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# "We are Bad Feminists!": Understanding Genre and Rhetoric in (Post)Feminist Dramedy Television

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# Thesis of
# Cailin Rolph

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# “WE ARE BAD FEMINISTS!”: UNDERSTANDING GENRE AND RHETORIC IN (POST)FEMINIST DRAMEDY TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

Centered on Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012) and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016) this thesis examines the use of genre conventions in dramedy to facilitate feminist critiques of postfeminist ideals. In conducting a case study of feminist rhetoric present in the shows *Girls* and *Fleabag*, this thesis addresses a gap in genre studies concerning the social and political potency of the dramedy genre. The thesis utilizes rhetorical critique, through generic methods, to identify the specific techniques used by Dunham and Waller-Bridge. Through its analyses, this thesis argues that dramedy can uniquely operate as a work of social action and critique, using conventions such as cringe aesthetics, excessive nudity, female intimacy, and more, to facilitate such goals. In this way the dramedy models the mutually advantageous relationship between genre and feminist rhetoric, carving out space in entertainment to explore the nuances of social action.

*Keywords: feminism, postfeminism, feminist rhetoric, dramedy, genre studies*

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*I love cats because I enjoy my home; and little by little, they become its visible soul.*

—Jean Cocteau

To my visible soul, Tony Boyfriend, this and most everything else, is for you.

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# INTRODUCTION

Born out of a media landscape that heavily influences society's perceptions of gender and sexuality, Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012) and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016) stand out for their unfiltered and unconventional portrayals of women in television. The shows are frequently lauded for their unflinching depictions of women in their 20s clumsily navigating life, relationships, and women's issues, while also reflecting the politics leading up to the #MeToo movement.[1] As a result, *Girls* and *Fleabag* have remained relevant shows to conversations regarding the need for feminism. Moreover, both shows are uniquely equipped to deliver feminist ideals and discourse through the dramedy genre. By investigating how these shows utilize genre conventions to facilitate feminist critiques, this thesis illuminates how dramedy supports feminist rhetoric towards social change.

Interested in the relationship between genre and political discourse, I specifically identify and examine *Girls* and *Fleabag* as examples of postfeminist dramedies. Defined as a hybrid genre with the conventions and expectations of both comedy and drama, the dramedy possesses at once comedy's often fruitful relationship with the political, and drama's ability to amplify the complexities and nuances of such themes (Mills et al., 2015). The combined use of comedic conventions like humor of discomfort and situational irony, paired with drama's complex romance narratives and intimate relations, position the dramedy to offer nuanced portrayals of discursive and political themes. Additionally, postfeminism is often depicted as the naïve and self-interested nature of young failing feminists who, due to their preoccupation with their individualism, knowingly fall short of feminist ideals. In this thesis, *Girls* and *Fleabag* serve as

[1] #MeToo was a social movement and awareness campaign against sexual violence, sexual harassment, and rape culture, that gained major traction in 2017 (note that this occurred after the series wrap on *Girls*). See Laurie Collier Hillstrom's (2018) book titled *The #MeToo Movement* for more information about the history that preceded and influenced the movement as well as the events that followed.

case studies for how dramedy uniquely critiques and portrays postfeminism. Utilizing generic criticism and feminist criticism, this thesis demonstrates the complex and advantageous relationship between dramedy and discursive movements (such as feminism).

In the popular culture zeitgeist of the last decade, *Girls* and *Fleabag* stand out as successful postfeminist dramedies. These shows serve as departures from traditional depictions of women in television because they challenge normative notions of gender, sexuality, the female body, etc. Both shows are often praised by audiences for the raw and realistic ways in which this subversion is accomplished (Weitz, 2016). Directed by Judd Apatow, *Girls* was produced for HBO. Starring American writer, director, actress, and producer Lena Dunham, the show focuses on Hannah (played by Dunham) and her three closest friends, Marnie (Allison Williams), Jessa (Jemima Kirke), and Shoshana (Zosia Mamet) all of whom are 20-something, college-educated, middle class, white women living in New York City.[2] Using the comedic conventions of the dramedy to persuasively alleviate the tensions of some of the heavier themes of drama such as sex, family, death etc. Dunham publicly situates the show as a loose autobiographical account of her youth. Faye Woods (2015) speaks directly to Dunham's position, noting the consistencies between her written characters and life through her

> focus on her elite upbringing within New York's art world and her precocious maturity; her mining of personal experience for stark comedic narratives; her generation's lack of privacy in life and online; and her freedom with her body onscreen serving as a pre-emptive strike against critique over her size. (Woods, 2015, p. 40)

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[2] *Girls* has received considerable notoriety through comparisons to its similarly structured predecessor, *Sex and The City* (1998-2004). See Faye Woods (2015), "Girls Talk: Authorship and Authenticity in the Reception of Lena Dunham's *Girls*."

These qualities contribute to the reception of *Girls* as "raw" and "realistic" and suggest that Dunham's depictions of her female characters' experiences with feminism are closely related to her own. In an article for the *Hollywood Reporter*, Lesley Goldberg (2012) writes that these similarities "reflect a frustrating time in [Dunham's] life when she shared the same frustrations." These "frustrations" for Dunham (and her character Hannah) include the struggle to establish herself financially and professionally while also trying to explore her femininity and sexuality—experiences that are relatable for many young adult women. As a result, the show is often commended for its authentic portrayal of female experiences.[3] In an article for *Glamour* magazine titled "Why Is Everyone Rewatching *Girls* Right Now?", Sam Reed (2023) states, "it was a mirror of my and my peers' messy inner lives," claiming the show's audience are 30-somethings "who were drawn to *Girls* then because they *were* Girls (in the ungendered sense of the term)" (n.p.). Reed's comment addresses the show's depiction of common young adulthood experiences for white, upper-middle class, 20-something year olds. *Girls* targets a primarily Western upper-middle class audience of young adult, white women that can relate to the show's specific depictions of postfeminist womanhood. The six seasons of the show encapsulate the main characters' young adult experiences with sex, drugs, and friendship, as they grow together out of their privileged naivety. With its dismal apartments and awkward sexual encounters, *Girls* depicts the nuances of young adult womanhood with specific emphasis on the unsavory aspects. Depicting these experiences within the genre of the dramedy, *Girls* is often compared to a host of postfeminist television shows from the era, including Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*.

[3] In a case study of young women ages 19 to 23 who watched the first three episodes of *Girls*, it was found that 75% of the women who took part in the study, ranging in ethnicity, races, and class, stated that the show reflected their own or their friends' experiences (Weitz, 2016).

Written and directed by Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* also attends to feminist criticisms of postfeminism through the conventions of dramedy. Waller-Bridge stars in the show as Fleabag, the flighty and fallible main character, positioning herself much like Dunham as the multi-talented writer, director, and lead actress in *Fleabag.* In grappling with the struggles of family and romance, Fleabag defines herself as a "greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist" (season 1, episode 1, 20:32-20:42). The audience follows Fleabag over the course of the two-season series as she clumsily navigates her strained relationship with her sister, mourning her deceased mother, and other aspects of young adulthood. The adapted television series has won a BAFTA, been nominated for several Emmys, and received nominations for a total of 11 awards (Van De Ven, 2021). Originally scripted and performed live as a one-woman stage play, the adapted series is widely regarded for its successful use of direct address, where Waller-Bridge's character speaks directly to the camera, complicating traditional ideas about audience (Beaumont, 2021). Through this specific convention, Waller-Bridge fosters a unique and intimate relationship between Fleabag's character and the audience as she narrates her awkward and uncomfortable experiences being a woman. Waller-Bridge's unique use of humor navigates situations involving sexual misconduct, death, familial trauma, and more, while commenting on her character's struggles with feminist responsibility. These elements of the show, in part, position *Fleabag* as a dramedy that explores postfeminist themes.

*Girls* and *Fleabag* were chosen as case studies for this thesis due to the public and scholarly attention they receive as feminist television shows. Both shows have received substantial criticism because they lack intersectionality, prioritize white middle-class voices, and depict a narrow-minded and naïve investment in feminism (Rogers, 2015; Simmons 2020), often

read as postfeminism. These criticisms highlight postfeminism's ineffectiveness in the show and invite feminist rhetoric that critiques these ideals. Further, both Dunham and Waller-Bridge are publicly considered to be and consider themselves to be feminists,[5] which informs how audiences understand the rhetorical purpose of their television shows. Both programs are explicit feminist commentaries meant to engage audiences with feminist and postfeminist discourse through dramedy.

In the following pages, I provide a review of literature organized into several subsections. The first subsection details a brief history of feminism and offers an account of feminist critiques of postfeminism. Here, I also provide a definition of feminist rhetoric and an explanation of its significance to conversations about feminist and postfeminist portrayals. The next subsection focuses on rhetorical genre studies, and scholarship on the expectations and conventions of dramedy as a genre. After the review of literature, the methods section of my thesis describes my methodology and the steps taken to complete this study to answer my research question about how dramedy, as a genre, is uniquely suited to deliver feminist rhetoric and critique postfeminist ideals. The analysis sections of this thesis include close readings of the selected television shows through the lenses of both generic and feminist criticism. The remaining thesis sections analyze techniques used by Dunham and Waller-Bridge, such as depictions of failing feminism, cringe aesthetics, and sororal relationships, to facilitate feminist rhetoric. The sections demonstrate how *Girls* and *Fleabag* capitalize on genre conventions to offer specific and persuasive critiques of women's issues. These sections address themes of female intimacy, nudity, gendered power dynamics, and more to illustrate the dramedy's ability to support and sustain feminist rhetoric.

[5] See Valentina I. Valentini's (2015) "Lena Dunham on Why She's an Imperfect Feminist" and the 2019 BBC article titled "*Fleabag* star speaks about her fear of being a bad feminists."

The conclusion to this thesis summarizes the results of my analyses as well as acknowledges potential areas for future scholarly inquiry.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review describes the relationship between rhetoric, specifically feminist rhetoric, and genre as accounted for through scholarship in composition and rhetoric, feminist rhetoric, genre studies and rhetorical genre studies. To accomplish this task, the review begins with a brief history of feminism, exploring its evolution in Western culture through the "wave" analogy followed by a description of postfeminism and its criticisms. Using genre as a focal point, the following sections explore comedy and drama separately, as well as how dramedy both reflects and shapes contemporary understandings of gender. Finally, this literature review illuminates the ways dramedy generates feminist rhetoric through genre conventions and political themes.

## Feminism & Postfeminism

To understand feminist rhetoric in dramedy television, this thesis traces a specific account of feminism that is relevant to discussions about Western dramedy television series.[4] The first wave of feminism, which took place in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, was primarily shaped by the voices of white, middle-class women, advocating for their right to vote (Muñoz, 2022). Day & Wray (2018), explain that feminism's first wave brought progress in securing gender equality within education, politics, and finances for white, middle-class women. While the first wave of feminism allows us to understand the foundation for the following feminist movements, the second wave, spanning most of the 60s and 70s, established the discursive voice of feminism through its challenging of unequitable systems in place at that time (Kent, 2022). This second wave interrogated gender relations with considerations for equality in

[4] For a broader historical account of feminism, see *The Routledge Global History of Feminism* (Smith & Robinson, 2022).

work, and in, education, as well as in personal and public life, and was defined by the sentiment that the systems in place perpetuated inequities.

The third wave, beginning in the 90s, aimed to redefine feminism and reclaim femininity (Day & Wray, 2018). To do this, third wavers moved to recoup the products of girlhood weaponized against them, such as miniskirts and lipstick. Third-wave feminists challenged expectations for femininity by embracing these and similar products, redefining what they represent. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2004), feminist writers and activists state, "Our Barbies had jobs and sex lives and complicated relationships with friends and family" (p. 60), acknowledging the complexities of being a woman committed to both femininity and feminism. While the second wave was motivated by feminists' memories of being a girl in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, the third wave included women who "grew up in a feminist influenced time" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004, p. 63). Due to this circumstance, third wave feminists were free to move away from the restrictions of the first two waves that aimed to reject femininity such as "wearing nail polish, pink uniforms, or crying" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004, p. 60). Baumgardner and Richards (2004) speak to this significant divergence between second and third wavers explaining, "young women are emphasizing our real personal lives in contrast to what some feminist foremothers anticipated their lives would – or should – be; that the way to equality was to reject Barbie and all forms of pink packaged femininity," (p. 61). Often called "lipstick feminism" or "grrl feminism," the third wave also supported women's interest in sexuality, working against gendered expectations about behaviors and dress.

Comparatively, *post*feminism is characterized as the rejection of second- and third-wave feminism. Postfeminism is often defined as the belief that equality has been achieved, and it is women's personal life choices that will reinforce societal changes (Genz & Brabon, 2017).

Postfeminists are typically young women who, having benefitted from earlier feminist movements, take an "individualistic" approach to *their* feminist performances (Genz & Brabon, 2017). In this way, postfeminists are often criticized for undermining the goals of the feminist movement by being preoccupied with lifestyle politics. In this context, lifestyle politics includes topics such as clothing choice and gender nonconformity as opposed to the public and political strife of previous feminist movements (Genz & Brabon, 2017). This iteration of feminism is considered by many feminists to be self-interested, moving away from the broader movement and toward an interest in personal life choices (Genz & Brabon, 2017; McRobbie, 2004; Patterson, 2012). Feminist scholar Angela McRobbie (2004) calls this "female individualization," referring to the postfeminist emphasis on choice as an individualistic concept. This kind of move, as Eleanor Patterson (2012) puts it, "depoliticizes" feminism and in over emphasizing the individual and "everyday politics," unnecessarily pulls attention away from the broader movement, stripping it of its political potency or legitimacy. These criticisms of postfeminism are central to the themes in the dramedies I analyze in that their depictions of young postfeminist characters failing to enact feminism critique some women's lived experiences.

Critiques of postfeminism inform the representations of individualization that are often the subject of postfeminist dramedies. Postfeminist portrayals in dramedy are frequently characterized by the female characters' failures to be effective feminists, due to their beliefs that they are above, or past the point, of being hindered by societal expectations. These depictions reify the postfeminist notion that women are now empowered to live their lives on their own terms without the need for overt feminist activism. These themes unfold in postfeminist dramedies as young women struggle to live up to the expectations of their feminist foremothers.

Deemed "failing feminists," these characters are often admonished by their peers for being too "selfish" to participate in "real" activism as they are preoccupied with their individual agency, empowerment, sexual liberation, etc. McRobbie (2004), refers to this as "take into account" feminism, where the efforts of previous feminists are recognized, accounted for, and then side-barred for self-expression and personal experience. From this perspective, women's interests in their individual experiences and their genuine attempts at feminist action are both depicted as narcissistic or self-interested. We see this often in *Fleabag* and *Girls* as the characters try to support their friends in their careers, love lives, and personal endeavors but inevitably fail due to being self-involved or narrow-minded. This is especially evident in popular postfeminist dramedy series where the goal is to both comment on the political position of young women and portray authentic female experiences.

## Feminist Rhetoric

This thesis contributes to the conversation regarding acknowledging women's rhetorics initiated by Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald's (2001) and continued more recently by Shari J. Stenberg and Charlotte Hogg's (2020) edited collections. This project utilizes these works to understand and define feminist rhetoric (its goals and qualities) alongside Jessica Enoch and Jordynn Jack's (2019) work to translate this framework to contemporary forms of feminist media. Extending rhetorical traditions of feminist rhetoric as outlined by these scholars, I identify and analyze the dramedy as a new mode for feminist rhetoric, situating *Girls* and *Fleabag* as examples of women's rhetoric. Utilizing their definitions of rhetoric outlined later in the literature review, this thesis investigates how *Girls* and *Fleabag* behave as departures from feminist rhetorical traditions that reimagine the place of feminism in contemporary politics and the relationship between feminism and identity. In studying the rhetoric of these dramedy shows,

I attend to qualities of feminist rhetoric, such as inclusive language, calls to action, personal narratives, and other subversive elements. By analyzing the feminist rhetoric in *Girls* and *Fleabag*, this project identifies characteristics of feminist rhetoric in television and how they are produced through dramedy.

Understanding feminist rhetoric is integral to tracing its presence in feminist television media. Ritchie and Ronald (2001), in their anthology *Available Means*, speak specifically to the way female rhetors redefine and subvert traditional rhetoric to advocate for feminist inclusion. Their work addresses how we might define women's rhetoric by looking for rhetorical patterns in unconventional places, such as journals and diaries. This view of feminist rhetoric as part of nontraditional documents, and including nontraditional methods, aids in my examination of the discursive themes present in *Girls* and *Fleabag.* Using these documents, authors included in Ritchie and Ronald's (2001) collection define feminist rhetoric as works that subvert traditional expectations to challenge gender inequality and promote social change. Examples of this kind of rhetoric are found through Ritchie and Ronald's (2001) inclusion of works that may defy traditional rhetoric by refusing to adhere to scholarly or professional expectations for writing and rhetoric. Ritchie and Ronald (2001) state,

> Some of the selections here may seem less eloquent. Others may seem to fail to take into account the sensibilities of an audience or readership because they blur traditional gender boundaries or raise issues of women's sexuality, or because the speaker is confrontational, angry, and resistant to decorum, institutions, and hegemonic discourse. (p. xviii).

This suggests that the qualities of these works that challenge traditional standards for scholarship are what set feminist rhetoric apart as being subversive. Here we see the patterns of feminist

rhetoric as the challenging of gender norms, radical language, and resisting of hegemonic boundaries.

These unique qualities of feminist rhetoric that subvert traditional expectation can be used as a framework for scholars to identify feminist rhetoric in contemporary media. The definitions provided by Ritchie and Ronald (2001), as well as Stenberg and Hogg (2020), guides how this thesis tracks rhetoric through the television series to identify them as works that amplify women's voices. Additionally, Ritchie and Ronald (2001) define feminist rhetoric as arising "not only from public, academic, or philosophical spaces but also the material reality of women's lives," (p. 382). This focus on materiality as the basis for feminist rhetoric is especially important for this thesis in that it is often in *Girls* and *Fleabag*'s depiction of how the female characters enact feminism through their individual lived realities, and their interactions with the "everyday politics" of gender, power, etc. that feminist rhetoric becomes traceable. Ritchie and Ronald's distinction can be seen in practice through the feminist rhetoric in the shows' treatments and depictions of their characters lived realities, their professional and social lives, as well as in their intimate conversations with friends and families, signifies the place, and use of, feminist rhetoric in the everyday lives of women.

Stenberg and Hogg's (2020) edited collection *Persuasive Acts*, which was inspired by Ritchie and Ronald's (2001) work, guides my analysis of how dramedy uses these goals and themes. Speaking to the current digital landscape's effect on feminist rhetoric, Stenberg and Hogg (2020) state "the digital affordances of the twenty-first century have also changed the rhetorical landscape of feminist work, altering the way feminists organize, communicate, and circulate knowledge." (p 108). One example of the need to study digital feminist rhetoric is Elizabeth Alsop's (2019) work on the "sororal series," which investigates feminist rhetoric

appearing in contemporary digital television. I use Alsop's scholarship to inform my own analysis of the social and political potency of feminist critique in dramedy television. Regarding *Girls* and *Fleabag* as examples of women's rhetoric, this perspective allows us to consider how television dramedy operates as a part of this landscape.

Viewing feminism through the lens of rhetorical studies encourages critical examination of language, media, and cultural norms that contribute to inequity. Enoch and Jack (2019) define the purpose of feminist rhetoric as a vehicle to envisage "new modes of being" (2019, p. 5), asking that we, conversely, view composition and rhetoric critically through the lens of feminist studies to queer our understanding of these fields and advocate for a stronger relationship between the two.[4] This understanding of feminist rhetoric is crucial for this project as my thesis considers genre, specifically dramedy, as a new mode through which feminist rhetoric might be delivered to challenge and subvert ideals. Enoch and Jack (2019) consider the implications of new opportunities for feminist research and scholarship within rhetorical studies, considering how such scholarship might challenge normative expectations and privileged perspectives. This persuasive communication of the goals of feminism assists in advocating for female voices in the field, as well as for more equitable and inclusive representation for *all* women, which I extend to television. Enoch and Jack's (2019) work also details rhetorically significant themes in feminist rhetoric, as well as the current desire for feminist rhetoric to move beyond the "able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual woman" (p. 9). This goal of intersectionality aids in articulating the critique of the postfeminist ideals present in these shows. With this in mind, feminist rhetoric functions to both challenge traditional perspectives, and envisage new ones. Together, these

[4] See Stacey Waite's (2015) definition of 'queering' from "Cultivating the Scavenger: A Queerer Feminist Future for Composition and Rhetoric" as "pushing against the normative conventions of gender and sexuality," (p. 54).

collections illustrate how disruption and the resulting rhetorics are critical markers of feminism and related discursive movements, informing the ways feminism and related ideologies are presented in media.

## Rhetorical Genre Studies and The Dramedy

Genre emerges through conventions and tropes founded in recurrent patterns of response to similar rhetorical situations. Carolyn Miller (1984), building on Lloyd Bitzer (1968), describes genre as "a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action" (p. 163). Genre, as a "rhetorical action," is derived from a pattern of response to similar situations and their contexts (Miller, 1984). Genre does more than simply categorize; it illustrates how communities use patterns of rhetoric to communicate or illicit specific responses. Miller (1984) places specific emphasis on moving beyond material and medium by considering rhetoric through action. Considering rhetoric through actions and the desired reactions of the audience allows us to consider how genre enacts or encourages social change. In this thesis, understanding genre as social action allows us to consider how television dramedy responds, in part, to specific needs for action regarding feminism and related social issues, such as gender equality, inclusivity, sexual liberation, etc.

The history of the term "genre" is extensive, dating back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and in film and television studies, what constitutes a genre differs from scholar to scholar. Edward Buscombe (2012), in his chapter on "The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema" identifies one popular conception of genre established by René Wellek and Austin Warren (1956) in their *Theory of Literature*, which identifies genre as a group of works based on "outer forms" and "inner" forms. For Buscombe (2012), "outer forms" refers to plot structure, what we can visually *see* on screen, such as setting, costume, use of tools (props) etc., while "inner forms," are defined

as “attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience” (p. 14). For television, these choices would be reflected in a show’s specific approach to style and delivery that reflects its overall message or goal. With this concept of genre, we can look to genre conventions and expectations to trace patterns across works. In this way, Buscombe (2012) provides a framework for *categorizing* genres and evaluating a piece through choices made concerning inner and outer forms.

While Buscombe’s (2012) definition of genre is useful for categorizing genres, some scholars view genre as more closely related to cultural and social context, moving beyond merely evaluating a text through form or structure. This thesis relies on Buscombe’s (2012) definition of genre as conventions and rhetoric used to achieve a certain *purpose*, and Miller’s (1984) understanding of genre as a pattern of rhetoric used to illicit specific actions and reactions. These concepts of genre are crucial for analyzing dramedy as a genre with a vested focus in social activism and critique.

Miller’s (1984) concept of genre as social action is important for considering feminist and postfeminist depictions, especially those in television, as cultural narratives that shape and are shaped by societal perceptions of gender. In considering genre as not only a set of conventions but also rhetorical choices that influence and shape ideologies, we can trace how feminist rhetoric is used to negotiate or critique discourses surrounding gender, femininity, etc. Miller et al. (2018) speaks to the intersection of genre and rhetoric, stating that genre is multidisciplinary in that

> genre criticism in film and television studies reminds us that the contexts for genre emergence and the material conditions that sustain genres and their relationships with their audiences can include economic and commercial considerations, technologies of

> production and dissemination, and sociopolitical events, as well as the influence of powerful individuals. (p. 272)

This means that genres arise from and are influenced by specific social and cultural contexts. For my project, this focus on the contextual and conditional elements influencing genres encourages consideration for contextual, political, and societal influences on portrayals of postfeminism. This thesis attends to how a television genre (particularly dramedy) can construct individual and collective feminist identities within a specific cultural context.

Understanding that genre shapes and reflects cultural narratives and contexts allows us to consider how the rhetorical choices of a television show can elicit a specific political response. Amy J. Devitt (2021), in her chapter "Genre for Social Action," adapts Miller's concept to conceptualize how genre might be used *for* rather than *as* social action, stating "Genres work *for* social action rather than only *as* social actions when people act through them deliberately, consciously, and toward desired social ends," (p. 22). Devitt (2021) theorizes that through mindfully selecting genres, *resisting* genres' performances of undesired perspectives, revising genres to perform *more* desired perspectives, and creating new genres, we can utilize genre for social action. Devitt (2021) uses Leighann Thone's study on the television show *Last week Tonight* as an example of genre prompting social action, pointing to how John Oliver used his show to encourage social action in his audience by asking them to use of political hashtags, write emails, make phone calls, and in some cases send money to support social and political change. Viewing genre as a set of rhetorical choices that speaks to larger cultural contexts and aims for desirable social outcomes can help us account for the social and political potency of shows like *Girls* and *Fleabag*.

The television dramedies selected for this thesis utilize genre conventions that produce and allow us to trace unique instances of feminist rhetoric. Genre conventions shape how themes are presented and how the specific goals for the genre are achieved. This allows us to consider how *Girls* and *Fleabag* advocate for social action through comedy and drama simultaneously. Glen Creeber's (2015) *The Television Genre Book* provides an in-depth history of major television genres, subgenres, and hybrid genres. Creeber's work defines dramedy as the hybrid genre of comedy and drama, or comedy drama, and thus, it possesses the blended characteristics of both genres. The ways comedy and drama have historically handled or depicted politics differ significantly, making the combined genre of dramedy uniquely equipped to address ideological issues. Comedy is sometimes perceived as low-stakes entertainment making it useful for negotiating the tensions of higher-stakes politics (King, 2002). Comedy can situate conversations and portrayals of political divergence between punchlines or moments of irony to serve as a salve for the pressures that come with such conversations. Drama, in contrast, commonly portrays political themes heavy-handedly (Havas and Sulimma, 2020). Controversial topics and conflicts that cause emotional turmoil are central to drama. Dramedy, in its negotiation of both comedic and dramatic conventions, is distinct in its treatment of political tensions.

In blending genres, dramedy is uniquely positioned to grapple with complex issues (such as feminism) persuasively. The dramedy is typically uninterested in highbrow or "'capital 'P' politics" and instead tends toward "everyday politics" (Havas and Sulimma, 2020, p. 79). Combining drama's handling of political themes and comedy's ability to provide low-stakes entertainment, dramedy can speak to political action while engaging audiences. The dramedy operates with the combined conventions of both genres, merging the conventions of comedy, such as humor of discomfort, and situational irony, with that of the drama genre, such as

emotionally driven relationships and conflict. This genre hybridity results in conventions, such as "cringe aesthetics" and playful critique that meet audience expectations by negotiating the tensions between comedy and drama while also exploring critical perspectives on postfeminism and feminism. Dramedy depictions, specifically those concerned with feminist or postfeminist ideals, demonstrate Miller's (1984) understanding of the relationships between social action, audience expectations, and genre. This thesis applies Miller's (1984) theory of genre as rhetorical patterns meant to illicit specific actions and reactions to the rhetorical choices made by Dunham and Waller-Bridge with the goal of influencing and shaping ideologies regarding feminism and postfeminism. With these goals in mind, we can trace how this theory of genre accounts for Dunham and Waller-Bridges' negotiation and critique of discourses surrounding gender. Applying Miller's (1984) and Devitt's (2021) theories of genre, allows us to understand how Dunham and Waller-Bridge use dramedy and its conventions to produce feminist rhetoric towards supporting social and political action.

Postfeminism is often critiqued through the comedic trope of "failing feminism." In many dramedies, "failing feminism," or the difficulties of enacting feminism while also meeting one's own personal needs and desires, is used to represent the pitfalls of postfeminist self-interest and contradiction. Faye Woods (2015), a film scholar who focuses on female representation in film and television, identifies these themes of postfeminism in *Girls,* specifically as they are depicted using "comedy of discomfort" (p. 42). The main characters' self-interest in *Girls* and *Fleabag* are made humorous using these and other dramedy conventions that satirize postfeminism. In a later passage, I expand upon Woods's analysis of comedy through discomfort by illustrating how these moments in the show (such as Dunham's nudity and female intimacy) use dramedy conventions dramedy to critique postfeminism.

Similarly, Havas and Sulimma (2020), scholars in culture studies and female representations, coin the term “cringe aesthetics” to describe another convention of dramedy. "Cringe aesthetics” are a convention of the dramedy that negotiate between the goals of both comedy and drama, with specific focus on identity politics (Havas & Sulimma, 2020). As such, “cringe aesthetics” speak to both the political and cultural action. To this point, Havas and Sulimma state, “character ‘complexity,’ embedded in ideological themes around identity, modifies the “comedy” in cringe and becomes associated with the more prestigious dramatic mode, this way governing the texts’ appeal to cultural value” (p. 77-78). With this commitment to identity politics, cringe aesthetics can act as a vehicle for critique and a call to social action. This thesis extends the works of Havas and Sulimma (2020) by elucidating the role of cringe aesthetics in dramedy as a means to participate in feminist discourse.

In identifying the intersections between feminism, rhetoric, and dramedy, this thesis turns to an analysis of *Girls* and *Fleabag* to illustrate how these relations might play out in a contemporary media form. The subversive nature of feminist rhetoric allows us to identify and trace its use in critiquing ideals and systems. Considering common feminist critiques of postfeminism, we can examine how feminist rhetoric is used to highlight, contemplate, and comment on these ideals. Through Dunham and Waller-Bridge’s portrayal of postfeminism in the form of the television dramedy, we can further consider how the relationship between rhetoric and genre supports feminist rhetoric and critiques of postfeminism.

# METHODS

## Rhetorical Criticism

The goal of this thesis is to consider how genre conventions support specific kinds of feminist rhetoric, as well as how this rhetoric may authenticate or validate women's experiences. For this project, I conducted a rhetorical analysis to answer the following research questions about postfeminist depictions in contemporary dramedy: how might genre, specifically dramedy, facilitate feminist rhetoric and critiques of postfeminist ideals? What does dramedy lend to feminist rhetoric, and vice versa? And how does this relationship relate to social action? To address these questions, my research examines feminist and postfeminist depictions within popular television dramedies, specifically those about young adult women. This project performs a rhetorical analysis of Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012–2017) and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016–2019), utilizing generic and ideological methods of criticism to read several scenes from the two series closely. Creating a case study of two televisions series required identifying scenes that used the conventions of the dramedy genre to present postfeminist rhetoric, or more specifically scenes that spoke directly to the characters' postfeminist qualities, including self-interest, sexual liberation, and expressed struggles or failures to meet feminist expectations.

This thesis applies theories of genre from Buscombe (2012), Miller (1984), and Devitt (2021) to perform a generic criticism of *Girls* and *Fleabag.* These works, as described in the literature review, provide a framework for categorizing genre both through the consistency of conventions, purpose, and form, and the rhetorical choices made to critique and encourage specific social and political actions among audiences. Reading *Girls* and *Fleabag* through these generic elements required analyzing Dunham and Waller-Bridge's rhetorical choices that assist in communicating their show's feminist critique. I identified scenes that exemplify the goals of dramedy, through the combined conventions of comedy and drama. This meant closely reading

scenes that include similar generic conventions and tone. By first watching each series with the express purpose of narrowing episodes that stood out as having feminist qualities or objectives, I was able to choose scenes that feature deliberate identifiable themes, such as power imbalances as well as sexual or sororal relationships, to communicate ideals related to postfeminism. Scenes that showcase excessive nudity and cringe aesthetics illustrate both Dunham and Waller - Bridge's commitments to using comedy as a vehicle for communicating and negotiating social and political themes. Additionally, this required choosing scenes that contained explicit references to feminism.

Because of the focus on politics in each dramedy series, I pair generic criticism with approaches from studies in feminist rhetoric to address their specific narratives of feminism and postfeminism. This thesis responds to the edited collections by Ritchie and Ronald (2001) and Stenberg and Hogg's (2020), and their calls for more diverse and subversive representation of feminist rhetoric. Additionally, this thesis uses Enoch and Jack's (2019) collection to translate these concepts of feminist rhetoric to contemporary media forms. Performing a feminist critique requires identifying what ideals of feminism the shows engage with. Performing close readings of *Girl*s and *Fleabag*, I examine feminist rhetoric in scenes that communicate a critique of characters' postfeminist qualities, by searching for scenes that explored themes of power dynamics, relationships, intimacy, and conflict. These are scenes that included a voiced or implied feminist objective that the characters were unable to accomplish due to their various shortcomings, such as their privilege or naivety. In reading these scenes, I analyzed multimodal rhetoric that was illustrative of feminist ideals and critical of postfeminism. Once I identified the scenes I would study and their rhetorical purpose, I was able to identify how genre conventions contributed to feminist rhetoric.

Performing close readings of both television programs also required choosing scenes that present common themes between the two shows to both provide a consistent argument regarding how feminist rhetoric can reliably operate within the dramedy genre and highlight the common conventions and tropes across both works. To speak specifically to how dramedy facilitates feminist critique, I chose scenes that use specific themes, tropes, and conventions, such as female intimacy, nudity, gendered power dynamics, etc., that are associated with postfeminist ideals. This decision allowed me to analyze how Dunham and Waller-Bridge made specific and similar choices to successfully accomplish the same goal independently. For *Girls* this meant choosing scenes that showcase Lena Dunham's character because Hannah is intended to embody postfeminism. For *Fleabag*, scenes with apparent calls to feminist rhetoric, such as the scenes that take place during feminist seminars and retreats, as well as those focused on sex, body politics, and sorority were analyzed. In my analysis, I highlight the use of feminist rhetoric, specifically in depicting failures to enact feminism, tumultuous relationships between women, women's bodies, and women's sexuality within these shows. By examining scenes that use genre conventions to produce feminist rhetoric, this project considers how the television dramedy might fit into feminist rhetorical traditions and serve as a mode of delivery for the social and political potency of feminist rhetoric.

## Limitations

There are practical limitations that affected this study. For example, with the time allotted to complete the study, my scope was limited to only two television shows, and further, to specific scenes that present common themes between the two shows. This case study also required consistent access to the technologies required to stream shows, limiting the television show options and amount of critical analysis possible within the timeframe. These restrictions

led to a narrowing of focus, binding this discussion to a few specific scenes and conversations, namely those focusing on depictions in dramedy of women's relationships with their bodies, sex, and each other, that exemplify postfeminism. In turn, this narrowed focus could result in a generalizing of certain concepts, that upon further analysis, may vary between genres, rhetorics, and cultures.

# ANALYSES

In considering *Girls* and *Fleabag* as postfeminist texts, the following sections perform close readings of selected scenes from each show that use feminist rhetoric to critique certain postfeminist ideals. Each section analyzes one or two scenes from each series (9 in total), with specific emphasis on a dramedy convention or theme relevant to the postfeminist portrayals. The scenes chosen from each show parallel one another in their construction, demonstrating common themes , such as failing feminism, sexual liberation, and empowerment, as well as conventions, like cringe aesthetics, that assist in the critique of postfeminism. The goal of this analysis is to highlight the effectiveness of feminist rhetoric and genre conventions *together* within dramedy.

## Failing Feminism and Postfeminist Criticisms

The following section analyzes scenes from both *Girls* and *Fleabag* that explore postfeminism through depictions of sexual misconduct and power imbalances. These scenes critique the postfeminist belief that gender parity has been achieved. In the face of gender disparities, the characters' postfeminist commitments to their personal agency and empowerment fail to shield them from the mistreatment they receive because of their marginal position of power as women. Using the trope of the failing feminist to highlight the characters' failures to successfully defend themselves in moments of clear subjugation, the shows produce feminist rhetoric that critique the ineffectiveness of postfeminism.

The leading characters in *Girls* and *Fleabag* are defined by their struggles to make ends meet and live up to certain expectations, though they ultimately can fall back on their privilege. Supported by their parents emotionally and financially, these female characters are free to pursue their personal life choices, like finding a dream job or choosing a sexual partner, with little risk. These attributes depict the freedoms of postfeminists that are often criticized by intersectional

feminists as well as criticize the postfeminist belief that all women now have the freedom to pursue independence and personal goals (Day &Wray, 2018). Comparatively, intersectional feminists acknowledge that women from diverse backgrounds may not experience these same privileges. Though able to recognize their privilege, the characters in *Girls* and *Fleabag* are consistently unable to move beyond their privilege of being white and middle-class, their actions often embodying postfeminist commentary on individual empowerment and the limitations associated with the privilege these characters experience.

In this way, these characters are not intended to be exemplar feminists, rather they are genuine representations of the privilege and freedom that feminists find to be emblematic of postfeminism. To this point, Anna Backman Rogers (2015), author and professor of feminist theory, states:

> *Girls* does not proffer positive role models for young women, for which it has been criticized, it (perhaps inadvertently) indicts a particular image of womanhood that serves pernicious structures at large and, moreover, painstakingly examines the mental and physical symptoms caused directly by this aspirational model of selfhood. (p. 46)

Setting *Girls* apart in this way highlights Dunham's intention to create fallible and relatable characters, rather than women to aspire to. Whether naïve or not, these experiences resonate with female audiences and their personal failures to meet feminist expectations.

Through the tropes and conventions of dramedy, *Girls* acknowledges the difficulties of enacting feminism in a purportedly postfeminist world. Examples of this acknowledgement can be observed in season one, episodes four and five of *Girls*. The first of the two scenes take place in episode four, after Hannah's new boss inappropriately "massages" her on the job. Hannah attempts to find solidarity with her female coworkers who claim that though their boss has

always touched them inappropriately, they never complain because, as one coworker states, "Look I know it's gross but he's really nice," to which the other adds "and he doesn't complain if I come in or if I don't and stuff," (season 1, episode 4, 6:37-6:48). This line suggests that while their boss's actions are inappropriate, these women feel as though they lack the power or the confidence to speak out against this objectification for fear of losing the workplace privileges they currently enjoy. The conversation quickly shifts toward Hannah's physical appearance, as her coworker comments on her patchy eyebrows and oily eyelids, proceeding to color in Hannah's eyebrows with a much too dark makeup pencil. Balancing the heavier themes of workplace harassment with Hannah's comical makeover and outlandish appearance, the dramedy of the scene criticizes postfeminism while also assuaging political tensions. While Hannah believes herself to be a feminist, her inability to find comradery in her discontent leads her to eventually disregard both the inappropriateness of the interaction and her obvious discomfort with it at first. In this moment, Hannah fails to enact her feminist responsibility. Instead of protecting herself from objectification and supporting other women in an obvious moment of subjugation, she allows herself to be convinced to disregard the behavior. By accepting their explanations and continuing to work for this man, Hannah effectively communicates that these women are correct in believing that the personal privileges they receive because of *not* speaking out against their boss outweigh the importance of all women feeling safe and comfortable in their workplace.

Dunham's portrayal of Hannah's constant misuse of feminism criticizes the character's postfeminist naivety. Utilizing humor to portray the high stakes discomfort in these scenes highlights the dramedy's effectiveness at facilitating criticism. In episode five, Hannah misguidedly attempts to reclaim her power by inviting her boss to have sex with her (see Figure

1). Instead, her boss is amused by the idea and brushes off the attempt as Hannah being immature. In a fit of frustration, Hannah responds with "I could sue you, Chastity, Lesley, me… whole office, class action," (season 1, episode 5, 14:39-14:49). Her boss responds by disregarding Hannah, accusing her of being incapable of starting a lawsuit, let alone getting to work on time. His inability to take her claims seriously eventually results in a loss for Hannah, who retreats with the final statement, "I am so glad you're not my dad or my boyfriend. And someday I'm going to write an essay about you, and I'm not going to change your name" (season 1, episode 5,15:38-15:49). This line reveals to the audience that both characters have known all along that his behavior is wrong and that her motives in calling attention to these actions were ultimately self-serving. Hannah later admits to Adam that the reason she attempted to have sex with her boss in the first place was, "for the story, or I don't know, to be an asshole" (season 1, episode 5, 20:40-20:43). Hannah's ridiculous attempt at asserting herself devolves into an embarrassing moment of rejection where her boss gaslights her into thinking that he has never intentionally been inappropriate. This scene demonstrates failing feminism in the face of gender inequality rhetorically to critique the postfeminist belief that gender equality has been achieved.

Using Hannah's situation to illustrate the ineffectiveness of postfeminism in a society that still endures sexual misconduct responds to a current need for feminist action, illustrating how the show produces feminist rhetoric in response. The show's feminist rhetoric is shaped through the combination of dramatic events with comedic dialogue. *Girls* uses dramedy and failing feminism to critique postfeminism through its rhetorical use of naïve and ignorant characters. In the show, Dunham allows humorous portrayals to be representative of the pitfalls of postfeminism; however, these aspects of the show are also depicted as awkward or embarrassing.

Similarly, in *Fleabag*, Waller-Bridge critiques postfeminism through scenes that explore sexual misconduct and gendered power imbalances. For example, in season one, episode one, Fleabag's interview with a bank manager about her request to take out a small business loan critiques the postfeminist belief that the fight for equality is no longer necessary given that gender parity has been achieved. The bank manager mentions that they have not had the opportunity to work with many female business owners since the "sexual harassment case," similar to that address in season 1, episode 5, of *Girls*. Just after this, sweaty and out of breath from having run from the train station to make her appointment on time, Fleabag attempts to take her sweater off. Unaware that she is not wearing anything beneath her sweater, she flashes her lacy black bra to both the audience and the manager (see Figure 2). The bank manager responds disapprovingly, "that kind of thing won't get you very far here anymore," prompting Fleabag's rebuttal of "No, I'm not trying to shag you. Look at yourself!" (season 1, episode 1, 7:25 – 8:23). The implications of sexual advancement and the bank manager's position of power captures women's experiences of being sexualized and marginalized by men in power. Doing so allows this scene to comment on the postfeminist implications of the conversation between *Fleabag* and the bank manager as she challenges the obvious gender disparity from her marginalized position as a woman, specifically one in need of financial assistance.

Behaving in many ways as a parallel to episodes four and five from *Girls,* Waller-Bridge uses this scene to demonstrate a need for feminism in a world where there remains a clear power imbalance against young women. Both scenes include a man accusing a younger woman of assumed sexual misconduct, especially from a position of financial power in a professional setting, serving as an obvious example of inequality. These men hold significant power over the situation, politically, economically, emotionally, and even psychologically, in that they control

how Hannah and/or Fleabag may be perceived as hysterical and sexually motivated. For Fleabag, in offending the man's ego with her statement about not wanting to "shag him," she challenges the power dynamics from her marginal position. The man's assumption that Fleabag, an attractive young woman, would use her body to gain power suggests that she would be unable, or ill-equipped, to successfully acquire what she needs in a non-sexual manner. Fleabag's "wardrobe malfunction" [7] aside, the man's statement that he found her application "funny," to which Fleabag comments, "that wasn't my intention," again suggests his inability to take her or her business, seriously. This scene displays the disadvantage *Fleabag* experiences as a young woman in a place she feels that she does not belong. In portraying an experience where a young woman is not only physically objectified but diminished both for her career efforts and her intelligence, *Fleabag* creates a scene that speaks to women's struggles to exist in a man's world.

This scene also highlights a moment of female subjugation and objectification as the Bank Manager decides how and why Fleabag may assert her femininity and sexuality for personal gain. The scene focuses on the social and political aspects of the characters' interaction, relying on the cringe qualities of the moment, such as Fleabag's accidental flashing, her visible nervousness, and her comedic timing in the delivery of her often inappropriate responses, to illustrate her uncomfortable powerlessness. Fleabag stumbles through the encounter humorously juxtaposed by the bank manager's unimpressed and emotionally withdrawn demeanor. Set in an aesthetically drab bank with no other characters except the two, the scene relies on the pair's physical and verbal interaction to communicate both the comedic misunderstanding as well as the drama of the power imbalance that suggests a clear inequity between the two. Waller-Bridge

[7] The phrase "wardrobe malfunction" was first used by Justin Timberlake to apologize for the incidence of Janet Jackson's nudity during the 2004 Super Bowl half-time show. The phrase is linked to a history of policing women's bodies through clothing and fashion. See Barbara Brownie's (2016) *Acts of Undressing: politics, eroticism, and discarded clothing* for more information.

uses the combined rhetorical power of comedy and drama to make Fleabag's embarrassment relatable and critical of postfeminism. In doing so, Waller-Bridge uses the Fleabag character as a mouthpiece that cheekily advocates for feminism where a clear gender disparity continues to exist.

The postfeminist implications of this scene are demonstrated by its focus on Fleabag's use of her body as well as her inability to gracefully navigate this moment of gender inequality. Waller-Bridge's emphasis on Fleabag's crudeness and unprofessionalism, such as using the word "shag" in a professional interview, is comedic. Instead of seeing the previous sexual harassment case as a warning, Fleabag sees this interview as a moment to capitalize on, where she may benefit from the bank's need to reestablish its validity with female clientele. This is apparent in Fleabag's willingness to move forward with the bank despite knowing about the sexual harassment as well as in her flippant mention of the case as though it were unimportant to her or her desire to do business. While her behavior is that of a "bad" feminist, Fleabag is desperate enough to take advantage of the bank's desire to use her business to rectify their indiscretion. Her preoccupation with personal gain, as well as her firm rejection of the possible advances of the man, comment on women's ability to use their sexuality for personal gain. These are common critiques of postfeminist women's desire to choose how to assert their sexuality and their bodies (Rogers, 2015). Thus, *Fleabag* capitalizes on the conventions of comedy to illustrate a dramatic but accurate performance of postfeminist ideals.

Both shows' ability to depict these moments of failing feminism as ridiculous and comical satirizes feminist critiques of postfeminism through dramedy. Due to their privileged positions, the characters in *Girls* and *Fleabag* have a difficult time reconciling their postfeminist freedom with feminist expectations. Rogers (2015) refers to this depiction as the "can-do girl,"

characterized by the ability to "have it all" while also being naively confident in their right to a successful future. These characters, though fixated on achieving success, find that the "horizon of expectations this sets up rests upon a precarious set of severely constrained and controlling choices" (Rogers, 2015, p. 47). This scenario inevitably leads the characters to choose between making the "correct" feminist decision or making the decision they *want* to make, the two being mutually exclusively at times.

Dramedy frames these critiques as humorous rather than severe, due to its unique ability to adopt tropes from comedy and drama simultaneously. In committing to their self-fulfillment, being controlled, or constrained by expectations they are incapable of meeting, the shows' main characters consistently fall short of feminist expectations. Portraying this as a comical naïveté enables these depictions to remain relatable rather than anti-feminist. For example, in *Fleabag* season one, episode one, during a feminist seminar[6], the spokeswoman addresses the audience by asking "Please raise your hands if you would trade five years of your life… for the so-called 'perfect body'" (season 1, episode 1, 14:17– 14:48). Both Fleabag and her sister Claire respond by instinctively raising their hands before realizing they are the only ones to have done so. After retreating deeper into her seat, Fleabag embarrassingly whispers "we are *bad* feminists!" The effect of portraying postfeminists in this way results in a relatable depiction of failure, one that resonates with female audiences who have experienced these seemingly contradictory postfeminist ideals such as the illusion of bodily autonomy and "choice" where there remains a "right" choice that "good" feminists are expected to choose. Thus, the dramedy uses its failing feminist characters to critique the high demands feminism places on women, such as loving

[6] The title of the seminar "Women Speak: Openings Women's Mouths Since 1988" is intended to be humorous in ironically juxtaposing the notion that feminism empowers women's voices with what sounds like a violation of their bodily autonomy.

one's body or feeling consistently empowered, while acknowledging the complexities and frustrations of real-world, lived experiences.

In *Girls*, these choices are most often highlighted in the female characters' relationships with men and sex. The plots of all four of the main female characters are tied closely to their feelings for the men in their lives. Despite believing in their own sexual liberation, the girls often experience emotional whiplash from their relationships because, to remain liberated and independent, they feel they must reject love or rectify the lack of freedom they experience because of *being* in love. For example, Hannah remains co-dependent with Adam for much of the series, Marnie is consistently dissatisfied on her own, needing a male partner to validate her success and happiness, Shoshana experiences extreme embarrassment at the concept of her virginity, feeling incomplete without sexual liberation, while Jessa often rejects and sabotages stability and commitment to protect herself from painful relationships. These characters' actions align with postfeminist ideals that create negative situations and relationships in which the characters feel inadequate. Additionally, the characters have access to reproductive healthcare, such as birth control and safe abortions, which supports their sexual freedom on multiple occasions throughout the show. These situations, which demonstrate the girls' privilege and naivety, exemplify feminist rhetoric by critiquing the postfeminist belief that feminism is unnecessary because gender equality has been achieved. The ongoing need to assert reproductive rights, especially those supporting these characters' sexual autonomy, underscores this criticism.

Dunham and Waller-Bridge's exaggerated performances of failed feminism create a playful critique of self-interested activism. Through these rhetorical choices, Dunham and Waller-Bridge present feminist critiques of postfeminist ideals, such as a preoccupation with individuality and self-interested activism, that speak to social issues beyond the show. Applying

comedy to scenes that rely on dramatic scenarios, such as complicated romances and challenging social issues, dramedy enables Dunham and Waller-Bridge to explore the nuances of postfeminism, which include contradictory notions of choice, ineffective enactments of agency, and misplaced proclamations of empowerment. In this way, the shows' female characters as examples of failing or "bad" feminists demonstrate the use of dramedy rhetorically to critique postfeminism.

Dunham and Waller-Bridge ground their portrayals of women in conversations of postfeminism by emphasizing their relationships with their sense of self-esteem, romance, dating, etc. These characters aim to feel empowered and secure; however, they live in a society where their gender is emphasized by the world around them. These characters are often confronted with misogyny in professional settings and their relationships with men. Depicting this imbalance reveals a need for feminism in a society where women still fall victim to sexual misconduct. In this way, *Girls* and *Fleabag* utilize feminist rhetoric to call attention to the futility and ineffectiveness of the characters' postfeminist actions in moments that require *feminist* action. Dunham and Waller-Bridge use dramedy to depict characters as comical but relatable failing feminists attempting to navigate dramatic moments of feminism. Depicting feminism in these shows as a difficult to reach goal for privileged white woman makes these characters, in part, representative of feminist critiques of the postfeminist preoccupation with the self and individuality in the face of gender inequality. Thus, *Girls* and *Fleabag* use the conventions of dramedy to emphasize feminist critiques through these portrayals.

Cringe Aesthetics in *Girls* and *Fleabag*

*Girls* and *Fleabag* use genre conventions to depict young women who derail audiences' expectations and, through their discursive narratives, critique postfeminism. These shows use

dramedy to depict women who repeatedly behave in "taboo" or unsavory ways, communicating postfeminist ideals and their political relevance. Acknowledging Havas and Sulimma's (2020) "cringe aesthetics" as a convention of dramedy, I examine how Dunham and Waller-Bridge use this convention to situate these scenes in the persuasive middle ground between the comedic and dramatic, and in doing so, enable this critique to encourage social action without airing on the side of overt criticism. Allowing humor and discomfort to characterize postfeminist experiences in their shows, Dunham and Waller-Bridge persuasively utilize dramedy to contribute to feminist rhetoric through its critique of postfeminist ideals.

Postfeminist dramedies use comedic genre conventions like "cringe aesthetics," excessive nudity, and discomfort to portray female characters' experiences with womanhood and feminism in ways that are rhetorically persuasive. In *Girls* and *Fleabag*, the following scenes utilize these conventions specifically with depictions of sex and the female body. In *Girls*, it is often Dunham that performs sexually explicit behaviors that produce cringe aesthetics by choosing to act in the nude for extended periods of time. In many of these scenes, the female body, awkward and fumbling in its nakedness, denies overt sexualization. Havas and Sulimma (2020) explain, "Instead of stylized depictions of sexual acts and erotic desirability, portrayals of female characters' sex lives are frequently steeped in cringe aesthetics due to their particular types of (hetero-)sexual practices, explicitness, and unsuccessful communications with sexual partners," (p. 84). Similarly, Waller-Bridge also uses cringe aesthetics to highlight the discursive qualities of unromantic sex. Making witty remarks to the audience while her sexual partners remain unaware of her discomfort communicates the humor in the cringe aesthetics. Hannah and Fleabag's desires for casual, "real" sex demonstrate their commitment to freedom of choice and

agency, concepts that are emblematic of postfeminism in the characters' misapplication of them. These acts of discursive nudity foster feminist and postfeminist rhetoric in *Girls*.

For example, in season six, episode one of *Girls,* Hannah has an awkward one-night stand with her surf instructor that demonstrates cringe as a dramedy convention. The drunken pair awkwardly struggles to find a comfortable position for intercourse with Paul-Louis, the surf instructor, flipping Hannah's exposed body around on the bottom bunk of a twin-sized bed while she expresses obvious discomfort. Hannah states more than once that she is uncomfortable first stating, "I don't think my body can necessarily do that," (season 6, episode 1, 23:54) and then "I'm not really flexible in that way," (season 6, episode 1, 23:58). The following morning a naked Hannah leans over the side of the bed, vomits on the floor, and then haphazardly attempts to clean up before trying to leave.

The conventions of the dramedy, specifically humor of discomfort, highlight the awkward qualities of Hannah's interaction, such as becoming sick over the side of a stranger's bed from consuming copious amounts of alcohol. This scene shows how *Girls* uses "cringe aesthetics" to temper tensions between drama and comedy in that Dunham's awkward performance is used to communicate feminist rhetoric regarding sex, and sexual liberation. In communicating her physical limitations Hannah subverts normative perceptions of women by accepting her body regardless of Paul-Louis's expectations.[8] The show's portrayal of a young woman aiming to be comfortable with both her naked body and expressing her sexual needs illustrates how dramedy critiques portrayals of postfeminist women. Where feminism often asks that women move away from sexualizing and commodifying their bodies, postfeminism

[8] In season four, episode 6, Hannah discovers she is pregnant with Paul-Louis's child. Despite the opinions of her family and friends, Hannah decides to keep the child, exercising her power of choice. See Mary Harrod's (2018) chapter "The Myth of Lena Dunham" in *Women Do Genre in Film and Television* for more on how this choice is indicative of postfeminist themes.

emphasizes the emancipation of women's bodies, and the freedom to choose how one uses their body (Rogers, 2015). The dramedy allows Hannah's commitment to her autonomy and sexual liberation to serve as feminist rhetoric in a scene that otherwise seems like comedic relief. Relying on cringe aesthetic to do this, Dunham is enabled to use Hannah's awkward sexual encounter to argue for non-stylized portrayals of sex. Here, Dunham uses the comical awkwardness of the sexual encounter as a critique rather than romanticizing the event. Leaving out background music and taking place in a dreary dorm-style room, the scene's cringe aesthetics comment on the concept of romantic and effortless sex, challenging these notions through the uncomfortable encounter.

Additionally, the scene acknowledges Hannah's desire to be a sexually independent and adventurous woman. Hannah vocalizes her bodily and sexual preferences admitting, "nope, I can't do this. I'm sorry, I cannot actually," (season 6, episode 1, 24:09). In voicing this concern and halting the interaction when she is not appeased, Hannah's behavior deviates from the expectation of women in sexual scenarios, attempting to enact her own sexual freedom. Watching the two drunkenly fumble communicates to audiences that this scene *should* be embarrassing for Hannah. However, her personal commitment to experiencing sexual liberation is indicative of the discursive actions consistent with feminist rhetoric and its relationship with contemporary politics. The cringe aesthetics here authenticate the sexual experience by underscoring both the reality of the encounter and Hannah's postfeminist desire to own her sexuality.

In addition to highlighting Hannah's commitment to her physical autonomy, this scene emphasizes women's agency. The dialogue in this scene highlights Hannah's commitment to sticking up for herself in sexual scenarios which aligns with postfeminist values as well as

challenges the expectation that women should be willing to compromise sexually. However, the frequency of Hannah's awkward and unsatisfactory sexual experiences emphasizes the downside to her desperate enforcement of sexual liberation. Hannah's misuse of sexual liberation as a selfish desire for adventure, rather than a feminist goal to challenge normative sexual standards on women, reveals postfeminism's shallow encouragement of individual activism. We see this as a recurring theme throughout *Girls* as Hannah and her friends frequently find themselves in unconventional sexual relationships, while often not benefiting from the sexual liberation they practice. The sex scenes between Hannah and her on-again, off-again boyfriend Adam aim to communicate this point. The two often meet in his dingy, and dimly lit apartment, where he takes a dominant role in the intercourse (see Figure 3). While these scenes communicate awkwardness and discomfort, both in set design and in Hannah's reactions, the character claims to be satisfied and feel empowered by these interactions. This theme throughout *Girls* communicates the reality behind the ineffectiveness of postfeminism in that while aiming to be empowered, these characters often struggle to reap the benefits of empowerment. While these scenes display genuine attempts to exercise their autonomy and agency, these scenes instead often emphasize the characters' misuse of, and frustrations towards, feminism.

While Dunham uses scenes that include awkward sex and excessive nudity to perform cringe aesthetics, Waller-Bridge similarly utilizes cringe aesthetics to emphasize her dissatisfaction or disinterest with her sexual partners and her failure to feel emancipated by her sexual freedom, Fleabag's postfeminist desire for casual and unemotional sex is often depicted as uninspiring and predictable as she comedically narrates her experiences. Using the aside to highlight her dissatisfaction, Waller-Bridge's creative use of cringe aesthetics allows these sex scenes to come across as awkward and unpleasant rather than as romantic or passionate as her

male partners would believe. Watching Fleabag's underwhelming sexual encounters play out encourages audiences to contemplate the efficacy of postfeminism, especially when enacted purely through sexual adventure. For example, in season 1, episode 3, Fleabag desperately invites a man she finds unattractive (played by Jamie Demetriou) to her sister's 30th birthday party to avoid going alone. After trying to leave without him, the scene features an abrupt cut to the two having sex against the food display case in the middle of her café. She grimaces at the audience as the man loudly describes the events of their encounter as they happen. Fleabag winces, stating to the camera "surprisingly boney… it's like having sex with a protractor" (season 1, episode 3, 22:42). The man, although oblivious of her aside, accuses Fleabag of having "faked" her pleasure before the scene quickly dissolves into a chaos as the man threatens to kill her guinea pig thinking it is a rat.

This scene uses cringe aesthetics to ease the tensions of the heavier themes of undesirable sex and Fleabag's desire to please men. This depiction of sex as unwanted and unsatisfying comments on the negative implications of "empowerment" and "liberation" for Fleabag. Aiming to exercise her right to sexual adventure, Fleabag is often left talking to the camera throughout the entire interaction, seeming to feel little satisfaction. The elements of these scenes, such as Fleabag's flat delivery of her asides and the situational irony of her sexual partners' obliviousness, are intended to be humorous. We learn this more explicitly as Fleabag privately reveals her inability to take these encounters seriously. For example, in season 1, episode (2) as Fleabag comically predicts exactly how her current sexual encounter will unfold, stating "Oh. So reliable. Utterly inaccessible, relentlessly profound. All he wants is to get you in the bath and ask questions like…," with an abrupt cut to the two in the bath as the stranger asks "what are you afraid of" (11: 51-12:01). Narrating the experience, Fleabag highlights how uninteresting and

unfulfilling these experiences have become for her. Thus, capitalizing on humor's ability to make awkward sexual encounters engaging, the dramedy uses feminist rhetoric regarding choice, sexual liberation, and the male gaze[5] to comment on Fleabag's desire to please herself and her ineffective choices.

*Girls* and *Fleabag* use cringe aesthetics to bring relatability to their performances of postfeminism, and in doing so, exemplify how dramedy can support discursive themes. The female characters' attempts at remaining unabashed about their sexual freedom while experiencing what audiences perceive to be psychologically, emotionally, or physically unhealthy, communicates the struggle of being a sexually liberated woman. Rogers (2015) speaks to this in reference to Hannah and Adam's sexual scenarios specifically stating, "one might assume that this scenario represents a forced and rather horrid sexual encounter; yet the female protagonist has *chosen* this for herself" (p. 45). The representation of the female characters as dedicated to their own individual choice and personal empowerment without reference to the broader power imbalances that lead to this need for agency, situates these women as postfeminists. While seeking this liberation is often to their own detriment, the portrayal of the women in these shows as preoccupied with emancipating themselves sexually supports a postfeminist, rather than feminist, reading of their actions. The dramedy's ability to support criticisms of these women and their experiences supports the claim that, as a genre, the dramedy is uniquely suited to present discursive movements. Utilizing the combined affordances of comedy and drama allows the dramedy to depict the contradictions and pitfalls of postfeminism.

*Girls* and *Fleabag* both use cringe aesthetics, specifically those illustrating gendered power imbalances, to produce feminist rhetoric that highlights postfeminist's inadequate and

[5] First defined by Laura Mulvey (1988), the "male gaze" refers to visual art and film production choices that cater to the perspective of a masculine, heterosexual perspective that objectifies women sexually.

contradictory nature. Dunham and Waller-Bridge utilize cringe aesthetics to illustrate their characters' clumsy navigation of feminism. In this way, postfeminism is depicted through the characters' genuine attempts, and inevitable failures, to meet the expectations of feminism. In using the comedic conventions of cringe to portray this failure, Dunham and Waller-Bridge use feminist rhetoric to argue for the relatability of their postfeminist failures. By struggling to achieve the feminist goals of subverting power dynamics, achieving sexual liberation and agency, and challenging hegemonic gender ideals, the characterizations of Hannah and Fleabag critique postfeminism. Using dramedy, Dunham and Waller-Bridge situate their criticism in the subtle middle ground between comedic and critical, allowing these depictions to appear authentic to audiences.

## Female Relationships in the Postfeminist Dramedy

Developing women's relationships through dramedy shows how the genre's conventions can portray complex feminist bonds between sisters and friends through comical relatability and dramatic intensity. Through generic tension (between the goals of comedy and drama), dramedy offers depictions of female relationships that support the idea of contradictory and complex bonds. The relationships in *Girls* and *Fleabag* behave differently from the depictions of female friendships in television series preceding them, like *Sex and The City* (1998) or *Friends* (1994) that portray similar friendships as largely sentimental and emotional.

*Girls* and *Fleabag* depict female relationships that express feminist rhetoric commenting on postfeminism and female friendships. Elizabeth Alsop (2019) uses the concept of "sisterhood rhetoric" to define television series that highlight the "politics of … distinctly aspirational depictions of sorority" (p. 1027). Here, Alsop refers to depictions of female relationships that are committed to allyship and solidarity, defining the "sororal series" as one that is focused "on

stories and situations in which women show up for each other regardless of whether they like each other, and often, despite the fact that they don't" (p. 1028). While *Girls* and *Fleabag* do not model the "sororal series," due to their characters' markedly postfeminist disinterest in community, they do utilize sisterhood rhetoric and feminist rhetoric to support their depictions of relationships between women as vulnerable, conflicted, and unconventional. These representations of womanhood are grounded in feminism in that they are centered around themes of female intimacy, autonomy, challenging conventions, and empowerment, and yet they are also shaped by the characters' codependency and postfeminist concern for their individual agency and independence.

In both shows, dramedy facilitates these depictions of complex female relationships using the combined effects of comedy and drama to underscore the contradictory commitment to both sorority and the self. In the following passages, I explore how *Girls* and *Fleabag* use feminist and sororal rhetoric to depict female relationships influenced by postfeminist preoccupations. Using the hybrid structure of dramedy, *Girls* and *Fleabag* develop characters' complexity by highlighting their relationships pitfalls due to their commitments to postfeminism. By including scenes that highlight intense conflict between female characters as well as a humor, sensitivity, and communication, dramedy supports the development of nuanced plots and relationships between characters. These representations are postfeminist in that these relationships between sisters and friends include both sentimentality and toxicity. These women have emotional bonds with each other, exhibited through their loyalty and commitment to one another; however, they are also often a point of contention, generating conflict between self-interest or selfishness and sorority.

In *Girls*, the postfeminist implications of the characters' sororal support is often depicted in moments of frustration or resentment towards one another. We often see arguments between the female characters quickly devolve into name calling and accusations, a product of the characters emotional immaturity. This kind of emotional conflict is a convention of drama that helps situate the characters as committed to finding resolutions and continuing their support of each other; however, negative or complicated their relationships are. In *Girls* season one, episode nine, during an argument about Hannah's need to constantly find closure, Marnie calls Hannah "a big, ugly wound," who thinks everyone in the world is out to humiliate her, eventually stating that she's a "bad friend" (see Figure 4). To which Hannah replies, "maybe that's not what's important to me right now, I don't really give a shit about being a good friend," (season 1, episode 9, 23:60 – 24:30) (see Figure 5). In this scene, Hannah dismisses her friend due to her preoccupation with her personal growth and independence.

Hannah's value of personal experience over friendship points to the negative implications of postfeminism for sororal relations. While this conflict leads to Marnie moving out, the following episode showcases the characters' codependency, highlighting the pair's consistent need to feel supported by one another through Hannah's gentle request of Marnie to stay until the end of the month, which Marnie rejects to give Hannah the extra time to find a roommate. Sorority, then articulates feminist rhetoric about friendship and commitment revealed through Hannah and Marnie's efforts to exert their individual autonomy and agency in their personal lives, while still fostering shared experiences and intimacy with each other. Regardless of this tension, the two women remain friends and continue to remain present in each other's lives, supporting each other in their various misguided actions, specifically their tumultuous relationships and poor choices regarding men, failed careers, etc. throughout the show. We see

the postfeminist implications of these friendships when the female characters exercise their desires for personal fulfillment or adventure, while remaining confident that their closest friendships will withstand this independence. It is through dramedy's conventions that these complicated depictions of sororal relationships that feminist rhetoric emerges and critiques postfeminism.

Dunham's female characters represent the use of feminist rhetoric in critiquing postfeminism through their sororal relationships. Another example of this occurs during a point in the series where Hannah and Jessa are no longer speaking because Jessa is dating Hannah's ex-boyfriend, Adam. Regardless of Hannah's commitment to villainizing Jessa, Jessa supports her friend, even when she is not around to hear it. In Season 5, episode 10, during a passionate argument between Adam and Jessa, Jessa yells, "You really don't get it do you. Hannah is my dearest friend. She will always come first. We may not be talking right now, and I hope to God that that changes" (Season 5, episode 10, 12:40). This line is indicative of sororal rhetoric in that it highlights Jessa's desire to be friends with Hannah regardless of Hannah's presence. The understanding that Jessa will remain loyal and supportive of Hannah, even in moments where they neither commune with one another, nor *like* each other, is sororal rhetoric. Even when they are not friends in the conventional sense, Jessa remains committed to Hannah sentimentally.

At the crux of the relationships in both *Girls* and *Fleabag* is the characters' ability to act as both obstacles and support systems for one another, sometimes interchangeably as they battle between being "good" friends or sisters and fulfilling their personal desires. These depictions do not shy away from capturing antagonisms and antipathy between women, which are often a product of conflict between characters' self-interests and their needs for independence and agency. This acknowledgement of sororal complexity, supports feminist rhetoric and critiques of

postfeminism. We see examples of sorority in the consistency, or codependency of the friendships in *Girls*, regardless of interpersonal turmoil, as well as in Fleabag's complicated and tumultuous relationships with other women, such as her sister, her best friend Boo, and her stepmother. The conventions of the drama, specifically intimate and sentimental relationships as well as emotionally driven conflict, paired with comedy's ability to alleviate tension, allows *Girls* and *Fleabag* to produce feminist rhetoric about female friendships.

In *Fleabag*, we see examples of sororal rhetoric most often in the character's misguided desires to support her sister that frequently result in failure. In season two, episode one, during a tense family dinner, after having not spoken for 6 months, Fleabag finds Claire in the restaurant bathroom experiencing a miscarriage. Claire screams for Fleabag not to touch her, stating through tears "Get your hands off my miscarriage! It's mine." (season 2, episode 1, 18:58 – 19:04). Fleabag immediately encourages Claire to go to the hospital, which she initially agrees to. The two seem to agree about their plan to leave dinner, Claire ordering Fleabag "Don't tell anyone" before Claire wordlessly decides to pretend as though it never happened and rejoin the dinner conversation casually. Fleabag, horrified by her sister's nonchalance but still attempting to protect Claire's request to keep her miscarriage a secret, blurts out that she herself has "had a little miscarriage" (season 2, episode 1, 21:30), to communicate the dire situation at hand and persuade Claire to join her in leaving for the hospital.

Waller-Bridge utilizes the conventions of the dramedy to emphasize the chaos of the scene and the ridiculous comments of the dinner guests as they talk over one another, to gesture toward an intended hilarity. In this way, this scene demonstrates how dramedy can negotiate between comedy and drama to focus simultaneously on both humor and political discourse. The combined effect of the other characters' comedic reactions to the miscarriage news, such as

Fleabag's stepmother questioning "Who's the father?! Is it the man with the teeth?" while making a dramatically toothy expression, and the topic of the seriousness and personal nature of a miscarriage, allows this scene to illustrate the dramedy's ability to situate the use of feminist rhetoric in the persuasive middle ground between comedy and drama.

The scene is shaped by feminist rhetoric as the characters argue about their right to choose, Claire stating, "she doesn't want to go!" as she pretends that it is Fleabag who has suffered a miscarriage (season 2, episode 1, 21:50). The episode ends with Fleabag finding Claire waiting for her in a taxi beside the road. Claire looks at her sister and states, "just tell me where you live and we'll talk about it later," (season 2, episode 1, 24:32 – 24:35). Fleabag leans forward, addressing the driver, and states, "can you take us to the nearest hospital" (season 2, episode 1, 24:36–24:38). Regardless of the chaos that occurred just moments prior, the sisters still rely on one another, needing to be both supported and supportive. Through this scene, Waller-Bridge uses feminist rhetoric to comment on the repercussions of the postfeminist characters' actions, as well as to portray the sisters' struggle to maintain comradery and the emotionally intense experience of a miscarriage. This scene uses feminist rhetoric to comment on the themes of bodily autonomy, solidarity, as well as stigmas about reproductive health, and the gendered dynamic of the interaction.

Doing so, *Fleabag* highlights the sisters' postfeminist failures. While the two eventually show up for one another, in Fleabag's refusal to accept her sisters' choices and her sister's refusal to defend Fleabag, this scene highlights the contradictory nature of postfeminism in influencing the sisters' choices. While postfeminism advocates for empowerment and autonomy, Claire's reluctance to accept help emphasizes her desire to keep up appearances and not to make a scene. In this way, this scene emphasizes the need for feminism where women are still silenced

by society's expectations of them. Additionally, this episode highlights Fleabag's failed attempts to encourage a sense of sisterhood in her support of Claire, instead making the moment about her. Fleabag, eventually frustrated, casts judgment on Claire stating, "No I think I'll just deal with this in my own insane, irrational, anal way" as if to speak directly to Claire's choice not to seek help (season 2, episode 1, 22:18–22:21). Finally, this scene uses feminist rhetoric to speak to the gendered power dynamics and reassertion of traditional gender norms as Claire's husband asserts his patriarchal authority through his dismissal of Fleabag and her hypothetical miscarriage, his treatment of his wife, and the derogatory nature in which he addresses the women in the scene. While the two women eventually find themselves alone, willing to help one another, the implications of this scene speak to both their commitment to one another as siblings and their responsibilities to other women as feminists.

In *Girls* and *Fleabag*, the characters' attempts at being "good" feminists are performed through the characters' determination to support other women, even if they are currently at odds with each other. Sororal rhetoric, or depictions of sorority that produce feminist rhetoric, is displayed through the main characters', namely Hannah and Fleabag's, desires for intimacy and support despite their frequent falling outs with other women. We see examples of sororal rhetoric in the emphasis on being a "good" or "bad" friend in *Girls* or sisters in *Fleabag*, these distinctions in the shows are usually defined by how willing or unwilling the characters are to affirm each other's choices. Being a "bad" friend/sister in these shows is showcased through the characters' beliefs that they must choose between their own success or that of their peers. In *Girls* and *Fleabag*, this dynamic is often depicted through characters prioritizing their personal growth or fulfillment over communal support. In this way, these depictions of friendship critique postfeminism and demonstrate its complicated and often contradictory values.

*Girls* and *Fleabag*, in their portrayals of sororal relations, use feminist rhetoric to critique the unhealthy nature of these relationships that are largely a result of the characters' postfeminist ideals. These relationships depict intimacy and autonomy, as well as conflict and support. Rather than platonic support that is based on a mutual love and respect for one another, these friendships demonstrate the negative effects of self-involved, individualistic approaches to activism, often in conjunction with emotional immaturity, that postfeminism encourages. While Dunham captures this rhetoric through platonic codependency, Waller-Bridge instead highlights the sororal bond between Fleabag and her sister Claire to emphasize the characters' preoccupation with wanting to be independent and empowered while struggling to conform to traditional views of marriage and societal gender expectations. The conventions of the dramedy that support complex sororal relationships, allow *Girls* and *Fleabag* to offer nuanced feminist rhetoric about postfeminism.

# CONCLUSION

This thesis investigates how contemporary feminist rhetoric is used in concert with the conventions of dramedy to critique the ideals of postfeminism. *Girls* and *Fleabag* exemplify how dramedy presents critical and persuasive depictions of postfeminism through genre conventions like cringe aesthetics, excessive nudity, romance, and intimate sororal relationships. Through performing close readings of scenes in both *Girls* and *Fleabag,* this thesis highlights the use of feminist rhetoric to subvert traditional gender expectations and critique certain ideal or ideas concerning postfeminism. Crafting these portrayals of postfeminism through feminist rhetoric allows these shows to represent the pitfalls of modern postfeminism through the struggles and failures of their female characters.

Reading *Girls* and *Fleabag* as examples of women's rhetoric illuminates the connection between the social and political potency of dramedy and the goals of feminist rhetoric. Feminist rhetoricians identify these goals as expanding the scope of scholarship and challenging oppressive forces and norms (Stenberg and Hogg, 2020). With these goals in mind and considering how genre can encourage social action through thoughtful critique, we can see how dramedy might extend, attend to, and converse with, these goals. By facilitating the use of feminist rhetoric and advocating for the continued furthering of its goals, dramedy can respond to the social and political actions of the feminist movement. In doing so, the dramedy operates as an avenue through which the goals of feminist rhetoric can be accomplished by encouraging social action through its critique of postfeminism. *Girls* and *Fleabag* are examples of the successful accomplishment of this.

The major conclusion of this project rests in its claim that dramedy, through its uniquely hybrid conventions, can explore feminist rhetoric in critical and nuanced ways. The sections of

this thesis focusing on failing feminism, cringe aesthetics, and sorority to account for the specific conventions used to communicate feminist discourse and persuade audiences of the need for feminism despite postfeminism. Due to comedy's fruitful relationship with political tensions and drama's ability to establish nuanced and complex characters and relationships, dramedy can occupy a middle ground that enables the genre to grapple with political tensions, discursive themes, and in the case of *Girls* and *Fleabag*, feminist critiques. Identifying the use of tropes like failing feminism to establish comedic relatability, this thesis highlights how television offers audiences palatable critiques of postfeminism from a feminist perspective. This project identifies the conventions of dramedy that assist in establishing Dunham and Waller-Bridge's criticisms, enabling them to remain subtle and persuasive in their critiques. *Girls* and *Fleabag* alike use conventions of dramedy to subvert traditional expectations of women, female friendships, romance, sex, etc., and in doing so, demonstrate the dynamic relationship between genre and feminist rhetoric.

By expanding on the scholarship of Alsop (2019), Havas and Sulimma (2020), and Woods (2015), this thesis attends to nuances in the ways postfeminist depictions and feminist rhetoric are presented through the conventions of television dramedy. Developing this criticism of postfeminism through dramedy's conventions allows us to see how the genre shapes and adapts feminist rhetoric. Rather than strictly critical or overly supportive, the dramedy enables a portrayal of postfeminism, that in using feminist rhetoric to comment on the pitfalls of postfeminism, is complex. This thesis highlights, through its analysis of *Girls and Fleabag*, how dramedy captures the contradictions in postfeminist activism. On the other hand, the dramedy benefits from the inconsistencies of postfeminism to be able to frame its criticisms of ideologies as equally comical and dramatic.

It is worth noting that postfeminism, emerging in Western cultures as a response to the prior waves, was shaped by the disproportionate inclusion of white middle-class voices. These shows, therefore, depict white, college-educated, middle-class women, and their struggles. While this is, in part, a component of the feminist criticism of postfeminism, it is, in many ways, overlooked in these shows and ignores the presence and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in these spaces. This erasure of intersectionality places these shows in danger of both creating a representational bias, and of further marginalizing minority communities by continuing to ignore them. The shows reinforce the already dominant narratives of white women's experiences. Moving forward requires a focus on and analysis of intersectional perspectives and a commitment to performing critical genre and rhetoric studies to produce well-rounded perspectives of the female experience as involving the voices and influence of marginalized women.

Shows like *Girls* and *Fleabag* are examples of the potential in dramedy to support critical feminist work. Considering *Girls* and *Fleabag* as examples of women's rhetoric, we can recognize the value of dramedy as a vessel for, and form of, women's rhetoric that is granted unique liberties, enhancing its effectiveness as social action. With women's rights continuing to be a current and pressing issue, *Girls* and *Fleabag* remain relevant to conversations regarding the goals of both feminism and feminist rhetoric. To continue this timely conversation, this thesis attends to how dramedy can elucidate the current goals of feminist rhetoric, explore the convergence between feminism and genre, and maintain its unique relationship with contemporary politics. This kind of critical analysis of the intersection between genre studies and discursive movements, like feminism, allows us to consider where television and dramedy might go from here, how new television genres are exploring feminism, and what rhetorical choices

they make. In future studies, the dramedy genre could be analyzed for its potential to promote intersectional feminism and extend the scope of scholarship with dramedy as a new mode for generating feminist rhetoric.

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APPENDIX

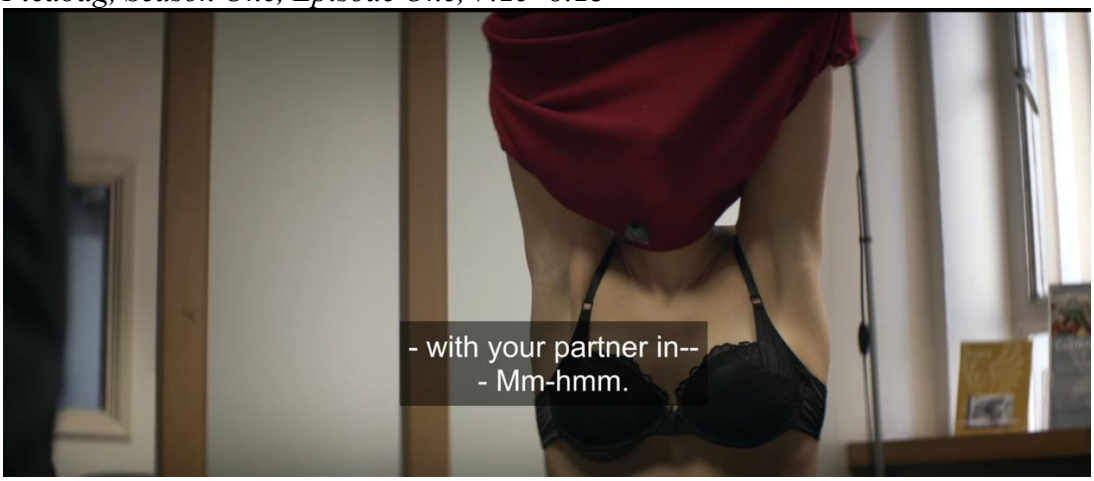
**Figure 1**

*Girls, Season One, Episode Four, 13:19–15:51*


*Note.* After her bosses touches her inappropriately at work, Hannah confronts him in his office, accusing him of making sexual advances towards her.

**Figure 2**

*Fleabag, Season One, Episode One, 7:25–8:23*




*Note.* Fleabag attempts to take off her sweater in front of a bank manager, forgetting she is only wearing a black lace bra underneath.

**Figure 3**

*Girls, Season One, Episode 1, 13:48*

*Note.* A shot of Adam and Hannah being intimate with one another in Adam's unkempt apartment.

**Figure 4**

*Girls, Season One, Episode Nine, 24:00–24:10*


*Note.* Feeling that Hannah does not support her decisions, Marnie lashes out at her during an argument.

**Figure 5**

*Girls, Season One, Episode Nine, 24:10–24:30*


*Note.* In her argument with Marnie about their friendship, Hannah responds to Marnie by expressing her priorities earnestly.