“Overcoming Tunnel Vision:” A content analysis of *Parks and Recreation*
“You hear that? That is the sound of the glass ceiling being shattered… It is my hope that one day we live in a world where the very idea of ‘Boys Club’ is ancient history.” –Leslie Knope

INTRODUCTION

Representation of femininity is an ongoing debate amongst sociologists. The word feminism is often associated with negativity, making it nearly impossible for women to claim empowerment without receiving ridicule from society. This study aims to analyze “How feminism is represented in the modern droll-comedy sitcom, Parks and Recreation.”

Parks and Recreation uniquely illustrates feminism in the form of satire. By purposefully hyperbolizing stereotypes, the show reiterates the ridiculousness of anti-feminism. It is important sociologists continue to research feminism in modern media because new analyses will encourage our society to break away from previous harsh stigmas.

During my research process, I will record interesting quotes relating to feminism and gender equality. I will look for stereotypes presented about the women in the show, representation of women in power, and the reinstatement of gender roles. By analyzing what I have mentioned, I will then create a theory regarding the data I have collected. I will elaborate on my theory about feminism represented as such and why it is important sociologically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for my research proposal helps maintain feminine research. By strengthening the knowledge of current sociological articles on feminism, the more validity I can claim when conducting my own research. I reviewed seven articles on the representation of
feminism and stereotypes of women in the media. The focus of the literature review was to grasp onto different perspectives of feminism from other educated scholars.

There is an ongoing conversation about feminist theories and women in the media. These two topics, mixed with continuous research and passionate writers, open up many doors to discuss inequities in society. Feminism research is not just a topic to critique, appreciate, and move on. It is a constant battle women and society face, continuously striving to move forward. The more we research feminist theory and women studies, the closer we are to reconstructing harsh stigmas. A great and interesting step in the right direction is analyzing women in the media. The presence of technology has become incredibly relative, helping perpetuate stereotypes and pursue judgments on the female community. But before we narrow our research to media specifically, it is important to understand feminist theory.

Many scholars have defined (or attempted to define) feminist theory. Winston (2014) claims, “we need to accept that it [feminist theory] is not a simple theory, it is a diverse, multifaceted idea with differing aims to the cultural context in which it finds itself.” By understanding that feminism can vary, it should be “congratulated, not criticized (Winston).” Winston (2014) states, “feminism has the power to give women a voice, though what they might say is liable to change.” Similar to Winston (2014), Dorer and Hipfl (2013) believe feminism is multi-definable, and “in its double meaning, feminism implies both an academic theory and a political dimension.” Politically speaking, feminist theory is identified best with gender injustice. By recognizing gender injustice, it allows “the transformation of the passive objects of welfare and development policy into active subjects.” Winston, Dorer, and Hipfl (2013) would agree that because gender inequality is present in our media, it is important to redistribute, recognize, and represent (Dorer, Hipfl 2013) positive examples of women, omitting previous stereotypes. This
is not possible without educating children on the subject.

*Feminist Theory Definitions*

Education is the key that can unlock solutions to injustice and sociological issues. Because of our recent incline in technology and constant flush of information from social networks, children and adults are able to gather and opinionate a vast number of topics faster than ever before. We see this quite often with modern sitcoms. Shorter, interesting, and humorous sitcoms allow the audience to receive quick, entertaining information. A common trend with media today is hyperbolizing social issues (i.e. feminism, racism, gender inequality…) using satire. Recent research on satire states that it “might be defined as humor that mocks human folly and vice and that challenges or ridicules part of a culture in order to critique it” (Birthisel, Martin 2013). Intentions behind satire are to exemplify radical or uncomfortable situations, with humor. This allows the audience to view sociological issues as ridiculousness, instead of dwelling on the otherwise heavy subject; however, some sociologists argue that satire might not speak to particular audiences and instead are “reinforcing prejudices” (Birthisel, Marin 2013). Bush-Bailey (2012), in her analysis of female comedians, questions whether audiences enjoyably “relish the disruption of expected behavior and responses” (2012) or reject buying “into the not-so-subtle controls of gender construction” (2012). She theorizes that acceptance and recognition of female successors in the comedic world is necessary for the progression of equality. With gender construction so influential in media today, are women represented as progressive, driven feminists? Or are they placed back into previous, demeaning stereotypes?

*Satire in the Media*

Krestedemas would agree that, yes, women stereotypes are present in both sitcoms, and television dramas. In his focus group analysis, he determines that because “recent criticism of
black media stereotypes has focused on portrayals of women, some scholars and media critics would argue that stereotypes of black women have eclipsed” (2010) within the last two decades. Society puts heavy expectations on all different types of women to be beautiful on screen, simultaneously encouraging particular feminine criteria. Scholars would argue that enforcing “one-dimensional and idealistic images… [is] a form of social control over women and are the result of “a violent backlash against feminism” (Goldman, Waymer, 2014). While this assumption may be a slightly radical one, research has proven that “these findings illustrate how media’s portrayals of beauty influence…are deemed unrealistic” (Goldman, Waymer 2014). Consequently, media representation is a huge influence on sociologists. Producing more modern, realistic television shows about women will encourage a shift in how society perceives the female community. Whether that be reinforcing gender equality with satire, or creating a drama with a strong, lead female protagonist, the urgency to diminish stereotypes will continue to be ongoing research collaboration.

**Stereotypes in the Media**

Because our technology is advancing faster, it is imperative sociologists continue to research and update information on feminism. Mann believes that “feminist media scholars should examine these media channels’ content and recognize their possibilities” (2014). As a feminist, Mann emphasizes on the possibilities of exploring the media and viewing it as a “resource” (2014) or tool to overrun hegemonic masculinity. By referencing current technological cultural terms such as “hashtag” and “twitter,” Mann believes that using the media is an easier and more effective way to communicate ideas about feminist theory and otherwise questionable topics. As previously mentioned, feminist theory and women studies are constantly being reviewed, revised, and renewed. This being said, media serves as a double edge sword.
On one hand, while there are flaws in what information society receives, without media, educating societies on the complexities and brilliance of feminist theory will be nearly impossible. On the other hand, with media, there is a much larger possibility of reinforcing the stereotypes, perpetuation what we already know is unequal. By understanding that media “can also [help society] learn something about what defines spaces for media resistance and mutual support,” (Mann) it then becomes our civil obligation to stream progressive, interesting information to further help reconstruct the portrayal of women.

DATA AND METHODS

This study utilizes unobtrusive method to analyze “How feminism is represented in the modern droll-comedy sitcom, Parks and Recreation.” I conducted a content analysis of six episodes of Parks and Recreation which were aired throughout six seasons. Content analysis examines non-interactive data that exists independently of the research (Hessey-Biber and Leavy, 2011:228). For the purpose of this study, I only used season’s one through five, which are available on Netflix, and refrained from using season six due to a contradiction of my previously conducted analysis.

Because I was so interested in representation of feminism in the media, the satirical twists Parks and Recreation throws at the audience, and the constant push for equality, content analysis was the most appropriate methodology for my research question: “How feminism is represented in the modern droll-comedy sitcom, Parks and Recreation.” In order to ensure my analysis would be well rounded, I decided to analyze the main and minor female characters in the sitcom.

Parks and Recreation takes in small town Pawnee, Indiana. Leslie Knope is both the main character of the series and Deputy Parks Director of Pawnee’s Parks and Recreation
Department. She is passionate, career driven, and an active feminist. Later in the series, she becomes First Councilwoman Knope. Ann Perkins is Leslie Knope’s best friend and nurse in Pawnee. Ann is hired on part time in the office as the Public Relationship Director for the Health Department. April Ludgate-Dwyer is the youngest of all the women and the intern for Ron Swanson, director of the Parks and Recreation Department. She is hired on in season 3 as Ron Swanson’s assistant and later becomes the Deputy Director of Animal Control. She is married to Andy Dwyer. Donna Meagle is a minor character and the only African American in the show. She is the Office Manager of the Parks and Recreation Department and part investor in the Snakehole Lounge, Pawnee’s local club, and a real-estate agent.

_Parks and Recreation_ continuously has high ratings on both NBC and Netflix. While its humor is both dry and satirical, the overall message is very clear: Inequality is ridiculous. It is no surprise that after the sixth season, audiences desperately craved more, causing the writers to bring back the series, giving the fans a seventh, and final, season. The season will not be aired until 2015.

I watched six episodes aired over the past five seasons looking for certain quotes, humorous stereotypes, jokes about feminism, feminism in general, and the breaking of gender norms. Anytime dialogue or actions reinstated my research question, I noted in a journal to further analyze throughout and after the episode. After collecting my data based on said research question, I began the coding process of the material at hand. Throughout the data collection, I noted themes and patterns. After finding the themes and patterns, I then edited them into descriptive codes. By creating a more descriptive analysis, the clearer my research became. The purpose of grouping my data together was to find key themes that best represent my research
question. Because feminism is such a broad and frequently researched topic, focusing on the humor of anti-feminism helps to illustrate a different viewpoint.

It is important to address the holes in research and limitations of using content analysis. Firstly, analyzing multiple television series would have strengthened my analysis and possibly presented new, valuable data. Secondly, while it is unobtrusive and subjective, not having a clear understanding of what people actually feel or believe when they watch *Parks and Recreation* weakens the analysis. Despite my inability to directly contact college-aged women, conduct in-depth interviews, or even distribute a survey questioning one’s involvement in feminist theory, content analysis remains an adequate way to analyze feminism in a more intimate fashion.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study was to explore “How feminism is represented in the modern droll-comedy sitcom, *Parks and Recreation.*” to do this, I analyzed six episodes which were aired throughout six seasons. The six episodes I will research include: Season 1, episode 4, The Boys Club; season 2, episode 3, Beauty Pageant; season 2, episode 10, Hunting Trip; season 3, episode 9, Andy and April’s Fancy Party; season 4 episode 4, Pawnee Rangers; season 5, Episode 11, Women in Garbage. The analyses of these six episodes help inform the understanding of how *Parks and Recreation* represent femininity. The findings help answer my research question “How feminism and stereotypes are represented in the modern droll-comedy sitcom, *Parks and Recreation.*”

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, two major themes emerged. (1) Female stereotypes are hyperbolized in order to demonstrate anti-feminism. (2) Satire is used to
represent the ridiculousness of inequality. Next I will discuss each theme and guide the reader to better comprehend *Parks and Recreation* with a more feminist perspective.

*My time of the month: Stereotypes at its finest*

The primary findings of the study encourage the idea that stereotypes can be shaped into being humorous. Before, stereotypes would embody our negative views of those who are different than us, causing deviance in society. While enforcing stereotypes have been deemed negative throughout time, slowly we begin to see a shift in thought patterns, resulting in utilizing stereotypes for comedy. For example in S2:E3 (Season 2, Episode 3) Beauty Pageant, Leslie serves as a judge in the Ms. Pawnee Beauty Pageant. Her intern, April, enters the pageant to hopefully win $200. April looks and acts completely different then all of the other contestants. She has no interest in being Ms. Pawnee; she enters for the money and to make fun of the beauty pageant process. This helps illustrate the contrast between April and the other contestants. Because Leslie is an honest, genuine character, it is her responsibility to vote for whoever she feels is the best candidate to represent Pawnee. The other judges disagree with her reasoning and decide to vote for a contestant named Trish, also known as “the hot one.” Trish wears revealing clothing, is extremely ditzy, and has no intellectual depth. All of which are stereotypes of upper class, white American women. While the audience and judges congratulate Trish’s sexualized demeanor, Leslie makes a short speech before awarding her as Ms. Pawnee. “It is my dream that the next Ms. Pawnee will not be judged by the flatness of her tummy, but by the contents of her brain.”

Continuing with this theme is S3:E9, Andy and April’s Fancy Party. This episode demonstrates how the dating world works. Donna and April go on speed dating to attempt to
break out of their previously known stereotypes. While Donna is confident and promiscuous, she purposefully acts like Ann who is both shy and meek. By challenging their normal behavior for the sake of a fun night, they discover that being their true identity is much more rewarding than forcing a stereotype that a man would enjoy.

Expanding on utilizing stereotypes for comedy, S2:E10, Hunting Trip, takes place on a shooting range in Pawnee. For the first time, the women at the Parks and Recreation department are attending a men’s only hunting trip. Leslie partners up with her boss, Ron Swanson, to challenge his hunting abilities. Because both are very competitive, she makes it her goal to outhunt Ron. When she shoots her first dove, she coolly asks him, “Are you surprised my breasts didn’t throw my aim off?” Openly reminding the audience of her sex, she does this to show that even though she is a woman, she can successfully hunt. When Ron is accidentally shot by an unknown culprit, Leslie allegedly takes the blame to protect her colleague. A Pawnee police officer questions Leslie on why she might have misfired. The officer asks Leslie if she checked the field before firing, fully aware that “a lot of women have tunnel vision.” This question sets up an impromptu stream of stereotypical answers as to why Leslie shot Ron. Some of the reasons Leslie states include: “Being hysterical because of the commotion.” “I let my emotions get the best of me.” “I cared too much.” “I saw something icky.” “I thought there was going to be chocolate.” “All I want in life is to have babies.” Because the officer sympathizes with her being a feeble, weak woman, he releases her from his custody. The general population in Pawnee refuses to support female equality, thus influencing Leslie and the others to prove their worth to the community. This is true in many societies today. While women continue to be overrun by hegemonic masculinity, there is still hope that women will eventually break out of the stigma.
Addressing the inequalities societies face today, especially in the form of satire, is a tool used by many comedians.

Cut a piece of equality pie: Satire holds the knife

While women in comedy are few and far between, the women in *Parks and Recreation* serve as a leading example of how funny women can be. As mentioned in the literature before, oftentimes, women are seen as the caretakers, and are neglected the label “comedian.” While comedy is generally a male dominated profession, slowly we are seeing more funny women in the media. In the beginning of S5:E11, Women in Garbage, Leslie, April, Ann and Donna discusses with a former City Councilwoman about the lack of women hired for various departments throughout the city. The woman goes on to explain that the councilmen kept her “menstrual cycle on a calendar” and used that against her later on when she wanted to hire on more woman, the men claimed it as “just her time of the month.” Purposefully tossing jokes about anti-feminism helps the audience make the connection that not supporting women is an outdated belief. Younger generations have statistically been more open to gender equality. Leslie addresses in a City Council meeting the lack of women hired in the sanitation department. Mid-meeting, she discovers that the departments never sent any women to discuss the issue. This is ironic, and hilarious, because the meeting is clearly about equal employment. To prove women are capable of working in sanitation, she volunteers herself and April to be trash women for the day. When the male employees in the sanitation department claim that the women cannot move an extremely heavy refrigerator, Leslie and April take the challenge and gather women from around town to help move “the symbolic feminist object.” Together, the women prove equality and more women are hired on the department.
In S1:E4, The Boys Club, Leslie states that “politics are full of boys clubs.” In this episode, Leslie and Ann crash a small gathering held by the men in the City Utility department. Pushing to be treated the same as the men, she opens a government gift basket of wine and cheese that exceeds $25, the limit a government employee can receive. By going against her strict rules, she turns herself in and gets written up. She broke the rule in order to hopefully break “the glass ceiling.” Her passion for equality is what drives the series and keeps the audience on their seats.

Another and final example, of satire being used to represent inequality is in S4:E4, Pawnee Rangers, Leslie, Ann, and Ron help host a boys and girls camping trip. While the boys have their own club with Ron called the Pawnee Rangers, Leslie creates her own troupe called the Pawnee Goddesses. She has a very clear, exciting agenda for the girls and also helps to promote and educate on the inner workings of equality. She treats the camping trip as a competition to have the better troupe. She succeeds by luring the boys into desiring to be a Pawnee Goddess. When at first Leslie rejects the boys from joining, she is soon reminded by her Pawnee Goddess troupe that she cannot be a confident feminist yet deny the boys from joining the troupe. The boys enter what is known as the gender transgression zone and what was seen before as “girly” and “lame” is now “cool” and “fun.” The boys go through the ceremony and become Pawnee Goddesses. Though Leslie and Ann succeed in a small step towards equality this time, there are always new obstacles that lie ahead. Utilizing humor to make an otherwise uncomfortable topic more interesting is a strategy used to plant a different way to view an issue. With every step toward change comes push from society attempting to minimize one’s success.

All of these examples above represent the satirical side to viewing inequality, pushing to break free of existing stereotypes, and further challenge the day to day obstacles women face.
CONCLUSIONS

I am woman hear me roar

This study aimed to analyze “How feminism and stereotypes are represented in the modern droll-comedy sitcom, Parks and Recreation.” The analysis of the six episodes revealed two major themes. These themes are supported by using Netflix to watch the episodes to gather my examples.

The first theme is that female stereotypes are hyperbolized in order to demonstrate anti-feminism. Parks and Recreation exemplifies stereotypes to show that judging people based on a predisposition is more comical than necessary. Exaggerating an issue shows how unnatural it can be.

The second and final theme is that satire is used to represent the ridiculousness of inequality. Comedy makes sense of an otherwise uncomfortable situation and allows for different people of a ranging audience to laugh and discover that inequality is slowly a topic of the past. By continuing to view inequality in this fashion, especially performed by women, will cause a shift in how women are viewed in society.

Continuing the research of anti-feminism and why satire helps alleviate the blow is important sociologically because awareness can promote change. If women are more aware of how they too can be a passionate, career driven, stern, and funny leader like Leslie Knope and her female colleagues, then more girls will strive for this same passion.
REFERENCES


