

CHALLENGING NORMATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN'S SEXUAL
AGENCY IN AMERICAN TELEVISION

by

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ABSTRACT

Real-life scenarios frequently inspire art and media. As the frequency of television shows that are labeled as “feminist” increases, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which these shows may depict women’s sexual agency and how what messages the depictions send may impact the real lives of viewers. This paper examines how “feminist” television depictions of women’s sexual agency differ from or adhere to normative constructions of women’s sexualities, as well as the potential implications depictions may have for viewers’ understandings of women’s sexual agency. While television depictions may be labeled as “feminist,” and generally seem to incorporate feminist constructions of women’s sexualities in their depictions, they still frequently rely on normative and traditional constructions.

Keywords: sexual agency; consent; pleasure seeking; reproductive rights; American television; women’s sexuality

In 1998, a television show premiered that altered the American public's perception of the limits of acceptable depictions of women's sexualities in mainstream media. *Sex and the City* portrayed women as financially independent and sexually liberated, in pursuit of no strings attached sexual pleasure. The show completely flipped gendered sexual scripts, objectifying men in ways that women were traditionally objectified and allowing the women to seek out sexual experiences, prioritize their own orgasms, have one-night stands and emotionally detached sexual encounters, and openly and unabashedly discuss various topics related to sex with their friends (Akass and McCabe 2004). Shaking up the standing constructions of women's sexualities of the late 1990s and early 2000s as non-agentic and non-pleasure seeking, Carrie, Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte made New York City their sexual playground, exploring their physical needs and wants, and having fun while doing so.

Sex and the City was groundbreaking in its depictions of women as individuals capable of sexual desire and agency. Since its premier, there has been increasing discussion among academics of the importance of positive and accurate media representations of women's sexualities as well as debates over what women's sexual empowerment actually looks like in practice (Akass & McCabe 2004). In particular, we have seen a focus on consent, reproductive rights and sexual health, and women engaging in sexual pleasure seeking, not just in television and movies, but also in academic discussions of women's sexual agency. These topics of consent, reproductive rights and sexual health, and pleasure seeking can all be grouped under the umbrella of women's sexual agency (Douglas 2010; Erdreich 2013; Tolman 2002; Wade 2017).

Because art and media often reflect the cultural climate, these shifts surrounding women's sexual agency have likely had an influence on mainstream television. In this study, I examine the potential correlation between these cultural debates and critiques and television

images of women's sexualities. Through this research, I seek to answer three questions: 1) How are American television shows that are classified as feminist embracing feminist constructions of women's sexual agency; 2) In what ways are these feminist American television shows still relying on normative constructions of women's sexual agency; and 3) What are the potential real-life implications of these depictions? I argue that, while shows that are classified as feminist are certainly making strides towards more progressive and feminist depictions of women's sexual agency, they are still frequently depicting women's sexualities using normative constructions of women's sexual agency, but that the progress they are making towards more feminist depictions could have significant impacts on the way individuals understand women's sexual agency in everyday life.

Through content analysis, I studied four American television shows released in recent years with a focus on how they challenge or conform to normative constructions of women's sexualities. In particular, analysis centers on shows that are likely to depict feminist understandings of women's sexualities. I examine the ways in which the shows interact with the topics of women's consent, reproductive rights and sexual health, and sexual pleasure seeking. After analyzing the ways in which the shows challenge or conform to normative constructions, I discuss the potential implications that the new, feminist television depictions of women's sexualities on the real-life sexual agency of the viewers.

CHANGING CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITIES

Constructions of Women's Sexualities

In the United States, women's sexualities have historically been constructed as passive, non-pleasure seeking, and generally non-agentic (Hamilton & Armstrong 2009; Tolman 1991; 2002; Valenti 2010; Wade 2017). Women have been consistently presented as sexual objects, to

be used for male pleasure and sexual fulfillment, and as sexual gatekeepers, responsible for stopping unwanted sexual advances from men, rather than being seen as sexual agents with desires in their own right (Hlavka 2014; Oppliger 2008; Tolman 1991; 2002). All of this exists inside the overarching construct of compulsory heterosexuality, which assumes that all individuals will be acting within the confines of heterosexuality and constructs women's sexualities as the opposite of men's sexualities (Hlavka 2014; McNair 2002; Pascoe 2011).

American women's sexualities have often been presented as being intrinsically tied to their moral character. In order to be deemed "nice" or "good", women must be sure to have the right amount of socially desirable sexual partners within the confines of particular types of relationships, and are not meant to vocalize sexual desire or actively seek sexual pleasure (Hamilton & Armstrong 2009; Tolman 1991; 2002; Valenti 2010). While there is some variation based on class and age, American women are generally expected to avoid casual hookups and confine their sexual interactions to a relatively small number of romantic, committed relationships (Hamilton & Armstrong 2009). Women who deviate from these restrictive standards run the risk of being labeled a "slut" or any other number of pejorative terms by their peers (Hamilton & Armstrong 2009; Harad 2003; Hlavka 2014; Miller 2016; Tolman 2002). Reproductive choice is also tied into these moral judgments; women who worry about being judged by their peers are less likely to seek out or use birth control pills or condoms, leading them to participate in unsafe sexual behaviors (Tolman 2002). Many Americans also place a moral judgment on abortion, leading many women to dismiss it as a legitimate option in the face of an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy (Erdreich 2013). Men's morality, however, is not tied to sexuality in the same way. Men are expected to explore their sexualities, openly pursue women, have substantially higher amounts of sexual partners than women, express sexual desire, seek

and expect sexual pleasure, and participate in casual hookups, all in the name of “boys being boys” (Hlavka 2014; Pascoe 2011; Tolman 2002; Wade 2017). This forces women into the role of sexual gatekeeper, making it their responsibility to ensure that they stop men from engaging with them sexually outside of the societally constructed “best scenario,” because women are supposedly less sexual than men and therefore more capable of controlling themselves and the situation (Hlavka 2014; Oppliger 2008; Tolman 2002).

Portraying women as less sexual than men contributes to the belief that women do not have sexual desire and do not seek sexual pleasure (Fahs 2011; Firestone, Firestone, & Catlett 2006; Hlavka 2014; Tolman 1991; 2002; Wade 2017). Instead, sexual desire is supposedly replaced with a desire for emotional intimacy and committed relationships (Hamilton & Armstrong 2014; Tolman 2002). Sexual desire becomes gendered, characterized as an aggressive, masculine trait (Tolman 2002). When girls and women dare to express sexual desire, they may be viewed as bad, dirty, or out-of-control because of their lack of conformity to the passive female standard (Firestone et. al. 2006; Tolman 2002). Expressions of sexual desire can be used against women; in the event of rape or sexual assault, law enforcement may use a woman’s unrelated prior expression of sexual desire to blame her for the assault, claiming that she failed at her gatekeeper duties and allowed the assault to occur (Hlavka 2014; Krakauer 2015).

Because of women’s assumed lack of sexual desire, men’s sexual pleasure is privileged over women’s sexual pleasure. During casual sexual encounters outside of committed relationships, whether or not a woman has an orgasm is often inconsequential to the participants’ overall perception of the encounter (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty 2012). A man not having an orgasm during a casual sexual encounter, however, is often seen as diminishing to the encounter

(Fahs 2011). Americans have been taught that it is natural for men to consistently orgasm and that orgasms are not necessary and perhaps too difficult to bother with for women, leading to a very large gap in the number of orgasms had by men and women (Wade 2017). This is not the case for every country, however. The orgasm gap varies by country; in countries where couples are more likely to participate in sexual activities in which women's pleasure is acknowledged, the gap is much smaller than in countries like the United States which are more likely to privilege men's pleasure (Wade 2017). The gap also varies between types of relationship; women in committed relationships are far more likely to have orgasms than women participating in casual sex due to a difference in the levels of care and effort put in by their sexual partners; women whose partners emphasize and prioritize their sexual pleasure are more likely to have orgasms, and this emphasis occurs more frequently within committed relationships (Armstrong et. al. 2012; Wade 2017).

The positioning of women as tools for male pleasure sets women up to become sexual objects for the male gaze rather than sexual agents (Kaplan 1983). And while women are not necessarily constructed as sexual agents, they are still supposed to portray themselves as being both sexy and sexually available to men (Tolman 2002). An example of this is women kissing other women at parties, not because they are sexually interested in the other woman, but because men will find them sexually attractive for doing it (Rupp & Taylor 2010; Wade 2017). Men then approach the women and the women resume their role as gatekeeper, rather than acting as sexual agents and approaching the men directly. Women may replicate this approach in courtship scenarios; for example, they may find alternate routes to expressing their interest in men that avoid specifically stating their interest, allowing the men to initiate anything beyond flirting and

allowing the women to maintain some semblance of the passivity that is expected from femininity (Lamont 2014).

Media Representations of Women's Sexualities

Because of the ways in which media may reflect society at large, examining media representations of sexualities is essential to fully understanding how a specific society constructs sexualities. Sex has been portrayed on television for decades. This does not mean, however, that the female characters in these television programs were allowed to deviate from the standard conceptions of women's sexualities of the time. American television has consistently portrayed the sexualities of female characters in accordance with the dominant social narratives.

Female characters are frequently objectified and coded as erotic to make them more pleasing and less threatening to male viewers (Hollows 2000; Oppliger 2008). Allowing female characters that are both smart and attractive could be threatening to male viewers, so female characters generally had to be either smart or attractive, but not both (Oppliger 2008). The same went for funny female characters; less conventionally attractive women were often relegated to comedy roles in an attempt to reinforce the idea that if a woman cannot get a man with her looks alone, she would have to use humor to gain a man's affection (Oppliger 2008). These women are stripped of their agency and preferences; they are forced to become part of a person for the sake of men rather than being a whole person while still being considered valid as a sexual partner.

While television rarely portrays women's sexual desire and agency as important, they frequently place female characters in sexual situations. A common way of doing this is circumventing the need for female character's consent or active participation through rape (Oppliger 2008). While there are also consensual sex scenes on television, they rarely include vocalized consent, women experiencing physical pleasure or orgasms, or woman initiating

sexual activities. Women's sexual pleasure is not the priority in any of these scenarios; they are simply tools for men's pleasure. When women are allowed to vocalize sexual desire, pleasure, or preferences, it is usually within the context of a character represented as a "sexpert," someone with a vast working knowledge of sex who usually acts as the go-to advice giver for her friends (Douglas 2010:156).

Finally, women's reproductive rights are often used as plot devices on television to create tension or comedy, usually in the form of unplanned pregnancies (Erdreich 2013). When unplanned pregnancies occur, the pregnant character rarely considers options other than having the baby, and if abortion is considered, it is made to seem like a horrid, life-altering option (Erdreich 2013). In the rare scenario that a character does decide to have an abortion, they often suffer a "conveniently timed miscarriage" before they can have the procedure (Erdreich 2013:96). Television often redefines reproductive choice, changing it from meaning a slew of equally valid reproductive options to a single, correct reproductive option and a collection of other incorrect choices that few or no characters make.

Feminist Constructions of Women's Sexualities

Feminist constructions of women's sexualities provide progressive alternatives to the normative constructions the media often relies on when depicting women's sexualities. Feminist constructions differ from normative constructions in their situation of women as capable of making their own decisions regarding their physical needs and desires. They place a strong emphasis on women as sexual agents, capable of making choices about their own bodies, desires, and comfort levels. Where normative constructions paint women as objects to be acted upon by men, feminist constructions provide space for women to be considered sexually equal to men,

capable of initiating or refusing sexual encounters with the partners of their choice (Erdreich 2013; Tolman 1991; 2002; Wade 2017).

Feminist constructions of women's sexualities vary greatly from the normative constructions. Feminist constructions create space for deviation from the norm of compulsory heterosexuality. These constructions also allow for women to be sexually agentic without falling back on a gendered definition of sexual agency. Sexual agency is allowed to mean more than just sexual aggression and dominance; it allows for enthusiastic consent and sexual health to become a part of sexual agency, as well as allowing for women to both be sexual beings and have emotions without being looked down upon. Feminist constructions do not call for women to become more masculine in order to become sexual agents, but instead expand the idea of sexual agency to allow women and their partners to express sexual desires while being caring and emotional if they so choose (Wade 2017). These feminist constructions allow women to claim their bodies as their own and make the choices that they deem correct for their desires, health, and wellbeing without requiring them to conform to patriarchal norms and expectations of femininity or convert to the aggressive behaviors of masculinity (Akass & McCabe 2004, Erdreich 2013; Gibson & Wolske 2011; Wade 2017; Weitz 2010).

This paper will focus mainly on television portrayals that claim to be or are heralded as feminist, so analysis will examine whether or not these portrayals do in fact mirror feminist constructions of women's sexualities. If they do not, it is important to determine the ways in which they conform to normative constructions. Because media reflects culture and culture internalizes media, it is important to analyze the ways in which television shows that are purportedly feminist may affect the individuals within a given culture. Studies have shown that media depictions that objectify women and women's bodies can have significant effects on

female viewers' self-image, so it follows that media depictions of women's sexualities may impact the ways in which female viewers understand their own sexualities (Aubrey 2006; Harper & Tiggemann 2008). While there has been extensive research on feminism in media generally, there has been significantly less on the specifics of feminist constructions of women's sexualities in media; much of the research on women's depictions in media focuses on body image or hypersexualization, but there has been little research on the ways in which the media has been pursuing more progressive constructions of sexualities. These constructions can both shape and be shaped by outside culture, so it is important to understand them fully.

METHODS

In order to explore the ways in which current American television shows embrace or reject feminist constructions of women's sexual agency, I selected four shows for analysis: *Scandal*, *Broad City*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and *GLOW*. *Scandal* is an hour-long political drama set in Washington, DC; the main character, Olivia Pope, is the only woman of color lead character in any of the four shows. *Broad City* is a half-hour sitcom following two young women, Abbi and Ilana, through their daily lives in New York City. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is an hour-long musical comedy set in West Covina, California that centers around a high-powered lawyer, Rebecca, who is trying to win back her high school boyfriend. Finally, *GLOW* is a half-hour comedy about women in professional wrestling set in 1980s Los Angeles. I selected these four shows because of their potential to include feminist constructions of women's sexual agency. All of the shows have been mentioned in multiple articles and lists as feminist television shows (Blay 2016; Dionne 2017; Nicolaou 2017). They also all focus on one or more female lead characters and deal with the topic of women's sexualities, usually through their female leads, but also occasionally through secondary female characters.

I also selected the shows for reasons pertaining to their creation and distribution. Each of the shows airs on a different network or platform, providing different formats and program standards. One airs on a major television network (*Scandal* on ABC), two are on minor networks (*Broad City* on Comedy Central and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* on The CW), and one is an original creation of an Internet streaming service (*GLOW* on Netflix). The inclusion of shows from different networks is important because it accounts for any differences that may exist between the shows because of the different viewership preferences of the networks or different content restrictions imposed or encouraged by networks. All shows were either currently airing or between seasons at the time of analysis. Additionally, all of the shows were created by women, because I hoped to increase the potential that the shows would capture the sexual experiences of women in a genuine and thoughtful way, and lived experience often plays an important role in honest art.

I analyzed all episodes of the first two seasons of each of the shows, with the exception of *GLOW*, which at the time of analysis had only one season. I coded for women characters that have either a speaking role, are a named character, or are on screen more than once in an episode, based on their sexual activity, both vocalized and visually depicted, using the following variables. Depictions of consent were coded using four categories: 1) verbal consent; 2) physical consent; 3) consent revoked or denied; and 4) consent process skipped. Depictions of reproductive rights and sexual health were coded using three categories: 1) pregnancy and abortion; 2) contraception; and 3) general sexual health. The general sexual health category includes things like mentions of gynecology appointments and vaginal health. Depictions of pleasure-seeking were coded using three categories: 1) woman-initiated partnered sexual encounter; 2) physical pleasure and orgasm; and 3) masturbation. All coding categories are

explained below (Table 1). The coding categories were selected based on the topics most frequently mentioned in the literature as important to feminist constructions of women's sexual agency.

I watched and analyzed ninety total episodes of the television shows. When an episode mentioned or depicted something related to consent, reproductive rights and sexual health, or pleasure seeking, or to sex in general, I paused the episode and recorded all related dialogue (if there was any) as well as a description of the scene, rewinding as needed to catch all relevant details. I then coded into the corresponding categories and subcategories; in the event that a scene fit into multiple coding categories, as many did, the descriptions were entered into all relevant categories. In the following sections, I outline the ways in which each of the shows progresses towards feminist constructions or relies on normative constructions in their depictions of consent, reproductive rights and sexual health, and pleasure seeking.

Table 1 Coding categories for depictions of women’s sexual agency on American television

Coding Category	Explanation	Codes
Consent	Female characters giving consent to sexual activity either through verbal communication or affirming physical actions or the lack of maintain consent or show creators neglecting to show the consent process.	1) Verbal consent 2) Non-verbal consent 3) Consent revoked or denied 4) Consent process skipped
Reproductive Rights/Sexual Health	Female characters discussing or being depicted in situations related to women’s sexual health or reproductive rights.	1) Abortion 2) Contraception 3) General sexual health
Pleasure-Seeking	Female characters being depicted either having or seeking out pleasurable sexual experiences with a partner or by themselves.	1) Woman-initiated partnered sexual encounter 2) Physical pleasure and orgasm 3) Masturbation

“WHEN DO WE START?” FEMINIST DEPICTIONS OF CONSENT, REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS, AND PLEASURE SEEKING

Each of the shows studied included feminist constructions in their depictions of consent, reproductive rights and sexual health, and pleasure seeking. While occasionally the shows included regressive, traditional, or postfeminist depictions of women’s sexual agency, the overall trend was toward feminist constructions, particularly in the category of pleasure seeking. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* did a particularly good job in the categories of consent and reproductive rights and sexual health, while *Scandal* was the most likely to include regressive rhetoric and depictions, especially around the portrayal of consent.

Consent

The shows varied significantly in their depictions of women’s consent. Most common across the shows were depictions of physical consent and depictions of revoked or denied consent. Depictions of verbal consent varied extensively between shows; verbal consent was depicted only twice in the twenty-nine *Scandal* episodes studied, while *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* depicted women consenting verbally nine times in the thirty-one episodes studied. *GLOW* had no depictions of women consenting verbally at all. Additionally, all of the shows included at least one depiction of sexual activity that skipped the consent process completely, but this was generally the least common consent theme.

Physical consent

Depictions of physical consent were very common in each of the four shows. In the ninety episodes studied, there were thirty-seven separate depictions of physical consent. Generally, physical consent was depicted in one of three ways. The first way was through showing a woman initiating a sexual encounter. This usually involved her kissing or touching her

partner or leading her partner to a bedroom. Each of the shows depicted at least one sexual encounter using this method of physical consent. In an episode of *GLOW*, one of the main characters, Debbie, attends a wrestling match with some friends. After the match, she meets one of the wrestlers, finds herself to be sexually attracted to him, and, after sending her friends away, kisses him enthusiastically and climbs on top of him, initiating a sexual encounter.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend takes a slightly different approach to physical consent: in the show's first episode, main character Rebecca physically initiates a sexual encounter with her friend Greg. Although Rebecca initiates and maintains technical consent throughout the encounter, it becomes clear that she is progressively becoming more distracted and less enthusiastic. She continues attempting to initiate new sexual activities with Greg, but when he notices her lack of enthusiasm, he ends the encounter and drives her home. This type of depiction is particularly important because it illustrates that, while someone may be technically consenting by way of initiation, the enthusiasm behind the base-level consent still matters. A lack of enthusiasm can indicate that an individual is uncomfortable with a sexual activity, is experiencing physical discomfort or pain, is not experiencing physical pleasure, or feels pressured, coerced, or forced into the situation. Any perceived lack of enthusiasm should result in partners checking in on and communicating with one another to reconfirm consent, renegotiate the terms of the encounter, and make any necessary adjustments, or potentially to cease the activity completely. Depictions that include these considerations of enthusiasm emphasize the importance of open communication and accounting for one's partner's body language and non-verbal signals.

Shows also depicted physical consent by showing a woman actively and enthusiastically participating in a sexual encounter which is initiated by another character, is mutually initiated by all characters involved, or in which it is unclear which character initiated. *Scandal* frequently

used this technique. Olivia Pope, the main character, almost never initiated any type of sexual activity with her partners; male partners initiated the vast majority of her sexual encounters. She showed consent through her reciprocation of kisses and physical touch, or later, through her active participation in other sexual activities.

Finally, the shows depicted physical consent through the use of specific physical cues; most often, these scenes focus on a woman's facial or body language to signify that she found an experience pleasurable and was comfortable with it. For example, episodes of *Broad City* and *Scandal* included scenes in which a man was performing oral sex on one of the women. In both instances, the camera focuses on the woman's face; she is shown to be smiling or otherwise content. This indicates to the viewer that the woman is actively physically consenting to the activity.

Verbal consent

All of the shows depict verbal consent far less frequently than physical consent. As mentioned previously, verbal consent does not appear at all in *GLOW*, and appears infrequently in the other shows. However, the times verbal consent is depicted are very important, as they show that the characters are comfortable with communicating, not only about basic consent, but about their wants and needs generally, which is a core tenant of feminist constructions of women's sexual agency. The most notable example comes from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which had the highest number of depictions of verbal consent of any of the shows (nine depictions out of thirty-one episodes). In one episode, Rebecca decides that she wants to have sex with Greg and attempts to initiate it by kissing him. Before he allows her to continue, Greg states exactly what he expects from a sexual encounter with Rebecca. He says, "Listen, if this is going to happen, you need to know something. This isn't going to be like a roll in the hay and you go home. This

is going to be like three days of you and me just ruining each other. And not emotionally. Is that what you want?" By including the question at the end, Greg gives Rebecca an opening to either provide affirmative consent or to feel comfortable in backing out. Rebecca decides to consent by asking, "When do we start?" The request is very informal; Greg does not specifically say "do you consent," and the response, while still affirmative and enthusiastic, is less stiff than a simple "yes" or "no."

A majority of the verbal consent shown in *Scandal* and *Broad City*, as well as the other instances of verbal consent shown on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, falls into this category of informal requests and answers; a clear yes or no is still provided in each situation, but the language is not overly formal. This provides an example of how verbal consent can be incorporated organically into a sexual situation without seeming stiff or awkward. This is particularly important because individuals may be reluctant to incorporate verbal consent into their sexual experiences because asking for and granting consent may be seen as an uncomfortable, unsexual process.

Consent revoked or denied

An important part of sexual agency is the ability to feel comfortable in refusing or revoking consent to sexual activities. All four of the shows depict at least one character either refusing to consent to a sexual activity or revoking consent during a sexual encounter. Women revoke or deny consent twenty-six times in the ninety episodes studied. In fact, *Broad City* included more depictions of women refusing or revoking consent than depictions that fit into any of the other three consent themes. In one episode, Ilana, one of the two main characters, is having sex with a female partner, Adele. While they are having sex, it registers with Ilana that she was attracted to Adele because she and Adele look exactly alike. Ilana becomes uncomfortable with this realization and revokes her consent, ending their sexual encounter.

GLOW and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* both contain similar encounters; in all three shows, when a character rejects or revokes consent, their partner generally accepts and respects their decision.

Scandal also frequently depicts the refusal or revoking of consent; however, it is often shown in problematic ways. Unlike the other three shows, which depict the refusal or revoking of consent as a legitimate choice that is generally respected by other characters, *Scandal* portrays the refusal or revoking of consent as something that can be worked past or ignored until consent is granted. Essentially, the men of *Scandal* rely on coercion to gain consent. On eight separate occasions over the twenty-nine episodes watched, Olivia's most frequent sexual partner, Fitz, kisses or touches her and is refused consent. Olivia usually refuses consent by pushing Fitz away or by backing away and telling him to stop; either way, it is clear that she does not want the encounter to continue. He then either continues to kiss or touch her until she changes her mind and grants a coerced consent, or he lashes out in anger. These depictions adhere to normative and traditionalist constructions by painting Olivia as a sexual gatekeeper who has to be persuaded and coerced into sexual activity (Hlavka 2014). She is often portrayed as cold and angry, particularly towards Fitz. She holds onto the many ways he has wronged her and uses this long-standing list of perceived slights to justify her role as gatekeeper.

While it is certainly understandable that one would refuse consent to someone with whom one has an exceptionally contentious relationship, it is notable that this forces Olivia not only into the gatekeeper role, but also into the role of "angry Black woman" who is constantly holding a grudge against a former lover (Walley-Jean 2009). The trope of the angry Black woman is a highly problematic characterization of Black women in the media; *Scandal*'s use of the trope is fairly subtle, but problematic nonetheless. Olivia Pope is the only main character from any of the four shows who is a woman of color; Heather and Valencia from *Crazy Ex-*

Girlfriend and Arthie and Cherry from *GLOW* are women of color, but they are all secondary or background characters. The infrequent inclusion of women of color as main characters makes it particularly disappointing that many of Olivia's sexual encounters are masked in this traditional trope. This signifies that, while television shows may be more willing to allow Black women to be shown as sexually agentic without being sexually aggressive (Oppliger 2008), show creators may still feel the need to qualify their agency in some way, leading them to adopt the anger in place of sexual aggression.

Consent process skipped

The final theme dealing with consent involves the decision of the directors and editors of the shows to skip the consent process altogether. Show creators generally do this by cutting scenes in such a way that only the middle or aftermath of a sexual encounter is shown to the viewer. Scenes that cut into the middle of a sexual encounter usually provide no way to determine if the initial consent was coerced, but may allow viewers to determine continued consent through active and enthusiastic participation. Scenes that cut into the aftermath of a sexual encounter, usually portraying the characters lying in bed covered by a sheet, give no hints to consent whatsoever. The shows used this method of bypassing consent sparingly; it occurred only seven times in the ninety episodes studied.

In each of the four shows, the first technique was the more common way of bypassing initial consent. For example, in *GLOW*, Ruth, the main character, is shown talking to Debbie's husband, Mark, in her apartment. They are discussing a prior sexual encounter, and Ruth says that they should not have sex again. The scene then cuts to them having sex; Ruth is on top of Mark and is actively participating. While the initial consent process is skipped and there is no way to know if Ruth's (or Mark's) consent was coerced, Ruth is clearly actively participating

and consenting in the moment. Scenes that only show the aftermath of sex do not provide the same hints to the viewer; while a character may say that they enjoyed the experience afterwards, there is no way to determine if their initial consent was coerced or if they participated and consented during the experience. This applies to both male and female characters; while this analysis is focused specifically on depictions of women's sexual agency and women's consent, depictions that cut out the consent process disadvantage men and women equally. Both men and women can be coerced into sex, and neglecting portrayals of consent ignores this possibility. Men's consent is often assumed in television depictions of sexual encounters, both because men are seen as either more sexually agentic or more frequently interested in sex than women, and because male characters are more likely to initiate sexual encounters than female characters. In depictions where the consent process is completely skipped, however, it cannot be assumed which of the characters initiated or consented, if either of them did.

Explicit depictions of verbal consent were perhaps not as frequent as one would expect from these supposedly feminist shows given the number of sexual encounters that occur. Occasionally, the consent process was skipped fully, giving no clues as to whether consent was coerced for anyone involved. When consent was portrayed, it was more likely to be shown through physical actions than through verbal communication; television shows seem to still be somewhat reluctant to include open communication before and during sexual encounters. They do not seem to be particularly reluctant to include women refusing or ending sexual encounters, however. Women in all of the shows are depicted refusing or revoking consent based on their partner preferences, comfort with the situation, and general mood. While these depictions occasionally force the women into a traditional gatekeeping role, they show women more often

as feminist sexual agents who feel comfortable enough with their bodies and their preferences to know and communicate when they do not want to have sex or continue having sex.

There was some reliance on normative constructions around the topic of consent. *Scandal* repeatedly used what essentially amounts to sexual assault to progress sexual encounters. Generally, the scenes involved Fitz and Olivia; Fitz would kiss Olivia, she would refuse consent, sometimes multiple times, both verbally and physically, but Fitz would persist until she finally consented. Many of the times that Olivia “consented” in the show were coerced in this manner. While it is important to note that television has a history of portraying women of color as sexually aggressive (Oppliger 2008) and these scenarios paint Olivia, a woman of color, as the opposite of sexually aggressive, they are still highly problematic. The scenes are emblematic of sexual violence against women generally and women of color specifically, and fall back on traditional constructions of women as sexual gatekeepers. Almost every sexual scene involving Fitz and Olivia begins this way, showing *Scandal*'s continued dependence on traditional constructions of women's sexual agency.

Reproductive Rights and Sexual Health

The inclusion of nuanced discussions of reproductive rights and sexual health is an essential component to gauging whether a show is adhering to traditional or feminist constructions of women's sexual agency. Three themes make up the umbrella category of reproductive rights and sexual health: abortion and pregnancy, contraception, and general sexual health. These three themes are fundamental to understanding the levels of bodily autonomy and reproductive control women on the shows are allowed, and therefore how much the shows adhere to feminist constructions.

Abortion and pregnancy

Television programs often use pregnancy as a plot device. Rarely does it seem like television characters are allowed to make the active decision to continue their pregnancy, as other options are seldom presented (Erdreich 2013). Shows that portray feminist constructions of women's sexual agency, however, are more likely to mention both continuing a pregnancy and abortion as equally valid options for pregnant characters. While *Broad City* does not use any pregnancy storylines, *Scandal*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and *GLOW* all include characters who become pregnant at some point.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend and *GLOW* depict agentic decisions to terminate a pregnancy. In *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Paula finds out that she is pregnant shortly after being accepted to law school. Paula already has two sons, does not want any more children, and does not have enough money or time to both go to law school and have another child. In a conversation with her husband, Scott, Paula discounts abortion as an option for “teenagers the month after winter formal,” not a legitimate option for a “married mother of two.” This characterization of abortion as only being a legitimate option for young, unmarried women without children is particularly prevalent in traditional constructions of reproductive rights. Eventually, however, Paula and Scott decide that an abortion would be best, both for Paula's career goals and for their family. Paula's abortion is handled very casually; a scene opens on her resting in bed. Scott comes to check on her and talks vaguely about a doctor saying that Paula needs to rest. The doorbell rings; Paula and Scott's son yells from out of the room, “Mom, I'll get it since you just had an abortion!” Paula yells back, “You're a good son, Brendan!” Paula's openness with her children about the abortion indicates that abortions are not events that should be stigmatized or that individuals should be ashamed of. By discussing her experience with her children, Paula works

to normalize abortion as a legitimate option for women who are married and who have already had children in the past. There is no conflict about the abortion itself in later episodes; some problems arise when Paula is trying to tell Rebecca about her experience, but all of the issues are due to communication difficulties within their friendship, not with anything actually related to the abortion.

In *GLOW*, Ruth discovers she is pregnant after having sex with Mark, Debbie's husband. She almost immediately decides to have an abortion and asks her coworker and friend, Sam, to drive her to a clinic. She and Sam sit in the waiting room together; she asks him to go get her a pink frosted donut while she is having the procedure. Sam asks Ruth if she is sure she wants to have an abortion, and she responds confidently, saying, "It's not the right time. Not the right baby." Ruth makes a joke about the abortion before she is led away by a nurse. She confirms to the doctor that she definitely wants to have an abortion, and then leans back and stares at the ceiling tiles as the doctor describes the procedure clinically and begins. At no point does anyone attempt to talk Ruth into continuing her pregnancy; while individuals do ask for confirmation that she is sure of her decision in ways few people do for someone continuing a pregnancy, no one is ever implied to be judging her for her decision. Ruth keeps the mood fairly light the entire time, and is never shown to regret or second-guess her decision in subsequent episodes.

Depictions of pregnancy also demonstrated the agency of female characters. In *Scandal*, Mellie, a major character, and Amanda, a minor character, both become pregnant. Mellie's pregnancy is intentional; she is shown making the active decision to have a baby, telling her husband, Fitz, that he will get her pregnant. However, while Mellie is shown as having agency over her reproductive rights, she is also depicted as being conniving and using her pregnancy to manipulate her husband. While Mellie is depicted as having agency over the pregnancy itself, the

aspect of manipulation calls back to traditional constructions of women's sexualities, in which women may weaponize their reproductive capacity in order to manipulate men or trap them in a relationship.

Amanda's pregnancy is unintentional. Unlike Mellie, Amanda did not make the active decision to become pregnant. Rather than assuming that a woman who is pregnant must want to be pregnant, Olivia reviews several alternative options with Amanda. She asks her specifically if she wants to keep the baby, give it up for adoption, or have an abortion. At no point does Olivia ever place a moral judgment on any of the three options, leaving Amanda free to choose which one she preferred. When Amanda decides to continue her pregnancy, she is fully informed of her options; Olivia laid each one out for her, implied that she would help her with whatever she decided, and did not indicate that she favored any outcome over the others, leaving the choice fully to Amanda. Amanda is seemingly able to make an agentic decision about her own reproductive rights. While Amanda's decisions themselves are agentic and feminist, the characters around her react to her pregnancy in ways that correspond to more normative constructions of women's sexualities; a male character has Amanda murdered because of her pregnancy, relying on traditional tropes of men committing acts of violence against women for reasons related to their sexualities.

Scandal was also not as adept at navigating the subject of abortion as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *GLOW*. In one episode, it is revealed that the daughter of the Vice President of the United States had an abortion as a teenager. In order for her to receive an abortion, she had to receive parental consent from the Vice President. Fitz, the President, uses this information to shame and blackmail the Vice President, a staunchly anti-choice religious conservative. This shaming of

women for exercising their reproductive rights is not in line with feminist constructions of women's sexual agency.

One area in which *GLOW* and *Scandal* relied heavily on normative constructions of women's reproductive rights was in discussions of miscarriage. *Scandal* again relied on women using their reproductive capacity to manipulate other people. In an early episode, Fitz is running for president, and Mellie publicly lies about having a miscarriage in order to elicit sympathy from voters. Again, Mellie is shown weaponizing her reproductive capacity, but instead of using genuine experiences, she relies on the common, potentially traumatizing experiences of other women.

In *GLOW*, discussions of miscarriage appeared in the form of one of the women, Melrose, making fun of another woman, Cherry, for having a miscarriage. Both Melrose and Sam refer to Cherry's miscarriage as a "womb goof," a highly insensitive term, and Melrose graphically fakes a miscarriage to get back at Cherry for embarrassing her earlier in the episode. While the depiction makes it clear to viewers that Sam and Melrose are in the wrong, the characters make Cherry's humiliation the end goal. Details of Cherry's reproductive health that she had not chosen to share with Melrose are used directly and intentionally to embarrass and emotionally wound her, implying that individuals who have miscarriages should be ashamed. This negates individuals' rights to maintain control over information about their reproductive health, as well as stigmatizing a normal aspect of reproductive health. This stigmatization directly relies on traditional constructions of women's reproductive rights.

Despite *Scandal* and *GLOW*'s tendencies to fall back on traditional constructions of women's reproductive rights, the depictions of pregnancy in *Scandal* and abortion in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *GLOW* largely show active and agentic decisions about characters' reproductive

rights. They align closely with feminist constructions surrounding women's reproductive rights; each woman is shown to be very much in charge of her own body. In only one of the four scenarios does anyone other than the woman herself make decisions that affect her bodily autonomy, but it comes after the woman herself makes other agentic decisions about her reproductive rights. Additionally, the lack of pregnancy or abortion plotline in *Broad City* serves as an important reminder that women and pregnancy are not synonymous, and that women exist as people separately from their reproductive organs rather than being defined by them.

Contraception

Television programs rarely discuss the topic of contraception. It is fairly uncommon for a character to mention a well-known type of contraception like condoms in passing, let alone actually discussing usage or expanding to lesser-known types of contraception. Both *Scandal* and *GLOW* maintained this standard; none of the women on *GLOW* ever mentioned contraception in the ten episodes studied, and the women of *Scandal* only mentioned contraception one time in the twenty-nine episodes studied, in the context of determining whether or not a condom was worn during a sexual encounter that may have led to Amanda becoming pregnant. Neither show stretched the boundaries of the traditional discussions surrounding contraception; they stayed safely in the zone of acceptability that has existed for decades. *Broad City* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, however, tested and pushed past these limits.

While a majority of the discussions about contraception in both of the shows were still condom-centric, the women on the shows discussed them in ways that were far more comfortable and natural than the ways in which they are traditionally discussed. *Broad City* is an excellent example of this. In one episode, main characters Abbi and Ilana go out to dinner for Abbi's birthday. During dinner, Abbi excuses herself to use the bathroom, and upon her return

informs Ilana that she had just “peed out a condom.” She then calls the man she had sex with the night before to ask him about it, only to find out that he had removed the condom he was wearing before they started having sex. He incorrectly assumed that Abbi had noticed him removing the condom and consented to it, even though Abbi claims that she had her eyes closed during the entire encounter. Abbi berates him for removing the condom without her consent, and after hanging up, realizes the condom had been in her body for multiple days, since she had last had sex with a different partner. When Abbi tells Ilana this information, Ilana lectures Abbi about the dangers of not using a condom. This becomes a running reference in the series, with Ilana requesting that Abbi send her a picture of the penis of every man she plans to have sex with wearing a condom (Abbi refuses), and, several episodes later, Ilana’s mother reminding Abbi not to forget to wear a condom as a way of saying goodbye. This approach maintained humor while broaching uncomfortable topics. The non-consensual removal of condoms is a hard topic to discuss, but the women of *Broad City* used comedy to make it more comfortable and relatable for the viewer.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend takes a different approach in its discussion of contraception. Rather than fixating specifically on contraception for a single episode, the series mentions contraception consistently throughout the episodes. In various episodes, Rebecca mentions condoms, birth control pills, intrauterine devices (IUDs), spermicidal lubricant, and the birth control ring. At one point, she discusses using a form of birth control that caused her breasts to shrink so much that she had to purchase several new bras, and implies that she has switched methods of birth control several times, which is normal. Media references to birth control pills often describe them in the singular sense, often as “*the Pill*.” This misrepresents birth control pills as a contraceptive category; there are dozens of types of birth control pills that contain different levels of the

hormones estrogen and progestin and have different effects on individuals' bodies. Many individuals have to experiment with several different pills before they find the right one, and some women end up deciding that they do not want to use the pill at all and switch to a completely different form of birth control, like an IUD or birth control implant. Depictions of birth control that imply that there is only one birth control pill may prove confusing or harmful for individuals who try a pill and find that it does not work for them, but do not realize that there are other pills or other types of birth control that they could experiment with. Rebecca's offhanded mentions of the various times she has changed her birth control method work to defy this normative representation and subtly educate viewers about the variety that exists in the world of contraception.

In another episode, Rebecca's mother visits and, while exploring Rebecca's apartment, pulls a handful of condoms out of Rebecca's bedside table. When Paula discovers she is pregnant, Scott mentions that they use protection every time. When Rebecca goes to her ex-boyfriend Josh's house for Thanksgiving, Josh asks his current girlfriend, Valencia, to move in with him. His mother's response is to request that, "...if you're going to go against the church and live in sin, be consistent and use contraception, okay?" All of these individual, small references to contraception work to normalize the discussion of contraception in everyday life. While *Broad City* focused on a specific topic within the broader umbrella of contraception, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* focused on the big picture. Both programs, however, feature characters that understand and communicate the importance of women being in control of their own contraception and willing to discuss it with partners, which are both important facets of sexual agency.

General sexual health

The final theme under the reproductive rights and sexual health umbrella is general sexual health. This theme encompasses anything that has to do with women's sexual health and is not directly related to pregnancy, abortion, or contraception. This includes discussions of menstruation, feminine hygiene products, STIs, and vaginal health, among other things. Of the four shows, only *Scandal* does not contain any references to anything that falls in this category. *Broad City*, *GLOW*, and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* each contain multiple references to sexual health. In *Broad City*, Ilana is generally responsible for providing discussions of sexual health. She talks about the potential physical effects of childbirth and asks a man Abbi was planning to have sex with when he had last been tested for STIs. In one episode of *GLOW*, the women on a television set all get their periods at the same time and ask around for tampons. They poke fun at one of the women, Arthie, who uses maxi pads exclusively. Arthie is very defensive of and comfortable with her choice of product, and vocalizes that to the other women.

While both *Broad City* and *GLOW* occasionally broach topics dealing with sexual health, it is *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* that examines the topic most fully. At various points in the series, the writers included both dialogue and sections of musical numbers that function as legitimate sex education for viewers and other characters. Rebecca explains how STI testing works in one song, and explains urinary tract infections (UTIs) to Greg in another. She eventually ends up in the hospital with a kidney infection from an improperly treated UTI, and a doctor in the scene provides further explanation of UTIs. Paula and Rebecca have conversations about their periods and talk about using a period tracker app called OvuNation. Paula sings about her period cramps, and Rebecca's neighbor Heather explains that Valencia does not understand the female reproductive system when she incorrectly refers to the vagina as the cervix. Just as they did with

contraception, the writers of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* included many small references to sexual health that work to normalize it as a topic. The thorough understandings of sexual health that many of the women on the show exhibit through these discussions are essential to the women being fully sexually agentic, and allow the women to fully claim autonomy over their bodies, as is crucial to feminist constructions of women's sexual agency.

Pleasure Seeking

The term "pleasure seeking" refers to women actively seeking out sexual gratification and physical pleasure. This was the most frequently represented category across the four shows. Pleasure seeking is broken down into the themes of woman-initiated partnered sexual encounter, which refers to depictions of women using either verbal or physical cues to initiate a sexual activity with a partner; physical pleasure and orgasms, which focuses on depictions of women actually receiving physical pleasure; and masturbation, which centers on depictions of women actively seeking physical pleasure on their own, without feeling the need to involve a partner.

Woman-initiated partnered sexual encounter

Depictions of women seeking out, initiating, and actively participating in sexual encounters are pleasure seeking in its most basic form. When a woman is depicted initiating a sexual encounter, she is acting as a sexual agent, taking control of her own sex life and physical pleasure. A majority of the pleasure seeking in the shows studied fell within this theme. All of the shows portrayed women initiating a sexual encounter multiples times. The sexual encounters varied in type, showing that women's pleasure is not restricted to vaginal, penetrative sex, which is the narrative perpetuated by traditional constructions of women's sexualities.

Some depictions of women initiating a sexual encounter have been mentioned in previous sections: Debbie initiates sex with a wrestler after a wrestling match in *GLOW* and Rebecca

initiates a three-day sex marathon with Greg in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Both of these examples involved women initiating vaginal, penetrative sex. *Scandal* also contains several examples of Abby initiating penetrative sex with her regular partner, David. *Broad City*, however, took a different approach to a woman-initiated sexual encounter. In one episode, Abbi is shown having sex with her neighbor, Jeremy. She suggests that they “switch,” meaning that she wants to change positions, but Jeremy misunderstands and assumes that Abbi means she wants to “peg” him (penetrate him anally with a dildo). Initially, Abbi panics about what she’s being asked to do and excuses herself to the bathroom, ending their sexual encounter. Eventually, after calling Ilana to discuss the situation, Abbi decides she wants to try pegging Jeremy. She walks out of the bathroom wearing the dildo in a harness and tells Jeremy to “turn around.” Abbi initiates sex with Jeremy, and they later confirm that the experience was pleasurable for both of them. The depiction paints Abbi as an active sexual agent who seeks pleasure through methods other than traditional penetrative sex.

In *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Rebecca initiates a sexual encounter with a man named Trent. She asks him if he has been tested for STIs, then asks if he wants to have sex. They are then shown in bed after having sex; in an earlier episode, Rebecca says that she enjoys being choked with red licorice during sex, and in the scene, Rebecca is holding a piece of red licorice, implying that she asked Trent to participate in an activity that she found pleasurable. Trent then asks Rebecca if she wants to have sex again, clearly meaning penetrative. She agrees, but changes the terms of the agreement, asking him to perform oral on her before they had penetrative sex again. While Rebecca still engaged in penetrative sex with Trent, she also requested other sexual activities that she knew were pleasurable for her. The pursuit of pleasure

and the comfort expressing and communicating sexual desires exhibited by this example and *Broad City* align closely with feminist constructions of women's sexual agency.

Scandal occasionally fell back on the normative stigmas that sometimes surround women who actively seek out or initiate sexual encounters. One of Olivia's associates, Abby, frequently shamed women for pursuing sex and having sex frequently, often before they became the victims of a violent crime related to their sexualities. She refers to a murder victim as a "whore," refers to a woman who claimed to be a rape victim as a "regretful slut," and expresses excitement over the media's "slut shaming" of a different murder victim. The show also had a tendency to kill off women who dared to have sex or relationships with powerful men. The very first episode includes the murder of a woman who was acting as a beard for a secretly gay war hero, Sully St. James, who was frequently used as the face of the most conservative parts of the Republican Party. She had sex with men outside of their relationship, and because Sully was not out as gay, was shamed for it. In the second season, a college student is murdered after cataloguing her sexual experiences with various politicians and diplomats on a public blog. Later in the season, another woman, a freelance journalist, is murdered in David's apartment after having sex with several powerful men in order to get information for a story. These depictions tie women's sexualities not only to their morality, but also to their mortality. They normalize violence against women by men and imply that women frequently use their sexualities to manipulate the men around them rather than for personal pleasure, which are callbacks to traditional constructions of women's sexual agency.

Physical pleasure and orgasms

Physical pleasure and orgasms are essential to understanding the role of pleasure seeking in depictions of women's sexual agency. Women's orgasms were rarely depicted in these

television shows, helping to reinforce the idea that women's orgasms are non-essential, or even non-existent (Fahs 2011; Wade 2017). Just as the orgasm gap exists in the lives of American individuals, it also exists in American television (Wade 2017). While three of the shows made reference to women's orgasms, only one of them actually depicted one. In the first episode of *GLOW*, Ruth is shown having sex with Mark. She is on top of Mark, vocalizing her preferences and guiding the situation. She appears to orgasm, and the scene cuts away.

Unfortunately, *GLOW* never again mentions women's orgasms. *Broad City* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* only mention them in passing; in one episode of *Broad City*, Ilana mentions "squirting," or female ejaculation, which accompanies an orgasm. In another, she claims that she achieved her first "simultaneous orgasm" with Adele, and "Adele and I were only kissing!" Women's orgasms were also only mentioned twice in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, once in the context of Rebecca imagining Valencia claiming that she "orgasms instantly," and once when Rebecca sarcastically says that her previous relationships were "filled with respect and mutual orgasms." None of the shows put any particular emphasis on women's orgasms; while any mention of women's orgasms at all still certainly goes beyond the boundaries of traditional constructions of women's sexual agency, the brief mentions are perhaps not enough to fully move into the category of feminist constructions, which would include more depictions and acknowledgment of women's orgasms.

Because there is such little representation of the most tangible example of women achieving pleasure, it is also important to examine other depictions that imply that a woman is receiving pleasure. These most often appear in the form of vocal cues or facial expressions that imply a pleasurable experience. All of the shows were far more likely to include these types of depictions than those of women's orgasms. The most common tactic for depicting women's

pleasure was by focusing the camera on a woman's face while her partner performed oral sex on her. This tactic was used in *Scandal* and *Broad City* multiple times, mostly with Olivia and Ilana. This is significant because even within the past decade, there has been public outcry over similar depictions of women receiving pleasure through oral sex; in 2010, the public and the Motion Picture Association of America vocalized their disapproval of a very similar scene included in the movie *Blue Valentine* (Gibson & Wolske 2011). The inclusion of women receiving oral sex in these shows, especially in *Scandal*, which airs on a major television network, shows significant progress toward allowing women to be depicted as pleasure-seeking individuals.

Women's faces were also shown while engaging in other sexual acts; the camera would often focus on the woman, cutting their partner either entirely out or mostly out of the frame. This tactic was used in *GLOW* with Ruth and Mark and with Cherry and her husband, and in *Scandal* with Olivia and Fitz and with Olivia's associate, Quinn, and her partner. In these scenes and the oral sex scenes, women were often shown making noises or facial expressions that imply sexual pleasure, or, in a few situations, smiling to confirm genuine enjoyment, pleasure, and participation for the viewer.

Masturbation

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that pleasure seeking individually is as important a part of sexual agency as pleasure seeking with a partner. Masturbation has long been a forbidden topic, both on television and in real life, and discussions of women masturbating have been particularly off limits. Women are often not introduced to the idea of masturbation until they begin to participate in dating relationships (Watson & McKee 2013). This avoidance of the topic of women's masturbation is paired with the traditional construction of women as lacking the sexual desire and drive that men supposedly have in abundance. Both *Broad City* and *Crazy*

Ex-Girlfriend, however, address this topic. There are two important aspects to the discussion of women's masturbation. The first is the discussion of the act of masturbation itself; the second is the discussion of things that facilitate or assist with masturbation, including pornography and sex toys. The shows discussed both.

Broad City discusses the act of masturbation generally several times. At the beginning of one episode, Abbi is shown attaching a sticky note with a date on it to a vibrator. It is later mentioned that Abbi schedules a specific time in her week to masturbate. In another episode, Ilana is shown lighting a candle, putting on a pair of earrings and some lipstick, eating an oyster, and prepping a space to masturbate. She positions a mirror over her head so she can watch herself, then begins to use a vibrator.

Broad City and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* also discuss things that facilitate or assist with masturbation multiple times, in the context of pornography and sex toys. In addition to the above mentions of vibrators in *Broad City*, Ilana tells Abbi that she needs to watch Colin Farrell's sex tape to prepare herself for a date. Ilana is also shown watching pornography in the scene mentioned above where she is preparing to masturbate. In multiple episodes, Ilana also openly criticizes various aspects of pornography and the porn industry. In one episode, she says that porn involving partners, specifically heterosexual partners, makes her uncomfortable because of the highly aggressive behavior of men and the frequent infantilization of women; she claims to only watch "solo" porn to avoid these issues. In another episode, Ilana says that "all porn is kiddie porn," because, "We live in a rape culture, ya know, we just do." These depictions of Ilana's ideas about porn are important because they combine feminist criticisms of pornography with the normalization of pornography as a medium through which women may explore their sexualities. While Ilana acknowledges some of the highly problematic aspects of pornography,

she continues to incorporate it into her sex life, avoiding the types that she finds to be more problematic and finding the types with which she feels most comfortable.

In *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Paula sings a song that includes the lyrics, “Maybe this dream/Won’t be like my vibrator/Breaking when I need it most!” In another episode, Rebecca lends her hard drive to her neighbor, Heather. Greg drops by to pick it up for Heather, and Rebecca tells him to tell Heather that if she is looking for porn on the hard drive, there is a clearly labeled folder, and that the porn is “the good kind, with plots!” Rebecca also hosts a sex toy party for her friends where they are presented with various types of sex toys for both masturbation and partnered sexual experiences.

All of these depictions of masturbation work to normalize the idea that women can be pleasure-seeking individuals, and that not all sexual pleasure comes from partnered sexual activities. Pleasure seeking and understanding one’s own body are essential parts of feminist constructions of women’s sexual agency, and masturbation combines both principles. All of the shows neglect, however, the potential for the integration of masturbation into partnered sexual activities. Such depictions would demonstrate that a character had a higher level of comfort with their own body and that they ultimately claimed responsibility for their own sexual pleasure rather than depending fully on their partner.

While all of the shows contained progressive depictions of pleasure seeking, it is important to note that all of the shows also subscribed heavily to normative compulsory heterosexuality. The only portrayal of a same-sex relationship involving two women was Ilana’s brief fling with Adele, which only lasted for one episode. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* included two bisexual characters, one a major male character and one a minor female character, but only the male character was shown having a same-sex relationship. Every sexual situation that occurred,

with the exception of Adele and Ilana, took place between different-sex partners, conforming to traditional constructions of sexuality. Women were almost never shown pursuing sexual pleasure with partner who was not a cisgender man. Only one episode out of the ninety episodes studied managed to break out of the compulsory heterosexuality mold.

CONCLUSION

This research clearly demonstrates that today's shows are increasingly likely to utilize feminist constructions of women's sexual agency when creating female characters and plotlines. The feminist discussions of consent, reproductive rights and sexual health, and pleasure seeking are present in each of the shows with a frequency that would have been unheard of in the pre-*Sex and the City* era. These depictions repeatedly include sexually agentic women characters broaching subjects that have previously been considered too taboo for television. This increase in use of feminist constructions on television has implications for the normalization of these topics in everyday life. Increased depictions of contraception and sexual health in the style of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* could make television a valuable resource for girls and women who have limited access to information about sexual health or feel uncomfortable or unsafe discussing their sexual health with people they know. Portrayals of verbal consent and open communication can provide real-life cues to encourage more open communication within relationships. Depictions of individuals refusing consent or revoking consent can work to validate refusal as an option when individuals are uncomfortable or simply do not feel like having sex. Feminist depictions of women engaging in pleasure seeking activities validate the sexual desires that women viewing the program may have never recognized as legitimate and normal previously. Television depictions have real-life implications, so it is critical that depictions of women's sexual agency are feminist and responsible.

Despite the many examples of progressive, feminist depictions included in these shows, they still sprinkle traditional constructions throughout. *Scandal* frequently used pressure and coercion to elicit consent from women characters. *Scandal* and *GLOW* demonstrated difficulty representing reproductive rights; *Scandal* did not totally abandon the stigma that may surround a woman's decision to have an abortion and relied on tropes of women using pregnancy as a tool for manipulation, while both *GLOW* and *Scandal* used the emotional trauma of miscarriage as a plot device, not to further discussion of women's reproductive rights, but to humiliate characters or portray them as manipulative. Women's participation in pleasure seeking is used against them in ways that are regressive; in *Scandal*, it comes in the form of blatant slut shaming, as well as physically violent responses from men to women participating in sexual activities. Finally, all of the shows strictly conform to compulsory heterosexuality, with only the exception of Ilana and Adele's single-episode romance.

While *GLOW* is still fairly new and not yet fully recognized for its feminist representations, *Broad City*, *Crazy-Ex Girlfriend*, and *Scandal* are all frequently included on lists of the most feminist American television programs. While all of the shows include some feminist constructions of women's sexual agency, they are generally very limited in their feminism. Many of the shows were labeled as feminist based on aspects that were not necessarily related to women's sexualities. The women of the shows were frequently depicted pursuing careers that are traditionally considered masculine and displaying agency over their careers, but that agency is not necessarily also applied to depictions of their sexualities. Additionally, all of the shows also focus on a very specific brand of feminism. Their feminism is not intersectional; it is very much a white, straight, cisgender, upper class feminism. Out of the seventeen women named in this research, only five were women of color (Olivia from *Scandal*, Valencia and Heather from *Crazy*

Ex-Girlfriend, and Cherry and Arthie from *GLOW*), and four of those women were background or secondary characters. Only two of the seventeen women named were not heterosexual, and both of those characters were from *Broad City*. None of the characters in any of the shows, named or not, were anything other than cisgender.

The main female characters in *Scandal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* have incredible class privilege: Rebecca is a well-paid lawyer with an Ivy League education who grew up in New York City before moving to southern California. Olivia has a lucrative job as a political “fixer” and lives in a very large apartment in Washington, D.C. The settings of both of these shows are exceptionally liberal areas that are more likely to allow women to be more sexually agentic, but still encourage the adoption of more masculine sexual practices rather than reconstructing femininity in a way that allows women to be sexual agents without having to adopt normative masculine traits. In *Broad City* and *GLOW*, the main characters are shown as being less economically privileged: Abbi and Ruth are both starving artists, and Ilana almost never shows up to her sales job. At multiple points, Ruth is even shown not having enough money to buy food. Regardless of these economic disadvantages, however, none of the shows ever address the ways money affects the resources required for the sexual agency exhibited. Ruth, who can’t even afford lunch for herself and her friends, has no difficulty paying for her abortion. Abbi, after ruining Jeremy’s dildo by putting it through a dishwasher, barely hesitates to spend almost eighty dollars on a replacement. In the shows, when it comes to sexual agency, suddenly the characters have all the resources they could possibly need.

The shows also neglect to discuss the structural constraints that may limit women’s ability to act as sexual agents. Much of this is due to the settings of the shows. New York, California, and Washington, D.C. are all very liberal and have fairly progressive policies that

enable women to be sexual agents. *GLOW*, which takes place in Los Angeles, showed Ruth easily being able to procure an abortion in the 1980s. If the show had taken place in 1980s Mississippi, or even in 2017 Mississippi, it is possible that Ruth, with her limited economic means, would have been forced to continue her pregnancy. In California, Ruth did not have to deal with protestors picketing en masse in an attempt to have clinics shut down or driving over state lines to try to find a women's health provider who was willing to perform an abortion. She does not have to face the prohibitive waiting period imposed by some states that make it difficult for working women to procure an abortion. Structural constraints are also ignored in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*; Rebecca has the money to experiment with many different types of contraception; there is no mention of how expensive it could be for someone without Rebecca's economic means to experiment similarly, particularly if they lack health insurance or their health insurance does not cover contraception.

Of all of the shows studied, *Scandal* most frequently conformed to normative constructions of women's sexual agency. This may be due to the fact that it was the only one of the four shows that aired on a major television network (ABC), which may be attempting to cater to a more moderate audience in order to capture and avoid offending as many viewers as possible. The CW, Comedy Central, and Netflix, as smaller networks and streaming services, may have more freedom in their programming because of the differences in their audience base. The presence of a woman of color lead character may also have an impact on the reliance on normative constructions; the show creators may feel that because they were progressive in the casting of the show, they need to compensate by being more conservative in other aspects, specifically depictions of sexual agency, to capture the maximum number of viewers. Even so, the general consensus seems to be that the show as a whole is feminist. The rationale behind

Scandal's perceived feminism seems to stem mainly from the depiction of Olivia Pope's extremely successful career in a male-dominated field. While the incorporation of women into traditionally male-dominated fields is an incredibly important part of feminism, it is used so frequently in television to signify a character's feminism that it begins to feel like a cop out. When there are few or no other feminist constructions incorporated into the lives of female characters outside of their careers, it is time to question whether depictions of women should be held to a higher standard than "unmarried woman has a job" in order to be considered feminist. Granted, it would be unfair to not acknowledge that Olivia repeatedly establishes the precedence of her career over her romantic relationships and generally attempts to prevent one from negatively affecting the other. She does not allow herself to become reliant on romantic relationships and does not depend on a romantic partner for stability or validation. While she is only depicted having sex with men she is emotionally involved with, she does not use the sex or the emotional attachments to justify staying in relationships after they have become unhealthy or unfulfilling. She knows herself well enough to know when situations are bad for her emotional health, and ends or attempts to end relationships that are problematic. While she comes back to an unhealthy relationship with Fitz several times, she acknowledges the problematic aspects of it, attempts on several occasions to fully extricate herself from the relationship, and does not let her feelings for Fitz or his for her hold her back from performing well in her career or exploring relationships with other people. These aspects of Olivia's romantic and sexual life are in line with feminist constructions, regardless of the more traditional aspects incorporated in other parts of Olivia's sexual life.

It is worth examining the possibility that the reluctance of these depictions to embrace feminist constructions of sexual agency fully is due in part to a societal reluctance to fully

embrace women as independent sexual agents and understand women's sexual agency as different than women attempting to claim masculine sexuality. While strides are clearly being made toward more feminist depictions of women's sexual agency on television, there is undoubtedly more progress to be made. Because of the impact television depictions can have on real life, it is essential that shows that claim to be feminist, as well as shows that make no such claims, start moving toward these more agentic depictions of women's sexualities. Television shows that use their platforms to validate the feelings and lived experiences of women and provide a safe and fun space for some forms of sexual education is one of the most responsible, important things a show could do.

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