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An analysis of femininity : how popular female characters in the media portray contemporary womanhood

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AN ANALYSIS OF FEMININITY: HOW POPULAR FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE
MEDIA PORTRAY CONTEMPORARY WOMANHOOD

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

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by
Stephanie Ortego Roussell
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ABSTRACT

The impact of the media on adolescent girls has received greater theoretical, legal and societal focus over the last few decades. Several studies link the development of women's gendered identities, healthy sexual activity and self-efficacy to how the media portray women. Restrictive or unrealistic themes of womanhood or femininity in the media can impact a young girl's social construction of identity and provide limited examples of what it means to be a woman in today's society. This study qualitatively examines femininity in contemporary media by analyzing—via textual analysis and focus groups—how popular female characters embody, portray and promote different conceptualizations of femininity. Do these characters portray more traditional styles of femininity? Or do they embrace the gains of Third Wave feminism and promote more contemporary versions of femininity? Results suggest a shift toward contemporary femininity, but also reveal lingering stereotypes in emotional and cultural behaviors.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, greater theoretical, legal and societal focus has been given to media characters' effects on adolescent girls (Lowe, 2003). Sexualization and self-objectification emerge as two conceptual consequences believed to manifest in young girls who are negotiating a social or cultural identity within a hyper-sexualized media environment. Literature reveals that "media representations of femininity are restrictive, unrealistic, focused on physical beauty of a type that is virtually unattainable," which can influence a girl's perception of womanhood (Durham, 1999, p. 193). Fleras and Kunz (2001) and Jiwani (1993) suggest that white, middle-class characters that do not reflect reality dominate television. Additionally, van Zoonen (1994) notes "stereotypical, degrading, humiliating and violating representations of women and femininity abound in mass media content," and that there exists an overabundance of traditional themes of femininity embedded in the gender norms of the media (p. 149). While individual exposures to conflicting media images may not produce a direct effect, comprehensive exposure can make it difficult to separate fact from a socially constructed fiction (Hirji, 2011).

According to Lotz (2006), more complex female characters appeared on television in the 1990s, whereas prior to then, network television primarily featured female characters in situation comedies, such as *I Love Lucy* or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Interestingly, even though such women may appear more often on screen, studies continue to demonstrate that inadequate representations still exist. A 2008 study by The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media examined more than 4,000 characters across 400 G, PG, PG-13 and R-rated movies, revealing that two types of female characters are represented most often: the inferior woman and the hypersexual woman. According to the report, "traditionality was a function of the character's

relational and parental status, i.e. women are more likely to be portrayed as parents and in a committed relationship; and hypersexuality was portrayed by an ‘overemphasis on attractiveness and sexuality by way of clothing and body proportions’” (p. 14). This finding is consistent with other studies, such as the National Organization for Women Annual Gender Portrayal Study that “documents the limited range of women’s representations, either in terms of their underrepresentation in televisual worlds or their overwhelming confinement to roles in which they are primarily defined as wives, mothers, love interests, or potential sexual conquests” (Lotz, 2006, p. 11).

The development of a gender or cultural identity is not solely based on what one views in the media. But, because feminine norms and beliefs often form during adolescence, the media can be a major socializing agent and one of great influence over whether women form healthy gender attitudes and beliefs about themselves or other women (Driscoll, 2002). Limited themes of femininity in the media can be even more detrimental to adolescent girls (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Adolescence—or emerging adulthood—brings about physical, cognitive, sexual and psychosocial developmental changes (Drobac, 2011). During this time, young women navigate emotional, developmental and sexual avenues that allow them to explore their identity and independence (Erikson, 1968; Sugar, 1993). Additionally, Durham (1999) suggests emerging adulthood can also mean a loss of self-determination as limited femininity norms are expressed repeatedly in the media. Hancock (1989) agrees that the mass media can play a crucial role in an adolescent girl’s identity formation:

“A young girl projecting herself into the future can’t help but feel caught by contradictory imperatives: even as she dons her soccer uniform, ads for deodorant implore, ‘Never let them see you sweat.’ Self-confidence yields to self-consciousness as a girl judges herself

as others judge her against an impossible feminine ideal. To match that ideal, she must stash away a great many parts of herself. She gives up being childlike in order to be ladylike. She loses her self-possession; she loses her sense of self as subject; she senses that she is now "other" and becomes object in a male world . . . Contained, adapted and sexualized long before adolescence, a girl is cowed and tamed as her natural spontaneity gives way to patriarchal constructions of the female. In donning the masks provided by [mass] culture, a girl easily loses sight of who and what she is beneath the feminine facade she adopts in youth" (p. 22).

This process, articulated originally by Simone de Beauvoir (1961) means "internalizing a 'male gaze' and turning it upon oneself, thus learning to evaluate and assess rather than to feel and experience one's own body" (Tolman, Impett, Tracy & Michael, 2006). This evaluation means young girls will mold their actions and behaviors to fit with social norms, rather than experience adolescence and femininity organically (Tolman, Impett, Tracy & Michael, 2006).

Other research suggests that adolescence may also serve as a time where girls resist the media's messages and cultural or gendered norms (Korobov & Thorne 2009; Tolman 2002). The ability for young women to understand and negotiate this time period with stronger or more complete representations of what it's like to be a woman can create healthier, natural and more confident adult women. The purpose of this study is to examine portrayals of contemporary femininity in the media and provide a deeper understanding and potential path forward for media content that won't confine a young girl's choice of femininity, but rather encourage it.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminist Theory

According to feminist scholar Anita Harris, “feminism has furnished young women with choices about sexuality, chances for education and empowerment, and new ways of asserting autonomy and rights” (2004, p. xvii). Feminist theory has long studied the effect of culture or society on women’s bodies and personalities (de Beauvoir, 1949; Coleman, 2008), and contemporary feminist work focuses on the media’s role in this construction of identity. Feminist theory critiques patriarchal supremacy and invests political, social and economic efforts to raise the group consciousness and power of women. Feminist theory suggests that patriarchal ideology is embedded in unequal power structures and represented in traditional femininity as efforts to “sustain gender inequities and sexual subordination” (Durham, 1999, p. 214). Durham continues that “contemporary mass media are fully aware of the power of feminist ideas on women, cleverly using them as rhetorical devices while working simultaneously to undercut feminism (1999, p. 214).

Scholars believe feminist values are thoroughly incorporated into political, civil and cultural practices, however contemporary feminist theoretical frameworks also examine the crossroads young girls stand at in modern Western culture (McRobbie, 2008). At the intersection of feminism and postmodernism, “new feminists,” or postfeminists “seek to rid feminist practice of its perceived ideological rigidity,” and focus more on cultural, societal and gender-specific issues (Snyder, 2008, p. 176).

Specific to media, feminist theory argues that women in subordinate roles “encourage societal adherence to patriarchal notions of femininity” (Lowe, 2003, p. 123). These ideas lead to

the general framework this thesis takes, one of a feminist psychodynamic developmental framework, which suggests gender inequities found in skewed patriarchal structures will fundamentally change how an adolescent girl psychologically develops (Tolman, Impett, Tracy & Michael, 2006; Curtin, Ward, Meriwether & Caruthers, 2011).

Social Construction of Gender

Gender is often defined as a cultural system—rather than the biological system that defines a person’s sex—and is affected and organized by social and societal factors (Silva, 2008). This idea of gender as a multidimensional system is supported by several gender scholars who cite gender dimensions can include: gender-specific personality and interests; globally approved sex role behaviors; masculinity and femininity ideology; gender role conflict, stress and conformity (Levant et al, 2007). Within the construct of gender, masculinity and femininity constitute meta-concepts composed of multiple characteristics, including socially and biologically defined factors (Gabbay, Lafontaine, & Lamontagne, 2011). According to Lorber (1994), “once gender is ascribed, the social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations” (p. 5).

Silva (2008) suggests behaving in step with culturally recognizable gender roles can be “crucial to the conception of one’s deepest self” (p. 938). Gender is often said to humanize individuals within their culture (Butler, 1990). The social construction of gender can materialize over time, and individuals will form opinions of what it means to be female or male based on several factors, including the behaviors and cognitions they view in the media (Pech, 2006). These ideas are then internalized and acted out in gender approved behaviors and form an individual’s gender ideology which can exist on a traditional to postmodern spectrum of beliefs

(Levant et al, 2007). According to Painter and Ferruci (2012), gender socialization can become a part of a young girl's conception of her identity, and media portrayals of specific characters, professions or roles provide socializing messages about women in general. This can be detrimental to gender equality. Studies have shown that men are more likely to endorse traditional gender ideology, more so than women do, and this is because traditional femininity and masculinity ideologies uphold traditional gender-based power structures (Levant et al, 2007).

Femininity

But what is femininity? Several frameworks and theories link femininity and gender literature. Femininity is a multifaceted concept that describes gender, but is developed through socialization and individual construction of self-identity or self-concept (MacDonald, 1995). Psychologists consider femininity (as a dimension of gender) as a way women evolve socially to enact appropriate behaviors, cognitions and experiences (MacDonald, 1995). And biologically, theories suggest that individuals obtain gender dimensions, like femininity, through knowable physical differences, social learning and interactions and experiences (MacDonald, 1995).

Making specific images or storylines of femininity most salient through repetition or promotion can activate “culturally prevalent, complementary gender stereotypes [that] serve to increase the degree to which they will endorse a system of inequality” (Jost & Kay, 2005). Fiske (1989) adds that culture circulates texts and discourses that define and redefine an individual's social identity. And Gonick (2010) believes researchers should consider “the ways in which images may be critically responsive to the ideological conditions of their circulation” (p. 310). Hall (1993) suggests that some ideals expressed in the media have become so naturalized that they are now common sense. Interestingly, the viewer does not have to agree with the storyline

or stereotype for it be influential (Jost & Kay, 2005). To understand this naturalization process, one must look not only at media effects, but also at the cultural conceptualizations that frame current social structure and acceptable behavior (Gonick, 2010).

Representations of women in the media, most specifically misrepresentations of women, have produced gender inequalities that transition into real life (Pech, 2006). Pech adds “these inequalities are manifested in stereotypes, which suggest that a female character, by virtue of being female, possesses all the qualities that are commonly associated with women (2006, p. 4). These stereotypes tend to complement historically constructed ideas of gender roles and are perpetuated repeatedly in the media (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). These stereotypes can provide limiting representations of what it’s like to be a woman to young adolescent girls, skewing her social construction of healthy gender identity.

In addition to qualitative and exploratory work, several quantitative and methodologically valid scales are used to assess femininity and gender norms, giving the concept quantitative and measurable qualities. The Femininity Ideology Scale measures responses to traditional feminine norms, such as body image, care taking, sexuality, family, religion, marriage, passivity, dependency and career (Levant et al, 2007). These dimensions connect well with literature that suggests traditional femininity can be operationalized as dependency on or deference to men, chastity, body image issues, motherhood and emotional affinity (Levant et al, 2007).

The Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory identifies self-reported measures of conformity or non-conformity to traditional feminine ideals, expectations and thoughts about societal rules (Mahalik et al, 2005). The Attitudes Towards Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1978), although developed during the peak of the women’s rights movement, is still used in media research, and examines beliefs about gender-specific responsibilities, privileges and

behaviors (Levant et al, 2007). It is an interesting scale because it does not specifically measure attitudes towards *women*, but rather attitudes towards *women's rights*. The scale has shown a trend towards more egalitarian beliefs since its inception, suggesting that gains made by the women's rights movement have been somewhat incorporated into contemporary gender attitudes.

The BEM Sex Inventory Scale is often used to test masculinity, femininity and androgynous beliefs in gender roles (Wolff & Watson, 1983). This scale tends to measure a level of mental health coinciding with respondents who identify as masculine, feminine or androgynous and posits "the androgynous person ... is emerging as a more appropriate sex role ideal for contemporary society" (Wolf & Watson, 1983, p. 544). Several traditionally feminine trait examples on the scale include "childlike," "shy," "yielding," or "gullible," suggesting that the scale inherently skews feminine traits as non-desirable or a sign of limited intelligence, while masculine traits, such as "forceful," "independent," "self-reliant," suggest more socially desirable personality outcomes (Wolff & Watson, 1983). The Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale (Tolman & Porche, 2000) measures the "degree to which adolescent girls have internalized or resisted two features of traditional femininity: bringing an inauthentic self into relationships and having an objectified relationship with their bodies" (Levant et al, 2007, p. 374).

These different measures of femininity and a feminism-induced shift in the make-up of female media characters, lead to two possible macro operationalizations of femininity in contemporary media: traditional femininity (or pre-Second Wave feminism) and contemporary femininity (or as defined in this study as postfeminist).

Traditional Femininity

In traditional femininity, “girl” or “woman” is associated with “weakness, vulnerability, gentleness and to some extent invisibility” (Jeanes, 2011, p. 404). Based on Freud’s theories of the Oedipus and castration complexes, Laura Mulvey, in her seminal work about film critique, cites that in an effort to protect the male viewer from these complexes and prolong his pleasure, the woman is either turned into a fetish or restored to her “due place in the patriarchal order by the end of the film by punishing her or by reintegrating her into a romantic relationship” (Mulvey, 1988; MacDonald, 1995, p. 27). Because of this, several words to describe traditional femininity hold a negative connotation, but it is important to note that stereotypes and negativity exists on both ends of the femininity spectrum.

Traditional feminine characters are also operationalized as fragile, nurturers, passive, agreeable with men’s sexual advances, focused on romance, sentimental or emotionally committed and consumed with desire to attract the male gaze and create romantic situations (Korobov, 2011). Additionally, traditional femininity suggests women do not initiate sexual relationships or voice needs or desires, rather opting to accept male advances or wait for pursuit by men, also known as the “sexual gatekeeper and passive partner” (Levant et al, 2007).

Moreover, traditional femininity has been linked with ignorance and objectification, which raises concerns that traditional femininity could harm women’s sexual health, self-efficacy, and interfere with sexual agency and personal fulfillment (Levant et al, 2007). Painter and Ferruci (2012) suggest that women in the media are generally portrayed as passive, overemotional or dependent on men. Other research gives evidence that women are frequently portrayed as subservient, sexualized or physically and mentally lacking (Durham, 1999).

Postfeminist Femininity

In contrast, there exists a new set of female characters that break these traditional norms. According to Jeanes (2011), “the contemporary western girl as constructed by the media, has deviated somewhat to incorporate a rebellious, independent ‘new breed’ of girl who knows what she wants and has the means to ruthlessly pursue it” (p. 404). Postfeminism posits that women should not define themselves in relation to men, but be our own definition relative to each other.

This “new girl” is a by-product of the work of postfeminism, a feminist paradigm that “expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks” (Lotz, 2006, p. 21). Postfeminism, or Third Wave feminism marks a break from Second Wave feminism that fought most specifically for political and gender equality. Postfeminism rejects that to be feminist, one must “conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories” (Snyder, 2008). In this light, feminism is more commonly understood in media as “a matter of identity and lifestyle, not as a matter of politics” (Painter & Ferruci, 2012, p. 249).

Postfeminist femininity focuses on the body, sexuality and personality. Characters are operationalized as educated, seemingly well rounded, sexually free and empowered by the gains of Second Wave feminism. “In contrast to their perception of their mothers' feminism, third-wavers feel entitled to interact with men as equals, claim sexual pleasure as they desire it (heterosexual or otherwise), and actively play with femininity” (Snyder, 2008, p. 179).

Postfeminism also promotes empowerment of adolescent and young adult women. “Girl” and “power” once completely absent from children’s media, is now “normalized within the discourses of consumer culture” and recodifies femininity into forms of empowerment and

agency (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 119). Girl power portrays female characters as robust, young women with agency or a strong sense of self, and combines independence and individualism with a girls can do anything spirit (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2000; Banet-Weiser, 2004). This suggests a more capable mental state, greater occupational opportunities, stronger cultural agency and more diverse familial states will be most apparent in postfeminist characters.

Based on this, different operationalizations of femininity fit into several categories, or “states” that describe the spectrum of a character’s traits. The main difference is the person placing the gaze on the female, that is, traditional operationalizations are focused on the patriarchal placement on females, whereas the postfeminist operationalizations are more co-opted, internalized by the women.

Table 1: States of Traditional and Postfeminist Femininity

Theme	Traditional Femininity	Postfeminist Femininity
Mental State	Weak; ignorant; lacking or inferior; short sighted (<i>Jeanes, 2011</i>)	Educated; egalitarian (<i>Snyder, 2008</i>)
Physical State	Thin body ideal; overemphasis on attractiveness and sexuality through clothing or body; (<i>Levant et al, 2007</i>)	Self-emphasis on well-kept body and attractiveness rather than accepting of male gaze; more sexually revealing (<i>description inserted by author</i>)
Emotional State	Sentimental; overemotional; dependent on men (<i>Levant et al, 2007</i>)	Determined; strong sense of self; but often undergoing identity crisis(<i>Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2000; Banet-Weiser, 2004</i>)
Sexual State	Chastity; agreeable to men’s sexual advances; obsessed with romance; desire to attract male gaze; failure to voice sexual desires; sexual gatekeeper (<i>Butler, 1990; Korobov & Thorne 2009; Tolman 2002</i>).	Empowered by Second-Wave feminism; sexually free or forceful; acceptable to enjoy multiple sexual partners; (<i>Snyder, 2008</i>)
Cultural State	Childlike; shy; passive or yielding; gullible; gentle; gossipers; naggers; invisible; secondary; (<i>Jeanes, 2011; Wolff & Watson, 1983</i>)	Rebellious; independent; individualistic; claim men as equals (<i>Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2000; Banet-Weiser, 2004</i>)
Occupational State	Subservient; wives; rarely presented as professionals (<i>Lotz, 2006</i>)	Capitalistic; productive consumer; unmarried working women (<i>Durham, 1999</i>)
Familial State	Mother; caretaker; nurturer (<i>Levant et al, 2007</i>)	Struggle to love or mother fully; friendships more important than family (<i>Snyder, 2008</i>)

Media Effects

According to social cognitive theory, media messages can serve as meaningful predictors of behavior. Albert Bandura states that “psychosocial functioning [occurs] in terms of triadic reciprocal causation...[where] factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events, behavioral patterns, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bidirectionally” (Bandura, 2001, p. 266). That is, individuals learn from a mixture of social and contextual factors, rather than a unidirectional flow. Social cognitive theory suggests that people learn about causal relationships “by operating symbolically on the wealth of information derived from personal and vicarious experiences” (Bandura, 2001, p. 267). So, not only do we learn cognitions and behaviors from personal interactions, but also from mediated experiences with media characters.

Observational learning is modeled by four different psychological sub functions: attentional processes, where modeled events become salient and accessible to us; retention processes where we begin to symbolically code and cognitively rehearse behaviors; production processes where we begin response production and monitor feedback; and finally motivational processes where we experience external and self incentives that motivate us to repeat the behavior (Bandura, 2001).

Adolescents can be particularly susceptible to sex-role stereotyping in the attentional process, most specifically occupational stereotypes that make salient roles deemed only appropriate for certain genders (Pech, 2006). Knobloch et al (2005) posits that media contribute to children’s socialization and behave “in line with traditional sex roles because they receive positive social feedback for doing so” (p. 124).

Social cognitive theory lends itself also to the formation of schemas, or “hypothetical

cognitive structures that contain and organize information related to a concept or object” (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). These schemas can be influential in a young girl’s social construction of identity because comprehensive and cumulative viewings of positive reinforcement for specific feminine behaviors can form influential paradigms of how to view the world. In turn, “media messages might shape schema development ... about various topics that viewers bring to media messages [that] might influence message interpretation” (Nabi & Clark, 2008, p. 410).

Research Questions

Based on the literature and theory presented above, the following questions are proposed to determine how themes of femininity are represented in contemporary media.

RQ1: How do the most popular female characters on television portray the different conceptualizations of femininity?

RQ2: How do these different conceptualizations fit on a femininity spectrum from traditional to postfeminist femininity?

H1: Based on the recent trends in feminist theory, the characters will portray more postfeminist character traits, especially in the mental, occupational, cultural and familial states.

RQ3: How do young women relate to the conceptualizations of femininity personified in their favorite television characters?

CHAPTER 3 METHOD

The exploratory nature of this thesis lends itself to a qualitative analysis of current, popular female characters in contemporary media. Several options exist for researchers who critique the media. This project employs textual analysis, which “connects the pattern of words that we use to systematic ways of thinking about the world” (MacDonald, 1995, p. 44). So rather than counting the types of occupations, roles, or characters women embody in the media, it is beneficial to look at how language (verbal and non-verbal) used in media texts reflect current sociological or cultural patterns. These patterns and themes will place popular female characters along the spectrum of femininity, ranging from traditional to postfeminist. Additionally, this study used focus groups to further investigate how the themes identified in the textual analysis connect with adolescent girls.

Stuart Hall writes “the mass media are more and more responsible for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an ‘image’ of the lives, meanings, practices and values can be coherently grasped as a ‘whole’” (1984, p. 340). Hall (1984) continues that texts are open to interpretation, but no “text is free of its encoded structures and ideological history” (p. 2).

Other scholars, such as Condit (1989) and Cloud (1992) suggest that discourse in media texts often supports a specific meaning, leaving the audience unable to construct a personal interpretation of the text. This can be particularly tricky for adolescent girls who, according to Durham (1999), “are constrained not only by ideologically monolithic texts, but also by a social context that mandates shared understandings” (p. 122). According to Berger (1998), textual analysis is “a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they ... produce on television” (p. 23). The purpose of textual analysis is to find the range of possible

meanings within a media text (Larsen, 1991), and can also include non-verbal language, such as camera angle, sequencing and graphics that may point to a specific interpretation or meaning (Kavoori, 1999).

Sample

To ensure strong validity, it was important to first learn what female characters are most memorable to young girls. As part of another study conducted by the author, where only older adolescent female respondents (average age of 20) were sampled, two questions were inserted—one open-ended, one categorical—that asked which television characters they remembered most, and then why they thought those characters were memorable. It did not specify if those characters had to be real, fictional or animated, and the respondents were asked to name as many as they remembered. Approximately 219 respondents answered the questions. The responses about why the character were memorable were overwhelmingly positive (I liked the character, the character had a great story, I want to be like that character, etc.), which suggests they stood out to the respondents because of positive rather than negative experiences.

The author removed reality and animated television characters to ensure an analysis of only real-life, scripted-style characters. The data was then narrowed down to the top 10 most mentioned characters. From the top 10, the author selected three female characters from the comedy genre and three from the drama genre to study. This was done because the same sample selected comedy and drama as their favorite genre types.

Table 2: List of Characters and Their Descriptions

Character/Actress	Show	Genre	Description
Blair Waldorf (Leighton Meester)	<i>Gossip Girl</i>	Drama	Blair Waldorf is the main character on the show and is both snobbish and sensitive. She is the Queen Bee of her New York City high school social scene and is often constant gossip fodder for the other characters.
Elena Gilbert (Nina Dobrev)	<i>The Vampire Diaries</i>	Drama	Elena Gilbert is the heroine, protagonist, and the main female character of the show. She is an 18-year-old high school student who struggles with a town filled with vampires, one of whom is her love interest.
Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay)	<i>Law & Order SVU</i>	Drama	Olivia Benson is one of the main detectives cast in the show alongside her partner Elliot. She is characterized as tough, but empathetic and emotionally involved in cases, sometimes to her detriment.
Gloria Pritchett (Sofia Vergara)	<i>Modern Family</i>	Comedy	Gloria Pritchett is cast as a loving wife and mother despite the large age difference between her and Jay. Her Spanish accent and voluptuous figure often provide humorous jokes on the show.
Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston)	<i>Friends</i>	Comedy	Rachel Green is one of the six main characters on the show and has been listed as by <i>US Weekly</i> as one of the most memorable TV characters. She is a “daddy’s girl” and struggles with living independently in the city.
Robin Scherbatsky (Cobie Smulders)	<i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	Comedy	Robin Scherbatsky is one of the five main characters on the show and is a news anchor. She is cast as very focused on her career and struggles with balancing her job and finding love.

Purposive sampling was conducted to gather a robust sample that would represent the character’s full storyline. The operationalizations presented in Table 1 became the basis for the codebook. This study began with a viewing of each episode and a qualitative examination of the character’s general story. The character was studied for verbal language first and then for non-verbal language (body movement, music, camera angles, etc.). The entire first season of each

show was analyzed to ensure fluidity and consistency of the character. The sample yielded 131 episodes with the unit of analysis as dialogue and non-verbal communication in each episode.

The list of every episode viewed is available in Appendix A.

Once the qualitative coding was complete, a second coder conducted intercoder reliability on one episode of each season to ensure continuity between themes and operationalization states. The coder viewed the characters in the same way the author did, and marked distinctions about each of the character's styles of femininity. The agreement between coders was consistent across the states, even though different personality traits were pinpointed to describe each character. The general agreement suggests the femininity states fully capture a comprehensive view of femininity within each female character.

And finally, the author conducted three focus groups with 13 college-aged adolescent women recruited from a research pool from a large Southern university. Each group was kept to five respondents maximum to ensure good conversation and each group had either four or five participants. In each of the focus groups, after a general discussion about traditional and contemporary femininity, the author displayed the characters and asked several questions about each. The questions are included in Appendix B. Each participant was kept anonymous and all names have been changed.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

Textual Analysis Results

According to the operationalizations presented in Table 1, femininity can exist in many different ways, including mental, physical, emotional, cultural, sexual, familial and occupational states. RQ1 asks how the most popular characters on television portray femininity in contemporary media based on these states. And RQ2 asks how these conceptualizations then fit on the spectrum of traditional to postfeminist femininity. Each female character should portray a specific style within each state that defines her as either traditionally feminine or postfeminist feminine. The data revealed key insights within each state that helped shape the character's style of femininity:

Mental state: Female characters that portray weak, mentally inferior or ignorant women characterize the traditionally feminine mental state, whereas characters in the postfeminist mental state portray more educated, egalitarian and mentally sharp women. The data revealed examples of both dimensions. Two characters—Rachel (*Friends*), who is a single girl working in New York city, and Gloria (*Modern Family*), a housewife and mother—exhibit the most traditionally feminine mental states because either each were often confused while other characters discussed advanced topics, were made fun of for inferior education, or were cast as overall mentally lacking compared to the other characters. One specific example is in the *Friends* episode “The One With Mrs. Bing” when Rachel works on her resume and makes several typos, which are only noticed once the group has made hundreds of copies, and she exclaims “Oh no! Do you think they are on every copy?” Two other characters—Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*) and Olivia (*Law & Order SVU*)—are cast as smart, educated and mentally capable women,

fitting squarely into the postfeminist mental state. Both hold powerful jobs—Robin as a news anchor; Olivia as a detective—and are often praised for their mental acuity. Blair (*Gossip Girl*) and Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*) were cast generally as smart, capable characters, but did not exhibit as many mental state examples as both are high school students, and the shows focus more on their social states rather than mental or occupational states.

Physical state: As evidenced in the literature, women in the media—no matter the decade—are often cast in physically revealing, sexual or emphasized beauty roles. In traditional femininity, the physical state is operationalized through thin characters, with an overemphasis on sexuality through body proportions or clothing. And in postfeminist femininity, these themes remain fairly constant or even more concentrated on sexual attractiveness and thin-body ideal, but rather are normalized or co-opted by the female herself, rather than accepting the male gaze. The characters in this study portray more postfeminist physical styles, in that they are all beautiful, sexual and thin women who are open and free with their clothing, sexuality and bodies. Gloria (*Modern Family*) is the most sexual (and only non-American) character, often wearing extremely tight or revealing dresses. Several lines of dialogue are dedicated to jokes about her appearance, e.g., in the episode “Coal Digger” she describes that she is glad her family is “accepting of hot foreigners.”

The other characters all have moments of bold sexuality and seem to internalize the empowerment that is believed to come with sexual freedom. For example, each character wears a red dress for an important “date” night or event, e.g., Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*), who is normally a timid high school student, wears a red, sexy nurse outfit on her Halloween date with her boyfriend Stefan; Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*) wears a red formal dress on her date with her friend and male romantic counterpart, Ted; Gloria (*Modern Family*) wears a red dress on a

Valentine's Day date with her husband Jay; and Blair (*Gossip Girl*) often wears red lingerie with her boyfriend Nate, even though in the show she is only 16. Even Olivia (*Law & Order SVU*), whom the data reveals as the most physically androgynous character, always has makeup or lipstick on, and is shown having sex with other detectives in her division.

Emotional state: Perhaps one of the biggest shifts from traditional to postfeminist femininity is within the emotional state, or the portrayal of women as sentimental, overemotional and dependent on men for emotional stability in the traditional sense, but cast more as the independent, determined and full of agency in the postfeminist sense. Three characters—Rachel (*Friends*), Gloria (*Modern Family*) and Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*)—were found to be the most traditionally feminine emotionally in that they often portrayed bouts of severe emotional distress i.e., tantrums or crying fits; are cast as overemotional or extremely passionate (in Gloria's case); and are often found in vulnerable situations requiring male common sense to take over (in Elena's case). For example, Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*) often finds herself in dramatic situations as she battles different creatures e.g., vampires, werewolves and witches, and subsequently requires her boyfriend Stefan to save or comfort her. Similarly, Rachel (*Friends*) often fluctuates emotionally depending on her relationship status (whether or not she has a boyfriend). And Gloria (*Modern Family*) has several moments where her emotions get the best of her. For example in the episode "Moon Landing," she has a car wreck and is described as having "laid on the horn until it completely died."

On the other hand, Olivia (*Law & Order SVU*) portrays the most postfeminist character in the emotional state because she remains fairly stoic as she handles difficult cases, and depicts a stronger sense of self-assurance and confidence than the other characters. However, she is not immune to emotional stereotyping. In one episode titled "Payback" the other male police officers

coddle her when it comes to a specific rape case because they are worried it will be too hard on her. Blair (*Gossip Girl*) and Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*) offer more mixed emotional characteristics in that there is no consistent emotional pattern for either of them, but more so portray characteristics of both dimensions, slightly skewing more traditionally feminine.

Sexual state: Similar to the physical state of femininity, sexuality is a common undercurrent in research about women in the media. In traditional femininity, the character is characterized as more agreeable to men's advances, waiting for men to make the first move, or desiring the male gaze; whereas in postfeminist femininity, sexuality has been co-opted by the female character as her domain and is empowered by her sexuality and the power it brings.

Interestingly, the characters in this data remain fairly consistent in the sexual state, meaning that the characters were sexually empowered and free, rarely displaying traditional feminine sexuality. Even Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*), who is more traditionally feminine in almost every other state, is sexually free with her boyfriend Stefan and has sex with him only after a few weeks of meeting him, even though she is only a junior in high school. Similarly, Rachel (*Friends*) is constantly craving or talking about sex, and Blair (*Gossip Girl*) uses sex as a manipulative tool with her many boyfriends and friends, and feels empowered when she is asked onstage to strip at a burlesque club in the episode "Victor, Victrola." Olivia (*Law & Order SVU*) is probably the least sexual character, but even though she is not shown in sexual situations, she often bears the brunt of sexual harassment with other policemen or victims, and openly admits to sex with other detectives. Also, Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*), sleeps with several men across the season, and often jokes about "being a bro" or like a man, because of her sexual activity, a major postfeminist trait.

Cultural state: The cultural state of femininity describes how female characters are

treated on a macro level throughout the season. That is, does the character exhibit more cultural norms that suggest traditional values are more important, or are postfeminist values more apparent? Traditionally feminine characters are culturally inferior or invisible, or cast in supporting roles to the main, male characters. Postfeminist characters are cast more as leading characters, individualistic, and claim the other male characters as equals. In this data, one sees more of a middle ground for the female characters in this state (except for Robin), in that each character does not portray a majority cultural state, rather fluctuates between the traditional and postfeminist styles of femininity. This means that there are moments where each character is cast as culturally dominant (for example, in *Modern Family*, Gloria is better at chess than her husband Jay), but there are also times where each character is culturally trivial (for example, in *Friends*, Rachel and the other girls aren't allowed to play poker, because it's a "man's game"). Blair (*Gossip Girl*) and Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*) are cast in leading roles in each of their series, suggesting a postfeminist cultural state, but also exhibit tendencies to defer to the male characters. Robin portrays the most postfeminist characteristics because she is clear from the beginning of the show that she wants to be treated as an equal (or even more masculine) to the men in the group.

Occupational state: One of the greatest gains of feminism is the equality found in the workplace. More women are in the workforce, taking jobs that are equal or greater to their male counterparts, and female characters in the media reflect this shift. This state of femininity is operationalized as the difference between housewives or characters that are rarely presented as professionals (traditional) versus a character who is capitalistic and a productive participant of the workforce (postfeminist). This data reveals that the female characters have fully internalized the postfeminist theme of occupational equality. For example, Rachel (*Friends*) who is probably

one of the most traditionally feminine characters works throughout the season to better herself professionally, find a better job and continue breaking away from her spoiled upbringing and become more independent. Conversely, Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*) and Olivia (*Law & Order SVU*) represent the most postfeminist occupational states in that they have chosen a career fully over relationships or a family. Robin is clear in her goal of never getting married because she wants her job to be her main focus. Similarly with Olivia, she is only shown with a man once in the season; otherwise, she is solely focused on her demanding job. And even though Gloria (*Modern Family*) is cast as a housewife, she has several conversations with her son Manny about treating women as equals. This state was not as significantly related to Blair (*Gossip Girl*) and Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*) because they are younger, but both shows feature a “college night” where both characters stress over where to go to college, suggesting an adherence to the feminist ideal of better educational opportunities lead to better occupational opportunities.

Familial state: Similar to the occupational state, the makeup of families also somewhat changed because of feminism, in that women were no longer expected to only be a housewife and mother (traditional), but are now women waiting longer to get married or have children, or struggle culturally with the housewife/mother path (postfeminist). Additionally, female friendships have taken more of an important role in postfeminist characters and family has become less central to a female character’s happiness. The characters in the data mostly mirror this shift. One example of this is in *Gossip Girl* when Blair exclaims to Serena “we’re sisters, we’re family!” Rachel (*Friends*) also displays the importance of female friendships when she moves in with her best friend Monica after she runs away from her wedding in the pilot episode. Gloria (*Modern Family*) is the only character to have a husband and a family. Otherwise the other characters struggle with family matters in different ways, such as trouble with distant or

absent parents (like Elena, Blair and Robin), or struggle with family relationships (like Rachel and Olivia).

After reviewing each character within each state, it's clear the characters did not represent mutually exclusive ends of the traditional or postfeminist spectrum, but represent a balance between the dimensions. It's also interesting to note that there are postfeminist and traditional storylines and moments in each of the character's lives. H1 suggests that because the major foci of feminism have shifted from a political or civil focus to a more societal or cultural focus, the characters would mirror this and fall along the postfeminist side of the spectrum in the mental, occupational, cultural and familial states. This hypothesis is *supported*. Even if the characters were traditionally feminine in the other states, their jobs, education, family focus and socialization were postfeminist. Examples include:

Blair (Gossip Girl) is cast as emotionally vulnerable and culturally bound by the rules of the New York Upper East Side elite, but portrays postfeminist characteristics of mental determination in that she is focused solely on getting into Yale.

Robin (How I Met Your Mother) is extremely focused on her job as a news anchor and repeatedly tells Ted (the male main character and romantic counterpart) that she does not want to get married or have kids. Even though she is cast as mentally capable, in a powerful job and sexually empowered, she still battles emotionally with her feelings for Ted and dresses or acts more feminine when she is around him.

Olivia (Law & Order SVU) is the most postfeminist character in each state, except the emotional state. She is most often the character who connects emotionally with the

victims, is always the receiver of sexual harassment and is often coddled by the other policeman amidst particularly emotionally grueling cases.

Rachel from *Friends* exhibits more traditional feminine qualities in that she's dependent on her friends for help, cast as mentally lacking, and emotionally self-centered, yet she culturally matches the postfeminist traits of undergoing an identity crisis and trying to be independent, an occupational side-effect.

Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*) is also traditionally feminine in most of the states because of her timid and nurturing nature. However, she also portrays sexual empowerment and occupational focus (i.e., college night) throughout the season, and struggles with her changing familial state after her parents die in a car wreck.

Gloria (*Modern Family*) is another traditionally feminine character but is clear in her conversations with her son that women are equal to men, and her sexuality is clearly postfeminist. Additionally (and as discussed later in the focus groups), her comedic take on her position as a housewife and mother acts almost as a cultural critique of that position, rather than her portraying a character stuck in the housewife/mother role.

Additional themes emerged in the textual analysis that give context to why certain characters exhibit different femininity traits.

Comedy / Drama Dichotomy

First, the comedic female characters are more often cast with an ensemble, rather than being a main character, while the dramatic female characters are cast in more main character roles, giving their story more depth and nuance. Rachel, Gloria and Robin are all cast with a group of friends or large family, so there is rarely an episode that is focused solely on them as characters. This is different from the strong, female comedic characters that emerged in the 1990s as “feminist” characters, such as Murphy Brown or Ally McBeal, which the literature suggests carried their comedic shows as the main character. In contrast, the dramatic characters (Olivia, Elena and Blair) all act as main characters around which storylines generally revolve. This allows for greater depth and analysis of the character because of more screen time and more intimate interaction with other characters.

Other differences exist between comedic and dramatic characters. The dramatic characters are portrayed more often in vulnerable situations where their emotionality can take hold. In contrast, the comedic characters’ emotional vulnerability is often highlighted for comedic effect or as a joke. For example, Olivia is cast as very independent, forceful and intimidating on the job, yet when she’s involved with the victims, she often lets her emotions cloud her mind. Another scene from *The Vampire Diaries* illustrates this well. In the episode entitled “There Goes the Neighborhood,” after a particularly rough night on a double date with an ex-boyfriend and a best friend, Elena crawls into bed and cuddles a teddy bear as she talks on the phone with her boyfriend Stefan. She sleeps with this teddy bear often after very dramatic episodes that feature fights between the vampires or scenes where she is in danger. Alternately, Blair in *Gossip Girl* is not cast as a damsel in distress, but is extremely vulnerable emotionally. Dealing with her parents’ divorce and her father’s subsequent homosexual relationship, she

wears the emotions on her sleeve and is often overtaken by them, portraying traditionally feminine behavior.

But as referenced above, when the comedic characters are in emotional distress it's often at the expense of a humorous twist (when Rachel learns she has a typo on her resume, or Robin is emotional because she's Canadian), or as a critique on the character's stereotypes (Gloria being a "hot foreigner").

Feminism Underneath

It became clear early in the coding process that feminism is everywhere. Even within the characters that portray more traditionally feminine characteristics, no character was without a reference to feminism or equal rights. Whether the character says she's a feminist, feminism is mentioned in character's discussions, or she portrays a feminist action (such as the aforementioned conversation between Gloria and Manny (*Modern Family*) about equal rights), it's as if each show has to prove its feminist muster.

In a particularly uncharacteristic moment for Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*), she discusses her love affair with Ted (the male role cast as her love interest), and says "I'm always putting my career ahead of my relationships and there are a lot of lonely nights, but choosing Ted over your career doesn't make you un-feminist, it may just mean you would be happy together" (*How I Met Your Mother*, "Cupcake"). Another example is in *Friends* when the group discusses Rachel's boyfriend Paulo who just tried to make a romantic move on another character Phoebe and they exclaim "you HAVE to tell her, it's a feminist issue!" (*Friends*, "The One With A Dozen Lasagnas").

An interesting twist on this theme is that when the women are with their girlfriends, they

make more postfeminist-specific comments or references made, in contrast to when they are with their boyfriends, dates or male friends, they exhibit more traditionally feminine characteristics.

Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*): "I'd feel really Stepford if I turned down a huge opportunity just for a guy I knew two months."

Elena (*The Vampire Diaries*): "I'm not going to cry about it, because I don't want to be one of those pathetic girls whose world stops turning because of one guy."

Another example is when Rachel and her two girlfriends throw a Valentine's Day bonfire to "cleanse their aura" of bad boyfriends, but become immediately smitten when the handsome firemen show up and exhibit the exact same qualities they were "burning." An example from *Law & Order SVU* shows Olivia pleading with her male partner Elliot in "Wanderlust" to play the traditional male role and talk to his daughter about sex, but in contrast when she is on the job with many other male counterparts, she tells Elliott not to get too involved in the cases.

The Reverse Damsel in Distress

Based on the literature, traditional femininity is often associated with vulnerability or secondary status relative to men. Characters in this sense are often portrayed as weak or needing help from men to survive, a sort of "damsel in distress." However, this data revealed an almost opposite effect (except in the case of Rachel) where the women, even those portraying more traditional feminine characteristics, are often the ones acting as the savior for the men.

For example, Elena on *The Vampire Diaries* is constantly in peril and is cast as the most vulnerable character on the show, but she is also constantly working to save her boyfriend Stefan and his brother Damon. She seems obsessed with "curing" them of being a vampire, or working with other people to save them from the evil spirits that lurk throughout the town. In a similar,

but more emotional type of support, Gloria (*Modern Family*) takes her role as wife and mother very seriously but also often defers herself for Jay (her husband) and Manny (her son's) well-being. She is sacrificial to the point where she agrees not to celebrate her Colombian Christmas traditions because Jay loves his American traditions so much. Another example (previously mentioned) is when Gloria plays Jay in chess, and even though she is a far superior chess player, she allows him to win and states "I'm a very good chess player, but I'm a better wife" ("Game Changer"). Statements like these suggest that she is taking on the traditionally feminine role of deference to the man, and saving him from embarrassment or heartache.

Robin (*How I Met Your Mother*) is another example, and an interesting one as well. As one of the most postfeminist characters studied, one would believe she would not be so eager to put men in the primary position, but she is constantly making choices "to make Ted happy." Whether it be setting him up on dates with other women, pretending not to be in love with him or stepping aside when he falls in love with Victoria (another female character on the show), she acts more like a savior figure for Ted than she allows Ted to be for her. Olivia also matches the description as she dedicates most of her day (and life) to saving and protecting her victims, but she is never in the opposite situation where she is being cared for instead.

These themes present interesting findings about each text's interpretation. However, the responses from adolescent girls in the focus groups can connect the interpretation to the actual behavior of this age group. Those results are presented below.

Focus Groups Results

Several characters were not included in this study that could offer additional insight into these conceptualizations of femininity. This spectrum of options became more apparent during

the three focus groups conducted for the study. The women interviewed in the focus groups all mentioned different characters that were their favorites, different reasons why they were their favorites and often listed characters that were different from those in this dataset. RQ3 asks how older adolescents respond to themes of femininity in an effort to draw connections between the characters and their ability to make specific professions, roles, or themes most salient to adolescent girls.

Even though different characters were mentioned and different reasons brought forth for why they liked the characters, the groups' definition of traditional femininity and contemporary femininity remained consistent with literature. When asked to define traditional femininity or womanhood, the following responses were offered in each group, and there was little deviation: nurturing, housewife, damsel in distress, homemaker, supporting role or softer. And when asked to define contemporary femininity (note: the word contemporary was used in lieu of postfeminist for more recognizable terminology), the girls responded most often with: independent, more opportunities, more educated, more jobs and women taking the lead.

However, some differences arose when the respondents were asked whether they liked more traditional or contemporary feminine characters.

Melanie: "I like the more contemporary women because they pursue more adventures, and that's what I'd like to do."

Danielle: "I kind of like the more traditional, because I just want to be a mom."

Amy: "The traditional ones stand out to me more."

Courtney: "Traditional stands out to me, but I like the contemporary characters for being able to support themselves."

Brandi: "I kind of like the Real Housewives on Bravo because it's the ideal, having the

family and the best of both worlds.”

What became quickly apparent were those respondents who tended to like traditionally feminine characters seemed shy or embarrassed to admit that fact. When prodded further, the idea arose that there is a stigma attached to wanting that lifestyle. Danielle mentioned this several times, that the idea “just wanting to be a mom” is equated with settling or not fulfilling your full potential as a woman.

After the general conversation about femininity, the respondents viewed each character and were asked several questions about each. Their responses are listed, by character, below.

Olivia, Law & Order SVU: Olivia was probably one of the most loved characters out of the dataset. Respondents perked up the most when her picture was shown and gave several reasons for this positive feedback.

Maxine: “She’s super independent.”

Melanie: “She’s got a different personality because she can keep up with the guys.”

Brandi: “I like her attitude, she intimidates when she needs to, but is likeable.”

Amy: “She’s passionate about her job. She’s nice to watch her being so pretty, but powerful.”

Several of the girls responded well to Olivia’s power role and her ability to “keep up” with the other men on the job. They felt she inhabited much more contemporary/postfeminist characteristics, but still has compassion for the victims portrayed in the show. However, it is important to note some respondents were wary of just *how* powerful she comes across.

Jamie: “She goes overboard trying to fit in with the other cops.”

Allison: “She’s an example of trying too hard to be independent.”

Trina: “Her life revolves too much around the job.”

This pushback—even against one of the most popular characters—may indicate some limits of open social gender norms. This idea was also seen when the respondents balked when the characters become too feminine as well (ex: too emotional). This is important to note because it is indicative of how young girls glean actions and behaviors from characters and enact or reject from their own behaviors. This finding shows young women want to see authentic characters that lead interesting lives, yet are not cast in extreme stereotypical ways, a trend that will probably grow as young adults grow even more media savvy and literate.

Elena, *The Vampire Diaries*: In contrast, the groups disagreed most with the character of Elena. The first group was adamant in their dislike for her, describing her as a “damsel in distress,” “can’t take care of herself,” “not powerful or strong,” and a classic example of a weaker woman. These results match with the themes revealed in the textual analysis. However the second group had more positive things to say about Elena: “she’s easy-going,” “very brave,” “optimistic” and “not your stereotypical high school girl.” Reagan mentioned that Elena was her absolute favorite character and loved everything about the show, and liked that she was a mixture of both traditional feminine characteristics and postfeminist/contemporary femininity. And in the third group, no one knew the character or watched the show at all.

Rachel, *Friends*: Rachel was one of the lesser-known characters in the focus groups, which is surprising because she was so memorable in the larger sample surveyed in the previous study. The respondents differed on their opinions about her as a character.

Maxine: “She’s the classic emotional wreck.”

Trina: “She wants the traditional femininity.”

Melanie: “Always looking for a man to complete her.”

Brandi: "I LOVE her! She's so well-liked, I just want to be her friend."

Reagan: "I can't think of anything negative about her."

Some girls thought she personified a more traditionally feminine character, most specifically because of her occupational state and her emotional state. Knowing that she was a waitress for most of the show, but then moved into fashion, they thought those fields were very feminine, but liked that she moved up the ladder and pursued other professional opportunities, a more postfeminist characteristics. The girls that responded positively to her wanted to be like her more so than the other characters (other than Olivia Benson). Most of the girls agreed that she was very emotional, dependent on a man for her happiness, but that she's also "sweet," "pretty," and "nurturing."

Blair, *Gossip Girl*: This love/hate relationship continued with Blair. Blair is a good example of the respondents questioning the character's sincerity if they went too far outside of generally accepted gender norms. Blair, cast as an emotionally vulnerable and manipulative character, is often in breakdown or tantrum mode. Some respondents liked that about her:

Courtney: "She knows what she wants...knows how to get at people."

But most respondents were turned off by her extreme emotional personality.

Maxine: "She's the classic bitchy teenage girl."

Deborah: "She's fake traditional."

Trina: "She tries too hard to keep up her rep, too insecure."

Additionally, Blair brought out the respondents' thoughts about sexuality on television. As evidenced in the textual analysis, Blair portrays a sexual character, where she embraces the postfeminist characteristics of sexual empowerment, but it's limiting to her character because she uses it as an emotional tool or manipulation. Melanie suggested "sex sells, [it] will still draw an

audience,” but those characters that seem sexually desperate are “not empowering at all.” Some respondents agreed that though it was empowering for women to wear what they wanted, even if it was lingerie like Blair or sexy dresses like Gloria (*Modern Family*), they also felt like Blair takes it too far. Reagan believes “I like her on the show, but I wouldn’t like her in real life.”

Robin, *How I Met Your Mother*: Robin was probably the least known character of the dataset. Several of the girls never heard of the show.. The only respondent to watch her was Trina, and what she could remember was that “she likes her job” and “she protests against Valentine’s Day.” This lack of awareness is interesting in that Robin, one of the most postfeminist and progressive characters, is lesser known than the other traditionally feminine characters.

Gloria, *Modern Family*: Gloria was another character the respondents were not as familiar with, mostly remembering her as “funny.” Melanie said “she’s the classic second wife” and Trina states, “she really does care about the family;” and Melanie added that it’s “hard not to like her.” Courtney agreed, “she’s a trophy wife and traditional.” These responses fit well with the analysis that showed Gloria as one of the more traditional feminine characters and cast most specifically as a nurturing wife and mother, but a likeable one.

The focus group respondents were interested and engaged in the conversation and had important opinions on how media treat their age group. It became clear that they are literate about stereotypes in the media, and want greater variety of characters and storylines that mimic their own lives. Other topics, such as sexuality and relationships arose by virtue of discussing how these characters reacted in similar situations, which supports the idea that media can impact how one behaves—a clear link between femininity in the media and an adolescent’s construction of identity.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore, highlight and examine themes of femininity in contemporary media. By understanding the most salient themes and characters in the media, researchers and media content creators can then identify how media content affects its viewers.

The textual analysis of this study revealed several interesting findings. First, postfeminist characters are popular on television; however they are not fully free from stereotypically traditional feminine qualities. The mental, occupational, cultural and familial states included the most postfeminist characteristics, but it's clear that content creators are hesitant to fully cast an emotionally empowered female character. The study's hypothesis suggests that based on the transformative power of feminism, characters will portray postfeminist characteristics more so than traditional femininity traits, and that hypothesis is *supported*. This is important to note because it shows that media embrace characters that exhibit strong, powerful and more contemporary roles, yet concerning that women are still portrayed as emotionally inferior or lacking in some way. Additionally, these findings suggests that postfeminist characters are written with an emphasis on the areas that feminism traditionally supported—and postfeminism continues to support in different ways—such as pay equality (occupational state), greater education (mental state), gender equality (cultural state) and more family options than being a housewife (familial state), but still often exhibit mentally and emotionally traditional storylines. This may mean that postfeminism has yet to completely break away from the Second Wave.

Each character portrayed characteristics within both styles of femininity, yet a majority of their tendencies did elicit a majority view of one dimension. Additionally, the idea that feminism is a constant undercurrent, even in traditionally focused storylines, shows its power and how it

has changed the media landscape as whole, even if media have not completely embraced the gains of Second Wave feminism. Because the character's roles are fluid throughout the season, that is, the character's become more traditionally female when around the men, but portray more masculine or androgynous gender characteristics (more pants, more courage, etc.) when around other women, shows that gender norms still exist, but may not be as strict as traditional femininity required.

This "balance" theme came up quite often in the focus groups. The respondents mentioned several times they like characters that offer a more balanced view of femininity, that have a family or romantic relationship, but still pursue their careers and other opportunities outside of the home. One especially poignant quote came from Brandi when asked whether they feel like this balanced style of female characters is missing, and she responded "the traditional women are missing, but I'm not missing them," meaning that she is cognizant there has been a shift to more contemporary/postfeminist sensibilities, and likes that there are more characters with multifaceted storylines. This is an interesting connection between the textual analysis and the focus groups. It means that the characters that show characteristics of both traditional and postfeminist femininity resonate with adolescent girls, which is how most of the characters act.

It was important to identify how these characters act, react, behave and relate to and portray femininity so that even among the differences, researchers can see how consistent and persistent themes can create a homogenous view of femininity. This homogenous view is apparent, not prolific in this data through the consistent portrayals of emotional women, even among greater postfeminist characters. It seems that media content continues to limit women in this way that no matter how postfeminist or independent the characters may be in the other states, they may always have an emotional Achilles heel.

Even though viewers do not know every intent or motive of content creators, these consistent themes portray a pattern that can make ideas or themes of femininity persuasive to young women. What's interesting is that even among the postfeminist characters that were popular with the focus group respondents, they still talked about wanting to see more traditional feminine characters that aren't so emotional. The group also agreed that home life is less interesting on television, and that the characters in different jobs or dramatic situations were more interesting. This is an interesting finding, and a possible reason for why the traditionally feminine characters are still portrayed in emotionally dramatic ways. Content creators are aware that they need to sell the stories and bring in viewers, and the media audience craves drama, action or scandal. But the media is failing at presenting diverse female characters that offer different styles of un-stereotypical femininity.

What's clear from the textual analysis and focus groups is that female characters do exist on a spectrum of femininity and that no one character represents the ideal version of either dimension. Postfeminist themes (as well as feminist themes) are alive and well in each of the characters and will probably continue to exist in different forms across other female characters. However, media continue to use shortcut stereotypes in several of the characters (damsel in distress, red dress, etc.) and seem to be hesitant to allow characters to emotionally break out of traditional stereotypes, even if they are more willing to portray the characters in more contemporary mental, occupational, cultural or familial roles.

Importance of Findings

These findings are important to both the feminist literature and media studies alike because the data illuminates not only major themes of femininity in modern media, but also how

older adolescent girls internalize the themes—found in the responses of the focus groups. It highlights the lack of emotional stability in female characters and suggests the need for more characters that show emotional maturity, but also offer adventurous and intriguing storylines.

Femininity is a core concept of gender, and understanding how adolescent girls socially construct their own versions of gender and womanhood is critical in ensuring a healthy development. If girls who watch these characters internalize the ideas, they internalize ideas of sexual freedom, professional empowerment and cultural equality. However, they are also exposed to characters that break under pressure, play the nurturer role (rather than being cared for) and change their personalities when among men versus women. These conflicting representations can rob the freedom with which adolescent girls develop, a truly detrimental issue for the future of healthy adult women. This study highlights not only the shift of media toward a more postfeminist paradigm, but also the stigmatization of traditional femininity as outdated or trite. The respondents in this study make it clear they want the choice, but they should be free to choose a traditional lifestyle if they so choose. The destruction of stereotypes should work both ways: removing the equality roadblocks for women, as well as allowing women to construct their identity freely and without unwarranted stigmas.

Studies like this one are important to identify how media is changing. It's clear that media adjusted to gains of both Second and Third Wave feminism, but continue to hold onto several stereotypical elements of femininity. Highlighting these shortcomings in media can help bring the issue to light for media content creators to identify new and stronger characters for young girls to relate to, rather than perpetuating damaging character typecasting. This study adds to the growing chorus of cultural writers pushing for content creators to stop relying on tired stereotypes to describe women and instead portray realities of femininity in the character's life.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample size and the focus group respondents limit this study. A larger, more regionally diverse sample of characters and focus group respondents, as well as a longer analysis of the characters over time (more than one season) could provide greater insight into the character as a whole. Over the seasons, the character's stories evolve and their themes of femininity probably also change. By only watching one season, it only allows for a glimpse into the character's full life. A fuller study of the entire show may reveal different or more robust data and fluidity in the character's femininity. Additionally, more diverse characters would enhance the findings from this study and allow for thicker findings about styles of femininity.

More focus group respondents (not to mention adolescent girls under the age of 18) could also provide greater depth into how girls respond to popular characters on television. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study cannot draw one-to-one causal relationships, but only draw conclusions surrounding major themes and sensibilities within the data.

The characters may also provide a limitation. The study worked for strong internal validity by asking the target audience for their favorite characters, but a few months later when discussing these characters with the same audience (but not the same people), there were differences in affinity for the characters. A stronger approach in future research may be a longitudinal study that asks uses the same respondents across each step of the study to provide stronger continuity across results.

Future research in this area could explore the balance theme or "having it all," and how pervasive this idea is among young girls. Do girls want more postfeminist characters because they offer different perspectives, or more characters that portray both ends of the spectrum? After more research in this area, feminist scholars and media content creators can discuss how to

create characters that portray good role models, different styles of femininity and give adolescent girls healthier examples of what it means to be a woman in today's society.

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APPENDIX A

List of comedy genre episodes

<i>Friends</i>	<i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	<i>Modern Family</i>
“The Pilot”	“Pilot”	“Pilot”
“The One With the Sonogram at the End”	“Purple Giraffe”	“The Bicycle Thief”
“The One With the Thumb”	“Sweet Taste of Liberty”	“Come Fly With Me”
“The One With George Stephanopoulos”	“Return of the Shirt”	“The Incident”
“The One With the East German Laundry Detergent”	“Okay Awesome”	“Coal Digger”
“The One With the Butt”	“Slutty Pumpkin”	“Run for Your Wife”
“The One With the Blackout”	“Matchmaker”	“En Garde”
“The One Where Nana Dies Twice”	“The Dual”	“Great Expectations”
“The One Where Underdog Gets Away”	“Belly Full of Turkey”	“Fizbo”
“The One With the Monkey”	“The Pineapple Incident”	“Undeck the Halls”
“The One With Mrs. Bing”	“The Limo”	“Up All Night”
“The One With a Dozen Lasagnas”	“The Wedding”	“Not In My House”
“The One With the Boobies”	“Drumroll Please”	“Fifteen Percent”
“The One With the Candy Hearts”	“Zip Zip Zip”	“Moon Landing”
“The One With the Stoned Guy”	“Game Night”	“My Funky Valentine”
“The One With Two Parts”	“Cupcake”	“Truth Be Told”
“The One With All the Poker”	“Life Among the Gorillas”	“Starry Night”
“The One Where the Monkey Gets Away”	“Nothing Good Happens After 2 a.m.”	“Game Changer”
“The One With the Evil Orthodontist”	“Mary the Paralegal”	“Benched”
“The One With the Fake Monica”	“Best Prom Ever”	“Travels With Scout”
“The One With the Ick Factor”	“Milk”	“Airport 2010”
“The One With the Birth”	“Come on”	“Hawaii”

List of drama genre episodes

<i>Gossip Girl</i>	<i>Law & Order SVU</i>	<i>The Vampire Diaries</i>
"The Pilot"	"Payback"	"Pilot"
"The Wild Brunch"	"A Single Life"	"The Night of the Comet"
"Poison Ivy"	"...Or Just Look Like One"	"Friday Night Bites"
"Bad News Blair"	"Hysteria"	"Family Ties"
"Dare Devil"	"Wanderlust"	"You're Undead to Me"
"The Handmaiden's Tale"	"Sophomore Jinx"	"Lost Girls"
"Victor Victoria"	"Uncivilized"	"Haunted"
"Seventeen Candles"	"Stalked"	"History Repeating"
"Blair Waldorf Must Pie"	"Stocks & Bondage"	"The Turning Point"
"Hi Society"	"Closure (Part 1)"	"Bloodlines"
"Roman Holiday"	"Bad Blood"	"Unpleasantville"
"School Lies"	"Russian Love Poem"	"Children of the Damned"
"The One With the Boobies"	"Disrobed"	"Fool Me Once"
"The Thin Line Between Chuck & Nate"	"Limitations"	"A Few Good Men"
"The Blair Bitch Project"	"Entitled"	"There Goes the Neighborhood"
"Desperately Seeking Serena"	"The Third Guy"	"Let the Right One In"
"All About Brother"	"Misleader"	"Under Control"
"Woman on the Verge"	"Chat Room"	"Miss Mystic Falls"
"Much I Do About Nothing"	"Contact"	"Blood Brothers"
	"Remorse"	"Isobel"
	"Nocturne"	
	"Slaves"	

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. Can you define traditional femininity for me? And what about more contemporary femininity?
2. Do you find yourself searching for characters that are more traditionally “feminine” or more contemporary “feminine?”

SHOW CHARACTER

3. What are your general thoughts about this character on television?
4. What do you think of when you think of feminine characters? Does this character exhibit traditional feminine qualities?
5. Do you think this character exhibits a more traditional or contemporary feminine character? Why?
6. Do you relate to this character in any way?
7. Tell me your general thoughts about how this character behaves? Is it more traditional or more modern?
8. What are some negative qualities of this character?
9. Does this character portray a type of woman you would like to be like? Why or why not?

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight



Institutional Review Board
 Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
 131 David Boyd Hall
 Baton Rouge, LA 70803
 P: 225.578.8692
 F: 225.578.5983
 irb@lsu.edu
 lsu.edu/irb

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

-- Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-F, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://research.lsu.edu/CompliancePoliciesProcedures/InstitutionalReviewBoard%28IRB%29/item24737.html>

- A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
 - (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of parts B thru F.
 - (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)
 - (C) Copies of all Instruments to be used.
 - *If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
 - (D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)
 - (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php>)
 - (F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://research.lsu.edu/files/item26774.pdf>)

1) Principal Investigator: Stephanie Proussell Rank: Graduate Student
 Dept: Mass Communication Ph: 388 208 4715 E-mail: soroussell@gmail.com

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each
 *If student, please identify and name supervising professor in this space

IRB# <u>E8123</u>	LSU Proposal # _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Complete Application
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Human Subjects Training

3) Project Title: An Analysis of Femininity: How Popular Female Characters in the Media Portray Contemporary Womanhood

Study Exempted By:
 Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
 Institutional Review Board
 Louisiana State University
 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
 225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
 Exemption Expires: 1/31/2016

4) Proposal? (yes or no) NO If Yes, LSU Proposal Number _____
 Also, if YES, either This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant
 OR More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students) M&L Subject Pool
 *Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature Stephanie Proussell Date 1/28/13 (no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU Institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Exempted _____	Category/Paragraph <u>2</u>
Signed Consent Waived?: Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No _____	
Reviewer <u>mathews</u>	Signature <u>Robert C Mathews</u> Date <u>2/1/13</u>

VITA

Stephanie Ortego Roussell is a native of Ball, La., and earned her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration with a concentration in Marketing from Louisiana State University in 2007. Following graduation, she worked at Louisiana Economic Development for four years where she managed the marketing, advertising and promotion of Louisiana as a place to do business. She also has experience with advertising agencies, non-profits and arts and culture organizations. Following the completion of her master's degree, she will return to the public relations industry in the South Louisiana area.

Her research interests focus on the representation of women and adolescent girls in the media, as well as strategic communication and branding. She is married, living in Baton Rouge, La., and is expecting her first child in September 2013.