Twenty-Something Girls v. Thirty-Something Sex And The City Women

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TWENTY-SOMETHING GIRLS v. THIRTY-SOMETHING SEX AND THE CITY WOMEN

Paving the way for “post? feminism”

Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant

Lena Dunham’s cable television series Girls is a candid and comical look at the lives of four young women living in Brooklyn, New York. Following in the footsteps of the earlier post-feminist, woman-centred television series, Sex and the City (SATC), Girls explores numerous feminist themes centring on an exploration of what it is like to be a young white woman in contemporary US society. Yet what kind of post-feminist narrative is being constructed in Girls? How is post-feminism deployed in the show? In a comparative analysis of Girls (Seasons 1–2) and SATC (Seasons 1–6), we argue that although both shows certainly exemplify post-feminist culture, they are inflected differently in relation to the representation of sexualities, reproductive “choice,” and feminine embodiment. Compared to SATC, we argue that Girls represents a novel approach to representing young US women’s lives on television, re-articulating and re-mobilising existing conceptualisations of post-feminism. To conclude, we propose that the term “post? feminism” may be used to describe Dunham’s version of post-feminism for a millennial generation.

KEYWORDS femininity; gender; popular culture; post-feminism; television

Introduction

In 1994, Angela McRobbie flagged a desire for a diverse feminist politics in response to a burgeoning post-feminist culture. For twenty years, feminist scholars have explored post-feminist texts and experiences, debating the meaning and deployment of post-feminism. However, they continue to identify an impasse in terms of feminist engagement with the concept. For instance, Imelda Whelehan (2010, 159) has observed that post-feminism is now so prevalent that it is “boring” and requires “little unpacking.” In this paper, we address this impasse through a comparative analysis of two post-feminist US television series, Sex and the City (SATC) (1998–2004) and Girls (2012–present). Exploring both programmes’ representations of femininities and sexualities allows for a closer examination of the use and continuing relevance of post-feminism and offers an opportunity to consider the micropolitics of this “baggy” concept (Charlotte Brunsdon 2013, 389).

Specifically, in light of SATC’s legacy and influence on contemporary post-feminist dramas, we wonder how the characters in Girls relate to their SATC precursors. Moreover, we question what kind of feminist narrative defines Girls. Is post-feminism useful in this analysis? In this article, we argue that SATC’s post-feminist legacy “lurks on the periphery” of
Girls, moulding it into a “new” kind of post-feminist narrative (Whelahan 2010, 161). From the inter-textual nod of the SATC poster on Shoshanna’s bedroom wall (Season 1, Episode 1, “Pilot”), to the ways in which the characters navigate early adulthood, sexuality, and relationships, Lena Dunham—the show’s twenty-seven year old creator, lead actor, writer, director, and executive producer—cannot ignore SATC as a formative cultural text while simultaneously railing against it. We contend that Girls is conscious of post-feminist discourses and themes but demonstrates an ability to irreverently satirise itself, actively taking both post-feminism and second wave feminism into account and asking “what now?” (Katherine Bell 2013, 363). By reflexively questioning and challenging its influences from earlier generations of second wave feminism and post-feminism, we argue that Girls allows for a re-articulation and re-mobilisation of post-feminism for a millennial generation.

**Twenty-Something Girls v. Thirty-Something SATC Women**

Broadcast for nine years on the premium cable channel Home Box Office (HBO), SATC was a wildly popular US television series that chronicled the lives of four single women in Manhattan. Sarah Jessica Parker played the role of Carrie Bradshaw, a journalist who writes a column, “Sex and the City,” for the fictitious newspaper, *The New York Star*. Based on New York journalist Candace Bushnell’s novel of the same name, the television show was created and produced by a male creative team led by Darren Star (of *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place* fame) and Michael Patrick King (*Murphy Brown, Will & Grace*). Each episode is structured around Carrie pondering a topic for her next column (e.g., having sex without emotion, female ejaculation, threesomes). Her friends—“hopelessly cynical” lawyer Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), “hopeless romantic” gallerist Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), and sexual libertine PR executive Samantha Jones (Kim Catrall)—serve as her inspiration as they share their perspectives on sex, love, and relationships (Season 1, Episode 1, “Sex and the City”; see Kim Akass and Janet McCabe [2008] for a detailed overview of the show). Carrie’s turbulent relationship with “Mr. Big,” a dashing but emotionally unavailable financier, provides a narrative thread throughout the series. The romantic/sex comedy show became a cult hit that inspired two spinoff movies arguably because it provided a template for television audiences to imagine what life was like for contemporary (single) New York women (Jane Arthurs 2003). Women especially coveted the glamorous lives of the characters and appreciated the frank, taboo-breaking discussions of sex and femininity.

As Akass and McCabe (2008) have observed, it is no coincidence that such a ground-breaking show was aired on HBO, a channel that was changing the way that audiences were viewing television in the 1990s. As a premium, subscription-only channel that was not reliant on commercial advertising, HBO was able to commission original shows and spend huge amounts of money on marketing. SATC was pivotal in helping HBO to establish its identity as a channel that is now widely known for allowing writers creative freedom, catering to niche audiences, and for contending with difficult adult content (especially around sex).

Despite its focus on ambitious women and their individual life “choices,” Michael Patrick King, the show’s writer and director, has rejected suggestions that SATC is “feminist,” noting in an interview that “... Every time a character says they feel something or entitled to something we literally put a man in front of them that blows that [feminism] all up” (Paley Center for Media 2008). However, feminist scholars have long regarded the series as one that “shadowboxes” with second wave feminism (Jane Gerhard 2005, 37). Feminist scholars have described it as a post-feminist narrative par excellence given its direct
engagement with individual women’s negotiations of sexual empowerment, choice, mobility, and consumption (Fien Adriaens and Sophie Van Bauwel 2014). While SATC may construct Carrie Bradshaw and her friends as “empowered,” it does this through a heteronormative, white, privileged lens that “ventriloquiizes” feminism as out-dated common sense (Whelihan 2010, 162–163). Indeed, the first season of SATC aired in June 1998 just weeks before the publication of the Time magazine cover asking “Is Feminism Dead?” (Astrid Henry 2004, 65). In the show, feminism is presented as a series of individual “choices” with no political agenda (Henry 2004). For instance, in “Time and Punishment” (Season 4, Episode 7), Charlotte positions her “choice” to quit her job to try to get pregnant as a validation of the “choices” that are now available to her because of “the women’s movement.” As Rosalind Gill (2011, 64) has observed, post-feminist “women are offered particular kinds of freedom, empowerment and choice in exchange or as a kind of substitute for real feminist politics and transformation.”

However, second wave feminist discourses are never entirely abandoned in SATC and the show is “haunted” by a feminist consciousness (Whelihan 2010, 161). The show reflexively evaluates the feminist legacy of “choices” as they are experienced by this particular group of women. For instance, when Charlotte presents her “choice” to quit her job to her friends, Samantha reminds her of the effect that this frivolous “choice” could have on her ability to return to the workforce: “Be damn sure before you get off the Ferris wheel, because the women waiting to get on are 22, perky and ruthless” (Season 4, Episode 7, “Time and Punishment”). As Samantha’s observation indicates, the legacy of second wave feminism imbues post-feminist texts with a feminist consciousness, and exemplifies the generational divide forged between feminist and post-feminist era women. This feminist conscience prompts post-feminist women to evaluate their “choices” and relationships, and to reflect on what has really been gained through “liberation” and “empowerment.”

It is this generational divide between feminist and post-feminist women in SATC that paved the way for Lena Dunham’s quirky comedy, Girls, a show that prompts us to further question the legacy of “liberation” and “empowerment” via its focus on the lives of four women in their twenties, living in Brooklyn. Also premiering on HBO to critical acclaim in 2012, Girls follows the lives of protagonist, Hannah Horvath (played by Dunham), and her friends—gallery assistant Marnie Michaels (Alison Williams), unemployed freespirit Jessa Johansson (Jemima Kirke), and naive university student Shoshanna Shapiro (Zosia Mamet), as they flounder through their twenties, coping with sex, relationships, work, personal humiliations, and “rare triumphs” (HBO 2014).

In focussing on four distinct female character types in New York and embedding itself almost immediately in the US cultural landscape, Girls has endured obvious comparisons to SATC (e.g., Rory Carroll 2012; Emily Nussbaum 2012). Dunham confronted the issue in the pilot episode of Girls via a conversation about Shoshanna’s SATC movie poster on her bedroom wall:

Shoshanna “Do you like the poster?”
Jessa “Oh, I’ve never seen that movie.”
Shoshanna “Only the show?”
Jessa “Is it a show?”
Shoshanna “Oh my god. You’re not serious. That’s like not being on Facebook.”
Jessa “I’m not on Facebook.”
Shoshanna “You’re so fucking classy. You know, you’re funny because you’re definitely
In this exchange, Dunham alludes to the practice of fans identifying with SATC characters as archetypes of feminine identity (e.g., Are you a Carrie? Are you a Miranda?). The conversation between Jessa and Shoshanna is, to a certain extent, necessary because Shoshanna, and even Hannah, would have likely moved to New York as a result of identifying with Carrie (even though Hannah would probably never admit to it). As Dunham has said, “these are women who could not exist without SATC” (James Poniewozik 2012). Thus, in this scene, Dunham honours SATC and its cultural relevance, but moves on, hoping to forge new paths for her own show. In establishing the characters in Girls, Dunham does not represent them as aspirational as in SATC (e.g., Are you a Hannah? Are you a Jessa?), but as young women experiencing post-university life in ways that are more familiar to viewers (see Claire Danes 2012). For instance, viewers would not aspire to be like Hannah—who wears shabby, ill-fitting clothes, has no money, makes a number of poor life decisions, and muddles through relationships—even though they may identify with her.

After all, fifteen years separates the airing of the first seasons of SATC and Girls—a period of time marked by a series of important social changes. The first season of Girls takes us to post-recession New York where the four main characters are trying to make it financially. Whereas the women of SATC were drinking Cosmopolitans in the hottest New York City nightspots, dripping in designer labels, and obsessing over $300 shoes, Girls is “Sex and the City in a charcoal-grey Salvation Army overcoat” (Frank Bruni 2012). Thus while “liberation” on SATC was primarily symbolised through economic and sexual independence (Arthurs 2003), the women of Girls are similarly white and entitled but unambitious, mostly unemployed, and financially unstable. The show shifts the feminist narrative from “liberation” to one of “post-graduation/post-feminist entitlement” (L. J. DeCarvalho 2013, 370) where “choice” has morphed from a “freedom” to an encumbrance. For instance, Hannah and Marnie share an apartment and much of the first season revolves around Hannah’s inability to pay the rent due to her lack of a job (she gets fired from her unpaid internship at a publishing company), and the humiliation of sponging off her parents (she begs her parents to give her $1100 per month to support her writing). Like Carrie Bradshaw, Hannah is also a New York City writer, albeit an emerging one who writes in an entirely different medium (online). In one of the most quoted lines of the series, Hannah proclaims to her parents that as a writer she may be “the voice of my generation, or at least a voice. Of a generation” (Season 1, Episode 1, “Pilot”). However, throughout the series Hannah realises that there is no guarantee that she will find her voice or that her voice will actually be heard. Thus this bold statement established Dunham and the series as “a proxy for the collective aspirations and insecurities” of a subset of millennial women in a similar way that SATC influenced women during the late 1990s (Meghan Daum 2014).

Like SATC, Girls evokes the post-feminist archetype of the modern “girl,” a term that was made popular in Helen Gurley Brown’s (1962) Sex and the Single Girl, which introduced the concept of an independent, urban, reflexive, and sexually active, modern woman.
In using “Girls” as the title for a show focused on young women, Dunham is arguably perpetuating the post-feminist “girilfication” of adult women in which women are infantilised and pre-adolescent girls are sexualised (Gill 2007). Yet Girls taps into the connotations of the word that “summon[s] up memories of choice and relative freedom before the travails of womanhood set in” (Whelehan 2000, 39). Compared to SATC, the show is a coming-of-age story with the characters awkwardly hovering between adolescence and adulthood—one gets the sense that the characters are not even sure that they would refer to themselves as “women.” Although the title certainly symbolises a post-feminist sensibility, its appearance in the opening credits in bold uppercase lettering that “gobbles up the screen,” subverts the pejorative nature of the word “girl” and demonstrates a knowing irony that permeates the narrative and perhaps an unwillingness to leave feminism behind so easily (Danes 2012). For instance, in contrast to the dismissal of feminism as an influential force in SATC by the show’s writing/production staff, Dunham leads an all-female writing team, identifies as a “feminist” publicly, and regularly engages in activist work especially in relation to reproductive rights (e.g., Judy Kurtz 2014). Following from this point, Dunham’s recently published memoir, Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She’s “Learned” (2014), reveals the most intimate details of her personal life from toxic relationships, to body image, and psychotherapy. Inspired by Helen Gurley Brown’s best-selling Having it All (1982), Dunham (2014, xvi) describes writing her book as a feminist act because: “There is nothing gutsier to me than a person announcing that their story is one that deserves to be told, especially if that person is a woman.” Dunham turned her book tour into a political campaign trail by partnering with US reproductive rights organisation Planned Parenthood to educate women and men about prevalent health issues. Thus the second-wave feminist project of conceptualising the “personal as political” in terms of voicing young women’s experiences of sexuality and embodiment is never far from the centre of her work and this has clearly influenced how she has approached Girls. Unlike the “empowered,” upwardly mobile post-feminist women of SATC, Dunham constructs a less optimistic vision of “liberation” and “empowerment” for her characters in Girls. Thus although SATC and Girls are clearly post-feminist cultural texts, they are inflected differently. In Girls, “discourses of post-feminism and privilege are called up, largely to be scrutinised” (Bell 2013, 363).

**Theorising Post-Feminism**

Post-feminism is a complex concept with multiple, contested interpretations. The arguments for and against post-feminism are well-rehearsed and have been outlined substantively in many other places (e.g., Gill 2011; Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra 2007), so we will highlight only a few key arguments. Developing out of the fractures caused by the 1980s feminist “sex wars,” post-feminist discourse can be seen as an “aftermath” of the achievements gained from second wave feminist movements in the West in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While post-feminism has been conflated with the third wave feminism of the 1990s–2000s, an era of “girl power” and “riot grrl” politics, it cannot be seen as a social movement in the same way (Catherine M. Orr 1997). The “Riot Grrl” movement originated in the 1990s with girl bands like Bikini Kill and was characterised by a suspicion of the “artefacts of femininity,” and the shunning of “femaleness” (Feona Atwood 2007, 24). Many grrrls used their bodies to convey their political resistance (e.g., wearing baby doll dresses with combat boots and smudged makeup). In contrast, as McRobbie (2004, 258) has
argued, post-feminism refers to the “undoing” of feminism that she believes started in 1990 in the UK and elsewhere. This was most visible in popular culture, where the sexualisation of women’s bodies on billboards and in advertisements became normalised. McRobbie (2004) has described a “new” and “modern” post-feminist British female subject with the ability to “freely” make her life “choices.” Thus the “post” prefix in post-feminism has been seen to represent the idea that feminism is “dead” but also as “an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and de-politicizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by feminism” (Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey 1990, 549).

Scholars have also argued that the “post” prefix may symbolise a positive association—an “in relation to” rather than a “split from” earlier feminist movements (Adriaens and Van Bauwel 2014, 175). Ann Brooks (1997, 4) operationalises this as a critical re-theorisation of feminist conceptual and theoretical agendas. For Gill (2008, 442) post-feminism is a distinctively new “sensibility” that distances itself from pre-feminist and feminist constructions of gender, while actively responding to both, “entangling feminist and antifeminist discourses.” Gill’s (2007, 147) post-feminist sensibility in media texts involves an intersection of individualism, choice, feminine self-surveillance, and body management, the “makeover paradigm,” and a shift from sexual objectification to “subjectification.” Thus post-feminism is positioned as part of a contemporary neoliberal refashioning of femininity in which women escape traditional boundaries of femininity through a continual reworking of subjectivity as subjects and objects of commodification and consumerism.

Feminist scholars have argued that although post-feminism is framed as universally “empowering,” it primarily describes a white, economically successful, young, attractive (hetero)sexual female subject (e.g., McRobbie 2009). This depoliticised female subject has translated especially well in television shows such as SATC and Girls where white women explore their “independence” (Adriaens and Van Bauwel 2014). As a result, post-feminism has long been criticised for excluding women of colour (e.g., McRobbie 2009). Given the sexual content of both shows and the ways in which female characters are portrayed, it is unlikely that SATC and Girls would even be broadcast in many countries. Thus SATC and Girls do not represent most women around the world and the lack of racial diversity/tokenistic portrayals of people of colour on both shows has been criticised widely (e.g., Rebecca Brasfield 2006; Kendra James 2012). While an in-depth discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth pointing out that the cultural conversations about the lack of racial diversity in SATC in the late 1990s and now Girls flags the complex terrain of contemporary post-feminism and the relations of power that produce post-feminist discourses for women. If post-feminism has become merely an “empty signifier” that is “overburdened” with meaning, as Whelehan (2010, 161) suggests, we argue that a comparison of SATC and Girls presents an opportunity to further clarify the meaning of the term—is post-feminism still relevant in relation to analyses of contemporary woman-centred television? How should/could the term be deployed?

**Sexuality**

If he goes up your butt, will he respect you more or respect you less? That’s the issue. (Miranda, Season 1, Episode 4, “Valley of the Twenty-Something Guys”)

As the quote above demonstrates, one of the most ground-breaking aspects of SATC was the open “sex talk” among the characters and their breaching of traditional female...
sexual scripts (for an overview, see Gail Markle [2008]). For instance, all of the characters had sex with a variety of men in defiance of Western cultural messages that discourage women from having multiple sexual partners (John H. Gagnon and William Simon 1973). The women of SATC, in many ways, embodied Gill’s (2008) media archetype of the “midriff,” a woman who finds pleasure and empowerment in self-objectification and sexual agency. To illustrate, in the first episode of the first season (“Sex and the City”), Carrie attempts to “have sex like a man,” an experience for pleasure only, and without feeling or commitment. Similarly, the women experiment with sex toys and Charlotte has a sexual awakening thanks to her new vibrator, “the rabbit” (Season 1, Episode 9, “The Turtle and the Hare”). Sexuality in SATC is presented as part of a consumer lifestyle—sexual relationships, fashion, and entertainment are the primary drivers.

SATC introduced “awkward” sex into the televisual realm through its storylines built around everything from “golden showers” (e.g., Season 3, Episode 2, “Politically Erect”) to premature ejaculation (Season 2, Episode 15, “Shortcomings”) and “funky tasting spunk” (Season 3, Episode 9, “Easy Come, Easy Go”). While female viewers cringed and laughed at these moments in recognition, for the most part, sexual “awkwardness” was attributed to the men. For a show that was supposed to more accurately represent single women, viewers rarely, if ever, saw any of the female characters fumble in the bedroom. Sex never involved smudged makeup and the lighting was always perfect. Viewers never saw bodily fluids, stained sheets, or genitals. Although the characters’ idealised images were momentarily interrupted in these “awkward” scenes, the women ultimately remained perfectly posed and sexually desirable. Furthermore, sexual “awkwardness” rarely involved the protagonist—a key difference between SATC and Girls. Carrie never used vulgar language, played with sex toys, was naked, or engaged in explicit sex acts on screen due to a strict clause in Sarah Jessica Parker’s contract (Nussbaum 2008). Parker was only filmed from the waist up in sex scenes and she was always wearing a bra, resulting in a more romanticised/sanitised portrayal of Carrie’s sexuality.

Furthermore, SATC women were always in control of when sex occurred. In a content analysis of a representative sample of episodes over six seasons, Markle (2008, 54) found that SATC characters had sex more often than they declined sex. However, when the women did decline sex there were no repercussions for doing so. Men never forced women to have sex on SATC—there is no date rape—and male characters only expressed “mild disappointment” when their advances were rebuffed (54). While this representation is certainly appropriate and conforms to feminist and other cultural messages that promote women’s empowerment in relation to sexuality, it is unrealistic that viewers never saw the characters in an uncomfortable sexual situation or expressing feelings of ambivalence or guilt about declining sex or more broadly, given the number of men that the women had sex with each season (at least five men per character). The show’s portrayal of female sexual negotiation runs counter to feminist research which reveals that US women admit to consenting to unwanted sex because they are pressured by men or do so in order to maintain intimate relationships (e.g., Elizabeth M. Morgan and Eileen L. Zurbriggen 2007).

In this way, the ability of SATC women to transgress social norms and engage in risky behaviour without consequences has been central to the show’s popularity among Western women. Samantha, in particular, was represented as being unabashed in her desire for recreational sex, announcing in the pilot episode, “I’m a trisexual—I’ll try anything once” (“Sex and the City”). Samantha’s vivid sexuality was a key aspect of her character and this was often used comedically in the show in a similar way to Hannah’s frequent, unglamorous
nudity and awkward sex scenes in Girls, which we discuss in forthcoming sections. The “post-feminist irony” is that SATC was meant to provide an alternative, “empowering” view of female sexuality, however, the characters continually returned to the safety of normative femininity (Arthurs 2003, 87). To illustrate, although the women were shown with multiple boyfriends/sexual partners, ultimately the series reinforced social norms via their ongoing search for “The One.” By Season 6, the women abandoned their need to have sex “like a man” and all four characters end up either married or in committed relationships (Markle 2008).

Compared to the women of SATC, Dunham’s Girls are not wholly positioned as active, confident sexual subjects. Arguably, one of the great strengths of Girls is Dunham’s attention to the emotional and experiential sexual fumbling of women in their twenties. Adam Sackler (played by Adam Driver) is Hannah’s bizarre boyfriend who straddles a fine line between repulsive and charming throughout the first season. Hannah’s sex scenes with Adam are far from the idealised acts of “empowered” SATC women who know how to exploit the power of femininity. These encounters are often anxious, awkward and, at times, unwatchable, as Hannah disappointedly exhales “I almost came . . .” after unsatisfying sex with Adam (Season 1, Episode 6, “The Return”). Furthermore, Hannah frequently externalises her anxieties about sex to Adam (e.g., “Is this position comfortable? Are you wearing a condom?”) and looks to the Internet when she is alone, Googling “the stuff that gets up around the sides of condoms” when she is convinced that she has an STI (Season 1, Episode 3, “All Adventurous Women Do”). In this way, Hannah’s relationship with and knowledge of her body is at odds with the post-feminist figurehead of the modern, sexually subjectified, “Can-Do Girl,” like Samantha, who has reaped the benefits of second wave feminist health movements (Anita Harris 2004, 16–17). Girls complicates post-feminist notions of feminine sexuality in its representation of a subset of millennial women whose primary source of information, knowledge, and experience of their bodies seems to come, not from feminist consciousness-raising or advice from friends (à la SATC), but from the Internet. With the proliferation of online knowledge and identities, Western women of Dunham’s generation experience and understand their bodies more ambivalently (Rhonda Shaw 2010). As a result, in sex scenes, Hannah is naked and the viewer is privy to her body wobbling and moving in relatively unflattering ways. Dunham has observed that her approach to representing sex on the show is led by a feeling of disillusionment with stylised Hollywood depictions of sexuality and “sex-in-a-bra type characters” (e.g., Carrie Bradshaw), stating in a recent Vogue interview, “Seeing somebody who looks like you having sex on television is a less comfortable experience than seeing somebody who looks like nobody you’ve ever met” (Nathan Heller 2014).

Thus the more nuanced representation of “awkward” sex, sexual failure, and issues of sexual intimacy in Girls is an important acknowledgement that such things happen in young women’s lives and are worthy of deeper consideration. For Dunham, “awkward” sex is not just a comedic source—it is also used as a compass for a character’s emotional state. For instance, for much of Season 1, Marnie is looking for a way to break up with her boyfriend Charlie who loves Marnie “too much.” Marnie can barely contain her revulsion for his sweet personality and desire to have romantic sex by candlelight, at one point responding to his desire to do whatever would “turn her on the most” sexually with the following reply: “What if you were a stranger? What if you were just a totally different person? What if you didn’t act like you?” (Season 1, Episode 1, “Pilot”). Marnie becomes infatuated with experimental artist, Booth Jonathon, and her interactions with him provide
an important glimpse into Marnie’s need for a “jerk” and also how young women negotiate “awkward” sex (Season 2, Episode 3, “Bad Friend”). In Season 1 (Episode 3, “All Adventurous Women Do”), Booth delivers this “pick-up” line to Marnie: “The first time I fuck you, I might scare you a little. Because I’m a man, and I know how to do things.” As it turns out, Booth does not live up to this claim. In Season 2 (Episode 3, “Bad Friend”), Booth’s idea of foreplay involves imprisoning Marnie in one of his art installations (a chamber of TVs showing disgusting/confronting footage) and then having sex with her in a “starfish” position against the backdrop of a blood-smeared dollhouse with a doll placed strategically on the bed to “watch” them. Marnie goes along with this disappointing experience for the sake of a potential relationship. Although she laughs hysterically at the end of the scene, Marnie does not call Booth out for his sexual shortcomings because she is desperate to have a relationship with a “real” man.

The sexual objectification/subjectification of women in Girls is more complex than SATC as the post-feminist notions of “choice” and sexual “empowerment” are juxtaposed with male-defined sexual encounters. The inclusion of a scene wherein sex is not clearly consensual is worthy of discussion (Season 2, Episode 9, “On All Fours”) in light of our earlier point about the lack of consequences associated with sex on SATC. Although a previous sexual encounter between Adam and his new girlfriend Natalia appeared to have been fun and consensual, in a subsequent encounter, Adam commands Natalia to crawl on all fours into his bedroom. He has sex with her without any apparent concern for her enjoyment or willing participation. The scene ends with Adam ejaculating onto her chest and Natalia looking away, saying “I don’t think I like that . . . I, like, really didn’t like that.”

Public reaction to this episode was divided—whereas feminist commentators contended that Adam “raped” Natalia (e.g., Amanda Hess 2013) others observed that it was merely a case of “exceedingly uncomfortable sex” (e.g., David Hagland and Jeffrey Bloomer 2013). Dunham responded:

Did what Adam do constitute rape? That’s hard for me to answer. I’m a rabid feminist and no woman should ever be placed in a sexual situation that leaves her feeling degraded or compromised. That’s not what sex is supposed to feel like. But I don’t think Adam is a villain. If he thought he had even touched the R-word, he would be unable to live. To me, it seemed like a terrible miscommunication between two people who didn’t know what they really wanted. (HuffpostTV 2014)

Throughout the first season, Adam is depicted making unusual sexual requests of Hannah (e.g., roleplaying, watching him masturbate). These episodes certainly raise issues of consent but Hannah acquiesces without too much concern. In contrast, in “On All Fours,” Adam’s behaviour is taken to a new extreme and Natalia is visibly distressed. Whether one believes that the scene is depicting rape or not, this episode does break important new ground when it comes to dealing with the unspoken realities of young women’s sexual experiences. The encounter between Adam and Natalia is not easily categorised but is an experience that many young heterosexual women have had and are often unable to describe—that “awkward” sex can change from something fun/funny to something much more difficult to articulate. This scene shows the blurred boundaries of consent and that women are not always sure themselves whether a “rape” has occurred. It also shows us that “rapists” are not necessarily predatory strangers but can be men that women know and trust.

These examples showcase Dunham’s masterful attempts at constructing a contemporary feminist narrative that reveals the multiple and often contradictory ways
that young women experience “liberation” and “sexual empowerment” compared to SATC which is more akin to fantasy fiction. Furthermore, the embodiment of feminine heterosexuality in Girls is experienced as an endless negotiation of objectification and subjectification that perhaps more closely reflects the experiences of young Western women.

Reproductive “Choices”

I don’t like women telling other women what to do, or how to do it, or when to do it. Every time I have sex it’s my choice. (Jessa, Season 1, Episode 2, “Vagina Panic”)

As Jessa’s quote above makes apparent, second wave feminist notions of sexual “choice” and liberation are experienced as a “given” for the privileged characters of Girls, with previously politicised issues such as abortion, sexual promiscuity, and sexually transmitted infections being solved by “the all-purpose postfeminist answer that [women] have a right to choose” (Whelehan 2010, 161). However, the narrativisation of reproductive “choice” in Girls subverts post-feminist discourses. An example of this is when Jessa is thrown an “abortion party” by her friends, who openly engage in a discussion about the termination of pregnancy (Season 1, Episode 2, “Vagina Panic”). As a demonstration of this “openness,” the word “abortion” is used eleven times in the episode. Although the characters seem to be mostly comfortable with abortion, the situation is more complex (Anna Goldsworthy 2013, 58). Marnie is furious that Jessa missed her appointment; Jessa is upset by her situation; Hannah is uncertain about whether having an abortion is a “big issue,” and Adam has the clearest stance of any of them—“kind of a heavy fucking situation.” Nevertheless, the abortion itself is a source of comedy as Marnie sends Jessa irritated text messages: “Uh, hey. You’re pregnant when you don’t want to be. So you might want to come have your abortion now. Thanks.”

This ambivalence coupled with a willingness to openly discuss abortion is contrasted with the handling of unwanted pregnancy ten years earlier in SATC in Season 4 (Episode 11, “Coulda Woulda Shoullda”) when Miranda, the career-focussed lawyer, finds herself pregnant. Miranda’s “choice” to terminate her pregnancy converges around the reproductive “choices” of her friends Charlotte (who is desperate to become a mother but faces the shock of infertility) and Carrie (who ruminates over whether to tell her boyfriend Aidan that she had an abortion when she was twenty-two). The conversation around abortion itself is fraught—“abortion” is only uttered three times during the episode even though both Carrie and Samantha admit to having had “at least one” as younger women.

Miranda’s ambivalence toward abortion centres on her struggle to “have it all.” Faced with Charlotte’s meagre “15% chance of ever getting pregnant,” Miranda weighs the pros and cons of motherhood. By the end of the episode, she fulfils the post-feminist cultural expectation that, as a woman in her late thirties, she should opt in to motherhood because this may be her only chance. Jessa, in her early twenties, in contrast, is far removed from the burden of the questions Miranda grapples with. In the middle of hooking up with a stranger in a pub bathroom, Jessa gets her period (or conveniently has a miscarriage), freeing her from making a “choice” about motherhood altogether. Upon seeing her blood on the man’s fingers, the relief on Jessa’s face is evident but it is a strange, sad scene that effectively demonstrates the ambivalent emotions that surround abortion for many young women. In this way, Jessa’s “choice” could be read as evidence of feminist progress in
de-stigmatising abortion compared to SATC where abortion must be personally and ethically laboured over. From another perspective, however, the age gap between Jessa and Miranda is a key distinction between the two shows which allows Girls to avoid what Diane Negra (2009, 47) refers to as the “time anxiety” around female life stages (e.g., marriage, career, motherhood) and a staple of post-feminist representational culture. Whereas Miranda falls into a life stage paradigm that is consistent with post-feminist feminine archetypes, Jessa is neither celebrated nor castigated for “failing” to become a mother. In not hewing to the logic of post-feminism, the Girls episode perhaps confirms that motherhood does not have to be a site of “authentic” feminine subjectivity. However, in challenging the “rules” of post-feminism, the episode is also an exception that “proves the rule when it comes to the strict ideological control post-feminism seeks to maintain over the female lifecycle” (Negra 2009, 85).

Feminine Embodiment and Bodily Management

Last night I could not stop thinking about a Big Mac. I finally had to get dressed, go out and pick up a guy. (Samantha, Season 4, Episode 2, “The Real Me”) Truthfully, I gained a bunch of weight very quickly and I just felt very out of control of my own body. It was just this Riot Grrrl idea, like “I’m taking control of my own shape.” (Hannah, Season 1, Episode 3, “All Adventurous Women Do”)

For Gill (2007, 149), post-feminist “femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one . . . In today’s media, possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as a woman’s key source of identity.” The central features of Gill’s (2007) post-feminist sensibility are feminine bodily management, discipline, and self-surveillance. As feminist scholars have observed, this takes the form of beauty, fashion, fitness, and dieting regimes common in post-feminist popular cultural texts such as SATC, where women are portrayed as always engaging in the process of self-monitoring and bodily management (e.g., Susan Bordo 1993; Shari L. Dworkin and Faye L. Wachs 2009; McRobbie 2009). The characters are often shown engaged in fitness activities (e.g., training for a marathon, doing yoga), at spas, purchasing beauty products, and visiting plastic surgeons. Samantha is especially concerned with her appearance as the oldest friend in the group (she is in her forties for most of the series). For instance, Samantha’s obsession with physical perfection is played out in Season 4 (Episode 2, “The Real Me”) when she goes on an extreme diet in preparation for a nude photo shoot and again in Season 5 (Episode 5, “Plus One is the Loneliest Number”) when she gets a chemical peel (“an impulse purchase”) to erase the signs of ageing before attending an event. Although the show, to a certain extent, reveals contemporary taboos surrounding (ageing) women’s bodies, the show is primarily a celebration of normative feminine bodies that are used to gain the attention of men.

Girls complicates post-feminist conceptualisations of femininity and feminine embodiment typified by SATC. Though women’s naked bodies are featured on Girls, they often do not conform to typical heteronormative ideals of feminine beauty or sexiness and body work is not a primary focus for any of the characters, with Hannah often un glamorously flopping onto beds in her worn-out underwear. Unlike Samantha, who actively pursues feminine bodily control, Hannah is featured sweaty and exhausted while attempting to exercise, playing table tennis in her underwear, binge eating, and dancing wildly (see Claire Perkins 2014).
Yet Hannah’s lack of feminine bodily control is complicated by her desires to be controlled. In a telling scene quoted at the start of this section, Adam pinches her “fat” and asks her why she has so many tattoos. Hannah admits that she had this "Riot Grrrl" idea and got tattoos to reclaim control over her body after gaining weight when she was younger (Season 1, Episode 3, “All Adventurous Women Do”). As a millennial, Hannah’s nod to the feminist subcultural “Riot Grrrl” movement is poignant. The “girl power” of the Riot Grrrl movement encouraged young women to see themselves as the producers of knowledge with diverse embodied experiences. Hannah’s commentary evidences her engagement with the cultural representation of women’s bodies and her own appearance which largely diverges from the post-feminist “self-fasioning” associated with SATC.

Dunham’s intention is to represent women and women’s bodies in a more realistic and unpollished manner, as “a way of saying, with these bodies, you know: don’t silence them” (Goldsworthy 2013, 59) and this is political. As noted earlier, the frequent exposure of Dunham’s naked body, especially during sex scenes, has sparked much discussion in terms of her subversion of dominant norms of feminine beauty and “sexiness.” Both within and beyond the show, the consumption, criticism, and metatextual discussion of Dunham’s body flags lingering sexist cultural attitudes around women’s bodies. A primary example of this occurred in relation to Episode 5 in Season 2 (“One Man’s Trash”) when Hannah spent a weekend with an attractive older man (played by Patrick Wilson). Critics of the show argued that a woman with a body like Dunham’s would never “get” a man as good looking as Wilson (Tracie Egan Morrissey 2013). Similarly, while being interviewed on a Television Critics Association panel, Dunham was questioned by a reporter who queried the “necessity” of her nudity in Girls (Kelly Faircloth 2014). Dunham responded, “Yeah. It’s because it’s a realistic expression of what it’s like to be alive, I think, and I totally get it. If you are not into me, that’s your problem." The exchange sparked a range of reactions on Twitter (see Faircloth [2014] for examples) and feminist critics argued that it was sexist for the reporter to imply that women like Dunham should not show their bodies. We argue that this exchange reflects the very notion of the male-defined representation of women’s bodies that Dunham subverts by allowing women’s bodies to “speak” for themselves.

Towards Post? Feminism?

Although Girls and SATC are “post-feminist” and share a number of continuities in terms of their foci of life, love, and friendships of privileged white women, we have proposed that the differences between the shows are equally significant. Through an analysis of the presentation of sexuality, reproductive “choices,” and feminine bodily management, we have demonstrated that the millennial women in Girls experience “liberation” and “empowerment” in “new,” arguably more complex ways than their SATC foremothers. Thus Girls embodies a distinctive post-feminist sensibility by re-articulating and complicating existing notions of post-feminism and by mobilising femininities and anti-feminist/feminist attitudes in nuanced ways. This re-articulation builds an argument for the continuing relevance of post-feminism but also flags the necessity of identifying “moments of rupture and refusal . . .” (Gill 2011, 64). The deployment of this “new” version of post-feminism on Girls is primarily credited to Lena Dunham, a “feminist” millennial woman who has had a strong hand in shaping the metatextual commentary and perhaps more “honest” depiction of Western womanhood on the show.
What should we call this “new” version of post-feminism? We propose that the term “post? feminism” may be used to describe a revised post-feminist sensibility for a millennial generation. Rather than rejecting post-feminism, we include a question mark to create a platform for new debate and engagement with post-feminism, while acknowledging its coexistence with predecessor feminisms, and the continuing popular and academic usage of post-feminism. The question mark importantly provides a focal point for questioning and re-articulating the meaning, usage, and constituencies of post-feminism today. For instance, “post? feminism” is potentially useful in enabling a dialogue around the challenges faced by a “media-savvy, culture driven” (Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards 2000, 77) generation of young women who are trying to position themselves between second wave feminism and post-feminism and in changed social, economic, and political contexts. Here, the addition of the question mark symbolises that feminist engagement with post-feminism is multiple and shifting and that the breadth of issues involved in feminist identification is much broader and complex in the current moment.

Is a post? feminist consciousness apolitical? While we recognise objections that surround post-feminism in terms of its political stance, we argue that Dunham has demonstrated that post-feminism does not necessarily have to be apolitical and can also be a site for critical resistance (see Fien Adriaens 2009). Dunham has shown that television can be an effective medium to advance the feminist adage that the “personal is political” via her position as an influential figure in cultural production (e.g., as a writer, director, and producer). The show is a kind of millennial consciousness-raising tool in which Dunham engages with the social processes that were instigated by second wave feminism and that were aimed at developing experiential knowledge, giving women a “voice” and unifying their experiences (although this is clearly contested in terms of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality), and “empowering” women in their relationships to their bodies. In relation to this, the addition of the question mark identifies the generative potential of popular cultural forms like Girls and the importance of articulating the “personal” and “political” in many different ways and contexts as opposed to assuming that they are political or not which is perhaps less productive given the “plurality of positions and issues that constitute feminisms today” (Ann Braithwaite 2002, 342).

Girls renews debates about post-feminism that, in many ways, SATC instigated in feminist media and cultural studies. This paper is a first step towards further analysis and we call on other scholars to examine Girls and its place within a changing post-feminist media landscape.

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REFERENCES


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