” a male book store employee opts to destroy a window display cutout of Liz, starting by punching it in the face (see Figure 4-4). In return, Liz berates the man for not being as successful as her (“You’re nobody!”). Despite the destruction of her cutout, Liz is extremely pleased at her latest accomplishment.6

Once she arrives at work, Liz pays a visit to her boss, Jack, for the primary purpose of giving him a copy of her new book. Jack seems pleased to learn that his blurb about Liz was printed on the back cover: “Lemon numbers among my employees.” With the exception of Jack’s positive response, Liz’s new book overwhelmingly seems to be making her work environment hostile, especially due to her men co-workers whom the book puts down. Exacerbating the situation, Liz does not receive any women’s solidarity from Jenna, who is upset with Liz over something that Jack actually did (hiring the new actor), and unexpectedly goes to Iceland to film a movie instead of attending the TGS rehearsals. The situation intensifies when Tracy reveals his own anger about the book, threatening to “kill you with a bazooka” and by flinging a copy of the hardback book toward Liz (but actually hitting Jenna in the face). In reality, such a work-place incident—typical for Tracy and arguably more extreme than that of even Michael Scott—would lead to a significant sanction. In 30 Rock, violence against women is positioned as a gag; this is the second example of workplace violence toward women (the first via the destruction of a life-size cutout in the bookstore) in the first 5 minutes of the program’s

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is noteworthy that the title of her fictional sitcom, TGS, is short for The Girlie Show, where Jenna is being referenced as a girl, as opposed to a woman.
narrative. Other instances occur later when Pete shoves Liz into a wall and a custodian dumps garbage on her office floor.

Liz’s work follows her home, both literally when Tracy takes it upon himself to move in with Liz after his wife reads Liz’s book and kicks him out of their home; and figuratively via late-night phone calls when Jenna calls Liz at 2 am from Iceland and Jack calls her in the middle of the night to get her input: “Okay, as a single woman, would you be more inclined to buy a new microwave if it could be programmed to ask you about your day? Before you answer, consider your loneliness.” Liz hangs up on Jack, only to be further confronted by Tracy in her own apartment. In particular, he accuses her of using numerous aspects of his life as material in her book.

Meanwhile, Jack spends his time competing against Banks, “…a [former] G.E. officer [who] used corporate funds to throw a cabaret-themed Halloween party on Fire Island.” In essence, Banks is intent on seeking revenge by way of destroying Jack. Vice versa, Jack is determined to outsmart Banks. This ultimately plays out almost as a primal battle to determine an Alpha male between the two of them, here using their wits rather than physicality. One commonality among the two competing men seems to be that neither has a problem with using other people, including employees, as collateral damage in their feud. In a series of later scenes, Jack, as a prominent organizational being, abuses his power by insisting that his subordinates, in a completely-unrelated department (e.g., the men writers at TGS) help him brainstorm ways to better General Electric’s microwave oven.

Before solving his own problems, Jack acts as a mediator to authoritatively end the feud between Liz and Tracy. Using his power as both of their bosses, he ultimately gives Tracy the right to own Liz’s life story in retribution for using Tracy’s life story as fodder for her book. Jack, then, ultimately has the last word on their feud, again due to his power, authority and (patriarchal) wisdom. Furthermore, Jack advises Liz on how to solve her problem. Taking his advice to
“climb down” into the metaphorical crevasse, Liz comes up with the idea to make an adult film of her life for Tracy, one written entirely by herself. In the process, she manages to make Jenna happy by not only filming their fight but also “giving [Jenna] the hotter porn lady.” The episode concludes with adult film stars pretending to be Liz and Jack onscreen.

In this episode, we see common themes that recur throughout the seasons. Liz, the program’s feminist character, is often quick to abandon her feminist ideals as means to solve a problem. Additionally, much of this problem solving stems from seeking the advice and aide of her patriarchal boss, Jack—a character whom the audience often laughs with, at the expense of others, including Liz. In this relationship with Liz and Jack, it is telling to notice the intersection of gender and class, where the rich man character serves as counsel to the less-wealthy woman character, whom is unable to solve her own problems without his help.

Recurring Themes from the Night: Gender Dynamics, Postfeminism, and the Absence of Economic Issues

Gender dynamics in the workplace.

In all four, back-to-back episodes, positions of highest authority—either literally (Jack Donaghy, Michael Scott) and/or through narratively-significant agency/wisdom (Jeff Winger, Mark Brendanawicz)—are held by men characters. By doing so, as Birthisel and Martin (2013) argue specifically about *The Office* but which can be applied to the other three programs from the NBC Thursday night lineup, the sitcom serves to reify the normative Western patriarchal authority in the workplace (p. 75). Moreover, though two of the four situation comedies feature independent women characters who hold some position of power (*Parks and Recreation*’s Leslie Knope and *30 Rock*’s Liz Lemon), these two women characters are shown unable to solve their own problems at work. It is only after both women characters heed the advice of their men colleagues that they are able to better their work environments. This is a paradigmatic
postfeminist construct, in that the ideas of feminist independence and gender dynamics are raised only to be used as the butt of a joke.

If men in these programs are always in the highest position and therefore “unaccountable” in a sense, it is no surprise that in one episode sexual harassment is committed by the person in charge (The Office’s Michael Scott), and gendered violence is carried out by men in high positions (Tracy and Pete in 30 Rock). This reaffirms the conclusion of Montemurro (2003) and her study on depictions of sexual harassment in 1990s workplace-based situation comedies: “The majority of incidents containing gender harassment occurred on television programs where men were in positions of authority or central characters” (p. 443). Speaking in direct relation to both Montemurro and The Office, Birthisel and Martin (2013) argue that the mockumentary style of the sitcom problematizes Montemurro’s conclusion and acknowledges the likelihood for oppositional readings of the text. With Douglas’s assertion about irony and enlightened sexism in mind, I would argue that the particular depiction of sexual harassment within this episode tends to reaffirm Montemurro’s conclusion that gender harassment gets trivialized. Following Michael’s confessional where he essentially admits to sexually harassing women in his improv class, the program immediately cuts to the opening credits. Keeping in mind the style of the mockumentary and in particular the solo confessional format, there is no negative reaction from other characters or the anonymous camera operator in response to Michael’s admittance. This absence of a negative reaction allows Michael’s behavior to go unchecked, just as the continued violations in 30 Rock do as well.

**Depictions of, or commentary on, (post)feminism.**

On the surface, all four episodes featured a dilemma concerning a seemingly independent, strong woman character. However, upon closer inspection, only one character (The Office’s Pam Halpert) actually sticks firm to her convictions. In one program, Community, a
feminist is ultimately being trained to put aside her feminist ideals in order to be more like “one of the girls.” Part of the problem faced by Liz in 30 Rock is her book critiquing the behavior of men, and the retaliation she faces. In Parks and Recreation and 30 Rock, strong women characters are continually shown being incapable of achieving their goals until they follow the advice of men. More so, one woman (30 Rock’s Liz Lemon) goes so far as to write and make an adult film just to appease her male co-worker who is mad at her. Similarly, this same character is positioned as a “child” in relation to her boss who stands as the patriarchal figure. This is shown both when her life story is given away by Jack to her angry male co-worker and also again at the end of the episode where her boss returns her retainer that had been missing since childhood (an impossible task that Liz requests of Jack early in the episode: “Now my dad won’t be mad at me,” says a relieved Liz). This adds another postfeminist element to the episode (and the series), as it serves to undermine Liz’s credibility by infantilizing her character.

A common thread of the workplace-based sitcom, as seen in this viewing strip, was the permeance of postfeminism. This is manifested onscreen through the dismissal of personal convictions by strong, women characters, and the role of men characters as voices of authority. In Community, Parks and Recreation, and 30 Rock, the characters who identify as feminist in particular are the ones who throw aside their personal convictions in order to get ahead and also are the characters who are ultimately directed by men to solve their dilemmas. Britta in Community conforms to “how to act like a lady” in order to be accepted with Shirley (and by extension Annie as well). She is taught that, in order to have female companionship, she must essentially give up her feminist convictions; she does so for the most part, but thankfully is unable to suppress her feminism entirely (as can be seen in the advice that she gives to Annie). She is initially made aware of the issue by Jeff, who explains to her (the social construction of) how women are supposed to act. In Parks and Recreation, Leslie is driven toward achieving her goal of filling in the pit. She varies from her usual course of action by breaking the rules and
taking a shortcut to try to get ahead. This turns out to be a poor decision, and one that she made only after taking the advice of her male subordinate (on the Task Force), Mark. In the wake of her initial shortcut, a new and much larger problem arose. Leslie rectifies the situation by taking yet another shortcut, this time conspiring with Andy against the town of Pawnee. Finally, in 30 Rock, Liz completely abandons her feminist convictions, by writing and producing a pornographic film based on her own life. She views this as the best solution to her quarrel with both Tracy and Jenna. The inspiration behind her resolution came from the advice that Jack gave her, to go deeper “into the crevasse.” The trends of postfeminism were very apparent in this viewing strip comprised of workplace-based sitcoms. In the context of the viewing strip, only one out of the four programs, The Office, was mostly devoid of markers of the post-feminist media text.

One point that is important to acknowledge is that Parks and Recreation stands alone in depicting all of its main women characters (Leslie Knope, Ann Perkins, April Ludgate, and Donna Meagle) as smart and competent. This is not necessarily the case on other situation comedies, especially the ones in this viewing strip. Additionally, it is equally important to note and acknowledge that none of the least intelligent characters from each of these four sitcoms are assigned to women. Instead, this role is always reserved for men, particularly the lower-level employees in their respective sitcoms (Community’s Troy Barnes, Parks and Recreation’s Andy Dwyer, The Office’s Kevin Malone, and 30 Rock’s J.D. Lutz). At the same time, on the other end of the spectrum within the postfeminist workplace, the role of the character with the most power (usually the boss) is also always reserved for men.

All four episodes, and sitcoms for that matter, utilize satire (a form of irony) as social commentary for their viewing audiences. As Douglas (2010) describes, enlightened sexism works collaboratively with irony. She delineates the relationship between the two: “…the final key component to enlightened sexism: irony, the cultivation of the ironic, knowing viewer and the
deployment of ironic sexism” (Douglas, 2010, p. 14). In an earlier work, Douglas (2009) expresses her concern, particularly in terms of irony’s implications on viewers: “If I were to single out two areas I’ve been struggling with and feel need much more work and attention, they are reception studies and interdisciplinary approaches, especially to the analysis of media effects. We need to focus more on reception but with a caveat: reception in the age of irony” (p. 49).

Given the subtle and deceptive nature of enlightened sexism, these implications are especially important to consider. It is significant to note that Douglas is not just positioning viewers as passive audience members; this is certainly not the case. Rather, she understands that it is the integration of irony, within (postfeminist) media, which is making it extraordinarily difficult for women viewers to gain the upper hand: “It’s not that many young women don’t see through this. But it’s precisely because so much media fare geared to young women incorporates their own ironic, self-reflexive critique that sorting out their effects—what creeps in through that shield of irony?—is much harder to discern” (Douglas, 2010, p. 15). The complexities of this relationship strategically overwhelm viewers through their simultaneous bombardment. Taking Douglas’s arguments here into consideration once more, I am inclined to agree with her and apply her arguments to my overall analysis of this viewing strip. In the Community episode, camerawork encourages audiences to align themselves with a non-feminist woman character (as opposed to a feminist woman character). Furthermore, as stated earlier, in The Office episode, the mockumentary’s solo confessional inhibits social commentary to be made in regards to Michael’s admittance of sexual harassment, as the character is left without any repercussions. While some may argue that this is just another way that the sitcom incorporates irony and is meant to side viewers against Michael’s inappropriate behavior, I would argue otherwise. Instead, the popular nature of the sitcom, coupled with the oft-occurring sexual harassment jokes, serves to undermine feminism. A case in point would be the transcendence of “That’s what she said!” beyond the
confines of the sitcom—from Michael’s sexual-harassment oozing catchphrase to the regular repertoire of lowbrow jokers everywhere.

**The lack of discussion on economic issues in the face of economic devastation.**

Despite the back-to-back episodes airing just five months after the official end to the recession but still during a period of economic uncertainty, it is striking to note that issues of economic viability were only explicitly mentioned in one of the four situation comedies. This has strong implications for the postfeminist world view, which downplays cultural problems so as to affirm that neoliberal patriarchy is working well for everyone. Of these four episodes, the character of Andy Dwyer in *Parks and Recreation*, by far, faced the greatest economical obstacles: being broke, jobless, and homeless. Even with these overwhelming problems, Andy was barely aware that they were even issues. The severity of this character’s economic uncertainty is quickly downplayed, and instead overshadowed by his longing to rekindle his former romantic relationship with a woman character (Ann Perkins). It was not until his desire to essentially impress his love interest with monetary wealth that the nature of his plight even dawned on him. By the end of the episode, he happily gave up the chance of financial stability in the form of a gesture which he thought Ann would appreciate, even though he would still be left broke, jobless, and homeless. In the end, there is a return to normalcy, a reality in which it is somehow perfectly acceptable for his character to be completely without financial means yet still completely content.

Even when it is mentioned, the economic downturn is downplayed. In two of the situation comedies, *Community* and *30 Rock*, issues of economic uncertainty were vaguely alluded to by (again, men) characters, but were quickly swept under the rug. In the former episode, the main male protagonist (Jeff Winger) initially agrees to help out his boss (Dean Pelton) in hopes of avoiding embarrassment by having his image posted on campus recruitment
fliers. He fears that his enrollment in a community college might jeopardize his chances of getting his old position as a lawyer back. In the *30 Rock* episode, the lead male protagonist (Jack Donaghy) does everything in his power to keep General Electric from going bankrupt, mainly because it could be viewed as a failure on his part. In his battle of wits with Banks, Jack plants the idea that Banks should offer a government bailout, an offer that Jack could not refuse because of all the jobs at stake. In reality, Jack does not really care about the jobs on the line; he simply sees this as a way to buy himself more time to ultimately prevail over Banks. In this episode, the story arc of Jack versus Banks pinned the collective fate of the employers of General Electric in the balance. However, even with the gravitas of the situation, the focus remained more on the personal vendettas between Jack and Banks, and their greater desire to outduel one another, no matter the cost.

The viewing strip as a whole paints a clear picture of representational trends in workplace-based situation comedies. Relating back to the main focus of this research project, we can notice the overall lack of discussion concerning economic uncertainty in these workplace sitcoms. This lack of explicit discussion around issues of economic viability might stem from the job security and stability afforded to an overwhelming majority of characters in these workplace-based sitcoms. In two of the episodes, those being *Community* and *The Office*, there was virtually no mention of economic issues. On *30 Rock*, issues of economic hardship were largely missing as well—only mentioned as collateral damage from the battle of wits between Jack and Banks. *Only Parks and Recreation* heavily featured issues of financial strife, and that was centered on the only character on that sitcom with no involvement in the actual workplace (at that point). Here, we can see that the workplace itself is a stabilizing factor for the financial standings of each character. This may stem from the pre-recessionary beginnings of *The Office* and *30 Rock*, later coupled with *Community* and *Parks and Recreation*—sitcoms all in the same vein.
One final thing to note, regarding the viewing strip, is the progression of socioeconomic position as the night advances. The viewing strip starts with *Community*, in which the main characters are unemployed, community college students. This is followed by *Parks and Recreation* and then *The Office*, which represent middle management in the form of local government and a branch office of a larger corporation. Finally, the night ends with *30 Rock* representing the highest level of job status in which the corporate level of a large multinational conglomerate is portrayed. One could say that the strip is tacitly showing the climb up the neoliberal corporate ladder—starting as students, working up through middle management, and eventually reaching executive status.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In this case study, the programs of the viewing strip demonstrated postfeminist elements throughout the night, which stands analogous to the postfeminist messaging found in each series as a whole. In *Community*, Britta is unable to figure out on her own why Shirley is upset with her. It is Jeff, the voice of patriarchal authority, who informs Britta of what the issue is with Shirley. Britta mends the rift with Shirley, but at the expense of abandoning her feminist ideals and accepting the societal guidelines of traditional gender norms (i.e. women going to the bathroom in groups in order to discuss personal matters, “learning” to be an accepted woman from Shirley’s teachings). This pattern of Jeff acting as a voice of authority and Britta not following through with her feminist convictions is common over the course of the series. Jeff, often assuming the role of the proverbial father figure to the study group, is often sought out for his advice from Britta (as well as Annie, Shirley, and the rest of the group). Britta is quick to speak up about feminist issues—but is just as quick to abandon them. It seems that in some instances, she merely wants to *appear* feminist rather than actually holding true to those convictions. A prime example of this, out of many to choose from, is in “Early 21st Century
Romanticism” (Season 2, Episode 15): Britta befriends a young woman named Paige, whom she believes to be a lesbian (incidentally, Paige, who is straight, believes Britta to be a lesbian).

Britta later boasts to Annie how comfortable and accepting she is to have a lesbian as a friend, and at the same time judges Annie for being close-minded. Britta and Paige attend a school dance together, where they each learn that the other is not a lesbian, and they are both, in fact, straight. It quickly comes out that the only reason they had befriended each other in the first place was solely based on the assumption that the other was a lesbian, and they each wanted to be able to say that they “have a lesbian friend.” This is postfeminist in nature because it shows that Britta is only superficially accepting of Paige (when she believes that she is a lesbian).

Essentially, Britta subconsciously positions Paige as the Other.

Similarly, in Parks and Recreation, the sitcom’s strong, woman lead often turns toward men to act as the voices of authority when in need of help. In this particular episode, Leslie figures out how to solve her problem only after being advised by Mark. Later, she solves the newly-created problem with Andy, by being underhanded and lying to the city government—something which would normally fall out of what she feels is morally right. Compared to the entire run of the sitcom in general, in early seasons, Mark often acts as the voice of authority—later on, Ron, Ben, and Chris all alternate in this role. While Leslie often turns to Ann (and sometimes April) when in need of carrying out a task or seeking emotional support, it is usually men whom she turns to when she is in need of actually figuring out how to approach and solve a problem. While she does not flip-flop on her convictions as nearly as often as Britta, Leslie on rare occasions does retreat on her feminism when she feels like it might further her causes—examples of this include taking Tom to a strip club to cheer him up or forcing Ann to go out on a date with Chris in order to try to elicit more money for the department budget. It is important to note though, while these instances occasionally occur, they are quite rare. Leslie easily represents
the strongest, feminist character on any of these four sitcoms, and may very well be the strongest, feminist character on television in general.

In the episode of *The Office* that was analyzed in this viewing strip, postfeminist messaging was not present as much. Unfortunately, this episode was an anomaly—the same cannot be said for the series in general. Men are not often sought out as voices of authority in this program, no doubt largely in part because Michael, and later Robert California (played by James Spader) and Andy Bernard (played by Ed Helms), all play the role of unhelpful bosses. All three are self-absorbed; additionally Michael and Andy both play the role of the buffoon, while Robert plays the eccentric narcissist who does not seem to actually make any attempt to manage the branch. However, even though men are not often looked at as voices of authority, this does not exclude them from being detrimental to the women of the sitcom. As I have previously discussed here and elsewhere, a strong postfeminist thread throughout the series is that some women are symbolically punished after becoming romantically involved with men (DeCarvalho, 2010). The pattern that often comes up is that career-driven women are pursued by their men counterparts. After a romantic relationship forms, the men always maintain their position and are sometimes even promoted. The women, on the other hand, seemingly fall from grace and are thrust into more “acceptable” roles for women on television. Women who fell into this trap included Pam Halpert (née Beesly), Jan Levenson (played by Melora Hardin), and Karen Filippelli (played by Rashida Jones). In addition to this trend in *The Office*, there is also a surprising lack of solidarity among the women characters. Through most of the sitcom’s run, the women characters are more often rivals than friends. This is a dynamic of women in situation comedies that has been noted by such scholars as Dow (1996) and Douglas (2010). One of the few examples of solidarity early on is when Jan holds a “Women in the Workplace” seminar at the Dunder-Mifflin Scranton Branch and encourages Pam to pursue her artistic aspirations. Regarding actual friendships amongst the women, it is not until the program’s final season in which viewers see Pam bond
with both Meredith Palmer (played by Kate Flannery) and Nellie Bertram (played by Catherine Tate), and this is only when she is feeling both physically and emotionally separated from Jim.

On *30 Rock*, in the episode of the viewing strip, I observed that Liz not only sought out Jack as a voice of authority, but also abandoned her feminist ideals by creating a pornographic film to appease Tracy. These are common occurrences on the program. Liz and Jack have a defined and explicitly-stated mentee/mentor relationship and Liz seeks Jack’s advice as a voice of authority in almost every episode. In regards to abandoning feminist ideals when deemed necessary, while the instance in this particular episode was an extreme example, there are other instances of this throughout the series. Most often however, Liz does have good intentions initially—she often tries to incorporate feminist ideals in her management style and within the writing of the fictional variety show—unfortunately these intentions often fall short of their targets, again as seen in “Rosemary’s Baby” and “TGS Hates Women.”

When looking at each of the four sitcoms as a whole, issues of economic uncertainty are still largely absent. Only on *Community* is financial hardship a semi-recurring plot point and one that affects multiple characters. These issues of economic uncertainty occasionally play pivotal parts of multiple episodes for four of the six main characters. Here are just a few examples: Troy is forced to move in with Pierce, and later Abed, in order to afford housing; Jeff lives in his car for a period of time, while he tries to restructure his finances; Britta considers using the money that Pierce gives to her for the charity of her choice for her own needs (in that particular episode, it comes out that she has less than $261 to her name); and Annie has to move to a seedy part of town in an apartment above a sex-toy shop to be able to afford the cheap rent and in a later episode, when she cannot even afford this amount, then she accepts money from Pierce to pay her rent. One important thing to note here is that all four of these economically-struggling characters are students, without any means of income.
Regarding the entire run of *Parks and Recreation* thus far, after Andy is no longer homeless, issues of financial instability are delegated to only the occasional joke—there are rarely instances of financial hardship that come into the spotlight later on. Similarly, over the course of *The Office*, it is rare that economic uncertainty plays a role in the story line. One of the few exceptions to this is when the character of Jan moves in with Michael (after she is fired from her job, as his former boss). Used to the lavish lifestyle of her former high-powered, high-paying position, she quickly depletes Michael’s finances—something that takes a major toll on Michael’s psyche as well as their relationship, when he is forced to confront her about his quickly expanding debt. In the sitcom, this hardship lasts for only a short period of time—Michael soon breaks things off with Jan and everything seems to return to normal, with the debt amassed having seemingly vanished and never mentioned again. Finally, in the larger scope of *30 Rock*, issues of economic hardship come up at even a lesser extent. They are occasionally joked about but rarely focused on (most of these jokes revolve around the character of Kenneth Parcell)—if anything, many of the jokes and plot points on *30 Rock* revolve around having an excess of wealth.

This contrasts with the next case study of this research: the programs which represent the shift from workplace-based to work-related sitcoms, and with this shift, the influx of economically-unstable, twenty-something, women protagonists.
CHAPTER 5:

“GIRLS” AND “BITCHES”: THE PORTRAYAL OF TWENTY-SOMETHING, ECONOMICALLY-STRUGGLING WOMEN IN POST-RECESSIONARY-INFLUENCED BROADCAST SITCOMS

Television characters are not like holograms. Each tiny fragment does not contain the sum of the whole, but rather becomes fully intelligible only when juxtaposed with all of the other tiny fragments in all the other scenes in all the other episodes in which the character appears. Television characters are to some extent autonomous beings; autonomous, that is, of the televisual codes and individuals scenes/episodes that construct them, existing as a whole only in the minds of the producers and audiences. – Roberta Pearson, 2007, pp. 42-43

Introduction to Work-Related Sitcoms

As we saw in the previous chapter, several of NBC’s Thursday night comedies feature women at work. Beginning in the 2011-2012 television season, situation comedies coupling gender with work issues—or at least issues of unstable employment and economic survival—became more prominent on other broadcast networks than NBC, which was home to more traditional, work-based situation comedies. Several sitcoms premiered that took a new approach to addressing the work-oriented theme. The NBC Thursday night sitcoms are mostly women-centered, but these new sitcoms are all women-centered. Especially noteworthy are that the titles of these new sitcoms are often explicitly gendered. Unlike the NBC workplace sitcoms which feature middle-aged women characters, these newer programs feature the generation after: twenty-something women. While the NBC Thursday-night sitcoms fall in line with the traditional scope of what would be deemed a workplace sitcom, these newer programs do not necessarily (or predominantly) depict their respective women protagonists in a workplace setting. Rather, what makes them worthy of still being labeled work-related is that the premise behind
each of these programs pertains to these young women struggling financially, trying to make it on
their own in the new post-recession era; these programs often portray them at work, yes—but also
show them extensively (and to some degree more so) in environments outside of the workplace,
not actively partaking in job functions. Programs in this category include State of Georgia (ABC
Family, 2011), and How to Live with Your Parents (For the Rest of Your Life) (Fox, 2013-
present).

In this chapter, I will be analyzing two manifestations of this newer type of work-related
situation comedies: 2 Broke Girls (CBS, 2011-present), and Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23
(ABC, 2012-2013) (with “B----” being the bowdlerized version of the word “Bitch”). When
CBS’s 2 Broke Girls debuted on September 20, 2011, it marked the biggest fall comedy premiere
in ten years for the major broadcast networks (Seidman, 2011). Less than a year later, ABC’s
Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23 debuted on April 11, 2012. The premiere of ABC’s latest
sitcom brought in 2.9 million adult viewers (aged 18-49) at the time (Bibel, 2012). Although the
latter program was canceled in its second season (largely attributed to the audience’s confusion at
ABC’s decision to air episodes out of order) (Thomas, 2013), both television programs speak to
the economic times, featuring twenty-something women struggling to make ends meet, pay rent,
and find steady income in the post-recession era. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss
the methodological technique employed in this chapter and I will also lay the groundwork for
what has been carried out in terms of previous archetypal character work within situation
comedies. The next section will feature synopses of both work-related situation comedies and
will detail four main character types, as hybrids of existing archetypes, that I have both named
and identified that are prominently focused in both series. Finally, in the third section, I will offer
some concluding thoughts to close out this chapter.

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7 According to an article on The Futon Critic (dated 1/14/09), Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment
23 initially tried to be picked up by Fox back in 2009. This would have been before the official start of the
post-recession era in June 2009.
Method and methodology.

For this chapter, I once again employ feminist textual analysis as a means to pinpoint how newer work-related sitcoms overlap not only in terms of their mutual themes but also in terms of their shared characters types. As Porter, Larson, Hartcock, and Nellis (2002) assert, one defining quality of televisual narratives is their predominant focus on character and character development: “Continuing storylines work to resist closure, which de-emphasizes the plot and brings the characters to the forefront of the narrative. As a result, the reader recognizes the emphasis and importance placed on character as story” (p. 24). As I argue below, such familiarity comes intertextually as viewers recognize character types from the wider culture—including television genres but from other socio-cultural sources as well—and intratextually as viewers grow accustomed to the same characters appearing in different episodes of a series. Stereotypes involving gender and work status, in fact, are easily recognizable markers for television characters. With this in mind, the unique methodological technique for this particular chapter aims to highlight character types within both sitcoms’ serial narrative.

I carried out close textual readings of both 2 Broke Girls and Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23 as two manifestations of work-related sitcoms on broadcast television, focusing especially on characterization and character relationships. I analyzed all 24 episodes from the first season of 2 Broke Girls using the sitcom’s first season on a Blu-ray Disc collection. For the latter program, I analyzed all 7 episodes that aired for the first season (via Amazon Instant Video) and all 11 episodes that aired for the second season (via Hulu Plus). Part of this second season actually included the airing of 6 episodes from the first season which were originally unaired
given the series’ status as a mid-season replacement. Due to the series being cancelled, ABC opted not to air the final 8 episodes from the second season.8

**Existing research on archetypal characters.**

In her comparison of viewing practices in watching television news versus situation comedies, Hess (2003) asserts that the latter “…rely heavily on viewer familiarity with a set of stock character types” (p. 50). Butsch (2003) adds that such stock types occur due to issues of networks avoiding risks, costly program development, and the tailoring of programming toward advertisers. Josh Schwartz (2010), the executive producer of *Gossip Girl*, *Chuck*, and *The O.C.*, states another purpose for archetypes: “…they’ve stood the test of time and have a powerful, iconic status for audiences…People relate to them, project themselves onto them. The key is in how you update these characters, modernize them, give voice to them and, most importantly, cast them” (as cited in Friedlander, 2010, para. 2).

In his book, *The Eight Characters of Comedy: A Guide to Sitcom Acting and Writing*, Sedita (2006) describes eight primary character types that he has come to identify in situation comedies after working in the entertainment industry for over twenty years as a prominent acting coach, a sitcom writer, and a talent agent. These televisual characters are “The Logical Smart One”; “The Lovable Loser”; “The Neurotic”; “The Dumb One”; “The Bitch/Bastard”; “The Womanizer/Manizer”; “The Materialistic One”; and “In Their Own Universe” (Sedita, 2006, p. 49). Many of these involve gendered assumptions (“Womanizer/Manizer”) that may be viewed differently depending on their gender manifestations—a “manizer” could easily become a “slut” that has no affective man equivalent, for example. Others, such as “The Materialistic One,”

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8 According to an article from *The Hollywood Reporter* (dated 4/18/13), the remaining unaired episodes of *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23* will be available through various outlets online, starting May 17, 2013.
involve class and possibly employment assumptions. Key traits and examples of these eight characters are presented in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1: Sedita’s (2006) Eight Televisual Characters within Situation Comedies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Type</th>
<th>Some Key Traits</th>
<th>Sitcom Example</th>
<th>Character Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Logical Smart One</td>
<td>Brutally honest, compassionate, intelligent, maternal or paternal, sarcastic, tolerant, well-educated</td>
<td><em>Everybody Loves Raymond</em> (1996-2005)</td>
<td>Debra Barone (played by Patricia Heaton)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lovable Loser</td>
<td>Charming, childlike in nature, good hearted, hopeful, narrow-minded, self-deprecating, vulnerable</td>
<td><em>The Wonder Years</em> (1988-1993)</td>
<td>Kevin Arnold (played by Fred Savage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Neurotic</td>
<td>Anal retentive, anxious, controlling, highbrow, internalizes every thought, meticulous, over-analytical</td>
<td><em>Will &amp; Grace</em> (1998-2006)</td>
<td>Grace Adler (played by Debra Messing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dumb One</td>
<td>Affable, childlike, endearing, friendly, genuine, good-natured, gullible, positive, unselfish, warm</td>
<td><em>That ’70s Show</em> (1998-2006)</td>
<td>Michael Kelso (played by Ashton Kutcher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bitch/Bastard</td>
<td>Biting, condescending, cynical, doesn’t apologize, dry sense of humor, mean-spirited, outspoken, wise</td>
<td><em>The Nanny</em> (1993-1999)</td>
<td>Niles (played by Daniel Davis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Womanizer/Manizer</td>
<td>Aggressive, bold, cocky, hedonistic, seductive, sexual, shallow, superficial, well put together</td>
<td><em>Two and a Half Men</em> (2003-present)</td>
<td>Charlie Harper (played by Charlie Sheen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Materialistic One</td>
<td>A princess, full of themselves, insecure, judgmental, oblivious to the less fortunate, pampered, snobby</td>
<td><em>Arrested Development</em> (2003-2013)</td>
<td>Lindsay Bluth Funke (played by Portia de Rossi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Their Own Universe</td>
<td>Accepting, eccentric, has good intentions, marches to the beat of their own drum, non-judgmental, odd</td>
<td><em>Friends</em> (1994-2004)</td>
<td>Phoebe Buffay (played by Lisa Kudrow)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But where else might viewers learn about such “iconic” characterizations besides from television? One social location where stereotypes develop is the workplace, especially given the unequal power manifested in work-gender relations. Julia T. Wood (2009), a well-known gender and interpersonal communication scholar, pinpoints four main types: The Sex Object, The
Mother, The Child, and The Iron Maiden (pp. 232-235). According to Wood, women are often viewed as mere sex objects in the workplace, thereby contributing to the judgment of women based solely on their appearances, but also to sexual harassment. The Mother stereotype refers to women being perceived more as maternal figures in the workplace. On a literal level, Wood discusses how women “…who have or plan to have children are often perceived as less serious professionals than men or women who aren’t mothers” (2009, p. 233). On a figurative level, women are expected to fall in line with affective labor, “…to smile, exchange pleasantries, prepare coffee and snacks, and listen to, support, and help others” (p. 233). The Child stereotype refers to how many women in the workplace are not taken seriously, and are instead perceived as being “less mature, less competent, and less capable than adults” (Wood, 2009, p. 234). Finally, Wood discusses The Iron Maiden stereotype as being reserved for women who are not seen as fitting any of the first three stereotypes. The Iron Maiden is a woman who is perceived as being driven, competitive, independent, and “tough” in the workplace (Wood, 2009, p. 235).

Elaborating on Wood’s work, Macey (2012) states that “archetypes manifest as the broad blueprint of recombinant characters” on television (p. 50). She goes on to apply Wood’s archetypal women stereotypes to women characters in the televisual workplace, as exemplified by the HBO series, Sex and the City (SATC). Table 5-2 summarizes how Macey sees these four archetypal characters playing out in the HBO dramedy.
Table 5-2: Macey’s (2012) Description of the Four Archetypal Women Characters in SATC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Type</th>
<th>Some Key Traits</th>
<th>Character Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Mother</td>
<td>Offers advice and comfort, also offers guidance to viewers through voice-over narration</td>
<td>Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sex Object</td>
<td>Keen on describing sexual behavior and exploits</td>
<td>Samantha Jones (played by Kim Cattrall)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Child</td>
<td>Hyper-feminine, refined, believer in love and marriage, prudish</td>
<td>Charlotte York (played by Kristin Davis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Iron Maiden</td>
<td>Cynical, sarcastic, career-oriented, doesn’t believe in fairy tales</td>
<td>Miranda Hobbes (played by Cynthia Nixon)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that this small section in no way exhausts the list of scholarship done on archetypal characters, especially as they appear on television. I highlight these particular individuals as they shine a light on and incorporate perspectives from the industry, how archetypes are formed and re-constructed, and especially their gendered and workplace manifestations. The characters we see in post-recession comedies have their roots in such previous characterizations, but are also given contemporary twists given the unique economic circumstances of 2008-2013 America.

Character Types in Post-Recessionary-Influenced, Broadcast, Work-Related Sitcoms

Two manifestations of work-related sitcoms.

In CBS’s 2 Broke Girls, a twenty-something, blonde woman named Caroline Channing (played by Beth Behrs) is forced to relocate from New York City’s Upper East Side to Brooklyn after her father is accused of a Ponzi scheme. With no money or housing, she heads to the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn in hopes of starting her life over (and to escape the sheer embarrassment of her “new” reputation). Caroline manages to land a waitressing gig at The
Williamsburg Diner, where she meets a co-worker, Max Black (played by Kat Dennings), a twenty-something brunette woman from the other side of the tracks. Feeling pity on Caroline after learning from a third source that Caroline’s friends would not speak to her and finding out that she is now homeless with no place to go, Max offers Caroline space in her own apartment. The two eventually become friends, reluctantly on Max’s part, and decide to start a cupcake business out of their apartment, saving money to eventually open up a storefront. Throughout the series, issues of economic viability are continually highlighted. One instance of this highlighting is immediately noticeable as the program’s title appears, from both the adjective used to describe the young women but also from the program’s use of the money symbol: 2 BROKE GIRLS.

Furthermore, at the very end of each episode, viewers are shown a tally of how much money the young women currently have saved up toward opening the storefront. In addition to these two recurring instances, throughout the series Caroline and Max take on odd jobs to complement their primary source of income through waitressing.

In Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, a twenty-something blonde woman named June Colburn (played by Dreama Walker) relocates from her home state of Indiana to New York after landing a job on Wall Street. To her dismay, June learns on her first day that the company, Buchwald Mortgage, is being shut down after Mr. Buchwald is accused of a Ponzi scheme. With no job, place to live, or means of income, she finds herself stranded with all of her belongings on the sidewalk outside of the It’s Just Beans! Coffee Shop. Looking for housing, June answers a “Roommate Wanted” ad and eventually meets and rooms with Chloe (played by Krysten Ritter), a twenty-something, brunette con artist. Later, Mark Reynolds (played by Eric Andre), who was initially supposed to serve as June’s associate mentor at Buchwald Mortgage but managed to somehow become manager of the coffee shop in “like 4 hours,” offers June a barista position to help get her back on her feet (Bradford et. al, 2012). Like 2 Broke Girls, issues of economic
uncertainty are prominently discussed, as June continues her efforts toward attaining a professional job on Wall Street.

It is worth pointing out that both texts have highly-gendered, problematic titles. In *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, the “B----” is a bowdlerized version of the word “bitch.” This is a problem as viewers are encouraged to see this character in this negative light, which is reinforced, through further de-humanization, when they never learn Chloe’s surname. Additionally, it propagates, rather than re-appropriates, the term “bitch.” In the case of *2 Broke Girls*, two twenty-something women are referred to as “girls.” Lazar (2009) argues that this “girling” of women serves to embrace notions of postfeminism by encouraging individuals to distance themselves from “popular (mis)conceptions of feminists as dour and mannish” (p. 390). Additionally, the titles of both sitcoms grammatically assume a relationship: in the former, there is a relationship between two broke “girls” (read: women); and the latter represents a warning from one woman to another woman about a third woman. An emphasis on relationships is also furthered by the individual title episodes from each sitcom. In the case of *2 Broke Girls*, it is the implied noun of every episode title—for instance, “[2 Broke Girls] and The Drug Money.” With the latter sitcom, titles complete the Apt. 23 sentence, sometimes with additional derogatory labels or a problematic saying: “Daddy’s Girl…in Apt. 23.”

From the brief synopses of these two programs alone, it is already clear that there is significant overlap in how both series depict, discuss, and comment on issues of concern in work-related situation comedies. Two of these issues include economic hardship and multiple yet unstable work environments. Both are contributing factors to a new iteration of postfeminism, what I term Post-Recessionary Sexism. This particular manifestation of postfeminism takes into account how the current cultural context of the post-recession era is influencing portrayals of women in work comedies/dramedies. In addition to the economic instability factor, there are a few other major themes to this new trend. One of these tenets is that women are often shown
“complaining” about their financial issues, while their men counterparts simply seem unfazed (by often very similar issues). In these instances, the women characters sometimes spend as much time complaining about the need to work as they do actually working (and again, the same cannot be said about their men counterparts). Another theme of Post-Recessionary Sexism is that women characters often get by financially by taking dishonest and underhanded approaches or shortcuts when it comes to work—men are able to get by using their skills and work ethics alone. Additionally, the women characters often turn to men for advice (regarding work and finances), even though the men are rarely in drastically better circumstances. Finally, in Post-Recessionary Sexism, serious issues, such as rape and sexual harassment, are downplayed by their use in a “comedic” sense—this is perpetuated by both women and men characters. Throughout the analysis below, we will see this phenomenon come into play.

In the remainder of this section, I will be elucidating four major, gendered character types that are shared by both programs: The Skeptical Brunette; The Down-on-her-Luck Blonde; The Comedic Sexual Harasser; and The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor. These character types have appeared in other television programs, but their situatedness in comedies about work anxieties influences their meanings. It is important for me to acknowledge that the names that I have opted to make for these character types may be considered problematic; however, please realize that I created these archetypal names conscientiously. In other words, it is crucial to highlight and draw attention to key elements of these particular character types (e.g. the gender dynamics), of which both programs share. Additionally, I want to emphasize here that some of these archetypes are not entirely new to television; they are hybrids of the archetypes put forth by both Scott Sedita and Julia T. Wood—see Table 5-3 below. Furthermore, these hybrid archetypes may display some of the traits of Sedita and Wood’s existing archetypes, but not necessarily all of the traits.
Table 5-3: DeCarvalho’s Hybrid Archetypes and their Relations to the Wood and Sedita Archetypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hybrid Archetypes</th>
<th>Related Wood Archetypes</th>
<th>Related Sedita Archetypes</th>
<th>Character Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Skeptical Brunette</td>
<td>The Iron Maiden/Sex Object</td>
<td>The Bitch/Manizer</td>
<td>Chloe on <em>Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23</em>; Max on 2 <em>Broke Girls</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Down-on-her-Luck Blonde</td>
<td>The Mother/Child</td>
<td>The Logical Smart One/Loveable Loser/Neurotic</td>
<td>June on <em>Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23</em>; Caroline on 2 <em>Broke Girls</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Comedic Sexual Harasser</td>
<td>n/a (Wood’s archetypes only apply to women)</td>
<td>The Bastard/Womanizer/In Their Own Universe</td>
<td>Eli on <em>Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23</em>; Oleg on 2 <em>Broke Girls</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor</td>
<td>The Sex Object (in 2 <em>Broke Girls</em>)</td>
<td>The Dumb One/In Their Own Universe</td>
<td>Robin on <em>Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23</em>; Sophie on 2 <em>Broke Girls</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Skeptical Brunette.

This first archetype describes a leading (woman) character on each of the work-related situation comedies. The key aspects of this televisual character are that she is a brunette woman who does what she can to make ends meet, participates in binge drinking and drug use, is knowledgeable about living in the area that her later roommate (aka The Down-on-her-Luck Blonde, or The DOHL Blonde) relocates to, is extremely open about her sexuality, feels scorned by the lack of at least one parental figure (or maybe even both), and does not believe in romantic love. Given this character’s previous experiences, she has become hardened to her surroundings and is not keen on opening up to other characters. We see manifestations of this character in other sitcoms, including that of Carrie Heffernan in *The King of Queens* and Robin Scherbatsky.
in *How I Met Your Mother*. In the following subsections, I discuss how 2 *Broke Girls*’ Max Dennings and *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*’s Chloe are emblematic of this Skeptical Brunette archetype (see Figures 5-1 and 5-2). For easier reading, I have broken down each subsection according to the archetype’s primary characteristics and in each subsection I discuss both young women.

Figure 5-1: Max Black (played by Kat Dennings) as The Skeptical Brunette in *2 Broke Girls*.

Figure 5-2: *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*’s Chloe (played by Krysten Ritter) as The Skeptical Brunette.
Making ends meet, means of income.

On 2 Broke Girls, Max Black works four jobs to make ends meet. Her primary job is working as a waitress at the Williamsburg Diner. From what viewers gather, it seems like she has been working there for quite some time. Despite this, the job only yields meager earnings for her, which is supplemented by the sale of her cupcakes there. In fact, despite her worldly demeanor, she is sometimes naïve about economics. Her cupcakes were undersold in price (at just $1.50 per cupcake) until Caroline, as The DOHL Blonde, came along and gave her financial advice. Max knows how the diner operates and feels comfortable being assertive (to the point of being rude) with customers, which makes the job a bit more enjoyable for herself (as she enjoys aggravating them to a certain degree). As a second source of income, Max babysits for Peach, a materialistic NYC socialite. Peach appears to be a terrible mother and instead focuses her time on fulfilling the Real Housewives archetype. Max recognizes this to be the case and grows quite attached to the kids. Overall, she is a great babysitter and takes this secondary job very seriously. Unable to make ends meet from her primary occupation, Max must juggle multiple jobs in order to make a living.

Max’s primary passion seems to come forth in her third job as a baker. In particular, she bakes cupcakes and seems to have done so for a long time. Initially, she only wants to sell them in the diner; however, Caroline persuades her to expand and think bigger. The two start a cupcake business and sell their cupcakes to local businesses. They also cater their cupcakes to local functions, like birthday parties and art gallery exhibits. It will be important to note later that Max’s “homemade” cupcake recipe is revealed to be a mixture of two commercially-boxed cupcake mixes. Nevertheless, even with this shortcut, the cupcakes are still selling and Max and Caroline continue to pursue their business dream. In order to help fund their cupcake business, Max takes a fourth job as a house cleaner. She works for her neighbor, Sophie, and cleans nearby apartments, lofts, and condos.
On Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, The Skeptical Brunette archetype is filled by the title character Chloe, whose surname is never disclosed to viewers. This, in itself, is telling as the program encourages viewers to not really identify with her character; instead, the lack of disclosure of her surname only serves to de-humanize her and encourage viewers to more closely identify her as being simply “the B----.” Her primary employment, ostensibly, is working as a nightlife guide for U.N. diplomats who are in town for the General Assembly. She essentially works for only a three-day period each year. In fact, Chloe’s month-to-month source of income stems from her being a con artist—in a way conning both her marks as well as viewers, the latter in how she is able to negotiate the economic conditions of the post-recession, without details and strife. In addition to conning people out of money, she also cons others into getting what she wants. For instance, she manipulates “favors” out of other characters: in quite a number of episodes, Chloe coerces gifts or money from her best friend, James Van Der Beek (playing a comedic version of himself). She also has her former roommate/now neighbor, Robin (also without a disclosed surname) do her bidding. An example of this is when Chloe convinces Robin to chauffeur her and her friends to the Hamptons and back for a weekend getaway, without any sort of real compensation.

In addition to conning people into doing favors for her, Chloe also cons people for power. In “Daddy’s Girl…” (Season 1, Episode 2), Chloe sets her new roommate, June (aka The DOHL Blonde) up with Scott, an older man who later to June’s dismay turns out to be Chloe’s father. The matchmaking was Chloe’s way of getting back at her own mother, whom she is still mad at for not taking her horseback riding or ice skating as a child. In this instance, Chloe is not only manipulating June but also her father, Scott, who recently separated from Chloe’s mother. In

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\[9\] This encouragement on the part of the program also comes through in its theme song lyrics, sung by a woman in a gossipy tone: “I’m not perfect. I’m no snitch. But I can tell you, she’s a…B----.” Similar to the word “bitch” being bowdlerized in the program title, the word “bitch” in the lyrics is drowned out by the sound of a door buzzer.
“Sexy People…” (Season 2, Episode 3)—an episode with heavy product integration—Chloe walks into the corporate offices of People Magazine and announces to the meeting in-progress that she is the new Managing Editor, who recently transferred from the magazine’s London office. When the staff starts to ask questions about her and their “former” Managing Editor, she proceeds to fire two of them immediately and threatens to fire a third. Despite having any actual authority, Chloe’s level of confidence in executing her con inhibits anyone else from questioning her. In general, while she gains money, goods, services, and power from her schemes, Chloe’s true passion seems to stem from the actual act of conning itself. But, as such, the issue of economic instability is sometimes highlighted in her character’s motivations. In a way, she can almost be seen as an austerity era neoliberal fantasy incarnate—her “me-first” mentality is getting her through a time when many of those around her are economically struggling.

As The Skeptical Brunette, the character of Chloe has a strong personality (like Max in 2 Broke Girls) and does not like when people stand in her way. Conning is a game to her, and when people stand in her way, sometimes she does not win. Two examples of this can be seen through her interactions with two other characters on the work-related program: Luther Wilson (James Van Der Beek’s assistant) and her mother, Karen (again, with no last name provided to viewers). In “Making Rent…” (Season 1, Episode 5), an episode (and title) that further highlights her economic hardship, Chloe asks for money from James Van Der Beek to help cover her half of the rent. Her best friend happily agrees and tells her to speak with his assistant, Luther, since he keeps track of James’s finances:


CHLOE (after giving a loud sigh of disappointment): Ugh, why not?

LUTHER: Because in the past four years, you’ve borrowed…(looking over his records) over $20,000 from James. Dinners. Shopping sprees. And I’m not even counting James’ stunt double you lost.
**CHLOE**: C’mon, Luther. I need the money.

**LUTHER** *(while Chloe rolls her eyes)*: And I needed notes on my play. I gave it to you to remember over a year ago, remember? So again, my answer is...the grapes on the vine aren’t having it. *(Chloe looks confused.)* If you read my play, you’d get that. *(Nickerson & Spiller, 2012)*

Chloe is used to getting her way, and Luther’s persistence in getting what he wants in this case temporarily puts Chloe in her place. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Chloe’s go-to method for getting what she wants out of men—using her sexuality—is not an option here as Luther is gay; the end result is that, for once, Chloe does not come out ahead. Chloe resolves her situation by loosening a second-floor railing at James’s apartment so she could pretend to trip, hit the railing, and then sue him for damages to cover both her and June’s rent.

The economic uncertainty that both Max and Chloe face set the stage for Post-Recessionary Sexism to surface. Chloe’s “occupation” as a con artist is an example of this. She is willing to scam others, including her own friends, in order to make ends meet. She has no qualms about taking the dishonest approach to earn a living and seems to have been doing so for quite some time. Max’s use of commercially-boxed cupcake mix is also illustrative of Post-Recessionary Sexism, as a shortcut is used to get ahead; this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

**Binge drinking and drug usage.**

In both programs, The Skeptical Brunette likes to drink (which adds to this hybrid archetype falling outside of the realm of mainstream femininity). The manner in which this is conveyed to the audience is quite varied; however, the end message is still the same. On *2 Broke Girls*, Max’s drinking habits are apparent, but are almost always implied rather than explicitly shown. Usually her inebriated hijinks are often relayed by Max herself in the form of jokes to
those around her. Like these “comedic” drunken moments, Max also tells stories of her occasional drug use, as seen in “And Strokes of Goodwill” (Season 1, Episode 3):

**MAX (to Caroline):** Hey, when you find something, check the pockets for pills. At a thrift store downtown, I found a purple one once and took it. Fell asleep for eight hours.

That was my vacation for that year. (Marchinko & Fortenberry, 2011)

Similar to her binge drinking, Max is rarely shown partaking in drug use; rather, it is only indirectly discussed, such as her being unable to find her “bedroom stash” (Cummings, King, McAleer, & Savage, 2011), and often as part of her self-deprecating humor. It is also interesting to note that her “vacation,” or really lack thereof, is tied to her economic hardship.

When Chloe, from *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, is not spending her time conning people for money or power, she drinks excessively, uses (and sells) drugs like Chinese energy tablets, and especially likes to party. In fact, at one point, she briefly believes that she has an alcohol problem. However, this gets overshadowed by June purposely trying to get Chloe to drink heavily so she is not in the capacity to reject the son of June’s potential employer (Hemingson & Chan, 2012). In this episode, there is a direct intersection of Chloe’s substance abuse and June’s economic situation. Throughout the series, Chloe’s drunken states are often part of the story, but mostly in a comedic sense. In one episode, Chloe’s lifestyle actually lands June (who is trying to keep up with her) in the hospital from alcohol poisoning. Like the excessive drinking, Chloe’s obsession with partying serves a primarily comedic purpose as she is often seen going out at night and coming back to pass out in a drunken slumber in the mornings. In “Whatever it Takes…” (Season 2, 5), viewers learn a little more about Chloe’s habits and her perspective on them: “I’m not partying. I’m making connections. I’m creating opportunities. For example, last night, I peed next to Jada Pinkett Smith, and now I’m invited to Tom Hanks’s Easter egg hunt” (Hemingson & Chan, 2012). The consumption of alcohol on both programs serves as a coping mechanism for the young women. Similarly, it also serves to remind viewers
that they are outside the scope of mainstream femininity. While their portrayals differ, with Max’s drinking habits being implied off-screen and Chloe’s being explicitly shown over and over again on-screen, it is important to note that on both programs, The Skeptical Brunette is the character that seems to enjoy drinking the most.

**Knowledgeable about surrounding environment.**

Another common thread throughout both programs is that The Skeptical Brunette acts almost as a sage to her DOHL Blonde counterpart, guiding the other on how to acclimate to and survive in a new environment—new found poverty in Caroline’s case and the cut-throat, high-paced New York City (Manhattan-specific) lifestyle for June. On *2 Broke Girls*, Max is portrayed as the battle-hardened local, and passes her knowledge on to Caroline, The DOHL Blonde, who is new to the area and lifestyle. In particular, Max teaches Caroline how to adapt to not only the neighborhood, but also how to adapt to poverty through competent consumption in teaching Caroline how to stretch each dollar of her meager earnings (but not how to produce extra income). The class dynamics of the working class (Max) versus the silver spoon (Caroline) come into play here. In “And Strokes of Goodwill” (Season 1, Episode 3), Max takes Caroline shopping for some “new” clothes at Goodwill and advises her where to look for clothes that other shoppers hide when they cannot afford an item right away. Later in the series, Max teaches Caroline how to go grocery shopping, and especially about the concept of coupons. Initially, Caroline is extremely hesitant:

**MAX** (*handing them over to Caroline*): Here. Here are the coupons.

**CAROLINE** (*looking frightened*): The coupons?

**MAX**: Yeah, here.

**CAROLINE**: Max, you use coupons? I had no idea.

**MAX**: You’re looking at me like I’m on *To Catch a Predator*. 
CAROLINE: We don’t need to use those. I have my tip money right here.

MAX: What are you talking about? I have coupons. Here take them.

CAROLINE: I have…I can’t, I don’t want to. I’ve fallen so far. I can’t fall any farther.

Don’t make me. (Hemingson & Chan, 2012).

Eventually, Caroline catches on, but then to the point of excess. It is not until she goes too far, to where she tries to turn couponing into “extra money,” that she finally realizes her ways and learns indirectly from Max to keep her priorities straight.

Given that Chloe has lived in New York City for seven years, she is used to the drinking and partying scene. More so, she has built up knowledge about living and surviving in New York City, including financially as she has learned how to adapt to living rent check to rent check. She, in turn, teaches June how to adapt and survive in New York City. Most importantly, Chloe teaches June how to build on her networking skills which, to Chloe, means flaunting her sexuality:

JUNE: Look, I am doing everything that I can. I have papered Wall Street with my resume, and I cannot get an interview anywhere.

CHLOE: That’s because your approach is all wrong. You can’t rely on a piece of paper. You have to get your face out there, and your boobs up here. (Hemingson & Chan, 2012).

In “Paris…” (Season 2, Episode 8), June lands a new job as a junior analyst at Harkin Financial, where she meets her new co-worker, Fox Paris, who seems super sweet. June excitedly tells Chloe about Fox later that night. Chloe’s intuition kicks in, and to June’s surprise, she informs her that, without having met Fox, she knows that her new co-worker is not as she appears.

CHLOE: That girl has it out for you. Did she ask you questions about your family? Did she compliment your jewelry?

JUNE: Yeah, my power brooch.
CHLOE: She’s studying you to find your weakness. She’s figuring out the most efficient way to take you down. Does she have a back tattoo? Does she wear a wig?  

JUNE: Look, um…you don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m sure if this were, like, cockfighting or Drug lording or what—whatever it is that you do, you’d be right. But I’m a professional, and I don’t walk into an office and immediately get a nemesis.

CHLOE: Think what you want, but I know this girl. I am this girl. And she’s your nemesis. Because if I worked there, I’d be your nemesis, too. By the way, I love your brooch. (McCreary & Walker, 2012)

Here we can observe one of the examples of how The Skeptical Brunette archetype is a blend of Wood’s Sex Object and Iron Maiden archetypes. Despite this advice from Chloe, June insists that Fox is not her enemy—only to learn later on that Chloe was exactly right. When the situation with Fox gets out of control, June finally ends up going to Chloe to solve it for her. As such, in both sitcoms, The Skeptical Brunette plays the role of the guide—for certain things—for The DOHL Blonde, who lacks “street smarts” and experience.

**Open sexuality.**

The Skeptical Brunette is open about her sexuality, which adds to her worldly nature. On *2 Broke Girls*, Max’s open sexuality is the source of many jokes. In keeping with her heavy use of self-deprecating humor, Max often jokes about her sexual experiences, both her positive and negative ones. However, similar to her binge drinking and drug use, she is rarely shown to have sexual relations (and never explicitly of course, as this is broadcast television). In the pilot episode, Max is seen fooling around with her then-partner, Robbie. The only other instances involve Johnny, the bartender/artist whom she has a crush on. Throughout the first season, Max (and other characters) continually draws attention to her figure, most often toward her breasts. At
work, this attention can be heard verbally but also seen through her apparel, which usually emphasizes that region of her body through low-cut blouses, unzipped uniforms, etc.

*Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*’s Chloe is not only forthcoming about her sexuality but encourages June to be the same. In “It’s Just Sex…” (Season 1, Episode 6), Chloe tells June that “some guys are just meant for sex” (Finnegan & Burstein, 2012). She praises June after catching her masturbating in the tub and lets her know that she should not be ashamed. Instead, June should embrace her sexuality—and casual sex. In fact, Chloe finds that having casual sex is the only way she is able to clear her head and make sense of things in her everyday life. On top of being open about her sexuality, Chloe often uses it to get what she wants. One major example of this early on is when Chloe tries getting June to realize that Steven, June’s fiancé, is cheating on her. As a final measure to prove her point, Chloe seduces and has sex with Steven on June’s birthday cake, and purposely gets caught by June in order to show her that Steven is, in fact, a cheater. An important distinction to make here, though, is that Chloe uses her sexuality generally only in her personal dealings—she does not use sexuality for her own career advancement (possibly because she has no career to speak of). There is one instance in which she does actually use her sexuality for career advancement; however, it is in actuality for June’s career advancement (Chloe sleeps with the son of June’s future employer to help her secure a position at a firm). Given the nature of the program as a situation comedy, Chloe’s sexuality, which often gets discussed through her sexual escapades and experiences, is offered to viewers comedically.

**Lack of a parental figure (or both).**

Throughout *2 Broke Girls*, viewers gather that Max feels scorned by the lack of both a mother and father figure, particularly as she had to assume the role of the parent and essentially take care of her mother from a young age. In the very first episode, as Max is setting a couple of hipsters straight at the diner, viewers learn about her father:
MAX: Oh. (Snapping her finger at a customer) Nooo, Hipster, no. Do not think we are all on the same team. We have nothing in common. I wear knit hats when it’s cold out. You wear knit hats because of Coldplay. You have tattoos to piss off your dad. My dad doesn’t know he’s my dad. And finally, you think (snapping her finger at the second customer) this is the sound that gets you service. I think (snapping her fingers again) this is the sound that dries out my vagina. (Cummings, King, & Burrows, 2011)

Jokes are cast about Max’s absent and unknown father throughout the series. Max’s mother was around for her growing up, but only in the physical sense of the word. She was present, true, but this was negated by her being a terrible mother, who drank excessively and reversed the parent/child role by having Max tend to her needs as opposed to the other way around. As Max puts it, her mother was “…40% off of a regular mom” (King & Robinson, 2012). Despite being twenty-something and out of that environment, Max continues to send her mother cards with money in them. More than anything else, it seems that Max’s cynical nature stems from pain and abandonment issues at an early age. This gives rise to her being a straight talker, yet remaining guarded and private (about personal matters) at the same time—also, not part of mainstream femininity, but instead is more emblematic of hegemonic masculinity.

Comedy is used to downplay various personal issues on Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23. In regards to Chloe, this plays out in how she feels scorned by the “lack” of a maternal figure despite her mother being in her life. Instead, as June discovers, Chloe has a lot of resentment toward her mother from her childhood, who according to Chloe was “…addicted to painkillers. She never wanted to spend any time with me. She never took me ice skating or horseback riding. She’s a real bitch” (Khan & Spiller, 2012). In actuality, viewers and June learn that Chloe’s mother, Karen, is a very caring individual. The reason that Karen could not do many physical activities with Chloe growing up is because Karen is physically disabled and in a
wheelchair. While ridiculous in nature, nevertheless, Chloe also feels that she grew up without a true maternal figure.

*Skeptical about romantic love.*

The final key characteristic of The Skeptical Brunette is that she does not believe in romantic love. Most likely due to her unstable home environment, *2 Broke Girls*’ Max has a hard time letting individuals in, especially romantic partners. Instead, she tends to maintain a distance, which even includes post-coitus sleeping arrangements: “I don’t even let the men that I sleep with sleep with me” (King & Burrows, 2011). At one point, in “And the One-Night Stands,” Max is confronted by a former one-night stand, whom she does not even remember, while visiting a prison with Caroline. When the young man, who had previously fire-bombed a Chipotle restaurant for Max, wants to resume their relationship and asserts that he is in love with her, Max reveals to him and viewers her feelings about romantic love: “Listen, I appreciate the ink, but I don’t really believe in love and, truth be told, I’m not even a fan of Mexican food” (Lee, Walsh, & Ellis, 2012). In a later episode, she confesses her feelings for Johnny, a recurring man character; however, the premise behind the program inhibits a romance actually forming (and Johnny turns out to be not a nice person). Instead, the two leading women are left best complementing each other by putting aside the notion of relationships with men and instead focusing on their business\textsuperscript{10}. Coupled with their sense of solidarity, this is one of the few feminist notions that come through in this program.

Chloe epitomizes this characteristic by coming up with a Halloween tradition that involves only pretending to be in love. In “Love and Monsters…” (Season 2, Episode 2), she fakes being in love with a young man only so she can break his heart for (her version of) laughs.

\textsuperscript{10} Another commonality to note about The Skeptical Brunette in each program is that she is immortalized through art work. Johnny portrays Max in both a graffiti mural and an art gallery piece. Max is also portrayed as a tattoo on the body of a one-night stand. Similarly, Chloe is the basis behind a graphic novel that is popular in Japan and titled *Shitagi Nashi* (translated: Tall Slut, No Panties).
When June first discovers that Chloe has been seeing someone, she is ecstatic for her roommate and confesses that she did not peg Chloe as “the relationship type.” To June’s horror, Chloe lets her in on her plan: “Every Halloween, I pick a person who annoys me. I figure out their deepest, darkest fears—what would psychologically break them and ruin their lives forever—and then the next Halloween, I do it” (Bradford & Nelli, 2012). At the end of the day, Chloe always stays true to her true love, conning and scamming others. In a way, and in regards to her avoidance of having relationships with others, her sexuality and worldliness act as a defense against a kind of ethical-self-examination brought on by making herself vulnerable.

The characteristics of The Skeptical Brunette converge on a centralized focus—all of her traits have evolved to form a cohesive character that excels in being able to survive economically (but not necessarily flourish), all while defying traditional gender norms (but only to the certain extent allowed by society). Her fragmented upbringing and her disinterest in romance lend to a fiercely, independent nature which helps her operate autonomously. Her skepticism inhibits a display of emotions and creates a general lack of empathy—necessary for the character to get by, as The Skeptical Brunette is willing to take shortcuts to make a buck. On an ideological level, this creates a “need” for an opposing counterpart to “set her straight” and reassert a certain level of femininity into the life of The Skeptical Brunette.

The Down-on-her-Luck (DOHL) Blonde.

This second archetype represents the second of two leading (women) characters on both 2 Broke Girls and Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23; she is a sweet-natured blonde woman who is starting over in a new environment. We see this basic character type in other television programs, including Penny from The Big Bang Theory and Elliot in Scrubs. In this post-recession version, The DOHL Blonde helps out The Skeptical Brunette, is embarrassed by her current financial and social situation, comes from a close-knit family, and believes in notions of love.
The DOHL Blonde’s character traits include being naïve, idealistic, driven, book smart, and knowledgeable in finance. It is telling about the times that in both programs the character’s hardship is caused by the fallout of a Ponzi scheme, a plot device no doubt influenced by the infamous Bernie Madoff, whose Ponzi Scheme garnered national attention just a few years before the start of either sitcom and was strongly associated with the greed and corruption that triggered the recession. A key element of this character, then, is a life disrupted by the recession. Despite several attempts to pick herself back up again, this televisual character is always cut back down again—and sometimes by The Skeptical Brunette. In the following subsections, I elucidate how 2 Broke Girls’ Caroline Channing and Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23’s June Colburn are representative of The DOHL Blonde character type (see Figures 5-3 and 5-4). Once again, each subsection addresses a main character trait and discusses how this trait is illustrated by both of the twenty-something women facing economic uncertainty.

Figure 5-3: Caroline Channing (played by Beth Behrs) as 2 Broke Girls’ Down-on-her-Luck Blonde.
Getting started in a new environment.

On 2 Broke Girls, Caroline Channing is left starting life anew after her old, wealthy, and lavish lifestyle is turned upside down when her father is convicted of a Ponzi scheme and sent to prison. Despite growing up exceedingly rich in the Upper East Side of New York, Caroline loses her family (which is comprised of her father and his hired help), her money, her friends, and her reputation. With nowhere else to turn, Caroline opts to start over in the Williamsburg area (or the hipster section) of Brooklyn and takes a job at the local diner. With no money or housing, The DOHL Blonde moves in with Max, The Skeptical Brunette, who tries to help Caroline adjust to being poor. For the most part, Caroline does well, except for the instances where her entitled background comes into play. From time to time, her rich upbringing seeps in, as was illustrated above when she is disgusted by having to shop at Goodwill and more repulsed at the thought of having to use coupons. A recurring tenet of the comedy on this program is based on placing Caroline outside of her comfort zone, by immersing her in the predominantly working-class spaces of the series.

Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23’s June Colburn exemplifies The DOHL Blonde. When she moves to New York City for a Wall Street job, June learns on her very first day of
work that the company’s assets are being seized by the government. Part of this seizure included June’s new apartment, which the company had paid for. As a result, she is left with no place to go in a new environment, many miles from home. June answers a roommate ad and ends up moving in with Chloe, The Skeptical Brunette. With nowhere else to turn, she gets a job in a coffee shop. Her meager income leaves her seriously struggling to pay rent. Despite this, June realizes that she cannot ask her parents for any more money and, in fact, we find that June’s family (similar to Caroline’s) is economically crippled:

**JUNE**: I can’t even cover my half, and I can’t ask my parents for help. They spent all their savings putting me through grad school.

**JUNE’S FATHER** *(via video chat)*: We canceled the cable and...we’re making our own hair spray.

**JUNE’S MOTHER** *(also via video chat)*: We’ll be okay as long as Grandma Rose passes soon. *(Keeping her fingers crossed.)*

**JUNE’S FATHER**: Unfortunately, she’s a fighter but, uh, we’re praying…every night. *(Nickerson & Spiller, 2012)*

With this conversation in mind, June’s driven nature and idealistic ways keep her continually applying and searching for employment opportunities, especially on Wall Street. Like Caroline, she is uncomfortable in her new working-class status and is always looking for her way out.

*Helping The Skeptical Brunette.*

We saw earlier how The DOHL Blonde is schooled on “It’s a Jungle Out There” survival skills by The Skeptical Brunette. But this is not simply one-sided. While street-smart Max and Chloe mentor Caroline and June, respectively, Caroline and June help get the Skeptical Brunettes in touch with “innate” feminine qualities of empathy and even romantic love.
On *2 Broke Girls*, Caroline teaches Max how to be a better “woman” through various means. She tries to instill in Max the notions of empathy, emotions, and romance, as well as through helping her to find ambition beyond just getting by. In terms of empathy, The Skeptical Brunette is at first hesitant to have someone else around, as she has spent the last several years (or more) essentially on her own. As such, she has a hard time relating to others. In Max’s case, The Skeptical Brunette has become hardened to her surroundings from her childhood, where the only thing that she learned from her mother (indirectly) was, from an early age, that she needs to take care of herself. On the other hand, Caroline’s life had up until recently been bright and full of opportunities. More importantly, she is used to being surrounded by many individuals and sees The Skeptical Brunette’s hesitation as merely a small challenge needing to be overcome.

Once Caroline gets Max used to the idea of having her around, The DOHL Blonde tries to find ways to get The Skeptical Brunette to experience genuine emotions and express them. Often this occurs in relationships, where Max is certainly worldly in her experience but hesitant about commitment and emotional connection. For instance, in “And the Disappearing Bed,” Caroline is persistent in her efforts to not only get Max to admit that she likes Johnny but more importantly get her to tell Johnny how she feels about him. With Caroline’s persistence, Max finally feels inclined to express her feelings for Johnny. Toward the end of this particular episode, Max and Caroline see Johnny walking on the street. Max goes up and, without a single word spoken, kisses Johnny, only to learn that Johnny has a partner, Cassandra, who is not pleased with Max’s action. Despite Max’s hurt feelings, this seems to be a big moment between Caroline and Max, as Max was finally learning to open up and heed the advice of her friend.

A final way that Caroline, as The DOHL Blonde, helps Max is by allowing her to see past just living pay check to pay check. Instead, Caroline encourages her to find her hidden ambition and run with it. One prominent example is when Caroline realizes Max’s passion for baking cupcakes. At first, Caroline’s help toward pushing Max in the “right” direction is purely a
self-serving one—as it is a means for Caroline to get out of her impoverished situation. However, as the two become closer, Caroline realizes that her ambitions stem from not only the desire to benefit herself but to benefit her friend as well. Instead, she utilizes what she learned from both Wharton Business School and her internship at Merrill Lynch (on Wall Street) and helps Max out with the financial side of their cupcake business. But this financial savvy is couched in “follow your dreams” motivation.

Caroline also helps Max find ambition beyond just getting by in her personal life. For example, in the pilot episode, Max’s then-partner, Robbie, makes a pass at Caroline while Max is out of the apartment. The bad “girl” Max, then, is attracted to bad men. Caroline recognizes the sleaziness of Robbie’s character and tries to get Max to see things from her point of view:

**CAROLINE:** It’s none of my business, but…you deserve better than that guy.

**MAX:** Yeah, it is none of your business. Ooohh, I was just starting to feel sorry for you.

**CAROLINE:** I’m just saying, you’re worth more than that. (Cummings, King, & Burrows 2011)

While viewers gather that Max has self-esteem issues, as evidenced through her constant put-downs of herself, Caroline sees nothing but potential in Max. It is important to note that Max’s views of herself do not inhibit her from helping others, including Caroline, Peach’s children, and Earl (a long-time cashier at the diner; played by Garrett Morris).

Contrastingly, on *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, Chloe’s character does not seem to need help in terms of her already-overwhelming confidence. Given this, June’s task as The DOHL Blonde is to not help The Skeptical Brunette feel confident, but instead to feel (occasional) empathy. This is similar to the Caroline/Max dynamic where The DOHL Blonde tries to make The Skeptical Brunette more “feminine”—not in terms of style, but it terms of emotional connections. However, in “Making Rent…” (Season 1, Episode 5), June discovers that helping Chloe in this area comes with a price:
**JUNE:** What’s happening to me? This is just like in the movies when the good person makes the bad person better...only in reverse. You’re making me worse.

**CHLOE:** No way! You’re making me worse. Because of you, I feel guilty about things that I shouldn’t even care about—the website, Robin. (*in a softer tone*) I even kinda feel bad about the James thing.

**JUNE:** What James thing?

**CHLOE:** Well, that was my plan to pay our rent. I loosened the upstairs railing so that I could trip and accidentally fall and then sue him for damages. (*June gives her a look.*)

What? He’s super rich. Plus, he’s the one who said I should get creative. (*Nickerson & Spiller, 2012*)

That is, helping Chloe often involves opening Pandora’s box, so to speak; for whatever good may come of it, there is a price to pay for each of them—June takes on some of Chloe’s characteristics while Chloe is slightly disempowered by her new found conscience, which clashes with her nature as a con artist.

Despite this difference between *The Skeptical Brunettes*, similarities arise as *The DOHL Blonde*, June, also offers Chloe companionship and helps her to open up. With the exception of her best friend James being around when he is not working, Chloe is used to doing things on her own and, more importantly, in her own way. June’s persistence to make friends with her new roommate is first met with a lot of resistance by Chloe, who even manipulates June into buying her a ride on the “Murder Tour” bus (which is a crime tour bus that highlights famous murders around the city). Responding to June’s anger that Chloe stands her up for dinner and refuses to be recognized as June’s “friend,” Chloe is more candid with June: “Oh. Okay. I think there’s been a misunderstanding. Sorry. Let me make it clear now—we’re roommates. We’re not friends” (*Bradford & Goss, 2013*). This is part of the initial set up to the episode’s main conflict, which is eventually resolved with Chloe admitting that she now views June as a friend.
June’s efforts toward getting Chloe to open up about herself prove just as difficult in getting Chloe to first accept her companionship. Up to this point, James seems to have grown the closest to Chloe over the years and knows her better than most individuals—although, as two superficial people, they are not above using each other. However, June is intent on being someone Chloe can talk to and confide in. In one episode where Chloe feels guilty after setting June up with Chloe’s father (without June’s knowledge), Chloe talks about her childhood and discusses her bitter feelings toward her mother, Karen. While as I already discussed how Karen turns out to have a physical disability and is in a wheelchair, this is an important moment for Chloe since she believes, from her own distorted perspective, that her mother was neglectful toward her as a child. This perceived neglect from a maternal figure could possibly be the source of Chloe’s lack of empathy toward others—one of the traits that she lacks that June, as The DOHL Blonde, tries to “fix.”

(*Embarrassed by her current situation.*

Caroline, from *2 Broke Girls*, is slowly adjusting to her new, less entitled lifestyle. With this being said, instances of her entitlement still haunt her current life as a waitress in Williamsburg. This is to say that she is embarrassed by her new job (and reputation) and does not want to be seen in Brooklyn, let alone working at a diner. In fact, that is the primary reason that she picked to relocate to Williamsburg as she felt that most of her former friends would not be caught dead outside of Manhattan. While her embarrassment, which created a feeling of empathy for Caroline, is shelved for a number of episodes, it makes a return in the Season One finale, when Caroline hides to avoid being seen by “the couple whose sworn statement put [her] father away in prison” (King & Wass, 2012).

Caroline is mostly embarrassed about her ruined reputation thanks to her father’s Ponzi scheme; June’s embarrassment similarly stems from economic shame: all of her friends have
stable jobs and are what she considers “successful.” In “A Reunion…” (Season 2, Episode 1), viewers see this to be the case when June calls up her childhood friends, initially excited to announce that she has the inside scoop that there will be a Dawson’s Creek reunion show. However, to her dismay, her friends are too busy being a full-time mother, a theoretical physics professor, and the Under Secretary of Commerce for the United States government. This causes June to reflect on her own life: a broken engagement from a cheating fiancé and the struggle to make ends meet in what she considers a temporary job. Essentially, she is embarrassed to see her friends because she is broke and employed in a position (as a barista) that she never wanted.

*Close-knit, economically-devastated family.*

The DOHL Blonde stems from a close-knit family, making her transition from comfort and safety into relative poverty and financial uncertainty that much harder. The nature of her relationship with her own family lends to The DOHL Blonde assuming a parental role herself—taking on the traits of Wood’s (2009) The Mother archetype. In 2 Broke Girls, Caroline grew up being extremely close to her father, as her mother left when she was very young. She tries everything in her power to hold onto the memories that her father and her have created over the years. At multiple times throughout the first season, Caroline tries to visit her father in prison but is always thwarted. Despite this, she still feels strongly connected to him, and even Max begins to realize how close the two of them are. When Caroline and Max go out for sushi, Caroline’s father calls to speak with his daughter. During the short conversation, he asks to speak with Max, and asks her to remind Caroline to “wear her bite guard” (Nader & Fortenberry, 2011). In another instance, on Valentine’s Day, Caroline is heartbroken to learn that, for the first time ever, she did not receive flowers from her father. It is later revealed that the flowers had been left outside and that *both* Max and Caroline received red roses with little notes. Max’s note read: “Thank you for taking such good care of my sweetheart. – M. Channing” (Feeney & Wass, 2012).
It is in these few instances that The Skeptical Brunette of this particular sitcom is encouraged to assume a maternal role, taking on some of the traits assimilated from The DOHL Blonde (who fulfills this role the majority of the time). While on the surface it seems that The DOHL Blonde has a similarity with The Skeptical Brunette in *2 Broke Girls* with the lack of a maternal figure, a major difference is that she has at least one very strong parental relationship, with her father in this case. While The Skeptical Brunette in the other program has a relationship with her father, it is not nearly as strong as the one between Caroline and her father in *2 Broke Girls*. In both cases, there is something “missing” from The Skeptical Brunette when compared to her DOHL Blonde counterpart—and as a result, the more “family raised” DOHL Blonde mentors The Skeptical Brunette in matters of empathy, emotion, and romance.

While June might not have come from extreme wealth like Caroline, she had the fortune of having a close-knit family in Indiana. Viewers frequently see June video chatting with both of her parents, who are recurring characters on the series. In one episode, June actually spring cleans with her mom, via video chat. Overall, June’s parents seem to be very encouraging, which actually adds to June’s stress because she does not want to be a failure for them. From her point of view, it is already bad enough that they spent so much of their savings to ensure that she received a good education. Interestingly, the conversations with her parents actually extend to other characters on the program. For instance, James Van Der Beek starts seeking out advice from June’s mother, Connie Colburn, especially in regards to his preparation for *Dancing with the Stars*. Here, The DOHL Blonde has two very strong parental relationships, including one with her mother (a role that is void with three of the four main characters of this case study).

*Notions of love.*

Unlike The Skeptical Brunette, The DOHL Blonde believes that romantic love exists. However, it is important to acknowledge that this archetypal character is, for the most part, not
actively seeking it. Instead, she concentrates her efforts on figuring out how to deal with issues of economic uncertainty and considers this her first priority (while still making time to be hopeful about potential love and romantic relationships for The Skeptical Brunette). On 2 Broke Girls, Caroline is candid with Max in stating that she does not even have time to think about sex: “Max, I just lost every dollar I had. The last thing on my mind right now is guys. Any type of guy…except this guy (talking to her horse). Hiii, Chestnut. I’m much more concerned about our business and getting my head above water. Men will come sooner or later” (Feeney & Ellis, 2011).

Similar to Caroline, June also hopes to meet the Man of her Dreams but, for the time being, is preoccupied with getting herself out of a financial struggle. In “It’s Just Sex…” (Season 1, Episode 6), Chloe persuades June to have casual sex with a man named Charles whom June finds attractive at the coffee shop. Thus, June attempts to just have a one-night stand and is initially pleased that she had casual sex with Charles. Unfortunately, things do not quite go as planned. June envisions the relationship (or lack of, really) to be non-committal and purely physical. To her dismay, Charles calls her while distraught about his missing pet, thereby forcing June into the role of significant other, rather than simply the initial role that she wanted. The notions of love, as well as the other character traits discussed above, paint a very similar portrayal of The DOHL Blonde in both sitcoms. In this case, the economic circumstance serves as a justification for why The DOHL Blonde, who believes in romantic love, does not pursue it more actively (because if she found it, it would end the premise of the two sitcoms).

The odd couple.

The dynamic between The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde exemplifies an “odd couple” relationship, a common sitcom trope (as found in Two and a Half Men, Will & Grace, and of course, The Odd Couple). The opposing characteristics of each hybrid archetype in
these programs and how they interact with one another are almost always central to the plotlines of each episode, as well as the overall story arc of the series. The juxtaposition of The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde, comprising the odd couple, highlights issues of fragmentation of financial knowledge in women as well as the “need” for the reassertion of femininity. In both sitcoms, the approach to finances are vastly different for each archetype; The Skeptical Brunette gives it little thought, while The DOHL Blonde is always looking to improve her current economic status—even though they are both largely in the same position financially. In terms of femininity, the sitcoms revert to the clichéd notions of emotions marking a feminine nature. In both programs, The DOHL Blonde tries to “improve” The Skeptical Brunette by “teaching” her to have empathy, emotions, and romance in her life—all aspects which connote mainstream femininity. Additionally, in both programs, the two hybrid archetypes each offer their counterpart something beyond their reach. It is as if they are the kind of two halves necessary. In 2 Broke Girls, Max is the world-wise woman who sees the world but is closed to it and Caroline is the rich woman whose material comfort allowed her to be open to the world in a way that working-class Max cannot. Max gives Caroline support in her new environment, while Caroline gives Max the ambition to elevate her working-class status. In Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, Chloe is hedonistic and lacks empathy for others while June is ambitious, yet naïve. In their relationship, Chloe prepares June for the harsh realities of New York City and livenes up her life; in return, June grounds and humanizes Chloe. In essence, the odd couple duo in this case, The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde, symbolically come together to represent what society deems an “ideal woman.”

In addition to the two main characters, there are two supporting characters found in both of these sitcoms, characters whose main function is to add comic relief. However, both characters also contribute meaning to gender ideology, in one case framing sexual harassment and stalking as “harmless hijinks” and commonplace at both work and home, and another as
reinforcing a notion of successful women as obsessed and irrational. This is significant for the iteration of the genre because these programs reify Post-Recessionary Sexism, especially in how they serve to undermine working women.

**The Comedic Sexual Harasser.**

This third archetype refers to a man character who is a series regular and is a constant source of humor in the programs. He also sexualizes The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde throughout these work-related sitcoms. As a combination of Sedita’s The Bastard, The Womanizer, and In Their Own Universe character archetypes, the main characteristics associated with this hybrid archetype are that he watches the two young women through an open window, makes perverted comments, and always finds the time to add his two cents into the young women’s personal conversations. In the succeeding paragraphs, I highlight how *2 Broke Girls’* Oleg (played by Jonathan Kite) and *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*’s Eli Webber (played by Michael Blaiklock) are symbolic of this Comedic Sexual Harasser archetype (see Figures 5-5 and 5-6). The Comedic Sexual Harasser serves as a source of humor on both programs, which serves to trivialize and normalize sexual harassment—a common trope found throughout all three case studies. In particular, he does so from a secure, privileged space (almost always through a window) from which his male gaze is extended.
Viewers meet 2 Broke Girls’ Oleg in the pilot episode during the very first scene. The Skeptical Brunette, Max, is picking up food that is ready to be served and in the process has to remind Oleg to quit staring at her breasts. A Ukrainian cook at the Williamsburg Diner, Oleg is often watching Max and Caroline through the pass-through window from the kitchen to the counter area. After Caroline’s first contact with Oleg, Max succinctly explains the situation with their diner’s cook: “That’s Oleg. He will hit on you aggressively and relentlessly. He doesn’t realize that he looks like that, and I don’t have the heart to tell him” (Cummings, King, & Burrows, 2011). The Skeptical Brunette seems used to the sexual harassment, but it takes some
getting used to by The DOHL Blonde. Rather than addressing the problem, Max advises Caroline on how to get on despite the harassment. In one example, after Oleg “69s” her (his way of incorporating his harassment while calling out table numbers ready at the window), Caroline approaches Max about his inappropriate behavior:

**CAROLINE:** Oleg just 69-ed me and now I don’t remember any of the table numbers.

**MAX:** Look, he’s never going to stop 69-ing us. Forget the table numbers. Here’s how you remember your orders. You just give people nicknames. (Feldman & Wass, 2011)

In a later episode, Caroline sees Oleg’s penis while he is taking a picture of it in the kitchen, using a camera that a customer had left at the diner. She initially freaks out, but Max once again tells her that she will get used to it and that it is only a shock with that initial sighting. In another instance, Caroline suggests that the diner should hold a seminar concerning sexual harassment in the workplace because of Oleg. To this, Max replies: “Why? He’s already so good at it” (King & Kail, 2012). Caroline reminds Max that she is serious and they both attempt to harass Oleg (in an effort to make him feel uncomfortable), who, unimpressed, simply asks when they will get “dirty.” Throughout the series, Oleg suggests that he is always available should they ever want to sleep with him and his “salami” (or “celery,” depending on the episode). However, once Oleg meets their “Crazed” Woman Neighbor, Sophie Kachinsky, he focuses almost all of his perverted efforts on her, and they eventually begin a sexual relationship.

Like Oleg on 2 Broke Girls, Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23’s Eli Webber serves as a source of sexual harassment for Chloe and June. Also similar to the former program, Eli’s sexual harassment is dismissed and is “meant” to serve as comedy for viewers. Eli is Chloe and June’s neighbor in the adjacent building. He often watches them through their always-open windows, and once introduced June to his “partner” named Tamika, who is really just a blow-up sex doll (whom, incidentally, he was set up with by Chloe). He regularly makes sexually provocative comments, and it is sometimes implied that he is masturbating and/or half naked
while talking to Chloe and/or June. Like Max in *2 Broke Girls*, Chloe does not mind the sexual harassment from Eli; instead, she tries to bank off of it. In “Making Rent…” (Season 1, Episode 5), Chloe sets up a website that features a fetishized version of June making jam. Chloe breaks the news to June: “Remember when you fed me a taste of your hot, hot jam? Well, I realized that perverts would pay a lot of money to be able to watch us make it, which Eli confirmed. So, he helped me set up the cameras” (Nickerson & Spiller, 2012). Taking his voyeurism to a whole new level, Eli is seen watching both women, not through the open window but instead through multiple computers that feature images from webcams around their apartment (see Figure 5-7). As a health inspector, Eli takes it upon himself to seize all of the jam that June made. Furthermore, viewers see a final measure of creepiness at the end of this episode when Eli gets into a bath comprised solely of June’s seized jam.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 5-7**: Eli Webber watching multiple screens capturing Chloe and June in their kitchen.

The downplay of the serious issue of sexual harassment, through this hybrid archetype, is emblematic of Post-Recessionary Sexism. In both programs, these primary characters exist for almost the sole purpose of degrading The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde—and in both programs they serve as steady sources of (attempted) comedy. This is problematic as it further normalizes the sexual harassment of women, which is already a major issue in everyday work environments.
The Comedic Sexual Harasser often comments on the situation of the main characters, in this sense serving as a kind of perverted “Greek Chorus” to the proceedings. On *2 Broke Girls*, Oleg is regularly butting into conversations between The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde, adding his perspective on *their* situation. For instance, in “And Strokes of Goodwill” (Season 1, Episode 3), Caroline complains to Max about wanting to stay at the diner longer since it is hot outside but they do not have A/C at their apartment. Oleg comes along and offers them to use his A/C, which involves him blowing air into their faces. In “And the Secret Ingredient” (Season 1, Episode 13), the diner’s owner, Han Lee, opts to raise the price of tampons in the women’s restroom. Upon learning this information, Max is furious that he would stoop so low and wants him to admit that he cannot even bring himself to say the word “tampon.” Oleg chimes in from his usual spot behind the window: “Just say it. Tampon. Tampon. Tampon. What’s the big deal? In the Ukraine, there are pop songs about it. *(In an angry singing voice)* She’s so pretty, she’s so grouchy… *(then he goes into beatboxing)* (King & Robinson, 2012).

As a source of humor in which this character routinely comments on the action, it serves to further normalize inappropriate comments in the workplace—a common trope borrowed from work-based sitcoms.

In *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, Eli always finds ways to add in his own two cents to Chloe and June’s conversations. For instance, in one episode, while June is discussing her future plan about starting a family and having a boy named Christopher (from *Winnie the Pooh*), Eli adds in that Winnie the Pooh also did not wear pants, letting June, Chloe, and viewers that he was currently speaking to them pants-less. In a different episode, Eli chimes along with Chloe who is making fun of June’s unflattering underwear. Unlike Oleg though who is only ever adding in his sexually-perverted two cents, Eli can occasionally act as a voice of moral authority for June and, on rare occasions, for Chloe as well. In “Daddy’s Girl…” (Season 1, Episode 2), Chloe is pleased that she set up her father, Scott, with June, who only afterwards finds out that he
is Chloe’s father and is deeply upset by the news. While June tries to explain why this is problematic, Eli adds his input and cuts to the chase to enlighten Chloe on the actual situation:

“Well, now you’re subconsciously using June as a pawn to get back at your mother and to align yourself more closely with your dad” (Khan & Spiller, 2012). For added measure, he follows up to make his psychiatrist-like status known here: “You never think things through, Chloe. Like do you really want June to be your new mom?” (Khan & Spiller, 2012). Chloe and June’s receptiveness to the advice from Eli is noteworthy. Eli, as The Comedic Sexual Harasser, is a flawed character—something which both Chloe and (especially) June are aware of, yet they still listen to him and heed his advice. This is an example of Post-Recessionary Sexism once again coming into play.

In both programs, we have sexually aggressive men invading the lives of women characters at both work (via Oleg) and home (via Eli). Additionally, in two comedies that feature women protagonists, these regular characters offer what could be argued as “the male perspective”—presenting a relentless sexual gaze—to viewers.

The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor.

This fourth and final archetype delineates a woman character who is part of the main cast but is not one of the two leading roles. Rather, she serves as a stark contrast to The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde. She is financially stable yet is “crazed” in her own way, and appears regularly since she is neighbors with both leading women archetypes. That these two characters are either older than the protagonists (in the case of 2 Broke Girls) and of a different race (in Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23) combines with their extreme portrayals to “Other” the successful woman. This hybrid archetype combines the traits of Sedita’s The Dumb One with In Their Own Universe archetypes. In 2 Broke Girls, the character of Sophie Kachinsky (played by veteran comic actress Jennifer Coolidge) represents The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor.
archetype, while Robin (played by Liza Lapira) does so in *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23* (see Figures 5-8 and 5-9).

![Image](image1.png)  

Figure 5-8: *2 Broke Girls*’ Sophie Kachinsky (played by Jennifer Coolidge) as The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor.

![Image](image2.png)  

Figure 5-9: The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor, Robin (played by Liza Lapira), in *Don’t Trust the B--- in Apartment 23*.

On *2 Broke Girls*, Sophie Kachinsky moves into the apartment directly above Max and Caroline’s. Her loud music keeps both twenty-something women awake at night, provoking Max (with Caroline as an accomplice) to leave a note under Sophie’s door, with threats such as “I will gut you like a hog” (King & Kail, 2012). Sophie confronts her downstairs neighbors but forgives them once invited into “Cupcake Land” (what she calls their apartment since she sees many freshly-baked cupcakes). They have another fallout after the main characters are convinced that
Sophie is a madam, running a brothel out of her apartment. Sophie, a successful woman running a profitable (and legal) house cleaning business is offended by this; however, they eventually make peace and become friends. While she is friends with both characters, she tends to skew heavily toward The Skeptical Brunette, Max, relating to her work ethic and sense of humor—and also enjoys being the beneficiary of Max’s extra cupcakes.

Like Sophie, Robin (whose surname is never disclosed to viewers) is a neighbor to The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde in Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23. At first, Robin warns June not to move in with Chloe and, before slamming the door in her face, leaves June with some disturbing words: “Don’t trust the bitch in apartment 23” (Khan & Winer, 2012). However, eventually June realizes that Robin is obsessed with Chloe; again, The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor heavily favors The Skeptical Brunette over The DOHL Blonde. Finally, Robin is part of the main cast during the first season, but then becomes only a recurring character in the second season.

Unlike either main character, The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor is not financially struggling. Rather, she has a stable job and a steady income. For instance, Sophie, from 2 Broke Girls, owns a successful house cleaning business, which serves as an intertextual (and insensitive) reference for viewers to Styron’s classic 1979 novel and is called Sophie’s Choice Cleaning Company. Her company seems to be thriving and she currently has at least 11 employees (all women). She is also saving up to build and design a lakeside vacation home in her native Poland. Additionally, she eats at expensive restaurants where waiters make at least “$300, $350 a night” in tips (King & Kail, 2012). Recognizing the tension between what Max and Caroline make a night at the diner and their aspirations for their cupcake business, Sophie addresses them head on:

**SOPHIE:** And how do you expect to accomplish cupcake business on money like this?

**CAROLINE:** Well, we’re just starting out.

**SOPHIE:** Yes, but at this rate, it will take forever. (King & Kail, 2012)
Furthermore, upon discovering that The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde are facing issues of economic uncertainty, Sophie offers them the chance to work for her, although at the time the twenty-something women still thought she was a madam. Eventually, they accept and viewers see Sophie managing her business in the form of directing Max and Caroline on which apartments, condos, and lofts they need to clean for her. She takes her business very seriously, as evidenced in her try-out period with Max and Caroline who must prove their skills by cleaning her own apartment. As always, she is not afraid to critique The DOHL Blonde, which is seen as an underlying joke throughout the series.

As Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23’s “Crazed” Woman Neighbor, Robin is also financially stable and makes a comfortable living. This is demonstrated throughout the series, such as when she is able to buy all of Chloe’s furniture from June in the pilot episode or even when she cuts a deal with June to pay to spend time with Chloe. In this latter instance, June manipulates situations to provide Robin with “access to Chloe” (Nickerson & Spiller, 2012). This consists of her “sharing a drink with Chloe” (read: finishing the last drip in her nearly empty Vodka bottle without Chloe actually being present or aware even), and getting to “chat on [the] phone with Chloe” (read: June calling Chloe’s cell phone and Robin snickering at the other end, etc.). Furthermore, as a nurse, Robin is candid in stating her financial stability to June: “Money? Ha. That’s the one problem I don’t have. I’m in the nurses union, June. I’m getting paid for having this conversation.” Interestingly enough, Robin is only shown once at the workplace, after June lands in the hospital from alcohol poisoning.

The final, and perhaps most crucial, character trait for The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor is her crazed obsession with something. Sophie is slightly obsessed with Max’s cupcakes. However, more so than this, she is sex-crazed. Sophie, in particular, also adheres to The Sex Object and Manizer archetypes. Throughout the series, she enjoys Max’s sexual innuendo jokes, often replying “I love it when you talk dirty.” In addition to Max’s dirty talk, Sophie likes to
receive “compliments” on her appearance from Earl, who in one episode not-so-subtly looks her up and down after finally closing his open mouth: “My, my, my, Sophie. Seeing you in that dress makes my heart race. Two scoops of ice cream in a one-scoop cone” (Feeney & Wass, 2012). Sophie also receives dirty talk from Oleg. Later in the first season, Sophie enters a purely sexual relationship with Oleg, most likely because he is into her kinky sexual nature.

In contrast to Sophie, Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23’s Robin is not sex-crazed. Rather, she is Chloe-crazed. Throughout the series, she exhibits serious patterns of stalking before viewers’ eyes. However, the seriousness of this stalking is overshadowed and instead it is supposed to come across comedically to viewers. As Chloe’s former (fourth) roommate, Robin lives down the hall but will do absolutely anything to get close to her. In addition to bartering with June for favors to get near Chloe, as discussed earlier, Robin also eavesdrops and snoops from the hall and even breaks into Chloe and June’s apartment when they are not home. In one instance, viewers see her chatting with Eli, who is in his usual spot, while she fills Chloe and June’s refrigerator with yogurt for Chloe. In a different episode, Robin drives Chloe, June, and their friends to and from the Hamptons just to feel like she has spent time with Chloe. In “Making Rent…” (Season 1, Episode 5), June finally asks about Robin’s obsession with Chloe and learns that Robin envies everything about Chloe’s life: “Pale, popular. She has 4% body fat. Chloe is everything I wish I was. I just feel like, if I could have one friend like her, everything would be good” (Nickerson & Spiller, 2012). It is interesting to note here that in both sitcoms The “Crazed” Woman neighbor archetype is the only successful woman (in terms of career and financial stability). However, she is depicted as being weird and obsessive, similar to The Office’s Jan Levenson from the first case study (who was the most successful woman character in the early seasons of the NBC series). Sophie acts inappropriately through her overly sexual behavior, while Robin’s obsession with Chloe highlights the problematic nature of idealized beauty standards (which to Robin, consists of being both white and overly thin to the point of
being unhealthy). The trend of successful women being portrayed as “crazed” or “erratic” could possibly fall under the umbrella of Post-Recessionary Sexism, but would require further study, as it was only seen in three of the nine programs of this research project.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This second case study explored eight characters filling four roles on two work-related sitcoms in the post-recession era. In this case study, there were a few feminist themes but overall they were overshadowed by Post-Recessionary Sexist messaging. The first prominent feminist theme was the portrayal of ambitious, intelligent women characters looking to advance their careers; this was reflected through the archetype of The DOHL Blonde in both sitcoms. A second major feminist notion regards the omission of a strong, regular love interest for either The Skeptical Brunette or The DOHL Blonde in either program. A trap that many programs featuring women protagonists fall into is that women characters strive to find love above everything else (e.g. *Sex and the City*’s Carrie Bradshaw). The women protagonists of these two work-related sitcoms are not driven, by any means, toward finding romantic relationships. While romance makes small appearances throughout both series, in neither is it a driving force or goal for any of the main characters. Without the intrusion of a love interest, the women characters are able to strengthen their own bonds and solidarity. This notion of solidarity is the final feminist theme apparent in both programs. On *2 Broke Girls*, Max and Caroline truly look out for each other and try to help one another when they can. On *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, Chloe and June’s relationship is not as strong as that of The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde of the other sitcom, but it did grow as the series progressed. While hampered initially by Chloe’s over-the-top selfish nature, June’s persistence in becoming friends eventually paid off. The pair were becoming increasingly close and it is possible, had the series not been abruptly cancelled,
they would have reached a greater level of solidarity in the face of Chloe’s character continually being encouraged to fill the role of a self-absorbed con artist.

Chloe’s nature—the development and prominence of her character as the basis for a sitcom—is important for understanding the post-feminist aspects of the programs. The notion of being underhanded and manipulative for women to get ahead distinctly is one of the characteristics that marks it as a sign of what I call Post-Recessionary Sexism. With no marketable skills, Chloe resorts to her extraordinary abilities as a con artist to get by. On 2 Broke Girls, while not nearly as manipulative as Chloe, Max still uses a very significant shortcut in what is supposedly her passion. Instead of learning how to truly create cupcakes from scratch, Max simply uses commercially-boxed mixes and falsely claims them to be (and sells them as) “homemade”—hardly what could be considered ethical or the foundation for a strong homemade cupcake business. This use of an underhanded method employed by a woman character (and never her men counterparts) to get ahead financially is an example of Post-Recessionary Sexism.

Another major Post-Recessionary Sexist issue that is evident in both programs is the language used for many of the jokes, specifically from The Skeptical Brunette in each sitcom. On 2 Broke Girls, Max often makes jokes about very serious issues, such as rape and racism. The occurrence of these types of “jokes” is so prolific that they seem to be showcased at least once an episode, sometimes more. This perpetuates Post-Recessionary Sexist messaging in the manner that these severe issues are downplayed and poked fun of. Adding to this layer of problematic post-feminist language, Chloe from Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23 perpetuates the usage of degrading terms for women, such as “bitch,” “slut,” “whore,” etc., through her everyday language. While some may argue that she is re-appropriating this type of language, upon my examination of the text, I still felt that her prolific usage of these words were deeply problematic and reflect a trend toward the acceptance of a certain patriarchal ideology as the norm. The manner in which she uses this type of language is still very degrading. If a man character would
use these words, it would be considered derogatory; why should it be okay simply because it comes from a woman? The application of this type of language takes away agency from women, as well as perpetuates its everyday use amongst the audiences of these programs.

Keeping up with this Post-Recessionary Sexist theme of trivializing issues (such as the degradation of women) that have traditionally been important to feminism, there are constant jokes centered specifically on the sexual harassment of women in both programs. These jokes are primarily delivered by The Comedic Sexual Harasser. On Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, Eli openly harasses Chloe and June from his usual perch, peeping through the windows. In the pilot episode in the very first meeting of Eli and June, it is implied that he is masturbating while watching her unpack. Initially, June is horrified but eventually takes no notice of and accepts, on some level, his constant perversion. Another reification of this sexual harassment leads into the even more serious issues of voyeurism and violation of privacy. This time, however, Eli does not act alone as he works with The Skeptical Brunette to set up hidden cameras to broadcast and watch June and Chloe in their apartment. On 2 Broke Girls, Oleg seems to only have lines revolving around the sexual harassment of women characters on the program. While he is featured on virtually each episode, it is very rare for Oleg to have dialogue not regarding some form of sexual harassment, therefore “jokes” about sexual harassment come through in almost every episode. It seems that the sole reason that his character even exists is to sexually harass Max, Caroline, and Sophie. While some may argue Oleg’s purpose is to draw attention to the nature of sexual harassment in the workplace, I feel that this is not the case—too often the sitcom’s creators want the audience to laugh with Oleg’s inappropriate behavior, as can be seen evident with the program’s laugh track coming in at these moments. Similar to the other program, The Skeptical Brunette also occasionally partakes in jokes concerning sexual harassment. When going through her repertoire of jokes in poor taste, when she is not making
rape or racist jokes, Max occasionally throws in a joke about sexual harassment. As such, she conforms to all the characteristics of the Post-Recessionary Sexist character.

A final post-feminist tenet that is very apparent in both programs is the lack of diversity. In both *2 Broke Girls* and *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, the four main characters are all young, white, and straight. There is some diversity among the secondary characters; however, their diversity is often the source of more humor in poor taste. On *2 Broke Girls*, Oleg, Sophie, Earl, and Han all fill in what could be considered a diverse cast representing individuals of Ukrainian, Polish, African-American, and South Korean descent, respectively; however, they seem to only have their ethnic or racial identities in order to perpetuate stereotypes. Even with the full cast, sexual orientation is still entirely heteronormative. On *Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*, while the main protagonists are still white and straight, the secondary characters of Robin, Mark, and Luther, representing Asian-American (Robin) and African-American individuals (Mark and Luther), comprise the program’s diversity. Additionally, Robin openly admits to wishing that she was white, as can be seen in her dialogue with June (shown in a section above) that explains Robin’s obsession with Chloe. Where this program varies from *2 Broke Girls* is that there are no jokes at the expense of the race of any of these characters. Luther, in particular, also happens to be gay. This represents a slight deviation from the otherwise overwhelmingly-heteronormative nature of both programs. Similar to *2 Broke Girls*, however, the diversity here comes at the expense of jokes concerning Luther’s sexual orientation—even though diversity is included, it is just for comic relief per the sexist clichés of patriarchal television.

Relating back to the themes of the Post-Recessionary Sexist sitcom, I want to elucidate how these two programs address issues of economic viability and uncertainty. There was a clear difference from the work-*related* sitcoms of this case study to the work-*based* sitcoms of the previous chapter. In the more traditional, work-based sitcoms from NBC, issues of economic
uncertainty were virtually non-existent. This is in stark contrast to the work-related sitcoms, 2 Broke Girls and Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23. In these two programs, featuring twenty-something women, the characters are actively seeking better employment and are constantly under financial duress. On 2 Broke Girls, Max and Caroline work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet and try to launch their own business as means to financial stability. The apparent nature of their poverty is highlighted at the end of each episode as viewers are shown a tally of their current total savings each week. In addition to the money that they try to raise for their business, Max and Caroline are often shown struggling to get by on what little they have with whatever means necessary (e.g. shopping at Goodwill, taking odd jobs, and participating in drug trial testing for money). On Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23, the constant stress of financial instability is clear regarding June. She is underpaid as a barista (based on her talents in the financial field), and is trying her hardest to get by. June continually is looking for a professional job in hopes of utilizing (and paying for) her graduate degree. In order to supplement her meager earnings at the coffee shop, she tries selling homemade jam to make ends meet. Throughout the course of the series, June is perpetually worried about her financial situation. Her hard work seems to pay off in the end though, as she finally lands a professional job—this is significant in that the ideology of hard work that undergirds neoliberalism is supported. It is hard to say where the series would have gone from there as, again, it was cancelled shortly after that plot development. Chloe is also struggling for money; however, by nature, her character simply does not emphasize this issue. She has no consistent job and makes most of her yearly income in the three-day span of working as a nightlife guide for U.N. diplomats visiting for the General Assembly. The money that she makes outside of this three-day period comes primarily from cons, schemes, and gifts from James. Her concern over finances only comes through when one of her cons has failed. Regardless of the varying nature of means of income among the four main
characters, the common thread is that they are all struggling to get by in the post-recessionary landscape (and yet, in the vein of neoliberalism on television, somehow they still do).

As this case study has demonstrated, the odd couple relationship of both sitcoms’ main characters, The Skeptical Brunette and The DOHL Blonde, serves to fragment women’s financial knowledge and (arguably) disempower these women characters. By The DOHL Blonde forcing The Skeptical Brunette to conform to mainstream “femininity” (here, the clichéd notions of emotional connections and romance), Chloe and Max are disempowered on some level—the keen senses that allowed The Skeptical Brunette to survive independent of others for so long is questioned and brought down, as means to insert “acceptable” societal views of women. In other words, Wood’s archetypes of The Sex Object/Iron Maiden (The Skeptical Brunette) are softened by The Mother/Child (The DOHL Blonde). Through The Comedic Sexual Harasser, issues of degradation of women are downplayed to reinforce patriarchal norms. This hybrid archetype exemplifies traits from Sedita’s archetypes of The Womanizer, The Bastard, and In Their Own Universe, such as their cocky tendencies while oversexualizing women, their biting and unapologetic nature, and their overall eccentricities. This all serves to put women in their symbolic “place” in the world of the sitcoms, especially through the trivialization and normalization of sexual harassment. To further drive home this message of “acceptable” women on television (economically-struggling women who perform mainstream femininity) the sole, successful woman of each sitcom is portrayed in a negative light—as being strange and obsessive, as well as affable and childlike—traits exemplifying Sedita’s The Dumb One and In Their Own Universe archetypes, as seen through the hybrid character archetype of The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor. In this case study, we saw that these new post-recessionary sitcoms feature complex, multifaceted characters that can no longer be categorized by only existing sitcom and women archetypes—as such, the need for new, hybrid archetypes may better suit the latest interplay between gender and economics on television.
While this chapter focused on the hybridization of these archetypal characters in post-recessionary sitcoms, the next chapter will look at the hybrid nature of HBO programming and its blend of work-based and work-related sitcoms with elements of drama. Similarly, these programs showcase both middle-aged and twentyomething women struggling to advance their careers.
CHAPTER 6:

IT’S NOT COMEDY. IT’S NOT DRAMA. IT’S DRAMEDY: THE TEXTS AND PARATEXTS OF HBO’S POST-RECESSIONARY PROGRAMMING, AND THE CRITICAL DOUBLE STANDARD THAT Follows

In *Girls*, sex is often messy, awkward, emotionally unsettling and never romanticized, and the city (New York, of course, Brooklyn variety) hardly welcomes them with generosity. They may fall asleep to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, but they haven’t made it after all—and I’m not sure they’d recognize it if they did. But they are fascinating, troubling, exhilarating company. *Girls* is the sort of authentic original you dream of discovering, and once you do, you can’t wait for everyone else to discover it. – Matt Roush, April 2012, para. 4

These gals are at times so self-absorbed it’s difficult to feel much for them when things don’t go their way. And things don’t often go their way, but mostly because they sabotage themselves.
– Curt Wagner, April 2012, para. 7

“It’s Not TV. It’s HBO”: An Introduction to HBO, its Unique Economic Model, and its Original Programming

Since its 1972 debut, HBO has been establishing itself as a network unlike any other. Relying on subscriptions, the premium channel has been able to focus and shape its format around trying to appeal to viewers, as opposed to appeasing advertisers as required of broadcast television. Given this, HBO has concentrated its efforts on establishing itself as a “quality” brand, and enticing viewers to subscribe to, and pay extra for, the premium cable network. As Lotz (2007) discusses, this unique economic model allows subscription-based networks such as HBO to strongly differentiate itself from both broadcast and basic cable, especially in terms of their programming. She argues that such networks
have developed original series programming that has irreversibly changed audiences’ perceptions of these networks, program norms, and the industrial practices of television programming. HBO became the darling of television critics and won numerous institutional awards in the late 1990s with its original series and films. To the further aggravation of broadcast network executives, HBO began using a strategic and contrary branding slogan that proclaimed, ‘It’s Not TV, It’s HBO.’ (Lotz, 2007, p. 85)

As Lotz and other scholars have noted, this slogan works to distinguish the aesthetics around HBO’s programming as being emblematic of high art, or rather quality television, at least higher or better than that which characterizes regular TV. Simultaneously, it points to how the premium cable channel is worth subscribing to, as it is “different” than traditional television. In order to attract subscribers, HBO offers a wide range of programming content, including recent theatrical films. But in an era of on-demand access to such films, especially key to HBO’s branding is its original series. For HBO, the success of a program may not necessarily be high ratings, but rather viewer loyalty: does HBO believe that current and potential subscribers to the network are drawn to do so by a particular program or a cluster of programming (Poniewozik, 2007)? For HBO, then, any cultural activity that may highlight their programming—awards, reviews, fan behavior—is considered valuable to build subscriber capital.

Edgerton and Jones (2008) posit that one traditional characteristic of HBO’s series—that, in fact, has made HBO’s legacy and ongoing relevance particularly distinctive—is their gendered niche. They write that “In a medium that is often characterized as being overwhelmingly feminine in orientation, HBO has carefully carved out a niche for itself that is strongly masculine in its programming appeals” (p. 322). Examples of especially hegemonic-masculinist HBO series include the dramas *Oz* (1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), and *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present), as well as comedies such as *Dream On* (1990-1996), *Arliss* (1996-2002), and *Entourage* (2004-2011).
As Stephen Collins (2012) from the *Los Angeles Times* notes, television programming has long been targeting women viewers. Interestingly, in the past, HBO seemed to focus all of its women-centric programming around a single text, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) (Arthurs, 2003; Gerhard, 2005). With the exception of this one program, HBO was still heavily invested in men-centric programming and has not invested as much time and energy toward women-centric programming, unlike its competitor, Showtime which has been well-known for its women-centric series including *Weeds* (2005-2012), *The United States of Tara* (2009-present), *Nurse Jackie* (2009-present), and *The Big C* (2010-present). In fact, it would not be until two years after the recession officially ended in 2009 that HBO would put forth more original women-centric programming. In October 2011, HBO debuted *Enlightened*, its first women-centric series since its mega-hit dramedy, *Sex and the City*, ended in 2004. Less than a year later, it debuted two more women-centric series: *Girls* (2012-present) and *Veep* (2012-present). As Collins (2012) states in regards to *Girls* specifically, “Indeed, *Girls* is at the vanguard of an industry-wide charge toward narrowly focused, female-centric scripted series that now dot the entire cable dial” (para. 3).

With a hit, buzz worthy program lasting at least three seasons (as of this writing), HBO is attempting to maximize on the success of *Girls* and its (twenty-something) women-centric programming. The creative team behind *Girls*—Lena Dunham and Jenni Konner—are developing another HBO women-centric comedy series, this time around the life of Betty Halbreich (Andreeva, 2013, para. 1). *Enlightened* lasted two seasons (being cancelled March 2013), while *Veep* has lasted at least two seasons, pending its second-season ratings. But for at least two seasons, HBO aired three high-profile programs featuring lead women characters, and have indicated continued development of such programming.

The main aim of this chapter is to examine the trends that are found within these three post-recessionary HBO programs—*Enlightened, Girls*, and *Veep*—and see if their constructions
of the post-recessionary woman are, in fact, “not TV”: what are their textual characteristics, what are their “paratextual” characteristics (to borrow from Gray, 2010), and do they differ in any significant extent to the previous texts discussed in this project? In the next section of this chapter, I go over my method and methodology, discussing my use of textual analysis as well as my examination of paratexts created by television critics. In the following section, I further delve into the polarizing nature of these HBO programs and the critical response found in their paratexts. It is there that I uncover an alarming trend, a term that I dub “The Critical Double Standard.” Lastly, I provide my concluding thoughts on what I found throughout this case study and what it all means within the larger scope of this research project.

**Methodological Technique**

**Critics’ reviews as paratexts.**

Given that HBO programs are often treated as critical “darling[s]” (Lotz, 2007, p. 85), this chapter will frame its analysis of gender and post-recessionary meanings with an accompanying engagement with the critical review discourse that surrounds three HBO, women-centric texts that arose in the post-recession era: *Enlightened*, *Girls*, and *Veep*. While the first case study in this research project analyzed the portrayal of mostly middle-aged women characters in the traditional (and stable) workplace and the second case study examined the portrayal of economically-struggling, twenty-something women characters in multiple, unstable work-related situations, this final case study explores a hybrid of both middle-aged and twenty-something women characters looking for employment or stable work environments in general. *Enlightened* and *Veep* feature middle-aged women characters in a single work environment, Abaddon Industries and the United States Government respectively, but these two workplaces are depicted to be anything but stable. On *Girls*, twenty-something women characters are rarely shown in work environments and instead spend their days facing the hardships of economic
uncertainty (and post-feminist entitlement). Like the two programs in the previous chapter—2 Broke Girls and Don’t Trust the B---- in Apt. 23—all three programs have titles that refer to the main woman character although only one of them, again the younger-skewing Girls, uses a gender-specific title.

For this chapter’s methodological technique, I will be analyzing the discourse generated from critics’ reviews, as exemplifying what Gray (2010) calls “paratexts,” in order to better understand and discuss the complicated and polysemic nature of these three HBO texts. In the process, I will be highlighting issues pertaining to (post)feminism, economic uncertainty, and gender relations in and around the workplace (or lack thereof). In particular, I combine the methodological techniques of the first two case studies for this final one. In this chapter, I examine a paratextual character study that is comprised of the programs’ main characters (Enlightened’s Amy Jellicoe, Girls’ Hannah Horvath, and Veep’s Selina Meyer) through an examination of these critics’ reviews as well as my own textual analysis. My use of “paratext” is adapted from Gray’s (2010) application of the term to popular media texts.

In his 2010 book, Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts, Gray extends Gerard Genette’s (1987/1997) work on paratexts to film and television. According to Gray’s reading of Genette, paratexts are “texts that prepare us for other texts” (p. 25). More so, within his research, Genette established that there are two types of paratexts when it comes to books specifically: peritexts and epitexts. The former refers to “paratexts within the book” and include such examples as book introductions, covers, title pages, author’s name and dedications, etc. (Gray, 2010, p. 25). The latter revolve around “paratexts outside the book” and include magazine advertisements, interviews, public responses, and reviews (p. 25). Important to Genette’s argument, according to Gray, is that it is only through paratexts that individuals are able to approach texts (p. 25). As such, paratexts set the stage of the text for audiences. They help audiences decide where and how to invest their time—“they tell us which movies and
television programs to watch, which are priorities, which to avoid, which to watch alone and which to watch with friends, which to watch on a big screen, which to save for times when we need a pick-me-up, and so on” (Gray, 2010, pp. 25-26). While Gray feels that Genette’s categories of peritexts and epitexts are limiting, he instead offers his own categories to more aptly describe what he finds in his own research on film and television: entryway paratexts and in medias res paratexts. The former alludes to paratexts that “control and determine our entrance to a text” and the latter references paratexts that “inflect or redirect the text following initial interaction” (Gray, 2010, p. 35). For this chapter, critical reviews of the programs that serve as “entryway paratexts” will be examined. Such texts, then, not only reflect the particular ideological views of the critics, but may also influence for some viewers the meanings they interpret from the programs.

An important concept that I uncovered during the analysis of the paratexts is the presence of a phenomenon that I have dubbed “The Critical Double Standard.” This term applies to when critics or reviewers of any text, regardless of medium, offer misogynistic remarks in lieu of gender-neutral criticism, even when originally written for venues geared toward gender-neutral audiences. While I expect a blatantly misogynistic venue such as *Maxim* or *Playboy* to perpetuate misogyny through their reviews, as this is the kind of performance their audience expects, I find it alarmingly commonplace that a venue with a relatively gender-neutral target audience, such as *TV Guide* or the *San Francisco Chronicle* is also putting forth reviews peppered with misogyny. Manifestations of The Critical Double Standard can vary greatly: it can range from the blatant usage of offensive language to the more subtle sexism through the lack of “reversibility.” As described by Larris and Maggio (2012) in “Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates and Politicians,” released by The Women’s Media Center, this term advocates for “…abandoning or evaluating terms or story frames of women candidates that wouldn’t be written about men” (Larris & Maggio, 2012, p. 3). While they discuss misogyny in relation to women
politicians and candidates in particular, their argument can easily be transferred to coverage of women characters of non-news texts, such as critics’ reviews.

**Method and methodology.**

Staying consistent with the other two case studies, this chapter also employs feminist textual analysis to deconstruct episodes of the HBO programs (and also paratextual critics’ reviews). Using the HBO Go service, I analyzed all available episodes—at the time of this writing—of the three programs, which include the first and second seasons of *Enlightened* and *Girls*, and the first season of *Veep* (the second season premiered on April 14, 2013), for a total of 46 episodes. Applying Gray’s work to this chapter, I analyze critics’ reviews as manifestations of paratexts—specifically as entryway paratexts. Often times, critics’ reviews serve as highly-visible venues where audiences learn about new and/or upcoming television programs. With texts such as *Girls* which is especially known for its polarizing effect on audiences, an examination of critical reviews will help shed light on this polarization. It will also help to better understand how, and perhaps why, critics praise—or dismiss—some texts over others. In terms of selecting paratexts to examine, this case study focuses on critic reviews aggregated on Metacritic.com. Metacritic, in addition to being a clearinghouse for reviews of movies, television programs, music, and video games, also assigns a score out of 100 for each review based on a conversion scale from the critic’s own scoring system to Metacritic’s scale. It is important to note that, each time I refer to a critic’s score of a text later on, I am referring to the Metacritic score conversion of their own system. For example, if I state that a critic gave a program a score of 88, then this refers to the conversion from the original score of 3.5 on a 4.0 scale. In order to adjust for multiple scoring systems amongst critics of different venues, I always defer back to converted Metacritic score. For each of the three HBO series, I selected nine reviews (for a total of 27 critical reviews) to gain a full range of views. In order to accommodate a shorter list of
reviews for one of the programs’ two seasons, I opted to select two reviews from the highest-rated, middle, and lowest-rated tiers, totaling six reviews each for the first seasons of *Enlightened* and *Girls*. For their second seasons, I selected one more review from each of the highest, middle, and lowest, thereby adding an additional three reviews for each program. Given that *Veep* has only aired one season thus far, I selected three reviews each from the highest, middle, and lowest tiers for the text. In this case study, I define the “middle” as review scores closest to the overall weighted average for the program listed on Metacritic.com (also known as the “Metascore” for each program). I felt that these “middle” reviews would provide a better understanding of critics who saw both good and bad in the programs. If two reviews were scored equally apart from the average but in opposite directions, I opted to always select the lower-scored text so that programs with a high average would not skew the nature of the paratext by falling too close in line with the highest-rated category (for example, the Metascore for *Girls*’ second season was 84). There were scores of 80 and 88 recorded, so I opted to go for the 80, as I felt it was important to get closer to the middle of the range as far as critical response (with the highest score being 100 and the lowest being 60 in this particular case). Additionally, if multiple reviews had the same score and I had to choose among them, I always picked the reviews written by women (if there were any—it seems as if television critics are overwhelmingly men), as I felt it would be important to get a variance of paratexts from both men and women writing on these women-centric programs. Furthermore, by selecting the most favorable and least favorable reviews, I was better able to hone in on the polar extremes of the critical reception of each program. However, the close-to-average reviews enabled me to gain a better understanding of the middle-of-the-road views toward the programs. Finally, it is important to note that these reviews stem

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11 The Metascore is a weighted average used by Metacritic.com. It accounts for both converting reviewers’ native ratings system into a 0-100 scale, as well as taking into consideration a critic’s proliferation. The scoring breakdown is as follows: Universal Acclaim (81-100); Generally Favorable Reviews (61-80); Mixed or Average Reviews (40-60); Generally Unfavorable Reviews (20-39), and Overwhelming Dislike (0-19).
from both highly-visible and smaller venues, again emphasizing the broad scope of perspectives analyzed in this particular case study.

**An introduction to each text.**

*Enlightened (2011-2013).*

On October 10, 2011, HBO launched *Enlightened*, which was at the time its first women-centric series since *Sex and the City*. The series stars Laura Dern as Amy Jellicoe, Luke Wilson as her ex-husband Levi Callow, Diane Ladd (Laura Dern’s real-life mother) as her mother Helen Jellicoe, and Mike White (also the program’s co-creator, co-executive producer, and writer) as her co-worker Tyler, whose last name is never revealed. Critically, the program received fairly positive reviews in the first season (Metascore of 75) and exceptional reviews for the second season (Metascore of 96—the highest in this case study). Furthermore, Laura Dern won a Globe Globe for her performance in the series.

*Enlightened* is a dramedy about middle-aged, corporate buyer Amy Jellicoe, who suffers a mental breakdown in the series’ pilot (see Figure 6-1). From what viewers are able to gather through the first few opening scenes, Amy had been sleeping with her boss, Damon (played by Charles Esten), who transfers her to a different department within Abaddon Industries. After overhearing two of her women co-workers talking behind her back, Amy ignores attempts by her administrative assistant, Krista (played by Sarah Burns), to calm her down (‘Amy, you look insane!’), and confronts Damon at the elevators. Viewers are left with the image of her prying open elevator doors and screaming “I will bury you, I will kill you, mothafucker!” This aggressive, narcissistic world view of Amy’s is symptomatic of the corporate world that she lived (and succeeded) in—as we see through the series, it is something that must be overcome for her character to achieve redemption.
After this initial breakdown, Amy spends a month in Hawaii at a holistic treatment facility and returns home with a new outlook on love, life, and work. She moves in with her mother and takes a new (but much less prestigious) position at Abaddon Industries. The remaining episodes of the series focus on Amy managing the tensions that arise from trying to take down “the system” that thrives on corporate greed and has little concern for social responsibility before it takes her down her first.

Figure 6-1: Amy Jellicoe (played by Laura Dern) in Enlightened.

**Girls (2012-present).**

On April 15, 2012, Girls debuted as a grittier version of HBO’s acclaimed series, Sex and the City. The series features four twenty-something women: Lena Dunham as Hannah Horvath, a struggling yet aspiring writer; Allison Williams as Marnie Michaels, an art gallery curator turned high-end restaurant hostess; Jemima Kirke as Jessa Johansson, a free-spirited nanny; and Zosia Mamet as Shoshanna Shapiro, an undergraduate student at New York University (see Figure 6-2). Like Enlightened, Girls has also garnered critical acclaim (Metascores of 87 and 84 for seasons one and two, respectively). In 2012, the series won an Emmy for “Outstanding Casting for a Comedy Series” and also received a Writers Guild of America award for the category of “New
Series.” In 2013, *Girls* won two Golden Globes, one for “Best Television Series – Comedy or Musical” and another for Lena Dunham specifically for “Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Series – Comedy or Musical.” In addition to her acting, Lena Dunham was also awarded a Directors Guild of America award for “Outstanding Directorial Achievement in a Comedy Series.”

HBO’s *Girls* follows the four women as they try to make it in New York City while they struggle with employment and financial viability, as well as their various friendships and romantic relationships. Hannah is an aspiring writer, mainly scraping by on the charity of her parents. When her parents cut her off financially in the pilot episode, it sets the tone of financial insecurity for Hannah’s character throughout the series. Marnie is intelligent, driven, and hardworking, yet she loses her job in the Season Two opener. She spends the rest of the season trying to figure out a career for herself. Jessa has no discernible career, ambitions, or goals. She seems to get by on whatever little money she manages to earn on her occasional jobs—in season one, she works as a nanny and in season two, she avoids working entirely by living off her newlywed husband’s earnings; however, she is back to economic uncertainty when they split up midway through the season. Shoshanna does not work but is enrolled in college. She is the only character who is not seen struggling for money or a career, but she does rely heavily on her aunt for her finances. In this group of four, not one of them is yet able to truly survive in New York City on her own.
Veep (2012-present).

A week after Girls’ series premiere, Veep debuted on HBO on April 22, 2012. Julia Louis-Dreyfus stars as Selina Meyer, the Vice President of the United States. Her daily work routine is accompanied by several colleagues: her chief of staff, Amy Brookheimer (played by Anna Chlumsky); her personal aide, Gary Walsh (played by Tony Hale); her director of communications, Mike McLintock (played by Matt Walsh); her deputy director of communications, Dan Egan (played by Reid Scott); and her personal assistant, Sue Wilson (played by Sufe Bradshaw). Additionally, Jonah Ryan (played by Timothy Simons) serves as a liaison between the President’s and Vice President’s offices. Staying consistent with HBO’s original series being received well by critics (Metascore of 72 for Season 1), Veep also won several awards, including a 2012 Pan-American Association of Film and TV Journalists award for Armando Iannucci and “Best Directing for a Comedy Series,” and a 2012 Emmy for Julia Louis-Dreyfus under the category of “Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series.”

Veep follows the day-to-day working life of Vice President Selina Meyer (see Figure 6-3). However, the opening credits clearly frame her office as a career disappointment, since Meyer originally had presidential aspirations. Not only does the program focus on the issues that she faces as the Vice President, but it also sheds light on issues that women in positions of power
face on a regular basis. Throughout the first season, viewers watch as Selina maneuvers the circus of US politics and the scrutiny of the media. In each episode, there is a heavy focus placed on her ratings and favorability poll numbers. As a high-profile politician, the character’s upper-class status is secure, but her job is not: Selina is always working toward the next step in her career (and sometimes she is simply treading water and trying to hold onto her current job as Vice President). She is often frustrated by her lack of power as Vice President (which also stands in as a metaphor, with her lack of power as a woman deemed subordinate to a man); the program makes it clear that she has ambitions of the Presidency in mind.

Figure 6-3: Selina Meyer (played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus) as Veep’s leading character.

In general, these three women-centric programs have attracted a high profile and have garnered a great deal of critical attention. Additionally, because they are on HBO, they carry the burden of higher expectations to fit with HBO’s branding mantra that emphasizes high quality texts—“It’s not TV. It’s HBO” (which was shortened to just “It’s HBO” in 2011). With the overwhelming number of paratexts from critics out there, as well this emphasis on high-quality programming, I examine how the leading characters of these three HBO original series are portrayed and perceived, and how they compare to their broadcast cable counterparts.
Paratextual Viewing Strip of the Lead Characters

In this next section, I analyze the recurring issues that critics discuss throughout their reviews of the three HBO programs. Given the overall objective of this research project, which again aims to analyze issues concerning economic uncertainty, the treatment of women characters, and gendered relations in the workplace, I have highlighted recurring themes revolving around each of the programs’ leading character in particular. In short, I examined how critics were making sense of and televisually reading Enlightened’s Amy Jellicoe, Girls’ Hannah Horvath, and Veep’s Selina Meyer. Through my analysis of the paratexts, I noticed that critics often placed emphasis on the same particular point regarding each character/program. This is to say, each text seemed to have its own, distinct common theme that critics focused on. To conclude each subsection, I also comment on key issues that I found through my own textual analysis of the programs that the critics missed, ignored, and/or glossed over in their reviews. While this might just be a result of the limited access that each critic had of their object of review (as critics were sent a certain number of episodes ahead of time), it is nevertheless important to acknowledge these issues as being crucial aspects of each of the three HBO texts.

Enlightened’s Amy Jellicoe (played by Laura Dern).

Upon analyzing nine reviews from critics concerning both of the seasons for the series, I realized that a singular thread kept coming up, revolving around a very simple topic of debate—whether or not the critic “liked or disliked” Amy Jellicoe. This was further broken down into four categories: those who liked Laura Dern’s acting but had no opinion on the character of Amy Jellicoe; those who liked Amy Jellicoe; those who had mixed feelings about Amy Jellicoe; and those who hated Amy Jellicoe (see Table 6-1). Numerous critics called Amy out on being self-
absorbed and/or narcissistic—even those who expressed appreciation for her character. Others criticized her for simply subscribing to humanitarianism for attention—to be known as a “do-gooder,” rather than having a true sense of altruism. Something to note is that the more the critics dislike the character of Amy Jellicoe, the more likely they were to raise issues of gender. I will elaborate on these categories below and will later discuss how key issues, from the series, were glossed over or ignored altogether.

Table 6-1: A brief overview of the venues, critics, their respective scores, and the category they fall under for *Enlightened*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Critic’s Name</th>
<th>Metascore</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>New York Post</em></td>
<td>Linda Stasi</td>
<td>Season One – 100**</td>
<td>Liked Dern’s performance; Had no opinion on Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Uncle Barky’s Bytes</em></td>
<td>Ed Bark</td>
<td>Season One – 100**</td>
<td>Liked Dern’s performance; Had no opinion on Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Huffington Post</em></td>
<td>Maureen Ryan</td>
<td>Season Two – 100**</td>
<td>Liked Amy Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>San Francisco Chronicle</em></td>
<td>David Wiegand</td>
<td>Season One - 75</td>
<td>Unsure about Amy Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Slate</em></td>
<td>Troy Patterson</td>
<td>Season One - 70</td>
<td>Unsure about Amy Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Hank Stuever</td>
<td>Season Two - 90</td>
<td>Unsure about Amy Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>New York Magazine (Vulture)</em></td>
<td>Matt Zoller Seitz</td>
<td>Season Two – 80*</td>
<td>Unsure about Amy Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>TV Guide</em></td>
<td>Matt Roush</td>
<td>Season One – 50*</td>
<td>Hated Amy Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>HitFix</em></td>
<td>Alan Sepinwall</td>
<td>Season One – 50*</td>
<td>Hated Amy Jellicoe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This denotes the lowest score for *Enlightened* for that particular season.
**This denotes the highest score for *Enlightened* for that particular season.
Category #1 - Critics who liked Laura Dern’s performance but who had no opinion on Amy Jellicoe.

Awarding the first season of Enlightened with her highest possible rating, 100 on Metacritic.com, the New York Post’s Linda Stasi was candid in stating that she likes the series. Interestingly enough, she did not really explain why but instead shares mostly summary with her audience. The closest that readers get to her explanation is that she finds the program to be “uncomfortable” yet “engaging” (Stasi, 2011, para. 3). Furthermore, Stasi remarks that she finds the acting performances of both Laura Dern and Diane Ladd (Dern’s actual mother) to be simply “divine” (para. 4 and 13). She does not state anything about gender but instead notes that Amy’s co-workers are “misfits” and that Dougie (Amy’s new boss) is “inappropriate.” In terms of this latter description, Stasis is most likely pointing to Dougie’s vulgarity and tendency to sexually harass women, including Amy.

Ed Bark, from UncleBarky.com, gave the first season of Enlightened a 100. His general take, amidst a review that was mostly summary like the previous one, is that he likes the series quite a bit. In particular, he enjoys the “maturity” of the program. As he describes, “Enlightened will hit you where it hearts. And hurts. It’s HBO’s most mature half-hour series ever, rising above the material worlds of Sex and the City and Entourage to offer a road worth taking in pursuit of a ‘higher self’” (Bark, 2011, para. 13). Similarly, he likes the acting of Dern and the supporting cast: “Dern is letter-perfect as Enlightened’s dented Joan of Arc, preaching to her choir of one in ways that never seem hokey or false. And the supporting cast is uniformly terrific, with Wilson convincingly shedding his goofball tendencies while Ladd shines in a rare (for her) understated role” (para. 12). Furthermore, he appreciates how the overall arc is a character striving for something meaningful, again unlike the characters of previous HBO dramedies. It is important to note that Bark does not comment on gender at all. He does, however, mention Amy’s attempt at “starting a new and worthy career,” which is an important
acknowledgement as it alludes to Amy’s financial struggles (more specifically, her having paid off only about half of the $50,000 debt that the holistic treatment center left her with).

**Category #2 - Critics who liked Amy Jellicoe.**

In this sample, only one critic expressed clear admiration for the main character. *The Huffington Post*’s Maureen Ryan reviewed the second season of the series and gave it a score of 100, the highest for Season 2. For Ryan, the complexity behind the program is crucial to her enjoyment. Similarly, she enjoys the nature of what the series, particularly the second season, conveys and appreciates the self-reflexive questions that it poses on both the characters and, ultimately, the viewers. In regards to Amy in particular, Ryan comments on the following:

> It takes a great deal of restraint to evoke such bittersweet feelings so consistently, especially when you consider that the show's lead character takes up a lot of space. But Amy Jellicoe (who's played by co-creator Laura Dern) is probably the reason the show is generally minimalist in its approach; for other aspects of "Enlightenment" to compete with her unruly nature would be a mistake. In a delicious irony, the show uses nuance to reveal—and almost revel in—her lack of subtlety. (Ryan, 2013, para. 7)

Like Bark, Ryan also does not comment on gender, instead commenting more on the character of Amy and the well-developed storyline of the second season.

**Category #3 - Critics who had mixed feelings about Amy Jellicoe.**

In the most prolific of these categories, four of the nine critics disliked the leading character. David Wiegand, of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, gave the program’s first season an overall 75. In general, he likes the series as a whole, but at times seems unsure about Amy Jellicoe. As he states in his review, “The fact that her character is difficult and at times, insufferable, is one reason ‘Enlightened,’ premiering Monday on HBO, is worth it for viewers” (Wiegand, 2011, para. 1). While Wiegand makes no mention of gender, he does spend quite
some time discussing how HBO has resorted to using the 30-minute format more often to test out “envelope-pushing concepts for shows” (para. 8), with *Enlightened* being a case in point.

Also reviewing the first season, *Slate*’s Troy Patterson seemed to have a similar reaction as Wiegand: he likes the program, but not excessively. Hence, his review for *Enlightened* earned a Metacritic score of 70. Like Wiegand, Patterson (2011) finds Amy to be quite unstable but is much more harsh in his assessment: “Amy is, in common parlance, batshit crazy” (para. 6). Unlike Wiegand, he does mention Amy’s economic uncertainty: “Meanwhile, she conducts a search for a do-gooder job and is hampered in that effort by her need to find one that will pay well; her rehab experience left her not only with a distrust of the material world but also $24,000 in debt” (Patterson, 2011, para. 5). Like Stasi’s review, Patterson also refers to Amy’s co-workers as “misfits” and her new boss as “inappropriate.” While he omits anything about gender, Patterson does note Dern’s ability to shift gears so well (and quickly) from tranquility to rage, and vice versa.

The third critic (and also third consecutive man) to be on the fence about the character of Amy Jellicoe is *The Washington Post*’s Hank Stuever, who awarded a Metacritic score of 90 to the second season. Like *The Huffington Post*’s Maureen Ryan, Stuever appreciates the “most hauntingly nuanced and carefully written show currently on TV” (para. 2). More so, he finds it to be realistic of the American workplace and thought-provoking in nature. In regards to Amy in particular, Stuever writes, “Dern’s Amy is fascinating but unlikable, mainly because she sees herself as a selfless crusader, which only makes her more self-absorbed. In this way, ‘Enlightened’s’ biggest asset is also its biggest drawback—the main character is written with such unsettling ambivalence that the viewer doesn’t know what to do: cheer for Amy or slap her?” (para. 12). He reaffirms his mixed feelings toward Amy by stating that the “best” episodes from this second season focus not on Amy, but rather solely on the supporting characters. Like Wiegand and Patterson, Stuever does not mention gender at all.
The final critic who is unsure about the series’ main character is Matt Zoller Seitz from *New York Magazine (Vulture)*. Reviewing the second season, Seitz gave the program an 80 rating, which was the lowest score for Season 2. He likes the series, but not for the traditional reasons. Seitz is candid in stating that he doesn’t like Amy, whom he describes as a “paranoid, manipulative flirt, a lazy flake whose workload is carried by her nebbishy co-worker Tyler (series co-creator, Mike White), and a drama queen who acts as if other people are supporting players in the Julia Roberts movie of her life” (para. 2). His description of Amy as a “manipulative flirt” reifies the first instance of The Critical Double Standard in this case study, as it is highly-gendered language. He adds that she is a “deeply damaged and irritating woman” (para. 5). He calls Amy out on her flaws, but also states that she is justified in her cause. In addition to his uncertainty around Amy, Seitz does not seem to like any of the characters, with the exception of maybe Tyler. Unlike many of the other critics, Seitz does bring in the issue of gender, specifically in pointing out more recent women-centric programming: “Contemporary TV is suddenly filled with shows starring charismatic yet ostentatiously flawed heroines: *Homeland, The Mindy Project, Girls, Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23*. *Enlightened* stands out because its vision is so much wider” (para. 3). While some critics had no opinion on Amy Jellicoe and others were on the fence about her, there were a few who absolutely hated her character.

**Category #4 - Critics who hated Amy Jellicoe.**

This final category is comprised of two critics (both of whom are men) who made it clear that they have a more intense dislike, one that borders hatred, for Amy. Matt Roush, from *TV Guide*, gave the first season its lowest Metacritic score with a 50. In general, he does not like the dramedy, instead alluding to wanting something that is just “stupid-funny” rather than something that forces one to think about a series. In addition, he finds the leading character to be “annoying” (Roush, 2011, para. 9). More specifically, he states his dilemma: “The problem here
is that we only know Amy at these extremes, from PMS rage to PMA (positive mental attitude), and while Dern commits fully to the role, Amy still feels like an annoying, exasperating caricature who probably ought to be committed” (para. 9). Here is another example of The Critical Double Standard. The choice to describe Amy’s anger at her treatment by Abaddon as “PMS rage” is hardly fair—had the character expressing anger been a man, rather than a woman, Roush would more than likely have dropped the misogynistic manner (and the PMS part) and simply called it rage. Roush here goes out of his way to assume that Amy’s anger must have something to do with her menstrual cycles, a frame that he applies entirely on his own as the program makes absolutely no mention of this. In describing the series in general, Roush is candid in stating that it “feels more like a Showtime dramedy in its focus on a damaged female hero whose life isn’t exactly a laugh riot” (para. 7). In his review, Roush implies that he feels the show does not meet HBO’s standard of high quality television. Levine (2008a) argues that a cultural hierarchy exists among television programming, especially when regarding what is deemed “quality” television. As she asserts, masculinized texts often connote, culturally speaking, quality. This is particularly fitting, given that HBO, which is prized for quality television, has historically featured mostly men-centric original series.

The review from HitFix’s Alan Sepinwall shares many similarities to Roush’s. For instance, like Roush, Sepinwall, also gave a 50 to Enlightened’s first season. Similarly, it seemed like he wants something with more laughs (and less drama) and generally does not like the program. Sepinwall does not find the character of Amy to be likeable. Instead, he seems to pity her and often feels embarrassed for her—sometimes in a gendered manner, such as when he specifically makes note of her “smeared makeup” from tears during the opening scene of the pilot episode. While he does not outright say it, this could be the “uncomfortable” nature of the series that other critics, such as Stasi and Stuever, have mentioned. He continues: “In a way, Enlightened seems like HBO’s attempt to make one of those Showtime dramedies built around
actresses of a certain age who are willing to do TV in exchange for a meatier part and a chance at an Emmy” (Sepinwall, 2011, para. 10). This is to say, Sepinwall feels the series is an attempt at a women-centric, Showtime dramedy; however, as he points out in his review, the protagonists in those dramedies usually face life-and-death situations, yet Amy’s main issue (according to Sepinwall) is simply trying to make changes in her own life. Interestingly enough, Sepinwall is candid in stating there is a lengthy list of successful comedies that feature characters who lack self-awareness; however, he is quick to state that Enlightened is not one of these comedies. It is revealing that the list he includes of aesthetically-successful, unaware characters is comprised of only men (e.g., The Office’s David Brent and Michael Scott, Arrested Development’s Tobias Funke and GOB Bluth, and Modern Family’s Phil Dunphy).

Taken as a whole, the reviews show a common fixation over whether or not they found the character of Amy Jellicoe to be “crazy” (and to what degree). Additionally, issues of gender only came into play by critics who disliked or hated her character. This is reflective of The Critical Double Standard through their (unnecessary) use of highly-gendered language. Additionally, some critics seemed to hate Amy and the program, simply because it is a woman-centric text—which they feel is unworthy of HBO and instead is more suitable for Showtime.

**What the critics didn’t say.**

Throughout the sampled critics’ reviews, there seemed to be a lack of addressing key issues on the series itself. Amy’s economic situation was glossed over by most of the critics. Slate.com mentioned her debt and there was mention as well of how she is unable to take a job in the non-profit sector (at a homeless shelter) as it will not afford her the means to get out of this debt. Aside from the occasional quick line here or there, very little was said in the paratexts about Amy’s financial issues.
As another example, none of the critics pointed to issues of unfair gender dynamics, thereby allowing the tacit norms of patriarchy with its double standards toward questions of fairness to go unchallenged. While many stated that Amy had an affair with her boss, Damon, none addressed the double standards where her superior (and also married man) was able to keep his job while she is punished and has to leave her job, later being demoted. In what could also be considered The Critical Double Standard, some of the reviewers seemed to favor Damon’s side of this conflict and slightly mocked Amy’s breakdown that stems from it. It can be argued that the series presents a feminist critique of the inequalities that women endure at the workplace. Viewers see as Amy elucidates the double standards that led to her being sent away to a treatment facility, especially since Damon was the one who abused his role as an authority figure. To this, Amy says the following to her co-worker:

Oh, he was trying to fuck me for two years. Groping and flirty, and like all over me. He's married. He's married and I'm the one. He fucking betrays his wife and I'm the one who gets punished? I'm the one who gets put in the fucking basement. He should be put in the basement. He's got a fucking wife and kids at home. (Season One, Episode Two)

She also points out that she was good at her former job and was with the company for longer than Damon, whom they promoted. Equally, none of the critics addressed this latter point.

The issues that Amy faces at work stem from her relationship with Damon, her old boss, and also include her interactions with Dougie, her new boss. Amy and her female co-worker, Connie, endure having to listen to Dougie say demeaning things about women time and again to the men co-workers of the department. Issues of sexual harassment were alluded to in how multiple critics called Amy’s new boss, Dougie “inappropriate.” However, none went further than this indirect reference. Important here is how the program itself mentions, and dismisses, sexual harassment (with comedic effect thrown in, a trope found throughout the programs analyzed)—this is indicative of Post-Recessionary Sexism. Given this, instances of feminist
critique on the program are often overshadowed. For instance, when she is scared that she will be fired by Dougie due to her incessant tardiness and serious lack of productivity at work, Amy takes her male co-worker’s advice and tries to set up her new boss as a way to keep him preoccupied. At one point, she wonders: “Oh, my God, I’m not like whore-ing her out, am I?” Later in the episode, Dougie (her new boss) gropes Amy’s bottom and she flips out. He brings her before the HR department and Amy unknowingly mentions this act of sexual harassment, which is of little concern to her, but is a major issue for the HR reps as they see it as potential liability for a lawsuit. Thus, the issue of sexual harassment is seriously downplayed by the main character. Similarly, when Amy confronts Damon (her former boss) about how they both made mistakes, he simply dismisses her. This is after her many attempts to contact him, which from his perspective might be construed as harassment. Upon being dismissed, Amy gets upset and opts to crash her car into his parked car.

As is often the case on the series, Amy is repeatedly told (and shown) that she is crazy and irrational—but rarely do the critics lay out the cause of this state of mind. In actuality, she has every right to be upset with the double standards that left her literally at the bottom of the company with her former fling at the top. However, this is clouded with the irrationality stereotype that women so often face on television. This is a common trope on television, in which a woman character comes across as irrational during her most assertive moments. An example of this can be found on NBC’s The Office with the character of Jan Levenson, as I have discussed here and elsewhere (DeCarvalho, 2010). Amy was once a successful corporate buyer, who was pursued by her married, male boss. Once she gives in, she later is punished while he walks away unscathed. Throughout the series, she tries to find the proper balance of radicalism as therapy and radicalism as political statement\textsuperscript{14}. Amy wants to be an “agent of change”: in the

\textsuperscript{14} This same dilemma can be found in another collaboration involving Mike White and Laura Dern, Year of the Dog (2007).
first season this largely entails trying to change herself, a focus that shifts in the second season when she seems to truly want to change things on a societal level. Amy learns the hard way that it is a man’s world; however, how does she learn this? She does so by being thrust into a more traditional role on television for women, as one who is unsuccessful, incompetent (particularly in her new position for which she fails to understand its job description), and finally, selfish. It is this role of being a “batshit crazy,” “damaged,” “deranged,” “unruly,” “madwoman,” that critics tended to fixate on, some as a reason to dismiss the series altogether while others a reason to heavily note the “uncomfortable” nature of the program.

**Girls’ Hannah Horvath (played by Lena Dunham).**

After examining nine critics’ reviews, from both the first and second season of *Girls*, three primary categories seemed to recur most often: those who felt that the character of Hannah Horvath represents real, twenty-something women; those who felt that Hannah represents working-class women; and those who felt that her character represents entitlement and contradiction (see Table 6-2). Below, I will expand upon these categories and will also bring in a discussion of key issues that the critics failed to mention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Venue</strong></th>
<th><strong>Critic’s Name</strong></th>
<th><strong>Metascore</strong></th>
<th><strong>Category</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>TV Guide</em></td>
<td>Matt Roush</td>
<td>Season One – 100**</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents real, twenty-something women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>USA Today</em></td>
<td>Robert Bianco</td>
<td>Season One – 100**</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents real, twenty-something women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Salon</em></td>
<td>Willa Paskin</td>
<td>Season One – 90</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents real, twenty-something women</td>
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<td><em>Chicago Sun-Times</em></td>
<td>Lori Rackl</td>
<td>Season One – 88</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents real, twenty-something women</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>David Wiegand</td>
<td>Season Two – 100**</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents working-class women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chronicle</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York Daily</td>
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<td>Salon</td>
<td>Willa Paskin</td>
<td>Season Two – 80</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents entitlement and contradiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RedEye (Chicago</td>
<td>Curt Wagner</td>
<td>Season One – 50*</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents entitlement and contradiction</td>
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<td>Tribune)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Washington</td>
<td>Hank Stuever</td>
<td>Season Two – 60*</td>
<td>Feels Horvath represents entitlement and contradiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
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</table>

*This denotes the lowest score for Girls for that particular season.
**This denotes the highest score for Girls for that particular season.

**Category #1 – Critics who feel Hannah Horvath’s character represents real, twenty-something women.**

TV Guide’s Matt Roush gave the first season of Girls a perfect score of 100. In general, he enjoys the realism of the series, including the awkward sex scenes which are a far cry from the “romanticized” sex scenes found on most programs. Regarding the leading character, Roush writes that she is “a snarky, puffy and self-deprecating anti-glamour girl” (para. 2). Note the comment here concerning her body, as this is a recurring topic among critics of this program. He alludes to the irony of Hannah being a young woman who is currently writing a memoir, not “having really lived yet” (Roush, 2012, para. 2). Roush acknowledges that Hannah stems from relative privilege, in that she was able to attend college and was able to have her parents support her financially for two years following her graduation. While he mentions the financial issue of Hannah’s parents cutting her off, Roush does not elaborate on it.

Like Roush, USA Today’s Robert Bianco also reviewed the program’s first season and gave it a Metacritic score of 100. What stood out to him most seems to be Dunham’s writing and what he deems to be an honest take on twenty-something women. Bianco attributes this honesty to the fact that Dunham is a twenty-something woman herself. In general, he seems to like the
character of Hannah but can see her flaws, and appreciates how Hannah (and Dunham) put those perceived “flaws” out there to be discussed. Once again, her economic uncertainty is mentioned, when Bianco explains that Hannah’s parents have recently stopped financially supporting their daughter. He takes it a step further: “Odds are these young women couldn’t afford even one of Carrie’s dresses [from *Sex and the City*] if they pooled all their resources” (Bianco, 2012, para. 8). Here we can see that the almost-obligatory mention to *Sex and the City* is made—a recurring reference made by critics.

For its first season, Willa Paskin, from *Salon*, gave *Girls* a 90 rating. According to her review, she enjoys the series and likes how it offers a realistic portrayal of the lives of the four women. In particular, she is candid in stating that the writing often seems to mirror her own life experiences:

> My concern was that ‘Girls’ speaks so specifically and accurately to the experience of me and my census buddies—and to be clear, that’s urban white girls with safety nets; have at us in the comments—that people would either write it off as navel-gazing, snark at the innate privilege undergirding the whole thing, or find it unrelatable. (Paskin, 2012, para. 2).

Unlike others, Paskin directly calls out the young women for being privileged but does not mind this as, again, it resonates with her own socioeconomic status and upbringing: “‘Girls’ is smart, bracing, funny, accurately absurd, confessional yet self-aware, but it is also undeniably about four white chicks with, relatively speaking, no worries in the world” (para. 2). Similarly, she feels the program acknowledges that these women are “economically privileged with no college debt” but appreciates that the series has an element of self-awareness to it in that it tries to make a special “effort to appeal to people who are less well off than Dunham and her colleagues” (Paskin, 2012, para. 8). Contrastingly, the one thing that Paskin did not seem to appreciate about the series is its
lack of racial diversity; she finds this to be appalling in this day and age, especially within the setting of New York City.

Similar to Roush, Bianco, and Paskin, the Chicago Sun-Times’ Lori Rackl reviewed the first season of Girls and liked the “raw” take on early twenty-something lives of women. She gave the series an 88 rating. For Rackl, Hannah is the series’ “most compelling character,” one who is complicated: “A slightly pudgy aspiring writer, Hannah seesaws between her sense of entitlement and self-loathing, which explains her willingness to repeatedly hookup [sic] with a narcissistic tool like Adam (Adam Driver)” (para. 7). Yet despite her positive feelings about the reality of the show, Rackl exhibits The Critical Double Standard here as she feels compelled to describe the physical attributes of Hannah, along with her three friends. If this was a series focused on four men characters, such as HBO’s Entourage, would Rackl have described the attractiveness or physical conditions of each character?—most likely she would not. For instance, Rackl describes Marnie as “beautiful” and “uptight,” which remains consistent with other critics’ tendency to also point out the “beauty” of Allison Williams’ character, who fits more in tune with traditionally-accepted, televisual beauty ideals. The Critical Double Standard comes into play here once again as Rackl comments on the contrast between Hannah and Marnie’s physical appearances, which should have no bearing on their review; instead it is an example of how society has taught individuals to read women characters in televisual texts, which is often based on their physical appearance. In contrast to Paskin’s review which refers to the women of Girls as anything but really economically struggling, Rackl touches upon issues of economic uncertainty twice—once to state how Hannah and her friends are having a hard time paying rent and again to place emphasis on Hannah’s personal financial struggles, which began shortly after being cut off financially from her parents. Both of these examples of economic uncertainty contribute to the post-recessionary nature of the program.
Category #2 – Critics who feel Hannah Horvath represents working-class women.

Reviewing Season Two of Girls, the San Francisco Chronicle’s David Wiegand awarded the series a perfect score of 100 and likes the program. Remarking on Hannah’s “fundamental bravery,” he is candid in discussing going after her dreams while facing economic hardship. Despite these obstacles, from Wiegand’s eyes, she remains “completely grounded and self-aware” (para. 2). Unlike some of the other critics, he goes further into discussing Hannah’s economic situation. For instance, he points out that “Hannah endures one low- or non-paying job after another as she tries to get a foothold on a career as a writer” (Wiegand, 2013, para. 5). In essence, for Wiegand, the character of Hannah is emblematic of working-class women and, like Enlightened’s Amy Jellicoe, she is too driven to stop and look around at how others perceive her.

David Hinckley, from the New York Daily News, gave Girls one of its lowest ratings (with a 60) for its first season. In general, he does not like the program, as reflected with his rating, and has a hard time relating to it\textsuperscript{15}. As he states, “‘Girls’ is different—better, smarter and more honest than your average sitcom, but also perhaps focused on a rather narrow slice of the 20s universe” (Hinckley, 2012, para. 2). More specifically, Hinckley comments on the working-class nature of the program, which starkly contrasts Sex and the City’s glamorous lifestyle; he claims that the main focus of the characters of Girls is to achieve the aforementioned lifestyle. Relating to his main critique of the program, that it appeals to only a certain demographic, he states the following: “It’s so intensely focused on these specific girls and their “Sex and the City” dream, though, that at times it may not resonate as much with a larger audience” (Hinckley, 2012, para. 15).

\textsuperscript{15} In some areas, Hinckley appears to be misinformed about certain aspects of the series. For instance, he mentions that Marnie’s character works at a PR firm (instead of an art gallery) and aspires to become environmental lawyer (which was never mentioned or alluded to on the program).
Category #3 – Critics who feel Hannah Horvath represents entitlement and contradiction.

In addition to reviewing its first season, Salon’s Willa Paskin also had a chance to review Season Two. This second-time around, Paskin seems to have changed her mind a bit about the program and about Hannah. She still likes the series, but not as much as before as evidenced by her rating of an 80. Similarly, Paskin finds the second season to be a lot funnier but far less emotional and raw. Given this, it has lost much of its real-life feeling and instead now has more of a TV show-type quality. Accompanying this change in tone, Paskin insists that the characters, especially Hannah, are increasingly less realistic. In fact, she now dislikes Hannah and flat out calls her an “asshole” (Paskin, 2013, para. 5). She continues:

Gone is the neurotic chick who worried about what got up around the sides of condoms, had crappy sex, and couldn’t pay her rent, replaced by an impish, hilarious, sometimes-sweet, sometimes-well-meaning, but hugely self-involved, often misbehaving jerk who kicks out roommates like she’s got a trust fund and seems related to Larry David or one of the ‘Seinfeld’ gang. (Paskin, 2013, para. 5)

The remainder of her review focuses on how Hannah is a “jerk” (but is still funny though, which Paskin sees as a redeeming feature). Within the review, there is another quip about Hannah’s body in which Paskin calls out her “ill-fitting” tank top.

Curt Wagner, from RedEye (Chicago Tribune), gave the program’s first season a 50, which was the series’ lowest rating from critics in either season. As reflected by his low rating, he generally dislikes the series. While Wagner acknowledges that the program is supposed to offer “a brave and daringly honest portrayal of four 20-something women struggling to make lives for themselves in New York,” the critic simply could not get past his intense dislike for the series’ characters (para. 1). He is candid in stating that he finds them to be “annoying, selfish and entitled” (Wagner, 2012, para. 2). Hannah’s character, in particular, comes across as “whiny” to
Wagner, who adds “[t]hese gals are at times so self-absorbed it’s difficult to feel much for them when things don’t go their way. And things don’t often go their way, but mostly because they sabotage themselves” (para. 8). One positive aspect that Wagner made about the program is Hannah’s character being outside of the norm for Hollywood and its traditional beauty standards. This point is quickly followed up with his dislike for Hannah tolerating her partner Adam’s degrading behavior in his belittlement and disparaging comments about Hannah and her body.

Finishing off this third category, The Washington Post’s Hank Stuever assigned Season Two its lowest rating of a 60. Similar to Paskin’s change in opinion from the first to second season, Stuever also had a change of heart toward the program but a more significant one. (While I did not discuss Stuever’s initial review here, he had assigned the first season a 90.) His general take now is that the series has become increasingly predictable but, more so, he finds the four women characters to be uninteresting and unlikeable. For Stuever, most of his review focused on these four characters exuding a strong sense of entitlement, despite supposedly struggling financially:

‘Girls’ is a television show about four young, narcissistic women living in New York on what we are led to believe is the cheap. If it irritates you that the young women are largely supported by their parents, and are in fact played by actresses who have famous or semi-famous parents, then congratulations, you are enjoying the full range of value-added responses to ‘Girls.’ (para. 5).

However, Stuever’s scathing review of the “narcissistic” and “self-absorbed” women characters does not stop there though. Instead, he continues on to discuss Hannah, who tries to distance herself from her former partner, Adam, whom Stuever finds to be “the show’s most intriguing and complex character, which is a shame, since the focus is supposed to be on four women” (Stuever, 2013, para. 12).
While the critics focused on the discussion surrounding the main character and issues of entitlement, there were a few other common themes that came up throughout the reviews. One glaringly-gendered theme was the fixation on, not only describing but rather, judging Hannah’s body. Using words such as “slightly pudgy” and “puffy,” as well as others, critics placed an emphasis on Lena Dunham’s deviation from the traditional Hollywood beauty standards—discourse that is heavily gendered in that it lacks the reversibility element that Larris and Maggio (2012) advocate for. In essence, when the lead character does not conform to the tacit norms of physical beauty within patriarchy, the critics do not know how to respond respectfully (or know that they do not have to respond to this deviation at all).

**What the critics didn’t say.**

Many of the key issues from HBO’s *Girls* were left out of critics’ discussions. For instance, economic issues play a crucial part of the dramedy, yet critics tended to merely allude to Hannah Horvath’s financial instability. Further analysis highlights that even though Hannah’s character is broke, the leading character makes little attempt at working hard. Instead, she only “complains” about both being broke and having to find employment, both illustrative of Post-Recessionary Sexism. While workplace-based sitcoms tend to portray women characters in work environments, work-related dramedies of the post-recessionary era, like *Girls*, focus more on women characters (who through their often gendered titles, and as a result of postfeminism, demote these characters from “women” to “girls”) talking about economic insecurity and hardship. With *Girls* in particular, Hannah is rarely seen in a stable work environment. Adding to her lack of work ethics, Hannah is often shown taking underhanded approaches toward “earning” money. As I pointed out in an article in *Feminist Media Studies*\(^\text{16}\), the series debuts with Hannah trying to guilt-trip her parents into continuing their financial support of her, which at

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\(^{16}\) My article is called “Hannah and her Entitled Sisters: (Post)Feminism, (Post)Recession, and *Girls*, and is currently available online via *Feminist Media Studies*’ website.
that point had lasted two years post-graduation. Toward the end of the same episode, Hannah’s parents leave $20 bills for both her and their hotel maid; however, upon waking up in their empty hotel room, Hannah opts to take both bills as a final measure of eliciting money from her parents, and essentially stealing money from the maid.

Hannah’s underhanded approaches toward “earning” money are both Post-Recessionary Sexist and oft-recurring. On the series, Hannah strives hard to get by and pay rent, which ironically consists of her working as hard as she can to get out of having to actually work. More than anything, this seems to be her full-time job on the dramedy. At the same time, it reflects post-feminist entitlement in the manner that she is reaping the rewards of second-wave feminism, where feminists fought against discrimination (and sexual harassment) in the workplace. Rather than using the workplace opportunities afforded to her by second-wave feminists, Hannah “…tries to maneuver and manipulate her way toward success in lieu of simply working hard toward it” (DeCarvalho, 2013, p. 2). For instance, in one episode, the leading character makes light of sexual harassment but, more so, sees it as “an opportunity” to make money. In “Hannah’s Diary” (Season 1, Episode 4), Hannah has recently begun working as an office assistant at a law firm when she realizes that her boss, Rich, has a tendency to touch and rub not only her but all of the women of the office. Rather than confronting Rich about this behavior, she instead attempts to proposition him, heeding the advice of Jessa to better her “story.” When Rich laughs at Hannah’s proposition, she tries to extort him by threatening to act as a whistleblower on his sexually-harassing ways. Once again, we see an instance of Hannah being underhanded in trying to earn money. This particular example of Post-Recessionary Sexism reifies how the dramedy’s interplay of gender and economic insecurity only serves to undermine what otherwise would be considered serious issues.

Keeping with the theme of trivializing serious issues, another case in point where Post-Recessionary Sexism is enacted on the series is how Hannah also makes light of rape. In “Vagina
“Panic” (Season 1, Episode 2), she is seen interviewing for a job at a trade journal. The interview is going well until Hannah opts to make a rape joke about her potential employer:

**HANNAH (feeling really comfortable in the interview):** I read a statistic that said Syracuse has the highest incidents of date rape of any university.

**MALE INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**HANNAH (continuing on):** Which weirdly went way down the year that you graduated. *(absolute silence from the interviewer)* That was just a joke, because I was saying that there was no more date rape because they figured out who it was, who was doing it, and it was you.

**MALE INTERVIEWER:** Maybe you’re not used to office environments like this, but, um, jokes about rape or race or incest or any of that stuff is not office okay… *(Season 1, Episode 2)*

Again, serious issues are downplayed, particularly through Hannah’s actions, dialogue, and post-feminist entitlement.

At times, there are instances for potential feminist messages on the series. However, more often than not, these instances are quickly overshadowed. For example, Hannah, who has an everyday woman figure rather than a typical model’s physique, is often shown nude or semi-nude which has led some, such as comedian Kate Spencer, to argue that it helps to break the stigmatization that women of healthy weights are not welcome on television, particularly during prime time *(Spencer, 2013)*. Others, such as *Vulture*’s Josef Adalian, have commented on how this pro-sex message may be lost or merely co-opted by the majority demographic of the series’ viewers: “According to Nielsen data supplied to Vulture by HBO, a full 22 percent of *Girls*’ audience has a penis and was born before the Beatles hit American shores, and no other single demographic group comes close in its love for Lena Dunham and her sexually curious Scooby gang” *(Adalian, 2012, para. 1)*. Not only do older men comprise the highest single demographic,
men as a whole comprise 56% of the series’ total viewership (Adalian, 2012). Furthermore, within the series itself, Dunham’s comfortableness with her body (which often translates as Hannah being insecure about her own body image within the world of the dramedy), is often overshadowed by Hannah’s on/off again partner, Adam, who is seen playing with her belly fat and encouraging her to exercise.

While this might be perceived as possible critique of men’s obsession with women’s bodies, it does not help that the series places a heavy reliance on its men characters as “rescuers.” While many of these instances are subtle, some are simply overt—such as in the Season Two finale when Adam literally runs (a seemingly great distance) to Hannah’s rescue when she calls him upset. As such, the series romanticizes a potentially-toxic relationship where Adam continually degrades Hannah, both mentally and sexually. In that same episode, Adam realizes that he is no longer interested in his current love interest since, unlike Hannah, Natalia (played by Shiri Appleby) does not allow him to call her degrading names such as “whore.” This is only after he has non-consensual, rough “sex” with her, which many (myself included) take to be an act of rape. Similarly, Hannah seems to miss Adam and his poor treatment of her, and thus does not seem to mind when he literally kicks in her door only to scoop her in his arms and “rescue” her from her current, unhealthy state in bed. Like Adam fulfilling the role of rescuer for Hannah, Charlie is seen coming to Marnie’s rescue, by agreeing to date her again, after a second season that emphasized her being “lost” without steady employment, housing, but especially him.

A final measure of the intersection of post-feminist messaging with economic issues, or simply Post-Recessionary Sexism, in particular, can be seen through men also fulfilling another role on the series: voices of moral authority, a trope discussed earlier with Parks and Recreation and 30 Rock. As is emblematic of Post-Recessionary Sexism, women are often seen struggling financially while their men counterparts are either not seen struggling or simply do not care as much since they are able to get by with their varied skill sets. As a result, women characters, like
Hannah, in the post-recessionary, work-related dramedy are seen often “complaining” about work, while men characters, like Adam, Charlie, and Ray, are shown content with doing whatever is necessary to make ends meet. During instances of their “complaining,” men characters (particularly Adam and Ray) reign in and offer their input, symbolically acting as voices of moral authority especially concerning financial and economic issues. There are times when Hannah bemoans her difficulty in finding a job to match her status as being college-educated. In one of these examples, Ray is quick to respond: “Yeah, I went to college, too. You know where it left me? I have $50,000 in student loans. That’s how deep in debt I am. I’m sorry, but watching this, this is like watching Clueless” (Season One, Episode One). Throughout the first season in particular, Adam (her then-partner) and Ray (her friend and eventual boss) separately voice their frustration over Hannah’s work transgressions and simultaneously critique her sense of entitlement.

**Veep’s Selina Meyer (played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus).**

For this final HBO text, I once again assessed nine reviews from critics. I only analyzed those written on the first season, as again the second had yet to premiere at the time of writing this chapter. Once more, I organized the commentary from critics into three categories: those who simply like Julia Louis-Dreyfus; those who think Selina Meyer is a good politician in a tough situation; and those who think that Selina Meyer is inept as a politician (see Table 6-3). I expand upon these categories below and later continue with an overview of some important things that the critics failed to bring up (or instead, merely glossed over) in their reviews.
Table 6-3: A brief overview of the venues, critics, their respective scores, and the category they fall under for Veep.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Critic’s Name</th>
<th>Metascore</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Boston Herald</td>
<td>Mark Perigard</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Likes Louis-Dreyfus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle Barky’s Bytes</td>
<td>Ed Bark</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Likes Louis-Dreyfus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Post</td>
<td>Linda Stasi</td>
<td>100**</td>
<td>Thinks Meyer is Good Politician/Tough Situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>RedEye (Chicago Tribune)</td>
<td>Curt Wagner</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Thinks Meyer is Good Politician/Tough Situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>James Poniewozik</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Thinks Meyer is Good Politician/Tough Situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco Chronicle</td>
<td>David Wiegand</td>
<td>100**</td>
<td>Thinks Meyer is Inept Politician</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York Daily News</td>
<td>David Hinckley</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Thinks Meyer is Inept Politician</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Huffington Post</td>
<td>Maureen Ryan</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Thinks Meyer is Inept Politician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slant</td>
<td>Philip Maciak</td>
<td>25*</td>
<td>Thinks Meyer is Inept Politician</td>
</tr>
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*This denotes the lowest score for Veep.
**This denotes the highest score for Veep.

Category #1 – Those who simply like Julia Louis-Dreyfus.

Julia Louis-Dreyfus is the most established comic actress appearing in any of the three HBO programs, having won Emmys previously for Seinfeld and The New Adventures of Old Christine, and some critics focused on the powerful presence of the actress in their reviews.

Mark Perigard, from the Boston Herald, gave Veep a 91, and generally seems to be a fan of the program because of his fandom of Julia Louis-Dreyfus. This comes forth in the very first sentence when he asks, “What if ‘Seinfeld’s’ Elaine Benes was elected vice president?” (Perigard, 2012, para. 1). Furthermore, he concludes the article by mentioning the Emmys that Louis-Dreyfus had won for her past performances, as well as suggesting that she deserves to win another for her work in Veep.17 In fact, Perigard tends to refer to Louis-Dreyfus more than he

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17 Julia Louis-Dreyfus did, in fact, win an Emmy for her work here later that same year.
refers to the character of Selina Meyer throughout his review. Given his fondness of Louis-Dreyfus in general, he tends to see *Veep*’s leading character in a positive light, despite being candid in stating that she has little power or sway and also perceives her staff, comprised of actors whom he also enjoys, as incompetent.

Like Perigard, Ed Bark, from *Uncle Barky’s Bytes*, seemed to most favor Julia Louis-Dreyfus. At the same time, he tends to dislike Selina Meyer, which resulted in a rating of a 75. Speaking highly of Louis-Dreyfus, he writes:

> Already enshrined on *Seinfeld* before the moderate success of CBS’ *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, Louis-Dreyfus again exudes a consummate comedy competence. In Sunday’s premiere episode, she conveys her varying moods with what seems to be the greatest of ease, particularly in a scene where Meyer storms out of her office to bluster ‘What the (f-bomb)!!!’ to a staffer who’s bungled a fake-signing of the sympathy card for Sen. Reeves. (Bark, 2012, para. 14)

When describing the leading character, Bark uses words such as “high maintenance” and “shallow,” the former being a highly gendered adjective and an example of The Critical Double Standard. He also makes a point to reference dialogue from the series that focuses on some of the negative aspects of Selina Meyer.

*Category #2 – Those who think Selina Meyer is a good politician in a tough situation.*

Some critics acknowledge the organizational dynamics that the character faces. The *New York Post*’s Linda Stasi gave *Veep* a perfect score. She finds Selina Meyer to be a promising politician who had the misfortune of losing power once she took on the role of Vice President. More so, she states that “[Selina] has come to realize that *Veep* [sic] is the most dead-end job one can have while still breathing” (Stasi, 2012, para. 6). In essence, Stasi tends to stick up for the *Veep*: “Here, we have a female VP who is neither hapless, helpless nor over her head. She’s a
divorced mother who is stuck in an extremely visible job with a boss who doesn’t like her anymore—the president [sic]” (para. 10). Unlike many of the critics, Stasi does comment on gender, specifically mentioning that this series is not a program about Selina Meyer being a female Vice President—it is simply a series about a Veep who happens to be a woman.

Curt Wagner, from RedEye (Chicago Tribune), reviewed the series and gave it a 75. In general, he enjoys the series because of the supporting cast, as he feels it is essential to workplace sitcoms. Regarding the leading character, Wagner admits that Selina Meyer has her faults, but is not entirely to blame—her staff is incompetent: “Meyer, viewers will learn quickly, wants to be a lot more important and respected than she is. She’s not a complete idiot, but she is a bit ditzy, a lot self-involved and completely image-obsessed. She lacks social graces and relies heavily on an inept group of aides who constantly screw up” (para. 5). Like Bark, Wagner’s words exhibit The Critical Double Standard, as the adjective “ditzy” seems to be a highly-gendered term. Additionally, he comes across as misogynistic while stating that Meyer would make a terrible president and he enjoys seeing her in her position of (non)power as Veep. Once again, we see the normative gender ideologies speaking through these critical paratexts.

Time’s James Poniewozik gave the program a 70 rating and generally enjoys the series but wishes the workplace sitcom was more satirical in nature. While the program lacks originality in his eyes, Poniewozik enjoys the “strong” cast. Like many of the other critics, he emphasizes how Meyer has little to no power: “The unpleasant things people have to shovel in Washington when they don’t have enough power are the stuff of Veep” (Poniewozik, 2012, para. 3). However, he does not find her to be completely inept; instead, he wonders how someone who was a political powerhouse could be the same person playing the role of a going-nowhere-fast Veep. Further, Poniewozik makes note that Meyer’s political prowess has not been seen so far but rather only alluded to.
**Category #3 – Those who think Selina Meyer is inept as a politician.**

In this final category, critics’ reviews reflected the most polarization as both the highest and lowest ratings for the series are included. The *San Francisco Chronicle*’s David Wiegand awarded the highest rating of 100, indicating that he felt the series was rich with satire (unlike *Time*’s Poniewozik). This critic feels that Meyer and her staff are “incompetent.” Discussing the leading character in particular, he describes her as “desperate for visibility and political viability” and adds that her “only saving grace may be that her staff is even more incompetent than she is” (Wiegand, 2012, para. 5-7). According to Wiegand, part of Selina Meyer’s problem might stem from her attention-craving ways. While he doesn’t make any specific mention of gender, he does opt to use some gendered language; as he states while discussing a (woman) senator: “Her interactions with Meyer just sizzle with political bitchiness” (para. 9). Yet again, The Critical Double Standard comes into play—would Wiegand have used the term “bitchiness” to describe the interactions between two men senators? This usage of politically incorrect and derogatory language serves to further the “bitch” stereotype of powerful women, in both television and real life.

In contrast to Wiegand, David Hinckley, from the *New York Daily News*, gave the sitcom a 40. Similar to Poniewozik, Hinckley feels the program lacks originality but goes a step further to question the series’ plausibility. While he enjoys Louis-Dreyfus’s performance, he is unable to say the same for her character. Instead, he questions how Meyer even came to power: “What [the series] doesn’t address is the larger question of how a woman given to frequently blurting out incorrect remarks got elected to the Senate in the first place. It’s not that she can’t say funny things. It’s just that if we believe she’s politically inept, the character doesn’t work” (Hinckley, 2012, para. 8-9).

Like Hinckley, *The Huffington Post*’s Maureen Ryan also gave a 40 rating and agrees by the program’s lack of originality. More so, she finds the series to be predictable—if the general
public opinion is that politicians only care about themselves, what is so new about a program that shows that politicians only care about themselves? Ryan continues on to offer a harsh critique of Meyer, especially in terms of the plausibility of her getting votes in the first place: “None of that would be a problem if the character had compensatory qualities that made you understand why some people, at some point, strongly believed in her” (para. 4). She adds: “Selina’s hair looks just fine, but otherwise, her career seems inexpliable and there are no reasons to care about anything that happens to her or the people around her” (Ryan, 2012, para. 5). A quick note here is that Ryan’s comments on Selina largely focus on her current progress (or lack thereof) as Vice President, rather than on her initial, earned rise to power (which is highlighted during the opening credit sequence of each episode).

Lastly, Philip Maciak, from Slant magazine, gave Veep’s lowest rating of 25. Similarly to his two previous peers in this category, Maciak generally does not like the series again due to a lack of originality. As he asserts, politics is a poorly functioning machine and the series depicts just that. Regarding Selina Meyer, he also joins those who feel that she is a little too unbelievably inept to have been elected in the first place. Maciak does bring in the issue of gender and directly addresses part of the running joke of the series: “All of this attempted hilarity is particularly notable because the central figure of incompetence skewered here is a woman” (para. 5). His critique of the program’s gender portrayal does not stop there:

…Veep often comes off as a long, involved variant on the damangingly simple-minded what-happens-when-the-president-has-her-period joke that circulated around both Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. Not every series has to be a feminist polemic, but could we at least not greenlight a pitch about a woman spectacularly failing at a job no woman has ever held? (Maciak, 2012, para. 6).
What is interesting to note here is that one of the few reviews which actually brought up issues of gender and women in politics in real-life is also the one in which the program earned its lowest score out of the field.

In regards to this set of nine reviews, critics tended to focus on the abilities versus ineptitude of Selina Meyer. However, there was also another common theme mentioned, to a lesser extent: the lack of power and ability to proceed with any authority in her role as Vice President. In essence, critics focused on the “joke” element of Selina being hamstrung at every corner. However, one interpretation of this could be that the blocking of Selina’s progress, by the unseen President, could be a metaphor for the glass ceiling that everyday women actually face.

*What the critics didn’t say.*

Similar to reviews of *Enlightened* and *Girls*, reviews of *Veep* either glossed over or ignored crucial issues, especially pertaining to gender, women, and unstable working environments, from the series. Out of nine reviewers, it is interesting (and sad) that only one critic, *Slant* magazine’s Philip Maciak, made the astute observation of the series’ problematic gender issues, especially in regards to the program’s premise: why is the first woman vice president portrayed as being incompetent? Alternatively, another critic, the *New York Post*’s Linda Stasi, commented on issues of gender in respect to her enjoying the series precisely because it sees past gender issues in the regard that it is a program about a vice president who happens to be a woman, not a woman who happens to be vice president.

While few critics may have commented on them, gender issues are very prevalent throughout the series. In some instances, problematic issues of gender are critiqued. For example, in “Catherine” (Season 1, Episode 3), the media create a narrative that Selina is having a feud with the First Lady over losing her stylist. This can be seen as being a critique of women in politics, who are often biasedly portrayed through non-gender-neutral discourse and a
stereotypical feud about her appearance, not over a real issue. Essentially, because Selina is focus group tested and has her every action scrutinized, she is quite literally performing mainstream feminine identities to see which one is best received by the audience (or in her case, the American public); as such, the disciplining of her character tells us a great deal about cultural norms in our post-recessionary era. Similarly, and in the very same episode, the hardships of balancing one’s work and family life are exemplified for viewers as Selina juggles making time for her daughter, Catherine. Unfortunately, this is quickly overshadowed by the clichéd portrayal of the “bad” (single) mother. Selina is seen prioritizing work over Catherine, to whom she pays very little attention. In another episode that takes the “single, working mother” trope a step further, an unexpected pregnancy comes up as an issue for Selina. She spends an episode panicking about being pregnant while both in office and unwed. The series has an opportunity to address a concern that many women face in their own lives—how to balance work, pregnancy, and motherhood—but instead the program quickly downplays this plot twist. By the next episode, the pregnancy issue is already “resolved” as viewers learn that Selina has had a miscarriage, which the characters seem to generally be happy about. A quick note on Selina is that she shares some commonalities with both Amy Jellicoe and Hannah Horvath, in that all three are perceived as being self-absorbed. Additionally, this commonality goes beyond premium cable programming and can relate back to the broadcast cable sitcoms discussed in the previous case study—the archetypes of The Bitch and The Iron Maiden aptly describe Selina Meyer.

On Veep, Selina’s staff is comprised of three men and one woman.¹⁸ Out of this group, it is interesting to note that the most career-driven is Dan Egan. At the same time, he is also the one who helps to fix most of Selina’s problems. Dan is posed as the “rescuer” as he always seems to swoop in and solve Selina’s issues; however, in doing so, he often is also the cause of problems.

¹⁸ This excludes Selina Meyer’s personal assistant, Sue Wilson (played by Sufe Bradshaw), who does not leave the Vice President’s office.
further down the line. The best example of this is in regards to Selina’s Clean Jobs Bill, a piece of legislation that she views as the proverbial stamp on her first vice presidential term. In trying to get this bill passed, Selina struggles to find balance between opposing parties to sit on the Clean Jobs Commission. After essentially treading water, trying to keep the bill afloat for as long as possible, it is eventually Dan, who through political trickery, manages to get the opposing lobbies to come to terms and agree on the appointees for the Commission (in a move that could be straight from the playbook of Jack from NBC’s *30 Rock*, as discussed in the first case study). Dan’s surreptitious maneuvering later comes back into play near the end of the season as it comes to light that there may have been underhanded politics at hand, forcing Selina to distance herself from and even strike down her own Clean Jobs Bill by voting against it. Acting as the counterbalance to Dan’s questionable ethics, Amy Brookheimer offers Selina advice usually falling on the moral highroad. The two together play the part of Selina’s “shoulder angel and devil,” one offering Selina an honest path to her goals and the other trying to sway her to the more devious. What this shows is that male assertiveness, while more typically executive, is problematic in its reckless bravado.

While issues of economic viability are not seen to be a problem for Selina, given her position, there is a heavy focus on the leading character always being worried about being replaced as the Vice Presidential candidate for the next campaign. Her unstable working environment is only aggravated further through intense media scrutiny and constant updates of ratings and her favorability factor (or lack thereof). Coupled with this, Selina’s work environment is made only more unstable through her working relationship with the unseen President of the United States. Any and all of Selina’s projects get pulled at the last second by her “boss.” This always leaves her in a jam, where she is essentially never able to do anything or get ahead. As such, she is continually inhibited by the President from following through on anything, thereby leaving her with no victories under her belt as Vice President. Furthermore, if
her term ends and she has not completed any projects, it will seem as if she simply has not done anything as Vice President.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter, I set out to explore the portrayals of working women in three HBO texts: *Enlightened*, *Girls*, and *Veep*. Situated within the larger scope of this research project, these three programs feature both middle-aged and twenty-something women striving for stable work environments. In particular, *Enlightened* and *Veep* portray middle-aged women who are already in the workplace, but are struggling to maintain their employment status (and sometimes sanity). Furthermore, they are also striving to head up their respective corporate/governmental ladders—this often serves as a source of humor on the programs in regards to the “outrageous, win-at-all-costs” mentality that both women characters share. On *Girls*, a twenty-something woman struggles with economic hardship but also post-feminist entitlement, poor work ethics, and men as voices of moral authority. She is rarely shown in any kind of stable workplace. Through the examination of television critics’ reviews, coupled with my own analysis, I focused on each of the series’ leading character: Amy Jellicoe, Hannah Horvath, and Selina Meyer, respectively. Drawing from Gray’s work on paratexts, I looked at reviews, as examples of paratexts for these HBO programs, to understand what and how television critics were discussing these three women characters.

My analysis of reviews revealed a common occurrence among the nine articles: the presence of The Critical Double Standard, a term that I use to describe the lack of gender-neutral criticism around Amy, Hannah, and Selina. Instead, in its place, there was evidence of misogyny through both overtly-offensive and more subtle sexist language; some examples include “manipulative flirt,” “PMS rage,” “high maintenance,” “ditzy,” and “bitchiness.” Given the nature of paratexts, as manifested through critics’ reviews here, it is important to consider the
ideological implications of the gendered semantics used and how it might influence an audience in how they read the central texts. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that The Critical Double Standard has no bearing on the reviewer’s overall feelings toward a character—a critic may like a woman character, yet still may use sexist terms to describe her. It seems that misogyny has been normalized or internalized by the writer, that they might not even realize how some of their words may be viewed as offensive. Additionally, it does not seem to be a phenomenon restricted only to men—women reviewers are just as capable of demonstrating The Critical Double Standard.

These double standards, then, are magnified as frames that reinforce the hegemonic readings of the televisual texts.

While HBO strives to distinguish itself from broadcast (and cable) television, as noted in their “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.” slogan, the women characters of these premium channel programs fail to distinguish themselves from their broadcast counterparts. These women-centric HBO original series are not immune to the influences of post-feminist media culture. Moreover, the critical paratexts tell us that the programs are viewed through the same normative lenses as standard TV, so even if they were thematically and aesthetically different, they would be seen in the same light. In Enlightened, for instance, Amy Jellicoe is successful and career-driven—but viewers never see her in that state. Instead she is seen as emotional, irrational, and willing to use others to get her way. In Girls, Hannah Horvath reifies Post-Recessionary Sexism onscreen in what “postfeminist/post-recession society deems her place: being entitled, unambitious, and unemployed” (DeCarvalho, 2013, p. 369). Regarding HBO’s Veep, Philip Maciak’s review touched upon perhaps my biggest critique of the series, which is that viewers finally see a Vice President who is a woman, only to see (and laugh) at her constant failures. In all nine programs, spanning four networks, and seven centered on women characters, I found only one woman to be truly emblematic of feminist ideals—Leslie Knope on NBC’s Parks and Recreation. While a few
other characters exhibited shades of feminism, these often faded in the face of adversity, as will be discussed shortly.

In the subsequent chapter, I conclude my research project through further reflections on all three case studies and what each has brought, especially in terms of their findings and their distinctive methodological techniques, toward making this project a cohesive whole. Additionally, I elucidate how my findings in this project have answered my overall research question, concerning women characters, workplace-based versus work-related issues, and the hardships of economic uncertainty, as a way to comment on the changing nature of the workplace (sitcom) in the post-recessionary era.
CHAPTER 7:

‘IT’S REAL LIFE, LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS’: THE WORKING WOMEN OF SITCOM AND POST-RECESSIONARY HARDSHIP

A feminism driven by representational concerns and commodity logic, and that is willing to sacrifice specific political objectives in the quest for a more attractive image, is a feminism with little hope of making a material difference in the lives of all women. – Bonnie J. Dow, 1996, p. 213

You need to stop freaking out because you’re not where you thought you would be, in life or in our business. It’s real life, lower your expectations. –Max Black, 2 Broke Girls, 2012, Season 1, Episode 19

Reflecting Back on Women in the Televisual Workplace

Just as they are in real-life workplaces across the United States, women protagonists in the televisual workplace have struggled to gain (and keep) positions of authority. During the 1970s, the “liberated woman” emerged as an archetype, giving rise to assertive, career-driven, yet contained working women characters. The workplace sitcom became a venue for more feminist-minded women protagonists on television—reflecting ongoing societal changes at the time, especially with the rise of Second Wave of Feminism during the 1960s, but only within the existing political-economic, patriarchal structure of television. Workplace comedies of the 1970s showcased lifestyle feminism, whereby the politics of feminism were removed from the depictions of “liberated women” characters. As Kutulas (2005) asserts, the depiction of liberation on television was vastly different from that of feminism. Instead, workplace comedies positioned feminism “as extremist and mean” (p. 221). The positions to which women characters were assigned paralleled real life, as men characters ran the televisual workplace while women characters were relegated to positions with less power—mostly jobs pertaining to clerical and
service work. Despite this, “for younger female viewers, who had few meaningful models of the workplace, images of strong, competent working women were particularly revelatory” (Kutulas, 2005, p. 221). At the same time, television networks felt no real threat from the depictions of liberated women. Coupled with this, 1980’s postfeminism became yet another reason why feminist women were rarely seen on television. Instead, working women were shown being preoccupied with romantic relationships—but the same could not be said for their men counterparts (Dow, 1996).

Since then, workplace sitcoms have continued to be a space for more feminist-minded, career-oriented, yet contained, working women. As this research project has discussed, however, workplace-based sitcoms have been in decline for quite some time now. In fact, NBC’s Thursday night is the only weeknight that still showcases back-to-back, workplace-based sitcoms on primetime, broadcast television—but even this came to an end in May 2013 with the series finale of The Office, just five months after the series finale of 30 Rock.

With this in mind, this dissertation explored the post-recessionary shift away from workplace-based sitcoms toward work-related sitcoms/dramedies to better understand the implications of the waning of a traditionally-historical venue for more feminist-minded (even if circumscribed) portrayals of women. With the emergence of these work-related sitcoms, women are rarely shown in the workplace or if they are they are struggling to stay afloat both in terms of job and financial security. Set against the backdrop of post-recessionary anxiety, this shift in programming could arguably be reflective of years of economic hardship—yet, as this research project has elucidated, men characters are shown struggling but still manage to get by (and without making any complaints or taking any underhanded approaches). As such, I have argued that the term “postfeminism” no longer fully captures the extent of depictions of working women on television today. Instead, the cultural context of the post-recessionary era must be taken into
consideration, as it has contributed to different portrayals of women in the televisual workplace, portrayals that dramatize what I have labeled “Post-Recessionary Sexism.”

In the next section, I will compare and contrast how each of the three case studies detailed in this project offer social commentary on the depictions and perceptions of working women in post-recessionary comedy, as well as issues of feminism and economic hardship. It is here that I will also emphasize the significance of this research project’s findings, especially within the larger societal context. The final section will then delineate extensions of this research into possible future projects.

**Key Post-Recessionary Televisual Trends**

As Kutulas (2005) asserts, “[t]elevision does not create gender norms, but it is a vital part of any cultural conversation about them, providing both a frame of reference and a forum where social contradictions can be explored” (p. 218). With Kutula’s assertion in mind, I conducted three separate but related case studies to examine working women in television comedy. In order to understand the roles of women in the post-recessionary era, I first needed to examine the televisual roles of women before and during The Great Recession.

In the first case study, I explored what would be deemed more traditional sitcoms in the form of a “viewing strip” to determine the messages put forth by four back-to-back, workplace-based sitcoms on NBC—*Community*, *Parks and Recreation*, *The Office*, and *30 Rock*. One of the common themes found through the viewing strip is that the women characters often contradicted their own principles to achieve their goals at work. Additionally, these women—unlike the stronger women of 1970’s work-based comedies—often needed the guidance of men to steer them toward how to approach their problem. These two themes were found in three of the four programs on the night of the viewing strip—Pam from *The Office* was the only exception that evening. Furthermore, issues of economic viability rarely were emphasized on the night of the
viewing strip, likely due to the nature of each program and the stable work environments that they take place in. Of the four episodes, only one featured economic uncertainty, and that only centered on the one character, of all four sitcoms, who was not employed (or enrolled in the case of Community) in said work environment. I found that these issues of economic uncertainty were more often emphasized in the transition from the workplace-based sitcoms of the first case study to the work-related sitcoms of the second.

The second case study looked at character archetypes that characterize women in situation comedies, and examined how these generic forms have been adapted to two new sitcoms of the post-recessionary era, CBS’s 2 Broke Girls and ABC’s Don’t Trust the B---- in Apartment 23. I found that the complex, multi-faceted nature of the characters in this newer style of work-related sitcoms required a hybridization of existing archetypes—thereby giving rise to what I call The Skeptical Brunette and The Down-on-Her-Luck Blonde (as well as The Comedic Sexual Harasser and The “Crazed” Woman Neighbor) archetypes. Additionally, the phenomenon of Post-Recessionary Sexism emerged with the examination of these programs. A central theme of Post-Recessionary Sexism includes portrayals of women and men both struggling financially. However, in these depictions, women are always “complaining” about their hardships while their men counterparts are seemingly unfazed by them. In these instances, the women characters often seem to harp on the need to work, rather than actually actively working. These women are portrayed as nagging and ungrateful, while men are depicted as calm, cool, and collected. In these instances, women characters tend to take underhanded and dishonest approaches to (temporarily) solve their financial issues. Men, on the other hand, are able to get by using their skills and work ethic alone. Furthermore, in depictions of Post-Recessionary Sexism, women

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19 It is important to note that concerns of personal financial instability, as well as macro-level issues stemming from the economic downturn, are tied into the storylines of all four of these sitcoms at various points in each series’ run. These include issues of layoffs, corporate buyouts, spending cuts, and low wages, as well as other concerns.
characters often seek or heed the counsel of men, even though the men are seldom in drastically better situations themselves. Serious issues are also downplayed in examples of Post-Recessionary Sexism, especially through the use of “comedic” sexual harassment between women characters and their co-workers/bosses. Additionally, often the women characters perpetuate problematic language and mindsets themselves, through the use of off-color humor, such as rape jokes. This downplay of serious issues continued into the third case study.

In the final case study, I examined both original texts and their paratexts, the latter being manifested through critics’ reviews, in relation to post-recessionary, women-centric programming on HBO: *Enlightened*, *Girls*, and *Veep*. I found that, for each program, critics tended to focus on one (varying) particular issue. In regards to *Enlightened*, critics fixated on whether or not they simply liked or disliked the character of Amy Jellicoe. A minor theme that came through in some of the reviews (but not all) was whether or not they thought that Amy was “crazy.” When writing about *Girls*, the critics more often than not focused on whether or not Hannah Horvath is entitled. Interestingly enough, there was quite a bit of variation in the paratexts on this subject. Some critics thought Hannah to be over-privilegged, while others felt that she was emblematic of the working class. A lesser commonality that came up often relates to Hannah’s body image and how it falls outside of the cultural norm for Hollywood beauty standards—discourse that falls under The Critical Double Standard which I introduced in this case study and will briefly touch upon again below. Finally, in *Veep*, the discussion amongst critics that came up in every review was whether or not Selina Meyer is inept as a politician. As critics pondered her ineptitude, some placed the blame on the incompetence of her staff instead, a theme that also came up quite often. Throughout the paratexts regarding each series, I noticed a pattern in many of the reviews. Peppered throughout the paratexts, there were sexist and misogynistic remarks regarding the women characters of these three HBO programs—comments which seemed completely normalized within the reviews. I described these occurrences as The Critical Double Standard,
because these remarks never would have been made if the protagonists were men. A few instances included attributing Amy Jellicoe’s anger at her unjust treatment as being a result of premenstrual syndrome, as well as the aforementioned comments regarding Hannah’s body using words such as “puffy” and “pudgy.” An important thing to note is that both men and women critics were guilty of perpetuating The Critical Double Standard. The phenomenon from the second case study also made an appearance in the HBO series. Post-Recessionary Sexism was found throughout the programs and was especially engrained in *Girls*. The characters of this particular dramedy exhibited many of the traits of Post-Recessionary Sexism. Hannah often tries to get out of work, is underhanded in “earning” a living, and is not above joking about serious issues such as rape. These issues of Post-Recessionary Sexism were prolific in *Girls*, largely due to its direct focus on issues of economic uncertainty in the post-recessionary era.

In the build-up leading to the start of recession, strong women characters in workplace-based sitcoms were being symbolically cut down. They once represented ambitious, career-driven individuals; after their moment of (brief) triumph though, they were quickly thrust back into more traditionally-accepted roles for women on television. As the recession waned, new sitcoms (and dramedies) emerged in the post-recessionary era. The problematic depictions of women, however, remained the same (and arguably worsened). The new breed of post-recessionary women characters no longer has stable work environments. This instability manifests itself in two primary ways: amongst younger, twenty-something women characters, it is found in financial insecurity; and amongst older, middle-aged women characters, it is found in what is essentially mental instability and duress.

The significance of making sense of this shift in programming from workplace-based to work-related sitcoms, and the accompanying decline of images showcasing working women on television, is important to consider as these changes affect everyone—that is, both women and men, girls and boys alike. By slowly removing women from (but keeping men in) the televisual
workplace, viewers are sent a variety of problematic messages, including that women should focus more on consumption and less on their careers, men are more valuable in the workplace because of their skillsets, and sexual harassment and assault are not a big deal so even women can poke fun at these issues. For women characters who were financially stable and successful, audiences receive messages that these women are “crazed,” obsessed, unstable. Given this, there are broader theoretical implications about how representations of financially-stable women are constructed, versus their men counterparts. One noticeable difference is that images of clichéd stereotypes, such women being emotional and irrational as opposed to being mentor-material and rational like men, were reified. Similarly, another message that is put forth for audiences, from these work-related sitcoms, revolves around women working only to a certain age, as again twenty-something women characters have been replacing their middle-aged counterparts. In essence, all of these messages give rise to a sort of “epistemological violence” against women. According to Teo (2008), who introduced the term, epistemological violence serves to “identify interpretations that construct the ‘Other’ as problematic or inferior, with implicit or explicit negative consequences for the ‘Other,’ even when empirical results allow for meaningful, equally compelling, alternative interpretations” (p. 47). Taking Teo’s term into consideration, I cannot help but think about the many manifestations of post-recessionary sexism that turned up in both the second and third case studies. Instead of promoting images of women’s solidarity, these manifestations inhibited spaces for this promotion and, as such, blocked images and messages concerning the importance behind such a type of solidarity (for audiences). In the absence of images and discourse around solidarity, it is alarming that emphasis and promotion was instead placed on the trivialization and normalization of sexual harassment and assault, coupled with the perpetuation of images that highlight financially-stable and successful women being “crazed” and twenty-something women being more desirable onscreen and in the workplace.
Shedding light on these potentially harmful messages is crucial in the process of highlighting the perpetuation of societal injustices, especially toward women and girls, that continue to play out not only in real life but also onscreen. As Jennifer Siebel Newsom (2011) makes clear in her award-winning documentary, *Miss Representation*, children need role models to look up to. However, what kind of role models are media providing them with? As discussed earlier in this dissertation, Douglas (2010) questions enlightened sexism in particular and has dedicated much of her work toward understanding and answering the following question: what messages are ultimately being taught by media, television programs in particular, to young girls (and boys)? Taking into consideration the backdrop of the post-recessionary era, I believe it is important to extend this question to post-recessionary sexism. It is not enough to simply ask “where have all the positive women role models in the workplace gone?” Instead, the more apt question to ask is “where have images of women in the workplace gone?” At the end of the day, the increasing absence women in the televisual workplace needs to be questioned since, again, young girls and women need role models to look up to, because as Marie Wilson, the Founder and President of the White House Project and also the Co-Creator of Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day™ (Wilson, 2013), reminds us “you can’t be what you can’t see” (Newsom, 2011).

**Future Research**

It is important to note that the United States was not the only country affected by The Great Recession. On the contrary, the recession of 2007-2009 was a global phenomenon. As such, scholars interested in the intersection of gender, economics, and media studies might wish to examine how the post-recessionary global economy has both influenced and changed the landscape of televisual portrayals of women (and, by proxy, men) in situation comedies. In

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20 Sadly, according to a January 2013 article from *The Atlantic*, The White House Project had to close its own doors “due to the challenging economic climate” (Franke-Ruta, 2013, para. 3).
particular, one objective might be to determine if the global recession created a truly monumental shift in television programming across the world, thus comparing popular work sitcoms from across the globe. An example that one might consider is that the US version of *The Office* originally adapted from a British sitcom; thus, this might serve as an indication that global dynamics may be at play. Furthermore, the importance of these future projects stems from, as I have previously stated in this research project, the fact that work-based sitcoms are the last bastion of progressive portrayals of women on television. If work-based sitcoms are being replaced on a global scale by work-related sitcoms (and the “Post-Recessionary Sexist” portrayals of women that go along with it), the implications could be a staggering step back—as entire generations across the world will be influenced by these poor televisual representations of women for years to come—until there is another monumental shift in the nature of the programming.

Rather than conclude this research project on a pessimistic note, I instead want to end on a hopeful one. The working women of these programs, for the most part, fell into the trap of Post-Recessionary Sexism; however this was not the case for all. Instead, as complex texts, there were moments of agency or character contextualization that viewers may see as truly “enlightened.” While it is true that some of the women were depicted poorly throughout their respective series, there were a few who evolved in a positive manner as their programs progressed. When we first met Amy Jellicoe in the opening pages of this research project, she was at a truly low point—irrational, angry, crazy, and slightly violent—completely disempowered. As the narrative of the show progressed, so did Amy. The person who emerged in the end was calm, composed, and finally at peace with herself—a far cry from the woman whom we met in the beginning.

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The woman picks up her coffee from the barista at the counter. Coffee in hand, she walks toward the door and passes a stack of newspapers on the way. She glances down and pauses. There she is: on the front page, in the story of how she took down a corrupt corporate giant. She lingers for a moment and stares at the paper, at her accomplishments. The look on her face is one of grim satisfaction. She continues on, out the door and down the sidewalk. She walks into the crowd of people—people engrossed in their own worlds, their own lives, unknowing and oblivious of the woman passing them by. She continues to walk, knowing that she stood up against corruption and greed. She stood up against those who have wronged her and who have wronged many others. She stood up to them, and she won. She became an “agent of change”—and this brief moment of triumph is the last time we see Amy Jellicoe. (“Agent of Change,” Enlightened, HBO, 2013)
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