Shame On Her: Representations of Women and Female Sexuality in HBO’s Girls

Farnaz Zanjani
faza4160@Colorado.EDU

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Shame On Her: Representations of Women and Female Sexuality in HBO’s Girls

By

Farnaz Zanjani

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Thesis Committee: Lisa A. Flores (Advisor), Cindy H. White, Steven Frost
# Shame On Her: Representations of Women and Female Sexuality in HBO’s *Girls*

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Abstract
Television serves as a dominant force in culture and possesses the ability to influence how we perceive the world around us. Gendered stereotypes have been perpetuated in various television shows, and research illustrates that representations of sexuality and gender reinforce the stereotypes present in traditional discourse. These representations often portray women as one-dimensional, and define them through binary typecasts. The purposes of this study are to examine ideologies of gender that are portrayed in both television and society and to understand how certain shows reinforce or reject these stereotypes. Through an ideological feminist critical analysis, this thesis explores the HBO television series Girls in order to demonstrate how this show functions as a critique on traditional ideologies of gender, specifically through representations of female sexuality. Girls highlights traditional depictions of women in media in order to recognize female sexuality on a continuum, rather than through binary typecasts. Using Bay-Cheng’s theory of the Virgin-Slut continuum, I examine how Girls uses these rhetorical tactics to offer critiques of previous depictions of women in media, while also presenting media consumers with a modern representation of femininity. Representations of women in television condition viewers’ beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of women, which Girls attempts to reshape through rhetorical strategies such as exaggeration and normalization.
**Introduction**

“On All Fours,” an episode from season 2 of HBO’s *Girls* raises a host of interesting questions regarding modern relationships. “Get on all fours and crawl to the bedroom,” says Adam, Natalia’s new boyfriend. Natalia appears dumbfounded by this request, and reluctantly obeys Adam’s command. Adam follows her to the bedroom and tells her that “[he] wants to fuck [her] from behind, hit the walls with you,” to which she does not verbally consent. He immediately begins to take her clothes off when she says “No. Look, I didn’t take a shower today”, seeming extremely uncomfortable by the situation. “It’s fine, relax,” he says, and proceeds to have sex with her. Natalia continues to express discomfort and is not engaged in the sex whatsoever. The scene ends with Adam pulling out and ejaculating over her, as Natalia begins to shout “No, no, no, not on my dress!” She then appears upset and looks away from Adam who looks absolutely content. She ends the scene by stating, “I don’t think I like that. I, like, really didn’t like that.”

This scene in *Girls* exemplifies the different issues embedded in gendered expectations of sexuality. Traditionally, women in media have specific roles; Whether that be subject to the male gaze or a housewife, female characters are often not portrayed as multi-dimensional complex characters. The aforementioned scene in *Girls* demonstrates an exaggeration of the typical ways women and their sexualities are represented to continue the conversation of female roles in media. While Natalia exclaims her discomfort continuously throughout the scene, Adam doesn’t recognize her experience. The exaggeration of Natalia’s discomfort and Adam’s domination illustrates the reality of women saying no during sex and how media portrays that. The scene demonstrates the passive sexual role that women traditionally adhere to, in order to critique that representation of women in media. Emmers-Sommers (2016) relates this phenomenon to Sexual Script Theory, which suggests that “traditional, heterosexual relational and sexual scripts position the man as sexually proactive and the woman as sexually reactive” (p. 375). Although women are
typically recognized as “sexually reactive,” there is another piece to this narrative which “captures the phenomenon of saying ‘no’ when one means ‘yes’” (Emmers-Sommers, 2016, p. 377). A similar example of this idea can be seen in a 2014 episode of *Game of Thrones*, where Cersei repetitively says “no” to sleeping with Jaime, but he forces himself onto him, saying that “he doesn’t care.” She kisses him back, but tells him to stop, to which he does not respect. Both of these instances illustrate the way in which token resistance allows for one person to have control over another person and ultimately takes them for granted (Emmers-Sommer, 2016).

Similar to the way men and women are not considered equals in society, such as in the workforce or simply through behavioral characteristics; they are also not represented equally in media. Television shows perpetuate these notions of masculinity and femininity through the ways in which characters are portrayed through discourse and behavior. Examples of gendered behaviors can be seen in the hit sitcom *Friends*. The character Joey is portrayed as being hypersexual, and his endless sexual advances throughout the show are highlighted as masculine. Mills (2005) confirms this by noting that Joey’s character is the “most sexually active of the male characters and is therefore defined as the most male” (p. 113). On the other hand, Rachel’s character in *Friends* is depicted as the most feminine of the female characters through her beauty and lack of domination over male characters. While Rachel becomes more independent later on in the series, she’s initially portrayed to not be able to take care of herself and needing to rely on her father for money. These portrayals of masculinity and femininity in television shows maintain stereotypes regarding men and women by resonating with audience members and their familiarity with how individuals are supposed to behave. For instance, women are meant to be subordinate and submissive to men, as men are meant to dominate women. Stereotypes about men and women alike are maintained through television; however, aspects of femininity tend to receive more shame
than masculinity. Media often shames femininity and traditional female roles such as women who are caretakers or stay-at-home moms, as these roles are considered inferior to that of roles that are often tied to men (i.e. CEO’s, lawyers). However, women and femininity are also shamed in media by their sexual experiences and expressions. This concept of sexual shaming can not only be perceived in media, but also in society, as women are constantly being shamed for their sexuality. Sexual shaming can be seen as far as slut-shaming, virgin-shaming, and even women who do not abide by the traditional standards of women according to society. If a woman is the bread-winner of the family or a successful CEO, she is often shamed and typecast as a bitch or often times, gay.

Women experiencing sexual shame is not only an issue that is represented through media, but is also a problem of social politics. In Western society, men are more often congratulated for their sexuality, primarily when it remains consistent with the hypersexual stereotype surrounding male sexuality. However, women are subject to countless methods of systematic oppression that shame them for their sexuality, such as being regarded as a slut or prude. Men don’t receive titles in the same way that women do that label their worth based on their sexual expression or experience. Rape culture further perpetuates these gendered values by placing blame on women for being victims of sexual assault. This idea of rape culture is normalized by labels placed on men, such as the term “player,” which is similar to terms like “slut”; however, terms for men reflect a more positive representation of male hyper-sexuality, while ‘slut’ alludes to a negative connotation about female hyper-sexuality. Women who experience rape or sexual assault are blamed for dressing too provocatively or being too intoxicated. Blaming women for sexual assault exonerates men from having responsibility for their actions, demonstrating that women have no agency when it comes to sex and their sexuality. Slut-Walks are an example of how women are
fighting back against the injustices of rape culture, to highlight the oppression that exists through judging women based on their sexuality.

This essay will focus on the notion of sexual shame and judgement that women face as a result of their sexual experiences, in order to uncover the ways in which this occurs in media. By analyzing the HBO television series *Girls*, I will explore how this television show uses rhetorical methods that exaggerate stereotypes of femininity as a way to critique traditional depictions of women in media. Media evidently has an enormous influence on people’s everyday lives and often reflects people’s general perceptions of the world around them. It’s interesting to explore how media continues to perpetuate particular gendered stereotypes as media offers viewers a way to think about gender and sexuality. In this essay, I will explore a modern-day television series to see how stereotypes about femininity and female sexuality are portrayed as a way to provide commentary about prior representations of women in media. I begin by theorizing gender and reviewing how the history of societal understandings of gender and sex have led to social constructions of gender, ultimately creating normalized behaviors associated with each gender.
**Literature Rationale**

*Theorizing Gender*

There are different theories of gender that posit different ways to understand gender, whether that be biologically or as a social construction. The idea that men and women are innately different stems from the notion that “until the eighteenth century, Western philosophers and scientists thought that there was one sex and that women’s internal genitalia were the inverse of men’s external genitalia” (Lorber, p. 33). This distinct separation of bodies designates the male body as the default, where the female body is some other form of the male. Although male and female body composition is the same, apart from reproductive organs and hormones, the two genders are still seen as different species (Lorber, p. 34). Lorber states that “in Western societies, we see two discrete sexes and two distinguishable genders because our society is built on two classes of people, ‘women’ and ‘men’” (p. 34).

Through the recognition of two distinctly different types of genders, society then constructs categories to better understand how these beings operate. Lorber draws on this notion of “analyzing the social processes that construct the categories we call ‘female and male’, ‘women and men’, and ‘homosexual and heterosexual’, uncovers the ideology and power differentials congealed in these categories” (p. 34). The biological theory of gender, that relies on the genital makeup of humans, attribute biology to make sense of the social categories that are created a result of the binary. According to Lorber, “Most research designs do not investigate whether physical skills or physical abilities are really more or less common in women and men. They start out with two social categories (“women,” “men”), and assume they are biologically different (“female,” “male”), look for similarities among them and differences between them, and attribute what they have found for the social categories to sex differences” (p. 35).
These social categories can further be understood as gender performances and identities. Gender performances and identities illustrate the differences between how each gender behaves, in addition to “the division of labor into women’s and men’s work and an often elaborate differentiation of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviors that are prominent features of social organization” (West & Zimmerman, p. 15). Some claim that the distinction between masculinity and femininity or men and women are rooted in biology and nature. However, role theory highlights the social construction of gender through a concept called “sex roles” or “gender roles” (West & Zimmerman, p. 15). These gender roles emphasize the dichotomous difference between male and female identities, which then amplify gender inequality. For instance, West and Zimmerman illustrate this concept through gender markers in titles such as “female doctor” or “male nurse,” that place identity markers on titles that seem to appear as socially acceptable (p. 16). This is just one of the many ways that our society constructs gender (men and women) as different, ultimately demonstrating that femininity and masculinity are vastly contrasting as well.

West and Zimmerman define gender performances, or masculinity and femininity, as “prototypes of essential expression- something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characterization of the individual” (p. 16). They are essentially the ways people act and behave, which construct societal understandings of that gender. Gender performances claim that there are ways of “the essential female and male natures” (West & Zimmerman, p. 24). Although some believed that this inherent difference was due to biology, it can also be argued that “human nature gives us the ability to learn to produce and recognize masculine and feminine gender displays” (West & Zimmerman, p. 17). The object here is to explore the possible reasons for gender performativity and how that can relate to gender inequality in society.
Understanding Gender Roles and Behaviors

It is evident that male and women are not regarded as equitable entities in society, and thus as a result, gender stereotypes shape perceptions of gender. As described by Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan (2008), “traditional gender stereotypes posit that men represent the ideal norm against which women are judged” (p. 201). As men and women are not considered equals, there are obvious disparities between the two gendered identities that are rigidly defined as male and female. These performances can be otherwise discussed as social roles which Lauzen et al. (2008) define as “the things people do in daily life” (p. 201). As understood by this definition, each gender is to behave within a particular set of behaviors as decided by these social roles.

Gendered roles are generally portrayed in media in ways that resonate with society’s understanding of gender, whether that be through domestic or relational activities, which illustrate the passive and active roles of masculinity and femininity. Lauzen et al. (2008) claim that “prior research has examined how fulfillment of these roles signals predispositions toward communal versus agentic goals” (p. 201). It is typically understood that women play the communal role that “are manifested by selflessness, concern with others, and a desire to be at one with others,” while men are assigned the agent role “manifested by self-assertion, self-expansion, and the urge to master” (Lauzen et al., 2008, p. 201). Therefore, women cannot be regarded as assertive or perceived through agentic qualities, in the same way that men are not to assume the passive, communal role because they have both been taught to perform these particular characteristics as a part of their gender performance. While these are simply noting domestic roles, it’s important to note that “the observed distribution of women and men into social roles such as interpersonal and work roles under lies gender stereotypes” (Lauzen et al., 2008, p. 202). For instance, women are generally associated with “notions of marriage, home, family, and romance,” whereas men are not (Lauzen et al., 2008, p. 202). This demonstrates the idea that there are particular facets of gender
that are to be upheld in the performance, such as femininity being associated with collective entities as opposed to being concerned with the self, which is something that is typecast as masculine.
Behavioral Media Representations

Prior research on media representations of gender roles demonstrates the narrow and stereotypical ways male and female characters are portrayed in media. Generally, stereotypes of men that are represented in media “reinforce long-standing cultural ideas of masculinity: Men are presented hard, tough, independent, sexually aggressive, unafraid, violent, totally in control of all emotions, and-above all-in no way feminine” (Wood, 1994, p. 32). These notions of masculine characteristics can be recognized in “high popular films such as Lethal Weapon, Predator, Days of Thunder, Total Recall, Robocop, and Die Hard,” which perpetuate the aforementioned components of ideal masculinity (Wood, 1994, p. 32). Therefore, if men are meant to manifest these particular qualities, women should then embody the opposite of these representations.

Women are depicted in a host of ways; however, the main intent of their depictions is to illustrate femininity as subservient, passive, beautiful, and in some way linked to men (Wood, 1994, p. 33). Wood examines this notion by asserting that women are generally portrayed as being “subordinate to men, they are usually cast as victims, angels, martyrs, and loyal wives and helpmates” (1994, p. 33). If women violate these cultural ideals, they are in some way punished or reframed through representation. Reframing female characters can be understood through Wood’s example of The Cosby Show’s, Claire Huxtable, whose character is softened and feminized as she is a working woman that must be reframed to be “consistent with traditional views of femininity” (Wood, 1994, p. 33). While Claire Huxtable is a female character of the late 80’s, we still see examples that reframe female characters through their level of agency. In Season 13, episode 9 of Grey’s Anatomy (2016), the show introduces a female character, Dr. Minnick, whose job is to consult the doctors and upgrade the current resident training program. Dr. Minnick’s character is assertive and controlling, which leads her to be disliked by the rest of the doctors. In addition to not being favored by the hospital staff, Dr. Minnick is revealed to be gay
and only reveals a less dominant behavior when flirting with another female doctor. As a more recent show, it is still evident that a woman of a high-status position in the workforce is still shamed or reframed in a way that pushes her further away from the typical female archetype.

Both Claire Huxtable and Dr. Minnick reinforce this notion that female representations in media are meant to somehow fit traditional stereotypes of femininity, even if that means reframing their character to be gay or focus on their role in the household instead of in the office. Female characters who defy traditional conceptions of femininity that depict themselves as being powerful or confident are ultimately stripped of their sense of femininity and typecast as a particular character. Wood describes this alternate female character as “the evil sister of the good homebody…versions of this image are the witch, bitch, whore, or non-woman, who is represented as hard, cold, aggressive- all of the things a good woman is not supposed to be” (Wood, 1994, p. 33). However, female characters who are powerful, career-driven women, may also simply be portrayed in a way that fails to highlight their careers. Wood continues this explanation through Claire Huxtable’s character, “whose career as an attorney never entered storylines as much as her engagement in family matters” (1994, p. 33). Media essentially perpetuates this gendered divide, however, by constructing one between what defines true femininity, and what does not.

Determining what is regarded as feminine can also be seen in the ways media portrays women as passive sex objects and men as active, sexual assailants. A key aspect of how this is represented through gender roles and gender representations is by defining each gender’s sexual nature, or “sexuality.” The term, “sexuality,” is to be defined in this case as attitudes and behaviors in regards to sexual intercourse or sex, and not the identification of one’s sexuality (i.e. homosexual, bisexual). Media portrays gendered views of sexuality in a way that supports the divide between male and women by suggesting that there is an inherent difference in the way the
two genders view sex. Prior research on media representations of gender has demonstrated the way this occurs. For instance, the TV show, *Sex and the City*, exemplifies this notion of division between male and female perspectives of sexuality (Attwood, 2007). Attwood (2007) examined the series’ first episode where one of the main characters asks the question: “Can women have sex like men?” (2007, p. 238). This suggests that male sexuality is the default and female sexuality should not or cannot imitate it, because media reiterates the idea that men can and should be hyper sexual, while women should not. The aforementioned episode also touches on this idea of what female sexuality is: “Are we simply romantically challenged or are we sluts?” (Attwood, 2007, p. 238), demonstrating that if women are not “romantic” or hyper sexual then they must be sluts.
Media Representations of Female Sexuality

Media constructs female sexuality to be strictly “feminine” or “romantic,” while being hyper sexual or a slut is something that is considered to be masculine (Attwood, 2007, p. 238). Women who perform sexuality in a way that is deemed masculine are ultimately punished, whether that be by being typecast as a slut, or simply by their character undergoing some kind of negative experience. For instance, in Sex and the City, one of the leading women, Samantha, is regarded as the slut of the group and is never truly portrayed as being as content with her romantic life. In addition, her typecast as a slut carries some weight as the term slut “suggests that overt sexuality in women is precisely not “classy” (Attwood, 2007, p. 239). Samantha’s defiance of femininity is demonstrated by her sexual expression that “treats her partners as sex objects and openly disdains the prospect of emotional commitment” (Markle, 2008, p. 52). As Samantha’s character evidently rejects traditional notions of femininity and embodies the sexual identity that is regarded as masculine, her character does encounter several adverse consequences. Samantha is subject to an STD scare, unrequited love that she once condemned, and the inability to appear truly fulfilled by the men in her life.

Additionally, undersexed individuals presented in media are depicted as being more conservative and innocent. An example of this in Sex and the City can be examined through another main female character Charlotte. Her character is depicted as having a “serious desire to marry and have children [and] follows dating “rules” such as restricting intimacy on a first date so that she will be viewed as marriage material” (Montemurro, 2004). Charlotte’s character ultimately follows the cultural ideals that typecast her as being feminine; however, despite her efforts to maintain her femininity, she is still shamed for her innocence and undersexed experiences. Charlotte is the character of the show who declines sex and is punished for that through typecasting her as prude. In her study of Sex and the City Markle (2008) examines an episode where Charlotte
“rejects her first husband’s urgent suggestion to have sex in a cab” (p. 54). Following this event, “on several occasions Charlotte’s sexual encounters with her husband were aborted due to his impotence” (Markle, 2008, p. 54). Charlotte’s initial rejection to have sex with her husband exemplified her true portrayal of femininity as she refused to have sex in a cab, which is not the ideal, ladylike location. However, she’s punished for her failure to please her husband by not being able to have sex with him due to his impotence, which is later revealed to be an addiction to masturbation. While both of these women participate on opposite spectrums of sexuality, they both experience shame in regards to their sexual experience and expression.
Social Role Theory, The Agency-Line, & The Virgin-Slut Continuum

While some gender roles may change over time due to a shift in societal norms, it is evident that for women there is still a significant element of shame that is incorporated in their sexuality or sexual expression. Bay-Cheng (2015) noted that one way that women are ultimately marginalized is by shaming their sexual expression and experiences. Female characters in traditional media are often typecast through stereotypes in traditional media, which ultimately define women through binaries. To consider this, Bay-Cheng (2015) has described the Virgin-Slut continuum in an effort to measure sexual agency through what she refers to as the Agency Line. She explores this idea by introducing the concept of the Virgin/Whore dichotomy, which serves as a “binary model [where] girls and women are divided in two discrete groups on the basis of their alleged or actual sexual behavior; either they are abstinent and presumed virtuous (i.e. virgins) or they are active and therefore contemptible (i.e. whores) (Bay-Cheng, 2010, p. 281). The idea of the Virgin-Slut continuum, however, “allows for gradations of acceptable sexual behaviors, specifically those occurring in heterosexual, monogamous, long-term relationships with conventionally gendered roles” (Bay-Cheng, 2010, p. 281). The Agency Line illustrates how the Virgin-Slut continuum represents a sense of status for women, while simultaneously participating in inequality and shame. The stigma associated with each end of the dichotomy perpetuates inequality and division through shame, and therefore should be replaced with the continuum in order to encompass all women and their sexual experiences.

The divisive rhetoric employed through labeling women based on sexual experience confirms a sense of power that is associated with the act of labeling itself. The Agency Line in relation to this phenomenon provides a link between how sexual activity is attributed to levels of agency, or lack thereof. Bay-Cheng (2015) confirms this by noting that “girls’ abstinence from sexual activity and their pursuit of sexual pleasure could be ascribed to sexual agency” (p. 281).
In doing so, women are able to justify their own sexual experience to establish higher levels of agency, while also shaming the other end of the spectrum. For instance, one woman may applaud herself for exploring sexual freedom and promiscuity, and also shame another for remaining abstinent in order to justify her own potentially, shameful experience. Bay-Cheng (2015) explains that this justification through agency, which “is not simply about doing something or acting in any way at all, [but] it is about acting strategically, with intention, out of self-interest, and while maintaining control” (p. 335). This is not to say that men do not contribute to the perpetuation of female sexual shaming. Men also maintain the labeling of women in terms of sexual experience by participating in ranking women based on particular femininities (Armstrong, 2014, p. 102). Defining a woman based on her sexual experience is ultimately determined as “good” or “bad,” and men and women alike engage in the negotiation of these definitions.

Women particularly participate in shaming one another based on sexual experience in order to express and maintain agency. Armstrong et al. (2014) describes this process as “defensive othering,” [which] suggests that women- as subordinates to men- fear contamination and thus work to distance themselves from stigma” (p. 102). The “defensive othering” that occurs through sexual shaming constructs a symbol of status that women on both ends of the Virgin-Slut Continuum aim to achieve. Armstrong et al. (2014) mentions that the desire to achieve this status is due to “women’s competition [that] is oriented toward both, attention from men and esteem among women” (p. 103). Obtaining attention and esteem from others allows women to be evaluated based on their sexual experience, which maintains the established definitions of the varying ends of this sexual spectrum. Apart from justifying their own experiences for status, Armstrong et al. notes that sexual shaming can also be used to “affirm the identities and reputations that set them apart from others” (p. 103). This method, however, also works for women who aim to maintain a sense
of status and favorability. Constructing a difference between people based on sexual experience continues to negotiate the defining characteristics that are often associated with both ends of the Virgin-Slut Continuum. While there is a clear difference in levels of sexual agency, women who identify with either end of the continuum are confined to rigid boundaries based on their level sexual experience.

One end of this spectrum examines how those that are typecast as sluts are both understood and represented. The Virgin-Slut Continuum demonstrates how women are characterized as sluts based on hyper sexual or unfeminine sexual behavior. Characteristics of this typecast can be recognized as those “slandered as sluts are really wantonly promiscuous” (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 334). Bay-Cheng’s description of the slut highlights the unfeminine aspect of the typecast because their promiscuity is deliberate. This intended hyper-sexuality is similar to that of a male’s sexual expectation, thus constructing a masculine association to female promiscuity. The link between masculinity and the term “slut” results from “masculine anxieties about female sexuality” (Attwood, 2007, p. 235). This double standard between masculine and feminine sexualities demonstrates how it deems female sexuality as deviant (Attwood, 2007).

Understanding the construction of the double standard through the term “slut” recognizes its ability to punish women for their sexuality. Tanenbaum notes in his studies of slut-bashing and slut-shaming that sluts are sanctioned for “[exercising] sexual agency” and that “[the] bad slut” actively does something to earn her reputation. She is never passive or in the wrong place at the wrong time” (p. 43). “[‘Slut’s’] looseness lingers until the end-stop is delivered like a brutal slap, making it ideal as an insult that berates a woman for her laxness” (Attwood, 2007, p. 235). Although the slut may be manifesting sexual agency, she is ultimately stripped of it through the punishment of being referred to as a slut. This is because sexual expression “may be seen as a way
of trying to construct a new societal identity that does not conform to traditional definitions of femininity” (Attwood, 2007, p. 236). However, the way the slut is typically portrayed diminishes this reconstruction of femininity and sexual freedom through shame. This is interesting because although women are shamed for being hypersexual, they are also judged for being undersexed.

The opposing end of the Virgin-Slut Continuum demonstrates how virgins, prudes, or undersexed individuals also experience shame and judgement for their sexual experiences. As described by Bay-Cheng, the label “virgin” suggests that these women “are abstinent and presumed virtuous,” which disregards their sexuality as a whole. As “virgins” are represented as the opposite of “sluts,” whom are present participants of sexuality, “virgins” are absent. Virginity is commonly associated with religion and abstinence, thus relating it to discourses surrounding purity. Virginity definitely used to be associated with this notion that women who remained abstinent were perceived as “good girls,” and those who didn’t were “damaged goods.” However, girls’ virginity is about far more than these stereotypes of abstinence, purity, and higher morality. Rather, sexual abstinence can be characterized “in terms of self-possession, independence, and personal ambition” (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 283). Bay-Cheng (2015) notes that young women share their virginity stories to advocate for free sexual expression:

“If you’re gonna have sex, go for it. Kudos to you! If you’re ready, then get set and go! Being the unique little sexual snowflakes we are, we have the choice to use our bodies how we see fit. This isn’t about the need for abstinence, of safe sex (even though I hear safe sex is great!), or anything like that. I’m a grown ass woman who didn’t have sex during college and who is tired of explaining that no, it’s not a religious thing, it’s not because I’m a ‘loser’ or ‘prude’ or ‘scared’. I really just didn’t feel like it” (Lindholm, 2013).
Similar to that of advocates of anti-slut rhetoric, those who choose to remain abstinent are also subject to shame and lack of agency in society. Virgins, prudes, or abstinent young women lack in agency through being shamed or “pitied for missing out…or being undesirable” (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 285). There is not much literature regarding young women who remain abstinent for their own choice, rather than a religious one. However, Bay-Cheng (2015) does mention that “girls regarded as [virgins] may not be reviled in the way sluts are, but they are still subject to dehumanizing ridicule, pity, and condescension” (p. 285).

“A few months ago, my friends went around the table talking about the most bizarre places they’ve had sex. When it was my turn, their jaws dropped at my response. Then someone made a soft, ‘Awww,’ – the kind you give a baby after she lets out a burp. It was the first time I admitted to a group of feminists that I was a virgin-something I’d been ashamed of for a while. […] I know 22 isn’t really that old. But in a country where the average age of virginity loss is 17, teens are having sex on popular TV shows…and feminists have worked tirelessly to make it OK for young women to embrace their sexuality, 22 seems a little late in the game. My few virgin friends and I are the weirdos” (Collins, 2014).

This exemplifies the divisiveness that can be recognized through the Virgin-Slut Continuum because it defines women as either virgins or not. It places pressure on young women who don’t feel ready or have the desire to have sex, by suggesting that they should feel ashamed for this choice. Collins mentions that not only are other women perpetuating the stigma surrounding virginity, but also popular television shows are also shaming women who choose to wait. Collins also notes that she was shamed by a group of feminists, who typically praise hyper-sexuality as a feminist ideology. A similar, shameful label doesn’t exist for men as “even the dictionary
definitions of “virgin” cite an “unmarried girl or woman” or a “religious woman, esp. a saint” (Valenti, 2009, p. 182). Apart from a few movies that poke fun at goofy teenage boys for being male virgins, this is not a common label for men (Valenti, 2009).

Understanding prior literature regarding the ways in which men and women are represented in society and media sets the framework for this particular analysis. As a modern television show, *Girls* will add a piece of contemporary analysis to the current conversation, in order to demonstrate how the use of exaggeration and normalization serves as a critique of traditional representations of women in media. This television series depicts the ways female characters are shamed and judged based on their sexual experiences and expression in order to bring light to the inaccuracies of these portrayals. Whether women are being shamed and judged for being a slut or a virgin, they are ultimately being scrutinized for something as trivial as sexuality. Men don’t receive the same measure of worth, and instead are idolized for their accomplishments, strength, and intellect. However, it is not simply men that perpetuate these labels and constrains for women, but rather, that women are also the culprits. *Girls* offers a fresh representation of female sexuality in media by exaggerating notions of shame associated with women and their sexual experiences in order to critique traditional depictions of women.
Methodology

In this study, I examine the HBO television series, *Girls*, in order to understand the show’s cultural implications through representations of women and their sexualities. I use methods of rhetorical criticism, particularly ideological criticism, to analyze how discourse constructs the stories told in this series. I will use rhetorical analysis in order to demonstrate how this show differs from alternate depictions of women in media. In this chapter, I will review the methods used to explain the claims made in the study, which is to argue that *Girls* presents realistic representations of women.

Rhetorical criticism includes the critique of texts as a method of understanding the cultural implications of the discourse employed within those texts. Rhetorical critics examine texts and evaluate the messages that are being communicated to the audience. By “working from the evidence within the text, the critic proceeds to make inferences about what the work is designed to do, how it is designed to do it, and how well that design functions to structure and transmit meanings within the realm of public experience while framing that discourse within its context” (DeWinter, 2006, p. 390). Analyses of the discourse within a piece of popular culture allows the rhetorical critic to understand how it operates as a representation of a particular world view (Corcoran 1984). Often times, the way critics examine an artifact is through an ideology, which acknowledges certain ideologies that are present and established in culture. In this study, the rhetorical analysis of *Girls* is constructed by a feminist ideology.

Ideological criticism has not always been used to examine television, as it is a “process which sets the bounds of what is reasonable and legitimate for the interests of a particular, dominant section of society” (Corcoran, 1984, p. 132). However, some television shows, such as *Girls*, have offered alternate representations of society that differ from these dominant narratives.
Foss (2009) defines an ideology as “a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world” (p. 209). Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) understand ideology as a means to reinforce and maintain dominant groups and power relations. These power relations exist through discourse or “kinds of talk: ideational structures and vocabularies that rationalize, justify, and ultimately reinforce economic, political and even social inequalities” (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, p. 262). Ideology is also rooted in Marxism, which demonstrates the proletariat class as a subordinate group to the bourgeoisie or upper class, ultimately separating them from the upper class due to a lack of power and representation (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001). This lack of power can better be understood as a lack of privilege, as “ideologies that present oppositional or alternative perspectives on the subjects to which they pertain are sometimes repressed” (Foss, 2009, p. 210). While ideological criticism stems from Marxism and the power struggle between the upper and lower economic classes, ideologies can also exist within other aspects of social and political power, such as race, class and gender.

This analysis is also developed from a feminist perspective of race-class-gender studies, in order to uncover the ways in which sexual shame and judgement towards women occur in media. The role of power in ideological criticism focuses on the lack of social control possessed by marginalized bodies through “agencies of control as ‘socializing’ or ‘conditioning’ media” (McGee, 1980, p. 6). Using ideology through a feminist perspective, I will be able to illustrate how media participates in shaming female sexuality in order to critique and provide commentary on societal constructions of gendered norms and expectations. Ideological criticism, and feminist criticism in particular, focuses on a sense of consciousness surrounding female oppression and a way to challenge that oppression (Capo and Hantzis, 1991, p. 250). It is important to note that understanding shame and judgement towards female sexual expression and experiences is about
more than a “good/bad girl binary,” but rather focuses on discourse that oppresses their sexuality into a category (Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte, 2015, p. 299). These categories of shame and judgement can be recognized through labels such as slut, whore, prude, virgin, etc. These themes are prevalent in HBO’s hit-television series Girls, which makes it an ideal artifact to examine for a feminist ideological critique of media.

Since its debut in 2012, Girls has received its fair share of both flack and praise. The show immediately became a spectacle of popular culture, and people have had a lot to say about it over the past five years. The HBO television series was created by Lena Dunham, who is not only the show’s creator but also the star, writer, and director. At 27 years old, she published her first book, a memoir titled “Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She’s ‘Learned.’” Dunham and the co-executive producer of Girls, Jenni Konner, created Lenny Letter, an online feminist newsletter. Over the years, Dunham has taken on a role in the political scene, as “it occurred to [her] that being political was an important part of [her] identity” (“Lena Dunham: ‘Girls has been my life, my identity,’” 2017). During the 2016 U.S. election, Dunham was extremely vocal about her opposition to Donald Trump and even made a speech at the Democratic National Convention affirming her support for Hillary Clinton.

Dunham entered the scene through her breakthrough movie, Tiny Furniture, which won the Best Narrative Feature award at South by Southwest Music and Media Conference. The success of Tiny Furniture opened the door for Dunham and introduced her to Judd Apatow, the producer of films such as Knocked Up, Superbad, And The 40-Year-Old Virgin. Apatow “is also an executive producer of Girls, and he helped Ms. Dunham and Jenni Konner develop the show at HBO” (“Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow on ‘Girls’, ‘Geeks’, and Trolls, 2017). Dunham, along with Apatow and Konner, worked together and created Dunham’s own reality. A common question
viewers of the series wonder is whether or not the show is actually a representation of Lena Dunham’s life. Often times, people find it difficult to separate Lena Dunham the person and Hannah Horvath, her character. Dunham as the writer, director, and star makes it possible for her to portray the world that she wants to see on television. Dunham has said that “Girls has been [her] life, it’s been [her] friends, it’s been [her] identity,” which is almost palpable in the raw depictions of reality within the show (“Lena Dunham: ‘Girls has been my life, my identity,’” 2017). The audience’s inability to distinguish the creator of the show from her character is a result of this reality; “The show felt, to her peers, FUBU: “for us by us” (“It’s Different for ‘Girls,’” 2012).

Often being compared to Sex and the City (SATC), Girls follows the lives of four women in their twenties, each of whom embodies a certain female typecast. However, Girls serves almost as the anti-Sex and the City, as Dunham suggests that the show “speaks to the young women whose illusions were dashed upon moving to New York, who wear ‘mismatched sneakers’ rather than Manolo’s and date slackers rather than millionaires” (“The Bleaker Sex,” 2012). While there have been many television shows, such as SATC, that follow young women on their quest for adventure in the big city, Girls tells a different story. It tells the story of what Dunham wants people to see as “real” young women. These “real” young women engage in their own real lives, and nothing about their lives is romanticized. They live in small apartments in Brooklyn, as a grimier alternative to million-dollar Manhattan, and think about how many meals they’d have to miss in order to make rent that month.

Hannah, who is played by Dunham, is the burgeoning writer who “doesn’t give a shit about anything, yet simultaneously has opinions about everything.” She’s depicted as being a self-absorbed narcissist, while also being uncertain about her writing career, her future, and herself. Hannah lives with one of her best friends, Marnie (Allison Williams), who is portrayed as the most
put-together of the girls. While Marnie feels unfulfilled by her long-term boyfriend Charlie, she remains the most sensible as she tries to be responsible and take care of everyone around her. The other two leading women in the series are Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) and Jessa (Jemima Kirke), who happen to be cousins and complete opposites of each other. Shoshanna is the bubbly, “innocent, Sex and the City-addled” younger woman who attends New York University as a business major (“It’s Different for ‘Girls,’” 2012). Jessa is the bohemian, former drug addict who does what she wants, when she wants. She’s typically described as being the least responsible of the women. Not only is this one of few television shows with an all-female lead cast, but it’s also one of the only shows with “girl” in the title (“It’s Different for ‘Girls,’” 2012). The girls of Girls transform representations of women in media by offering television a rough cut version of the realities of women through their own “real life” narratives.

Girls aired its final season on February 12, 2017 and has critics and fans alike discussing the show’s influence over the last five years of television. During its first season, Girls received a substantial amount of criticism for having an all-white, female cast. Since then, Dunham has commented on the matter saying that she “wouldn’t do another show that starred four white girls” (“Lena Dunham Won’t Do a Show Starring ‘Four White Girls’ Again,” 2017). “That being said, when I wrote the pilot I was 23. Each character was an extension of me. I thought I was doing the right thing. I was not trying to write the experience of somebody I didn’t know, and not trying to stick a black girl in without understanding the nuance of what her experience of hipster Brooklyn was” (“Lena Dunham Won’t Do a Show Starring ‘Four White Girls’ Again,” 2017). After receiving numerous critiques about her all-white cast, Dunham added a black character to her show, as a response to the comments. This demonstrates that Girls is clearly a depiction of Lena Dunham’s reality and the world that she perceives. She draws from reality to create the reality
within *Girls*, in an effort to prompt viewers to think about the nuanced commentary that she makes on the show. While many argue that the show is “too white,” it has completely changed the direction of television narratives and the people telling those narratives, to be more inclusive and evolved. Since *Girls*, so many other young people, such as Donald Glover and Aziz Ansari have been able to create their own shows that reflect their realities as well. In 2016, HBO took on the show *Insecure* starring Issa Rae, a show that offers people a glimpse into the story of awkwardness and not fitting in as a black woman. *Girls* made it possible for more people from other social realities to portray their worlds in a way that adds to the same conversation.

This study will focus on the notion of sexual shame and judgement that women face in both society and traditional media. By analyzing the television series *Girls*, I will explore how this show exaggerates conceptions of gendered expectations of femininity to redefine female representations in media. In my study, I focused primarily on the first season of *Girls* because as the initial season of the series it offers an introduction to all the characters. The later seasons explore more complex cultural issues, whereas the first season provides deeper insight into the main female characters, which was beneficial to the focus of my thesis. Exploring an ideology through ideological criticism includes a four-step process: “identifying the presented elements of the artifact, identifying the suggested elements linked to the presented elements, formulating an ideology, and identifying the functions served by the ideology” (Foss, 2009, p. 214). Once the presented elements have been identified, the meanings suggested by those elements will construct the foundation of the ideology (Foss, 2009). Representations of female characters, in addition to the rhetorical strategies employed by the show to highlight the dominant depictions of women will demonstrate how media can reconstruct gendered expectations and stereotypes. Media evidently has an enormous influence on people’s everyday lives, and therefore people are influenced by the
representations presented in media. In turn, media often reflects people’s general perceptions of the world around them. It’s interesting to explore how media continues to perpetuate particular gender portrayals as it is a part of how people think about gender and what is expected of themselves and other because of this understanding. In this study, I will explore a modern-day television series to see how gender and stereotypes surrounding each gender are portrayed to reconstruct how women are portrayed in television. In addition, I will focus on femininity and how this particular show shames female sexuality, sexual expression, and sexual experiences as a rhetorical strategy which critiques dominant depictions of women in media. This study will focus on the feminist ideology of shame and judgement with regards to female sexual expression and experience in HBO’s *Girls*, in an attempt to reveal the show’s ability to redefine female representations in media.
Analysis

In a recent *New York Times* article, Dunham says that she feels that some people didn’t understand the show because they “basically thought they were watching *The Hills*, and the four of us were actually these characters…because we’re young, female, for a million reasons- obscured people’s ability to see it as commentary” (“Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow on ‘Girls’, ‘Geeks’, and Trolls, 2017). As an HBO show on premium cable, the show is able to feature nudity, something *Girls* definitely overuses. Dunham, in particular, “has appeared nude frequently onscreen and has probably been asked to talk about it more than any actor in television history.” It’s especially interesting because while Dunham is known for her body that’s “soft and round like a dumpling,” she intentionally makes herself look even worse on *Girls*. It’s almost as if in every scene, she’s in the most unflattering outfit, in the most unflattering light, with absolutely no make-up on except for her deep red lipstick (Malone, Rosin, & Thomas, 2017). Women of all sizes are generally made to look good regardless, but Dunham seems to go out of her way to push people to comment on her appearance (Malone, Rosin, & Thomas, 2017). This is a part of the commentary that Dunham refers to in the interview. The realities of women, or at least what the realities of women are from the perspective of Lena Dunham. Lena Dunham describes *Girls* as a “bold defense (and a searing critique) of the so-called Millennial Generation by a person still in her twenties” (“It’s Different for ‘Girls,’” 2012). The show served as a way for Dunham to represent a reality that she believes doesn’t exist in television, particularly one that portrays women in a way that is not romanticized or beautified. While it may not be a story of her life per se, it is a reflection of the way she sees the world and how she hopes to add to a conversation as a particular woman from a particular generation. In this analysis chapter, I will explore how *Girls* provides commentary on gendered stereotypes and shameful rhetoric associated with female sexuality through the Virgin/Slut continuum, implications of casual sex vs. monogamy, and female reproductive health.
Breaking Through the Virgin/Slut Dichotomy

_Girls_ represents female sexuality as fluid through a lens of a continuum, in order to demonstrate how media perpetuates gendered stereotypes and shaming. The show does so by highlighting particular ways shaming occurs in media and society as a form of critique and commentary. When examining femininity and female implications of sexuality, some researchers use the concept of the Virgin/Slut Dichotomy (Bay-Cheng, 2015). The dichotomy recognizes sexuality as a binary, which suggests that sexuality is perceived as opposites, or one versus the other. The Virgin/Slut Dichotomy implies that women are categorized into binaries. Labels that define women as “sluts” or “prudes” construct an expected behavior that then normalizes the behavior associated with the assumed label. Media often plays into the Virgin/Slut Dichotomy by typecasting certain types of women as sluts or whores, and others as virgins or prudes. Television shows such as _Jane the Virgin_ and _Grey’s Anatomy_ also address this group which is commonly referred to as “twenty-something virgins.” Other television shows that revolve around similar age groups assume that all characters should be sexually active well into their teens, creating stigma around those who have yet to join the club. Television shows such as _90210_, _Gossip Girl_, and _The O.C._, use virginity as a marker for characters “becoming a woman/man, and worry they’ll be a loser if they don’t go through with it” (“How Characters Lose Their Virginity on Teen Shows Through the Years,” 2017). Ultimately, these shows portray virginity and “losing” one’s virginity as a significant milestone for adulthood.

For the sake of the narrative argument, I will use Bay-Cheng’s idea of the Virgin-Slut Continuum instead of the dichotomy as _Girls_ displays sexuality as fluid, rather than something rigid such as a dichotomy. As Bay-Cheng notes, on a continuum women are not labeled by fixed definitions, of one side versus another because the continuum places sexuality on a flexible scale. _Girls_ engages with this dichotomy in a way that demonstrates the ridiculousness of name-calling
women based on their sexualities or sexual histories in order to represent sexuality on the continuum instead. To make this argument, I will focus on the character of Shoshanna, specifically in her relationship with Ray. Although the two of them met following Shoshanna’s crack incident, their relationship began as a result of Ray’s infatuation with Shoshanna’s quirky and unique character. Being Shoshanna’s first “real” relationship, the dynamic between her and Ray was similar to that of student and teacher. Additionally, during their relationship, Shoshanna was twenty-one while Ray was thirty-three, which influenced that student-teacher dynamic within their relationship. This is evident when Shoshanna’s first time includes Ray saying that “he’s teaching her” how to have sex. Despite their difference in age and life experience, Shoshanna was able to have a successful relationship with Ray, which contrasts with the relationships she has prior to Ray. Before her relationship with Ray, Shoshanna experienced shame and judgement for her status as a virgin. For instance, I will later go in depth about a particular scene in the show where Shoshanna is told that “virgins get attached…or they bleed,” which demonstrates the overt shaming tactics are used to point out the use of binaries as reprimanding.

In her pitch to HBO, Dunham stated that, “[This] is the kind of show [she] would want to see. [This] is the kind of show [she] would like to see. [This] is what [her] friends are like” (Poniewozik, 2012). Whether someone sleeps with a bunch of people or none at all, Girls aims to emphasize that sexual experience does not define anyone. To shed light on these divisive categories of female sexuality, Girls utilizes the rhetorical strategies that are often utilized to accomplish shaming, in an exaggerating manner in order to emphasize their role in society. The purpose is to recognize all women and destroy the categories that allow for judgement based on sexual history. The character of Shoshanna holds a significant role in the rejection of the virgin/slut dichotomy, as her character is the show’s token for virginity. She serves as a voice for young
women who haven’t had sex in their twenties, a group that is often neglected or mocked in media. *Girls* draws attention to the reality that these portrayals might not be accurate, especially to create a space where virginity is not regarded as a big deal. Here, I will argue how *Girls* uses the character of Shoshanna to dismiss traditional stereotypes of virginity and provide a realistic narrative of virginity through notions of exaggeration, normalization, and role reversal. The way this functions is by utilizing exaggerated discourse in order to highlight the ridiculousness of these stereotypes, in an effort to normalize virginity.

Characters such as Jane (*Jane the Virgin*), April Kepner (*Grey’s Anatomy*), and Shoshanna (*Girls*), normalize young women’s choices and allow them to be recognized on the continuum, despite their lack of sexual experience. These modern narratives serve as a way to normalize this group of women, by providing them with the same amount of sexual empowerment that is given to women who choose sexual liberation. Most shows, such as *Grey’s Anatomy*, make an effort to associate virginity with religion. The narrative of women abstaining from sex because of religious purposes is not only outdated, but also doesn’t encompass all women who do fit in this category. However, the character of Shoshanna is unique in the way her virginity is constructed. Shoshanna’s character challenges this typical narrative to illustrate a different narrative that feels more familiar to Millennial women. This narrative is one that isn’t about abstinence, but rather it is about women who haven’t found the right opportunity or the right person as the result of chasing after something different. Before her relationship with Ray, the audience witnesses many of Shoshanna’s awkward sexual encounters. It’s extremely obvious that she’s uncomfortable in every sexual scenario, through her inability to stop rambling and an almost charming cluelessness about what to do. The audience is aware of Shoshanna’s innocence, but is also aware of her work-ethic and unusual self-sufficiency compared to the other leading women. She’s an NYU business student with a stable
career goal, unlike Hannah the writer, Marnie the artist, and Jessa the nanny. However, Ray’s entrance into Shoshanna’s life proves the very basis of her prolonged virginity. Virginity, in Shoshanna’s case, is less about sex and more about growing into yourself before falling into an emotionally stable relationship.

Shoshanna’s virginity is introduced to the audience through exaggerated uses of the shameful rhetoric that is typically employed in media and society when discussing virginity, particularly with women this age. At Jessa’s abortion, Shoshanna tells Marnie that she’s a virgin, in a way where it’s evident that she’s embarrassed, assuming other people will perceive her as a “loser.” This could be a result of the perpetual shaming of late-in-life virgins as a result of social constructs surrounding the appropriate time to start having sex. The audience gets a glimpse of her embarrassment when she tells Marnie that “it’s like everyone and their mother has had sex except for [her]” (“Vagina Panic”). Here, Shoshanna is using exaggerated language, such as “everyone and their mother,” to shame herself to indicate the shameful rhetoric that is typically used to talk about virgins. Shoshanna’s account of her sexual history displays the reveal of her virginity as a vulnerable experience to convey this group’s realities. Shoshanna is engaging in the exaggeration herself because it allows viewers to recognize her internalization of her virginity as a result of the shameful language that persists in the world around her. It seems as though it’s the first time she’s told anyone, thereby constructing the scene as a much greater event than it is in actuality. She continues to shame herself in an exaggerating manner by stating that “everyone has had sex except for her,” which can be perceived as a defense mechanism as a result of learned assumptions about how others view virginity. “You think I’m a loser,” says Shoshanna. (“Vagina Panic”). Assuming that she’ll be subject to judgement for her sexuality suggests a common understanding of virginity in society, as Shoshanna portrays that is it something she seems to feel naturally or from previous
shameful experiences. While Marnie doesn’t say anything but tell Shoshanna that “sex is overrated,” Shoshanna is somehow led to believe that anyone who has had sex will judge her. Her assumption isn’t unreasonable, as neither society nor media have fairly paid respect to this group of women. The entirety of this scene features Shoshanna projecting an idea of shame onto both herself and Marnie through exaggeration. The exaggeration technique is used to explicitly offer commentary about the issue, and in this case, is used to highlight the shame within the narrative that Shoshanna is subject to. While this scene depicts an accurate portrayal of virginity and Shoshanna trying to navigate herself through the shame associated with it, Girls demonstrates that the inaccuracy exists within the way we’re taught to think about sexuality. Through an exaggeration of reality, Dunham offers an alternate reality where sexuality exists on a continuum instead of a binary where one person is regarded as “other” as Shoshanna is in this scene.

Girls also explores realistic scenarios in an exaggerated manner to demonstrate the realities of women being shamed for their sexual experiences. For instance, in “Hannah’s Diary,” viewers witness Shoshanna running into a former camp counselor and hanging out with him later that night. While the two of them are sitting on the couch, Shoshanna decides to disclose her virginity to avoid any potentially issues. She bluntly exclaims, “I don’t want to touch if we haven’t kissed” (“Hannah’s Diary”). Her statement here is an exaggeration of her conservative nature, which sets the tone for the rest of the scene:

Shoshanna: “Um, do you want to have sex? Now? If you want? Uh, you want to? Like, uh, yeah, if you want to.”

Matt: “This is so chill, the way this is happening. I love it.”
Shoshanna: “Okay, so, uh, I just thought you should know something just in case it’s, like, weird or I’m weird, which I totally shouldn’t be. But, like, just in case I scream, which I won’t. Um, I’m like totally ready to have sex.”

Matt: “Yeah, it’s just really not my thing…virgins.”

Shoshanna: “But, like, except for the fact that I haven’t had sex, I’m like totally not even a virgin. I’m like, the least virgin-y virgin ever.”

Matt: “I just, you know, it’s like, virgins get attached or they bleed.”

This scene in *Girls* demonstrates exaggeration through societal constructions of virginity by referencing the stigma of “attachment” and “bleeding.” The explicit use of the “attachment” and “bleeding” myths perform as a way to highlight the inaccurate stereotypes of virginity in society. Shoshanna’s awareness of these myths, where she explicitly states that “she won’t be weird,” adds to the exaggeration of the scene as the show is attempting to highlight the reality of navigating through social constructions of sexuality. In this scene, Shoshanna clearly informs the audience that she’s aware of how Matt will perceive her virginity as a result of the perpetual stereotypes of virgins. The exaggeration in this scene also conveys that Shoshanna isn’t ready to have sex, by focusing on her constant squirming and stuttering. She continuously refers to her “weirdness” and how “she shouldn’t be weird,” to demonstrate the reality of a woman in her twenties who finds herself trapped in a web of social constructions. This web of social constructions ultimately works to define women like Shoshanna, making it difficult for them to find their sexuality through the noise that is society telling them who they are. The guy in the aforementioned scene tells her that “virgins aren’t his thing,” constructs an inaccurate representation of women and groups them together through a single definition. In this scene, Dunham utilizes exaggerations of societal constructions of virginity in order to illustrate the false
representations based on stereotypes and compel viewers to recognize virginity as a part of the continuum, instead of a binary.

Interestingly, *Girls* doesn’t employ exaggeration when Shoshanna actually “loses her virginity.” This scene is depicted in a way that isn’t represented in traditional virginity milestone portrayals by normalizing Shoshanna’s sexuality without any explicit statements. Instead of depicting Shoshanna as uncomfortable, as in the aforementioned scenes, we see her as the most comfortable she’s been up to this point in the series. Instead of focusing on her virginity, the show follows Shoshanna’s personal journey where she finds a connection that she’s never experienced before. She ends up falling for, Ray, one of the leading male characters in the show. But, what is interesting is that Shoshanna’s first time isn’t depicted in that stereotypical “first time” way. Rather, the entirety of her first time is almost skipped over. Unlike the other characters on the show, viewers don’t really see the first time this couple has sex, which is a way for Dunham to break away from the virgin trope altogether. What viewers do see is Shoshanna and Ray going home together after Jessa’s wedding, in a way that is common for people to understand. The two of them going home together is an indicator of comfort. Shoshanna’s portrayal when she realizes she’s going to sleep with Ray isn’t one where she’s making a decision. She knew what she was doing, unlike in the previous scene with Matt where she was clearly uncomfortable. Everything about Ray was right for Shoshanna and it didn’t need to be explicitly stated. Shoshanna’s performance was completely calm and collected, which is something the audience never sees from her. The storyline of Shoshanna’s virginity becomes one of her own personal decision, and not one where she’s inexperienced, thus normalizing her sexuality as a part of the continuum.

However, following the wedding scene, it’s made clear that Shoshanna and Ray are going sleep together, and the scene also includes Shoshanna having a minor freak out thinking that Ray
has changed his mind as a result of her virginity. This scene is interesting because it is similar to Shoshanna’s first sexual encounter that we see in the series. In both scenarios, she rambles on about the situation, particularly about her partner not wanting to have sex with her because of her virginity. However, in this scene when she loses her virginity to Ray, the outcome of this event is a depiction of idealism that is associated to Shoshanna and Ray’s relationship. In classic Shoshanna fashion, she utters, “I knew it, you hate virgins. You totally hate virgins. You totally lied to me. You hate me” (“She Did”). But contrary to the other sexual encounters we’ve seen Shoshanna involved in, Ray reaffirms the situation and tells her, “It’s not that at all. It’s just that, it just occurred to me that you’ve never done it before, and thusly I am teaching you how it’s done. And you know, that’s a lot of power, which I don’t know if I deserve” (“She Did”). Evidently, Ray does believe that he does deserve the power, but he explicitly highlights Shoshanna’s worthiness instead of judging her because “she’ll bleed.” The person she loses her virginity to is depicted as this utopian man, an exaggeration of idealism as a way to pay homage to the idealism narrative of virginity. However, Dunham suggests that Shoshanna’s first time doesn’t follow that idealistic narrative because the audience doesn’t get to see it. The idealism for Shoshanna is the connection she found with Ray and not the fact that she’s having sex for the first time. This represents the idea of sexuality on a continuum as Shoshanna fails to be constrained to the virgin trope through the representation of her virginity loss.

When the audience meets Shoshanna and Ray again, the scene focuses on an intense depiction of their happiness and connection, in order to perpetuate the idealism of their relationship. While they are in what appears to be a trance, Shoshanna tells Ray about her childhood as he appears to be completely mesmerized by her. Ray’s fixation on Shoshanna is focused on and her complexities, not necessarily her beauty, which is demonstrated by his
powerful interest in what she has to say. His gaze is present when she tells him about herself and her life, as a form of intimacy that doesn’t portray anything overtly sexual, which is odd for a show like *Girls*. However, Shoshanna’s successful relationship is not a reverence of “prolonged virginity,” rather is “praising solitude” (“*Girls*: Lena Vs. Hannah,” 2013). This scene serves as a way to confirm female agency through self-sufficiency. Her deeply intense romance with Ray explores the role of solitary when finding a real and successful relationship. Although Shoshanna’s character is the token virgin character, she is also the interesting girl who carries a croissant handbag. It was evident from her character’s debut that Shoshanna is unique and does her own thing, which is the very thing Ray saw in her as well. In the aforementioned scene where two of them go home together. Ray explicitly states that he may not be deserving of Shoshanna which serves as a nod to the maturity that is lost in *Girls*. This is not to say that any one of them is “mature,” but rather to illuminate Shoshanna’s more mature qualities and her effort to establish a sense of responsibility. Losing her virginity to Ray becomes a moment where Shoshanna is the character the audience wants to be. Her relationship is portrayed as the most “normal” of the girls, as it illustrates an image of a real, in-love relationship. Shoshanna demonstrates how sexuality operates on a continuum as her character refused to be constrained by the virgin trope and instead performs as a three-dimensional being without being defined by her sexuality.

The way Shoshanna demonstrates how sexuality operates on a continuum is further perpetuated through exaggerated role reversal between her and her boyfriend, Ray. As the virgin, Shoshanna should be depicted as more naïve and ambitious because virginity alludes to innocence. However, in the episode “It’s a Shame About Ray,” Shoshanna learns that Ray has been living at her place as a result of his homelessness. Ray expresses his embarrassment about being “a huge fucking loser,” placing him in an inferior position in their relationship. It’s not to say that the male
should be inferior to the female, but rather that Shoshanna’s superiority in their relationship demonstrates the inability to be defined by one’s sexuality. Ray continues to disclose himself and exclaims, “What makes me worth dating? What makes me worth anything?” (“It’s a Shame About Ray”). Here, Ray, constructs a role reversal between him and Shoshanna. The virgin/whore dichotomy would designate Shoshanna as the partner who feels embarrassed and unworthy. Interestingly, the episode title further engages in the role reversal, as shame is not associated with Shoshanna, but rather, with Ray. As seen in Shoshanna’s previous sexual relationships, she’s been shamed for her virginity up until she meets Ray. Dunham may have chosen this title to suggest that an issue in Shoshanna and Ray’s relationship does not have to be a result of Shoshanna’s sexuality or sexual experience. Instead, she constructs Shoshanna as the person in the relationship who possesses agency, which demonstrates the continuum entirely. As Bay-Cheng mentions in her discussion of the Virgin-Slut continuum, agency on the continuum serves to provide status to women with status and allows women to maintain control of their sexuality. Shoshanna’s agency, then, rejects the notion that her virginity is a defining facet of her character because sexuality is not static.

Shoshanna’s agency is confirmed later in this scene, where she tells Ray that she’s falling in love with him. The way she tells Ray that she’s falling in love with him is similar to her performance when she sleeps with him for the first time. She appears reassured and without a doubt certain in what she’s saying. Shoshanna is also telling Ray that she loves him before he tells her, proving her ability to take control despite her initial virgin status. To that, Ray places his hands onto his head, telling her that “that’s a crazy thing to say…it’s way too early for that” (“It’s a Shame About Ray”). The show plays on this idea of the man saying “those three words” first, by having Ray respond to Shoshanna as if she said something “wrong.” As the recent virgin,
Shoshanna shouldn’t know any better which prompted her to say something ‘too soon’. After she apologizes, Ray tells her that he loves her “so fucking much,” reaffirming Shoshanna’s avoidance of the virgin label. Her sexuality was not associated with her ability to have a real relationship because she’s more than “just a virgin.” Shoshanna is ambitious and smart, and those are her defining qualities, not her sexuality. The demise of Shoshanna and Ray further depicts just that. Despite the overwhelming love and respect the two of them had for each other, Ray stood in the way of Shoshanna’s self-sufficiency, as she soon began to take care of both of them. Her character needed to continue on her path and “develop into a fully formed human,” without the excess weight of another person. Shoshanna’s entire relationship with Ray transformed her character, but not by defining her sexuality. Instead, Girls altered the story by zooming away from her virginal status and honed in more on Shoshanna’s complexities and dedication to herself.

The character of Shoshanna begins the dialogue for Girls as an alternative representation of female sexuality. The show demonstrates notions of shame, name-calling (i.e. “virgins bleed and get attached”) in order to provide commentary on the ways media defines female characters on the basis of their sexualities. Dunham uses explicit language, such as “virgins bleeding,” to address this issue through the characters and their experiences of that reality. Shoshanna’s reality is that while she did experience shame and judgment for her sexuality, the show never defined her on the basis of that. Instead, Girls uses Shoshanna as a way to highlight these realities and provide a voice for women that differs from traditional media depictions of femininity. As a character who began as the token virgin character, the audience also got to see Shoshanna become the fully formed human she always set out to be. Her character is defined by putting herself first and embracing her uniqueness. Her value doesn’t come from her sexuality, instead it comes from
within, thus reaffirming the existence of sexuality on a continuum as opposed to controlled
binaries. As Shoshanna, herself, once said, “I may be deflowered, but I am not devalued.”
Casual Sex vs. Monogamy

*Girls*, as a demonstration of Lena Dunham’s reality, is an attempt to depict a world where women and their stories include complexities that have often been omitted from female characters on television. This effort is a part of the way the show represents sexuality as a continuum, by deviating away from one-dimensional female characters who are defined by their sexualities. Traditionally, women are either invisible, underrepresented, or constrained to be traditionally feminine, as opposed to being able, powerful, and confident (Wood, 1994). For instance, in *SATC*, each of the four women is defined by particular characteristics that box them into categories based on shallow aspects of their character. The women of *SATC* exist as typecasts, such as Samantha as the “slut” and Charlotte as the “prude.” *Girls* references *SATC*’s use of labels for female characters when Shoshanna proclaims herself as “a Carrie at heart.” Labeling allows for the audience to associate certain things with “Carrie” and other things with “Samantha,” placing them in complete opposition to one another.

Instead of enlisting female characters as specific types, *Girls* focuses on highlighting the grey areas that respect women as complex beings by representing women on a continuum. The female characters on the show are not defined by rigid qualities; rather, they embark on their own journeys and progress as three-dimensional characters throughout the show. While these women primarily engage in plots related to romance, this context serves to demonstrate all aspects of a women’s identity in both relationships with others and the relationship with the self. People change and grow in solitude and in relationships, whether they be romantic or platonic. This is the very idea that Dunham is trying to portray through depictions of female subordination and domination in sexual relationships. She doesn’t overuse sex scenes or use sex to beautify anyone. Rather, she tells imperfect, awkward, and somewhat bizarre stories that humanize the characters to suggest that people are imperfect. The show demonstrates that the ways women act are not calculated, and
therefore should not exist on a dichotomy. Women can act in oppositional ways without defying any rules because there aren’t any rules. On a continuum, there is no way to disobey anything because a continuum recognizes change and flexibility.

In *Girls*, one way in which this idea is illustrated is through the casual sex vs. monogamy trope, primarily seen through the characters of Hannah and Marnie. To assess the ways *Girls* demonstrates this dichotomy, I will examine the ways these two characters navigate through the rigid boundaries that are constructed through the dichotomy. I will explore the show’s consistent use of exaggeration as a way to normalize different ways women express their sexuality in an attempt to recognize sexuality on a continuum. The dichotomy is present in the depictions of Hannah and Marnie as opposites, as Hannah embodies full sexual liberation and engages in unconventional sex, and Marnie is the put-together, uptight character. However, while they are complete opposites, their characters seek the same thing which is sexual freedom without being deemed a slut or whore. It is important to note that in this chapter, the idea of casual sex is sex that is free from emotional attachment. While Hannah is not in a monogamous relationship at the start of the series, the guy she’s sleeping with is also only sleeping with her. However, the status of their relationship is not defined when they begin having sex, which demonstrates the nature of casual sex for this argument. In this chapter, the casual sex v. monogamy dichotomy explores the ideas of sex for pleasure as a part of the continuum. This is done as a way to normalize women who seek sexual pleasure and refuse being labeled as “sluts” or “whores” as a result of their sexualities.

The character of Hannah is particularly controversial in the way she’s portrayed on the continuum, as both sexually submissive and dominant. Hannah is otherwise known as the liberal feminist who believes women can and should express their sexuality freely. Whether or not she’s
able to alter the status of her relationship from just a hook-up to a full-fledged monogamous relationship, is not the point. Rather, the point of Hannah’s character is to demonstrate that sexuality is fluid and that fluidity can be enjoyable for both men and women. From sleeping with a random older man who requested that Hannah sleep in his guest room, to giving her best friend’s ex-boyfriend a blowjob he didn’t really want, Hannah makes it a point that sexuality has no boundaries. This is evident that while her primary relationship in the show begins as casual and strictly for pleasure, the relationship turns into a monogamous one. Her relationship began as non-normative and became normative, indicating the significance of sexuality as a continuum in order for this shift to take place without shame and judgement. Hannah is not confined to one or the other; instead, she demonstrates her sexuality on a continuum in order to diminish the perception of female sexuality as a dichotomy.

Typically, in media women are portrayed as sexually submissive, and when they’re depicted as sexually dominant, they’re regarded as sluts. Girls attempts to reject these traditional representations of women, to create a shift where women can actually be both submissive and dominant at the same time, without constraining their sexual agency. The different ways we perceive Hannah throughout the series as she attempts to navigate her way through a hook-up to a monogamous relationship illustrates her ability to exercise her sexual agency. At times, she may be submissive; however, her compliance to a man’s demand in the bedroom is a mutual matter of sexual pleasure, and not solely for the man’s pleasure. Media often depicts sexually passive women as people who don’t desire sex or do so in the interest of their partner and not themselves. Girls, however, represents both active and passive responses to sex by the women in the show in order to demonstrate that passivity is not necessarily dangerous, although it certainly can be. Moreover, Dunham’s use of explicit and frequent female nudity bleeds into the way Girls depicts its female
characters, serving as the foundation for the hyper-sexual/liberated woman vs the submissive/monogamy-latent woman. Dunham draws attention to both sexual subordination and dominance by the women in the show to further demonstrate the complexities of women that are not typically represented in media.

During the initial stage of Hannah’s relationship with Adam, viewers are led to recognize the relationship as degrading, marking Hannah as a subordinate participant. He asks her to engage in outlandish foreplay. For instance, in “Pilot,” Adam directs Hannah to get into a specific position, lying flat on her stomach and reaching her arms back to hold her legs. Of course, she does what he says, and Adam mentions that “[he’s] going to get some lube and wants [her] in that exact position when he gets back.” This scene can be perceived as degrading; however, their bizarre sex is always consensual and is also enjoyable for Hannah. Additionally, when Hannah participates in Adam’s outlandish and degradin role play, she makes it a point that her participation is a result of her willingness to explore her sexuality. For instance, in “Vagina Panic,” Adam uses odd dirty talk to entice Hannah, saying that “he knew she wanted it like this when he found her as an 11-year-old junkie in the street with a Cabbage Patch lunchbox.” Girls is addressing the idea of unconventional sexual fetishes through exaggeration, such as Adam’s unusual role play, to illustrate sexual fluidity for both men and women. Obviously Hannah is not an “11-year-old junkie,” but she engages with his candid script, not just to please him, but in order to make sex enjoyable for both of them.

This scene is important because it highlights Hannah’s intention for getting in Adam’s chosen position, which is not to get this guy to like her. Instead, the show is utilizing this questionable scene, that could be regarded as degrading and non-consensual to create a dialogue about women who do partake in unconventional styles of sex. It is not meant to portray Hannah as a delusional slut, which could be an interpretation for some. Rather, this scene serves as a way to
demonstrate that Hannah sees Adam for who he actually is, and not the person who tells Hannah that it takes him “ten years to nut when he has sex with her” (“Vagina Panic”). Hannah chooses to do what Adam wants in the bedroom because she wants to please him, and not in a belittling way, but simply because she wants to make him feel what she feels. She participates in his role play that can be regarded as degrading, but the show uses scenes like this to demonstrate unconventional sex doesn’t necessarily need to be perceived as degrading. Rather, it suggests that women can make decisions for themselves in regards to their sexuality. In Hannah’s case, she likes the sex with Adam, not simply because she likes Adam, but also because it makes her feel empowered. When Adam decides that Hannah is an “11-year-old junkie,” it is evident that she found pleasure and empowerment as she says, “That was really good. That was so good,” and then Adam offers her a Gatorade. Adam offering Hannah a Gatorade is simply a marker of the casual nature of their relationship, through a nonchalant act of affection. The ways that Dunham depicts sexuality through Hannah’s character are extremely conflicting, but also reflect a reality that women often face. The reality is that there is middle ground between casual sex and monogamy, which affirms Bay-Cheng’s turn to the continuum, over the dichotomy. For Hannah’s character, her sexuality is on a continuum. While she might not be presented as a particularly conservative woman, she does mostly engage in monogamous relationships throughout the series.

Dunham seems to also include depictions of traditional monogamy in order to encompass a range of relationships, as a way to manifest the continuum and not solely normalize unconventional relationships. For instance, prior to the moment where they define their relationship, Hannah shows up at Adam’s house in the middle of the night to end their casual sex relationship because she wants to be in a loyal and committed relationship. Here, Hannah employs shameful rhetoric to demonstrate conflicting representations of femininity as she attempts to
maintain her identity as an unconventional woman, while simultaneously declaring her desire for a traditional monogamous relationship. In this monologue, she describes women through rigid characteristics that align with Dunham’s perception of the ways women are traditionally represented. She’s providing commentary about these definitions of women as socially constructed, strict, and ultimately untrue. She utilizes common representations of women in order to highlight the fact that she can behave in this traditional way while also staying true to herself.

There is no incorrect way for women to act and that’s what Hannah demonstrates as she stands her ground:

“I’m not asking anything. I’m really not asking you for anything. I’ve never asked you for anything. I don’t even want anything, okay? I respect your right to see and do whoever you want, and I don’t even want a boyfriend. I just want someone who wants to hang out all the time and wants to have sex with only me. And it makes me feel very stupid, to tell you this, because it makes me sound like a girl, who wants to like, go to brunch. And I really don’t want go to brunch. And I don’t want you to, like, sit on the couch while I shop, or, like, even meet my friends. But I also don’t want to share a sex partner with a girl who seems to have asked for a picture of your dick. And also, I don’t want a picture of your dick, because I live very near you, so if you wanted me to look at your dick, I could just come over, and look at your dick…I don’t really see you changing, so. I just summed it up for you. And, I’m sorry that I didn’t figure it out sooner. But, consider it a testament to your charms, because you might not know this, but you are very, very charming. And I really care about you. And I don’t want to anymore, because it feels too shitty for me. So I’m going to leave…” (“Hannah’s Diary”).
Hannah’s monologue further demonstrates the contradictions present in Dunham’s portrayal of casual sex and monogamy in order to validate the continuum of female sexuality. In this scenario, it seems as though she believes there is something shameful about expressing her feelings for a “traditional,” committed relationship. However, it is that media often depicts female characters as attached to men, and Hannah is rejecting that stereotype. Hannah’s conflicting statements are a reflection of the ways women are often perceived - as emotionally attached, clingy, or unable to be hyper-sexual - and her desire to break through those perceptions. She addresses these common perceptions of women when she says that “it makes me feel very stupid…because it makes me sound like a girl, who wants to like, go to brunch.” But, through her proclamation in this scene, Hannah highlights that women can desire monogamous relationships without fitting in this one-dimensional bubble of “girls who want to go to brunch.” She puts herself in a vulnerable position, highlighting her adoration for Adam while simultaneously telling him that she can just “come over to see his dick.” She is not one or the other, but rather she is all of these depictions at once. Her monologue explicitly demonstrates female sexuality as a continuum by employing various representations of women at play together.

When thinking of sexuality as a dichotomy, this would be problematic because her relationships exist fluidly through time and don’t shift from one rigid definition to another (i.e. casual sex to a monogamous relationship). Instead, Hannah’s sexuality and relationships are shaped by her experiences every day. For instance, in “Welcome to Bushwick a.k.a The Crackcident,” Hannah discovers that Adam is an alcoholic, which evidently creates a shift in their relationship. This is the moment where the audience realizes Adam’s peculiar behavior is a result of his alcoholism, which appears to make Hannah like him even more. It adds to the vulnerability that Hannah saw in him before, being the reason she did anything to make him happy during sex.
In this same episode, Adam and Hannah engage in a yelling match, where Adam asks her if “she wants him to be her boyfriend.” The next scene cuts to them in a cab headed back to Hannah’s place and Hannah is grinning from ear-to-ear, suggesting the new committed status of their relationship. Hannah’s dichotomous embodiment of both sexual liberation and desire for monogamy further demonstrates the broad representation of female sexuality. Adam might be the sexual director, providing Hannah with cues and instruction, but Hannah never fails to verbally consent to these directions and put her pleasure on display. Furthermore, the audience is meant to recognize that Hannah is with Adam for reasons much more significant than just having a sexual partner. The audience is meant to recognize that the way Adam initially treats Hannah is similar to that of someone he’s just sleeping with. But it’s evident that he does actually care about her because not only are they together every day, but he also displays moments of endearment and loyalty to her. Moments where he calls Hannah “kid,” or even when he tells her the blunt truth, there is a clear sense of intimacy and affection between them. Hannah and Adam’s dynamic relationship serves as a way to represent the complexities of both women and the ways women choose to conduct themselves on a continuum of sexuality.

Hannah’s character plays a unique and important role in *Girls*, by offering a modern perspective of female empowerment, while also remaining quite contradictory. The contradictions present within Hannah’s character and her story lines serve as a way to highlight this idea of the continuum. Hannah demonstrates that it’s possible to be a dominant, hyper-sexual woman, while also yearning for a committed, “traditional” relationship. She may be eager and willing to explore new experiences in the bedroom, but she is also unafraid to tell Adam what she wants, even if she believes it makes her look like a “typical” girl. She is destroying the idea of the “typical” girl by demonstrating that women are complex beings, capable of all emotions and sexual desires.
Hannah’s character provides a lens into the truth of what it means to be a woman in a world where female dominance and subordination are both shamed through rigid definitions and typecasts. Recognizing female sexuality as a continuum allows women to perform as both without repercussions of breaking rules of femininity.

Another interesting way *Girls* portrays casual sex and monogamy as conflicting and dichotomous is through Marnie and Charlie’s relationship in Season 1. We’re introduced to Marnie and Charlie’s relationship with an understanding that the two of them have been together for four years, through their undergraduate careers. Their relationship is depicted as “too” perfect as a result of their long-term status. However, we also instantly see that Marnie feels dissatisfied with their relationship, claiming that Charlie’s “touch now feels like a weird uncle” (“Pilot”). In “Vagina Panic,” Marnie states that “Charlie is so busy respecting me that he sees right past me and what I need from him.” Marnie is confronting typical standards of femininity in this scene, to convey the problematic definition of femininity as one that values emotional attachment over sexual pleasure. This heterosexual, gendered performance diminishes female sexuality by suggesting the woman can’t manifest sexual desire and instead should desire emotional connections.

The show exaggerates Charlie’s love and respect for Marnie in order to highlight Marnie’s unhappiness and desire for less emotional attachment in a way that reconstructs female sexuality on a continuum. Marnie’s sexual misery serves as a way to represent women as able to want casual sex without being defined as a slut. As someone who tends to comply with traditional standards of femininity, Marnie finds herself in a difficult situation as she recognizes that staying with Charlie is unfair to both her sexual needs and Charlie’s emotional needs. The role reversal here, with the man as emotional and the woman as sexual prowess is meant to place each gender in opposing gender roles. Marnie’s character opens the dialogue for women who feel afraid to explore their
sexual desires because of societal standards of gendered behavior. While she loves Charlie, she has also become bored of their four-year relationship and feels that her sexuality is being compromised for the sake of his feelings. Here, Marnie and Charlie’s opposing roles are a manifestation of the continuum, constructing hyper-sexuality as acceptable for women.

Marnie’s character serves as a representation of female sexual liberation, regardless of defining aspects of monogamy and hook-up culture as rigid boundaries of sexuality. For instance, in the same episode, where Marnie appears confused about which direction to take her relationship with Charlie, Hannah tells her that “You’ve had the same boyfriend for four years, so you’re allowed to be bored.” Marnie says that “that’s a very simplistic explanation for what’s going on” (“Pilot”). Hannah’s comment here highlights the continuum, by suggesting that Marnie is “allowed” to feel a certain way despite feeling restricted to monogamy. The viewer is encouraged to understand that Marnie’s yearn for true sexual pleasure is not contingent on an emotional attachment. She suggests that it’s not her long-term relationship with the same person that’s making her bored, but rather, that as a result of societal conditioning, her boyfriend is unable to recognize her desire for sexual liberation. This idea of societal conditioning demonstrates how femininity is generally understood as fragile and docile, which ultimately forbids women to embody any notion of sexual prowess. Marnie’s character, then, attempts to rewrite this narrative to include women as sexual agents. She addresses this in a more direct way when she tells Charlie that “[he] should be able to go about his business, piss [her] off and not give a fuck…because that’s what men do” (“Pilot”). Marnie is redefining female and male gendered performances to imagine a world where men are confined to specific definitions and categories. It is not that she yearns to be the submissive partner, but that both partners should express their desires in order to achieve sexual harmony. She demonstrates that she doesn’t need nor want to be coddled, and instead
wishes for a partner that will allow her to exercise her sexual agency. Similar to Hannah’s relationship with Adam, the primary goal for both of these women is to embody their complexities through the empowerment they feel regardless of the status of their relationship. Marnie, then, escapes her emotional attachment that held her back from her sexual expression and redefines her definition of femininity.

*Girls* presents the controversial dichotomy that women can be empowered while engaging in both casual and monogamous sex. It is simply a matter that is unique to the individual and doesn’t have any reflection on women or female sexuality as a whole. Following her escape from Charlie’s smothering love, Marnie ends up having a casual, sexual relationship with artist Booth Jonathan. In this relationship, Marnie finally expresses her pleasure through both liberation and dominance, free from emotional attachment. Her dominance is exhibited by her ability to let go of her comfortable relationship with Charlie and to chase after her own sexual pleasure. Marnie’s shift in character from being constrained to someone else’s vision of love, into a woman who follows her own idea of sexuality, is a mechanism to portray the notion that femininity lies on a continuum. She’s able to be flexible in her sexuality and chase after anything she wants through sexual and romantic relationships. There aren’t any rules to follow, which is what Marnie is beginning to understand. It doesn’t make her a slut to explore her sexuality and it doesn’t make her submissive to follow a man’s lead in the bedroom. *Girls* utilizes rhetorical strategies to demonstrate that women can be empowered and possess sexual agency in both casual and committed relationships.

*Girls* redefines female sexuality by addressing the common conceptions of casual sex and monogamy in a way that doesn’t deem one superior to the other. In a world where women are constantly put down for expressing their sexuality, or lack thereof, *Girls* depicts these types of
ideas where women’s sexualities are shamed in order to demonstrate that any way a woman chooses to express her sexuality is fine, and that there is no sexual standard. This is depicted by both Marnie and Hannah’s conflicting narratives, where despite the status of their relationships, committed or not, they choose the sexual relationships that they pursue. That is the true nature of sexual freedom- that these women are able to engage in any sexual relationship that allows them to embrace their femininity, and nothing less.
Narrative Implications of Female Reproductive Health

*Girls* also utilizes the Virgin-Slut Continuum to address reproductive health as a way to refuse the use of binaries to define female characters, and instead aims to normalize sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), abortion, and other reproductive health issues that are often stigmatized in society. Often times, these issues of female reproductive health are referred to as “the modern day scarlet letter” as a result of society’s ability to define them as damaging to women. For instance, in *SATC*, the episode where Miranda finds out she has chlamydia is titled “Are We Sluts?,” suggesting that her STD contraction is a result of her promiscuity. Even in *Grey’s Anatomy*, Dr. Christina Yang is depicted as a woman who refuses to get married, and in her discovery of her pregnancy, doesn’t need to think twice about getting an abortion. However, we see that she feels ashamed for her decision, primarily through her husband’s anger with her for getting the abortion. This is an example of a common representation of female reproductive health in media as it depicts the women as hypersexual, thereby shaming them for these experiences.

Dunham employs discourse surrounding female reproductive health in an effort to refute the notion that women with these experiences are inferior to women who haven’t had them. These representations serve to refute the notion that these women have less of a moral foundation than those who have not had these experiences. Female characters in media who defy traditional notions of female sexuality are somehow more susceptible to abortions and STDs. The narrative that these women cannot control themselves shames and stigmatized women as a result of their defiance of femininity. Women who engage in hypersexual behaviors are subject to shame and are generally characters who are written into storylines of reproductive health as a stigma to their sexuality. *Girls* demonstrates that these common representations of shaming women for issues of female reproductive health are an inaccurate depiction of reality. Simultaneously, in an effort to normalize these experiences, *Girls* suggests that these issues do not define women, rather they’re experiences
that some women face and others don’t. The show suggests that female reproductive health and the difficult decisions that come with it are not things to be ashamed of, and media should be discussing the reality that these experiences are difficult to overcome. In this chapter, I will argue that the character of Jessa performs as the slut of the show and remains consistent through her character to tackle stereotypes of hyper-sexuality with regards to female reproductive health. In addition, I will explore how exaggerated humor continues to play a role in the commentary that Girls provides about representations of reproductive health in media.

Girls depicts realistic scenarios that demonstrate the complex emotions that encompass reproductive health, such as the contraction of STDs, in a way that resonates with young women to communicate the normalcy of these issues. For instance, in “Vagina Panic,” the conversation about sexual health emerges as the girls prepare to accompany Jessa to her abortion. Jessa’s abortion storyline demonstrates the realities of sexual health in an attempt to normalize these issues for women. The way the Marnie organizes for all the girls to be present at the clinic is portrayed in a way to mimic the event of childbirth. It’s simply a way to address the emotional impact of an abortion as comparable to that of childbirth. The continuum, here, can be seen by recognizing issues such as abortion not as shameful, but emotionally difficult. This scene indicates a sense of significance, that all the girls must be present for Jessa as a means of emotional support. In “Vagina Panic,” Hannah mentions to Adam that she’s accompanying her friend to her abortion later that day. She says, “What was she going to do? Have a baby and take it to her babysitting job? It’s not realistic” (“Vagina Panic”). Hannah isn’t judging or defining Jessa by her decision to have an abortion, but rather she is recognizing Jessa’s inability to have a baby as a result of her circumstances in life. Girls constructs a narrative of abortion as something larger than Jessa’s sexuality. Instead, Jessa’s abortion is about her. Her abortion shouldn’t be seen as a shameful
experience because it is a difficult decision that she had to make as a result of her previous sexual choices. But, that is not to say that she is deserving of such an experience. Rather, her reproductive health and who she is as a person should not be recognized through binaries. The continuum suggests that, thereby allowing her to make decisions for herself. Jessa’s consistency with her sexuality throughout the show and refusal to be marked as a slut or whore demonstrates that women are not to be defined by their sexual experiences, and instead should be perceived on a continuum.

Jessa’s abortion further demonstrates the consistency of her sexuality through the continuum when Shoshanna tells the girls about a self-help book of romance called “Listen Ladies: A Tough Love Approach to the Tough Game of Love” (“Vagina Panic”). In this scene, Jessa maintains her status as the hypersexual character by explicitly addressing the dichotomy presented in the book. Jessa, who’s about to get an abortion, sounds disgusted while reading the title. She rolls her eyes and says, “this woman doesn’t care about what I want” (“Vagina Panic”). Her anger about this book demonstrates the one-dimensional ways women are perceived. The book mentions things like, “if he doesn’t take you on a date, he’s not interested, point blank.” It doesn’t provide any flexibility for all women, which is what Jessa’s response is alluding to. She says, “I don’t like women telling other women what to do, or how to do it, or when to do it” (“Vagina Panic”). Not only is she addressing the stereotypes about women that the book communicates, but she’s also commenting on the book’s lack of representations as she doesn’t feel accounted for. She continues to say, “Every time I have sex it’s my choice. You know, I want to have children. I really want to have children. I’m going to be amazing at it. I’m going to be really good” (“Vagina Panic”). Jessa is explicitly stating that “the book,” which acts as a marker for mainstream media, doesn’t represent all women because it doesn’t represent her. While traditional media might shame women for their hyper-sexuality, Jessa’s situation places emphasis on women having sexual agency to
decide when, where, and how to have children. The show suggests that while Jessa may not want to have a child right now she isn’t prohibited from having children in the future, because it shouldn’t define her as a person. *Girls* presents the idea of female reproductive rights as a continuum of sexuality that rejects the use of rigid definitions to define women. Jessa serves as the representation of this idea but normalizing hyper-sexuality and refusing to allow her sexual decisions to define her.

The character of Jessa also represents the Virgin-Slut Continuum through her ability to explicitly address the problematic recognition of sexuality as a dichotomy and representation as the “slut” of the show. While *Girls* uses Jessa’s abortion to portray this sense of “punishment” for her hypersexual behavior, Jessa never shows up to her abortion. She ends up hooking up with a random guy at a bar and eventually realizes that she’s bleeding. As aforementioned, media typically shames women for behaving in an unfeminine or hypersexual manner. Generally, in media, female characters who get abortions are punished for their hypersexual performance by being forced into an abortion or even giving up their baby for adoption. This traditional depiction suggests that women who detach their emotions from their sexuality should be punished for making certain decisions. However, *Girls* aims to break this common narrative of the hyper-sexual woman or “slut” in order to demonstrate that no one’s sexuality makes them in a position of superiority. Jessa’s character is not redefined because of her pregnancy or her abortion. Hooking up with a random guy in a bar during her abortion appointment is the most “Jessa” thing she could possibly do. The consistency with her character throughout this storyline suggests that her sexuality is not able to define her, and therefore doesn’t change anything about her as a person. It doesn’t make her any less moral than the other women, and it certainly doesn’t affect her representation in the show. The audience sees an overjoyed Jessa when she discovers her
miscarriage. Her character is not shamed for this feeling of relief, instead *Girls* celebrates Jessa’s character and her desire to manifest her true, sexually liberated nature.

The episode “Vagina Panic” further explores female reproductive health through exaggerated humor to discuss the controversy between men, women, and condom use that is often times left out of media representations. A study by the UK Department of health found that only “7 percent of the sex scenes included discussions of safe sex” in popular media such as *Lost*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *Neighbors*. *Girls* provides insight into the lack of safe sex representations in media as Hannah and Adam discuss whether or not they’ve been using condoms during sex. When discussing Jessa’s abortion, Hannah says that “she has very little sympathy for people who don’t use condoms” (“Vagina Panic”). The proceeding conversation with Adam portrays this issue of societally constructed gendered behavior, particularly within the discussion of men vs. women and safe sex.

Adam: “Well I don’t know what it is about me, but girls never ask me to use condoms.”

Hannah: “Girls never ask you to use condoms? But we always use condoms.”

Adam: “Do we?”

Hannah: “Yeah, we used one last night.”

Adam: “I guess we did. That’s probably why it takes me 25 years to nut when I have sex with you.”

Adam’s initial comment in this scene demonstrates the socially constructed, generalized ways society discusses men and condom use. This idea defines women who take precautionary measures for sex as inferior to women who don’t. Instead of being shamed for their hyper-
sexuality, they are shamed for the exact opposite as men are typically meant to be hypersexual. As a result of this dichotomy between masculine and feminine, it is evident that the goal is to present reproductive health on a continuum without rigid definitions of virgin/slut. Stating that “girls don’t ask him to use condoms” suggests an element of superiority of those girls over Hannah, particularly when he says that it “takes [him] 25 years to nut when he has sex with [her].” This depiction is an exaggeration that Dunham often utilizes in order to construct an overarching point. In this scene, Adam clearly makes Hannah feel badly about herself when suggesting that sex with other women is better than his sex with Hannah. This scene performs as an illustration of the ways society thinks about men and condom use. Their conversation serves as a way follow the cultural narrative that men don’t enjoy sex with condoms and that women are more likely to endorse safe sex than that of their male counterparts (Calsyn et al.). Their exchange here is similar to the type of exaggeration Shoshanna experiences when she’s told that “virgins bleed and get attached.” It’s an exaggeration that highlights use of stereotypes to shame women. *Girls* reflects Dunham’s reality, and in her reality she believes female sexuality is perceived as subordinate to male sexuality, and women exist solely for the pleasure of men. She explicitly demonstrates this idea by portraying Hannah as inferior and Adam as superior in their exchange. The exaggerated power dynamic compels viewers to recognize the problematic ideas that are being presented as a form of commentary on traditional media. Adam shames Hannah for this in order to shed light on the frequency of this event, to stress the ridiculousness of the idea that women favor safe sex over men.

*Girls* continues to destigmatize female reproductive health through exaggerated representations of STDs. The show primarily engages in a conversation about HPV in an attempt to demonstrate how ridiculously common and normal it is for young women to contract. Prior to her STD test, Hannah begins to obsess about all the possible ways that she could’ve contracted an
STD, in an exaggerated manner. She begins to neurotically google her symptoms, searching for “diseases that come from no condom for one second” and “stuff that gets up around the sides of condoms,” which portrays the realities of Millennials’ anxiety of “googling” their symptoms (“Vagina Panic”). She even describes her “Forrest Gump induced fear” to her gynecologist, which can be seen as that exaggerated element that Dunham uses to comment on inaccurate representations of sexuality in media. Hannah’s obsessive behavior demonstrates the common fear and shame associated with HPV, that she aims to normalize by the end of this episode. Her exaggerated fear of an STD is reflective of the mainstream rhetoric that shames women for having sexual experiences, and serves as another effort to destigmatize hypersexual women.

*Girls* further engages in the discussion of HPV as a dichotomy through contradictions of its representation throughout the episode “All Adventurous Women Do.” In to her conversation with Marnie, Hannah and Marnie engage in contradictory representations of HPV in order to highlight the current discourse surrounding STDs as dichotomous. Hannah is dressed in all black with her makeup smeared across her eyes which adds a humorous nod to the severity of HPV. During their phone conversation, Marnie appears fearful for Hannah as she says, “It appears that I do…yes…have something. I kind of can’t believe that I’m saying this, but I have HPV” (“All Adventurous Women Do”). During this exchange, Hannah appears much more calm about her diagnosis, as if she’s come to terms with it. She assures a crying Marnie that it’s not a big deal, further demonstrating the realistic progression from shock to acceptance. Hannah’s acceptance here represents the rational awareness of HPV, while Marnie’s reaction serves as an exaggeration of the severity. However, at the end of the scene Hannah shouts, “I have pre-Cancer!” This scene provides insight to the realities of HPV as it is represented through a dichotomy of severe and minor. Hannah’s exclamation about having “pre-cancer” is an exaggeration, but also “her
performance models a plausible way someone might act” (Rogers, 2015, p. 86). Her entire portrayal attempts to depict HPV as something that should exist on a continuum, rather than the dichotomy that is represented through Hannah and Marnie’s exchange. The show aims to demonstrate that while HPV can be scary, it’s also extremely common as “more than 3 out of 4 women will contract HPV in their lifetime” (“‘Girls’, HPV and Why the STD is Part of Lady Life”, 2012). Girls introduces HPV as a dichotomous phenomenon in order to illustrate the realities of it, but also to reframe the dialogue to recognize these realities.

This type of contradictory representation is further perpetuated through exaggeration in Hannah’s conversation with Shoshanna later in the same episode, thus continuing to normalize STDs. The two of them are watching a dating reality show called “Baggage” where the contestants reveal their emotional “baggage”. Hannah and Shoshanna, reveal to each other their small, medium, and biggest baggage. Hannah declares that her biggest baggage would be that she has HPV. Indicating that her STD is her biggest baggage demonstrates one end of the dichotomy as an exaggeration of the severity of HPV. Girls continues to employ exaggeration by discussing more of the scientific implications of the infection through humor as Shoshanna exclaims, “Oh, my God; do you have warts?” (“All Adventurous Women Do”). This is the second instance when warts are mentioned in the show’s HPV dialogue, highlighting the health risks of the infection as an important piece of the conversation.

However, the other end of the dichotomy is also demonstrated by normalizing her STD, where it is explicitly stated to be a common occurrence. Hannah mentions that she doesn’t have any warts and Shoshanna reaffirms her to say, “Oh it’s like much less bad then. Jessa has HPV,” as she completely minimizes the severity of HPV (“All Adventurous Women Do”). Mentioning that a friend also has HPV can aid those who’ve contracted the infection cope with the uncertainty
and worry that comes along with diagnosis (Kosenko et al., 2012). Hannah appears puzzled by the news that Jessa also has HPV, to which Shoshanna confirms, “Yeah, like a couple strains of it. She says all adventurous women do” (“All Adventurous Women Do”). This constructs the issue of HPV on a continuum as opposed to a dichotomy as it allows people to recognize the infection as something common that individuals can adapt to. Hannah was unaware that her good friend had “a couple strains” of HPV, which shifts the tone of the conversation as inclusive, instead of isolating. In the beginning of the episode when Hannah found out she tested positive for HPV, viewers saw her as afraid and feeling alone. But, by the end, she finds out that Jessa also has it and she never had the slightest clue. This realization depicts the importance of discussing HPV in media as a way to refute outdated narratives which Girls uses as a means to shift the attitudes surrounding STDs. When Hannah realizes that while it may not be true that “all adventurous women do,” she begins to recognize how common HPV is and maybe there isn’t anything to be ashamed of.

The episode closes as Hannah and Marnie dance in Hannah’s bedroom to Robyn’s “Dancing on my Own,” illustrating Hannah’s freedom from the shame she initially felt as a result of societal pressures and common perceptions of STDs. As the title of the episode claims, “all adventurous women do,” Girls depicts the reality of STDs and female reproductive health through a discussion where normal people are subject to their implications. The show doesn’t minimize the significance of STDs, but rather provides an accurate representation of both the scientific severity as well as reframing the narrative surrounding that severity. Instead of claiming that it’s impossible to avoid STDs, Girls addresses the realities of HPV, primarily by providing a representation of how women deal with the uncertainty of the infection. This changes the dialogue by illustrating HPV as more normal than people may believe. It diminishes the prevalence of the
dichotomous understanding of STDs by allowing individuals to be included in mainstream dialogues without feeling ashamed. The HPV storyline serves as a way to facilitate the conversation of STDs among young women, to help change their attitudes towards infection similar to that of Hannah’s transforming attitude from the beginning to the end of the episode.
Conclusion

In this study, I aimed to explore the ways in which women are represented in media, particularly by assessing how shaming performs as a construction of female identities in television. Prior research showed that female characters in media are often restricted to specific identities based on their sexual experiences or sexualities. The purpose of this study was to analyze Girls in order to examine the portrayals of women in a show that claims to represent accurate depictions of women’s realities. Based on my research, I found that while Girls does attempt to reshape representations of female characters in media, the show also engages in shaming through exaggeration and normalization to provide a critique on traditional portrayals of female sexuality in both media and society. This rhetorical criticism has used Bay-Cheng’s idea of the Virgin-Slut continuum as a framework to understand how the critiques of conventional portrayals of female sexuality presented in Girls works to reconstruct these representations.

As a modern-cultural text, Girls attempts to reshape portrayals of female sexuality in media through rhetorical strategies of exaggeration and normalization in a way that highlights the inaccuracies of conventional media representations of women. Methods of exaggeration serve as a way to highlight the ridiculousness of stereotypes and to underline the problematic implications of shaming. Normalization is sometimes a result of these exaggerations, but it also exists on its own as a way to refuse particular stigmas and stereotypes. This show presents realistic narratives in order to appeal to audiences as a piece of cultural commentary, as opposed to a “reality” show or a show that simply features a group of female actors. Instead, Girls boasts an intent within its production that is meant to attribute a sense of realism to modern-day media. It is not just a show about women, but rather, a show about a generation that engages in a dialogue about attitudes, behaviors, and discourse surrounding sexuality and societal constructions of femininity. Through my research, I found that Girls participates in this conversation because it offers media with
specific representations of women that serve as critiques about how female sexuality is typically shamed in media.

Bay-Cheng argues that “The Virgin/Whore dichotomy is a cornerstone of conventional rhetoric regarding female sexuality.” According to this binary model, girls and women are divided in two discrete groups on the basis of their alleged or actual sexual behavior: either they are absent and presumed virtuous (i.e., virgins) or they are active and therefore contemptible (i.e., whores)” (p. 281). Typecasting or defining women into binary categories based on sexual experiences perpetuates traditional representations and understandings of women. In turn, these persistent representations shape our beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions as well. Representations of women and their sexualities in Girls function in a way that destroy these binaries through exaggeration and normalization. For instance, Shoshanna’s character is initially portrayed as one end of this dichotomy, the virgin. Her character was subject to exaggerations of shameful rhetoric surrounding stereotypes of virginity as a way to highlight the binary that is present in The Virgin/Whore dichotomy. However, Girls destroyed the representation of Shoshanna through the binary by using the Virgin-Slut continuum constructed by Bay-Cheng as a way to “allow for gradations of acceptable sexual behaviors” (p. 281). The show demonstrates the continuum in order to communicate the importance of including a variety of narratives about female sexuality in media. I argue that the use of the continuum is a way to call attention to traditional depictions of women in media, in order to suggest that recognizing female sexuality on a continuum may offer more realistic representations of sexuality to viewers. Girls redefines how women are depicted in media by encompassing the realities of different women to create a space where all sexual experiences are deemed acceptable.
My research demonstrates that the representations of both the female characters and their sexualities are intended to reshape viewers’ perceptions and attitudes surrounding femininity. The show participates in redefining femininity through the use of the dichotomy as exaggeration in order to illustrate femininity on the continuum by normalizing negative stereotypes. The exaggerations that each character is subject to is a way for the show to communicate implications associated with understanding female sexuality as a dichotomy. Through these exaggerations then, Girls redefines the recognition of female sexuality from a dichotomy to a continuum in order to encompass all women and all sexual experiences. These representations suggest that women are not defined by their sexual experiences, but rather highlight the women as three-dimensional characters that extend beyond their sexuality. For instance, Jessa’s abortion is initially depicted through the dichotomy, and typecasts her as a slut as a result of her hyper-sexuality. Her hyper-sexuality is exaggerated through the abortion storyline; however, viewers end up recognizing Jessa as more than just “the slut who got an abortion.” Instead, Jessa redefines the stereotypes that exist within discourses surrounding both abortions and hyper-sexuality. The continuum allows for women like Jessa to be represented in a way that doesn’t define them by their sexualities, but rather creates a dialogue about the emotional distress and strength to overcome something such as an abortion. Jessa’s story as demonstrated through the continuum recognizes that her experience is just as valid as Shoshanna’s.

Representations of female sexuality on a continuum in media provide viewers with flexible identity construction. Women are able to view television and perceive a variety of representations, as opposed to depictions of femininity that are strictly defined through specific characteristics. The Virgin/Slut dichotomy and continuum play a role in the ways media portrays women as a result of shaming different groups for particular sexual experiences. The Virgin/Slut dichotomy presents
two groups of women and places them into rigid categories, either into the category of “slut” or “virgin.” It defines women based on their sexual experiences, which doesn’t recognize women or their sexualities as fluid and subject to change. Placing women into one of these categories is a means of shaming because it deems both experiences as inacceptable. The continuum, on the other hand, recognizes that all sexual experiences are acceptable and that sexuality should be perceived as fluid because one’s sexuality does not define them. Through the continuum, women are not shamed for their sexual experiences, and thus allow women with more space to explore their sexualities without being subject to judgement for their personal decisions. The continuum doesn’t constrain women to rigid definitions, nor does it define any level of sexuality as acceptable or unacceptable.

Research in feminist rhetorical criticism regarding representations of women in media follow both the negative and positive implications of these depictions. Conducting my research through this method served as a way to gain insight into previous representations of women in media in order to demonstrate how Girls contributes to reshaping how female sexuality is portrayed. Feminist rhetorical criticism serves as a way to understand how media shapes identity and discourse at large, particularly within a female audience. Examining the show through this method allowed me to recognize how media can disrupt dominant narratives in order to redirect the conversation. Girls engages in this as a result of the show’s ability to use stereotypes through exaggeration and normalization to demonstrate the rigid constrains that women in media often face. Dominant narratives in media construct and maintain narrow depictions of women, which Girls disrupts and offers a representation that attempts to encompass other groups of women that haven’t been included in the dialogue. If they have been included in the dialogue, dominant narratives often portray them in negative ways, generally making these women subject to shaming.
In *Girls*, Lena Dunham uses shaming through exaggeration and normalization to highlight the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of these women, which finally offers them recognition in media.

While *Girls* does present realistic storylines to reshape representations of female sexuality, the show does contain certain limitations. For example, the female-lead cast is made up of all white, heterosexual women, thus not presenting the realities of all women. However, Dunham has argued that the reason for an all-white leading cast is simply a result of her own reality that she felt wasn’t portrayed in traditional media. In addition, the show has also received criticism for its failure to fully engage with certain narratives, such as the HPV storyline. Some argue that the show does not “offer a clear intervention [for HPV], and that it perpetuates problematic perceptions of HPV by focusing too much on the source of infection instead of other issues” (Rogers, 2015, p. 88). However, in this study I argue that Dunham’s intention for including a focus on certain aspects of issues, such as HPV, is a means to exaggerate the situation to normalize HPV in an effort to destroy the stigma surrounding it.

Despite the show’s inability to encompass each and every aspect of female sexuality perfectly, since its debut in 2012, *Girls* has made an impact on television for both men and women. As mentioned in methodology, *Girls* has “helped usher in an impressive new generation of idiosyncratic voices on television,” (“6 Ways ‘Girls’ Changed Television. Or Didn’t,” 2017). Not only has it opened the door for other people to communicate their realities, but amidst the controversy *Girls* was “praised for its sexually frank, wryly satirical look at millennial angst, and dissected in an endless stream of essays and social media post thanks to its explorations of gender politics and post-collegiate social panic” (“6 Ways ‘Girls’ Changed Television,” 2017). Lena Dunham didn’t just break open the barriers of how women and sexuality were depicted in media.
Instead, she completely took control of her creative project and changed the way media is created. She didn’t play another female character created by some male writer, instead she created the characters to tell a story that illustrates a reality that she believed was missing from television. *Girls* influenced the future of television by appearing “loose, candid, and personal in a way that few scripted series had before,” and thus made it possible for shows such as *Broad City*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, and *Insecure* to succeed in mainstream media.

Based on my research, I found that despite its limitations and controversy, *Girls* has changed the way women are depicted in media in a number of ways. While Lena Dunham’s reality may not resonate with every viewer, it is evident that the show has provided a voice to women who have been underrepresented and misrepresented in traditional media. Not only does *Girls* provide a unique critique on the ways traditional media portrays women through stereotypes and typecasting, but also uses those rigid definitions to tell the story of women who haven’t been properly represented in media. Additionally, *Girls* has sparked an immense amount of academic research and conversations throughout media about representations of female sexuality in media. As I mentioned earlier, Lena Dunham created this show to provide commentary on traditional media, and over the course of five seasons it seems to have successfully prompted a conversation to push media into a progressive understanding of gender and sexuality. Further research may focus on the way television has changed since *Girls*’ debut, primarily by focusing on television shows with female lead casts, such as *Broad City*. While *Girls* is not totally responsible for the cultural shift in how women are perceived, it has definitely urged viewers to consider the problematic ways media tends to negotiate gender and sexuality.
References


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