

Postfeminism and female friendship:

A content analysis of *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*

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A Thesis Submitted to
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Women and Gender Studies.

September, 2019, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Date: September 20, 2019

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Abstract

This thesis explores how two popular TV shows, *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation*, portray and talk about female friendship, particularly as it relates to the notion of the postfeminist girlfriend as proposed by Alison Winch. Utilizing a combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis, it explores how these shows draw on discourses of feminism and postfeminism. It finds that *Girls* more than *Parks and Recreation* relies on discourses of postfeminism and replicates behaviors of the postfeminist girlfriend. It finds that both shows struggle to address issues of class difference and are guilty of post-race sentiments. Finally, it finds that *Parks and Rec*, more than *Girls*, reiterates feminist sentiments. *Parks* gives an overall feminist sentiment, while *Girls* walks the line between feminism and postfeminism.

September 20, 2019

Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis could not have been possible without the support and assistance of so many.

To my supervisor, Dr. Marnina Gonick, for providing ongoing support. Her academic guidance helped me shape my thesis into the work I dreamed of and her encouragement in every interaction kept me motivated to push through to the end. To my second reader, Dr. Michele Byers, for her careful reading of my thesis and her crucial feedback. And to my external examiner, Dr. Sailaja Krishnamurti for her willingness to join my committee and the thought-provoking questions she asked during my thesis defense.

To my fellow classmates, for being a sounding board when working out a thesis topic.

To my parents, for their never-ending, unconditional support.

Finally, to my partner Jordan for his encouragement and understanding. His positive attitude and sense of humor made the long days of research and writing less dark. His support for all my academic goals is wholeheartedly appreciated. I cannot thank him enough.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In an interview with Media Education Foundation, bell hooks states that "whether we're talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it's where the learning is" (ChallengingMedia, 2006). She discusses how, in asking her students what and how they think about certain films or television shows, she is able to relate pop culture to theory in an interesting or exciting way. She argues that feminist theorists and literary critics have turned to pop culture because of its increasing impact on people who want to "in some way, understand the politics of difference" (ChallengingMedia, 2006). It is because of the impact of pop culture and its pedagogical potential that I myself am also interested in the field.

Pop culture is a large concept, but Maudlin and Sandlin describe it straightforwardly as "the broad range of texts that constitute the cultural landscape of a particular time and/or place, as well as the ways in which consumers engage with those texts and thus become producers of new negotiated meanings" (2015, p. 369). Through our interactions with pop culture, we learn ways of seeing the world and ways to act in it, and we learn which of these ways are the norm. This process plays a role in the construction and performance of our identities by teaching us about, for example, race, class, gender, and sexuality (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015).

I knew I wanted to do a research project that in some way explored pop culture because of the importance I see in studying it. I believe this is especially important now, in a time when content production is dominated by streaming services like Netflix, when a seemingly endless number of TV shows are at our disposal. Further, there are growing numbers of public spaces in which to think, write, and talk about these shows on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit and other discussion boards, as well as through a prolific number of online

think pieces about pop culture. Teurlings (2018) discusses the proliferation of these spaces as the new “commons” of TV criticism, where commons is understood as a sort of shared common knowledge (p. 211). Teurlings argues that media should not be thought of as something we passively consume, but as a site for active audience participation. He argues that over the past fifteen years, TV criticism has been relocated to the sphere of the commons (p. 212), largely thanks to the above-mentioned social media, which has resulted in a sort of democratization of criticism (p. 210).

Teurlings’ argument reflects observations I have made through my own experiences online in recent years. I have noticed an increase in the amount of discussion and criticism of TV shows on Twitter and Facebook, especially as people’s viewing habits have changed with the rise of streaming services. To me, this process suggests that people are engaging with television in a different way than twenty years ago; TV viewers have become more personally involved in TV and tend to feel like they have built an expertise on the topic.

Further, through my own experience online, I have seen the new commons of TV criticism take on a sort of feminist lens, where critiques focus on feminist issues, such as the representation of marginalized groups and the depiction of violence against women. While my experience online is shaped by the values I hold, meaning that I engage with people who have similar interests and worldviews, I have noticed that people are becoming more interested in having conversations about what popular media is trying to show us. Of course, the academic study of popular culture is an established field, and the combination of this with the new commons has resulted in interminable criticisms and discussions of television. I want this thesis project to contribute to these ongoing conversations about what pop culture can teach us about ourselves and others.

In addition to pop culture, I also knew that I wanted to explore some aspect of postfeminism. After reading Andi Zeisler's *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (2016), I became interested in the corporate advertising practice of co-opting the language of feminism by focusing on women's empowerment and free will to choose. Zeisler argued that feminism has become an identity or a brand in the mainstream, rather than a set of political beliefs, and this is where I discovered postfeminism. Postfeminism promotes autonomy, choice, and self-improvement, where women allegedly can freely choose to do what they want with their lives because structural inequalities like sexism are in the past. It is an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (Gill, 2007), wherein feminist sentiments are expressed without an acknowledgement of the political underpinning of feminism.

I began reading about postfeminism in media and found that a few shows, particularly HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and HBO's *Girls* (2012-17), are repeatedly discussed as examples of postfeminism. I continued to read about *Girls* because it is more contemporary than *Sex and the City*, and because I was somewhat familiar with *Girls* and creator Lena Dunham, whose approach to feminism I have found questionable. A common criticism of *Girls* is its lack of racial diversity, especially considering it takes place in multiracial New York City. After the first season aired, Dunham addressed these criticisms by saying "When I get a tweet from a girl who's like, 'I'd love to watch the show, but I wish there were more women of color.' You know what? I do, too, and if we have the opportunity to do a second season, I'll address that." (Rosen, 2012). But writer Kendra James (2012) took issue with this, pointing to the authorial position Dunham holds as showrunner, writer, and director which would have given her the opportunity to bring diverse perspectives to the show if she wanted. Further, the chosen title "*Girls*" seems to

hint at a show that will relate to girls universally, regardless of their race, sexuality, or class (Grdešić, 2013). The focus on “privileged white hipsters [meant to represent] Everygirl” is blamed for its inability to be the “Perfect Feminist TV Series” (Fuller & Driscoll, 2015). This issue of diversity however, is not a standard every show is held to; because there are fewer shows written, directed, or produced by women, these shows are expected to “live up to the task of being all things to all women” (Grdešić, 2013, p. 355).

As I mentioned, *Girls* has often been written about in relation to postfeminism, although there is no clear consensus on what that relationship is, that is whether the show embodies postfeminism or challenges it. Fuller and Driscoll (2015) wonder if the ambiguity of postfeminism itself causes the ambivalence towards the show, while Weitz (2016) believes that the ironic and satiric nature of the show is to blame for the inability to identify a single message. Bell (2013) argues that *Girls* demonstrates what can happen when “an institutionalized privilege catapults youth so hard into their individual journeys that they end up spiraling around themselves” (p. 365). Thus, while the girls themselves are not the perfect postfeminist example of successful young women, they call on postfeminist discourse by failing to live up to it (Fuller & Driscoll, 2015).

I realized that female friendship was crucial to *Girls* as a narrative function, and I wanted to explore that in relation to postfeminism. It was here that I noticed a gap in the literature: the only work I could find in a preliminary search on postfeminism and female friendship was that of Alison Winch (2011, 2012, 2013), who proposes a particular feminine identity she has labeled the postfeminist girlfriend. Winch describes this identity as a woman who “privileges her female relationships as necessary to her subjectivity” (2011, p. 360). These female relationships are understood as an investment for the individual, as girlfriends offer a system of comparison,

feedback, and motivation in order to regulate normative femininity (2013, p. 2). Female friends here offer emotional and moral support, which helps to validate each other's identities as girlfriends. Further, Winch observed a wave of films centering on female friends, such as *Baby Mama* (2008), *Sex and the City* (2008), and *Bride Wars* (2009), which she refers to as the postfeminist girlfriend flick. Winch argues that these films contribute to the circulation and production of the "girlfriend" as an identity and they offer female viewers a cathartic space to consider the complex nature of women's friendships (2012, p. 70-71).

Once I pinpointed friendship as something I was interested in studying, I wanted to find a second show that also constructed friendship as important to the characters. I immediately thought of NBC's *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) because I knew it featured a positive representation of friendship. Unlike *Girls*, *Parks and Recreation* is not often mentioned in relation to postfeminism. *Parks* is, however, written about for being a female-led comedy, often paired with NBC's *30 Rock* (2006-2013), for their more critical engagement with feminist discourse (Swink, 2017, p. 16). The feminist nature of these shows are often conflated with the feminist ideals of the women behind them, Amy Poehler and Tina Fey, although Poehler's character, Leslie Knope, is perhaps "the most beloved feminist television character since Mary Tyler Moore" (Anderson, 2018, p. 287).

Leslie Knope as a character is career-focused and smart, as well as kind and optimistic. She demonstrates her feminist ideology by decorating her office with portraits of the female politicians she idolizes, as well as through her professional challenges and accomplishments; many episodes see Leslie fighting for equality for the women in her small, often behind-the-times town of Pawnee, Indiana. It is not only Leslie who espouses feminism, but the show in its entirety. Anderson (2018) argues that unlike women-centered sitcoms of the past, such as *Mary*

Tyler Moore (1970-1977) and *Designing Women* (1986-1993), which typically blurred a feminist identity with feminist politics, *Parks and Recreation* does something different. As Engstrom (2013, p. 6) puts it: “*Parks* simply treats feminism and feminist values as something normal.” *Parks* satirizes the sexist nature of political culture, dealing with boys’ clubs and double standards for female politicians, and at the same time uses a positive attitude to push a feminist agenda of gender equality and the progress of women (Engstrom, 2013, p. 7).

Friendship is important in *Parks and Recreation*, mostly because of how highly Leslie prioritizes it. She is friends with all of her co-workers, demonstrated by her interest in their lives as well as her over-the-top kindness towards them. Leslie especially values her female friends, and creates a holiday for them on February 13 called Galentine’s Day, wherein they celebrate their love for each other. Of all her female friends, however, Leslie is obsessed with her best friend, Ann Perkins (played by Rashida Jones), and the closeness and positive representation of this relationship is why I chose *Parks and Recreation* for this project.

I was interested in the idea of female friendship on TV because I believe that female friendships are important, although they are not always portrayed as such. Unlike Leslie and Ann, women are often depicted as in conflict with each other or as rivals. However, women coming together for fun and emotional intimacy can be read as resisting patriarchal constructs and male objectification (Cooper, 2000). I concur with Hollinger (1998, p. 8) that female friendships can function politically under patriarchy by challenging the idea that women need male companionship and therefore, these close friendships allow women to build their own identities outside of their relationships to men. Martinussen, Wetherell, and Braun (2019) argue that the radical potential of female friendships can be erased, however, if the relationship is

performed through tropes of postfeminist empowerment, where it may instead lend itself to the workings of patriarchal capitalism.

Female friendships have been important to me, as I have been better friends with women for most of my life. As I've gotten older and become more engaged with feminism as a political ideology, the female friendships in my life have felt even more significant, especially with those who also identify as feminists. I have developed a deeper connection with those women through a shared understanding of the ways in which all women continue to be oppressed by patriarchy. Further, following the research of Martinussen et al. (2019), I see how my friendships tend to work as a resistance to, or at least a reprieve from, the pressures women face in this current neoliberal, postfeminist era.

Two of the patterns Martinussen et al. discovered through talking to women about their friendships resonated with my perception of my own friendships. That is, I see my female friends as an outlet for an escape, from both my busy life and from the pressures on me as a woman to be nice and agreeable. Time spent with close female friends is time that women don't have to think about expectations or self-monitoring, and are "free from having to actively attend to preoccupations that currently come with doing womanhood in a man's framework" (p. 11). Having a space to "just be" without the pressures of doing things right or being agreeable, without feeling like a filter is needed (p. 10, 13), women are able to offer support and love in a way that is less artificial and regulatory than the postfeminist girlfriend Winch proposes.

I would like to take a moment here to situate my work. While both texts I have chosen are television shows, I am not so much interested in what TV is doing as a medium as I am in what these shows specifically are doing. That is, I recognize the existence of television studies as an academic field (see Miller, 2002; Gray & Lotz, 2015; *Critical Studies in Television*), but am

choosing not to focus on it. Taking from television studies would allow for an exploration of things like network differences, production choices, and viewer reception; it would allow for a larger exploration of how female friendship is portrayed on television in general. I however, am opting to look solely at how these popular texts are involved in discourses of postfeminism and female friendship.

In this thesis, I wanted to explore how *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls* talk about and portray female friendship. I was interested in the role friendship plays in the shows, but also in the lives of the characters involved. Although I was not studying TV as a medium, and despite the fact that my findings will not necessarily be generalizable, I used these popular series as a sort of case study for how female friendship is being depicted on TV. I was also interested in how these shows deploy postfeminist discourse, that is in how these shows may embody or resist the individualized discourse of postfeminism. Further, because postfeminism relies on feminist discourses, I was interested in how these women-driven series draw on feminism as well, and I looked for instances of the entanglement of postfeminist and feminist discourses in order to think about postfeminism as a sensibility (Gill, 2007), which I explore in the next chapter. Related, I was interested in how these shows portray racial and class differences, including if these differences impacted the structure of the friendship. I was interested in what these differences say about the feminism of each show, that is if there is any level of intersectional analysis.

The main analysis of this thesis relies on Alison Winch's concept of the postfeminist girlfriend, which I understand as a specific set of practices produced from postfeminist discourse. I was interested to see if the friendships on these shows use the same set of practices as the postfeminist girlfriend, tracking if and how they relate to Winch's concept. As I noted above, except for Winch, there is a gap in the literature around female friendship in relation to

postfeminism, and others who have since explored female friendship in a postfeminist era have similarly depended on this concept of the postfeminist girlfriend (see Boyle & Berridge, 2014; Martinussen et al. 2019). Therefore, I relied heavily on Alison Winch's work.

My analysis of the first four seasons of both *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls* will be guided by the following questions:

1. How do *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls* talk about and portray various female friendships? What is the role of the different friendships in each show?
2. In what ways, if at all, do the women in the shows exemplify Alison Winch's notion of the postfeminist girlfriend? That is, do the women prioritize their female friendships? Do they also police one another for normative feminine behavior?
3. Are there friends of different racial or classed backgrounds? If so, how do these social differences factor into the representation of the friendships?
4. How, if at all, do the shows discuss feminism? Is it overt or implicit? Do they reiterate postfeminist sentiments?

My thesis is organized into the following chapters. Chapter Two is a literature review of relevant academic research. I explore what postfeminism is, including how it is variously understood and its relationship to media. I also investigate previous female friendships depicted on television before I move on to the guiding literature for this project, Alison Winch's (2011, 2012, 2013) notion of the postfeminist girlfriend and the postfeminist girlfriend flick. Chapter Three gives an overview of the theoretical framework I will use, feminist poststructuralist theory. Here I also describe my chosen methodology as well as the design of this research. Chapter Four is the bulk of my thesis where I answer my research questions through the analysis of the chosen texts. Finally, Chapter Five is my conclusion, which includes a discussion of the analysis

findings, and an acknowledgment of the challenges I experienced and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

What is postfeminism?

Postfeminism cannot be singularly defined; it is typically understood in one of three ways: as a shift or development in feminist theory, as a period of feminism, or as a rejection or break from previous feminist ideology (Boyle, 2008). It is worth noting that, given the multiplicity of understandings of postfeminism, ideas across these categories may contradict one another or fall under more than one heading.

In the first category, postfeminism is understood as a political shift or development in feminist theory. Here, it is believed to be part of a transformation for feminism, the result of a break in consensus during the years referred to as the second wave (Lotz, 2001, p. 113). According to Genz and Brabon (2009), this notion of transformation is favored by proponents of postmodernism, where the use of the prefix ‘post’ signals a dependence on, or continuity with, the term that follows (p. 4). Thus, the ‘post’ of postfeminism here does not mean that feminism is being rejected or eliminated, but it indicates that feminism is still active within postfeminism, that it still depends on and continues feminist thinking. Indeed, for Brooks (1997), postfeminism is a sign of feminism’s “maturity into a confident body of theory and politics, representing pluralism and difference” (p. 1).

While this category considers postfeminism to be a shift within feminism “from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference” (Boyle, 2008, p. 4), the insinuation that debates about difference are only now arising is problematic. This conceptualization diminishes the history of women’s movements to one strand of hegemonic liberal feminism, which has long overlooked differences among women along lines of race, class, or sexuality (Boyle, 2008),

working to further disregard strands of feminism such as black feminism, separatist/lesbian feminism, or post-colonial feminism.

The second category, where postfeminism is understood as a period, implies that it comes at a time after feminism has ended. In this conceptualization, postfeminism suggests that feminism is over, that it has become obsolete, either due to its failures or because it succeeded and therefore has served its purpose (Boyle, 2008). This version of postfeminist ideology argues that feminism has already achieved equality for women, largely thanks to the work of the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted in things like women being able to work outside the home, to control their reproduction, and to earn their own income (McRobbie, 2009). Proponents of this ideology may reference statistics such as those that tell us women currently attend and complete university at a higher rate than men (Statistics Canada, 2018) as evidence of feminism's success. Of course, this understanding suggests a universal experience of womanhood, implying that only through the organized, white feminist movement called the second wave did women begin working outside the home, despite the fact that, for example, Black women had been in the workforce long before (see Smith, 1985).

Postfeminist ideology also suggests that feminism has failed. One such failure is the notion that women can 'have it all;' postfeminism suggests that feminism's desire for women to successfully balance a career and a family hasn't benefitted them the way it was meant to (McRobbie, 2009), as women continue to earn less than men (<https://www.canadianwomen.org/the-facts/the-wage-gap/>) and they continue to struggle to balance 'it all' (see Aveling, 2002). Postfeminist critic Angela McRobbie (2009) argues that postfeminism takes ideas like 'having it all' into account for its own ideology, that is it takes ideas from feminism only to discount them as out of date and unnecessary. Here, postfeminism

derides feminism's supposed disavowal of the roles of mother and wife, and reframes them as empowering; pre-feminist ideals such as the prioritization of marriage and motherhood are repurposed as postfeminist freedoms (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003).

Of course, blaming feminism for women not being able to 'have it all' fails to note the ways in which women have disproportionately been expected to make all the changes; while women have been increasingly joining the workforce in recent decades, men have not similarly increased their amount of domestic labor (Yavorsky, Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). In this way, postfeminism's focus on what the previous period of feminism may or may not have done 'right' can seem unproductive, as it works to criticize feminism and feminists, rather than the issues of sexism and oppression that feminism is concerned with (Boyle, 2008).

The final category refers to postfeminism as a rejection of or break from previous feminist movements, particularly from the more radical politics of the second wave which fought for structural changes. The 'backlash' to feminism (see Susan Faludi, 1991), in conjunction with the rise of neoliberalism, which I will explore more below, has resulted in a popular feminism that focuses solely on the individual. In this version of postfeminism, political questions about gender, discrimination, and oppression have vanished, and feminism is repositioned as a lifestyle or identity, rather than a political movement (Boyle, 2008).

McRobbie has described this as a disarticulation of feminism, as a social force that "devalues and makes unthinkable the very basis of coming-together, on the assumption that there is no longer any need for such actions" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 26). She argues that young women in particular are the targets for this disarticulation, in an attempt to steer them away from previous feminist goals presented by popular media, which frames feminists as angry and man-hating (McRobbie, 2009).

Beyond these main three categories, there is one other relevant conceptualization of postfeminism that I would like to explore. Rosalind Gill (2007) suggests that postfeminism is best understood as a sensibility, which she points to as characterizing an increasing number of media products like TV shows, movies, and advertisements. She argues that postfeminism is more complicated than simply being a backlash to feminism because there is often an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (p. 163); indeed “the patterned nature of the contradictions is what constitutes the sensibility, one in which notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the ‘wrong’ ‘choices.’” (p. 163). For Gill, postfeminism has a significant relationship to neoliberal discourse, leading her to refer to postfeminism as a sort of gendered neoliberalism.

Gill (2017) revisited the notion of postfeminism as a sensibility ten years after she first proposed it. Here, she argued that the sensibility has both been intensifying and becoming hegemonic (p. 610). While postfeminism has always relied on discourses of individualization, it has become similarly dependent on psychologized discourses, particularly those that aim to produce the ‘right’ disposition to thrive in neoliberalism, which includes confidence, perseverance, and ambition.

Importantly, she also draws our attention to ways in which critical work on postfeminism has opened it to intersectional possibilities, challenging the assumption that only certain women – white, young, heterosexual, middle-class, and Western – are the privileged subjects of postfeminist discourse (p. 612). Consider the increased visibility of sexualized older women, such as the figure of the MILF or cougar (see Jermyn & Holmes, 2015), or Doeskin’s (2015) argument for postfeminism to be understood as a ‘transnational culture,’ due to its existence and influence outside of the West. Further, Gill and Flood (in Gill, 2017, p. 614) have observed queer

spaces infiltrated by postfeminist and neoliberal values; see McNicholas Smith and Tyler's (2017) discussion about TV lesbian weddings and how they seem to take queer into account without threatening heteropatriarchy. Thus, while the idea of postfeminism as a sensibility was initially about contemporary depictions of gender in the media, it has grown with the development of an intersectional lens. This means the sensibility is now able to explore the complex and nuanced ways in which those women presumed to exist outside postfeminist culture are in fact impacted by it.

Before moving on, I would like to take a moment to address my understanding of postfeminism, as this will shape the rest of this thesis, including my analysis. I concur with Rosalind Gill's (2007) argument for postfeminism as a sensibility; what I find most notable about postfeminism is the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideals (Gill, 2007), the way in which postfeminism hints at feminist sentiments without identifying feminism per se (Butler, 2013, p. 83). I understand postfeminism as often overlapping with neoliberalism as well, with its focus on the individual, who should be a self-regulating, consuming, autonomous subject who thinks about the self as a constant project, and the denial of ongoing systemic inequalities wherein failures are blamed on the individual despite realities of sexism and racism. Following Gill (2007) and Butler (2013), I believe that women, more than men, are expected to become these subjects, and these expectations are concealed with language of empowerment, confidence, and self-worth. Finally, like Gill (2007), I believe this postfeminist sensibility is most active in popular media and that this understanding will allow for a critical study of contemporary visual representations of gender in the media (p. 148).

Neoliberal Feminism

Postfeminism is closely tied to neoliberalism, which is widely understood as a mode of governmentality that “produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social” (Rottenberg, 2014). It is a powerful rationality that includes deregulation, privatization, and welfare reform; that frames every human activity in entrepreneurial terms; and further, that entails a process of individuation, wherein each individual is framed as an entrepreneurial and economic actor (Prugl, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014). The neoliberal governmentality does not include space for social justice, as it prioritizes economic identities, which become the foundation for political work, thereby erasing the need for a collective movement like feminism. Subsequently, neoliberalism reshapes our understanding of feminism by prioritizing the individual self over society at large (Rottenberg, 2014).

A neoliberal take on feminism acknowledges the existence of gender inequality, but overlooks the systemic nature of issues like sexism, racism, and classism (Rottenberg, 2014). Proponents of this ideology, such as Camille Paglia (2017), view their own position of power and wealth as proof that women are no longer oppressed and therefore that sexism no longer exists. Neoliberal feminism understands, for example, that pay inequality and sexual harassment are ongoing issues, but any solutions offered are individualistic, and victims are blamed for their situation, assuming they made the wrong choice(s) somewhere (Rottenberg, 2018).

Indeed, the notion of ‘choice’ is important to neoliberal postfeminism, as all women are now supposedly able to choose from options which were historically denied to certain women. As the argument goes, if feminism and therefore sexism is no longer a problem, there are no restraints on what options are available for women. However, we need to unpack and think about what

choice means in this context. According to Chen (2010), terms like choice, freedom, and agency have been resignified to refer to an individual woman's choice to self-objectify or willingly subscribe to patriarchal heterosexual norms and capitalist commodity culture, norms that women are encouraged and/or pressured to follow by making the right choices (p. 442). Therefore, if women are expected to make particular choices, the act of choosing in itself becomes the symbol of women's freedom; as Katha Pollitt argues (in Whelehan, 2010), "women have learned to describe everything they do, no matter how apparently conformist, submissive, self-destructive or humiliating, as a personal choice that cannot be criticized because personal choice is what feminism is all about" (p. 166).

A New Visibility

Because I am interested in how *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* talk about feminism, I want to explore the new visibility feminism has gained in recent years; McRobbie (2009) noted an increase in popular feminism in the 1990s and Gill (2016) points to the early 2010s as a time when mainstream media began having conversations about gender and feminism, covering topics related to feminist activism such as rape culture, online misogyny, and the lack of strong female characters in film (Gill, 2016). I want to address this issue because of the debate around what this new visibility means for postfeminism: Keller and Ryan (2014) argue that it challenges the postfeminist idea that feminism is in retreat, while Gill (2016) believes that some of the popular feminism "circulating is in fact distinctively postfeminist" (p. 612) due to the focus on the individual, autonomy, and choice.

One particular source responsible for the new visibility of feminism is the rise in celebrity and style politics, which no longer disparages or rejects the identity of 'feminist,' but that

presents it as a trendy one. This can also be associated with the contemporary power of brand culture, where, in this case, feminism becomes part of a celebrity's brand and marketability. By relying on feminist language and ideologies, celebrities can present themselves as feminist role models for their fans, especially their young female fans. This process, however, has been understood as depoliticizing feminism and using it as an appealing characteristic that will encourage girls to buy into the celebrity's brand, which will further the financial success of the celebrity (Rivers, 2017). While public statements about feminism or other social justice movements from a celebrity can be positive and influential, it is important that we recognize when a feminist identity is just that, an identity, without explicit politics behind it (Gill, 2016).

Roxane Gay (cited in Hobson, 2017) has referred to celebrity feminism as a sort of 'gateway feminism,' or 'feminism lite,' meaning that it is an easy introduction to feminist values without diving deeper into the politics and political action fundamental to a strong feminist consciousness. However, this reduction of celebrity feminism to 'feminism lite' or 'marketplace feminism' (Zeisler, 2016) suggests that there is an authentic feminism, one that is more substantive and better coordinated, that celebrities are not participating in. The practice of policing celebrity feminism in this way homogenizes both celebrity feminism and feminism more broadly, assuming there is a single definition for either.

The surge of celebrities claiming feminism as part of their brand is of particular interest for this thesis, as both Amy Poehler and Lena Dunham, the stars of *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls* respectively, are known for identifying themselves as feminists. While these women did not gain notoriety directly through their claims of feminist identity, feminism has been seen as central to many of the projects they have worked on, if simply because they put women in the center, such as *Baby Mama* (2008) or *Tiny Furniture* (2010). Both women have deepened their connection to

feminist identity through the publication of their non-fiction bestsellers—wherein they explore their gendered experiences and sense of solidarity with other women—and their involvement in various online platforms, discussed below, where they are able to mediate certain conversations around feminism (Taylor, 2016).

Amy Poehler created an organization called *Amy Poehler's Smart Girls*, which is active on various social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. The organization is "dedicated to helping young people cultivate their authentic selves" and they "emphasize intelligence and imagination over 'fitting in'," according to their website (<https://amysmartgirls.com/about-us-352aa89f56cf>). Taylor (2016) notes that *Smart Girls* is guilty of marketing and selling empowerment in a neoliberal fashion (p. 243), particularly through the videos of Poehler herself, answering users' questions or giving advice. Poehler uses the language of choice and agency to give young girls the tools to be confident and self-actualizing individuals. She is able to position herself as a sister figure, guiding the younger women through their feminine adolescence. However, Taylor notes that Poehler and *Smart Girls* lack the regulating girlfriend gaze of Alison Winch's proposed postfeminist girlfriend culture, which I will return to below. This is to say that Poehler comes across as an empathetic, caring friend of sorts who uses her time and supposed expertise to help young women, and her advice "is clearly underpinned by a feminist ethic of care" (Taylor, 2016, p. 248).

Lena Dunham, in response to what she perceived as the failures of social network platforms like Twitter, created an online community, starting with an e-newsletter titled *Lenny*. Whereas Poehler and her *Smart Girls* rely on the rhetoric of choice and empowerment, according to Taylor, *Lenny* is more overtly feminist, "[seeking] to reconcile feminism with formerly trivialized preoccupations" such as fashion and beauty (Taylor, 2016, p. 256). Taylor argues that

this celebration of traditionally devalued and feminized cultural practices is typically associated with third-wave feminism (p. 256), yet *Lenny's* interviews with women like Hillary Clinton and second-wave feminist Gloria Steinem demonstrate a desire for cross-generational dialogue, which is a departure from typical understandings of third-wave feminism. Notably, as *Lenny* developed, it seemed to give space to an increasing number of voices and experiences, publishing stories like ““They Want to Silence Us”” (<https://www.lennyletter.com/story/they-want-to-silence-us>) about a mother and young daughter fleeing from violence in Nicaragua, and ‘Building a Lifeline’ (<https://www.lennyletter.com/story/building-a-lifeline>), which focuses on the support systems in place for queer and trans prisoners. Taylor suggests that the inclusion of stories like this was perhaps in response to the numerous critiques of the whiteness of the feminism Dunham has demonstrated elsewhere (Taylor, 2016).

Postfeminist Media

Following this exploration of some understandings of postfeminism, we can now consider how postfeminism is deployed in popular culture. According to McRobbie (2009), the transition from feminism to postfeminism has been most notable in the popular media, with Vered and Humphries (2014) suggesting that postfeminism arises directly from popular culture.

Lotz (2001) considers postfeminism a critical tool in identifying concepts within media texts in order to explore the complexity of various female representations. Here, she offers a list of attributes she has observed across various media that indicate the presence of postfeminism, while acknowledging that because media studies is an evolving field, the list will likely change in the years to come. Narratives with an underlying postfeminist perspective are likely to explore the varying power relations women deal with, such as how different proximity to systems like

sexism, racism, or capitalism can lead women to have different experiences of oppression. A postfeminist perspective can also be seen in the depictions of feminist solutions for women's problems and a loose organization of activism, such as the episode of *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) that offers both a staff walkout and a legal suit as solutions for those experiencing sexual harassment. Lotz (2001) also lists the deconstruction of binary categories like gender and sexuality as an attribute; that is, a show may play with gender and sexuality, demonstrating the flexibility available within those categories. Finally, Lotz (2001) talks about the way in which contemporary issues faced by women are discussed or depicted within a series. Here she refers to instances where a show explores how to define feminism and its current goals, or those where we see similar patterns of behavior across shows, such as how women negotiate finding a romantic partner in comparable ways on *Ally McBeal* or *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) (Lotz, 2001).

These attributes Lotz (2001) has identified do help to locate postfeminist discourses on television, however, they also demonstrate what could be considered an issue within postfeminist media studies. Much of this work relies on the analysis of genres marketed towards women, such as romantic comedies and female centered sitcoms or dramas (Tasker & Negra, 2005). While feminist media studies is meant to expose how media help produce and maintain patriarchal practices, the objects of study are almost always "the 'feminism' of women-centered media texts" rather than any examination of "the daily playing out of gender relations in non-feminist or male-centered shows" (Boyle, 2008, p. 177). This is to say that the way postfeminism has been taken up by media scholars has resulted in a heaping of research on media that already attempt to demonstrate how modern women negotiate their lives, such as *Sex and the City* or *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), while it seemingly overlooks an exploration of how feminism or

postfeminism may be utilized in media where women are not featured prominently, such as *Entourage* (2004-2011) or *I Love You, Man* (2009).

I am interested in the ways that race and class may influence the friendships between the women on the shows I analyze, and therefore I want to address the way in which postfeminism has a problem with race, evident in its overwhelming whiteness (Winch, 2013, p. 127).

Following Gill's notion of postfeminism as a sensibility, Butler (2013) argues that postfeminism reproduces inequalities of gender, race, and sexuality (p. 36). Butler disagrees, however, with the idea that postfeminism excludes women of color, suggesting instead that "postfeminism primarily represents an affirmation of a white, heterosexual subject" (p. 49). She points to shows like *Basketball Wives* (2010-), *Flavor of Love* (2006-), and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007-) as examples of women of colour enacting postfeminism; they embrace femininity and the consumption of feminine products, they draw on language of choice, sexual freedom, and individual empowerment, and they construct themselves as ideal heterosexual subjects (p. 48). In Butler's view, the tendency to think about postfeminism as excluding issues of gender, race, and sexuality only works to conceal the way in which non-white, non-middle class, and non-heterosexual subjects are included in "a specific and limited way" (p. 49).

Springer (2007) argues that postfeminism works to erase any progress towards racial inclusion, producing racial difference as a commodity, similar to postfeminism's treatment of feminism (p. 251), while Banet-Weiser (2007) observes a dynamic comparable to the undoing of feminism taking place in relation to race in popular culture, where "race, like gender, as a political identity has been appropriated in the dominant culture through the brand identity of the urban and postfeminism" (p. 215). Thus, postfeminism may seem to demand racial inclusion, but it produces race as a commodity, something cool which can be consumed through a particular

style of clothing, through the trend of year-round bronzed skin, or through the fetishization of a “big booty” (Springer, 2007, p. 252). Through this commodification, understandings of race are detached from political underpinnings, resulting in a widespread ambivalence to race and a lack of attention to racial differences. Despite ongoing material issues of poverty, unemployment, and institutionalized racism, ideologies about race are typically represented through the images of the urban, framing it as a hip identity or style that anyone can perform (Banet-Wieser, 2007).

Further, Banet-Weiser (2007) discusses how the rhetoric of identity and of choice utilized by postfeminism is characteristic of what Christopher Smith refers to as the “New Economy” of race, wherein “the tropes of the urban and hip-hop culture are used as means to designate a particular national perspective on diversity” (in Banet-Weiser, 2007, pp. 204-205). This means that depictions of personal success or moments of media visibility for those from minority communities are wielded as proof that we, as a society, have moved beyond the fight for representation. However, the current representations of race and gender are more tied to the dynamics of the market than a desire for diverse representations. For example, *The Cosby Show* is known for being an early mainstream representation of African-American families, but Banet-Weiser (2007) argues that this culturally significant show took place in the same moment that corporate America discovered how the term ‘diversity’ could be used as a marketing tool, and marketing strategies began to focus on segments of the population.

Following these arguments, if women of colour are minimally included in representations of postfeminism, while understandings of race are being undone so that race has little political meaning, how are women of colour being represented? According to Projansky (2001), they appear as “assimilated ‘equal’ beneficiaries of the same ‘rights’ that feminism has supposedly provided to white women” (p. 87). The idea that racism, like sexism, is a thing of the past

overshadows the need for an intersectional analysis; women of colour can be visually represented in film or TV, addressing that market desire for ‘diversity,’ without exploring the differing ways in which non-white women experience oppression.

Female Friendship Precedents

In order to understand current representations of adult female friendship on the two TV series I analyze below, it is important to look at their antecedents. While most of the literature on representations of female friendships is written about film, rather than television, Lynn Spangler (1989) identifies various dyadic friendships starting in the 1950s in her historical overview of female friendships on television. First is the instance of what Spangler refers to as “the most enduring female friends during the 1950s” (1989, p. 15): Lucy and Ethel of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957). While their friendship was perhaps fresh at the time, the women reinforced traditional sex roles by spending much of their time together waging a sort of ‘battle of the sexes’ against their husbands (Spangler, 1989). The 1970s saw *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which was one of the first shows to portray women leaving their childhood home to earn a living while often remaining single. While the show may not have addressed social issues that would have affected working women at the time, the character Mary Richards is seen to have multiple fulfilling friendships with various women (Spangler, 1989).

Spangler (1989) identifies the 1980s as a decade ripe with female friendship on TV, featured in various shows, some of which address serious issues and move beyond personal problems to larger ones involving current events. *Kate & Allie* (1984-1989), for example, is about two divorced women who live together and raise their children in a nuclear-family-like structure. *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) was praised for its groundbreaking portrayal of aging women, who

were granted more sexual freedom than television typically allows for older women, but also featured a close group of friends who lived together (Spangler, 1989). *Cagney & Lacey* (1981-1988) is one of the few examples of a prime-time drama that represents women positively. Cagney and Lacey are detective partners and close friends, who are often shown dealing with problems women face, such as sexual harassment and struggling to balance work and family (Spangler, 1989).

Despite a gap in the literature on female friendship TV, I want to discuss a few contemporary examples of close female friendships. Consider Rachel and Monica of *Friends* (1994-2004), an ensemble series about a group of six friends living in New York City. Rachel and Monica were childhood friends, who reconnect in the pilot episode after losing touch since high school, and move in together. Despite the other dynamics within this group of friends, Rachel and Monica are best friends who give advice on love and careers, while occasionally fighting as a result of personality clashes between the high-strung Monica and laid-back Rachel. *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), which focuses on the lives of mother-daughter duo Lorelai and Rory, features at least two close friendships: that between Lorelai and her co-worker Sooky, and between Rory and her high school nemesis turned college roommate Paris. Both dyads offer emotional and moral support as the women navigate romance, their career ambitions, and complex relationships with family.

Broad City (2014-2019) is a show about two female friends, Abbi and Ilana, and the various hijinks they get into while living in New York City. Their friendship is rooted in the offbeat schemes they plan, such as retrieving the air conditioner unit Ilana left in her college dorm years before. We see the supportive, interdependent nature of their relationship when those schemes go wrong, such as when the two are taken to the hospital after Ilana lets her allergic reaction to shellfish go for too long and Abbi accidentally stabs herself with Ilana's epi pen.

Finally, *Insecure* (2016-) is about the experiences of contemporary Black women, particularly the friendship between Issa (played by creator Issa Rae) and her friend-since-college, Molly. The show explores issues women face at work, such as having to work harder than their male counterparts, while also exploring similar issues through an intersectional lens, such as when Molly worries that her new Black female co-worker won't be taken seriously if she doesn't learn to "switch it up" ("Racist as F") when talking to their white colleagues. The friendship between Issa and Molly is supportive, pushing each other to be their best, while also still being frank and honest when needed.

The Postfeminist Girlfriend and the Girlfriend Flick

As I pointed to in my introduction, there exists somewhat of a gap in the literature on female friendships in the era of postfeminism, specifically in pop culture. Alison Winch, who has written the book on the topic (Winch, 2013), identified a 'girlfriend culture' which reflects the values of postfeminism in the form of peer control, where women regulate the behavior and lifestyle of their closest friends. Additionally, she identified an increasingly popular genre of film she refers to as 'girlfriend flicks': movies which portray the intimate aspects of female friendship in a particular way, helping to circulate and produce the identity of the 'girlfriend' (Winch, 2012).

For Winch (2013), girlfriends fit easily into a postfeminist pop culture context which focuses heavily on entrepreneurship and frames the self as an ongoing project, constantly worked on but never complete. Girlfriends play an important role in the project of the self by continuously regulating one another's behavior in both public and private spheres. Winch (2013) views girlfriendship as an investment in the individual because of the regulation that friends

provide; these girlfriends are about comparison and feedback, with a goal of facilitating normative femininity. Her argument is that girlfriend culture, where women bond over the bodies of other women, contains a unique, homosocial level of control and surveillance. Hegemonic power structures are reproduced within the girlfriend culture when women are complicit in policing female bodies, which leads Winch to suggest the existence of a “gynaeopticon,” a gendered, neoliberal take on Bentham’s panopticon, wherein girlfriends are constantly watching other girlfriends (Winch, 2013, p. 18).

Pop culture marketed to women has typically relied on the idea that the female body is a site of anxiety and yearning, but under the pretense of girlfriendship, this new level of homosocial surveillance is framed as solidarity between women. The supportive and friendly solidarity disguises misogyny, which “becomes legitimated [as] it is articulated by women for and against other women” (Winch, 2013, p. 31). Indeed, men are now positioned as a sort of afterthought because girlfriendship has become the place women go to work through their emotions and, according to Winch, learning to control emotions through female sociality teaches the girlfriends how to better negotiate heterosexual relationships (2013).

Within Winch’s proposed girlfriend culture, the male gaze has become a friendly gaze, as policing women’s bodies has become the responsibility of girlfriends who, unlike straight men, can recognize and understand the labor that goes into the body. In fact, we could argue that women now look through the male gaze, which has been internalized and redirected into girlfriend culture (Winch, 2013). Additionally, Apter and Josselson (in Winch, 2013) have theorized a ‘female gaze’ which is produced in childhood and subsequently internalized. They suggest that female friendships are formative because women and girls often look to their peers for appropriate behavior and appearance, and therefore learn normative femininity “in the mirror

of her girlfriend's gaze" (p. 10). Because the girlfriend's role is to police her girlfriend's appropriately feminine and heterosexual behavior, this female gaze has similar intentions and results as the male gaze, but is now concealed in the postfeminist language of girlfriends and constant self-transformations.

Films Winch (2012) classifies as girlfriend flicks, such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), *Baby Mama* (2008), and *Bride Wars* (2009), are written for female spectators and the stories are typically relevant to the lives of women; the characters negotiate relationships, family, the body, and careers. They give female viewers a cathartic space to explore the emotions of female friendship, portraying the women working through issues of conflict and betrayal. They offer guidance and imply that women can 'have it all,' thereby appealing to the postfeminist sensibilities of women in their twenties and thirties who have already been raised to believe that they can be and do whatever they want now that women are empowered and have choices. However, there is seemingly no work done to unpack what 'having it all' means or to politicize any aspect of it. For example, *Baby Mama* is about Kate, a woman nearing forty, who has achieved her career goals and decided to have a baby by herself through surrogacy. This movie does not address the financial privilege it takes to control one's fertility in this way, nor does it discuss what will happen to Kate's career while she is on maternity leave.

The girlfriend flick is unlikely to feature any women of color as members of the friend group or to portray black women and white women relating through Winch's notion of girlfriendship. Butler (2013) argues that TV shows and films like *Basketball Wives* (2010-) or *Think Like a Man* (2012) can center the friendships between women of colour while embodying the sentiments of postfeminism, which is not something Winch addresses in her proposal of the postfeminist girlfriend flick, thereby reaffirming white women as the ideal postfeminist subject (Butler, p.

49). However, Winch does explore a few examples of friendships between a white woman and a woman of colour, including that between Carrie Bradshaw and her personal assistant Louise (Jennifer Hudson) in the *Sex and the City* (2008) film. Louise's search for love and passion for fashion brought her to New York, where she lives in a small apartment with two roommates and rents designer handbags. Carrie benefits from the professional and personal advice of Louise, and Carrie buys her a Louis Vuitton purse as a farewell gift, which is depicted as an older woman giving her younger self a gift. However, in the racial context of mostly-white *Sex and the City*, Winch reads this as a patronizing gesture, and reads Louise's retreat back to her hometown as a reminder of her place within gender and racial hierarchies. Thus, Winch (2013) concludes that the main function of women of color in the girlfriend flick is to make the white women's lives better: women of color typically hold a subservient position or they exist as a symbol of authenticity, making the consumer-obsessed girlfriends appear less superficial (p. 126).

Needless to say, the girlfriend flick represents girlfriend culture as described by Winch (2013). The girlfriends in these films shop, drink, and occasionally work together, although their major role is to police the behavior and appearance of the other girlfriends. They monitor each other's body work, including their eating and exercise habits because the main concern for a girlfriend is that all of her girlfriends look good, even if this requires negative and disciplinary language that can easily transform into abusive language. The intense monitoring and regulation of the body only comes from girlfriends, however, while men appreciate their romantic partners for who they are and what they look like. Here, we can see how the male gaze has become one of support, while the female gaze has developed into the overarching, patriarchal gynaeopticon (Winch, 2012; Winch, 2013).

Girlfriend flicks tend to demonstrate a renewed desire for traditional notions of femininity such as marriage and motherhood, reinforcing the idea that women will “slip into the seeming security of the middle-class matrix” (Winch, 2012, p. 79). Friendship is understood as a stage in women’s lives before they find a husband or partner, a step which often functions as the conclusion of the girlfriend flick. In fact, most stories about female friendship are also clearly stories about heterosexuality (Boyle & Berridge, 2014). Girlfriends play the part of relationship expert, and female characters will often turn to their friends immediately following a dispute with their male partner. This demonstrates how female sociality teaches women to better control their emotions and subsequently to better negotiate heterosexual relationships (Winch, 2013).

On another note, Boyle and Berridge (2014) argue that the girlfriend flick is comparable to the popular ‘bromance’ genre of films. Both types of films portray close friendships, but in different ways. For example, the girlfriend flick often includes a group of friends whereas the bromance, a play on ‘romance,’ is typically about the relationship between two men. Further, the majority of films that center on female friendship feature pre-existing friendships, often ones that were formed in childhood. Whereas films such as *I Love You, Man* portray the beginning of a ‘bromance,’ we seldom see the origin of female friendships on screen. When we do see them, they are often located in childhood and the film depicts how the women negotiate the shift to adulthood, particularly as they “grow into” heterosexuality (Boyle & Berridge, 2014, p. 355). The bromance film may involve heterosexual desire or relationships for one or both of the men, but the plots can function without it (Boyle & Berridge, 2014). Girlfriend flicks are often romantic comedies with a happy and heterosexual ending that feature a group of friends along the way, while bromance films are comedies that may include a romantic plot line, but are ultimately about the men and their friendship.

This chapter has provided an overview of the concept of postfeminism, exploring the various and often contradictory ways in which it has been understood in previous literature. Further, considering the plethora of scholars who locate postfeminism predominantly within media, this chapter has also considered the relationship between postfeminism and media representations. We have seen the notion of the postfeminist girlfriend and the representation of it, which Winch refers to as the postfeminist girlfriend flick. Following a brief history of female friendships in on television, we saw how female friendship is portrayed in the contemporary context, reflecting postfeminist ideology. The literature reviewed here frames this research project going forward; it shapes the questions I ask and the analysis I conduct in order to understand how these two shows specifically, *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation*, portray female friendship in a postfeminist era.

Chapter Three: Theory and Method

Theoretical Framework

My research will be guided by feminist poststructuralist theory. I begin the exploration of my theoretical framework by positioning my own approach to feminist theory. I understand feminism as a type of politics which, simply put, “aims to intervene in and transform the unequal power relations between men and women” (Hollows, 2000, p. 3). These power relations are often referred to by feminists as patriarchy, a system where women are dominated by men and their own interests (Hollows, 2000; Weedon, 1987). Patriarchy can explain the sexual division of labor, as well as the internalized norms of femininity and masculinity we all live under. It rests on notions of biological sex difference, which suggest that women are naturally built to be wives and mothers (Weedon, 1987), while simultaneously disparaging the work required, or at least expected, of women in these roles.

The notion that the personal is political, that women’s lived experiences reflect systems of oppression, is crucial to feminism (Gavey, 1989). Many women develop a feminist perspective as a result of the tension between the hegemonic definition of ‘woman’ and its accompanying roles, and their lived experience of the oppressive structures. Therefore, a successful feminist theory should not overlook subjective experience, but rather “should be able to recognize the importance of the subjective in constituting the meaning of women’s lived reality” (Weedon, 1987, p. 8). A feminist theory must demonstrate the connection between a woman’s experience and the social practices and power relations that shape her experience, while also accounting for variability among women in different subject positions.

Poststructuralist Theory

Poststructuralism, which includes a range of theoretical approaches, is interested in the important role language plays in issues of power and subjectivity. Subjectivity, or our sense of ourselves, is a contradictory process, constantly being reconstituted and re-constructed through the language and discourse we use to think and speak about ourselves and others. It is understood to be socially produced through various discursive practices, which indicates that it is not an innate or predetermined process. Indeed, the idea that subjectivity is socially produced means that forms of subjectivity are context-specific, depending on historical and cultural shifts within the discursive fields with which we engage (Weedon, 1997).

In poststructuralism, ‘language’ does not so much refer to words or a vocabulary, but a meaning-making system that shapes how we understand the world (Scott, 1988). Through this system, meaning is produced within language, rather than reflecting it (Weedon, 1997). Thus, meaning is socially constructed and therefore polysemic; that is, any given language is capable of constructing various meanings and will not necessarily be interpreted the same by everyone (Hollows, 2000). Despite this possibility that language can have multiple meanings, the common understanding of a language reflects the values of those in power, including class, gender, and racial interests (Weedon, 1987). Language is the site where “actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested” (p. 21). Thus, poststructuralism analyzes the ways in which social meanings are constructed in language and in addition, how these meanings work either to further hegemonic ideals or challenge existing power relations.

It is because of this focus on the ways in which power is wielded through language and social institutions that poststructuralism has been taken up by feminist theorists (Weedon, 1997). For

example, some feminist poststructuralists argue that gendered identities and cultural forms are produced, reproduced, and negotiated in historical and cultural contexts within dynamic power relations (Hollows, 2000, p. 27), and they believe that language offers us discursive positions such as normative masculinity and femininity, or, in the case of this project, the postfeminist girlfriend. Through poststructuralism, feminist theorists work to challenge underlying assumptions about gender and power by analyzing the language we use to talk about them (Weedon, 1997).

Feminist poststructuralism, then, is a process of knowledge production based on language, subjectivity and social processes, which aims to understand power relations and suggests strategies for change (Weedon, 1997, p. 19). According to Weedon (1997):

...through a concept of discourse, which is seen as a structuring principle in society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism is able, in detailed historically specific analysis, to explain the working power on behalf of specific interests and to analyze the opportunities for resistance to it (p. 40).

The poststructuralist concept of discourse is key to this thesis, where a discourse is “seen to articulate what we think, say, and do” (Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 80); discourses are “practices that are composed of ideas and ideologies that systematically construct both the subjects and objects of which they speak” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 238).

It is important to understand that texts are not disconnected from the social context in which they are produced, nor are they consumed in a vacuum outside of the social context of the reader. Language is not only produced in a particular social environment, but it consequently has social effects, which can be limited for an individual depending on their social positioning and therefore their access to the socially produced discourse. When available, individuals tend to

internalize the effects, using the internalized information to participate in various social practices and structures, most of which are shaped by and are a product of discourse (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 23-24, 39).

What we understand as common sense is largely determined by the individuals or groups who exercise power in a society or social institution. This power can be displayed through physical force or coercion, or through manufactured consent. It is the relationship between common sense and power that leads to dominant ideologies, and to quote Fairclough “ideology is the prime means of manufacturing consent” (1989, p. 4). Those in power desire widespread consent to dominant discourses, knowing that ideology is most effective when it is invisible. This invisibility occurs when an ideology is not explicit but is tied into assumptions about power, truth, and knowledge, often embedded in the language we use every day (Fairclough, 1989).

Those assumptions are where Fairclough (1989) locates ideology. Maintaining a position of ideological power wherein one’s practices are seen to be universal and common sense is the main mechanism that allows a discourse to become dominant. In turn, what comes to be defined as common sense is reflective of the existing power relations (Fairclough, 1989). If groups of individuals start to recognize that ‘common sense’ is harming them or working against them, it ceases to be common sense and becomes unmistakable for ideology. Therefore, the process of producing a dominant discourse demands a level of naturalization, where the direct connection between a dominant discourse and certain ideologies or interests is no longer detectable (Fairclough, 1989). When a discourse becomes dominant, it becomes more difficult to see the puppet strings coming from those in positions of power or authority. As a result, it becomes more difficult to think differently than so-called common sense directs us to and more difficult to think past the dominant ideological framework.

Sara Mills (1997) has also traced the relationship between discourse and ideology, positing that discourse theory has been successful because of how it has dealt with theorizing power. Issues of access are especially relevant in relation to our current class system; those who are not privileged by class are more likely to struggle for access to discourses because of the inaccessibility of education, knowledge, and information networks, meaning they have less control over the discourses they participate in. Of course, it is important to note here that the perceived validity of any given discourse does not necessarily indicate truthfulness, as truthfulness is less influential on the circulation of a dominant discourse than the actual mechanics which manufacture it. Factors such as truth, power, and knowledge are crucial in what kind of effects a discourse may have (Mills, 1997).

Method/ology

For this thesis, I understand postfeminism as a discourse, as a set of ideas that rely on the same language and ideology to produce a certain subject or object. Through feminist critical discourse analysis, I consider the ways discourses of feminism and postfeminism are drawn on and used in *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*. I understand the postfeminist girlfriend as a series of practices of friendship, which relies on postfeminist discourse. I was interested to see if the friendships on these shows have the same characteristics as the postfeminist girlfriend, that is if they portray the same set of practices. Here, I will use the principles of content analysis to track how the friendships do or do not relate to Winch's concept. Thus, in this section I explore feminist critical discourse analysis, as well as content analysis more broadly.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Scholars from various fields, including sociology and linguistics, have developed critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to critically investigate the social inequalities evident in language use and the circulation of hegemonic discourses (Wodak, 2001). It involves a close reading of texts with the aim of determining “patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies” (Gavey, 1989, p. 467). Critical discourse analysts view language as a social practice and understand the importance of the context of language use, particularly the dynamic between language and power (Wodak, 2001). They focus on social issues, drawing attention to the reciprocal relationship between language and social structure. They are especially interested in the role discourse plays in the production and reproduction of power inequalities through our daily use of and interaction with discourse (Holmes, 2005; van Dijk, 2001).

When considering the production of a text that makes use of a particular discourse, it is important to understand that the language and specific wording of a text depends on and helps create social relationships between participants, as well as between participants and discourse. Some words are ideologically contested, such as feminism for example, and the producer’s decision to use such a word in a text could signify a site of struggle (Fairclough, 1989). Talbot (2001, p. 169) considers it a “necessary condition” for any given statement to be associated with other similar statements. However, the text in question does not necessarily need to repeat what previous discourse has said; the newly circulated text could draw on statements that it comments on or opposes. A text may state the opposite of a common-sense discourse, but the opposition still functions as a connection to a previous discourse.

I will now take a moment to discuss the ‘critical’ component of critical discourse analysis. CDA is not simply the analysis of a discourse, but the critique of power differentials evident in

discourse and language practices (Wodak, 2001). A critique essentially makes visible relationships that were once hidden behind common sense. The word ‘critical’ signifies the “linking of ‘social and political engagement’ with ‘a sociologically informed construction of society’” (Wodak, 2001, p. 2); it refers to the practice of evaluating an object or situation based on a system of rules and values (Locke, 2004). The concept of critical is understood as the existence of distance between the analyst and the data and as the embedding of data into the social. It implies taking an explicit political stance and it requires a level of personal self-reflection as scholars doing research (Wodak, 2001). In short, the critical aspect of CDA brings to light the ways in which power or authority help to circulate dominant discourses.

Scholars like Michelle Lazar (2005) have developed feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), a practice that combines critical discourse analysis and feminist scholarship, and aims to “advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse sustaining hierarchical gendered social arrangements,” which will reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and hegemonic power relations abundant in society (Lazar, 2007, pp. 141-142). Lazar believes that representations of gender relations and identities are embedded and framed within the context of our social institutions and, thus, through analyzing representational practices, FCDA attempts to challenge existing and continuing power dynamics (Lazar, 2005).

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a broad form of analysis designed to explore the larger ideas embedded in cultural texts and objects, which can teach us about the norms and values within our social context (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Content analysis studies cultural documents, which both shape and reflect norms (Reinharz, 1992). As a research method, it is best described as a

“summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages” (Neuendorf, 2011, p. 277) or as a “systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena” (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1).

When conducted through a feminist perspective, content analysis can work to locate traces of a hegemonic worldview embedded in cultural documents and texts, as well as the ‘silences’ around things like race, class, or age (Hesse-Biber, 2011, p. 237). Indeed, feminist scholars worry about the “cultural expression, production, and perpetuation of patriarchy” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 150) and identifying the ways in which certain women, or at least information about certain women, are missing from cultural texts and documents. In this way, a feminist perspective focuses on how certain topics came to be absent and what these absences implicate about the hegemonic worldview (Reinharz, 1992).

Principles of FCDA

Michelle Lazar (2007) lays out five key interrelated principles of feminist critical discourse analysis, and although I do not solely focus on FCDA in my analysis, the feminist perspective expressed through these principles are important and relevant. The first is feminist analytical activism, wherein the analysis completed through FCDA functions as activism; the discourse analysis process should bring light to and help challenge oppressive structures. This means that the perceived divide between theory-driven academic feminism and practice-centered grassroots feminism can be eliminated, allowing for what Lazar (2007) refers to as academic feminism, the practice of “raising critical awareness through research and teaching” (Lazar, 2007, p. 146).

The next three principles Lazar (2007) identifies are closely related in that they each focus on how we discursively understand gender. First, gender must be understood as an ideological structure. Lazar (2007) describes ideologies as representations of certain practices formed from certain perspectives with the goal of maintaining the status quo as it relates to power relations.

Particularly with gender, the status quo is a hierarchical divide between men and women where men are considered the norm and women are set apart as different and inferior. Take for example, the way in which the terms “he” or “man” hold a generic status, able to refer to an unknown person or group of people regardless of gender (Lazar, 2007).

This takes us to the next principle, the complexity of gender and power relations. It is crucial, especially under FCDA, to understand the discursive power patriarchy can hold. Lazar (2007) points to the fact that power currently functions as a self-regulating, subject-producing power wherein inequalities are internalized and therefore become hegemonic and common sense, similar to the process described by Fairclough (1989) above. The third of these related principles is the role of discourse in the (de)construction of gender (Lazar, 2007, p. 150). This principle calls attention to the way language use itself helps reproduce and maintain the social order, but also how language use can be a site of resistance or transformation of that social order, in this case of gender (Lazar, 2007, pp. 148-151).

The fifth and final principle listed by Lazar (2007) is the importance of critical reflexivity as praxis. Two main areas of focus under this principle are how reflexivity is expressed in institutional practices and the need for continuous self-reflexivity among feminists. Lazar states that the reflexivity of institutions is “of interest to feminist CDA, both in terms of progressive institutional practices engendered and in terms of strategic uses of feminism to further non-feminist goals” (Lazar, 2007, p. 152). Here she focuses on the implementation of things like women-friendly programs in universities thanks to the work of previous generations of feminists, as well as the way in which institutions will use the language of ‘empowerment’ and ‘equality’ for non-feminist ends, often for increased profit or notoriety. This is an issue because, as discussed in relation to postfeminism and celebrity feminism, it often works to depoliticize the

goals of feminism when institutions, for instance the advertising industry, frame feminism as a sign value, fetishizing and appropriating it (Lazar, 2007). Lazar insists that feminists need to be constantly reflecting on their own lives and their own work in order to have the most inclusive, interdisciplinary feminist practice. She reminds us of the notable flaws of classic liberal feminism that framed women as a singular category and that attempted to bring women to the same level as men, rather than to deconstruct the gender hierarchy altogether (Lazar, 2007).

Research Design

I have chosen to use two popular television shows as the texts for my research: *Parks and Recreation*, a mockumentary that follows the parks and recreation staff in small town Pawnee, Indiana, and *Girls*, the hit HBO show about four twenty-something women living in New York City. Both shows have since concluded, *Parks and Recreation* after seven seasons and *Girls* after six. For this project, I decided to focus on the first four seasons of each show, as I wanted to make sure that I had enough data to fully understand how they represent female friendships, without being overwhelmed by the amount of data. This data consists of 42 episodes of *Girls*, each averaging 30 minutes, and 68 episodes of *Parks and Recreation* which averages 21 minutes.

I watched each episode in its entirety three times. The first time was in the mindset of a viewer in order to understand the plot and the character development; I focused more on the show itself than the ways in which it might be related to my research questions. The second time was a closer watch, where I made notes about conversations, plot points, and overall themes that stood out to me as relevant to the research from the literature review. My final watch was the deepest, where I transcribed the moments that encapsulated the show's representation of female friendships. I made a point to think beyond the forms of representation I was looking for and

expected to find in order to understand how the women characters are portrayed relating to one another more generally. From there, I looked for common practices across and between the shows, organized by the research questions I formulated before conducting the research.

I want to take a moment to explain how I implemented the five key principles of Michele Lazar's feminist critical discourse analysis. The examination and analysis of pop culture can function similarly to Lazar's feminist analytical activism; by exploring the discourse used in the entertainment we consume, we can understand how our ideals and values are being reflected as well as being shaped. By making explicit the discourses used in media, we can understand the ideological positioning of them. Because gender functions as an ideological structure, I believe it plays a similar role in these shows by reproducing already established practices. Although the female characters in these shows sometimes are shown to resist the status quo, they face it time and again as women.

When considering the complexity of gender and power relations, Lazar (2007) discusses how contemporary power has come to function as self-regulating and is subsequently internalized. Further, Winch (2013) suggests that girlfriends now take on the role of policing and regulating the behavior and appearance of their girlfriends, implicitly encouraging one another to follow the status quo. I watched for instances of either self-regulation or regulation from a female friend, and I paid attention for examples of the (de)construction of gender in the language used in *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*. I looked for ways in which language reproduced the status quo and/or served as a site of resisting the social order.

Finally, I tried to practice critical reflexivity myself. I looked for it in the shows to see if the representation of feminism was being used for non-feminist ends, but I also reflected inward. I want to make sure I myself am not reproducing inequalities, especially as a white middle-class

woman. I looked for more than differences between men and women, I paid attention to differences among women. According to the literature, women of color, working class women, or other marginalized groups of women tend to be less represented in postfeminist female friendships, but I try to acknowledge when they are absent from the texts themselves in order to draw attention to the predominant whiteness of postfeminism, as well as of pop culture representations.

Chapter Four: Analysis

“All that’s important is that we’re still friends”: Portrayals of friendship

Parks and Recreation is a mockumentary-style sitcom based in fictional Pawnee, Indiana. It focuses on the professional and personal lives of the parks and recreation department, led by eager and dedicated Deputy Director Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler). The show itself is upbeat and optimistic, and friendship is a recurring theme; given their current town slogan, “First in friendship, fourth in obesity” (S04E03), even the town itself seems to value friendship. Leslie prioritizes friendship in her life, especially that with Ann Perkins (Rashida Jones). This friendship is one of the most intimate relationships on the show, comparable only to Leslie's eventual romantic partner, Ben Wyatt (Adam Scott).

The friendship between Leslie and Ann is portrayed as compassionate and supportive, and they exhibit good communication skills. We see the origin and blossoming of their friendship, where even early on, Ann and Leslie demonstrate their love and respect for each other through both their behavior and their language. Although it can at times feel one-sided, the role of the friendship between Leslie and Ann is central to much of the story in the seasons included in this analysis. Both Leslie and Ann develop personal relationships with the other women who work in the parks department, Donna (Retta) and April (Aubrey Plaza), but none of those relationships compare to that between Leslie and Ann.

We see Leslie and Ann meet for the first time in the pilot episode, when Ann attends a town hall meeting, hosted by Leslie, to complain about the dangerous pit in the lot behind her house. When Leslie investigates the lot for the first time, she falls into the pit and Ann, a nurse, takes Leslie to her house to mend her injuries. Initially skeptical of Leslie's motivations, Ann seems to

warm up to her, telling the camera that she's "a little doofy, but she's sweet" ("Pilot"). When Leslie finds out that she has been granted a sub-committee to proceed with the pit project, the parks department celebrates with champagne. Leslie and Ann, somewhat drunkenly, proclaim to the camera and each other that they are committed to this project, and in a way, they are committing to each other as well. In the final scene of the episode, Leslie starts to sing "hey sister, soul sister" from the song "Lady Marmalade" to Ann, seemingly solidifying their new bond.

Almost immediately, Leslie and Ann become inseparable. Although they start by only working on the pit project together, they become more comfortable with each other and we can sense them falling into a best friend-ship. It appears that they see each other every day, as Ann is often coming and going from City Hall. Sometimes she wears scrubs, seemingly on her way to or from the hospital where she works, and sometimes she brings coffee or lunches while the two talk about their lives. In one episode, we see Leslie and Ann, both in pajamas, drinking coffee at Ann's house, as if they had had a sleepover. They seem to quickly become the other person's confidant, turning to each other to discuss any and every detail of their lives.

The fact that we see Leslie and Ann's friendship begin and continue to develop in this way differs from what the literature suggests is typical. In their study on gendered narratives of friendship in Hollywood films, Boyle and Berridge (2014) argue that portrayals of adult female friendship rarely show how they met, as most female friends on screen have a pre-existing relationship. Occasionally, they note, we are shown the origin story of adult friends, but those are typically located in childhood, working to de-eroticize any possible sexual tension between the adult women. Further, the dyadic nature of Leslie and Ann's friendship is more in line with portrayals of male friendship, the popular 'bromance' genre, while most films about female

friendship privilege groups of friends, similar to the friendships on *Girls* (Boyle & Berridge, 2014). The uniqueness of their friendship is reflected not only in the atypical development of friendship between adult women, but also in how respectful they are towards each other as individuals.

Leslie and Ann demonstrate their friendship in how they communicate. They speak with kindness and compassion, often verbalizing their love and the importance of their relationship. Ann tells Leslie, “You are smart and creative and talented, and you're going to be fine” (“Camping”) in response to Leslie’s fear of failure, and when a man almost comes between them, Leslie tells Ann: “All that’s important is that we’re still friends” (“Pawnee Zoo”). A recurring joke in *Parks*, in fact, is the quirky ways in which Leslie verbalizes her love for Ann. From simple encouraging phrases, like “Ann, you're beautiful and you're organized!” (“Campaign Ad”) or “you're so sweet and innocent and pretty” (“The Reporter”), to the more peculiar ones such as “you beautiful, naïve, sophisticated, newborn baby” (“I’m Leslie Knope”) or “you beautiful tropical fish” (“The Comeback Kid”).

The two women rely on each other for emotional support and for advice in their careers and relationships, but at times, the guidance can feel one-sided. Ann is often the supportive, sounding board for Leslie to bounce her ideas off of. She tends to endorse whatever Leslie wants and when she doesn't, she finds a way to tell her in a compassionate manner. Leslie, on the other hand, can push Ann to do what suits Leslie best and is less involved in Ann’s decision-making. For instance, when Ann discovers that her boyfriend Andy (Chris Pratt) stayed in full-leg casts two weeks longer than necessary, forcing her to take care of him for that much longer, we don't see her ask Leslie for advice (“Rock Show”). Ann and Andy break up because of this revelation, but

we never see Ann and Leslie talk about it, whereas Leslie talks through every move in her romantic relationships with Ann.

The friends seem to only address Ann's issues when she brings them up herself: when Ann is contemplating breaking up with Mark ("Telethon"), or later, when she worries that Chris is cheating on her, she looks to Leslie to talk through it ("Indianapolis"). Whereas Ann often asks Leslie how she is feeling about something, Leslie rarely reciprocates, meaning Ann brings up her own issues when she may need advice. It may be worth considering this uneven dynamic as a reflection of the fact that Leslie is the main character, so minor characters like Ann are written around her. However, it is also notable that Leslie, a white woman, relies on her friend Ann, who is not white, to solve her problems without returning the favor; the way in which Leslie looks to Ann for encouragement and approval could reflect Alison Winch's argument that women of colour make the lives of their white friends better (2013, p. 126). Thus, while Leslie and Ann are incredibly close and supportive, there are instances that demonstrate an unevenness in their relationship.

The friendship between Leslie and Ann is not the only portrayal of female friendship in *Parks*. In the first episode of season two, Leslie laughs manically in response to Donna, a co-worker, complimenting her outfit, with Leslie telling the camera, "That was hands down the best interaction I've ever had with Donna!" ("Pawnee Zoo"). While these two never become close friends, their relationship does deepen over time. Leslie also has a close relationship with April Ludgate, who starts as an intern in the parks department. At first, their relationship seems professional, but over time it comes to feel more like a friendship, with them talking about dating and encouraging each other's professional endeavors.

Of course, we couldn't talk about female friendship on *Parks and Recreation* without addressing 'Galentine's Day.' Leslie, creator of Galentine's Day, describes it as "the best day of the year. Every February 13, my lady friends and I leave our husbands and our boyfriends at home and we just come and kick it breakfast style. Ladies celebrating ladies" ("Galentine's Day"). We see Leslie and her friends celebrate Galentine's Day twice; both times Leslie has prepared personalized gift bags for each woman, containing things like mosaic portraits made from the crushed bottles of their favorite diet soda, a 5,000-word essay of why they're awesome ("Galentine's Day"), gift certificates for facials, and a needlepoint pillow with each woman's face and a headline from the day they were born ("Operation Ann"). Although Leslie claims that February fourteenth is for "romance" while the thirteenth is "about celebrating lady friends" ("Operation Ann"), the majority of the conversations we see at both Galentine's Day brunches are about the romantic relationships in the women's lives. Regardless, the existence of this holiday illustrates how much Leslie values her female friends.

The other show under analysis here, *Girls*, is a coming-of-age narrative centered on a group of four friends in their early twenties living in New York City. It features Hannah (Lena Dunham) and her roommate/best friend from college Marnie (Allison Williams), along with another college friend, Jessa (Jemima Kirke), and Jessa's cousin, Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet). The group at times includes other people, most notably Elijah (Andrew Rannells), Hannah's ex-boyfriend from college. Some of the girls develop important relationships with individuals outside the group, such as Hannah's on-again-off-again boyfriend Adam (Adam Driver), and Ray (Alex Karpovskiy), a friend to the group, and at times a boyfriend to Shoshanna and a sexual partner to Marnie. *Girls* has been praised as a liberal feminist text (Solis, 2017), partly thanks to Dunham's reputation as a female producer telling a story about women, however, it has also

been heavily criticized for its singular focus on the experience of white, upper-class young women (Daalmans, 2013).

Because *Girls* is about the lives of a group of friends, friendship plays a vital role in the show, a show that consists of a lot of talking, framed around conversations between friends. Comparable to *Sex and the City*, “it is through their sociality that the narrative is revealed” (Winch, 2013, p. 64). In fact, as I will demonstrate, even the way in which female friendships are depicted is mostly through talking; the girls talk about friendship and what being a friend means, but it often feels like their words are covering for inaction. This talking could be a sign of their reflexive tendencies toward friendship as they navigate what friendship means to them. I understand their consistent friendship language as a sign that they are working to understand where friendship fits in their lives and how they want those relationships to look.

This depiction of friendship through talk is the most striking aspect of the way female friendship is portrayed in the show. For instance, in the pilot episode, Hannah and Marnie plan to host a dinner for Jessa who is moving back to town. Marnie, who does not seem to like Jessa, is dreading the dinner, but Hannah thinks that Jessa will appreciate it, saying it’s “a very friendish thing of us to do” (“Pilot”). A later example occurs when Hannah, Shoshanna, and Adam go to pick Jessa up from rehab and Shoshanna says they are “really giving of [themselves] being like, models of female friendship” (“Truth or Dare”). The girls talk themselves through their actions, as if they are rehearsing what they think the behavior of a good friend is. They use their language to navigate their understanding of friendship as well as to perhaps measure their approach to friendship against those of their friends.

Marnie takes her role as close friend seriously, especially in the first two seasons, evident in the level of possessiveness when she talks about her relationship with Hannah. When Hannah

claims that she needs to be rescued from Adam, Marnie shows up proclaiming her status as Hannah's "best friend" ("Welcome to Bushwick a.k.a. The Crackcident"), as if this position holds some authority that Adam would know to respect. Jessa, on the other hand, does not care about the status of "best friend." When Marnie implies she is unconditionally supportive of Hannah because she is her best friend, Jessa repeats after her in a mocking tone, "best friend, this is my best friend" ("Pilot"). Marnie believes Jessa has "never stayed in one place long enough to have one," but Jessa argues it is because "we don't own people" ("Pilot").

This conversation demonstrates how Marnie considers the title of 'best friend' to be meaningful, but it also reflects differences between her and Jessa. Marnie, who is more up-tight than Jessa, understands that to be a 'best friend,' you have to show up for your friends by giving them the support they need, such as when she tried to rescue Hannah from Adam. Jessa, on the other hand, the free-spirit of the group, does not take anything seriously, including the work required to maintain a relationship. In a sub-plot, Jessa finds out that an old friend, Season, faked her own death, specifically to end their friendship, after Season told Jessa she needed counselling for her addiction and Jessa "took [her] to an ayahuasca ceremony" ("Dead Inside").

Further, conversations these characters have with individuals outside of their friend group reflect how the girls see the friendships they are engaged in. Consider when Marnie complains to her sexual partner, Booth, that the repeated calls she's getting from Hannah are likely unimportant, suggesting they're because "she wrote a blog post or found a really good hot dog or something." When he asks "Are you even friends? Why do you hang out with her still?" Marnie doesn't sound enthusiastic about her friendship with Hannah: "It's just really ingrained. Like, she's Hannah. I don't know. I spent so many years with her" ("Boys"). It is interesting that she does not confront these questions, at least in this conversation with Booth, and doesn't have a

deep explanation for their continuing friendship. This answer gives us an insight into Marnie's understanding of friendship by demonstrating that perhaps she does not think about why her and Hannah are still friends.

The way that Hannah talks about friendship demonstrates her own understanding. She, like Marnie, seems to maintain friendships without reflecting on their function in her life and she does not appear to believe that relationships need work. When Hannah forces Adam to participate in her dinner party with Marnie and Shoshanna, he tells her that he doesn't hate her friends, he's just "not interested in anything they have to say" ("Females Only"). As Hannah sees it, "I'm not interested in anything they have to say. That's not the point of friendship" ("Females Only"). Further, Hannah doesn't care to be a 'good' friend at times. In a pivotal fight that results in Marnie moving out, Hannah isn't bothered by being called a bad friend. She tells Marnie that being a good friend "isn't important to me right now. I don't really give a shit about being a good friend. I have bigger concerns" ("Leave Me Alone"). Hannah wants to maintain the friendships she has already formed, but her approach to those relationships does not require selflessness or ongoing work. Tally (2014) argues that the friendships on this show "are not based on the positive attributes one usually associates with being a good friend such as affection and companionship, but on the seemingly easier requirement to not be a bad friend" (p. 35), and I would argue that this is especially the case in how Hannah understands friendship.

From time to time, Adam plays the role of supportive confidant to Hannah's friends, often providing more tangible support and advice than Hannah herself. On the drive to get Jessa from rehab, Adam suggests that taking her out early is in fact the opposite of what Hannah and Shoshanna should be doing to support Jessa. Hannah criticizes this advice, telling him that he doesn't "understand the nature of female friendship" ("Truth or Dare"), and Adam agrees, to an

extent. He doesn't want to understand, he says, "not if it involves ignoring all logic and being totally hysterical. ... I just think women get stuck in this, like vortex of guilt and jealousy with each other that keep them from seeing situations clearly" ("Truth or Dare"). These comments reflect the stereotypical understanding of women in general, and more specifically that of female friendship (Tally, 2014, p. 36), and I would argue the specific context of *Girls*, where women struggle to have mutually beneficial friendships with each other. Adam's comments feel out of place in a show about female friends and it therefore comes across as ironic, or as an instance where the dialogue was written in a way to directly address this stereotype that women can't be friends with other women.

Obviously, female friendship is less than ideal between these girls. In the fight mentioned earlier, which results in Marnie moving out, we see again how their friendship is based on not being a bad friend, rather than on positive traits friends typically demonstrate (Tally, 2014). At this point, the tension between Hannah and Marnie has been building for a few episodes, and it culminates in a yelling match where many of the issues between the two are vocalized. They call each other selfish and crazy; Marnie says Hannah has been crazy "since before I even met you ... since middle school when you had to masturbate eight times a night to 'stave off diseases of the mind and body' ("Leave Me Alone"). Hannah takes mention of this as an offense and is upset that Marnie might tell someone this "shameful, painful, private secret." The dialogue that follows demonstrates how badly neither of them want to be 'the bad friend':

Marnie: "I didn't tell anyone! I would never do that! I would never tell anyone that! I am a good [expletive] friend! Unlike you! You are a bad friend!"

Hannah: "Maybe that's not what's important to me right now. I don't really give a shit about being a good friend. I have bigger concerns."

Marnie: “You know what? Thank you. That is all I needed to hear. I’m done” (“Leave Me Alone”).

The fight comes to a head after Marnie accuses Hannah of being a bad friend, which Tally (2014) argues is the worst criticism a girl could direct at a friend (p. 33). Hannah, however, is not as offended over the designation of ‘bad friend’ and doesn’t see that as a reason to end the relationship.

A similar argument arises in the aptly-titled episode “Bad Friend” after Hannah finds out that Marnie slept with Elijah, Hannah’s ex who is now openly queer¹. Hannah claims she doesn’t need an apology for it, and scolds Marnie for how she behaved as a friend: “What I actually need is for you to recognize that maybe I’m not the bad friend and you’re not the good friend, okay? ... What makes you a good friend is not doing something that you know will intentionally really hurt another person. And you did that.” Interestingly, once Marnie admits that she, not Hannah, is the bad friend, Hannah claims to be over the fight, telling Marnie that they can “keep being friends just as long as you know you’re a bad one” (“Bad Friend”). Whereas Marnie drew the line when Hannah admitted to not caring about being a good friend, Hannah doesn’t see the same line; Hannah doesn’t mind having a friend who treats her badly.

The friendship between Hannah and Marnie is the closest at the outset of the show when female friendship is most prominent as a theme, and theirs is the one that falls apart the most significantly. In an attempt to adapt to the pair's fluctuating dynamic, different members of the extended friend group partner off and develop different relationships. While friendship continues to play a role in the show, it loses much of its power by season three. Female friendship

¹ I am choosing to label Elijah as queer, despite him not using this term. When we first meet him, Elijah tells Hannah “I don’t say gay, but I don’t say straight either” (S01E03), and, before they have sex, he suggests to Marnie that he might be bisexual (S02E01).

specifically becomes not only less important, but less visible as the seasons go on, to the point that the show is arguably not about female friendship at all in the later seasons when they have all befriended men, as I will explore below.

As I mentioned, Elijah becomes a more important friend in the group when he moves into Marnie's room after she moves out, and consequently takes over her role as Hannah's closest friend. Although he and Hannah too go through rough patches in their friendship, such as when she kicks him out over the Marnie indiscretion, he returns in season three and moves back in with Hannah in season four. During these later seasons, he seemingly becomes one of the girls, commiserating with them and joining them for girlfriend activities, like brunch. Although he is the gay best friend, Elijah is not depicted through the usual trope of the gay best friend. He exists as more than a sidekick whose sexuality is reduced to his interests and behaviors that align with traditional femininity (Scheffler, 2015). Pullen (2016) argues that Elijah is depicted as a queer man, but his representation as one of the female friends makes him part of a unique representation of the friendships between queer men and straight women.

Elijah is not the only man who becomes an important confidant for the women. We first meet Ray Ploshansky in the pilot, as a friend of Marnie's then-boyfriend, Charlie. Ray exists as Charlie's friend in season one, but after he is tasked with watching over Shoshanna during her accidental crack cocaine ingestion, the two date for much of the second season. During this time, Marnie is dealing with the aftermath of her drawn out, painful break up with Charlie and has been staying with Shoshanna after her big fight with Hannah. Ray is also staying with Shoshanna at this time, and we occasionally see him and Marnie spend time together when Shoshanna is out. One night in particular, when Ray has had enough of Marnie's complaining, he gives her

advice for her future. He discovers that she wants to be a singer and he supports this, telling her that now is the time in her life for her to pursue this dream.

Ray and Shoshanna break up in the end of season two, but when Marnie continues to feel like her life is in shambles, she seeks Ray out in hopes that he can tell her “what’s wrong with [her]” (“Only Child”). She claims to need Ray specifically, saying “It just feels like it’s time for me to take responsibility for what has happened in my life and you are someone who likes to tell people what’s wrong with them anyway.” After he “sums it up in a nutshell” that she’s a “huge fat [expletive] phony,” Marnie is upset, but he consoles her, saying he still likes her because he believes that she is “ultimately a good person” (“Only Child”). He offers her a hug and this moment of intimate kindness quickly turns into heated sex. Ray and Marnie continue to spend time together, mostly talking, and occasionally having sex. Whereas Hannah replaced Marnie with Elijah, Marnie replaces Hannah with Ray. Ultimately the relationship between Ray and Marnie dissolves when Ray develops real feelings for Marnie and she becomes enamored with her singing duo partner Desi, but Ray’s role as emotional support to Marnie can’t be overlooked.

Friendship is crucial to both *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* as shows, especially in the earlier seasons of the shows, as we see less screen time of these groups of friends as time goes on. It plays different roles in each show, however: while friendship comes up often in *Parks*, it does not shape the narrative of the show overall as often as it does for *Girls*. Although we see less of Leslie and Ann’s friendship over time, the dynamic does not seem to change much, in that they continue to value each other, offering explicit love and support. In opposition to this, the structure of the friendship(s) between Hannah, Marnie, Jessa, and Shoshanna completely changes: by the middle of season three, these girls have all replaced their closest friends with men, in a way harking back to the stereotypical understanding that women cannot be trusted and

therefore cannot be friends with each other (Hollinger, 1998, p.5). In this way, *Girls* seems to depict a friendship filled with instability and uncertainty, while *Parks* portrays the development and progression of what may be a lifelong friendship.

It is possible that the differences between the shows' treatment of friendship reflects the difference in age of the friend groups. We watch Leslie and Ann, adults with established careers and lifestyles, develop a relationship, successfully organizing the new friendship in and around other aspects of their lives. Perhaps also a sign of their age, they are able to resolve fights with honest apologies, displaying more maturity and humility than the friends of *Girls*. Leslie and Ann seem to know exactly what they want out of a friendship and how much they are willing to put in. *Girls*, meanwhile, seems to depict the decline of adolescent friendship as young women attempt to navigate their plans for the future. We see the girls, Hannah and Marnie in particular, talking through friendship and what they should do as friends, while being unable to explain the benefits of maintaining the relationship. Here, I read their reflexive tendencies as a sign that they are trying to understand how and where friendship will fit into their adult lives. Thus, despite the differences between the depiction of friendship on *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*, both shows portray the possible ups-and-downs of a close friendship. At their worst, these characters display selfishness, which can harm the relationships, but at their best, these shows demonstrate the significance a mutual female friendship can have in the lives of women.

“Ladies advising other ladies what to do”: Winch’s postfeminist girlfriend

As we saw in the literature review, postfeminism is contradictory, and applying it to *Parks and Recreation* is no less straightforward. Following my close watch of this show, I will argue the show does little to exemplify the notion of the postfeminist girlfriend; Leslie and Ann

prioritize their friendship with each other, but it feels more about infatuation with the other person than about believing in girlfriendship as a source of social capital (Winch, 2013, p. 63). They police each other's normative behavior to an extent, but do not seem to model their femininity off each other. Some of their behavior could be read as regulating in the way postfeminist girlfriends are posited to do, but it could also be read as being about how the characters behave more generally. Leslie and Ann disagree from time to time, typically resolving their issues with productive communication, and even in the few instances when they do fight, they respectfully apologize and are able to move on. It is also worth noting that their biggest fights are not about being competitors for a man or a job, but a disagreement or lack of communication.

The postfeminist girlfriend, according to Winch (2013), prioritizes her female friendships, considering them to be essential to her subjectivity. While Leslie may prioritize Ann and their friendship, I don't interpret it as prioritization of female friendship per se. Leslie has other female friends in the show, but none get the attention that Ann gets. Along with the funny complements mentioned above, there is also a recurring joke about how Leslie loves Ann far and above anyone else. Consider when Leslie aggressively quiets a crowd to let Ann speak, despite the fact that most people were already listening to her ("Rock Show"), or when Leslie describes Ann as "the best nurse in North America" ("Hunting Trip"). The obsessive tendencies Leslie has towards Ann are non-existent in her friendships with other women, which tells me they are about her love for Ann, not her desire for a female friend. Certainly, Leslie adores Ann and prioritizes her, however I don't perceive their love for each other as a need to have specifically female friends, but a desire to have an inspiring woman as a friend. Leslie and Ann think highly of each other and they both feel lucky, not entitled, to have such a supportive friend on their side.

Contrary to the postfeminist girlfriend, Leslie's friendship with Ann is not a stage in her life before she finds her one-day husband. Leslie's romantic relationship with Ben never overshadows or diminishes her friendship with Ann, because Ben too understands the strength of the women's friendship that came before him. We can see Leslie's comparable love for Ben and Ann when she asks her colleagues to "gather around in order of how much [she] trusts them" and the two stand equally close to her ("Bus Tour"). Sometimes Leslie appears to love Ann more than Ben, seen when Tom (Aziz Ansari) creates a word cloud out of Leslie's emails and memos, where the more a word is mentioned, the bigger it is on the visual: Leslie's boss Ron Swanson points out, "'Ben' and much larger, 'Ann'. She definitely loves Ann." ("Citizen Knope"). Although we see fewer conversations between Leslie and Ann as the seasons progress, they continue to value each other and their friendship, even as they move in and out of romantic relationships.

A crucial component of postfeminist girlfriend culture is the modeling and regulating of normative feminine behavior. This is, again, contradictory and difficult to determine in the context of Leslie and Ann's friendship on *Parks*. There were moments that I did not initially read as exhibiting 'girlfriend' behavior, but that I later realized could be read as such. Take, for example, Leslie's controlling behavior; she's a "steamroller" ("Smallest Park") according to both Ben and Ann. Ann elaborates, telling Leslie "You do what you want, you ignore what other people want, and you hear only what you want to hear" ("Smallest Park"). Leslie tells various characters how to behave appropriately, but some of the judgments she passes on specific aspects of Ann's life feel like they could fit into postfeminist girlfriend behavior. Leslie reacts negatively when it becomes public knowledge that Ann is on birth control ("The Reporter"), she judges her decision to date numerous men casually ("Soulmates", "The Fight"), and she spends a whole

episode trying to find a date for Ann on Valentine's Day, despite Ann's insistence that she isn't looking to date anyone ("Operation Ann").

Occasionally, Ann appears to police Leslie's behavior, but she is not the only one, as we see other characters do the same when Leslie is being aggressive or a goofball at inappropriate times. For example, when Leslie suggests to a mother that her 4-year-old could watch her 2-year-old in order to attend a town hall meeting, Ann drags her away ("Canvassing"). When Leslie implies her boyfriend Dave (Louis C.K.), a police officer, should hurt the teen boy that she believes is taunting her, he has to reign her in ("Greg Pikitis").

Further, there are contradictory instances of Ann regulating Leslie's feminine behavior, specifically as it relates to dating. When Leslie is nervous about her first date with Dave, Ann helps her pick an outfit and takes her on a practice date ("Practice Date"). Later, when Ann encourages Leslie to move on from a recent rejection, she helps shape Leslie's online dating profile. She modifies Leslie's answers for the profile, so that "Yellow-haired female, likes waffles and news" becomes something she deems more appropriate, like "Sexy, well-read blonde, loves the sweeter things in life" ("Soulmates"). While this feels like the behavior of the postfeminist girlfriend, both episodes end with Leslie and Ann agreeing that Leslie is better off being herself than trying to change. In this way, Ann seems to move in and out of the postfeminist girlfriend practice of regulating Leslie's behavior. She may begin to regulate Leslie's normative femininity, especially to help her achieve the heterosexual ideal, but Ann's regulation and guidance seem to come with a grain of salt: anytime she offers advice in this way, she ends up telling Leslie to be herself, which might suggest that Ann doesn't believe in the self as an ongoing project of transformation.

Alison Winch (2013) devotes a chapter of her book to the topic of catfights between female friends on television, wherein she argues that the ideal of a “utopic sisterhood” (p. 196) without conflict or disagreements is unrealistic and prevents women from being able to understand each other better. She suggests creating a space where these issues can be handled productively (Winch, 2013, p. 196), which I would argue Leslie and Ann do. Any time these friends get in a fight or disagreement, they seek each other out afterwards to apologize for their behavior. Consider: Leslie is unhappy when Ann suggests that her mom is giving her “slimy” advice to blackmail a politician, and she in turn snaps at Ann about waiting on Andy hand and foot, telling her “he’s got three crutches. And one of them is you!” (“The Banquet”). Or, after Ben calls Leslie a steamroller for not respecting his wishes, Ann loses her patience trying to talk to Leslie about it, calling her “a massive, enormous, runaway steamroller with no brakes and a cement brick on the gas pedal” (“Smallest Park”). In both of these instances, the friend who gets yelled at recognizes the truth in what the other said, taking accountability for her difficult behavior, and the friend who did the yelling apologizes for losing their temper.

These best friends have one big fight, “a doozy” as Leslie calls it, in the episode aptly titled “The Fight.” We see Leslie and Ann catch up for the first time in a while and they seem to be out of sync with each other. Shortly after, in a meeting with her boss, Leslie puts Ann’s name into consideration for a government job without talking to her about it first. There is a passive-aggressive tension from both sides, which continues when they run into each other at an event Tom is hosting at The Snakehole Lounge. They take shots and drink beer together in an attempt to pretend the tension isn’t there and neither one of them will confess that they are upset with the other. Later, and clearly after more alcohol, Leslie and Ann engage in a stereotypical drunk girl fight: they argue almost incoherently and yell hurtful things at one another, all in the somewhat

privacy of the bar's bathroom. Leslie considers this fight "a watershed moment" in their friendship because she believes that "honest discussions between friends can lead to deeper intimacy" ("The Fight"). The next morning, suffering a bad hangover, Ann does the job interview, where she and Leslie profusely apologize for behaving like "jackass[es]" and they make amends. The episode ends with Leslie telling the camera: "We need to remember what's important in life: friends, waffles, and work" ("The Fight").

Leslie and Ann occasionally exemplify the postfeminist girlfriend in their behavior, but the content of what they say differs from what a 'girlfriend' would say. They don't discuss the things girlfriends worry about; they don't talk about their bodies or their lifeplans, they don't try to 'have it all,' and they aren't constantly working on themselves in response to the market. Overall, there are few postfeminist sentiments in the female friendships on *Parks*, and the examples I have identified could be read as both postfeminist and not.

Similar to *Parks and Recreation*, some behaviors exhibited on *Girls* could be read as either embodying postfeminism or somewhat challenging it. In watching *Girls*, I got the feeling that the girls, especially Hannah, are meant to represent "feminists" based on various comments made, which I will return in my discussion of feminism below. I believe, following how they talk about friendship and feminism, that they consider having female friends to be important. I perceive their talk about friendship as symbolic of its importance to them, especially female friendships, as they rarely talk about male friends, even when men become their biggest supporters. The girls prioritize having female friendships, but they don't necessarily prioritize the friends they have as individuals with issues of their own. A central component of Winch's (2013) notion of the postfeminist girlfriend is the way in which the girlfriend posits her female relationships as necessary to her subjectivity. I will argue that this is what Hannah and Marnie believe: although

they seem, at times, unable to give the kind of emotional support they expect from a friend, they choose to maintain the friendship, indicating that it is a crucial relationship for them.

Winch (2013) explores how girlfriends fight and hurt each other emotionally, arguing that betrayal is the worst offense a girlfriend can commit in the context of postfeminist girlfriendship. We see the girls betray each other numerous times on *Girls*, almost always involving men. For example, Marnie and Ray's secret sexual relationship is first revealed to the group when Hannah and Adam go to Ray's apartment, where Adam is temporarily living, to find that Marnie and Ray are there, having sex ("I Saw You"). Although Ray and Shoshanna dated previously to this, Hannah seems to be more offended that she was kept in the dark than the fact that Marnie is sleeping with a friend's ex; Hannah is more upset that there was a secret at all than she is about the content of the secret.

Of course, this tryst was a bigger betrayal to Shoshanna, whose life went on a decline after her break-up with Ray. Marnie goes to Shoshanna's apartment to apologize, unknowingly stumbling upon Shoshanna mid-tantrum, after finding out she can't graduate on time. Marnie quickly jumps into the topic of her and Ray and tries to defend her decision to sleep with him "more than once," telling Shoshanna "it's probably not a big deal and you're probably going to be insulted that I even implied that you would care" and that "it came from like, a deep place of insecurity" ("Two Plane Rides"). Shoshanna, however, is not open to talking about it and pins Marnie down on her bed, screaming "I HATE YOU!" ("Two Plane Rides"). Marnie's actions here seem to reiterate the stereotype that women are untrustworthy and incapable of being friends with each other (Hollinger, 1998, p. 5).

Marnie in particular is emblematic of the girlfriend gaze, the notion of policing other girlfriends for normative feminine behavior. She is especially regulating of Hannah, particularly

about how she should present her body through clothing. Some instances are less harsh than others, such as when Marnie helps Hannah decide which dress to wear (“It’s About Time”). In other instances, Marnie is cruel: when Hannah trades shirts with a random man at a club while she’s high on cocaine, she ends up in a loose-knit mesh shirt through which her breasts are visible. Marnie’s initial reaction to this outfit is to ask, in a criticizing tone, “What are you wearing?” (“Bad Friend”). Later in the scene, when Hannah is telling Marnie all the ways she has disappointed her as a friend, she tells Marnie that she doesn’t “need to play by [her] rules anymore” (“Bad Friend”). One of these rules seems to be about Hannah’s clothing choices, given Hannah’s claim that she “definitely, definitely [doesn’t] care about putting on appropriate pants, because one can really go through their whole life wearing shorty shorts and offend almost nobody” (“Bad Friend”).

Interestingly, Marnie does not make negative comments about Hannah’s body or indulge Hannah in the negative comments she makes about her own body. This differs from the postfeminist girlfriend who, according to Winch (2012, p. 69-70), regulates the bodies of her girlfriends. Consider when Charlie tells Hannah and Marnie they “looked so angelic” when they fell asleep together: Hannah responds with “Victoria’s Secret angel” pointing to Marnie, and “fat baby angel” pointing to herself, to which Marnie ardently tells Hannah: “Don’t say that!” (“Pilot”). However, Marnie does make comments that seem to indicate that she wants Hannah to take better care of her body. For example, at Hannah’s 25th birthday party, her parents tell her that she “really look[s] great,” “so wonderful.” While Hannah is glowing in the light of these compliments, Marnie says “Doesn’t she? I keep telling her she could look like this every day if she wanted” (“She Said OK”).

Girls often seems to walk the line between embodying postfeminist sentiments and critiquing postfeminist girlfriend culture, particularly the self-help aspect (Winch, 2013, pp. 137-138). Winch points to the advice Hannah's co-workers, Chastity and Lesley, give her in regards to make-up and their boss Rich, who sexually harasses the women in the office. Chastity and Lesley do Hannah's make-up for her, but when her friends see it they mock her appearance. Further, the women tell Hannah that she'll "get used to" their boss's groping ("Hannah's Diary"), especially because he is an otherwise generous boss. Winch (2013) argues that the advice Hannah's co-workers give her is meant to symbolize postfeminism, "ladies advising other ladies what to do," but here, "their expertise is highly dubious" (p. 138).

However, I argue that the show is only sometimes critical of postfeminism, and other times it exemplifies postfeminism, as we will see later with Marnie and Shoshanna. Even in relation to the example of Hannah's boss, when Jessa hears that he is sexually harassing her, she asks if Hannah is "sort of flattered by the whole thing" because she herself "love[s] that stuff," and even suggests that Hannah actually sleep with him ("Hard Being Easy"). In this conversation, Jessa frames Hannah as a willing participant rather than a victim of sexual harassment, which makes sense in light of postfeminism, where being a victim is a sign of failure (Winch, 2012, p. 4). Thus, while *Girls* as a series might do things to challenge postfeminist sentiments, the girls themselves all seem to buy into the individualized ideology offered to them, meaning the show comes across as both embodying postfeminism and critiquing it at the same time.

Neither *Parks and Recreation* nor *Girls* perfectly or easily exemplifies Alison Winch's postfeminist girlfriend, although they both engage with it in some ways. Both shows depict women prioritizing their female friendships, albeit in slightly dissimilar ways. Leslie of course values her female friends, but she also values friendship more generally. Her and Ann prioritize

their friendship specifically, but the focus on the other person's happiness makes it feel deeper than a postfeminist girlfriendship. While they do at times regulate each other's behavior, I have argued that they don't enforce the regulations, that is the regulation they conduct is presented as an option, such as when Ann offers Leslie dating advice, only to tell her that being herself is the best approach. Meanwhile, the friends of *Girls* prioritize female friendship as an object as they struggle to determine what they want friendship to mean to them. They seem to value female friendship as an object as they struggle to determine what they want friendship to mean to them. They seem to value the existence of their relationships to one another, but unlike Leslie and Ann, they do not verbalize their love or offer the same sympathetic support, and when the girls fight, the disagreement tends to fracture the relationship in that it never fully recovers.

It has been difficult to determine if certain practices exemplify the postfeminist girlfriend or not, likely due to the fact that postfeminist ideology is contradictory and has become hegemonic (Gill, 2017, p. 609). I struggled at times to determine whether certain behavior, such as Leslie and Ann's regulatory practices, is emblematic of the postfeminist girlfriend. There were instances that seemed to resist or critique postfeminism, such as the bad advice Hannah's co-workers give in regards to her appearance and their harassing boss, however such instances appear with irregularity. For example, while Jessa telling Hannah to sleep with her boss could be read as ironic, the language she uses, here and throughout the show reflects the notion this is not systemic, but rather a problem for an individual victim. Thus, I want to acknowledge that this reading of the texts is subjective, shaped by my own interpretation of the shows themselves as well as the shows within the context of the postfeminist girlfriend.

“I never thought about the fact that you are black once”: The issue of race and class

Leslie Knope, our main character on *Parks and Recreation*, is white and seemingly middle or upper-middle class. Her female work friends, Donna and April, are both women of color. Donna's race is not talked about, though she is African-American, and April often mentions her Latina heritage. These friendships play minor roles compared to that with Ann, and we don't see them engage much in the way of postfeminist girlfriendship. There are no white friends to compare them to, but the friendships Leslie has with Donna and April are treated similarly to each other, as well as to the other friendships Leslie has in the office. The friendship of focus here, between Leslie and Ann, is one between a white woman and a woman of colour, although it is only acknowledged once; in one of her odd compliments to Ann, Leslie says "I've said this before, and I know it makes you uncomfortable, but you're thoughtful and you're brilliant, and your ambiguous ethnic blend perfectly represents the dream of the American melting pot" ("Win, Lose, or Draw").

The characters of Ann, Donna, and April could be read as representing a desire for more than tokenism, but we also need to consider the way in which they could be read as exhibiting a post-racial sentiment. Projansky's (2001) assertion that, when depicted in postfeminist media, women of colour are portrayed as "assimilated equal beneficiaries of the same rights" as white women (p. 87) is applicable here: while there are a handful of non-white characters on *Parks*, it does not address issues of race, such as discrimination, nor does it not feature any acknowledgment of cultural differences, thereby neglecting the specific intersections of oppression these women would experience. In contrast, consider Netflix's *Master of None* (2015-), which centers a group of three non-white friends. Each of the characters, Dev, Brian, and Denise, are portrayed in a sympathetic manner, actively avoiding stereotyping. What makes *Master of None* more inclusive

is its “casual and continual presence of race-discussion” (Kirkner, 2017, para 5), such as the episode where Dev and Brian contrast their experiences as first-generation Americans to that of their parents who immigrated as adults (“Parents”). Thus, while *Parks* may visually represent diversity, it does not take the time to explore experiences that reflect their cultural backgrounds.

Class is rarely addressed on *Parks* in any capacity. There are moments where someone mentions something about their financial status, such as Donna's obsession with her Mercedes-Benz SUV (“Hunting Trip”, “Eagleton”, “Bus Tour”), or when April and Andy take \$1000 out of their bank account, revealing a remaining total of \$18.04 (“End of the World”). Moments like these are treated more as a source of humor than as symbolic of anyone’s actual class status, so that class is seemingly irrelevant in the parks and recreation department. Thus, while I cannot conduct a nuanced analysis of class representation on *Parks*, I would argue that the lack of focus on this issue is because the characters are all meant to be upper-middle class.

There is one instance of class difference, but it is between Pawnee and their rival town, Eagleton, rather than between any of the friends. As Leslie informs the camera, "Eagleton was founded by former Pawneeans. Pawnee was established in May of 1817 and by July, finding the smell unpleasant and the soil untenable, all the wealthy people evacuated to Eagleton" (“Eagleton”). Interestingly, it is the group from the lower-class town that we see as good people, while the rich citizens of Eagleton are disliked for being "a bunch of rich snobs."

Girls, as we know, has been widely criticized for its lack of inclusive representations (Winch, 2013; Carmon, 2013; Lawson, 2012), especially considering the universality the title of the show suggests. In defense of this issue, Lena Dunham has said that she chose to write what she knows: “I am a half-Jew, half-WASP, and I wrote two Jews and two WASPS” (Lawson, 2012). Despite this claim that Jewishness is written into the show, there is not a lot of explicit mention of it,

other than making Jewish jokes about Ray, who is not actually Jewish. While I do not want to suggest that they should be caricatures or stereotypes of Jewish women, I expected some verbal indication that they identify as such. Shoshanna is the only character to verbalize her Jewish identity, but even then, I had to be looking for it, as she typically mentions it in passing. For example, in "Hannah's Diary," Shoshanna runs into someone on the street who she went to Camp Ramah with in her teen years, a camp that I now know is specifically for young Jewish people, but which isn't made obvious in the dialogue of the episode. Therefore, I acknowledge that there may be moments, similar to the Camp Ramah instance, which are indicative of their Jewish identity that I, a non-Jewish person, did not comprehend.

It is unsurprising, considering the critiques aimed at *Girls*, that no women of color ever join the group. Some of the characters interact with women of color, but they are all minor relationships. The minimal attempt the show makes at dealing with racial differences is through Sandy (Donald Glover), a Black law student Hannah dates over two episodes, who critics have argued was written only in response to criticisms about the whiteness of the show after season one (Bowen, 2018). While his character seemingly exists to address diversity, the show focuses much more on his political affiliation as a Republican than his race. When Sandy accuses Hannah of dating him because she fetishizes his Blackness, Hannah makes the typical post-racial comment that she "never thought about the fact that [he is] black once" ("I Get Ideas"). Although Hannah's comments could be read as ironic in the face of Sandy's accusations, it is notable that Sandy is one of the few people of color to be directly involved in the main characters' stories over the seasons I've analyzed.

As for class differences, there is an underlying aspect of financial entitlement among the girls, such as the various comments regarding their parents' financial support. In the pilot,

Hannah's parents tell her they are cutting her off, meaning that her unpaid internship will no longer suffice. While lamenting what this means for her future, Hannah says "I'm going to have to work at like, McDonald's" ("Pilot"), which Marnie assuredly denies. Ray asks Hannah "What's wrong with McDonald's? ... It's great!" ("Pilot"), but she suggests that she shouldn't work there because she went to college. Ray's response seems reflective of their generation's general experience with higher education: "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" ("Pilot").

Neither *Girls* nor *Parks and Recreation* do a great job of depicting race or class differences. In both cases, class is consistently implied, yet only explicitly explored in rare instances, such as when Ray discloses his student loan debt, or in the contrast between Pawnee and Eagleton. The latter of these examples is interesting because it positions Pawnee as a lower-class town, but the citizens we meet do not seem to be facing financial issues. *Parks* allows us to laugh at the ridiculous extravagance of rich Eagletonians, such as the public forum they held, complete with a valet, crepe station, and gift bags containing an iPod Touch ("Eagleton"). Meanwhile, *Girls* seems to imply that relying on family as a financial safety net is the norm. For example, after Hannah's parents cut her off, both Marnie and Jessa tell her that if she comes up with the right argument, her parents will start giving her money again, without considering the possibility that they cannot afford to pay for Hannah's life or that they don't want to continue to support their adult child.

Further, neither show depicts racial differences positively. *Parks* may be visually diverse, but as I have argued, the characters played by people of colour are portrayed as having the same kinds of experiences as the white characters. This is similar to *Girls* if we consider how the show treats the character Sandy, who seems to appear in response to complaints about the whiteness of

season one (Bowen, 2018). Hannah's attempt to act colour-blind in this instance is comparable to how the show treats racial difference in general: she pretends not to notice the race of those around her, unless it can give her the semblance of inclusivity, and only until she is called out for it. Thus, despite the occasional diverse casting, the omission of discussions around racial and cultural differences from both *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* seems to suggest a belief that we are past racism and classism, or at least that these issues do not need further discussion.

“My life has been shaped by powerful women”: Feminist and postfeminist sentiments

Feminism is evident in *Parks and Recreation*, often without naming it as such. It is implicit in much of the work Leslie does, reflecting her personal values. Leslie only explicitly refers to herself as a feminist once in these four seasons, when she reluctantly takes Tom to a strip club to cheer him up over his divorce and tells him "I'm a feminist, okay. I would never go to a strip club." It is interesting, however, that a strip club is what prompts Leslie to explicitly identify herself as a feminist, partly because of the historical debate within feminism over issues of pornography (see Comella, 2015), and partly because of the importance of 'choice' under postfeminism. *Parks* demonstrates feminism through Leslie's navigation of sexism as a professional woman, as well as through minor story lines such as a beauty pageant, a college-level introduction to women's studies course, and the girls' organization that Leslie runs.

Much of the feminism represented in *Parks* emerges in the way Leslie talks. From episode one, she discusses the importance of women participating in politics and government: "government isn't just a boys' club anymore. Women are everywhere. It's a great time to be a woman in politics" ("Pilot"). A few episodes later, Leslie discusses women in politics less optimistically, when she takes the camera past a wall of male portraits of "all the members of

city council over thirty years” and says “everyday as a woman I have to walk past this. It can be very upsetting” (“Boys’ Club”). She gets the chance to rectify this at the end of season four, when we see her run for and win a seat on city council. In a sweet full circle moment, the final scene of that season shows Leslie putting her own portrait on that same wall of men.

We see Leslie respond to the misogyny of men she meets through her job, where she doesn't want to come across as difficult or resistant. For example, when the parks department goes hunting, Leslie is questioned by a park ranger after she takes the blame for Ron getting shot in the head. The park ranger assumes Leslie doesn't know anything about guns or hunting because she is a woman, saying condescending things, such as "I find a lot of women have problems with tunnel vision" and "I think you're hysterical because of all the excitement" (“Hunting Trip”). Leslie clearly senses his misogyny, and responds with irritation, offering him various excuses that she thinks he will buy: "I got that tunnel vision that girls get ... I let my emotions get the best of me ... I was thinking with my lady parts ... I thought there was gonna be chocolate ... All I wanna do is have babies. Are you single? ... Bitches be crazy. I'm good at tolerating pain, I'm bad at math, and I'm stupid" (“Hunting Trip”).

Another example comes from former parks director Clarence, who exhibits a more old-fashioned, hostile type of sexism. He tells Leslie to "stay away from leadership roles" because he believes that "women need a lot of blood to flow through to their baby centers, which leaves less to the brain" (“Summer Catalog”). As her frustration becomes more visible, Clarence asks if her "little friend came to visit," to which Leslie explodes: "If you mention anything about women or menstruation or anything, I'm gonna take your face and I'm gonna shove it in those brambles" (“Summer Catalog”).

Contrary to people's expectations, given instances like those above, Leslie is excited when she has the opportunity to be a judge for the Miss Pawnee Beauty Pageant, claiming that Miss Pawnee “is going to represent the ideal woman for a year. She’ll be someone that little girls in South-Central Indiana look up to” (“Beauty Pageant”). Leslie is quickly identified as an outlier among her fellow judges when they don’t seem as enthusiastic as her to “choose the most well-rounded, intelligent, modern, and forward-thinking woman to represent our fine town.” Tom mocks her for creating a score card with categories like “presentation, intelligence, knowledge of ‘herstory,’ je ne sais quoi, and something called the Naomi Wolf factor.” Clearly Leslie values her role in choosing “the representative of womanhood in [their] town,” but the rest of the judges are more interested in “the hot one,” Trish (“Beauty Pageant”).

Throughout the pageant, Leslie is in direct opposition to the rest of the judges, as well as the audience. This is demonstrated through humor, such as when the camera cuts from Leslie talking about choosing a “well-rounded, intelligent, modern, and forward-thinking woman,” to Tom guessing the contestants’ bra cup sizes, or from Leslie talking about Susan, who she considers “the perfect Miss Pawnee” because “her values are strong, her commitment to her job is very admirable,” to zooming in on Trish as she bends over in a short dress (“Beauty Pageant”). After the winner has been crowned, Leslie jumps on stage to share her frustration with the room: “This isn’t the first time that Susans have lost to Trishs, and it won’t be the last. Susan and I will continue on until the women of Pawnee are judged not by the flatness of their tummies, but by the contents of their brains” (“Beauty Pageant”). Leslie’s belief that women should be valued for more than their appearance demonstrates the feminist principles that I feel underlie *Parks and Recreation*.

Leslie demonstrates a desire to instill girls and young women with values similar to her own, most clearly evidenced in her work with the Pawnee Goddesses, which is arguably comparable to Amy Poehler's real-life *Smart Girls* organization. Leslie explains how this organization for girls, similar to Girl Guides or Boy Scouts, was founded: "Five years ago, a plucky fifth-grader wanted to join the Pawnee Rangers, but their executive council said what obnoxious jerks always say: 'No. This is males only. Go start your own club.' She couldn't. So I did" ("Pawnee Rangers"). This episode takes place over the joint camping weekend with the Goddesses and the Pawnee Rangers, and we are shown what kinds of activities these girls do: they have craft time, a pillow fight, "hiking and capture the flag and a puppet show about the bill of rights set to Party in the USA by Miley Cyrus, and ... lasso training and a s'mores-off." Leslie is always giving the girls positive feedback, along with physical awards such as trophies and badges, which give us another look at what the Pawnee Goddesses are about; we see Leslie give out badges for "most community service," "flyest hairstyle," "cabin refurbishment," and "prettiest eyes" ("Pawnee Rangers").

The Goddesses, Leslie included, respect one another's perspective and listen to each other when they disagree, as we see when Darren, a boy from the Rangers, asks to join the Goddesses. Leslie considers his plea as proof that the Goddesses are the better group, and assumes the girls will feel the same way when she thanks them "for not cheering when [she] sent Darren away." Leslie realizes that she has "taught them too well," that she has "created a mob of little Leslie Knope monsters" ("Pawnee Rangers") when members of the group respond by challenging her take. One girl asks "Wasn't Darren just asking for the same equality that you and the goddesses wanted five years ago?" and when Leslie says its more complicated, another camper asks

“Wasn’t your answer the very same thing that the Ranger Council said to you? Stick to your own kind?” (“Pawnee Rangers”).

Following what they have learned from Leslie, one Goddess suggests they hold a public forum to find a solution, to which Leslie reluctantly agrees. The forum allows for various viewpoints to be heard, including those of the Pawnee Rangers, such as the ideas that “separate but equal is never really equal,” and that there is a “benefit to educating the genders separately.” Ultimately Leslie sides with Darren, allowing the Rangers to join the Goddesses, but she does not change what the group is about, meaning that the boys have to recite the Goddesses’ motto in order to join: “I am a goddess, a glorious female warrior. Queen of all that I survey. Enemies of fairness and equality, hear my womanly roar!” (“Pawnee Rangers”).

Leslie is not always the source of feminist ideas on *Parks*. After sampling a few college courses, Andy decides on the one that captivated him the most: introduction to women's studies. The portrayal of the professor does not give in to the stereotypes we might anticipate, such as an angry and ugly feminist, but rather she is an intelligent, attractive, kind woman. We see Andy think about feminist issues and feminist thinkers like Susan B. Anthony through his class. After the final exam, April and Ron take Andy and his professor out for a celebratory dinner, where Andy shares that he wrote about Ron for an assignment on positive male role models. Ron denies considering himself a feminist, but says that his "life has been shaped by powerful women." The fact that other characters exhibit feminist ideals in some way gives the whole show a feminist feel, even when feminism as a term or a political ideology is never explicitly named.

Overall, *Parks* seems to successfully depict feminism as a logical set of values, even when the term may be absent. The idea that women are just as capable and strong as men is palpable. Amongst the moments of implicit feminism, I find it difficult to locate postfeminist sentiments.

Feminism on *Parks* doesn't seem contradictory or about individual women improving themselves. Further, the episode about the Pawnee Goddesses could have easily slipped into postfeminist notions of girl power and 'empowerment,' where empowerment indicates joining the neoliberal marketplace, but it successfully avoids this. Leslie teaches the girls about the importance of open communication, community service, and civic engagement. In her own life, Leslie is often in disbelief at the lack of equal treatment women receive, but contrary to postfeminism, she understands the systemic nature of sexism rather than framing women as victims.

To quote Whelehan (2010, p. 156) "generally, postfeminist discourse is characterized as deploying what might be regarded as broadly 'feminist' sentiments in order to justify certain behaviors or choices, but these sentiments have become severed from their political or philosophical origins." This reflects how I understand the feminism/postfeminism of *Girls*; the girls see themselves as and want to be seen as feminists, but their inability to explore the political, systemic issues raised within feminism results in a reiteration of postfeminist sentiments. The word 'feminist' is said only a few times in the episodes analyzed here, and although there is a scene where Hannah calls out the historic sexism of the literary world, the girls rarely talk about feminism or do the work I would expect from a self-proclaimed feminist.

While most of the female characters on *Girls* exemplify postfeminism in some way at some point, Marnie and Shoshanna could be poster-children for different aspects of it. From early on in season one, Marnie makes it clear that she wants to be a mother. While waiting for Jessa to show up to her abortion appointment, Marnie contemplates that her own sexual irresponsibility has never resulted in a pregnancy. She says this seemingly out of a desire to get pregnant, and

tells Hannah: “Seriously, I need to become a mom. I was put on this planet to be a mother” (“Vagina Panic”).

Marnie is also obsessed with finding a long-term, monogamous partner, perhaps first evidenced by her hesitation to end her four-year, no-longer-fulfilling relationship with Charlie. This obsession does not go unnoticed, and in the monumental fight between Marnie and Hannah, Hannah brings it up. She says: “We talk about what’s right with Charlie, then we start talking about what’s wrong with Charlie. Now we talk about how you’re never gonna meet someone. Cause it’s like you think meeting a guy is the main point of life, so we have to have like, a summit every day to make a game plan” (“Leave Me Alone”).

Fortunately for Marnie, she finds what she’s looking for in Adam's Broadway co-star, the folk-singing Desi (“Incidentals”). Their relationship starts professionally, creating music together, but escalates and becomes sexual, despite Desi’s current girlfriend. Although the few people who know about the relationship tell Marnie that she should end it because she is essentially the mistress, she wants to believe, and therefore acts as if, she and Desi are in love. After Desi’s relationship with his girlfriend ends, he moves in with Marnie and begins to show his true colors (“Cubbies”). He does not seem to respect Marnie or her opinion, such as when he spends the whole \$2000 advance they got from a record company on music equipment they don’t need (“Tad & Loreen & Avi & Shanaz”). Marnie proves that she is aware of his disrespect, telling her friends that “he’s a total asshole as it turns out” (“Close-Up”). Despite the evidence of their incompatibility, Marnie excitedly accepts Desi’s marriage proposal, which he offers as a resolution to their dispute over the expensive gear. Here, we can see Marnie’s prioritization of marriage.

Shoshanna also embodies postfeminism, in the way that she buys into the notion that she can ‘have it all.’ This is the idea that in a postfeminist and neoliberal society, a woman can “combine her job aspirations and material success with her desire for a rewarding home life” (Genz, 2010). In season three, Shoshanna tells her friends: “Basically, it’s the beginning of a somewhat sexually adventurous time for me. I’m alternating nights of freedom with nights of academic focus so that at the end of my senior year, I will have had both experiences while also being like, super well-prepared for the professional world” (“Females Only”). Hannah responds with an invocation of feminism, telling Shoshanna “It sounds like a really good plan. It sounds smart and strong and feminist.”

However, this feels more reflective of postfeminism, suggesting that Shoshanna is being feminist in her ability to choose, because “any choice is a feminist choice if a self-labeled feminist deems it so” (Zeisler, 2016, p. 21). Indeed, this language of choice is a recurring one, and even in instances where it might feel unrelated to postfeminism, the idea that making a choice is empowering is implicit, such as when Jessa feels attacked by a self-help relationship book and she defensively claims “every time I have sex, it’s my choice” (“Vagina Panic”). Bell (2013) argues that in the context of *Girls*, the notion of choice lends itself to parody, reiterating the postfeminist perspective on it. This perspective frames women as autonomous subjects who are “no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances” (Gill, 2007, p. 153), who can now freely make choices that affect their livelihood. The girls, as well as Elijah, treat their own ability to choose in and of itself as grounds for praise (Bell, 2013), giving the sense that the act of choosing is most important to them.

Shoshanna struggles with trying to balance school and sex, however, and we see her stress over school increase. She tells Jessa that her “recent hijinks have really taken a toll on [her]

GPA” and that “it’s really important to [her] 15-year plan that [she] get into a good business school” (“Only Child”). This lifeplan, which a woman or girl should have under postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004), goes off the rails when she graduates a semester later than planned, and she briefly changes her lifeplan. She tells the other girls: “I’ve decided I’m not getting a job. I’m going to marry Scott the soup mogul ... I’m going to forgo all of my dreams and ambitions for his” (“Close-Up”).

Related to this, Shoshanna buys into the notion of “leaning in,” as popularized by Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. Sandberg encourages women to pursue their career goals, arguing that women’s lack of self-confidence holds them back in the workplace. She believes that when women overcome their individual obstacles, they will be able to ‘lean in’ to their careers, closing the ‘ambition gap’ where men are often more committed to their jobs. Sandberg wants women to be able to balance high-powered jobs and home life, but does not address how systemic oppressive structures such as racism and classism continue to prevent some women from being able to ‘lean in’ to their career (Rottenberg, 2014). When Shoshanna finally receives a job offer after multiple unsuccessful interviews, she uses this ‘lean in’ logic to make her decision, although she doesn’t get there on her own. She looks for Ray to give her advice, but when he is not at his workplace, his boss Hermie offers to help instead. Their conversation goes as follows:

Shoshanna: “I was offered a high-powered job in Japan and I need [Ray’s] advice on whether or not to take it. ... I’m kind of on the precipice of like, possibly falling in love with a very successful, very kind, very fashionable man, and I just feel like if I don’t give this relationship a shot, then I’m gonna regret it my entire life. And he offered me a job at his company, so I feel like—”

Hermie: “Stop, stop, stop, please. ... You familiar with the work of writer Sheryl Sandberg? ... This is your ‘lean in’ moment. This is your moment to lean in. You don’t want to be dependent on some guy, some nerd. Don’t give the power to your partner. Grab a seat at the table and lean the [expletive] in. ... This is for you, taking what’s yours. Attainment, achievement, this is your time to grasp your destiny.” (“Home Birth”)

Shoshanna heeds this advice, and subsequently accepts the job in Japan. She clearly buys into the idea that she has to balance work and romantic relationships, however, she struggles to strike that balance, evident in the drop in her grades when she started partying and pursuing casual sex more. Following the subtle ways in which *Girls* critiques postfeminism, it could be argued that this trajectory of Shoshanna’s life is meant to demonstrate the impossibility of ‘having it all.’

Girls does something curious with the role of men in the lives of these friends. Winch (2013, p. 67) suggests that postfeminist girlfriends deal with their emotions through girl talk, which is understood to benefit the men in the girlfriends’ lives as well, as the men aren’t needed for conversations about emotions. This is not the case, however, for *Girls*. The more often the girls fight with each other, the more reliant they become on men for guidance, who in turn are treated by the show as the voice of moral authority (DeCarvalho, 2013), such as when Marnie seeks out Ray for guidance or when Shoshanna accepts a job offer in Japan thanks to Hermie’s advice. As the friendships start to dissolve and become seemingly less significant, especially the friendship between Hannah and Marnie, it is notable that these young women, who claim to care about female friendship and feminism, seek out men to replace the friends they’ve outgrown, reverting to outdated stereotypes that women are incapable of friendship with other women, and should therefore rely on men as their closest allies (Hollinger, 1998, p. 5).

I take issue with this pattern of friendship and I struggle to understand the purpose of pairing the girls off with male friends, especially considering Lena Dunham's claim that female friendship is "the true romance" (in Traister, 2012) of her show. These girls shape their lives around the men they have relationships with and they make important life decisions only after consulting their male friends. This is particularly troublesome for me because of the attention *Girls* has received for being a feminist and groundbreaking show; how can a show that reiterates the idea that women are untrustworthy in friendship be considered revolutionary for women?

Both *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* have been referred to as feminist shows for a variety of reasons, including the fact that women are the main characters, the reputation both Lena Dunham and Amy Poehler have as feminists, as well as their contribution to their respective show as writer, director, and producer. Both shows say the word 'feminist' at some point, but the sense of feminism differs between them. As Engstrom (2013) argued, *Parks* treats feminist values as common sense, despite seldom using the term, by having a sort of ongoing conversation about gender. Leslie in particular portrays feminism, through the way she talks about being a woman and the projects she takes on, like volunteering to be a beauty pageant judge and creating the Pawnee Goddesses. Thus, despite the lack of explicit feminism, *Parks* feels like a feminist show.

Meanwhile, *Girls* certainly outright says 'feminist' more often, but unlike *Parks*, it does not follow this up with feminist action, disconnecting the term from its politics (Whelehan, 2010). Rather than letting actions speak for themselves, the girls, particularly Hannah, describe their own behaviors or those of others as feminist, without exploring the political underpinnings. For example, Shoshanna's claim that she is going to "forgo all of [her] dreams and ambitions for his" fails to consider the privilege that comes with being able to make this choice. This example reifies the palpable entitlement of the show, as well as postfeminist sentiments. Overall, *Girls* is

capable of using feminist language, but it's lack of acknowledgement of structural oppression reiterates postfeminism, while *Parks* is able to present feminist values which think past the individual, even without using the term 'feminist.'

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Both *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* center female friendships particularly in their earlier seasons. The established friendship between Hannah, Marnie, Jessa, and Shoshanna and the budding friendship between Leslie and Ann are guiding relationships at the outset of these shows. These friendships are crucial for the women involved and overall, I would argue that they are all represented as wanting close relationships with their female friends. This desire, however, is acted upon in different ways; simply put, *Girls* talks friendship while *Parks* demonstrates it. Leslie and Ann do verbalize their love and respect for one another, but many moments of their friendship come from the compassionate and supportive way in which they treat each other and try to make time for their relationship. The friends on *Girls*, however, talk about friendship more often; they seem to be talking their way through what behavior is expected of them as a friend. Of course, as we saw, the fervency for female friendship fades as the seasons go on, but the friendships do continue to exist, serving both the emotional needs of the characters and the plot of the shows.

Girls and *Parks and Recreation* both exemplify Winch's postfeminist girlfriend to an extent, but neither show relies on this notion to depict female friendship. The women in these shows prioritize their female friendships, albeit in different ways: Leslie and Ann seem to prioritize each other as individuals, with a sort of idolization, while Hannah and Marnie especially seem to prioritize keeping their friendship intact, even if they don't consider the other to be a 'good' friend. Further, we see fights between friends on both *Girls* and *Parks* with different outcomes. When Hannah and Marnie fought, they could no longer be roommates; when Marnie and Shoshanna had a fight, it changed the dynamic of their dyad; but when Leslie and Ann get in a

fight, they always seem able to take accountability for their actions and offer an apology, which I have suggested could reflect the difference in ages between the women in these friendships.

Girls has a reputation for only portraying white, wealthy, young women, and although we meet some characters who are not-white, the friendships at the center of the show are between white women. *Parks* focuses on the friendship between a white woman and a non-white woman, and we see Leslie develop friendships with other women in her office, women who are not all white. While this may signal inclusivity, there is little mention of racial or cultural differences, indicating a sort of post-racial sentiment. Thus, while we see people of colour on screen, they are treated the same as the white characters, and this representation suggests that racial differences do not need to be discussed or explored.

Thinking about class on these shows was difficult as it was rarely discussed or even alluded to. The two shows represent class in similar ways, with a silence that makes it difficult to determine for certain the classed position of these characters. For example, the clearest acknowledgment of class on *Parks* is when they compare themselves to the “rich snobs” of their rival town, Eagleton. For *Girls*, there is an implied understanding that the four main characters have rich parents, and they all exhibit a sense of financial entitlement, such as when Hannah feels above working at McDonalds.

The differences between the way in which *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* depict feminism is similar to that of the portrayal of female friendship: *Girls* talks feminism, but *Parks* does feminism. *Parks* rarely uses the term, but it has a sort of feminist aura. Leslie talks about the importance of women in politics and we see her deal with sexist men, like Clarence and the park ranger. Her feminism is obvious in the way she judges the Miss Pawnee Beauty Pageant and in her work with the Pawnee Goddesses. *Girls*, on the other hand, uses the term more frequently,

but often as a talking point. That is, the language of their feminism tends to relate back to postfeminism; their deployment of ‘feminism’ “[justifies] certain behaviors or choices” (Whelehan, 2010, p. 156). While *Parks* is implicitly feminist, *Girls* explicitly takes up feminism in a postfeminist manner.

Discussion

I wanted to explore how *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls* portray female friendship, including how it fits in the lives of the characters. *Parks* shows the beginning of the friendship between Leslie and Ann, where the budding love for each other plays out almost like a romantic relationship. We see them meet and can feel the connection growing, to the point that they become each other’s closest confidant. The friendship between Leslie and Ann is not necessarily crucial to the structure of the show, but there are certain episodes which focus on the friendship. More than that, there is an underlying sense of friendship throughout the show, largely thanks to the way Leslie values each one of her friends. Of course, I am interested in female friendships, and the main one, between Leslie and Ann, shows us that adult women can be friends, even with people who they’ve only recently met.

The friendship on *Girls* is structured differently than that of *Parks* for a variety of reasons, including the fact that this is a group of four rather than two, that they are younger adults, and they were friends before we as the audience meet them. The younger age of these girls is likely why they are navigating friendship, trying to determine where it will fit in their lives going forward. It is less clear what role friendship plays in the lives of the characters here, however it is certainly important to the show, in that much of the narrative is shaped around these friends spending time together. *Girls* demonstrates that perhaps friendships can be difficult to maintain,

and that it can be hard to break up with longtime friends. However, the way in which these girls eventually rely on men complicates the notion that they're simply trying to figure friendship out, as it works to reiterate the stereotype that women can't be friends with other women and must therefore turn to men for guidance. By seasons three and four, I often found myself wondering if and why these girls are still friends with one another, because the relationships that get the most screen time in these seasons are those between each girl and her respective male confidant.

I was interested in how these shows deploy discourses of postfeminism and feminism, and if the postfeminist sensibility was evident through an entanglement of feminism and antifeminism. I was especially interested in this because of the reputation the shows, and the actresses behind it, have for being feminist. *Parks* gives the impression of a feminist show through its ability to navigate patriarchal institutions and various microaggressions of sexism, even without regularly using the term 'feminism' or even 'sexism.' Importantly, *Parks* differs from *Girls* here in its ability to think beyond the individual, to recognize systems of oppression; through Leslie, *Parks* is able to demonstrate the ways in which sexist rhetoric continues to circulate.

Certainly, *Girls* evokes feminist discourse, however it does so in a postfeminist way, in that it uses the language of feminism without thinking deeper about the broader history and political ideology. Further, the show portrays the characters as entitled, coming from middle if not upper-class families (which arguably reflects the lives of the actresses, who all have influential, wealthy parents). This entitlement in combination with the language of feminism results in the deployment of postfeminist discourse, where the girls prioritize the individual. Their focus on 'choice' and their dream to 'have it all' overlooks systems of oppression; their belief that they can do whatever they want, including be a housewife, relies on an assumption that they will be wealthy enough to choose anything, that they will not be required to have a paying job.

Thus, feminism may be visible in these shows, but there is a silence around race in both *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation*. I was interested in how differences in race and class may impact a friendship, especially considering what Winch argued about postfeminist girlfriends between a white woman and a woman of colour. I of course knew that *Girls* would leave much to be desired here, but the representation of race in *Parks* did as well. While we can commend the visual diversity of *Parks*, in that there is more than one woman, more than one person of colour, this is not enough, as the characters themselves are treated the same as the white characters. This is particularly relevant when thinking about these shows in relation to feminism because feminism should be about all systems of oppression, not just sexism, but both *Parks* and *Girls* seem to represent a sort of white feminism. Again, this is not surprising in the case of *Girls* and Lena Dunham, both of which have been criticized for only being interested in white women. It was, however, unexpected from *Parks*, an otherwise feminist show. These shows may be new and/or different due to their heavier focus on women, but by failing to acknowledge race or class differences, they fail to fully represent feminism.

Finally, I was curious if the friends in *Parks* and *Girls* used the same set of practices as those of the postfeminist girlfriends, which was not as simple to determine as I thought it would be. The practice of regulating or policing the normative feminine behavior of other girlfriends was the most complicated, because most instances I saw could be read as postfeminist girlfriend behavior, but they could also be read as friends helping one another, such as when Marnie and Ann helped Hannah and Leslie, respectively, choose outfits. Of course, thinking about it as a simple act of friendship as I've just suggested indicates that helping a friend with her appearance is part of female friendship. The fact that judging appearance is part of the job of being a friend

signals a sort of internalization of female gaze, as proposed by Apter and Josselson (in Winch, 2013).

The other aspect of the postfeminist girlfriend I would like to address here is the way in which the women prioritize their female friendships, as *Parks* and *Girls* did portray this to an extent, in different ways, which I think speaks to the overall structure of the friendships under analysis here. Leslie and Ann seem to prioritize each other as independent people more than the relationship itself; they seem truly impressed and in love with each other. Despite the instances of selfishness, they are able to give the support their friend needs as well as the support they would expect to receive in return. On the flip side, if we consider Hannah and Marnie, the friends on *Girls* prioritize the mere existence of their friendship more than the other person in the relationship. They may continue to spend time together, but it tends to be at Hannah's discretion, and even when she does make the time to see Marnie, they don't give support or advice the way Leslie and Ann typically do.

Challenges

The main challenge I had throughout this thesis was due to the complexity of the theories I drew upon, in particular postfeminism. The contradictory nature of postfeminism meant that the data I looked at could not be clearly categorized as exemplifying postfeminist sentiments or not. I went back and forth over whether certain behaviors were postfeminist, because my reading could change depending on how I took up postfeminist theories. For example, in *Parks*, there were times that Leslie and Ann seemed to regulate one another's behavior, something that is typical of a postfeminist girlfriend, but the regulating never seemed tied to normative standards of femininity and it felt more like the woman doing the regulating was doing it at the request of

her friend. Or in the case of *Girls*, there were instances that could have been read as critiquing postfeminism or embodying them, such as when Hannah's co-workers give her advice on makeup and dealing with their boss's harassment.

This issue made it easier to implicitly indulge my bias within the analysis because where a situation may be polysemic, I could read it in a way that better suited the opinions I had of the shows going into the analysis. For example, I expected *Girls* to exemplify postfeminism often and I expected *Parks* to rarely interact with it. When a moment could be read as either postfeminist or not, I initially tended to read it in support of my expectations. This challenge forced me to go back into my analysis and re-evaluate how I answered the research questions, which resulted in a deeper analysis.

Future Directions

As I made explicit in my introduction, I was more interested in *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation*, than TV as a field of study. However, a future study could teach us different things by taking the idea of TV as a medium into account. It could ask about who the intended audience is, or how the shows are received by viewers. For these shows specifically, it could also consider what it means that as the seasons progress, and the shows arguably gain popularity, female friendship becomes less crucial to the characters and the plot. This would allow for a more nuanced exploration of how TV as a whole is representing postfeminism and female friendships.

A future study could also consider differences between *Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* in regards to how the shows are produced. For example, we could compare the genres of the shows, sitcom versus dramedy, or the networks on which they aired, NBC versus HBO. We could also think about differences due to location of the shows, that is Pawnee, Indiana versus New York

City. We could consider how the age, gender, and race of the writers and creators of the shows influence the stories told.

A final recommendation, following Boyle's (2008) concern that postfeminist media studies tends to focus on "the 'feminism' of women-centered media texts" (p. 177), is to ask similar questions about "non-feminist or male-centered shows" (p. 177). Asking the questions I asked of shows centered on women and female friends is one thing, but to get a deeper understanding of how these topics are portrayed on TV as a whole, we would need to ask how shows about men portray female friendships and postfeminism.

This research project contributes to the gap around postfeminist female friendship by tracking which practices of the postfeminist girlfriend are utilized by two popular shows about female friends. There is also a gap around literature on *Parks and Recreation*, especially as it relates to the friendship between Leslie and Ann. I am happy to contribute to this gap, because their relationship has always been of interest to me and I was surprised to find so little on the topic. Finally, this project contributes to the study of pop culture, and it adds to the category of feminist and postfeminist discourses on television.

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