Consumption in the city: The turn to interiority in contemporary postfeminist television

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Abstract
In this article, I discuss a postfeminist ‘turn to interiority’ which takes place in US postfeminist television from 2005 onwards. Drawing on the theoretical critiques of postfeminist retreatism and girlie femininity, this turn is characterised by a concern with interior spaces – reviving domesticity and the importance of finding and securing a home – as well as internalised consumption – replacing forms of material consumption with the quest for self-actualisation, particularly through eating and expressions of the authentic self. I analyse this shift through a comparative analysis of the television shows Sex and the City, Girls and The Mindy Project. I argue that the turn to interiority is a product of the US cultural context, but also that this examination evidences the malleability and longevity of postfeminist ideology. Accordingly, I argue for the continuing importance of critical scholarship on postfeminism as an insight into the failures and pervasiveness of neoliberal politics.

Keywords
domesticity, femininity, girlie culture, Girls, postfeminism, recession, retreatism, Sex and the City, The Mindy Project

In this article, I discuss a postfeminist ‘turn to interiority’ which takes place in US postfeminist television from 2005 onwards. Although interiority is not a new concept in postfeminist theory, the turn I identify is characterised by a concern with interior spaces – reviving...
domesticity and the importance of finding and securing a home – as well as internalised consumption – replacing material consumption with the quest for self-actualisation, through eating and expressions of the authentic self. This change coincides with recent cultural phenomena in the United States that have threatened the concepts of nation, the economy and the self. I argue that a shift in the construction of the postfeminist subject is made visible on postfeminist television shows through the tropes of interiority and consumption. Drawing on the broad meanings of these terms, I explore the symbolism of representations of female labour and career; authenticity, pleasure and self-nurturing; consuming food and fashion items; and the spaces of city and home.

I elucidate these ideas by comparing three televised postfeminist texts: Sex and the City, which aired from 1998 to 2004, and Girls and The Mindy Project, which debuted in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Whereas the former has been established as a prominent text in early articulations of theoretical postfeminism, I argue that the latter two shows build upon the themes of female agency and the negotiation of career versus romance with changes that belie a crucial difference in the current context of postfeminist values of empowerment, labour, femininity and space. I position these texts within a trajectory of postfeminist media, to comment more broadly on the malleability and corruptibility of postfeminist rhetoric. Ultimately, interiority is both the romanticisation of mythic, conservative cultural tropes and the individualist, neoliberal demand for self-reliance as the only form of security. Rather than locating failure within the landscape and structure of postfeminism, the postfeminist subject is called inwards, to shelter from and counteract the failures of her socio-cultural environment.

This analysis particularly engages with the reduction of postfeminism to empowerment as an empty signifier applicable to whatever issue, product or behaviours need to be sold to women, as dictated by social, cultural and economic conditions. This inherent instability – contrasted to the decisive and innate quality of male power – explains the multiple contradictions of postfeminism. In this view, women become flotsam in a cultural ebb and flow, guided by the ephemeral hope of empowerment. Thus, the triple destabilisation of the nation, the economy and the female subject ultimately belie the power of postfeminism in its cultural malleability and longevity. This prompts the need for further attention to the use of postfeminism as a flawed but nevertheless political strategy within contemporary, neoliberal culture.

1995–2004: career/consumer postfeminism on Sex and the City

I begin my discussion of postfeminist interiority by outlining the theoretical definition of postfeminism, and providing a historical context for discussions of postfeminist labour. Postfeminist ideology operates through two concurrent actions: First, the reductive and homogenous conflation of feminism with certain tenets of the second wave, liberal feminist agenda. Second, the representation of this ‘feminism’ as ‘taken into account’ (McRobbie, 2009: 14) and repudiated as both irrelevant and undesirably ‘rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist’ (Negra, 2009: 2). This has the effect of ‘caricaturing, distorting, and (often wilfully) misunderstanding the political and social goals of feminism’ (Negra, 2009: 2). Postfeminism is primarily disseminated through
popular culture, a medium that is ‘perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to “feminism”’ (McRobbie, 2007: 27).

Postfeminism is aligned to neoliberalism in advocating a feminism based on ‘individualism, choice and empowerment’ (Gill, 2007: 149) and expressed through self-regulation, entrepreneurialism and consumerism. Moreover, McRobbie (2007) notes the ‘double entanglement’ of postfeminism, wherein ‘the coexistence of neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life … with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations’ (p. 28) leads to novel and contradictory female representations in the media. Indeed, postfeminism is marked by these and other contradictions, as Gill (2007) notes that the term is used ‘variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance’ (pp. 147–148). While mindful of these contradictions, I argue that exploring the trajectory of labour, consumerism and femininity in postfeminist texts from the mid-1990s until today reveals not only a qualitative shift in the expression of postfeminist values but also the enduring and evolutionary capacity of pop culture postfeminism.

Early postfeminist representations elevated Betty Friedan’s (1963) rallying cry to get middle-class, White women into the public sphere a central issue (while conveniently eliding bell hooks’ (1984) and others’ important critiques of this inherently exclusionary and narrow definition of feminism) by positing the career of the postfeminist subject as the focal point of meaning, narrative and identity. Social power was located in the masculine spaces of paid, white collar labour and early postfeminist battles conflated enabling women’s access to these spaces with the desire for masculinity.

Thus, postfeminist career women were depicted in early 1990s television shows such as Melrose Place and Murphy Brown and though masculinity could be symbolised through attire – such as Melanie Griffiths’ running shoes in Working Girl or Diane Keaton’s oversized briefcase in Baby Boom – it manifested most commonly as personality traits, such as Amanda from Melrose Place’s icy exterior and Murphy Brown’s single-minded ambition and reluctant maternalism. Susan Douglas argues that these shows emphasised the careers of these characters by precluding them from the privileges of socially sanctioned femininity, including romance, family and friends, as Melrose Place’s Amanda ‘make[s] it clear … that successful, driven career women could not have real love’ (Douglas, 2010: 37) and Murphy Brown’s professional achievements amount to ‘no personal life, no network of female friends, and regrets … about not having children’ (Douglas, 2010: 38). I regard these early 1990s texts as ‘career postfeminism’ shows, which are articulated against the 1980s figure of the powersuit-wearing superwoman.

In contrast, the shows of the mid-1990s redeem the ‘career woman’ by recuperating her femininity. This sleight of hand is enacted by justifying her entry into the workforce not as a grab for male power, but as an opportunity to empower herself through the financial independence and consumer agency a salary affords. Notably, this position is much less threatening to the restoration of the heterosexual matrix (McRobbie, 2009), as women’s careers do not present a direct threat to professional male power, and their femininity keeps them compatible – if perhaps slightly harder to trap – within the patriarchal confines of marriage. Sex and the City illustrates these issues, as it centres around a form
of empowerment directly derived from the careers and economic independence of the main female characters all the while maintaining a deeply feminine concern with love and romance.

Consumer postfeminism arises from the glamour and excess of *Sex and the City*, as the four main characters reclaim agency within the depressing career–success/love–failure dichotomy via the consumption of fashion, food and sex. The centrality of Manhattan to the show’s logic showcases consumerism as the key to cosmopolitan, independent womanhood. Although Jane Arthurs (2003) argues that the show ‘self-consciously explores the instability of feminine identity in a postfeminist, postmodern consumer culture’ (p. 88), their work is the key to their consumption, and their consumption is indicative of their empowerment.

Such empowerment is symbolised through fashion and the consumptive approach to men and sexual liaisons. The fantasy of their purchasing power is matched in the frequency and easy negotiation of their sexual encounters – male dates are available, easily seduced, and often discarded for frivolous reasons. The prominence of sex alludes to postfeminism’s ironically deployed ‘in-your-face sexism’ (Douglas, 2010), which allows the female characters to foreground the importance of love, romance and relationships with men, but simulate agency over these issues through their treatment as free-market commodities.

Finally, domestic disavowal is written into the show, as the characters are featured dining out, socialising with both the people and spaces of the city. Conversely, the women are rarely featured eating in the home or cooking: Emily Matchar (2013) describes Carrie as an ‘urban careerist who use[s] her oven for storing extra copies of *Vogue*’ (p. 5) and sweaters, and Carrie describes herself by saying, ‘[t]he only thing I have ever successfully made in the kitchen is a mess. And several little fires’ (*The Agony and the Ex-tacy*). Meanwhile, Miranda and Charlotte experience failures in the kitchen when they attempt to impress men by, respectively, cooking a birthday cake and a Shabbat dinner. In both cases, these gestures explode rather than complete the heterosexual matrix, as Miranda’s cake does not succeed in winning her baby’s father back from his girlfriend and the dinner Charlotte prepares for her boyfriend leads not to the proposal she desires but rather, their separation. Pleasure and empowerment are located in the city-based triad of fashion, friends and sex, not within the confines of the home.

In summary, this early postfeminist text situates consumption as central to the working and romantic lives of its subjects, and their subsequent empowerment. In *Sex and the City*, postfeminist heroines are calibrated to cater to the fantasies of working women, where professional work must be negotiated without eclipsing the essence of femininity; labour and leisure are complementary and balanced; and work and love are found by navigating the urban landscape with the confidence bestowed by career status and its purchasing power.

**The turn to interiority: consumption in the body and the home**

In this section, I discuss the evolution of the postfeminist heroine whose empowerment primarily takes form through expressions of interiority. I must begin by noting that girlie femininity is not an entirely new trope. *Sex and the City* expresses aspects of interiority
and girlie femininity as, McRobbie notes, Carrie is afflicted with a ‘desperate child-like search for male approval, [and] … schoolgirl voice-overs’ (McRobbie, 2008: 542), and the character Charlotte certainly encompasses the desire for heteronormative, conservative femininity – although her heteronormative intentions are thwarted by her disastrous first marriage, divorce and her infertility. Similarly, Meg Ryan offered an important precedent to girlie femininity through the characters she played in her oeuvre of 1990s romantic comedies.

Interiority – as a move out of the workforce and away from the aggressive ambitions of careerism – has also been foreshadowed as a postfeminist theme. Diane Negra (2009) has greatly contributed to the mapping of this phenomenon, identifying the trends for Hollywood romances to variously portray women performing low-paying ‘though often nurturing and symbolically domestic’ (p. 86) work, repudiating high-status female careers and experiencing ‘adjustment narratives in which working women must downsize the importance of work in their lives’ (p. 86). Alternatively, Pamela Thoma (2014) notes the use of writing as a common postfeminist labour theme, celebrated for simultaneously symbolising entrepreneurialism, self-actualisation and female creativity. Thoma (2014) argues that writing is therefore ‘connected to the seemingly limitless demands for women’s flexible labor in the marketplace and at home’ (p. 130). Additionally, Negra’s (2009) work on retreatism touches on interiority as a conservative manifestation of postfeminism, as the retreatist subject is characterised as ‘having lost herself but then (re)achieving stability through romance, de-aging, a makeover, by giving up paid work, or by “coming home”’ (p. 5), themes that have been present in a number of postfeminist texts since the 1990s. Interiority can be seen, then, as a postfeminist theme that operates both on the level of ‘shepherding women out of the public sphere’ (Negra, 2009: 5) and glamorising the potential of reproductive and self-disciplinary female labour.

However, while this trend to domesticity and femininity is not an entirely new feature of the postfeminist landscape, I argue that there has been a qualitative shift in televised representations of the postfeminist subject, where formerly relentless but romantic independence is reduced to a childlike dependence, and where the allure of material consumption is replaced with the comforts of physical consumption. I argue that these changes are in line with the revival and glamorisation of domesticity, traditionalism and self-fulfilment in the current anxiety-ridden United States and that this is due to key events that have, in the last decade, altered the cultural symbolism of the nation, the economy and the individual.

Part of the revival of the home space is due to the increasing instability of the borders of the nation state in an era of globalisation. The potential spoils of globalisation have encouraged national borders to become more porous to support the increased mobility of people, finances and culture. However, this new permeability of the nation has generated attendant threat, as illustrated by several key events in the United States. September 11, and its lingering trauma throughout the past decade, demonstrated the dangers accompanying the potential of globalisation, as the technologies of cosmopolitanism became weapons to attack the economic and cultural heart of the city. Jane Arthur notes the subsequent effect of this cultural trauma on popular culture, writing that ‘in a post September 11 context, the connotations of Sex and the City’s logo of the Manhattan
skyline has changed. The guiltless triumph of consumer values no longer seems so secure’ (Arthurs, 2003: 96).

This threat of terrorism was continued with the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings which aroused new suspicion of the outsider within, as the Boston marathon – an American institution held on Patriots’ Day – became the target of attacks by two refugees.1 Finally, in October 2014, the Ebola virus was transformed from an abstract, African epidemic into an illness diagnosed and contracted on American soil, revealing the perils of a networked world and triggering disproportionate panic about the spread of the disease in the United States.

Accordingly, as cultural ideologies proliferate about the increasing insecurity of the homeland, the home has been glorified as the individual’s sanctuary and fortress through the mechanisms of neo-conservatism. Neoliberal ideologies permeate these constructions of the home as the individual becomes responsible for securing their own welfare and security, a point tragically revealed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 which exposed the devastating incompetence of the neoliberal state in protecting citizens and their property.

Moreover, on a symbolic and cultural level, the trauma of the 2008 recession evoked many anxieties that were heralded by the widespread foreclosure of homes and the collapse of the US auto industry – the two pillars of the American (consumer) dream. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (2014) examine this phenomenon at length, arguing that ‘new, sometimes uncertain, evocations of home are matched by an increasing anxiety about the nation-state and its ability to provide a home for its citizens’ (p. 19) and that the home is recreated as an important trope within post-2005, popular culture as part of the nostalgia and longing for safer, simpler times. This often goes hand-in-hand with traditional gender roles, as Tim Snelson (2014) argues in his analysis of recession-era horror texts: ‘the centering of housewives and mothers as the only defense against the (re)possession of the American home might ultimately act to reinforce the ideology of female domesticity’ (p. 162). Thus, the reconstruction of gender in the private sphere is accompanied by concomitant changes in the public sphere, notably that recessionary popular culture

centralises women who possess the resources for weathering economic turmoil, valorises even more work for women by associating it with leisure, and ultimately rationalises long hours for low or no wages for women through the revival of a gender division of domestic labor, (Thoma, 2014: 108)

a trend that sits alongside the neoliberal imperative that ‘everyone is creative, everyone is entrepreneurial, everyone is an activist’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 217).

Finally, it is worth noting that a similar dynamic of simultaneous expansion and conservatism was observed in the groundbreaking election of President Obama in 2008, an event that represented a brief moment of optimism and racial progress that was just as rapidly undercut by the subsequent mobilisation of the ultra-conservative Tea Party shortly thereafter.

The sanctity of the nation state has also been threatened by the rise of digital media and the Internet’s networked logic, which have displaced the domestic, nation-centred
qualities traditionally fostered in television. The exponential rise of social networking takes place around the same time period as discussed above: Facebook was founded in 2004 and 2 years later *Time* magazine controversially nominated ‘You’ its Person of the Year. The dominance of Facebook was further enshrined through the film based on the biography of its founder, *The Social Network*, which was released in 2010. From the de-emphasis on geography fostered by Internet technologies, the individual emerges as the primary node of significance, exaggerating neoliberal individualism and the narcissism popularly equated with Generation Y and their digital activities. Importantly in the postfeminist context, digitality also portends numerous entrepreneurial opportunities and facilitates the markets for amateurism and domesticity, which have led to the rise of genres such as devocationalised life writing which, as previously mentioned, ‘typically function as expressive of women’s essential femininity in postfeminist culture’ (Thoma, 2014: 125), and the prominence of lifestyle blogging and figures such as the fashion blog ‘recessionista’, who is presented as a ‘knowledgeable, efficient, and economical consum[er] who navigate[s] consumer and virtual environments while upholding hegemonic definitions of femininity as objectified, managed, and scrutinized’ (Nathanson, 2014: 137). Accordingly, female labour in this environment is typically figured as creative – which, McRobbie points out, typically means that such workers ‘toil in their own homes, operate casually and flexibly as part-time and contingent workers, and frequently work without benefits’ (as cited in Thoma, 2014: 124–125). However, such work is part of the pursuit of self-sufficiency and self-actualisation based on the proven inability to depend on government and corporate institutions for fiscal responsibility and social welfare.

Similarly, Emily Matchar (2013) uses the term ‘new domesticity’ to describe the phenomenon of opting out of the workforce in a ‘longing for the handmade, the old-fashioned, the authentic’ (p. 3). This manifests in do it yourself (DIY) activities centred around the home and, frequently, an attempt to spin these activities into profitable enterprises. This prefigures new domesticity’s strong associations with digital media, particularly food, parenting and lifestyle blogs. Again, Matchar (2013) couples new domesticity specifically to the economy, as a response to widespread retrenchment during the 2008 recession and general malaise regarding the rewards of the workforce as ‘less appealing to a generation weaned on a ‘follow your passion’ ethos’ (p. 21).

These trends are illuminated through a broad range of cultural texts. For example, while lifestyle programming proliferated in the 1990s (Brunsdon, 1997), the past decade has witnessed the emergence of lifestyle blogs and vlogs, which are bottom-up entrepreneurial productions that demand feminine intimacy and authenticity from their creators in return for potential economic profit. Similarly, digital spaces such as Etsy and Pinterest offer an opportunity for creative, domestic activities to be circulated with added value. They are also demonstrated by writing- and food-based biopics that have recently been released – such as *Julie & Julia* and *Eat Pray Love* (Thoma, 2014); films such as *Bridesmaids*, which features the owner of a failed cupcake business as protagonist and *I Don’t Know How She Does It* where the mommy wars are partly figured through baking; and a variety of television shows such as *Desperate Housewives*, *DC Cupcakes* and *Cupcake Wars* which feature real and fictional women expressing their business-sense through cupcake shops.
Moreover, although the Food Network has always had a concern with women’s domesticity, its latest instructional-format shows explicitly play on the retreatist narrative, featuring shows shot on location in non-urban, women’s kitchens and narratives that centre around the heteronormative family such as The Pioneer Woman, Southern at Heart and My Heartland Table. The depiction of the family empire – reminiscent of the romantic rurality and old American wealth of Dallas’ Ewing family – is also reconstituted on network television programmes of the last decade such as Brothers and Sisters, Parenthood, Six Feet Under and Modern Family. Moreover, the construction of large or chaotic families is strongly represented in the ever-malleable reality television genre, particularly on TLC shows such as 19 Kids and Counting, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, Gypsy Sisters, Jon and Kate Plus 8 and Sister Wives.

Interestingly, while retreatism exists within the terrain of postfeminism, its expression in the media expressly contradicts some of the aforementioned tenets of postfeminism. That is, while the imperative to work remains, its rationale lies not in the potential for empowerment through financial independence but rather through the creative, self-fulfilling work of traditional femininity. Within consumer-saturated culture, retreatist figures provide and nurture, fulfilling the traditional feminine tasks of carework and feeding others (Bordo, 1993; Inness, 2001). This situates the productive potential of women back in the home, justifying their decision to opt-out of the workforce akin to early backlash feminism. However, retreat is no longer necessitated by fear or guilt, but through choice and the self-affirmed pleasures of new domesticity. Furthermore, the private sphere is no longer cleanly separated from the public sphere as domesticity translates – through digital technologies and a large market of women with their own purchasing power – into a glamorous and potentially profitable enterprise.

Finally, it is worth considering that retreatism is typically characterised by girlieness, as a counterpoint to the hypersexuality described by Douglas (2010) and Levy (2005). This girlieness can be chaste – in deference to the wholesome mommy myth which is positioned at odds with expressions of explicit sexuality (Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Karlyn, 2011) – or can take on the tenor of third-wave girlie culture, drawing from Riot Grrrl sensibilities by characterising feminine accoutrements and behaviours as the empowering recuperation of devalued girlhood. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2010) explain, ‘Girlies are girls in their twenties or thirties who … have reclaimed girl culture, which is made up of such formerly disparaged things as knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun’ (p. 80). While these retreatist, girlie femininities are discursively esteemed as outlets for passion, pleasure and empowerment, they are also groomed for easy profitability through consumption and entrepreneurial opportunities. Given this context, I build on the specific expressions of interiority in consumption as a result of the post-2005 cultural context.


In this section, I reflect on the impact of cultural instability on portrayals of the postfeminist subject in Girls and The Mindy Project, which I consider to be two key examples of current postfeminist television. Given Sex and the City’s dominance as the foundational,
popular culture text of womanhood in the 1990s, Lena Dunham’s 2011 HBO series, 
*Girls*, appropriately announces itself by explicitly recalling and then renouncing the 
show. The structural elements of the show – four, female friends navigating life and love 
in New York City – remain. In the pilot episode, Shoshanna enacts a well-established 
ritual of identification with *Sex and the City* characters by proclaiming, ‘I’m definitely a 
Carrie at heart, but sometimes … sometimes Samantha comes out’. However, this child-
ish admission by naïve Shoshanna – and her worldly cousin Jessa’s indifference and 
purported ignorance of the show – serves to mock, not revere, the show. Indeed, rather 
than the glittering fantasies, impeccable fashion and self-assuredness of the early-30s 
*Sex and the City* characters, *Girls* lays bare a more precarious, insecure and poverty-
ridden representation of mid-20s, post-recessionary femininity.

In this spirit, consumption on the show is ref figured from an emphasis on the material 
goods marking one’s status to the ingestion of food which – while still pleasurable – 
speaks to the primal drives of necessity and lack. *Girls* depicts food as a casual and per-
vasive backdrop to its narratives of girlhood, which aligns with Hannah’s struggles to 
find work, financial independence and a sense of adulthood. The opening frame of the 
pilot episode reveals Hannah shovelling pasta into her mouth: Her voracious appetite is 
symbolic of her desire to take advantage of the fancy meal her parents are paying for, 
while her parents have used the same dinner to inform Hannah they will be cutting off 
their financial support, explicitly linking food to security in the post-recessionary con-
text. Subsequently, the show features scenes of Hannah eating a cupcake while taking a 
bath; reaching for a mouthful of chips in front of her computer while trying to meet a 
writing deadline; stealing cold chicken from her parents’ fridge to eat in bed; and eating 
wedding cake while sitting alone on the beach. The motif of eating – and the intimate 
environments in which it occurs – is emblematic of physical consumption in the era of 
domestic/girlie postfeminism, as the subject heroine negotiates her positioning through 
her body, rather than against the space of the city and its uncertain promises. This uncer-
tainty has led to forms of consumption that are figured in terms of necessity and lack, 
hunger and desperation, as opposed to mere accessories of a well-presented life.

Alongside the importance of the body in constituting the self, *Girls* emphasises 
Hannah’s small, Brooklyn walkup – the interior, domestic space – as integral to Hannah’s 
emotional world and the setting for her negotiation of key relationships. While *Sex and 
the City*’s Carrie had a similar affinity for her apartment, it was largely a site for indi-
vidual repose and a place to reflect on, and write about, her experiences of navigating the 
city and public life with her friends and lovers. Indeed, when Carrie’s serious boyfriend 
Aidan briefly moves into her space, this is treated as a claustrophobic invasion that ulti-
mately drives her out of the house and into an affair.

In contrast, Hannah’s apartment is porous: It is the site of a number of house parties 
and dinner parties, and reflects the trajectory of Hannah’s personal life as she cycles 
through housemates – from college friend Marnie, to gay ex-boyfriend Elijah, and then 
serious boyfriend Adam – throughout the first three seasons. The distinction between 
public and private, reflective and social, ultimately converges to depict not only a realis-
tic financial and living situation of a young, aspiring writer living in New York City, but 
the increasing permeability of the body, the home and female interiority as simultane-
ously the site of retreat, as well as a site to be mined for profit in the new economy. This
leads to Hannah’s painfully self-involved personal essays, and prefaces the destructive potential of her writing, as her private diary is exposed and leads to Marnie’s break-up with her long-term boyfriend Charlie.

Hannah’s anxiety in regard to these new social conditions is palpable. She has obsessive compulsive disorder and Googles obscure health issues, including ‘stuff that gets up around the sides of condoms’, a phrase which surely demonstrates the fear of the possibilities and consequences of breached boundaries. Anxiety also flourishes through the show’s commitment to abject and grotesque forms of intimacy: Hannah’s frequent nudity and the many graphic and awkward depictions of sex, frequent scenes of the friends talking to each other while on the toilet, Jessa’s period joyfully interrupting a sexual encounter, the bloody q-tip that has pierced Hannah’s ear-drum, and Adam’s sister’s glass-shattered, bleeding palm. Thus, interiority is relentlessly sought out for sanctity and safety, but is also continually under threat of invasion. Hannah’s hunger – for food and sex – marks an appetite that cannot be sated; her body and her home are both penetrated and the source of her creative and personal inspiration. Unlike the consumption of fashion which adorns the body, her consumption of food constitutes the body and marks the inward search for meaning and replenishment in these times of social uncertainty. It also marks the futility of earlier postfeminist forms of bodily discipline, as Hannah’s fatalistic attitude towards her body and its appetites – exemplified through the repetitive motifs of eating and sex – is juxtaposed against virginal Shoshanna who ‘comes closest to caricature, and … ironizes the role of postfeminist pedagogue’ (Bell, 2013: 364) and rigid Marnie who childishly asserts, in a fight with her mother, ‘I’m not going to do like what Hannah does and order six pizzas to make me feel better’.

A great deal of public commentary has focussed on Dunham’s refusal to hide her pear-shaped body, with the subtext that daring to expose her unconventional body is an act of bravery and courage. In the pilot, Hannah chastises skinny and ‘anorexic’ Marnie for keeping her towel on while Hannah sits naked in the bathtub, noting that ‘I never see you naked and you always see me naked and it should totally be the other way around’. However, this subversion merely indicates the new currency of interiority and intimacy in the current cultural economy.

A similar public discourse has been conferred upon Mindy Kaling, creator and star of the show The Mindy Project, whose presentation of her brown, curvy body is typically labelled ‘brave’. Kaling and Dunham’s unconventional, non-thin bodies might be contrasted to the decidedly and effortlessly skinny bodies on Sex and the City – whose characters’ frequent dining out, without any regard to their weight or caloric intake, seemed almost as unrealistic as their high-fashion purchasing power and sexual conquests – and the even skinnier female bodies on Ally McBeal, which were symptomatic of the eating disorders that allegedly flourished on set.

Yet, in opposition to the secrecy and shame associated with eating disorders, Kaling openly acknowledges and exaggerates her body difference. Also set in New York City, The Mindy Project sees Kaling playing Mindy Lahiri, a successful gynaecologist beset by a hapless love-life. Lahiri is the only female doctor in her practice of male colleagues, the only brown body within a sea of White characters and love interests, and the only ‘plus-size’ woman in her cast of conventionally skinny, female actors. As such, Kaling’s body becomes the fodder for much of the comedy of her character on the show as, like
Hannah, Lahiri has a voracious appetite for food and sex which is referenced explicitly and often in the show. When colleague and love interest Danny asks her if she is hungry, she responds ‘Well, I did just have an enormous meal. But a doctor told me that my metabolism is so high that I basically have to eat every hour. That doctor was me’. (Girl Next Door). She buys two doughnuts on her commute to work, and must be stopped from eating the second one after it falls on the floor. She admits, ‘I zero out my fridge every night before I go to bed’ (An Officer and a Gynaecologist).

The themes of excessive eating and sex signal that female appetites will no longer be denied or ignored, which can be contrasted to the two brief moments, in all the episodes and movies of Sex and the City, where the characters reveal battles with their weight or overeating. Sex and the City frames excessive appetites for food in terms of life dysfunction: Miranda’s excess baby weight reflects the overwhelming effect that early motherhood has on her independent and aggressive personality, and Samantha’s weight gain in the first movie signifies her problematic departure from her core values, summarised by the admission ‘I eat so I won’t cheat’. In contrast, Lahiri’s consumption of food is joyful, unapologetic and depathologised. Although at times she alludes to trying to lose weight through dieting and exercising, it is also clear that she is too busy working, dating and experiencing life to bother with the draconian restrictions of the postfeminist subject’s disciplining regime. Her open acknowledgement of her body and the pleasure she takes from food marks her confidence in her own skin, and she is empowered instead by frank admissions of her postfeminist ‘failings’. It is this creativity, entrepreneurialism and dissemination of intimate life that marks the new priorities of the postfeminist subject after the turn to interiority.

Furthermore, Kaling’s decision to name her character Mindy references the collapse of the auteur/protagonist that similarly structures Dunham’s Girls and other recent postfeminist television shows such as 30 Rock, New Girl and Parks and Recreation, which respectively feature characters based on the autobiographical work and/or personal characteristics of Tina Fey, Zooey Deschanel and Amy Poehler. This collapse, which is contrasted to the attribution of authorial credit on Sex and the City to writer Candace Bushnell and producer Michael Patrick King, reflects the new value and visibility of intimacy, particularly in the digital age. From this perspective, Hannah’s fruitless writing and professional failures on Girls cannot so easily be dismissed as ‘doing everything in her power not to actually work for a living … [as] indicative of postfeminist entitlement’ (DeCarvalho, 2013: 368), as these representations are in fact underwritten by Dunham’s real-life status as a writing protégé: backed by Judd Apatow after her Sundance contribution, Tiny Furniture, and contracted to pen her autobiography – for US$3.5 million dollars – at the tender age of 26, Dunham is afforded the opportunity to play a narcissistic and hapless young writer because her talent and work ethic are already proven by the existence of the show (Nygaard, 2013). Similarly, Kaling’s character, Lahiri, can embrace feminine naïveté and hapless incompetence with impunity as Kaling has already established herself as a successful comedian, writer and actor committed to the feminist cause. Whereas Douglas (2010) points to the use of ironic sexism in postfeminist hypersexuality, Dunham and Kaling imbue their characters with ironic girlishness in the domestic postfeminist context, which details the pleasure and profitability of exposing the intimacies of the ideal, postfeminist subject.
In fact, Kaling does revive some of the visual appeal of *Sex and the City* with depictions of Lahiri’s active and exuberant acts of material consumption. Lahiri is presented as an avid consumer of popular culture and is knowledgeable about celebrity gossip. She appears well dressed, with an extensive wardrobe and an impeccably stylish apartment. Yet, while these acts of cultural consumption mark her as a postfeminist subject, she is not empowered by them. Rather, she is consistently mocked for her fashion sense and her obsession with tabloid fodder. These acts of consumption do not mark her as independent, but as hyperbolically feminine. She appears in bright colours, loud patterns and polka-dots, cardigans, collared blouses and ruffles, and this girlie aesthetic also infuses her apartment. Many scenes take place in and reference her beautifully decorated New York apartment. The décor features bold turquoise blue and bright orange accents, alongside statement pieces such as an ornate, turquoise chandelier, chevron patterned cushions and plush, upholstered armchairs. Again, this attention to detail and the establishment of her apartment as a lush, girlie haven reveal the new attention to the postfeminist heroine’s interiority and femininity, both of which become central to her post-recessionary brand of empowerment, her sense of authenticity and the increasing symbiosis between private and public, professional and domestic.

In turn, Lahiri’s femininity is indicative of her resolute romanticism: the centrality of the Empire State Building and her wistful revival of both *An Affair to Remember* and *Sleepless in Seattle* as ideal romantic comedies references a pre–postfeminist idealism and sense of security that were eclipsed by the brash cynicism of the *Sex and the City* characters and their colonisation of the city before September 11 and the recession. Consequently, Lahiri is depicted as comically dependent on men. Her male colleagues are called upon to solve her personal problems and immediate needs, including rescuing her when she gets tangled in her earbuds on the subway. Her romantic interests bring her food and cook homemade dinners for her. She asserts, ‘there are things that women should never have to do. Like fix a toilet. Or vote’ (Girl Next Door). This prompts the discerning viewer to ask how, exactly, she is empowered? As with her open acknowledgement of her body’s voracious appetites, the answer appears to be in her unapologetic acceptance of herself, and her determination to be loved for who she is, where who she ‘is’ is often equated to her femininity.

In summary, postfeminist empowerment after the turn takes into account the insecurities arising from the recession and 9/11 by securing the home space as central to the protection of the individual. This private, domestic sphere becomes the site of self-sufficiency and the scene of the individual’s creative potential. As the recession highlighted the failures of material consumption and career ambition in constituting the self, more attention is paid to the body as a source of personal pleasure rather than as a canvas whose meaning and value is reliant on the judgement of strangers in the city. Finally, the professional credentials and intellectual proficiencies of the new postfeminist heroine are assumed and need not be proven or necessarily featured, which allows hyperfemininity and the joy of romance to be openly embraced. Empowerment is no longer contained within acts of consumption, but through emphasising the true feminine self and detailing these intimacies for profit in the public, cultural market for female interiority.
Conclusion

The term ‘postfeminism’ emerges in the 1990s, giving it a lifespan of more than two decades. In this timeframe, it has remained riddled with ambiguities in terms of its meaning and intent. Many theorists have implicitly and explicitly hinted at the tiredness of the term (Whelehan, 2010), coining different neologisms to explain part or all of the trends that are afflicting young women, including ‘retreatism’ (Negra, 2009), which emerges as a particular manifestation of postfeminism; ‘enlightened sexism’ (Douglas, 2010); ‘neo-feminism’ (Radner, 2011); ‘girlie culture’ (Baumgardner and Richards, 2010) and ‘raunch culture’ (Levy, 2005). These terms embody the contradictions of postfeminism, as in the generational divide of Douglas’ (2010) enlightened sexism and the battle between what Levy (2005) views as a hypersexual raunch culture with the often chaste and maternal retreatism that Negra (2009) describes. Moreover, these contradictions at once belie the vested corporate, cultural interests which influence the movement of postfeminism, while also asserting that although the relative interests of postfeminism might be shifting, the postfeminist moment is far from over, and its contradictions continue to inform and displace current generations of young women.

Tracing a trajectory of postfeminist media – from *Sex and the City* to *Girls* and *The Mindy Project* – reveals the inherent emptiness of the rhetoric of empowerment, as it is broadly and blindly applied to any and all facets of feminine lifestyle according to the social trends and ideological demands of the moment. While the themes of consumption, labour and femininity have remained prominent over the past 20 years, their expression has shifted with the times. As I have argued, in the contemporary moment, consumption and labour are directed inwards, as the home and body replace the city as the spaces of significance for postfeminist performance and femininity is traditionalised and romanticised, made prominent as an appropriate corollary to the inherent strength of women. This interest in conservative depictions of the home and family reveal the easy appropriation of feminist rhetoric by the national and corporate interests of the day, as the socio-cultural context of 2005 heralds these changes as a product of necessity and choice. Mommy blogging is sold as a glamorous and enjoyable lifestyle enterprise, that is a solution to modern women’s work–life balance struggles. Baking bread is more meaningful and creative than office work. While these statements may be based on truths, the depoliticisation of empowerment-through-lifestyle is also made salient when considering the middle-class, White, heterosexual means and resources required to engage in these acts of cultural consumption and production.

Thus, the turn to interiority does not so much dismantle postfeminism as exemplify its resilience, adaptability and generativity within a variety of different social conditions and across a range of different media platforms. Although postfeminism is, and always has been, problematic in its bastardisation of feminist values and its formulation as a theoretical critique, its longevity and evolutionary potential within cultural flux suggests that it still demands critical attention for the days of recuperating ‘real’ feminist politics – the marches and the activism – are gone. Declaring a theoretical fatigue with postfeminism does not erase its dominant presence in popular culture, and indeed a generation or more of women have now grown up not knowing anything but postfeminism. Postfeminism
embodies the complexity and partiality of neoliberal politics, and it is these inherent contradictions that demand continuing scholarly consideration.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that terrorist threats on US soil of the late-20th century that most captivated the popular media revolved around indigenous terrorists such as Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City Bomber, and Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. The racial profile of terrorists within the current media climate tends to identify incidents of mass murder by White men – for example, the multiple school shootings of the last decade – as acts of individual mental illness.
2. Notwithstanding the work of Daniel Miller (2010) and other scholars who convincingly argue that clothes do in fact constitute the body.
3. This comment is qualified by the inclusion of African American nurse, Tamra, at the end of the first season.
4. Although it should be noted that Baumgardner and Richards coin this term from the express intent and perspective of third-wave feminism, not postfeminism.

References


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