Evolving Feminisms on TV:

A Comparative Analysis of Female Representation in HBO's *Sex and the City*, *Girls*, and *Insecure*

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ABSTRACT

The demands for feminist representation have shifted from requests for visibility to more nuanced expectations regarding authenticity, inclusivity, and intersectionality. Viewers are no longer content with superficial representations of strong women; there is growing demand on media to depict real-life experiences influenced by race, class, sexuality, and cultural background. Representation is now anticipated to confront structural inequality instead of avoiding it with individualistic stories. With feminist discourse gaining greater visibility, audiences are increasingly scrutinizing which narratives are presented, who narrates them, and how power flows through media channels that assert progressive ideologies. In this thesis, I address how feminist discourse is depicted and mediated in HBO's Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure*. All three of these series, which debuted in separate decades, present us with their own takes on womanhood, empowerment and identity. I was also curious about the way each series responds to the political and cultural demands of its day, and in what those changing approaches said about the larger shifting demands for feminist representation on TV. My central research question is*: How do HBO's Sex and the City, Girls, and Insecure reflect the evolving demands for diverse representation in feminism?* I approach this by combining thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis. I analyze four episodes per series, selected for their narrative weight and relevance to feminist themes. This includes the pilots and finales, as well as episodes that sparked discussion or explicitly addressed gender, race, or empowerment. I use feminist media theory to guide my reading, drawing on work by scholars such as Gill, Banet-Weiser, Rottenberg, Crenshaw, and hooks. Throughout my analysis, I found that *Sex and the City* presents empowerment largely through consumption, confidence, and emotional control. It promotes a version of postfeminist freedom that is appealing but narrow, where choice is central but structural critique is absent. *Girls* shifts the tone by making visible the discomfort, contradiction, and privilege that underlie this model. Its feminism is messier and more ambivalent, though often still centered around white middle-class subjectivity. *Insecure* moves further by centering Black womanhood, showing how race, community, and emotional labor shape the meaning of confidence and success.

KEYWORDS: *feminist media, HBO, postfeminism, intersectionality, neoliberal feminism, television studies*

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1. Introduction

In one of the most iconic scenes from Sex and the City, Carrie Bradshaw makes her entrance through the streets of late 90's New York in a tutu, her voiceover constantly questioning whether women can truly “have it all”: unconditional love and independence. A decade later, *Girls* opens with Hannah Horvath being cut off financially by her parents, forcing her to face the realities of millennial economic instability. Fast forward to *Insecure*, where Issa Dee raps to herself in the mirror, hyping herself up to navigate the complexities of workplace racism and relationship struggles. These moments capture the shifting portrayals of womanhood in popular culture, where feminism is constantly being reshaped and renegotiated through the media.

Over the past two decades, television has played a crucial role in shaping and circulating cultural understandings of gender, empowerment, and identity. As feminist discourse becomes increasingly visible in popular media, questions emerge about how such visibility functions: does it challenge or reproduce dominant ideologies? In this thesis, I investigate how feminist discourse is represented, commodified, and contested across three influential HBO series: Sex and the City (1998–2004), *Girls* (2012–2017), and *Insecure* (2016–2021). HBO is a subscription-based network, famous for their bold and critically acclaimed original series’ such as The Sopranos and Euphoria. Their original series is notable due to their raw and uncensored way of representing contemporary culture in America (DeFino, 2013, p. 1909). Hence, I consider the three different original series produced by HBO suitable sites for exploring how feminist discourse and gender ideologies are represented in contemporary popular media products.

The three selected series all feature storylines around contemporary women’s life in American. Sex and the City follows the lives of four single women in their early thirties, in cosmopolitan late 90’s/early 2000’s New York, starring Carrie Bradshaw, and her best

friends: Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte, who all have vastly different perspectives on what it means to be a single woman in New York. This show was remarkable for its time at showing what it was like to navigate financial independence and feminist empowerment in a neoliberal age. Subsequently, 8 years later, *Girls*, also follows the lives of four women in New York, except this time, it is an ironic portrayal of millennials navigating their early 20's. Moving from New York to Los Angeles, *Insecure*, portrays the lives of Issa Dee and her best friend Molly Carter, navigating similar issues such as financial independence and feminist empowerment, as well as navigating racial identity. Each of these shows marks a particular cultural moment, ranging from 1998 to 2021, and offers insight into the shifting progression of feminism and representation on television.

This thesis is focused on the evolving nature of feminist media discourse, drawing attention to the rise of what scholars have termed postfeminism, popular feminism, and neoliberal feminism which are ideologies that emphasize visibility, self-empowerment, and personal responsibility while often sidelining structural critique (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Rottenberg, 2014). Academic interest in HBO's Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure* has grown steadily, with researchers such as Daalmans (2013) and Nash and Grant (2015) exploring the postfeminist tensions and generational shifts between Sex and the City and *Girls*, particularly in relation to whiteness, consumerism, and economic precarity. More recent work by Peterson (2018) has introduced *Insecure* into this conversation, arguing that it marks a key departure by centering intersectional Black womanhood and expanding feminist televisual narratives. However, these studies tend to treat the shows in relative isolation or compare only two of them. This thesis builds on and responds to this body of work by offering a comprehensive, three-way comparative analysis. I argue that Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure* serve as key cultural texts that represent distinct phases in feminist television storytelling. Each series reflects its specific sociopolitical moment and employs unique aesthetic strategies to navigate questions of gender, race, and empowerment.

The objective of this thesis is to trace how feminist narratives evolve across these HBO series and what they suggest about broader shifts in cultural expectations, changing sociopolitical contexts in the United States and globally at the interplay of global, and feminist media politics. While existing studies have written about these shows, I am particularly interested in comparing Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure* not as isolated media products but as socially, politically, culturally, and historically situated texts. The goal is to analyze how together these TV series represent popular culture's discursive power to shape, negotiate, and challenge norms and ideologies surrounding contemporary womanhood and feminism. My research is guided by the following primary question:

How do HBO's *Sex and the City, Girls*, and *Insecure* reflect the evolving demands for diverse representation in feminism? —

This overarching question is supported by three sub-questions:

What are the evolving demands for diverse representation in feminism?

How does each of these series portray postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of empowerment?

How do racial and class realities intersect with postfeminist discourse in these series?

In order to answer these questions, I adopt a qualitative research approach that combines thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis. While I aim to critically examine media from an analytical distance, I also recognize that my own position as a media scholar influences how I interpret these texts. I approach television as both a cultural forum and a site of ideological negotiation, where questions of gender, race, class, and sexuality are made visible (and often made marketable). Through this approach, I hope to contribute to ongoing debates in feminist media studies by offering a comparative reading of these series and examining how they mirror, modify, or resist dominant feminist sensibilities.

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 2 outlines the

theoretical framework, situating this research within literature on television, postfeminism, popular feminism, race, and intersectionality. This theory is then used to ground the study in feminist media theory. Drawing from relevant literature, this chapter establishes the analytical perspective that guides the rest of this thesis, especially the methodological and interpretive decisions that follow in the next chapter. In Chapter 3, I elaborate on the methodological design used for this study. Building on the theories laid out in Chapter 2, this chapter details the rationale behind selecting specific episodes for analysis and introduces the qualitative tools used, including thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. In this chapter, I also reflect on my positionality as a researcher, acknowledging the subjectivity as an inherent part of interpretive work. These methods have been carefully chosen to translate theoretical concepts into concrete analytical steps. Chapter 4 presents empirical findings. Drawing on the methods established in Chapter 3, this chapter explores recurring themes across the three shows, such as representations of empowerment, commodification of feminism, and intersections of race and class. Each theme is examined comparatively, demonstrating how the series reflect different feminist moments and aesthetic approaches. These analyses bring the earlier theoretical and methodological discussions into dialogue with the texts themselves, providing the foundation for final reflections. To close off, Chapter 5 offers a critical discussion and conclusion, reflecting on the implications of these findings for the broader politics of feminist representation in media. In doing so, it evaluates the broader cultural and political shifts in feminist representation on television. The chapter also outlines limitations of the study and directions for future research. It wraps up by tying together the analytical, methodological, and theoretical strands of the thesis, offering a clear reflection on how feminist discourse has evolved across the selected HBO series.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I set up the foundation for examining how gender and femininity are

depicted in modern television, which informs textual and discursive analysis in the following chapters. This framework leads the reader through the significant academic debates surrounding how popular culture, particularly television, intersects with and influences feminist discourse in today's media environment. This theoretical framework is structured into three main sections: first, exploring television as a cultural forum and site of representation; second, introducing core feminist theories; third, exploring intersectionality and its evolving demand for racial representation in feminist media. These concepts will hopefully collectively provide the necessary theoretical background to interpret the ways in which empowerment is portrayed and negotiated on screen across different shows.

2.1 Television, Representation, and the Cultural Forum

Media and cultural researchers have been invested for a considerable time in how representation and television contribute to the formation of popular culture.

Representation is central to understanding how media construct knowledge, identity, and power. Stuart Hall (2012) defines representation as a discursive process that shapes meaning through language and shared cultural codes. As Hall writes, "Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events" (Hall, 2012, p. 19). Media texts take part in shaping representation by organizing language and concepts in specific ways. Therefore, this approach frames media texts as sites where meaning is shaped through discourse and positioned within broader social frameworks.

This understanding of representation also demands attention to where these meaning-making processes unfold. John Fiske positions popular culture as a space where dominant meanings are reworked through everyday acts of interpretation (1989). He states, "Popular culture is created by individuals at the junction of cultural industry products and daily

existence. It serves as a battleground, a location where interpretations are debated, and where prevailing ideologies may be challenged" (Fiske, 1989, p. 25). Fiske's work shows that media texts are understood by various audiences in multiple ways, highlighting the importance of examining media representations for grasping societal dynamics.

Building on this, Raymond Williams (1974) presents television as a crucial site of popular culture, influenced by and influencing the daily frameworks of modernized society. He states, "Television became available as a result of scientific and technical research, and in its character and uses both served and exploited the needs of a new kind of large-scale and complex but atomized society" (p. 13). He situates television as a cultural technology that has become intricately woven into the norms and beliefs of contemporary living.

Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) shift the focus from television's formal properties to its cultural functions, framing it as a space where dominant and competing values circulate. In their essay Television as a Cultural Forum, they describe television as a medium structured by contradiction. "The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence" (p. 565). They argue that television allows ideological positions to appear side by side without the need to be resolved. Viewers are invited to witness disagreement and tension as part of the viewing experience. This makes television a significant site for the circulation of social meaning and for the rehearsal of cultural norms.

Within the field of television studies, three key methodological approaches have been noted to investigate how meaning is constructed and communicated.

The first key approach to studying television focuses on production. This perspective considers how media texts are shaped by the institutional, discursive, and material conditions under which they are made. As Caldwell (2008) writes, "Film and television, in other words, do not simply produce mass or popular culture […] but film/tv production communities themselves are cultural expressions and entities involving all of the symbolic

processes and collective practices that other cultures use: to gain and reinforce identity, to forge consensus and order, to perpetuate themselves and their interests, and to interpret the media as audience members" (p. 2). This understanding directs attention to how production cultures shape what is valued, what gets made visible, and what kinds of meanings are legitimized in the process of making television.

This perspective is expanded by Newcomb and Lotz (2013), who stress that media production cannot be understood through a single framework or level of analysis. They write, "To account fully for the production of media fiction, it is necessary, at some point and in some measure, to acknowledge the extraordinary range of levels of influence, from the broadest structural arrangements to the most particular creative or administrative decisions made. It is the interdependence of these factors which, above all, defines media production practices" (p. 66). Their framing shows how meaning is shaped through institutional conditions as well as the more immediate decisions made during development and execution. These factors influence which stories are supported, which perspectives are seen as valuable, and how television content is structured in practice.

The second common approach to study television is audience studies which highlight the various ways in which media texts are received by the viewer. David Morley (1994) explains, audience studies has moved from "a concern with questions of ideology and the analysis of televisual messages, through a set of questions concerning class structure and the decoding process, towards an emphasis on gendered viewing practices within the context of the family". He continues that the work has since been engaged in "two principal shifts, one concerning the decentering of television as the focus of interest (towards a more inclusive concern with the uses of various information and communication technologies in the domestic sphere), and the other involving a broader consideration of the functions of such media in the construction of national and cultural identities within the context of a postmodern geography of the media" (p. 1). Hall's encoding/decoding model is particularly

useful for understanding the audience's perception of television text, by focusing on how the audience interpret media messages in relation to their own social and cultural positions. Media texts are encoded with preferred meanings, but these meanings are not fixed. Audiences may negotiate or reject them, depending on their own position. As Hall writes, "There is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding" (Hall, 1980, p. 136). This approach highlights that while producers construct meaning, audiences renegotiate those meanings with their own agency based on their set of lived experiences.

Although this thesis does not adopt production or audience studies, both provide foundational insights into how meaning is circulated on television. Instead, I have chosen to prioritize intertextuality as the core methodological approach for this thesis, due to its suitability for analyzing how texts respond to and reflect one another across time and genre. Intertextuality in television studies refers to the way meaning is generated through relationships between texts. These can include past shows, promotional material, genre conventions, or public discourse (Gray, 2010, p. 8). Jonathan Gray introduces the concept of paratexts to describe supplementary materials such as trailers, interviews, and merchandise that shape how audiences make sense of what they watch. He writes, "paratexts create the frames through which texts are consumed, interpreted and debated" (p. 7). Although Gray's text focuses mainly on the work of paratexts, he also introduces the more relevant concept of intertext as "the referenced film or program" in dialogue with a previous film or program. Intertextuality provides a particularly relevant framework for this thesis, as it enables the analysis of *Sex and the City, Girls,* and *Insecure* as intertexts that reflect, revise, and complicate one another within a wider media ecosystem. According to Gray, "intertextuality refers to instances wherein a film or program refers to and builds some of its meaning off another film or program" (p. 117). Each text is in conversation with its predecessors as well as its forefathers. As Gray notes, "Since intertextuality works by placing the text at hand into a conversation with previously viewed texts, not only will earlier-viewed texts be able to talk

to a current text—the current text will also be able to talk back to earlier texts. We may well find, then, that many years, months, days, or minutes after we thought we had finished with a text, it is once more active, and we are once more consuming, decoding, and making sense of it" (p. 44). I use this framework to decode and compare the three significant texts, to then be able to make sense of the overarching evolving demands for feminist media representation.

2.2 Feminist Theory and Neoliberal Culture

Building upon the understanding of television as a site of cultural meaning-making, I will now introduce the core theoretical concepts that describe the contemporary landscape of feminism as it is represented in the media. These frameworks are essential for analyzing the often-contradictory ways empowerment is portrayed on screen, particularly concerning the influence of postfeminist, neoliberal, and popular feminist ideologies.

Firstly, understanding gender as performance is helpful for analyzing how femininity is enacted on-screen. Judith Butler's foundational concept of gender performativity argues that gender is not an inherent state of being, but rather a repeated and stylized act, a "doing" rather than a "being". As Butler (1999) famously states, "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act… a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (p. 33). This view of gender demonstrates how media representations do not merely display femininity but continually shape and reproduce it through repeated performance. Butler's conception of gender is built upon Simone de Beauvoir's earlier foundational work in The Second Sex, where Beauvoir famously asserts that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 283). Both authors build upon the idea that you become who you are, rather than being a predetermined set of characteristics. With this understanding of gender in mind, I introduce the ways in which it is situated within contemporary feminist media.

To understand how representations of femininity are shaped by political ideology, it

is necessary to situate them within the historical development of feminist thought. Kroløkke and Sørensen (2005) outline the evolution of feminist movements through three major waves. The first wave "arose in the context of industrial society and liberal politics but is connected to both the liberal women's rights movement and early socialist feminism in the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States and Europe. Concerned with access and equal opportunities for women, the first wave continued to influence feminism in both Western and Eastern societies throughout the 20th century" (p. 1). This focus on formal equality and equal access shaped the foundations on which later feminist critiques would build. The second wave is associated with demands for structural transformation: "Second-wave feminism is closely linked to the radical voices of women's empowerment and differential rights and, during the 1980s to 1990s, also to a crucial differentiation of second-wave feminism itself, initiated by women of color and third-world women" (p. 1). This internal critique opened space for a broader understanding of power that accounted for racial and political difference within feminist movements. The third wave centers ambiguity and fragmentation: "Third-wave feminism manifests itself in 'grrl' rhetoric, which seeks to overcome the theoretical question of equity or difference and the political question of evolution or revolution, while it challenges the notion of 'universal womanhood' and embraces ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in transversal theory and politics" (p. 2). This wave reflects a turn toward cultural critique, where identity is seen as unstable and feminism becomes increasingly concerned with representation and discourse.

This shift toward discourse, identity, and cultural critique in the third wave creates the conditions in which feminism becomes increasingly mediated and made visible. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) builds on this shift by outlining how feminism operates in popular culture across a wide range of platforms and forms. She writes, "Feminism is 'popular' in at least three senses. One, feminism manifests in discourses and practices that are circulated in popular and commercial media, such as digital spaces like blogs, Instagram, and Twitter, as

well as broadcast media. As such, these discourses have an accessibility that is not confined to academic enclaves or niche groups" (p. 3). Feminism is no longer confined to activist spaces or academic theory. It is increasingly made visible through messages shaped by commercial visibility. Banet-Weiser continues, "Two, the 'popular' of popular feminism signifies the condition of being liked or admired by like-minded people and groups, as popularity. And three, for me the 'popular' is a terrain of struggle, a space where competing demands for power battle it out" (p. 3). This deepens Hall's earlier framing of representation as a discursive process as shaped by power, positioning popular culture as one of its primary arenas. In this formulation, popularity becomes both a measure of visibility as well as a site of political tension. Multiple feminisms circulate at once, but not all receive equal recognition or legitimacy. Banet-Weiser notes, "Some of these feminisms become more visible than others. Popular feminism is networked across all media platforms, some connecting with synergy, others struggling for priority and visibility. Popular feminism has, in many ways, allowed us to imagine a culture in which feminism, in every form, doesn't have to be defended; it is accessible, even admired" (p. 3). This form of feminism is shaped through media logics of commercial strategy and emotionally resonant cues. It is widely available but often stripped of its political antagonism.

Banet-Weiser's framing of popular feminism sets the stage for Catherine Rottenberg's critique of neoliberal feminism as its political and ideological extension. Rottenberg (2014) writes, "Unlike classic liberal feminism whose raison d'être was to pose an immanent critique of liberalism, revealing the gendered exclusions within liberal democracy's proclamation of universal equality, particularly with respect to the law, institutional access, and the full incorporation of women into the public sphere, this new feminism seems perfectly in sync with the evolving neoliberal order. Neoliberal feminism, in other words, offers no critique – immanent or otherwise – of neoliberalism" (p. 419). In this shift, feminism is repositioned away from structural critique and toward a cultural

discourse of individual empowerment. Neoliberal feminism reframes empowerment in terms of market-based practices shaped by personal responsibility and emotional regulation, reinforcing rather than critiquing the prevailing social and economic order. This logic smooths over difference and depoliticizes feminist struggle, offering visibility without redistribution and recognition without critique.

I will now turn to Krijnen and Van Bauwel in order to offer a productive bridge by arguing that gendered representations in the media are also, by extension, never neutral but are shaped by and contribute to existing ideological power structures. They state that "Representation has a dual meaning. While the first representation refers to a numerical analysis of women's and men's presences in media, the second is more complex to understand. It involves the study of the ideologies of gender. Media are thus viewed as an arena for the struggle of cultural meanings" (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021, p. 21). In this thesis, I take up this second understanding of representation by focusing on how gender is constructed through ideological struggles over meaning.

Rosalind Gill (2007) provides a critical framework for examining contemporary feminist media discourse, focusing on how postfeminist culture integrates feminist and antifeminist messages within the same text. This discourse centers on individual empowerment shaped through practices of branding and emotional regulation, while structural inequalities often remain unaddressed (p. 149). Gill identifies postfeminist discourse as deeply shaped by neoliberal logics. She writes, "Postfeminist media culture is profoundly and deeply contradictory—as it is characterised by the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses and is structured by a distinctive kind of neoliberal subjectivity" (p. 153). This subjectivity encourages women to manage inequality through self-monitoring and psychological adjustment. Within this discourse, women are positioned as entirely self-responsible, expected to continually improve and brand themselves in response to social pressures. As Gill explains, "power is exercised not through coercion, but through the

construction of individuals as subjects who are ‘free’ to choose and who must take full responsibility for their choices” (p. 154). Feminism is reframed as a personal project oriented around confidence and success. This neoliberal logic privileges individual transformation over collective change. Gill refers to a makeover paradigm, in which transformation becomes the mechanism through which empowerment is imagined (p. 156). Practices of self-surveillance are encouraged and reframed as autonomy. This is reflected in what Gill calls the “reassertion of sexual difference” (p. 158), where normative femininity is performed through hyper-feminized aesthetics and behavior. Postfeminist discourse also contributes to a culture structured around sexual visibility and regulation. Women are encouraged to see themselves as both desiring and desirable, within limits that align with dominant norms. Gill refers to this shift from objectification to subjectification, noting that the desiring subject remains shaped by the male gaze (p. 151). The overall tone of postfeminist media is marked by irony and knowingness (p. 159), which enables feminist critique to appear without destabilizing the ideological structure. Gill describes this as a “double entanglement,” where feminist and antifeminist themes coexist (p. 161), creating a media environment in which empowerment and discipline are inseparable. Gill’s concept of postfeminism as a sensibility introduces a way to understand how feminism is rebranded through neoliberal discourse. It is a configuration of attitudes and strategies that recode feminist empowerment as personal adaptation, shaped through market logic and affective self-management.

Gill and Orgad’s (2017) concept of confidence culture describes how confidence becomes a site of governance in contemporary feminist discourse. They write, “There is a notable coherence between and across the sites and contexts in which confidence emerges, as a technology within and through which women and girls across age, race, sexuality and class are exhorted to think about, judge, and act on themselves” (p. 2). In this context, confidence is not treated as a personal feeling, but as a social demand. It is a technique for

shaping the self, deeply entwined with the broader postfeminist sensibility Gill has previously theorized (Gill, 2007). Confidence culture takes shape through specific practices and environments. Psychological assessments, mobile applications, and institutional programs invite women to evaluate and improve themselves in response to perceived internal deficiencies (p. 3). These interventions ask individuals to manage emotional states as a condition of social legitimacy. Confidence is framed as a resource that must be cultivated to navigate contemporary life. As Gill and Orgad write, "Confidence has become a new 'technology' of the self, encouraging women to work on their self-esteem as a prerequisite for success" (p. 20). Confidence is framed as an ongoing emotional responsibility. It must be built, measured, and expressed in socially appropriate ways. Gill and Orgad note how this demand is naturalized through therapeutic discourse and motivational rhetoric, which reframe empowerment as a matter of emotional self-management (p. 5). Feminist concerns have been absorbed into a framework of individual resilience. The result is a cultural logic in which feeling confident stands in for challenging inequality. The confidence culture is thus deeply implicated in the neoliberal remaking of feminism. As they argue, confidence becomes a disciplinary technology that directs women to locate the cause of inequality within themselves, while exonerating social and political structures (p. 17). Feminist discourse is reconfigured as an individualized, affective project, where political critique is substituted with the imperative to just 'believe in yourself'.

It is important to note that the borders between postfeminism, popular feminism, and neoliberal feminism are thin. As Gill, Banet-Weiser, and Rottenberg note, "Here, we think through the fact that post-, neoliberal and popular feminism all depend on and validate media platforms and organizations as well neoliberal capitalism. These iterations of contemporary feminism do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constitutive with capitalism), but rather contribute to its normalisation and conceit of inevitability" (2020, p. 4). Therefore, these feminist forms must

be analyzed through both their discursive features as well as the political economies which allow them to circulate.

2.3 Evolving Demands for intersectional representation

Popular feminism and postfeminism are regarded as useful concepts for tackling Western media culture, as they are "mutually sustaining and focus on white, middle-class Western women" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 154). However, these concepts in feminist media discourse can sometimes fall short of addressing the lack of representation when it neglects the role of race. In this section, I will outline key theoretical approaches that expose the racialized dynamics of mainstream feminist representation, with particular focus on Black womanhood, concepts that will guide the analysis of the chosen shows.

As Richard Dyer observes, "Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves as whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualised and abled... at the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (1997, p. 3). With this framing, Dyer reveals how whiteness often functions invisibly, occupying the universal subject position while rendering racial specificity elsewhere. Within feminist media discourse, this invisibility reinforces the centering of white womanhood as default, which limits the terms through which other identities can appear.

This invisibility of whiteness as a racial category comes at the cost of other racial identities being either distorted or rendered absent. As bell hooks writes, "If we compare the relative progress African Americans have made in education and employment to the struggle to gain control over how we are represented, particularly in the mass media, we see that there has been little change in the area of representation. Opening a magazine or book,

turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy" (hooks, 1992, p. 1). While whiteness disappears into the category of the universal, Black representation remains tightly constrained by the dominant gaze. This imbalance reveals how racial power is sustained through control over visibility.

This imbalance between whiteness as universal and Blackness as overdetermined is further exposed in Asha Gammage's analysis of visual media. She writes, "The over-saturation of negative images in the media has caused some Black women to be more susceptible to internalizing these images, and they in fact participate in their own damnation... misogynistic notions conveyed in this form of media give credence to the devaluation and eventual damnation of Black womanhood" (2015, pp. 6-7). Where hooks points to the continued marginalization of Black subjects in media, Gammage identifies how their visibility is structured by repeated stereotypes. These images sustain a visual order in which Black womanhood becomes legible only through racialized scripts of degradation.

The limitations of feminist and antiracist discourse become clear when the experiences of Black women are left out. As Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, "In much of feminist theory and, to some extent, in antiracist politics, this framework is reflected in the belief that sexism or racism can be meaningfully discussed without paying attention to the lives of those other than the race-, gender- or class-privileged. As a result, both feminist theory and antiracist politics have been organized, in part, around the equation of racism with what happens to the Black middle-class or to Black men, and the equation of sexism with what happens to white women" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152). Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality shows how race and gender work together, and why neither can be fully understood on its own.

Postfeminism, popular feminism, and neoliberal feminism offer insight into how empowerment is made culturally legible, while intersectional critiques reveal which subjects

remain excluded or flattened in that process. Throughout this thesis, I use these frameworks to examine how race, class, and gender intersect in the construction of feminist meaning on screen.

2.4 *Situating the Series*

This section situates *Sex and the City*, *Girls* and *Insecure* within the evolving field of feminist television studies, drawing on recent scholarly work to map how HBO's programming reflects shifting ideologies of gender, race, and authorship.

Nash and Grant (2015) describe the relevance of HBO by stating, "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)" (p. 977). The development of Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure* reflects HBO's branding strategy as a space for creative autonomy and risky content, particularly around gender and sexuality. Nash and Grant (2015) trace how *Girls* positions itself against Sex and the City while remaining in conversation with its legacy. From the *SATC* poster in Shoshanna's bedroom to Hannah's reluctant participation in adult life, the show critiques but does not reject the conventions it inherits. They write, "*Girls* complicates post-feminist conceptualizations of femininity and feminine embodiment typified by *SATC*" (p. 986). Dunham's work critiques the myth of confident femininity and exposes the emotional and economic messiness of young adulthood.

Daalmans (2013) adds to this reading by critiquing the passivity of the narrative in *Girls*. She proposes that "Hannah's need for something to happen in her life, rather than

actually taking charge of her life, is disconcerting, as is her continuous willingness to engage in awkward, degrading, and unprotected sex" (p. 360). From this perspective, *Girls* tends to display self-indulgence more than critical engagement. Daalmans reads the show as mirroring the entitled attitudes of its characters rather than interrogating them.

Peterson (2018) shifts the focus by introducing *Insecure* as a racial and generational intervention. "Dunham and Rae have formulated their shows to bring together a group of women within their own demographics to provide comprehensive understandings of Black and white women on television" (p. 17). *Insecure* builds on the introspection of *Girls* but centers Black women's friendship and the uneven politics of becoming oneself (p.14).

Read together, these authors outline a trajectory: Sex and the City affirms aspirational whiteness and consumer agency; *Girls* offers irony and ambivalence; *Insecure* presents a quieter, racialized realism. Nash and Grant highlight how Dunham engages the contradictions of postfeminism. Daalmans questions the effectiveness of this method. Peterson points to Rae's grounded authorship and its impact on representation. These perspectives position *Insecure* as part of a lineage of HBO programming that reflects and reshapes feminist media discourse. Together, they provide a brief background that helps ground my following analysis. The following chapter outlines the methodological tools used to carry out this analysis, with attention to both the discursive structures and thematic patterns that emerge across the selected series.

3. Method

In this thesis, I employ a qualitative research approach, integrating Boeije's (2010) thematic analysis with Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze how *Sex and the City, Girls,* and *Insecure* construct and negotiate feminist discourse. By combining these methods, I was able to identify certain overarching feminist themes in these shows and

critically examine the ideological structures that shape their portrayal of contemporary women's life and the entangled narratives and discourse of feminism.

3.1 Data Collection

In my research, I use purposive sampling to select key episodes from *Sex and the City*, *Girls*, and *Insecure* that are most relevant to the research question. I have selected four episodes per series (with a total of twelve episodes) based on their explicit engagement with feminist themes, critical reception, and comparative relevance across the three series. For *Sex and the City*, I focus on episodes that highlight consumer-driven postfeminism and individual empowerment. For *Girls*, I have identified episodes that critique or reinforce white, privileged feminism, while for *Insecure*, I have chosen episodes that centralize intersectional Black feminism, allowing for an exploration of how these shows negotiate feminist discourse differently.

The selection process was guided by Boeije's (2010) thematic analysis, which is a flexible yet systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. In the context of this study, it provides a clear foundation and rationale for selecting specific episodes, as it supports a comparative thematic exploration across the three series. Based on the theoretical framework of postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, and intersectionality, I use an inductive approach to inform the open and axial coding stages of my analysis (Boeije, 2010, p. 75). This process ensures that each selected episode contributes meaningfully to the identification of broader feminist narratives and ideological tensions across *Sex and the City, Girls,* and *Insecure*. With the goal of tracing the development and transformation of feminist discourse over time, this method guides my purposeful selection of episodes that are most representative of key themes and turning points.

The above-mentioned episodes have been selected based on their explicit

engagement with feminist discourse, their relevance to postfeminist, neoliberal, and intersectional frameworks, and their narrative significance. Particularly, I included the pilot episodes of these three series and also included the finale episodes to provide a clear overview of how each narrative has progressed throughout the show. The inclusion of opening and closing episodes provides further contextual insight into how each show introduces and resolves its feminist narratives, while mid-series episodes were selected for their critical reception and thematic depth. Through this targeted selection, my analysis remains focused on how these shows construct, reinforce, or challenge dominant feminist discourses in distinct cultural and historical contexts.

Sex and the City

The episodes selected for *Sex and the City* highlight postfeminist themes of self-surveillance, consumer empowerment, and emotional discipline as described by Rosalind Gill (2007). For example, the pilot episode (S01E01) establishes the show's framing of femininity as sexual agency and financial independence. "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda" (S04E11) explores bodily autonomy and fertility through neoliberal frames of choice and success. "The Post-it Always Sticks Twice" (S06E07) exemplifies confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2017) through Carrie's resilience. Finally, "An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux" (S06E20) offers closure through romantic and consumer fantasies, reflecting postfeminist sensibility's affective contradictions.

Girls

The episodes chosen from *Girls* reflect the show's ironic deconstruction of postfeminist tropes, while often remaining complicit in the whiteness and privilege it critiques echoing Daalmans (2013) and Nash & Grant (2015). The pilot (S01E01) introduces Hannah as a figure of economic instability, placing her outside the fantasy

of “having it all.” “One Man’s Trash” (S02E05) offers a surreal retreat into romantic and class fantasy, ripe for reading neoliberal escapism. “Flo” (S03E09) brings intergenerational tensions to the fore and complicates the individualized feminism embodied by Hannah. The finale (S06E10), “Latching,” shows Hannah becoming a mother, reflecting the burden of personal responsibility within neoliberal feminist discourse (Rottenberg, 2014).

Insecure

The episodes selected from *Insecure* center Black womanhood and challenge the racial exclusions of earlier feminist texts, engaging Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality and hooks’ (n.d.) critique of the gaze. “*Insecure* as Fk” (S01E01) introduces the tension between visibility, performance, and workplace respectability. “Hella Perspective” (S02E08) provides a multi character lens on emotional labor and divergent life paths, perfect for analyzing neoliberal imperatives of self-reinvention. “Lowkey Happy” (S04E08) deals with emotional vulnerability and racialized expectations of romantic resilience. “Everything Gonna Be, Okay?” (S05E10) functions as a discursive closure to Issa’s arc, offering a final reflection on selfhood, confidence, and community.

In summary, these selected episodes can allow for a comparative cultural analysis across shared themes while reflecting the historical shift from feminist representation in the late 90s/early 2000s versus its evolving demands each decade. They were selected not only for what they reveal individually, but for how they speak to each other across time and cultural shifts, reinforcing the comparative goal of this study.

3.2 Data Analysis

As explained in the data collection part, I selected key episodes from the three series based on their thematic relevance to the research question. I have further conducted thematic

analysis on these episodes, following Boeije's (2010) five-step iterative process for thematic analysis: (1) open coding: watching and transcribing episodes while identifying initial feminist themes in character dialogue, story arcs, and framing (p. 78); (2) axial coding: grouping codes into broader categories related to feminist discourse, such as postfeminism, race, consumerism, and empowerment (p. 82); (3) selective coding: refining and connecting themes across the three series, identifying dominant and contested feminist narratives (p. 85); (4) theme interpretation: organizing findings to highlight how each series constructs and negotiates feminism; and (5) comparative analysis: examining how these feminist themes evolve across different cultural and historical contexts.

However, thematic analysis alone does not account for the underlying power structures and discursive formations that shape these representations. To address this, I employed Fairclough's (1992) CDA, which allows for a deeper analysis of how language, media framing, and discourse function to reinforce or challenge feminist ideologies (Fairclough, 1992, p. 64). CDA is particularly relevant in examining how power operates within feminist media narratives by analyzing the textual and visual elements of these shows in relation to broader social structures.

Once key themes were identified, I applied Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model to examine how feminist discourse operates within each show. First, textual analysis studies language, word choice, and framing in key dialogues, particularly in discussions on feminism, gender roles, and race (Fairclough, 1992, p. 64). Second, discursive practice will investigate who speaks, whose voices are prioritized, and how feminist discourses are structured within each show (Fairclough, 2003, p. 87). Finally, social practice will connect these findings to broader cultural and feminist movements, determining how these shows reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies (Fairclough, 1992, p. 75). By integrating thematic analysis with CDA, I capture both surface-level feminist narratives and the deeper power structures that shape them.

To systematically analyze feminist discourse in these shows, I operationalize key concepts as follows. With the conceptual understanding of television as a site of cultural meaning-making, I use Gill's concept of postfeminism as a media culture to explore the postfeminist narratives which emerge in each show through character arcs, dialogue, and thematic framing. I have analyzed how Sex and the City and *Girls* engage with this, particularly in their representations of empowerment through consumption and self-expression. Finally, intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1989), examines how feminism often centers on white, middle-class experiences, neglecting how race and class intersect with gender oppression (p. 139). Using this lens, I assess how *Insecure* challenges this exclusion by foregrounding Black womanhood and examining how it contrasts with *Sex and the City* and *Girls*.

As this thesis involves textual and discursive analysis of publicly available media, there are no direct ethical concerns regarding participants. However, I remain aware of my own positionality as a researcher, ensuring that my interpretations of feminist discourse are informed by diverse perspectives and grounded in existing feminist scholarship. As Donna Haraway notes in her seminal text, *Situated Knowledges*, "Feminists have stakes in a sucessor science project that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions" (1988, p. 579). Therefore, I would like to note that although my arguments are grounded in feminist and intersectional theory, I use my own understanding and positionality as a researcher to situate them. This study's methodological approach enables a comprehensive examination of feminist discourse in television, combining Boeije's thematic analysis for pattern identification with Fairclough's CDA for ideological critique. By applying these methods to *Sex and the City*, *Girls*, and *Insecure*, I contribute to academic

discussions on the role of feminism, the role of intersectionality in media, and the shifting needs of feminist representation in contemporary television.

4. Analysis

In this chapter, I present the empirical findings by applying the theoretical frameworks introduced earlier to a close analysis of selected episodes across the three series: Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure*. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how feminist discourse is represented in contemporary television, with particular attention to how postfeminist sensibilities, neoliberal ideologies, and intersectional dynamics are negotiated through characters, narratives, and visual style.

4.1 Sex and the City

Sex and the City is one of the most popular HBO productions in television history (Nash and Grant, 2015, p. 977), focusing the lives of four single women in their early thirties, in cosmopolitan late 90's/early 2000's New York. By reviewing the selected episodes of this series, I identified the following key themes which reflect contested feminist narratives: *economic independence and individualism, romantic love and sexual agency, confidence as a mode of affective regulation.* In the following writing, I offer an episode-by-episode theme interpretation to reveal how each episode constructs and negotiates feminist discourses in relation to these key themes.

4.1.1 "Sex Like a Man" (S1EP1)

The pilot episode of Sex and the City opens with Carrie Bradshaw narrating the story of Elizabeth, a recent arrival from London who quickly falls into what appears to be a whirlwind romance with a successful Manhattan man named Tim. Their early connection is staged through idealized scenes: gallery dates, golf lessons, and tender pillow talk. Yet just as suddenly, Tim disappears. His vague excuse about a sick mother is followed by two

weeks of silence. When Elizabeth reaches out, she receives nothing in return. Her confusion: "In England, looking at houses together would have meant something." This becomes the first moment the viewer is invited to question what romantic signals still mean in a postmodern dating landscape. Carrie concludes, "No one had told her about the end of love in Manhattan," a line that sets the tone for what she calls "the age of uninnocence." The pilot aired in 1998, a moment when New York was booming with ambition, money, and the sweet smell of independence. It was a city, an era where traditional romance collided with rising values of individualism.

This narrative pivots away from romantic idealism into a culture of affective precarity which is the core thematic concern of the episode. As Carrie frames it, love in New York has become a transactional space governed by self-protection and strategic detachment. The camera pans across the city as she narrates: "Instead we have breakfast at 7 a.m. and affairs we try to forget as quickly as possible." This cynicism is framed as realism, and it marks the emergence of what Rosalind Gill (2007) terms a postfeminist sensibility: a cultural mode that emphasizes individual choice and emotional autonomy but often reproduces neoliberal expectations around personal responsibility and self-surveillance (p. 149).

Carrie's narration introduces a cast of women who embody different affective responses to this ambiguous idea of empowerment. A short red-haired lawyer named Miranda tells a cautionary tale about a woman who partied through her twenties only to be abandoned in her forties, physically and professionally depleted, a story for which men have no sympathy for. Charlotte, successful and traditional art buyer, offers an alternative perspective, insisting that women must "play by the rules" to attract a man, revealing a return to conventional gender politics masked as strategy. And finally, Samantha, the PR executive who, more radically, insists that women should stop looking for relationships altogether and start "having sex like men." Miranda's cynicism, Charlotte's traditionalism,

and Samantha's boldness illustrate the contradictions of neoliberal postfeminist culture where empowerment comes with emotional risks. Samantha's line of "having sex like men" becomes the thesis of the episode. Carrie repeats it in voiceover and decides to put it into practice herself. This decision leads her back to Kurt; a man she previously dated (unsuccessfully) multiple times. She frames the encounter as an experiment. If she can sleep with him without catching feelings, she might reclaim a sense of control over her romantic life. After the encounter, she narrates, "I felt powerful, potent, and incredibly alive." In this moment, Carrie appears to achieve what Angela McRobbie (2009) calls the postfeminist ideal: a woman who makes bold sexual choices as a sign of empowerment, and who positions emotional detachment as an aspirational trait. This aligns with Gill's understanding of sexual agency where one freely chooses to present herself in a sexualized manner, but with the same dominant heteronormative scripts (Gill, 2007, p. 152). This explains why Carrie's pleasure is short-lived. Later, when she sees Kurt again at a club, he interprets her detachment not as a challenge but as alignment. "Now we can have sex without commitment," he says. Carrie agrees with him in the moment, but her facial expressions betray her with discomfort. Her voiceover follows with a critical turn: "If I was really having sex like a man, why didn't I feel more in control?" This line is crucial. It reveals the emotional cost of performing detachment under the guise of empowerment.

Here, confidence culture, as described by Gill and Orgad (2017), becomes visible as an emotional imperative, especially in the context of romantic love. In this context, confidence becomes a prerequisite for desirability. As Gill and Orgad (2017) explain, confidence is framed as a prerequisite for romantic success, especially for heterosexual women, where it is "important partly because it is sexy and attractive to men" and even more important than appearance, linking self-assurance directly to the ability to be loved (p. 25). Carrie must feel good, or else she has failed at the very "feminism" she's trying to embody: a kind of feminism that values the freedom of empowerment, However, the burden of

maintaining confidence becomes a quiet form of labor, one that isolates rather than connects. Samantha may insist that treating men like objects is empowering, but Carrie's experience shows how that fantasy can collapse under emotional complexity.

Toward the end of the episode, Carrie encounters Mr. Big, a man who is aptly named for his significance as her main love interest. During their first encounter, Carrie bumped into him and accidentally dropped a decent number of condoms onto the street. Embarrassed, Carrie looks up at him to apologize, only to fall head over heels for him instead. Later in the evening, when Carrie is out with her friends, Samantha notices Mr. Big and suggests that Carrie talk to him, describing him as "the next Donald Trump, except younger, and much better looking". Carrie looks over at him and waves. Samantha asks Carrie if she knows him. Not wanting to rehash her earlier embarrassing encounter, Carrie decides to deny ever seeing him before. Samantha comments that he usually only dates models, but this does not intimidate her. However, it appears that Samantha strikes out as Mr. Big declines her offer. He then, later on in the evening, sees Carrie walking home and offers her a ride home. Carrie sits in his car and tells him she's researching an article about women who have sex like men. He replies, "But you're not like that." This moment introduces a conservative undercurrent that will reappear throughout the series. Even as the show flirts with postfeminist rhetorics such as empowerment, autonomy, sexual freedom, it often re-centers romance as the ultimate goal. Mr. Big's final line, in response to Carrie's question about whether he's ever been in love: "Abso-fuckin-lutely", restores emotional depth as the real aspiration. The episode thus closes with ambiguity. The fantasy of control remains unstable, and the conditions of empowerment are always in negotiation.

4.1.2 “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda” (S4E11)

Season four, episode eleven of Sex and the City, titled "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," moves the series away from its often-celebratory tone of sexual agency to a more intimate and ethically loaded territory: reproductive choice. Although Carrie’s voiceover is heard, the episode’s emotional center lies in the stories of Miranda, Charlotte, and Carrie herself as they navigate fertility, abortion, and womanhood. The feminist tensions at play are no longer just about dating strategy but about bodily autonomy, maternal desire, and the affective burdens of decision-making.

Miranda’s storyline introduces the central conflict. Discovering her unplanned pregnancy, she considers the consequences of abortion. Her deliberation is met with mixed responses from the group, revealing their varying relationships to reproductive expectations. Charlotte, who is struggling to conceive, is devastated, not because of moral opposition but because of what Miranda’s accidental pregnancy represents: the randomness and perceived unfairness of fertility. Her comment, "You have a baby, and you don’t even want it," captures this pain. Meanwhile, Carrie reveals to Miranda that she herself had an abortion at twenty-two. This admission is handled quietly, almost offhandedly, but it opens space for a more nuanced reflection. As Gill (2007) notes, postfeminist discourse shifts the focus "from collective politics to individual practices, from social critique to self-help" (p. 153). The burden falls on women to navigate these reproductive decisions completely on their own, while the complex emotions that come with it are pushed aside. As Gill and Orgad (2017) put it, “A second central domain where exhortations to become self-confident seem to proliferate is parenting. Women are addressed as subjects who can and should transform themselves from anxious, *Insecure* or simply confused parents, into confident mothers who raise confident children. This process of self-transformation requires self-work, self-measurement, and self-evaluation - intense labour, which paradoxically is associated with embracing feminist language and goals” (p. 23). These characters are all responding to

different versions of what motherhood is supposed to mean, and the show doesn't try to resolve that tension. Instead, it holds space for all of its uncertainties, resentments, or even grief.

The episode stages a powerful negotiation of neoliberal feminism, particularly in how reproductive choice is framed. As Catherine Rottenberg (2014) notes, neoliberal feminism reconfigures empowerment as an individual burden: the woman must make the "right" decision, manage her feelings, and do so without demanding structural change (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 426). Miranda's decision is entirely hers, but the support or judgment she receives from her friends is shaped by their own emotional investments and moral views on what motherhood should mean. Charlotte's heartbreak, in particular, illustrates how neoliberal logic can pit women's experiences against one another, emphasizing scarcity and individualized pain rather than solidarity. Rottenberg (2014) identifies a key contradiction in this framework: "The promise of emancipation and happiness this feminism holds out hinges not only on one's active desire to cultivate a profession and on having a spouse and children, but also on one's ability to calibrate a perfect equilibrium between the private and the public spheres" (p. 429). The fantasy of balance and control is undone here by the messiness of unplanned pregnancy and relational tension, highlighting how unattainable that equilibrium really is.

Visually, the episode avoids sensationalism. The doctor's office is unremarkable. Conversations happen over brunch, in cabs, on the streets. This everyday framing reinforces how central (and yet underdiscussed) reproductive struggles are in women's lives. Carrie's narration does not offer a resolution. Instead, it closes with a question that lingers: what do we owe each other when our desires clash?

"Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda" breaks from the fantasy of invulnerability that often defines Sex and the City's postfeminist ethos. Instead of glamorized self-reinvention, it offers ambivalence, discomfort, and affective complexity. The emotional labor of being

confident, rational, and self-sufficient is no longer invisible; it is made visible in this text. In this episode, empowerment is interrogated, and the conditions of choice are revealed to be far more complex than the series typically admits.

4.1.3 "The Post-it Always Sticks Twice" (S6E7)

Season six, episode seven of Sex and the City, titled "The Post-it Always Sticks Twice," marks a tonal shift from the emotional weight of previous episodes by using humor and irony to explore emotional dismissal and the precarity of confidence. Carrie is abruptly broken up with via Post-it note by her boyfriend Berger, who also happens to be a writer. The episode opens with Carrie narrating the absurdity of her breakup, immediately establishing a tone of disbelief wrapped in sarcasm. She finds herself waking up in bed all alone, with a note on her pillow. The note states: "I'm sorry. I can't. Don't hate me," The lack of explanation in the note satirizes the emotional minimalism of modern masculinity and displays the ongoing tension in postfeminist representation: how to balance narratives of female strength with acknowledgments of emotional pain? Carrie attempts to reassert emotional control by deciding to go out with her friends, smoking marijuana, and ultimately getting caught by the police. These antics function as a rebellion against vulnerability, or rather to reframe her humiliation as a form of liberation. As Gill and Orgad (2017) write, “Confidence culture conjures a happy, calm, uncomplaining feminine subject who is appealing and unthreatening… Other affects are systematically disallowed and viciously policed -particularly insecurity, complaint and anger” (p. 34). Carrie must quickly recover, regulate her own emotions, and perform empowerment to maintain her confidence. Although her pain is legitimate, the show's structure demands that it be reframed as a humorous anecdote instead.

Popular media tends to often frame emotional wounds as necessary steppingstones for personal growth and resilience. This is exemplified in what Gill frames as the "makeover

paradigm", where women are expected to convert emotional wounds into self-narratives of growth (2007, p. 10). However, to what extent is this paradigm feasible? As Gill and Orgad (2017) argue, "these circulating discourses of self-love and self-confidence constitute a new 'cultural scaffolding' for the regulation of women, a move deeper into women's psyches so that women must work not just on developing a 'beautiful body' but also 'a beautiful mind'—an 'upgraded' form of selfhood in which there is no space for vulnerability or ambivalence, but only for compulsory body love and self-confidence" (p. 42). This quote perfectly captures the emotional demands placed on Carrie in this episode. By brunch, she shares, "Berger broke up with me on a Post-it… 'I'm sorry. I can't. Don't hate me.' The motherfucker's concise" This witty remark suggests that emotional dismissal can be empowered if it is reclaimed and made appealing. However, the affective dissonance between wanting sympathy and wanting to be viewed as strong remains. Carrie's performative confidence is undercut by her visible discomfort. When she tries to explain to the police officer why the breakup hurt, her voice cracks. In this moment, the fantasy of unshakable empowerment collapses. Carrie is not undone by the breakup itself but by the pressure to feel nothing in its wake. Her struggle reflects the emotional labor of postfeminist survival: to endure heartbreak and still look good doing it.

Importantly, the episode avoids offering resolution. There is no moral clarity, no growth arc. rather only a series of events meant to distract from and perform over pain. This ambiguity is crucial. It exposes the limits of the postfeminist promise that self-reinvention and confidence can undo structural emotional harm. The Post-it, in its brevity, becomes a metaphor for emotional outsourcing: the reduction of complex intimacy to a disposable message. In sum, "The Post-it Always Sticks Twice" critiques the superficial resilience demanded by postfeminist narratives. Carrie's experience reminds us that emotional fortitude is often a public performance, not an internal truth. Through satire and style, the

episode reveals the quiet burden of staying composed, reminding us that confidence is not always a cure.

4.1.4 "An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux" (S6E20)

Season six, episode twenty of *Sex and the City,* named "An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux," acts as the series conclusion and resolves the ongoing conflict between postfeminist ideals and traditional romantic values. Carrie has moved to Paris with Aleksandr Petrovsky, pursuing both artistic and emotional clarity. However, instead of liberation, she finds isolation. This final episode presents a visual and emotional unraveling of postfeminist ideals, revealing their fragility when confronted with material loneliness and the loss of self

From the opening scenes, Paris is rendered hyper-aestheticized and beautiful but cold. Carrie wanders the city in couture, yet she is silenced, culturally dislocated, and emotionally sidelined. Her glamour contrasts sharply with her emotional marginality. This dissonance aligns with Gill's (2007) understanding of postfeminist sensibility as a media logic, one that reflects the broader role of popular media in mediating gendered communication and expectations. As Gill puts it, "a large role for the popular media then is translating or mediating men's and women's communication customs and 'funny ways' to each other in a mass-mediated public sphere" (p. 13). Carrie is living in Paris, the enchanted city of love. Yet from the moment she arrives, her disenchantment builds slowly. Petrovsky misses her book launch party, dismisses her homesickness, and treats her writing as secondary to his art. Carrie, once the narrator of her own story, is now relegated to a supporting role. The supposed fantasy of being swept away to Paris becomes a narrative of emotional erasure. It is at this low point that Mr. Big re-enters. His arrival, and the eventual romantic reconciliation, function as both a resolution and a retraction. The series abandons its flirtation with postfeminist independence and returns to a traditional romantic ending. Carrie no longer must pretend to thrive. Instead, she is rescued. Big's return restores

narrative stability, but it does so by reinstating a heterosexual romantic closure that undercuts the series' earlier provocations.

Visually, the episode indulges in fantasy: sweeping shots of Paris, Carrie's dramatic fall in the Dior boutique, and the intimate slow dance that reunites her and Big. Yet these images, while emotionally satisfying, reveal the underlying conservatism of the show's resolution. The woman who once asked if she could have sex like a man now finds closure not in self-realization, but in being chosen.

"An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux" ends Sex and the City with a return to narrative comfort that underpins heteronormativity. The final scene with its kiss and promise of return, renders closure not as empowerment but as an emotional compromise. It affirms that postfeminist women's desire for love, for beauty, for recognition which ultimately bends toward traditional resolution of romantic love with a successful man. Empowerment is imagined, then deferred. Autonomy is desired, then domesticated. All that remains is the poetics of longing. Carrie returns to New York, to her friends, to Mr. Big, but she also returns to a framework where love is posed as the final answer. The show's conservatism is subtle, glossed in romance, but undeniable. What we are left with is not the feminist future the show once hinted at, but a beautifully dressed surrender to the familiar heteronormative order.

4.2 *Girls*

Girls is an HBO series that follows four women in their early twenties, navigating adulthood in post-recession (2012) New York. Through its raw and often awkward storytelling, the show reflects the uncertainties and contradictions of postfeminism. By reviewing selected episodes of *Girls*, I identified the following key themes that shape its feminist discourse: *independence as a financial and emotional precarity*, *performing confidence culture,* and *neoliberal feminism.* In the following writing, I interpret each episode to show how these

themes are constructed and negotiated, revealing how *Girls* complicates and critiques dominant feminist narratives.

4.2.1 "Pilot" (S1E1)

The pilot episode of *Girls* presents a world shaped by economic instability. Hannah is introduced in a hotel room, eating room service as her parents tell her they are ending her financial support. This moment signals her lack of control. It highlights the show's departure from earlier portrayals of female independence. As Gill (2007) writes, "the burden of self-management is unevenly distributed" (p. 154). Hannah's position reflects this, as she is pushed toward managing herself, whilst being cut off financially as an aspiring writer in post-recession New York.

In the scene following, Hannah's lack of support bleeds into her love life, which feels equally empty. Adam, Hannah's love interest, is emotionally distant and uninvested. Hannah's interaction with him is portrayed by awkward intercourse and little communication. He appears to give her little attention, which makes their interactions feel one-sided. She responds without much expression. This reflects the way confidence is linked to desirability, as Gill and Orgad (2017) write, "The incitement to confidence in intimate relationships is largely seen in sex and relationship advice targeted to heterosexual women, but increasingly it seems to be part of a more general strategy linking attractiveness and desirability to self-belief" (p. 25). Hannah's emotional uncertainty seems to mirror the lack of closeness in the moment. The (perceived absence of) intimacy reveals the pressure to appear confident, even when the interaction lacks care.

The show introduces Hannah's voice early on, but her narration is hesitant. She tells her parents she believes she could be the voice of her generation, or at least a voice. Her delivery is unsure, and her claim does not land. She attempts to define herself, but this

statement comes across as a question rather than a truth. This reflects Gill and Orgad's claim that despite the warm language encouraging women to believe in themselves and be confident, this discourse shifts the burden of difficulty onto the individual (2017, p. 26). Hannah is aware that she should speak with certainty, but her voice falters. The demand for confidence becomes a measure of worth she cannot meet.

The visuals of the episode support its tone. The lighting is flat. The rooms look lived-in. The characters speak casually. There is no strong soundtrack to carry a specific mood. This realism is deliberate. It reflects Gill and Orgad's (2017, p. 26) point that a lack of confidence is figured as unappealing, if not toxic, to relationships, and treated as the woman's own fault.

The cast and setting highlight how neoliberal tensions are distributed across individual lives. The pilot follows four young white women who live in New York City. Three of them have recently graduated from liberal arts programs, while one, Shoshanna, is still finishing her undergraduate degree. Hannah wants to be a writer. Marnie is her Type-A roommate and closest friend. She works as an assistant at a small gallery. Jessa is Marnie's friend from college and Shoshanna's older cousin. Jessa returns from travelling abroad and positions herself as free-spirited with no limits. Shoshanna idolizes women from reality television (including *Sex and the City*) and struggles to relate to her more experienced cousin. However distinct each character might be, all of them are educated, middle-class, and situated in a post-recession neoliberal world. This reflects Rottenberg's (2014, p. 420) account of the neoliberal feminist subject. She writes, "Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but lso because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit

calculus." The pilot displays inequality instead of resolving it. Its world makes visible how confidence and control are unequally distributed across characters who might appear similar on the surface.

4.2.2 "One Man's Trash" (S1E5)

This episode builds on the contradictions introduced in the pilot. Hannah enters a short-lived romantic interlude with Joshua, a wealthy older doctor. Their dynamic offers a thought experiment: what if someone like Hannah could access comfort, validation, and adult stability? For a few days, she stays at his clean, quiet brownstone. His home feels distant from her usual spaces. It is curated and still. It acts as a visual metaphor for her own stillness. Gill and Orgad argue, "the work of confidence is to be undertaken in addition to, rather than instead of, the vast labour already expected of women in heterosexual relationships" (2017, p. 26). This framing helps explain why the brownstone's calm and beauty do not comfort Hannah. Instead, they highlight how surplus emotional labor is demanded from her even in moments of ease.

Hannah is alone with a man who treats her well. However, this intimacy becomes destabilizing. In a long monologue, Hannah confesses feeling unwanted and incapable of happiness. She says she wants everything for herself, but nothing seems to fit. Her breakdown reflects Gill and Orgad's argument that the pressure to be emotionally self-sufficient can produce shame (2017, p. 20). This emotional labor is presented not only as exhausting, but as morally required. This is visible in Hannah's attempt to mold herself into the fantasy Joshua provides. The space of the brownstone functions more than a backdrop. It stands for an ideal of adult femininity built around stability. Banet-Weiser argues that confidence discourse links empowerment to appearance and spatial control (2018, p. 28). Hannah's presence in this space makes her uneasy. She does not seem to radiate the sense of balance this setting demands. The result is emotional dissonance. She finally has the stage,

but not the script. Joshua's kindness throws her off. She has been conditioned to read care as transactional. In this setting, comfort feels unfamiliar. The feminist insight here is not that Hannah is damaged. It is that emotional ease is unfamiliar to her. The tools she has inherited from postfeminism, such as self-reliance and positivity, do not prepare her for actual closeness. Gill and Orgad state that when confidence is framed as the key to love, failure becomes a personal flaw (2017, p. 25). Hannah's struggle illustrates that sometimes, a lack of confidence cannot be resolved when met with unconditional care.

The final image shows Hannah taking out Joshua's trash. The symbolism is clear. Even after all those moments of fantasy, her emotional labor of feeling loved will always remain. She is alone again. The episode ends without growth. However, it highlights the sad reality of confidence culture. "One Man's Trash" shows how deeply the need to appear confident has shaped her self-image. It reveals her limits when measured against real emotional experience. In doing so, it portrays the emotional costs of trying to live up to a model of womanhood built on fantasy.

4.2.3 "Flo" (S3E9)

This episode shifts focus from Hannah's usual New York routine to a hospital where her grandmother is dying. The setting introduces a different kind of pressure. Hannah is surrounded by older women who do not see her as exceptional. Their world is shaped by care that feels more like expectation than intimacy. The episode removes romantic tension and replaces it with something heavier: familial obligation.

Unlike the previous episodes, Hannah is not the center of attention. Her mother and aunts take up space through argument, memory, and tension. Their conversations revolve around caregiving, missed chances, and frustrations. The emotional atmosphere is brittle. Loreen tells Hannah, "You think you're the only one who feels things? We all feel things. We just don't whine about it." Her words shut down the possibility of emotional openness.

In this space, survival is the only acceptable mode. Gill (2007, p. 154) writes that postfeminist culture encourages women to turn pain into growth. These women don't do that. They carry their pain without attempting to process it. Hannah's usual self-reflection is not welcome. Within this family, her openness reads as self-involvement. Her mother sees it as a weakness. Yet this insistence on naming her own feelings can also be read as a rejection of the silence passed down to her. The show does not frame this as a solution. It presents it as a difficult and lonely position. Gill and Orgad (2017, p. 26) argue that confidence has become a requirement across all parts of life. In this episode, confidence offers no protection. Hannah's attempt to hold onto her sense of self breaks down under the weight of her family history. When her grandmother tells her she is not special, it signifies a statement shaped by a lifetime of restraint. The idea that Hannah could narrate her life differently, outside the emotional habits of her mother and aunts, is challenged. She is reminded that their story has already been written through repetition. The scene shows how individual scripts are often interrupted by inherited roles.

"Flo" captures how emotional labor repeats across generations. Each generation's attempt at escape becomes the next generation's performance. The viewer is left in that quiet recognition.

4.2.4 "Latching" (S6E10)

The concluding episode, named "Latching," transitions the storyline from family obligations to actual circumstances. The story returns to Hannah, now a new mother, living just outside the city. Her days are marked by fatigue from the effort to care for her newborn who will not latch. What starts as a household moment transforms into a prolonged contemplation on the breakdown of connection and what persists following empowerment.

Hannah's life has narrowed. Her friends are absent. Her body has changed. The beats of the city have been overshadowed by the needs of a sobbing child. The picture of Hannah

attempting and struggling to breastfeed represents a symbolic inability to fulfill the expectations associated with new motherhood. Gill and Orgad write that women are expected to transform themselves from anxious or confused parents into confident mothers who raise confident children (2017, p. 23). This transformation requires constant self-evaluation and intense labor, which Hannah is unable to carry out. Her effort collapses into frustration. A brief encounter interrupts this scene. Hannah storms out and meets a teenager who has run away. The girl is barefoot, defiant, and afraid. Their conversation is short. But in it, Hannah speaks without defense. She offers comfort and listens. This moment reveals an older part of herself that is still intact. The exchange works as a soft resistance to the demands that Rottenberg (2014, p. 420) describes: the imperative to optimize oneself while balancing care and control. Hannah offers care without control. She is present without being composed. Once Hannah arrives back at home, she attempts to feed her baby once again. This time the baby finally latches and Hannah sings. The moment is not offered as victory. It is simply an instance of survival. This is the final statement of the show's feminist lens. The earlier question about whether Hannah could be the voice of her generation no longer matters. What matters is that she is still here.

The show closes leaving this unresolved. This refusal to frame motherhood as either fulfillment or failure avoids the traps of postfeminist storytelling. Feminist politics are not built here through progress. They are shown through representation. Hannah does not represent a generation. She is only one example of what it means to try to make sense of care in a world where sense is rarely offered.

4.3 *Insecure*

Insecure is an HBO series that follows Issa Dee as she learns to live with and move through her insecurities while navigating adult life in Los Angeles. The show focuses on the emotional weight of becoming, especially for Black women, and how that process is shaped

by race, intimacy, and self-perception. By reviewing selected episodes of *Insecure*, I identified the following key themes that shape its feminist discourse: *relational vulnerability, racialized self-making*, and the *labor of emotional maintenance*. In the following writing, I interpret each episode to show how these themes emerge, shift, and reflect broader tensions within feminist media.

*4.3.1 "Insecure as F**k" (S1E1)*

The first episode of *Insecure*, titled "*Insecure* as F**k," introduces Issa Dee, yet again, as both the narrator and the main character. The structure of the episode centers on her inner thoughts, most visibly through her bathroom mirror rap. This scene refuses the posture of confidence. It exposes a need for expression that has nowhere else to go. The rap is awkward and turned inward. It shows how Issa narrates herself in ways no one else can.

At her nonprofit job, "We Got Y'all," Issa is the only Black woman on staff. Her colleagues seek her input on outreach materials and speak over her in meetings. She becomes a placeholder for inclusion, without being treated as a full participant. Crenshaw (1989) notes that "not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women" (p. 154). This quote makes visible the structural role Issa is made to occupy: she must carry the image of diversity without being recognized as a subject with her own voice. At home, Issa's relationship with Lawrence, her long-term unemployed boyfriend, is stagnant. She does not express what she wants, and the silence feels familiar. Welang (2018) describes how Issa "extends the parameters of black female identities by accessing a quirky alternate self that is independent of tropes and archetypes" (p. 302). Yet this self is still negotiating social and emotional constraints. Her silence becomes a way to avoid tipping the balance in a relationship already marked by economic tension. Later in the evening, this tension is further strained when Issa runs into her ex, Daniel, at a club event. Unlike Lawrence, who is unemployed, Daniel

seems to be doing well as a producer. The encounter evokes what Gill (2007) calls a postfeminist sensibility of choice, where women are expected to navigate their desires and decisions within the framework of individual responsibility and personal growth (p. 162). Issa's moment with Daniel is about the fantasy of what could have been, had she chosen differently. He represents movement, while Lawrence is marked by stillness. The final shot shows Issa standing in a parking lot beside Daniel's car, looking uncertain and slightly withdrawn as they part ways. Peterson (2018) reminds us that "the emotional labor of Black women is often unrecognized, even when central to how narratives unfold" (p. 57). Issa's quiet acts reflect this labor. Her restraint in conversations with Lawrence, her self-soothing mirror raps, and her decision to stay loyal rather than follow Daniel all mark the work required to preserve stability under conditions of emotional neglect.

4.3.2 "Hella Perspective" (S2E8)

The following episode, "Hella Perspective", takes a split-narrative approach to show how Issa, Molly, and Lawrence experience the same week from different perspectives. In doing so, the episode departs from the show's structure, offering insight into how race, gender, and economic pressure intersect to shape each character's inner world. This shift expands the feminist frame from a single character study to a fragmented, collective portrayal of how Black millennial subjects live through constraint and contradiction. As Crenshaw (1989) writes, "The praxis of both should be centered on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties" (p. 166). This episode centers those complications without asking its characters to justify or solve them.

For Issa, the week is marked by instability. She is pushed out of her apartment and moves in with Daniel. This move signals both economic precarity and emotional uncertainty. The scenes between Issa and Daniel are tense and undefined. Their connection

is shaped by unclear expectations and circumstantial dependence. As Crenshaw (1989) writes, “Black women are burdened not only because they often have to take on responsibilities that are not traditionally feminine but, moreover, their assumption of these roles is sometimes interpreted within the Black community as either Black women's failure to live up to such norms or as another manifestation of racism's scourge upon the Black community” (p. 156). This explains why Issa feels the need to appear composed while scrambling to keep her life together. She is overextended, working multiple jobs, and performing a version of resilience that lacks a reward. Molly, Issa's best friend, discovers that she is paid less than her white male colleagues despite performing as well as they have. When she raises this issue, she is dismissed. She explores options at a Black-owned firm out of exhaustion of feeling undervalued. Her story shows the emotional cost of being told that competence is enough. hooks (2000) reminds us that "the promise of equality without structural transformation reproduces harm and frustration" (p. 113). Molly’s career arc illustrates this. Her feelings of betrayal come from seeing how success still leaves her feeling vulnerable. Lawrence’s storyline, often sidelined in feminist analysis, serves here as a contrast. He is navigating shame and disorientation. He performs with confidence, but it falters. Welang (2018) writes that Issa’s world forces her into experimental subject positions (p. 298). The same could be said for Lawrence, whose masculinity depends on stability he no longer possesses. His insecurity produces distance from others and from himself.

By separating these storylines, “Hella Perspective” makes visible how structural limitations influence personal experiences. The episode presents these tensions as an ongoing state, revealing the limits of narrative closure in feminist storytelling. Feminist subjectivity here does not seek coherence. It endures misrecognition, burnout, and stalled movement. The show withholds progress and instead documents effort and that effort is what lingers.

4.3.3 “Lowkey Happy” (S4E8)

Season four, episode eight of *Insecure*, named “Lowkey Happy,” centers on Issa and Lawrence, presenting them in a bottle episode format: a self-contained story situated in one location or time frame that deeply emphasizes character growth (Newman, 2006, p. 17). Throughout a prolonged night, the two rekindle their emotional and physical bond, reflecting on their previous relationship with fresh honesty

The episode opens with Issa and Lawrence meeting for drinks. Their conversation is relaxed but layered with subtext. Issa breaks this passive tone by saying, "I just want to be real with you," and Lawrence pauses before responding with a soft "me too." They do not say much, but each word is heavy with implication, showing how they feel on their way back into trust. There is no scripted confrontation or forced apology. Instead, the writing allows them to ask difficult questions gradually such as: What went wrong? What do we want now? Their dialogue (or for better words, lack thereof) displays mutual vulnerability. This pace of conversation resists the urgency of television tropes that push for romantic resolution, instead prioritizing slow emotional clarity. Lawrence admits he has been thinking about Issa since their breakup. He asks if cheating was the end or just the trigger. Issa, in turn, explains her loneliness and confusion at the time. Their emotional honesty is not neat or reparative. It lingers. The episode challenges confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2017, p. 6), where maturity is often expected rather than treated as an ongoing learning process.

Importantly, "Lowkey Happy" avoids placing this reconnection in a framework of romantic redemption. Issa and Lawrence are not “getting back together” as a plot point but rather exploring what it means to see each other clearly. This episode highlights uncertainty: what happens if we are still figuring it out? By slowing down and staying with one relationship, the episode presents intimacy as something ongoing and honest, rather than something to win or resolve. There is no perfect line that resolves the past. No empowered performance that makes the pain go away. Just two people, more honest than before,

walking toward the possibility of something different. Not stronger. Not wiser. Just clearer.

4.3.4 “Everything's Gonna Be, Okay?!” (S5E10)

Season five, episode ten of *Insecure*, titled "Everything's Gonna Be, Okay?!", acts as the series finale and moves through multiple years of Issa's life using a time-lapse format. Rather than presenting a central event, the episode observes Issa's passage through birthdays, weddings, and professional milestones. The tone stays steady, and the visual storytelling emphasizes quiet shifts in routine. It closes the series on a reflective note, asking how someone continues while carrying everything they have lived.

As time passes, Issa’s relationships evolve. Her friendship with Molly becomes the emotional center of the episode. Molly’s wedding is a narrative anchor, but the scenes stay focused on their shared intimacy. Issa helps her with the wedding dress in the mirror, a quiet act that carries the weight of years. Gammage (2015) points out how Black women’s emotional labor underpins the health of relationships and communities, even though it is often overlooked (p. 84). That gesture makes the care between them tangible. Issa’s relationship with Lawrence appears throughout the episode, woven into other parts of her life. Their reunion offers no closure or resolution. It happens alongside work changes and parenting. Gill (2007) discusses how postfeminist culture turns romantic stability into a symbol of growth (p. 153). The finale avoids that framing. The bond between Issa and Lawrence flows alongside everything else. The episode includes scenes of Issa in the car, in her old neighborhood, and standing in front of a mirror. Each moment stays grounded in observation. In the final scene, Issa looks at herself, smiles, and walks away. The series closes with care that remains open-ended.

Insecure leaves Issa in motion, making decisions, surrounded by the people who shaped her. The show stays close to its feminist politics by stepping away from narrative pressure.

5. Results

This chapter applies Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) model to examine how Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure* construct feminist meaning through production, address, and ideology. CDA enables a layered reading of television texts by unpacking how language, tone, and structure reinforce or challenge dominant cultural scripts. I use Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model to analyze meaning across three levels: textual (what is said and how), discursive (who is speaking and who is addressed), and social (how discourse reflects or contests broader ideological structures) (Fairclough, 1995, p. 98).

5.1 Embedded production and audience information

Meanings are shaped by who creates the show and who it speaks to (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983, p. 565). CDA helps uncover how these meanings are built into media texts, both through what is shown and how it is framed. I use Fairclough's (1995) model to zoom in on three levels: textual (language, tone, style), discursive (who is addressed, who is centered), and social (how these reflect larger ideologies) (Fairclough, 1995, p. 98).

The first show, *Sex and the City,* constructs its viewer through a polished and aspirational frame. Carrie Bradshaw's voiceover may appear confessional and intimate, but it is authored by a predominantly male writing team (Akass & McCabe, 2004, p. 5). This reveals a tension between the appearance of authenticity and the ideological framing of femininity. The show idealizes whiteness, wealth, heterosexuality, and urban privilege (Gill, 2007, p. 149; Dyer, 1997, p. 10), assuming the viewer identifies these norms. It performs what Hall (1997, p. 19) describes as a closed textual strategy, reinforcing dominant codes and excluding differences (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021, p. 21). The imagined viewer is a mirror of Carrie herself.

In contrast, *Girls* introduces ambiguity and discomfort into its address. Hannah is awkward, ironic, and often unlikeable. Lena Dunham's dual role as writer and actor blurs the lines between creator and character, complicating how viewers engage with the narrative (Gill, 2016, p. 621). Unlike the glossiness of *SATC*, *Girls* leans into contradiction and instability. Its viewer is expected to decode irony and navigate the performance of gender as unstable and theatrical (Butler, 1999, p. 33). This opens the text to oppositional readings (Hall, 1980, p. 136), allowing the audience to reflect on the limitations of postfeminist representation.

Insecure continues this movement but reframes the imagined audience entirely. Issa Rae's dual role as writer and lead actress allows the show to place value on the role of race and culture as central structuring logics (Gammage, 2016, p. 74). The use of mirror scenes creates intimacy, speaking directly to a Black audience without needing translation (hooks, 1992, p. 73). By refusing to center on whiteness, the show redefines visibility itself through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Banet-Weiser (2018, pp. 50–51) argues that visibility is never neutral or inherently empowering. Instead, it operates within existing power structures and market logic. In *Insecure*, visibility is not just about screen presence; it is about centering Blackness without explanation, depicting emotional nuance and cultural specificity in ways that resist dominant expectations. The show illustrates how visibility can challenge norms, but also how it requires careful framing to avoid reproducing the very systems it seeks to critique.

5.2 Generational shifts in understanding feminism

This section explores how each show responds to and reshapes feminist discourse according to its cultural moment. Generational shifts are visible in how feminism is interpreted, parodied, or embedded in each text. Using Fairclough's CDA model, this analysis breaks down the textual features, discursive positioning, and broader ideological work at play.

Sex and the City presents feminism through a visual language of control and polish. Its tone is confident, the aesthetics aspirational. The city becomes a playground for independent women, with Carrie's narration offering clear, witty reflections that frame feminism as choice and empowerment. As Gill (2007) explains, this kind of postfeminist media installs traditional gender values in updated, stylish forms, allowing feminism to appear resolved and folded into lifestyle (p. 149). *Girls* visually disrupts this sense of clarity with its grungier look and emotionally raw scenes creating a sense of instability instead. The initial smooth wave of excitement about feminist empowerment has seemed to pass. Instead, the main characters are portrayed to be ironically messy but also self-conscious individuals. Characters invoke feminism by behaving inconsistently. This ambiguity marks a shift toward what Gill (2016) calls "feminist fatigue" which is a space where the lgoal of empowerment exists without clear outcomes (p. 621). *Insecure* continues the trend of emotional realism but brings with it warmth, rhythm, and specificity. It avoids the irony of *Girls* and the gloss of *SATC.* Intimacy is built through mirror scenes, pacing, and close attention to silence. The show presents feminism not through slogans but through the emotional labor of navigating race, class, and gender expectations.

The feminist discourse in *Sex and the City* assumes resolution. The characters act as if gender equality has been achieved. Their struggles are framed as personal dilemmas, not political structures. Gill (2007) notes how postfeminism shifts attention from collective action to individual self-styling (p. 153). This is reflected in the show's uncritical celebration of choice. In *Girls*, the discourse becomes more complex. Characters discuss feminism, yet with an emotional layer of irony, or with a sense of defensiveness. Hannah's self-centeredness reflects a wider cultural disorientation: what does feminism signify when structural critique appears obsolete or unproductive? Banet-Weiser (2018) refers to this change as a move toward branded feminism as prominent in rhetoric but lacking political substance (p. 10). *Insecure* moves away from trying to portray feminist ideals and instead

shows it through everyday experiences. There are only a few explicit declarations on the matter. Instead, feminist discourse emerges through experience such as in workplace microaggressions, romantic conflict, and friendship breakdowns. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality becomes visible through the various experiences that shape each character. Feminism here is affective and grounded in the community.

5.3 Different approaches to economic realities

This section looks at how money, labor, and class shape feminist subjectivity in Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure*. Rottenberg describes this economic reality by stating, "Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (2014, p. 420). Each show handles this precarity in its own way. The shows offer different ways of imagining economic power, insecurity, and ambition as well as how these are then gendered and racialized.

In *Sex and the City,* money is rarely discussed as a problem. Carrie lives in Manhattan, gets to buy designer clothes, and never really seems to be struggling financially. Her work as a columnist is treated more like a lifestyle choice than a real job. Gill (2007) points out how postfeminist culture ties empowerment to "consumption, glamour, and personal style" (p. 149). The show presents wealth as effortless and unmarked, folding it into the fantasy of white femininity. Dyer (1997) writes that whiteness works by "masking its own privilege and appearing universal" (p. 10). *Girls* makes economic struggle more visible.

Jobs are either unstable, unpaid, or linked to parental support. The characters deal with rejection, failure, and burnout. Their feminism is shaped by economic insecurity, creative anxiety, and precarity. Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that this is central to postfeminist subjectivity, stating that it is "one defined by individual responsibility within shrinking economic options" (p. 5). Race remains sidelined, but the show starts to acknowledge the limits of privilege. Banet-Weiser (2018) calls this the affective exhaustion of neoliberal culture, where feminist language exists but often leads nowhere (p. 10). *Insecure* brings structural inequality into focus. Characters face workplace racism, code-switching, and career ceilings. Labor is racialized and emotional. The show includes scenes where ambition is undercut by microaggressions or unfair expectations. Money becomes both a source of stress and a tool for survival. Gammage (2016) emphasizes how, series such as *Insecure*, "centers the lived experiences of Black women navigating systemic barriers" (p. 74), highlighting how the show refuses to abstract labor from identity. The show demonstrates how overlapping systems of power can be felt during everyday moments such as missed promotions, needing to be more cautious about being perceived properly which ultimately shape our decisions for survival. The structural critique placed here is built into each character's experience. These frameworks deepen the reading of how *Insecure* portrays economic struggle not as a personal failure, but as a structural reality that characters actively resist and navigate.

In *Sex and the City,* economic comfort is a given. Work is tied to identity and style but not to survival. The characters talk about fashion, dating, and lifestyle, rarely about wages, rent, or job insecurity. Feminism is implied through choice and autonomy, but class privilege stays unspoken. The show frames consumption as liberation (Gill, 2007, p. 149). *Girls* brings these contradictions to the surface. Feminist talk appears in job interviews, therapy sessions, and awkward conversations about success. The characters speak from positions of whiteness and cultural capital yet still feel blocked and financially unsuccessful.

They perform empowerment but often fall short of it. Banet-Weiser (2018) notes that in this space, feminism becomes "emotionally loaded but politically stuck" (p. 10). *Insecure* speaks to economic realities without needing to spell them out. The characters navigate racism at work, support each other through layoffs, and push for better futures. Crenshaw (1989) explains that the "intersection of race and gender creates unique challenges" in labor spaces (p. 150). Feminism is lived through negotiating everyday experiences

5.4 Love life and intimacy

This section explores how each show frames romance and intimacy in the context of feminist empowerment, In *Sex and the City*, romance is the primary goal. Love is tightly tied to the success of a woman's lifestyle. Feminine confidence is framed as the goal for attracting intimacy. Emotional labor, when it happens, is either glamorized or avoided. The show gives us a dramatized version of relationships that lean towards the imaginary. Carrie narrates her desires with certainty, and when things fall apart, it is rarely because her emotional work wasn't done. Gill (2007) describes this as the fantasy of "The One" being offered as the reward for self-discipline, self-confidence, and desirability (p. 149). This framing of love as a reward links directly to the show's larger postfeminist narrative, where confidence and style are positioned as emotional currency. In contrast, *Girls* depicts love as broken and uneasy. In season 2, episode 5, Hannah engages in a short sexual affair with an older doctor named Joshua, in a rather subtle narrative that unfolds almost exclusively in his apartment. However, as the story unfolds, it appears that Hannah is more engaged in the idea of being desired than in the man himself, and eventually, she confesses to feeling profoundly unhappy and ends their relationship. This moment shows how *Girls* frames intimacy as something that is uncertain and emotionally unstable. Gill (2016) argues that postfeminist media texts such as *Girls* are marked by a "refusal to resolve discomfort" (p. 621), and this scene lingers in that unresolved space where unspoken needs are failed to be met and the

characters suffer through quiet withdrawal of intimacy. The breakdown of intimacy here can be read through Fairclough's (1995) claim that textual analysis must engage with "the traces of struggles over meaning" embedded in language (p. 98). These traces become visible through what is said in silence. The show resists offering a clean resolution to romantic narratives and instead presents failure to resurface feminist critique. Instead of simply framing love as either romantic fantasy or emotional disconnection, *Insecure* offers a middle ground where intimacy is built through emotional labor. In “Lowkey Happy”, Issa and Lawrence reconnect and visit old memories. They come to the realization that their connection is shaped by past pain and shared growth, and it doesn’t exist separately from the cultural pressures they both navigate as Black professionals. hooks (2000) write that “love is an action” (p. 196), and here, that action looks like listening, being honest, and showing up for one another. This way, love becomes a space for mutual care and support.

In *Sex and the City*, love is discussed through the language of self-assurance and individual choice. The characters reflect a discourse where emotional success is framed as a matter of personal responsibility. *Girls* opens up this discourse and exposes its instability. Intimacy is not something the characters know how to manage, even with frequent communication. This reveals the emotional contradictions of living in a culture where feminism is visible but not always functional. *Insecure* combines these views of intimacy by showing how emotional labor becomes part of everyday care. Characters are able to take responsibility, and move forward together, building a discourse of love rooted in mutual effort.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed how feminist discourse is adopted, reflected, and transformed in Sex and the City, *Girls*, and *Insecure*. At various times and in various manners, they each attempt to understand what it signifies to be a woman in a society that claims feminism is

obsolete, or even worse, that the fight has already been achieved. Nevertheless, they share a single trait. These stories defy linear progression, thereby contradicting themselves, looping back, and exposing the discord between what is expressed and what is executed This tension shapes how feminist meaning emerges. It is never static, never finished, and continuously being negotiated through language, structure, omission, and affect.

Across the previous sections, I have traced how discourse circulates through aesthetics and tone, through narrative form and authorship. What CDA made visible is that these shows are doing ideological work, even when it does not appear at first glance. Postfeminist discourse, as Gill (2007) argues, functions through its flexibility and its ability to take the language of liberation and reattach it to familiar scripts of romance, labor, and self-styling (p. 149). The shows let this flexibility stretch. Sometimes they try to hold it accountable, sometimes they do not. but across all three, feminism is awkward, commodified, fatigued and intimate.

The comparative structure was key to tracing how feminist discourse has evolved across recent generations. *Sex and the City* offers feminism as fantasy, resolved through success and style. *Girls* interrupts that fantasy, but mostly to sit in its contradictions. *Insecure* doesn't promise resolution. It opens up space. Not for clarity, but for complexity. For vulnerability, ambivalence, and refusal. Gill and Orgad's (2017) critique of confidence culture became especially important here as a way of understanding what kinds of emotion and failure are allowed to surface (p. 34). *Insecure* lets insecurity live. And in doing so, it builds something closer to what Crenshaw (1989) demanded: intersectional visibility that isn't just about being seen, but about being centered (p. 140).

Importantly, this thesis does not treat representation as a solution to feminist struggle. None of these shows break free from their capitalist structures. Even the most nuanced still operate within prestige TV, bound to certain narrative conventions and audience expectations. That logic saturates all three texts. Even when they resist it, they're

still within it. So, the goal here was never to sort them into good or bad representations. It was to ask: what kinds of feminist meaning get made possible, and what gets left out?

There are clear limitations to my research. The analysis focused on twelve episodes. A greater amount of data would have allowed for a deeper analysis. It privileged HBO's definition of "quality" television (Lotz, 2006, p. 12), which already narrows the scope of what counts. It stayed within Western, English-speaking media, and didn't engage with how audiences might interpret these texts. These limitations would be interesting to explore in future research.

In that regard, they continue to hold significance as they aid in exploring the types of feminist notions that are accepted and those that are not. In a media landscape where empowerment frequently becomes more about aesthetics, instances of dissonance or subtle resistance still indicate significance. They do not guarantee change, yet they provide a glimpse into the ways feminism is influenced, limited, and occasionally re-envisioned.

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Appendix

Show	Episode	Theme
Sex and the City	"Sex Like a Man" (S01E01)	Sexual agency, financial independence, postfeminist femininity
Sex and the City	"Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda" (S04E11)	Bodily autonomy, fertility, neoliberal choice and success
Sex and the City	"The Post-it Always Sticks" Twice (S06E07)	Confidence culture, resilience, affective self-regulation
Sex and the City	"An American Girl in Paris" Part Deux (S06E20)	Romantic closure, consumer fantasy, postfeminist contradiction
Girls	"Pilot" (S01E01)	Economic instability, failed empowerment fantasy
Girls	"One Man's Trash" (S02E05)	Class fantasy, romantic detachment, neoliberal escapism

Girls	"Flo" (S03E09)	Intergenerational tension, critique of individualized feminism
Girls	"Latching" (S06E10)	Motherhood, neoliberal burden, unresolved postfeminism
Insecure	"*Insecure* as F**k" (S01E01)	Respectability, visibility, racialized workplace performance
Insecure	"Hella Perspective" (S02E08)	Emotional labor, diverging paths, self-reinvention
Insecure	"Lowkey Happy" (S04E08)	Vulnerability, romantic pressure, racialized expectations
Insecure	"Everything's Gonna Be Okay?!" (S05E10)	Selfhood, confidence, community-oriented resolution