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# Gynecologists, Bureaucrats, and Stoners: The Rise of Women in Television Comedies and Critiquing the Postfeminist Perspective

Victoria Montecillo  
*Scripps College*

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Gynecologists, Bureaucrats, and Stoners: The Rise of Women in Television Comedies  
and Critiquing the Postfeminist Perspective

by

Victoria Montecillo

Submitted to Scripps College in partial fulfillment  
of the Degree of the Bachelor of Arts  
in Media Studies

Professor T. Kim-Trang Tan  
Professor Mark Andrejevic  
Professor Zala Volcic

*“The expectation that TV women need to be more likeable than men is bullsh\*t and in  
need of a change.”*

- Mindy Kaling

December 11, 2015

*This thesis looks to explore the rise of women in television comedy and the accompanying implications of this phenomenon. Using a historical framework, this thesis looks at the progression of representations of women in television comedies beginning in the 1950s up to today. Considering factors such as the rise of social media, as well as online television streaming services such as Hulu and Netflix as more legitimate avenues to distribute content, this thesis traces women's place within television comedy, and argues that shows such as Parks and Recreation, The Mindy Project, and Broad City serve as examples of the progress that has been made in achieving gender equality on television, as well as stepping stones for how much more progress must be made in the future*

*Key words: feminism, women, comedy, postfeminism, television, interactive, media*

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Setting the Scene: Funny Women Through History.....	3
Going Against the Grain: Naysayers, The “Unruly Woman”, and Why the Postfeminists Are Wrong.....	7
Agents for Change: Social Media and Interactive Television.....	10
New Avenues for Feminist Representations: Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, and More.....	12
<i>The Mindy Project</i> : A New Kind of Feminist.....	14
<i>Parks and Recreation</i> : Rangers Versus Goddesses Discussing Gender Equality.....	18
A Cruder Kind of Feminism: Unruly Stoner Girls in <i>Broad City</i> .....	22
Concluding Thoughts.....	29
Works Cited.....	31

## Introduction

*30 Rock. Jane the Virgin. Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt. New Girl. Inside Amy Schumer. Veep. Mom. Grace and Frankie. Nurse Jackie. The Mindy Project. Parks and Recreation. Broad City.* Television is changing. More and more comedy shows have women in starring roles, leading the charge and pioneering a new era for women in comedy. Looking at these shows, one could easily marvel at how many changes have been made in representations of women. Looking back to the days of *I Love Lucy* and *The Donna Reed Show* in the 1950s, it would seem natural to say that television has indeed come incredibly far in gender representations. The women on television, particularly in comedies, are no longer confined to the role of the dutiful and doting wife, whose main purpose is to make sure her husband comes home to a hot dinner. The women seen on television today are all across the board in terms of culture, ethnicity, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation. These women are complex, deeply flawed, and multi-dimensional characters, representing women from all walks of life and all different backgrounds. They are a far cry from the “perfect” housewives, damsels in distress, or sexual objects we saw in the women on television for so many years.

Society has come incredibly far with the women seen on television. There are more women on screen, as well as behind the scenes, and in the offices. Women made up 42% of speaking characters on broadcast television programs in the 2014-2015 season, and 40% of all characters on broadcast, cable, and Netflix television programs. Behind the scenes, women comprised 27% of roles like show creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, and directors of photography (Lauzen 2015). While these numbers may seem insignificant, one must consider that television, and television comedies in particular, used to be vastly male-dominated. The television industry has shown an undeniable evolution to make room for more

women to find success—more than ever before. The evolution of social media and interactive television, the emergence of alternative outlets for television programming, as well as specific individual television programs that signify the shift of how women are portrayed in comedy are certainly factors in how television has progressed thus far. However, this is certainly not the end goal. This is not the end of the fight, and one could certainly not say that we have reached gender equality in television in terms of exposure and representation. The postfeminist perspective argues that based on the simple fact that there are more women in television comedies, we have, in fact, reached gender equality, which is also absolutely incorrect.

These social and political trends, as well as emerging technological trends, have shaped female representations in television over the past fifty or sixty years. With the rise of social media as a forum for audiences to discuss and react to content, television producers and creators have direct access to opinions of the masses. They can adjust plot points, themes, or characters to cater to what they know audiences want. Conversely, audiences have learned to discuss and react to television content through social media, whether it's through Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, reddit, etc. Television, as one of society's most dominant forms of media, has always been a platform on which to present important issues worthy of discourse through its power as a visual media, and those issues have evolved and expanded along with society (Ruggieri & Leebron). As time has progressed and society has continued to change and evolve socially and politically, there has been a noticeable change in television as well. The "standard" formula for television comedies, including the format, content, and the nature of representations of women, is no longer the standard. Not every comedy is a multi-camera, single-set show with a standard laugh track and an over-the-top soundtrack a la *Seinfeld* (1989-1998). There is more room for different formats, different characters with different careers and interests, and different women.

This change has led to an increase in female-centric television comedy shows, as well as a raised social awareness of female empowerment and gendered issues.

A study of *The Mindy Project*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Broad City* will emphasize the changes that are apparent in television comedies for women. Through the postfeminist perspective that argues that these shows solve all problems of gender equality on television, these shows can be seen as examples of the answer to the problem of representation. However, this paper will argue that these specific television shows use their critical and commercial popularity to function instead as stepping-stones on the path towards equality of gender representations in television comedies. These shows are not the answer to all of the problems in television comedy regarding women and feminism; they are only the beginning. However, it is first important to first understand the history of women in television comedies in order to contextualize the discussion.

### **Setting the Scene: Funny Women Through History**

Before the twentieth century, the relationship between women and comedy was closely associated with prostitution and indecency. Even in the early twentieth century in the days of vaudeville, women were looked down upon for singing and dancing (Parker). As time went on, television audiences saw the occasional woman pushing boundaries, toying with comedy in a male-dominated field. However, television comedies didn't see real change in the United States for women until the 1950s, with the booming success of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) that led to the birth of sitcom. In both *I Love Lucy* and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), the audience followed a female protagonist through her domestic adventures of being a housewife and mother (Kohen).

In Bonnie Dow's "How Will You Make it on Your Own?: Television and Feminism Since 1970," Dow describes what she believes to be a turning point in television comedies for women: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977). After the success of shows like *I Love Lucy* and *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* came about in the 1970s presenting a new type of female lead. She was without a man, pursuing a career in a male-dominated industry. Dow writes:

*[Independent working women are] generally young, educated, white, middle-class professionals who are heterosexual and unmarried, who live in an urban setting, and who often work in a traditionally male occupation. These characteristics signify, in important ways, the visibility of certain kinds of liberal feminist arguments associated with the second wave: the need for women's access to higher education (especially professional schools), employment (especially traditionally male-dominated occupations), and equal pay, as well as the critique of traditional marriage and motherhood (and their incompatibility with careerism and self-fulfillment for women) and the undermining of the sexual double standard (under which men, but not women, are permitted to be sexually active outside of marriage (380).*

Through her analysis, Dow explains how *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* signified a shift towards more feminist representations. In this discussion of a show that aired in the 1970s and its relation to the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s,<sup>1</sup> it is important to consider how

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<sup>1</sup> This movement fought against societal standards of beauty and femininity, seeking sisterhood and solidarity. It very much rejected the idea of men as feminist allies, as opposed to third wave feminism.

relevant these statements remain today. Topics such as the double standards of the portrayal of women's sex lives, equal pay, and women in the workplace are still topics of discussion, and are currently being explored on popular television shows today, as shown in the case studies later in this paper. Although the analysis of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and its themes can be used primarily as historical context for how the portrayal of women has changed from the 1970s to today, particularly in comedy, it is also an essential frame of reference in discussing how much has *not* changed for women on television in the last forty years.

For the next few decades, there continued to be small hints and sparks of women breaking into the television comedy world, but the next significant shift in the field was through the emergence of what Yael Kohen describes as *Saturday Night Live's* "Girls' Club" in the 1990s. Beginning in 1995, as Kohen writes, "[A] fundamental shift in the show's gender balance began to take place. With the arrival of Molly Shannon and Cheri Oteri, and the following year, Ana Gasteyer, 'S.N.L.' saw a new core of female cast who fought for time on the air, encouraged each other to succeed, and took ownership of their performance styles. These women paved the way for subsequent generations of female cast members—Rachel Dratch, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, and, later, Kristen Wiig—who continued to bolster the position of women on the show and, in the process, became some of the biggest names, male or female, in comedy today."

With these female comedians fighting for airtime on one of the longest-running and most popular comedy shows on television, gaining more recognition and acclaim for their work, many of these cast members went on to become some of the biggest names in comedy. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, specifically, are now considered to be feminist comedy icons; both of them have created, written, and starred in their own critically and commercially successful television

comedy shows (*30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation*, respectively). On *Saturday Night Live*, they were the first female co-anchors of “Weekend Update” in 2004, which arguably put them on the map as the ultimate all-star female comedy duo. Post-*SNL*, Fey and Poehler have co-starred in a hit comedy film called *Baby Mama* (2008), co-hosted The Golden Globes three years in a row, and are now set to co-star in another comedy film, *Sisters*, together in December 2015.

Both Tina Fey and Amy Poehler moved on from their success at *Saturday Night Live* to create and star in two of the most successful female-led comedy shows on television. In the show’s seven-season run, Tina Fey was nominated twelve times for her role as Liz Lemon on *30 Rock* (2006-2013), and nine times as the show’s writer. The show overall has received 103 Emmy nominations, winning 19. *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) also ran for seven seasons, and was nominated for over 60 awards, winning 13. Amy Poehler was nominated for 25 different awards during the show’s run for acting, producing, and writing.<sup>2</sup> After the end of their shows, Tina Fey went on to produce *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, a critically acclaimed comedy on Netflix about a woman in New York City learning about how to navigate the world after being imprisoned by a cult for fifteen years. Amy Poehler went on to become an executive producer on *Broad City* for Comedy Central, working with two writers and actors that came from Upright Citizens Brigade, a sketch and improv comedy theatre and training center founded by none other than Amy Poehler herself. Both Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are also New York Times-bestselling authors, having both penned memoirs about their lives and their experiences in comedy.<sup>3</sup> These two women have been both masters and pioneers in their field, gaining respect for women in comedy everywhere.

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<sup>2</sup> List of Awards and Nominations Received by 30 Rock." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Entitled *Bossypants* (2011) and *Yes Please* (2014), respectively.

## **Going Against the Grain: Naysayers, The “Unruly Woman”, and Why the Postfeminists Are Wrong**

In countless literary, academic, and popular sources published in the last 8 years regarding the role of women in comedy, there is at least one reference to Christopher Hitchens’ essay, “Why Women Aren’t Funny”. Although most likely the most infamous published work expressing a disdain for women in comedy, Hitchens’ assertion that women lack a fundamental ability to be funny is not an uncommon one. As Kristen Anderson Wagner writes in her article about comedy and femininity in film, “Countless writers and critics have argued that femininity and a sense of humor are mutually exclusive and that women’s ‘natural inclination toward emotion and sensitivity has left them incapable of possessing a quality—humor—that many feel is dependent on ‘masculine’ traits such as intellect and aggressiveness” (35). Wagner’s explanation helps contextualize the significance of the accomplishments of women like Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, as well as countless other female comedians in the last fifty years or so: many of these women chose to go against what society told them was the “proper” way to be a woman.

The concept of the “unruly woman” is a trope that describes a woman in comedy who defies societal gender roles and expectations (Rowe). Although it didn’t emerge as a better-known concept until decades later, its roots began in the late 1920s and early 1930s with a few select female comedy teams in the early sound era. Kristine Karnick writes, “The willingness of female comics to become ‘unruly’ spectacles, to not only make spectacles of themselves but to revel in public acts of unruliness, characterized this relatively brief period in American film comedy” (78). However exciting and revolutionary these concepts were, they did not come to complete fruition until decades later, briefly in the 1950s with Lucille Ball and stand-up

comedian Phyllis Diller, and later to a fuller effect in the 1980s and 1990s with shows like *Roseanne* (1988-1997). As described by Anne Helen Petersen,

*[B]eing unruly is more than just being funny[.] Unruly women have unruly bodies – they’re too big for their clothes, their hair refuses to stay down. They talk too much, laugh too loudly, say things ladies shouldn’t. They fart and burp and poop; they make themselves known, refuse taming. These unruly women are electric – you can’t take your eyes off of them – but fiercely controversial [...] But that’s the beauty of unruly women: they’re ‘bad examples’ of womanhood because they compromise our understanding of what a woman can or should act like. And any time a woman does that, there’s pushback – sometimes, as in the case of [Lucille] Ball, they pave the way for future comediennes; others, as in the case of [Roseanne] Barr, they unleash a severe backlash, underlining just how little society has progressed.*

The “unruly woman” is an incredibly important part of why television comedies have changed. These unruly women went against what was considered as “normal” or “acceptable” by society, and people began to pay attention. *Roseanne* was one of the first sitcoms on television to feature an American blue-collar working-class family in a female-dominated household. Roseanne was loud, outspoken, and her likeability was not at all reliant on her adherence to societal beauty standards. The emergence of this trope of the “unruly woman” led to more strong-minded women on television of various backgrounds – and, as Petersen stated, the way that society receives these female characters is often a testament to how much (or how little) societal gender expectations have progressed.

The simple fact that any woman on television that chooses not to adhere to certain “acceptable” standards of behavior is immediately dubbed an “unruly” woman, however, illustrates how deeply embedded traditional gender roles are in television. The root of these character tropes is based completely in constructed gender roles and patriarchal power dynamics. Today’s inherently patriarchal society decides which behaviors are acceptable for women, particularly in the public eye. Looking at certain television shows as examples of feminist representations is not one-sided; they are indeed great examples of interesting and complex female characters, but they are still the exception to the rule. It is still revolutionary and exciting to have a show with a complex female protagonist, especially in comedy.

With all of this considered, it is interesting to consider the postfeminist perspective in relation to television as a dominant media and the importance of female roles in comedy. Postfeminism argues that there is no need to push for more change or progress in the feminist agenda, because equality has already been achieved. In the context of television comedy, the postfeminist perspective argues that in looking at the history of television, there has been undeniable progress in the kinds of women portrayed (Imre). There is more diversity in personalities, occupations, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, and more.

Particularly in the last fifteen years, audiences have seen some very important shifts in terms of representations of women on screen. There are shows featuring women of color, lesbian and queer and gender-fluid women, working class women, single mothers, divorcees, and single older women with no interest in marriage or families. On top of all of that, these women are succeeding in the world of comedy, not just in melodramatic genres typically associated with women. These women are updating and redefining what exactly it means to be “unruly”. There is an incredible amount of progress that has been made that should be commended and celebrated

in the last fifteen years or so in television. As Dow writes, “[T]o conclude that feminism has had no positive effects on television’s representations of women is too pessimistic; the variety and scope of representations of women’s lives continues to expand” (392).

However, simply acknowledging the progress that has been made is not at all a sufficient answer to the problems of representation and equality. The danger of the postfeminist perspective is that society is left with no room to progress and improve. If society is ever to progress further and work to eventually achieve true gender equality, with the equal treatment of men and women—on screen and off—there is no room to be complacent.

### **Agents for Change: Social Media and Interactive Television**

It is impossible to analyze these significant shifts in television comedies for women without taking into account the influence of social media and the new “interactive” type of television. With the rise of social media sites, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, audiences are able to make comments and share opinions directly with show creators and actors. Tweets and Facebook comments are the new forums to share thoughts and opinions, and to interact with other fans. This provides creators, producers, and network executives with firsthand reactions from fans, as well as recommendations on how to improve their content.

Although this practice has existed for much longer than some people are aware of, what with the existence of online chat rooms and blogs in the 1990s soon after the creation of the internet, the rise of social media has brought this practice to the forefront of the media-consuming consciousness. Because of the almost inescapable nature of social media in our society today, television creators and producers are now incredibly cognizant of the fact that the majority of their audiences will choose to take to the internet to respond to their content. This

phenomenon has led to a symbiotic relationship between audiences and creators via social media. In the more recent history of the past 40 or 50 years, television has taken advantage of its status as a product of mass consumption to present particular social or political issues as topics of discussion or critical thinking. Television allows for audiences to be made aware of particular issues, and social media has opened up the opportunity for online communities.

For example, there has been a resurgence of feminism and feminist ideology in the past fifteen years that has come with the conception of “intersectionality,” or overlapping social identities and related systems of oppression or discrimination (Crenshaw). With the resurgence of feminism via social media and websites such as BuzzFeed and Jezebel working to spread awareness of the feminist cause, more people are interested in learning more about the concept and its history. Subsequently, audiences speak out via social media in regards to their desire for more strong female characters. As a result, creators and producers are made aware of the commercial benefits of including strong and diverse female characters (Dockterman, Evans, Schneider). Conversely, the increase of strong female characters on a dominant media form allows for a greater awareness and opportunities for discussion among wide audiences of feminist perspectives and issues surrounding feminism like sexuality, reproductive rights, and women in the workplace. Audiences that may not have been aware of these particular issues, or perhaps had not seen them portrayed from a particular perspective, could be exposed to them in a new light through their favorite television show.

In response to the rise of social media’s influence on television, shows have embraced this change wholeheartedly with the incorporation of interactive media. On numerous television shows, regardless of genre, networks will incorporate a hashtag topic on one corner of the screen during the show’s broadcast, in order to encourage viewers to take to social media for discussion.

This allows for certain shows and topics to go “trending” on social media, meaning that a significant number of users are posting about that topic at a given time and place. From a business standpoint, this allows television shows to gain more exposure and reach more people.

The adoption of on-screen hashtags, as well as the encouragement from networks for fans to take to social media sites to discuss the show to increase exposure has fundamentally changed the way that television functions as a business model. If a television show does not have a Twitter account or a Facebook page, the show and its showrunners come off as out of touch or irrelevant. Because of the all-consuming nature of participating in social media, show creators and network executives have seen the value in giving the voice back to the audiences, allowing them to express their opinions and interact directly with actors and writers. These changes in the way that television functions have undeniably contributed to the evolution in representations of women on television.

### **New Avenues for Feminist Representations: Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, and More**

The rise of online television streaming services has been an incredibly significant factor in the shift of the nature of television shows. Finding success in the television industry is no longer dictated by network executives alone; it is not the case anymore that the people in positions of power have the final say in which shows find success and which shows “get the axe”. Online television streaming services like Netflix and Hulu—which originally were created for the purpose of watching previously broadcasted episodes of television shows at the user’s leisure—have evolved in the last few years to produce original content as well as network shows.

With these new avenues to put up successful television shows, creators and performers have access to more freedom in their creative and executive decisions; they no longer have to

answer to network executives dictating their every move and making sure they follow certain rules of broadcast television (Segal). Particularly with the television shows that have female creators and writers, this new medium allows them to have much more creative freedom on what to incorporate and show onscreen. Because creators and performers were no longer required to answer to network executives, online streaming as a legitimate avenue for creating content provides more of a “safe space” for creators to regulate their own content and perhaps also push more boundaries in terms of what is acceptable to discuss or portray on television, particularly in regards to women and feminist issues.

As previously mentioned, these websites began to bring out original television shows and movies along with streaming network and cable episodes that have already aired. These websites began to churn out more shows with women in starring roles, and the nature of television began to change. Although the majority of television shows are still network and cable shows, online streaming websites emerged as a legitimate contender for competing for audiences. Not only were these websites bringing in audiences that wanted to re-watch previously aired television shows or experience shows they missed the first time around, they were also bringing in more audiences with their original content.

*Broad City*, one of the shows that will be further analyzed through a case study, originally started as a webseries on YouTube where writers and actors Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer had complete creative freedom. Episodes were 2-5 minutes long, generally a short sketch exploring topics such as smoking marijuana, sexual exploration, and navigating societal expectations for women as young twenty-somethings in New York City. *Orange is the New Black*, a comedy-drama that premiered on Netflix in 2013, is set in a women’s correctional facility with a cast of predominantly women of color. *Grace and Frankie*, another Netflix

comedy, tells the story of two married women in their 70s who discover that their husbands have been romantically involved with each other for the past 20 years. All three of these shows, only a few examples of the types of shows with women that are being put out through online streaming websites, have brought in both commercial and critical acclaim. The rise of online television streaming services as a legitimate avenue for creating and distributing content has not only changed the television industry, but has also changed the type of content audiences are seeing.

### ***The Mindy Project: A New Kind of Feminist***

Mindy Kaling rose to fame through her work as an actor and writer on NBC's *The Office* (2005-2013). The only female full-time writer on the show, Kaling was working consistently with at least four men on a daily basis. During her time writing for and acting on *The Office*, Kaling also worked as a director and executive producer; her long residency on the show allowed her to try on all kinds of hats behind the scenes while maintaining her on-screen character of Kelly Kapoor. When Kaling left the show in the ninth season, she moved immediately on to write, produce, and star in a show she pitched called *The Mindy Project*.

The show revolves around the life of Mindy Lahiri, an obstetrician/gynecologist in New York City. Similarly to Kaling's real-life work situation as a writer for *The Office*, Mindy Lahiri is the only female doctor within her small practice. Lahiri is consistently written off in the show by her coworkers as shallow, materialistic, ditzy, and self-absorbed. Despite all of these criticisms, Mindy Lahiri still manages to be a likeable, compelling female character within a television comedy. Her blatant flaws make her all the more interesting as a character; additionally, the fact that her character completely embraces what would be "traditional" aspects of femininity (an interest in clothes and material possessions, pursuit of a husband and a family,

etc.) presents audiences with the idea that it is possible to be a strong female character and discuss feminist and controversial issues while simultaneously embracing femininity.

Looking specifically at the seventh episode of the first season, entitled “Teen Patient,” Mindy is approached by Sophia, her 15-year-old next-door neighbor. After Sophia’s initial introduction, Mindy arrives at her practice to find Sophia there, requesting birth control so that she can lose her virginity to her high school boyfriend Henry. Appalled at Sophia’s decision to take this step at such a young age, Mindy refuses to give her birth control until she meets Henry and approves of his character. Mindy shows up at Sophia’s school to meet Henry and question him about his relationship with Sophia, as well as his plans for the future. When Henry storms out after Mindy criticizes his disdain for a college education, Sophia insists on meeting Mindy’s boyfriend Josh to ask similarly probing questions about their relationship. This leads to an awkward discussion between Mindy and Josh about marriage and their future, which causes Mindy to reflect on what her own relationship means in the context of her life and her own career.

To make up with Sophia, Mindy shows up at Sophia’s volleyball practice to apologize for passing judgment on Sophia’s decisions and her relationship. Mindy gathers Sophia and her entire volleyball team to teach them about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, and begins passing out condoms before being reprimanded by the volleyball coach. As this storyline unfolds, Mindy Lahiri is established as a woman who cares about others, values higher education, and is comfortable discussing topics like sexually transmitted diseases with anyone in order to share information and educate others. She shows stubbornness in her refusal to change her mind about Henry, competence within her job as a gynecologist, and frustration towards the patriarchal system that reprimands her for sex education. Through this characterization, Mindy

Lahiri can be seen as many things: a competent if not excellent surgeon who takes her job very seriously, a caring friend/mentor concerned about making a big decision too hastily, as well as an gynecologist determined to prove her legitimacy in the field.

Towards the end of the episode, Sophia approaches Mindy as she leaves the school, telling her that she has decided to wait to lose her virginity to Henry. Mindy gives a sigh of relief, saying, “Are you serious? Oh, thank god. I mean, it was totally up to you, it was your decision, but you made the right choice.” In this scene, it is made clear that Mindy never meant to shame those who decide to have sex at a younger age, but instead to educate them on the possible repercussions of such a decision. Additionally, Mindy urges Sophia to consider not only the possible medical consequences of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but also of the possible emotional consequences. Mindy is not afraid to acknowledge the emotions usually tied to losing your virginity and having sex, and the show does not shy away at all from discussing such controversial topics.

*The Mindy Project*, particularly in this this episode, manages to cover important topics regarding sex education, female sexuality and pleasure, does all of this with a new type of female protagonist in television comedies. Mindy Lahiri is feminine, materialistic, self-absorbed, and self-indulgent. At the same time, Lahiri embraces her status as a doctor in order to be taken seriously by others and educate others on certain topics. The show has received a substantial amount of scrutiny and criticism in regards to the type of feminism it presents, or even if it counts as a feminist representation at all (Greco). Some critics have criticized Mindy Kaling for rarely acknowledging her status as a woman of color. However, it seems more that the fact that Kaling chooses not to make her race central to her character could also be an incredibly positive decision. By having Mindy Lahiri’s race become just one of many aspects of her personality and

identity, Kaling provides audiences with a representation of a strong, accomplished woman who also happens to be a woman of color. Kaling does not seem to want to encourage audiences to question her status as a woman of color, but instead to accept it as a more normal practice.

*The Mindy Project* and Mindy Kaling as an actress and comedian are the perfect examples of a step in the right direction towards achieving gender equality on television. Mindy Lahiri is unapologetically “girly” in her fashion tastes and her overt desire to find a partner in order to settle down and start a family. At the same time, however, she is constantly fighting to prove herself in a male-dominated office (much like Mary Richards in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), and is incredibly passionate about her job as a gynecologist. Regardless of her comically self-absorbed nature, she cares about others and wishes to use her status as a doctor to educate others, particularly young woman, on important issues. Mindy Kaling understands the platform she has to present and discuss these issues, as an actress, writer, and a woman of color. By using her sitcom to present audiences with a complex, new kind of strong woman, she teaches audiences through comedy and storytelling that there is more than way to be a strong independent woman. As actress Elisabeth Moss explains in America in Primetime’s documentary episode *The Independent Woman*, “It’s not about marriage or children or work, or what you’re going to do, or what you’re going to wear. It’s about being able to decide for yourself” (*The Independent Woman*).

At the end of the 2014-2015 season, Fox decided to cancel *The Mindy Project* after its third season. In May 2014, it was announced that *The Mindy Project* would be moving to Hulu permanently. Through this move, *The Mindy Project* joined the slew of television sitcoms with female protagonists streamed exclusively online, like Netflix’s *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (produced by Tina Fey) and *Grace and Frankie*. Online streaming services are becoming more

and more of a home to television comedies with strong women in starring roles. Perhaps the powers that be at Hulu saw the true importance of the storytelling in *The Mindy Project*, and thus chose to save it from going off the air. Through this move to Hulu, *The Mindy Project* has been able to continue to reach its substantial fanbase to bring about commentaries on feminism, gender equality, navigating relationships, and more.

### ***Parks and Recreation: Rangers Versus Goddesses Discussing Gender Equality***

In 2007, NBC approached *The Office* showrunner Greg Daniels about developing a spin-off for the show. Daniels recruited fellow *Office* writer Michael Schur to think up concepts for a new show based on characters from *The Office*. After some unsuccessful brainstorming, Daniels and Schur decided they wanted to pitch a stand-alone show about an optimistic bureaucrat in small-town government. From there, *Parks and Recreation* came about in 2009. Although not a spin-off of *The Office* in plotlines or characters, Daniels and Schur did bring along the mockumentary style of shooting, as well as encouraged improvisation among the actors along with the script. The show follows the adventures and challenges of Leslie Knope, played by Amy Poehler, a mid-level bureaucrat in the Parks and Recreation department of Pawnee, Indiana. Optimistic, driven, and enthusiastic, Leslie is constantly working to bring change and progress to her small town, and spends most episodes fighting against government red tape to create real change. The specifics of Leslie's character, as well as the groundbreaking nature of the show as a whole, are made clearer upon further analysis of specific episodes. Looking at the episode entitled "Pawnee Rangers," the fourth episode of the fourth season, a close textual analysis will better serve the evaluation of the show as a feminist representation of women in comedy, as well as a mechanism for continuing the fight for gender equality on television comedies.

*Parks and Recreation* is structured similarly to *The Office* in that it is an ensemble comedy; although it is led by Leslie Knope, there is a substantial cast of characters that contribute to the creation of the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. Leslie's best friend in the show is a local nurse named Ann Perkins, who also works part time as the public relations director of Pawnee's public health department. Ron Swanson, Leslie's supervisor, works as the Parks and Recreation director. Other characters within the office include Andy Dwyer, April Ludgate, Donna Meagle, Tom Haverford, Jerry Gergich, Ben Wyatt, and Chris Traeger. In "Pawnee Rangers," the episode opens with Ron Swanson leading a Boy Scouts-esque group of young boys called the Pawnee Rangers. Ron gives them a pep talk to prepare them for the impending "Wilderness Weekend," where he and the Rangers will escape civilization and technology to spend time in the wild. Ron explains to the camera that he has served as the troop leader for the Pawnee Rangers for the past three years, after which he pulls out the Pawnee Rangers handbook. Ron opens the book to show one single rule inside: "1. BE A MAN." As he explains with a frown, "I wrote the whole thing myself."

Immediately after this scene, the camera quickly cuts to Leslie Knope, leading a similar meeting: a group of young girls in what appear to be Girl Scout-type uniforms, all smiling expectantly. Leslie begins handing out badges for different accomplishments to each of the girls (badges such as "Most Community Service," "Best Penguin Blog Badge," and "Flyest Hairstyle" are included in the mix), as all of the girls clap and cheer for each other enthusiastically. Leslie explains to the camera, "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. We're called the Pawnee Goddesses, and we're freakin' awesome." With Ron and Leslie's contrasting explanations and

interactions with their respective group of kids, the show establishes Ron Swanson as not only the antithesis to Leslie's encouraging and optimistic nature, but also as an overtly gruff man interested in perpetuating traditionally masculine pastimes like hunting, camping, and fending for oneself in the wild. Conversely, Leslie's interactions with the Pawnee Goddesses showcase her nurturing tendencies. She is clearly incredibly proud of starting the Pawnee Goddesses as a response to sexist discrimination against young girls, and wants to use the group to educate young girls on issues of gender discrimination and societal gender expectations. Moreover, this conflict between Leslie and Ron in regards to their respective troops of Pawnee Goddesses and Pawnee Rangers also showcases another difference in their personalities: their individual attitudes towards competition. With their groups pitted against each other, Leslie excitedly jumps at the chance to prove herself as the superior group leader, especially as a woman against a man. Ron, on the other hand, seems to have no true concern with beating Leslie and the Pawnee Goddesses as the "better group". In the following scene, Leslie approaches Ron after their respective troop meetings:

LESLIE: Hey, Ron, whose club do you think is better, yours or mine? The answer is mine. Say mine is better.

RON: It's not a competition.

LESLIE: Oh, but it is. Your club made it a competition when they kept girls out.

RON: [...] I have no problem with strong women, Leslie.

This scene perfectly illustrates the rapport between Leslie and Ron, with Leslie consistently taking issue with gender expectations and the need for girls and women to fight for legitimacy and inclusion. Ron, on the other hand, has no interest in starting an argument or perpetuating a feeling of competition with Leslie, because even though he finds value and

enjoyment in traditionally masculine activities and practices, he takes no issue with strong women subverting gender expectations.

These themes, established by these opening scenes, are further expanded upon through the course of the episode. When the Rangers and Goddesses arrive in the woods for their camping excursions, Ron gives each Ranger a cardboard box and a canvas sheet in order to teach them creativity, resourcefulness, and survival skills. The scene then cuts to Leslie with the Pawnee Goddesses in a cabin right by the Rangers' campsite, where Leslie asks the girls to share what they've done with their "loosely structured craft time". Halfway through the episode, one boy named Darren from the Pawnee Rangers shows up at the Pawnee Goddess cabin, requesting to leave the Rangers and join the Goddesses. Leslie is giddy at the proof that her club is "better," but turns Darren away because Goddesses is a girls-only club. The Goddesses question Leslie's decision to send Darren away, given the fact that the Goddesses were founded on a desire for gender equality. While Leslie wants the Goddesses to celebrate their "victory" and superior status over the Rangers, the girls argue for gender equality that includes fair and equal treatment of everyone regardless of gender, arguing against the "separate but equal" ideology that Leslie seems to be pushing for. The episode ends with Leslie inducting all of the Pawnee Rangers into the Pawnee Goddesses troop, celebrating equality and female empowerment together. In order to make peace with Ron, Leslie recruits a group of kids, both girls and boys, interested solely in participating in a "hardcore outdoor club".

This episode shows a lot about how *Parks and Recreation* functions as a television show; through Leslie Knope's optimism, leadership, competitive and driven nature, and compassion, the show serves as a way to present and question important issues such as sexism and gender equality. *Parks and Recreation*, through its presentation of Leslie as a strong-willed female

character with a drive and desire to further the feminist agenda, is able to function as not only a television show, but also as a cultural forum for the exploration of potentially controversial topics (Hendershot). The rise of social media allows for audiences to discuss the types of issues presented on the show, creating incredibly important discourses in society today. *Parks and Recreation* exists as a show that works to present the feminist agenda through comedy. The character of Leslie Knope cares deeply about her job, much more so than any of her coworkers. She is constantly fighting to prove her competency and her legitimacy as a woman in municipal politics. She is strong, driven, determined, stubborn, competitive, caring, and absurdly hardworking. Leslie Knope is a complex, multi-dimensional female character that the show uses to address feminist issues through comedy.

### **A Cruder Kind of Feminism: Unruly Stoner Girls in *Broad City***

*Broad City* originally began as a webseries on YouTube in 2009, with Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson as the creators, writers, and stars. Having originally met through improv and sketch comedy classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade in New York City, Glazer and Jacobson decided to launch their own comedy series, and found that creating a webseries on YouTube was a great way to get started and experiment with form and content, and also a way to take advantage of creative freedom and opportunities to explore new and different topics that probably would not be acknowledged on a network or cable television show. As their viewership began to grow online and they increased their exposure through Facebook promotion, Amy Poehler took notice of Glazer and Jacobson and joined the show as an executive producer. After gathering a substantial viewership online, *Broad City* was picked up as a full-on television series by Comedy Central in January of 2014.

Centered around the lives of Glazer and Jacobson’s fictional counterparts, Ilana Wexler and Abbi Abrams, *Broad City* follows their adventures as best friends in New York City. The brief show description on the Comedy Central website reads: “Created by UCB alums Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, and produced by Amy Poehler, *Broad City* is an odd-couple comedy about two best friends navigating their 20s in New York City. Abbi and Ilana are broke and flawed, and they don’t shy away from the sticky situations NYC throws at them – they dive right into the muck. No matter how bad it gets, these broads are always down with whatever hits them.”<sup>4</sup> Based on this description alone, which is one way that Comedy Central chooses to market the show, it is clear that *Broad City*’s creative identity is very much tied to the fact that stars Glazer and Jacobson also created and frequently write for the show. Even in a brief description, *Broad City* prides itself in its unapologetically “dirty” or crude nature. Abbi and Ilana, as well as the show as a whole, “don’t shy away from the sticky situations,” but instead embrace them. Abbi and Ilana as characters in *Broad City* represent a lot about how far television has come, and the kinds of women that are on television that subvert expectations and break “rules”. As Anne Helen Petersen put it in her essay, “The Unruly Stoner Girl: What Makes *Broad City* So Radical,” she explains what makes this show so important:

[The *Broad City* protagonists are] just two perpetually broke Jewish NYC girls who hate their jobs and spend most of their time doing very little. But this is much more bro-comedy than *Jewish Girls*. All the gross stuff the bros of Comedy Central do on *The League* and *Workaholics*, Abbi and Ilana do worse: they stuff satchets of marijuana up their vaginas, they Skype while one of them is having sex, they strip down to their panties

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cc.com/shows/broad-city>.

to clean the house of a sexual fetishist in order to get enough money to go to a Lil' Wayne concert. They fantasize about what their love lives would be like if they were dogs; they eat entire pizzas and throw them up. They smoke a *ton* of weed. They're female stoners, and they're hilarious. That might sound benign – there's nothing more clichéd these days than the male 20-something stoner – but mapping those behaviors onto a female character automatically does something transgressive. They become “unruly women,” a term used to describe a whole cadre of women who've pushed boundaries of proper femininity.

As Petersen describes in this passage, Abbi and Ilana represent a new kind of “unruly woman”: a millennial unruly woman. These women do not give a second thought to whether or not their behavior is proper or correct or appropriate. They do whatever they feel like doing, with absolutely no regard to how others will perceive them. In creating these characters, Glazer and Jacobson took the hilariously irresponsible and idiotic antics of their male comedian counterparts, and transposed them onto female characters to create something revolutionary. Further analysis of these characters and the function of the show is best served by close textual analysis, looking at one episode in particular: the show's pilot, “What a Wonderful World.”

Looking first at the show's first episode after its move from YouTube to Comedy Central, “What a Wonderful World,” the episode opens with Jacobson's character Abbi Abrams analyzing a vibrator labeled “TUESDAY 7AM.” Immediately with that first establishing shot, Glazer and Jacobson assert *Broad City* as a show that unapologetically confronts taboo topics such as female pleasure and masturbation, through comedy. The shot then cuts quickly to Ilana Wexler, calling Abbi over video chat on a laptop, where Ilana shares her plans for the two of

them to attend a pop-up Lil' Wayne concert at the Bowery Ballroom. Throughout the conversation, Ilana is bouncing and dancing, randomly interjecting with things like "harder," in the middle of her sentences. After Abbi tells Ilana she would much rather just stay in, Ilana berates Abbi for being too stuck in a routine, joking, "I bet you schedule when you jack off." Abbi looks down at the vibrator in her lap and attempts an incredulous comeback before trailing off helplessly. Ilana then tilts the screen of her computer in the video chat, revealing that she is not sitting on her bed dancing or bouncing up and down as it seemed, but is in fact on top of another person, having sex while she video chats Abbi. To Abbi's horror, the shot then adjusts to show Ilana on top of a man named Lincoln, with a laptop on his belly while Ilana talks to Abbi. After Abbi confirms that Ilana and Lincoln are in fact having sex at that very moment, Abbi says, "Alright, let's just set some ground rules here for everybody involved. I don't want to see you have sex. Let's try and avoid that." Meanwhile, however, Ilana is completely unapologetic and unabashed, almost confused as to why she can't share this moment with her best friend. Not only is this scene incredibly funny and outrageous, it presents the audience with Ilana as a woman who is unapologetically comfortable with her own pleasure and her sex life, so much so that she wants to share it with her best friend and push what would be considered "conventional" or "appropriate" boundaries. The fact that Abbi needs to clarify to her best friend that she doesn't want to see that part of her life is funny, because one would think you shouldn't have to explain that to anyone. Sex and female pleasure, especially when talked about by women on television, are generally taboo topics that are avoided at all costs. Within the first two minutes of *Broad City*'s first episode, however, Glazer and Jacobson choose to establish their characters as comfortable with their sexuality in a way that is rarely seen on television. Ilana's character has

no interest or regard for what is the “right” or “proper” behavior; she goes about life making decisions solely based on what she feels like doing, or what would be the most fun.

After Abbi hangs up the video chat and Ilana shuts her laptop, Lincoln asks, “Ilana, what are we doing? Are we just having sex, hooking up? Are we dating? What is this?” To which Ilana responds immediately, “This is purely physical.” Lincoln simply stares at her, and says, “Why does this always happen to me?” before a quick cut to the show’s opening credits. By ending the “cold open”<sup>5</sup> with this conversation, Ilana’s character is further established as a woman with no desire for sentimental attachment in her sex life. Instead, she seems only interested in finding sexual pleasure and fulfillment without any emotional attachments or commitments. This conversation serves to subvert societal expectations and gender stereotypes of women as overly sentimental and emotional, especially when it comes to romantic relationships and sex. Ilana presents herself as a woman concerned mainly with fulfilling her sexual needs and avoiding emotional attachments; exhibiting behavior, in fact, that would seem most typical of male characters on television. With Lincoln asking to clarify the status of their relationship and seeming disappointed when Ilana denies any emotional ties, this scene seems to reverse the typical gender stereotypes that are generally seen on television, with women consistently seeking validation and clarification in their sexual and emotional relationships and men showing more emotional apathy or only showing interest in fulfilling their sexual needs.

The audience is then shown Ilana and Abbi at their respective jobs: Ilana works at a sales company and Abbi works as a custodian at a fitness center. Ilana and Abbi are not particularly attached to their jobs, and do not see them as careers that require any mental or emotional investment. The show presents these characters as women that are not particularly concerned

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<sup>5</sup> Also called a teaser, a cold open is a technique of jumping directly into a storyline at the beginning or opening of a show before the opening credits.

their jobs, instead showing their jobs as simply sources of income and the time in between goofing off and having fun. In describing the typical “strong, independent woman,” one would presumably describe a strong, driven, career woman unconcerned with love and marriage. Basically, one would most likely describe someone like Mary Richards from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or Murphy Brown from *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998). They were, after all, two of the most revolutionary feminist representations of women at their time. Abbi and Ilana, however, represent a new kind of strong and complex woman: they are women that are unconcerned with getting married and starting families. But they’re also completely unconcerned with their jobs; as two young women in New York City in their early to mid-twenties, they spend their time smoking marijuana, pestering their bosses for paychecks, and playing the drums on old buckets to make quick cash. These women represent a broader, newer type of female character, where they do what they want and don’t apologize for their behavior. Abbi and Ilana represent a step towards equality of representation on television—just as there are still more of the “conventionally feminist” strong women on television comedies like *Leslie Knope*, characters like Abbi and Ilana can exist within the same realm of television at the same time.

Women are complex individuals, with different actions, motivations, and goals—and deserve to be portrayed as such. Just as audiences see all sorts of men on television, *Broad City* and Abbi and Ilana show through their crude and unapologetic humor that there is no one correct way to represent women on television comedies. They prove to us once and for all that not only can women be funny, but they can also be funny in different and unexpected ways. The fact that *Broad City* began as a webseries, where Glazer and Jacobson had complete and total creative freedom to write the content they wanted, and broach previously unexplored subjects shows the influence of more available avenues to distribute television content. Glazer and Jacobson were

able to build a fanbase and establish respect as artists and creators before they moved to more mainstream television to reach wider audiences. The genius of *Broad City* is only the beginning of how television comedies need to proceed.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Within the world of television comedies, there have been irrefutable changes in the types of content distributed, the methods in which that content is distributed, the ways in which creators interact with audiences and choose to market their content, and the types of women portrayed within this content. Looking at the historical context of the state of women within television comedies, as well as the types of roles available and the degree of legitimacy that women were awarded within the field, television has come incredibly far in terms of what audiences are exposed to. Women are no longer confined to the oversimplified, one-dimensional characters of the 1940s and 1950s. They are no longer caricatures of real women, emphasized for their sexual viability, or for their roles as caretakers, wives, and mothers. Women on television are able to pursue whatever they want, whether that's a career, marriage, a family, all of the above, or none of the above. They are no longer concerned with their likeability; after years of being taught otherwise by television and society as a whole, these women are learning for themselves and teaching audiences that it is acceptable, and maybe even encouraged, to put yourself first. Actress Felicity Huffman said on the subject of women on television, "The women on television are now in pursuit of other things. And yes, it would be nice if people liked them, but it's not their ultimate goal" (*The Independent Woman*).

There have been a multitude of factors in the changes on television in regards to representations of women. The rise of social media as a forum for discussion and interaction with

creators and actors has influenced the way that television is created and produced; the relationship between creators and audiences has become much more of a give-and-take, a symbiotic relationship with open lines of communication and collaboration. Television networks and creators encourage active sharing and participation from audiences, allowing for feedback on the state of television and representations, as well as discussions about how certain shows choose to handle particular social and political topics. The concept of interactive television, particularly with the incorporation of on-screen hashtags to encourage discussion, has fundamentally changed the ways in which television shows choose to interact with audiences and market themselves.

The rise of online television streaming services as a more legitimate avenue for creating and distributing content has also changed the nature of the television-audience relationship. Because television is no longer dictated by specific people in power at television networks, there are fewer limitations on the type of content that can be produced, as well as the types of characters audiences see. This change in the nature of television has allowed for more television shows with strong female characters, where female actors and writers are granted more creative freedom to explore the topics that they want without having to answer to a higher power that wants to regulate feminist discussions or representations.

Despite all of this positive developments and the progress that has been made since the days of *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s, the progress cannot stop here. The postfeminist argument asserts that equality has, in fact, been achieved among the genders. The fact that there are more women in television comedies, of all different shapes and sizes, cultures and ethnicities, personalities and motivations, should be celebrated. However, shows like *The Mindy Project*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Broad City* only provide a framework from which society needs to

move forward and continue to fight for gender equality. These shows provide feminist spaces with strong female characters, all feminist in very different ways. They question societal gender expectations, explore their sexualities unapologetically, and pursue their passions and wants with gusto. Most importantly, they function as stepping-stones towards where society needs to be in the future. They represent fantastic steps in the right direction, but they in no way signify an end in the fight for gender equality. They are only the beginning.

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