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# Make it on Her Own? The Portrayal of Single Women on Television from the 1970s to the 2010s

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Make it on Her Own?  
The Portrayal of Single Women on Television from the 1970s to the 2010s

By  
Antonia Batha

\* \* \* \* \*

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
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## ABSTRACT

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This longitudinal study examines the portrayal of single women on television series from the 1970s to the present, demonstrating the changing perception of single women by American society through the history of television. The study first examines the demographic changes leading to the rise of "singleness" in three forms: never-married women, divorced women, and widowed women. The study then examines television as a cultural force, which affects and reflects the way that Americans perceive themselves and others, including single women. A qualitative and quantitative content analysis of six television series shows several trends, which appeared throughout the series. In earlier series the episodes were focused on the workplace, while in later shows more focus was placed on the personal life of the main character. The sexual relationships of main characters also increased chronologically. Television remains unrepresentative of the demographic of single women, especially in regards to race and sexual orientation.

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## Introduction

The amount of single women in the United States has been steadily increasing since the 1960s. Single women now equal married women in the United States. The term “single women” includes three categories: never-married women, divorced women, and widowed women. However, the largest category is never-married women. While the rates of single women have been increasing, in recent years the number of single women has remained relatively stable around 45.3 per 1,000 marriages (Lamidi and Manning 2016). This unprecedented number of single women in America has not only affected the institution of marriage, but single women have also affected politics, economics, and social institutions.

Television is an expanding cultural force in America. In 2015, 79.9 percent of the US population watched TV averaging about 2.78 hours per day of television (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). For those who actively watch television the average is 3.48 hours per day (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Americans consume a large quantity of television and a wide variety of different series on different networks. Television is a cultural force that has proliferated the American public: “In 2006, more than 98 percent of US homes had at least one set, while 64 percent had cable, up twenty points in twenty years” (Miller 12). Television reflects and is reflective of American society including its portrayal of single women.

Television affects the way that Americans perceive themselves and others. For single women, “popular culture offers us visions of female friendship, and also...reassure unmarried women that their lives are real and full and worth telling stories about” (Traister 2016 117). Accurate and diverse portrayal of single women on television is vital to social dynamics. However, television has not been and is still not representative of the demographic of single women, especially in regards to race and sexual orientation. Examining television series from the

1970s to 2010s presents a longitudinal study of the portrayal of single women, which demonstrates the perception of single women by American society through the history of television.

### The Rise of Singleness

Singleness in America has been and is continuing to rise for both men and women. According to the Pew Research Center in 2016, “the share of adults who are married has been steadily declining for decades. In 2014, just half of Americans were married, down from 57% in 2000. In 1960, 72% of U.S. adults were married” (Barthel 2016). The number of never married women in the United States has steadily risen past never-married single men. Numbers of divorced, widowed, and never married women outnumber married women in America (Traister 2016 5). While the term ‘single’ includes widowed, divorced, and never married women, the most common of these three demographic groups is the group of never married women. While singleness is now at its highest point ever, in recent years the marriage rate for women has remained relatively stable. In 2014, the marriage rate was 45.3 per 1,000, which was the highest since 2010 (Anderson 2016). The marriage rate varies by race. The marriage rate is highest for Asian women, 69.9 per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15 and older, and lowest for Black women at 22.0 per 1,000 unmarried women (Anderson 2016). The racial differences in marriage rates are due to differing societal norms for different racial groups. The National Center for Family and Marriage Research suggests that the decrease and subsequent stabilization of marriage rates for women is due to “a postponement rather than a retreat from marriage” (Anderson 2016). This would also explain why the number of single women has increased while the marriage rate has

stabilized. The demographic shift of increasing numbers of single women has far-reaching effects in American society.

The shift to single women being more common than married women has far-reaching effects on American society including affecting the wage gap, voting, and popular culture. The wage gap is the difference in earnings between men and women. The wage gap can be further divided into racial differences and marital status. Currently, women earn about 80 cents to every dollar a man earns, but this wage gap increases along racial divides. The wage gap also increases for unmarried women: “unmarried women make far less than married and unmarried men and even lag behind married women” (Gardner 3). As the number of unmarried women rise they will have to contend with earning less than married women and unmarried men. This could also negatively affect single working mothers. The wage gap matters for all women as they continue to get paid less for the same work, but for unmarried women the wage gap has decreased since 2014 even as the rates of unmarried women have increased. This makes the wage gap an even more pressing issue. However, single women are gaining more political power, because as the rates of single women continue to rise their individual political impact also rises. Single women have already impacted legislation by lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment; causing the formation of the National Organization of Women; and impacting various Supreme Court cases surrounding birth control (*Eisenstadt v. Baird*). Single women also have significant voting power. Single women in America make up almost a quarter (23 percent) of voters (Traister 2016 30-31). In 2012, single women voted 67 percent to 31 percent in favor of Barack Obama (Traister 2016 31). These rates differed between races, but single women have a strong impact on elections. In 2016 there are more than 58 million single women eligible to vote in the 2016 presidential election (Voter Participation Data Center 2016). Additionally, single women have

the power to control the election in swing states for the 2016 presidential election. This is particularly important as in 2016 a woman is a major party nominee. The rise of singleness is a reflection of the rise of gender equality, especially regarding the expansion of choices. This is reflective of a general rise in individual freedom. The rise of single women in America has already changed American society and these changes are reflected in popular culture.

### Television as a Cultural Force

Television is a dynamic visual medium, because of its ability to constantly change. Television reflects the changing demographics of America more quickly than other forms of media because television shows show change over time throughout different seasons of one show or different series of shows. Television also reaches large numbers of Americans, especially before television diversified. While the way that Americans watch television has diversified over the last 10 years, prime time cable television viewership has still increased from 2007 to 2015 (Barthel 2016). In 2015, 79.9 percent of the US population watched TV averaging about 2.78 hours per day of television (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). For those who actively watch television the average is 3.48 hours per day (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Television is a cultural force has proliferated the American public: “In 2006, more than 98 percent of US homes had at least one set, while 64 percent had cable, up twenty points in twenty years” (Miller 2010 12). The rapid increase of television demonstrates its power for representation, cultural influence, and advertising. Television also exists as a vehicle for advertising and capitalism:

TV is frequently identified as a crucial component of advanced capitalism, a site for delimiting, molding, and controlling people’s needs, and ensuring routinely high levels of

consumption. Television is the key point of articulation between the requirements of a massively complicated economic system and the daily lives of people whose individual patterns of purchasing and laboring both service and are serviced by it (Miller 2010 11).

To make money, viewers need to be drawn in and keep watching while advertisers have to approve of the content. Television and advertisers will work together to reach a certain demographic. The rise of single women caused a change in their representation on television because of the commercial influence of single women: “the commercial power of the singles market—and new demographic models that emphasized the need to reach youthful, female audiences—enhanced media producer’s interest in representing urban singles” (Lehman 2011 82). Single women caused a change in representation because of their commercial power based on their rising numbers. Television can also influence certain demographics and culture while being influenced by those same demographics and culture.

The diversification of visual media includes streaming services, YouTube, and online shows. The diversification of television has not taken away from television’s overall impact: “television still occupies vast amounts of people’s time and money, because it delivers information and entertainment with astonishing speed and ease” (Miller 2010 12). The numerous ways to watch television shows actually increases their viewership, but detracts from a shared community experience.

Advertisers recognize the significance of television as prevalent media and continue to use it to their advantage by targeting certain demographics: “As marketing models changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, networks saw the growing demographic of young, working women as a more attractive advertising audience and used the single working women to prove their relevance to these consumers” (Lehman 2011 6). The rise of single women impacted the

content of television through their consumer power. As visual media diversifies viewers will continue to impact the content: “Viewers have come to enjoy a meaningful increase in and expanded diversity of programming as a result of the industrial changes of the multi-channel transition and emerging post-network era, and television has come to be revolutionized in comparison with network-era norms” (Lotz 2007 254). Television continues to be an important reflection of society even as visual media diversifies. The diversification of television resulted in new avenues for watching and sharing content. However, “while viewer’s ability to customize their experiences has become essential, paradoxically, community remains a crucial part of the media experience” (Lotz 2007 245). Twenty years ago a shared community would be built around a prime time show or event, but as television diversified prime time has become almost obsolete. However, viewers now have a larger community through the Internet and shows are able to reach an even wider audience. As television changes to keep up with technology and changing social norms it still remains an important cultural touchstone. “The same studios, conglomerates, and distributors that dominated the network era and multi-channel transition remain important at the dawn of the post-network era, but their relationships and control of cultural production require significant renegotiation” (Lotz 2007 254). Changing population demographics caused television content and advertisement to change in order to stay relevant and popular as a form of media.

### Television Theories

Just as television affects the audience that watches it, the audience affects what is shown on television. The field of television studies is interdisciplinary, so lots of different approaches are used and combined to study audiences and how they interact with television (Zaborowski and

Dhaenens 2016). A prominent theory is reception studies, which is the study of active choices, uses, and interpretations made of media materials by their consumers. Consumers (the audience) make purposeful choices about what they watch and why they watch it: “audiences are active in the process of making meaning and that reception and participation cannot be understood by solely analyzing texts” (Zaborowski and Dhaenens 2016). These choices can be hard to interpret and analyze due to the transitory nature of audiences. A definition for reception studies is also difficult to create, because of the complex nature of television and audiences: “articles most strongly rooted in cultural studies and the audience tradition employ the concept to express the ways people engage with texts, on the whole, ‘reception’ remains unproblematised beyond that” (Zaborowski and Dhaenens 2016). The lack of depth in reception studies limits its usefulness; however, it still provides a needed aspect to theories on television studies.

A perspective that more fully explains the relationship between audiences and television usage is the uses and gratifications perspective. The uses and gratifications perspective on television explains why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs, so it represents an audience-centered approach. Uses and gratifications theory is “based on these basic ideas: that media audiences are active rather than passive; that their media choices depend on perceived needs, satisfactions, wishes, or motives; and that audiences are formed on the basis of similarities of need, interest, and taste” (Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents and the Media 2007). This approach relies on the theory that humans have basic needs that they are actively trying to fill. In this approach the audience is searching for specific programs that will fill their needs. The approach has been criticized for not being predictive, for being nontheoretical, and relying too heavily on the psychological theory of need. However, the theory

is useful as television grows and consumers have more choices, like in the case of increased access to shows through streaming services.

In uses and gratifications theory, the audience acts as an active entity rather than a passive one. Other theories regarding television focus on the affect that television has on the audience, the uses and gratification perspective relies on the audiences controlling their choices and; thus, controlling the television. The audience uses media based on a few categories. Originally four broad categories were listed as reasons people use the media: diversion or escapism; companionship and development of personal relationships; value reinforcement and exploring personal identity; and surveillance or getting information about the world. Changes and other categories have been added, but these categories remain the main focus. The audience is actively seeking out media (television shows) that will satisfy the categories of needs listed above.

### Women on Television

The demographic and cultural shift of the rise of single women in the United States is documented in popular media including books, movies, magazines, and television. The sociological theory reflection theory states that the inherent structures, values, and beliefs of society are reflected in media. Reflection theory can be applied to television, because television is a reflection of American society. Television is also one form of representation of American society. “The way women are treated socially and professionally by others may depend to a large extent on prevailing stereotypes and images of women in society” (Wober and Gunter 89). Television then should represent certain groups accurately. Unfortunately, accurate representation of minorities still does not exist on television. For the 2016-2017 television

season, “44% of regular characters on primetime broadcast will be female characters...still significantly underrepresents the percentage of women in the population” (GLAAD 2016 5). Representation is important to minorities, like single women, because it shows people minority characters that they can relate to as well as exposing people to different demographics in a safe environment. For single women, “popular culture offers us visions of female friendship, and also...reassure unmarried women that their lives are real and full and worth telling stories about” (Traister 2016 117). If television showed the stories and lives of single women, it would be representative of the changing demographics of America. To combat the underrepresentation and negative portrays of women and girls, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media collects research and data about media. Their slogan reflects the importance of and the desire for representation: “If she can see it, she can be it.”

The community that television creates is tied to the psychological theory of social identity theory, which “assumes that one part of the self-concept is defined by our belonging to social groups (Trepte 256 2006). Individuals are part of a social group, which is categorized through similarities and differences. Individuals will then choose media in line with their group memberships and that reflects a chosen social group. Television provides a community experience that, in turn, builds community: “the investment in stories and ideas that lead to the connection people make online provides the tools for the beginning of relationships---what he [Chris Anderson] has identified as the creation of ‘tribes of affinity’” (Lotz 2007 246). Social identity is strengthened through media that reflects an individual’s social group because it further defines an individual’s in-group and the out-group. Social identity is tied to self-esteem (Harrison and Martins 2011). A longitudinal study from 2011 of 400 black and white 7-to 12-year olds in Illinois found that the self-esteem of white girls, black girls and black boys decreases

with TV consumption while the self-esteem of white boys increases (Harrison and Martins 2011). On television white boys “tend to be in positions of power; you have prestigious occupations, high education, glamorous houses, a beautiful wife, with very little portrayals of how hard you worked to get there.” (Harrison and Martins 2011). Groups that are underrepresented on different forms of media, including television, may perceive their status as negative and unchangeable, but if media focuses on that minority then the group may encourage social mobility. Women are often underrepresented on television, especially as leading characters, meaning that women and girls do not see themselves reflected in media or only see themselves negatively portrayed in media, which decreases self-esteem.

George Gerber and his colleagues argue that television is a powerful cultural force that is “an arm of the established social industrial order that serves to maintain, stabilize, and reinforce...systems of beliefs, values, and behaviors. They also argue that the main effect of television is enculturation meaning television “cultivates stability and acceptance of the status quo” (Wober and Gunter 2). Television not only promotes acceptance of the status quo, but it also influences people’s perception of reality. One’s view of reality is changed by television and television also impacts how one feels about reality, which in turn affects one’s actions.

Television is still not representative of the demographic of single women. Class and race are important dividers along demographic lines, and they also matter in representation on media. Media representation tends to focus on white upper and middle-class men and women. Television shows that focus, or include, single women are also focused along these race and class lines. However, the amount of single women in America is now at its highest point, which means that women of all races and classes are now single. In fact, black women have the lowest marriage rates but they lack proportional representation on TV. While overall representation of

women as a demographic on TV is almost equal to men, single women are underrepresented: “In 2014-15, female characters comprised 42% of all speaking characters on broadcast television programs and 40% of all characters on broadcast, cable, and Netflix programs.” (Boxed In 1). The almost equal representation represents progress made by women in media, but single women are still underrepresented. However, minority women lack overall representation on television: “77% of female characters were white, 15% were African-American, 3% were Latina, 4% were Asian, and 1% were of some other race or ethnicity” (Boxed In 2). This prevents new generations from identifying with the characters on television and can perpetuate negative and damaging stereotypes of minorities.

## Single Women on Television

### Methods

To study the portrayal of American single women on television, definitions and parameters were created to choose a group of television series from which data could be gathered. To be chosen a series had to feature a single woman as the main character. Being a single woman was defined as a character that is not in a long-term, monogamous, romantic relationship. The main character could date and/or be in a relationship during the series. However, these relationships could not last the majority of the series. Singleness could mean that the woman was divorced or widowed, although these situations were not present in the sample that was ultimately chosen. All time periods were considered and included in the study to demonstrate the changing perceptions of single women. A list was created of any television series that had the criteria of a single woman as a main character. This list included over 30 different series. This list was then narrowed down to six series. These series were chosen based on popularity of the show, lasting cultural impact, and accessibility of the series. Demographic factors of the main character were not taken into account, which led to an overrepresentation of characters that are employed in a position related to the news. This is not an accurate representation of all of the single women characters on television. Six series were chosen so that there would be two series from each time period. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown* represent the first era of television spanning the 1970s-1908s. These two shows were chose because they fit the required parameters and they were popular when they were on television and have since retained that popularity. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* represent the next era of television from the late 1990s to the 2000s. *Girls* and *Being Mary Jane* are both still

on television; therefore, they provide examples for the current era of television. All of the series chosen are narrative fiction.

The sample from each series was four episodes in order to gain an accurate understanding of the entire series. These four episodes were chosen through a systematic random sample. The total number of episodes for each series was determined. Then the pilot and finale (if the series is not currently on air) were subtracted from the total due to the extreme differences that these episodes have in relation to the rest of the episodes from that series. Once the total number of episodes for each series was determined, the total number was divided by four (the number of episodes being watched). If this number was not a whole number it was rounded to the nearest whole number. Then a random number generator chose a number between 1 and the quotient. This random number was called the random start. The first episode in the sample was the random start. The three subsequent episodes were found by adding the quotient to the random start number. A character-level content analysis was done on each of the four episodes of each series that was chosen. This content analysis included basic demographic information of the main character as well as indicators of her relationships to others. Each episode was watched twice and analyzed using the chart (Appendix 1). The data gathered from the content analysis chart was then analyzed for trends using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Qualitative data about each episode was also noted. Notes were specifically taken on the plot of the episode, dialogue from the characters about quantitative data, and overall background of the episode within the series. This data provided context to the quantitative data that was also recorded.

## Discussion of Sample

Mary Tyler Moore plays the titular character of Mary Richards in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977). Moore is described as “an office drone at a TV station who worked her way up to producer under station manager Lou Grant (Ed Asner)” (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 109). Her job places her in a newsroom with other producers and writes for the station. Richards best friend is Rhoda Morgenstern who is an outspoken New Yorker. Richards has her job “while dating and breaking up with various men, some fascinating and others rather trivial” (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 109). Richards does not have a long-term relationship, but dates frequently. Richards received her job at the TV news station after breaking her engagement with her fiancé. As the series continued its run, it is revealed that “Mary had lived with her former boyfriend, in the same apartment, and in the later years of the show it was revealed that she was on birth control” (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 109). Both of these acts were considered taboo when they aired. For its portrayal of an independent single woman and facing social taboos, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is often considered groundbreaking.

*Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) follows the career of Murphy Brown, who is described as a “flinty, Motown-singing, recovering alcoholic star of a primetime network newsmagazine” (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 334). The beginning of the series has her returning from rehab to her work as a news anchor for the fictional company FYI. Brown being a recovering alcoholic is “the sort of personality flaw that would never have been considered, much less approved, as a starting point for Mary Richards on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Biaculli 2016 377). The pilot episode distances the character of Brown from past representations of single women on television. Brown “was clearly and indisputably in charge, often as tough on her staff as she was on her interviewees” (Biaculli 2016 377). Brown dates different men throughout the series, but

not seriously. She becomes pregnant and chooses to be a single mother to her son. *Murphy Brown* followed the path set by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, but breaking social taboos relevant to a new generation of women.

*Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) “chronicled the manic vicissitudes of Ally (Calista Flockhart) and the cohorts of a Boston law firm, Cage/Fish & Associates, headed by senior partners John Cage (Peter McNicol) and Richard Fish (Greg Germann)” (Nochimson 2000 25). The character of McBeal is “a successful attorney with impeccable credentials, including a Harvard degree” (Busch 2009 89). However, she is “an anxious, insecure, emotionally unstable, chronically hallucinating, emaciated woman...after following her boyfriend to law school, despite her lack of any apparent passion for law, she spends her life pining for him once he has married another” (Busch 2009 89). The earlier seasons are focused on the love triangle created by McBeal, her ex-boyfriend, and his new wife. The series also shows the lives of

fellow lawyers Georgia and Billy Thomas (Courtney Thorne-Smith and Gil Bellows), a seemingly conventional TV married couple, Nelle Porter (Portia de Rossi), a lawyer who combines Rapunzel-length blonde tresses with the instincts of a killer shark; and aggressively sexually promiscuous office manager Elaine Vassal (Jane Krakowski) (Nochimson 2000 26).

This cast of characters constitutes McBeal’s work life and most of her personal life. The line between personal life and professional life is blurred in the law offices where she works.

*Sex and the City* (1998-2004) presents the lives of four women: Carrie, Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte. The series “follows the women’s romantic and professional adventures: corporate Miranda’s difficult single motherhood and her troubles with boyfriend-the-husband Steve Brady, played by David Eigenberg; Samantha’s moving, late-series struggle with

cancer; the failure of Charlotte's marriage to a guy who was perfect on paper but sexually and temperamentally all wrong" (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 226). Their lives radically change throughout the course of the series. Carrie is a columnist writer and "spent much of the series falling in and out of lust with...Mr. Big. Carrie and Big eventually do get married in the first of the two *Sex and the City* films" (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 226). However, during the TV series she frequently dates men and engages in a few long-term relationships. *Sex and the City* is notable for its candor on sex and female sexuality.

*Girls* (2012-present) is a semi-autobiographical series written by Lena Dunham, who also stars as the main character Hannah. Hannah, like Dunham, is a "writer, bouncing from relationship to relationship, dealing with post college life, and struggling when cut off by her parents" (Newman 2016 294). Hannah's three best friends comprise the rest of the cast,

Marnie (Allison Williams)—a tightly wound wannabe curator or singer depending on the day, Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet)—an NYU college student discovering the joys of sex and mainstream popular music, and Jessa (Jemima Kirke)— a wandering free spirit with a penchant for indulgence and creating havoc (Newman 2016 294).

The series, which is still on going, follows these four friends, as they engage in new jobs, sexual relationships, and romantic relationships. Hannah "tries to keep a relationship going with her (maybe) soul mate Adam (Adam Driver)" (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 291). Their relationship is present through some of the series, but Hannah has other relationships and dates other men. *Girls* has many similarities to *Sex and the City*, but it represents a more current representation of single women. Its portrayal of sex is similar to *Sex and the City*: "Its *Sex and the City* sex, raw but awkward and often deliberately mortifying" (Sepinwall and Seitz 2016 291).

*Being Mary Jane* (2014-present) follows the character of Mary Jane Paul as she balances her work and home life: “Mary Jane Paul is a beautiful, highly successful woman who seems to have it all, but actually doesn’t. She is a television news anchor, devoted to her family but feels something is missing from her life” (Terrace 2013 26). The series tracks Mary Jane as she seeks the missing part of her life. The series “depicts fabulous, upwardly mobile women having the same kinds of conversations that Carrie Bradshaw would have with her “Sex and the City” friends — if any of them were black” (Smith 2015). Paul’s race and the race of other characters is a frequent topic on the show and often informs story lines. The producer of the show, Mara Brock Akil, said that, “The character was conceived around the same time that a misconstrued statistic began to circulate, about how 70.5 percent of black women had never been married. (That number actually referred to women between the ages of 25 and 29.)” (Smith 2015). With *Being Mary Jane* Akil strived to create an accurate representation of a single black women in America today.

### The Network Era

The Network Era in television started with the beginning of television in the 1950s and finished around the 1980s (Lotz 2007 7). Limited options and mass audiences characterize the network era. The television market consisting of a few large television networks, thus providing limited options for viewers. This era represents the era in which television was the strongest cultural institution, because of the mass audience. The mass audience provided opportunities for advertisers. The lucrative quality of radio for advertisers translated into television; thus, the most common advertising was single sponsorship, which started on the radio. During the network era, advertisers shifted from single sponsorship to participation sponsorship (Lotz 2007 157).

Participation sponsorship means that advertisements for different products are mixed in with the programming. The advertisement possibilities made this era very advantageous for sponsors and encourage audiences to feel involved in the products and the shows.

Single women were made the focus on television shows starting in the late 1960s and this tradition continues to this day. However, the representation of single women has gone through drastic changes during that time. *That Girl* (1966-1971) is considered a forerunner to later iconic shows with a single woman as the main character. Marlo Thomas played the main character, Ann Marie, and created and produced the sitcom. The show follows Ann Marie as she moves to New York City to follow her dreams of becoming an actress. The show followed the structure of a traditional sitcom and followed basic story lines about work and relationships. Ann moves to New York City as a single woman, but quickly finds a boyfriend, Donald. Ann and Donald get engaged at the start of season five; however, the show ends without them getting married. Since Thomas was the producer of the show, she influenced her character's arc and resisted the idea of her character getting engaged and then married although that was the popular convention at the time (Newman 2016 285). Thomas understood the need for young women to see themselves on television as they viewed themselves.

And when young women heard what it was about, they knew it was them. And when they turned on, they saw themselves... It wasn't like she was from Mars, that's exactly how they felt. That's who I want to be. That's what I want to do. And I think why I think it was a success so quickly. And so what the network saw, and thought was a revolutionary figure was, in fact, a *fait accompli*. She was there. She was in the fabric of the society (qtd. in Newman 2016 285).

As revolutionary as Ann was as a character, Thomas still had to make concessions to make the show appeal to a mass audience. Ann is in a long-term relationship with her boyfriend Donald and retains strong ties to her parents (Newman 2016 287). These relationships ground Ann as a woman and reassure the audience that she is not a completely subversive character. Thomas' portrayal of Ann also reassured the audience: "Thomas was charming and could easily be imagined as a best friend or a girlfriend. Likable by both men and women, Thomas had appeal that made *That Girl* especially watchable" (Newman 2016 287). *That Girl* was quickly followed by another series about an independent woman, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

#### *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*

*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* follows the life of Mary Richards after she leaves her fiancé and moves to Minneapolis. In the early seasons, the opening credits shows a montage of Richards moving to Minneapolis with the song "Love is All Around" playing. In later seasons, the montage becomes Richards being independent at her job, with her friends, and in her apartment. She gets a job at a television news station as a producer and a new apartment. The episodes mostly take place at the news station and in her apartment. At her work she interacts mostly with men, especially in earlier seasons. All of her coworkers are men. Some of the dialogue and plot revolve around the news station, but the majority of dialogue is centered on the personal lives of the people that work at the news station. Often the plotline takes place in both the news station and in her apartment. Richards' apartment is located in an apartment complex and at the apartment complex her friends are women. She regularly interacts with her friends Rhoda and Phyllis in the apartment complex. She and her friend Rhoda are both single in all of

the episodes, while Phyllis is married and has a daughter. Different people in the episodes mention Richards' singleness.

Two of the four episodes are directly focused on Richards' dating. In the episode "Today I Am Ma'am" (season one, episode two) Rhoda convinces Richards to invite a potential romantic interest for drinks and she will do the same. Richards being called ma'am for the first time precipitates this date. As she is commiserating with Rhoda, she says "if there's one thing worse than being single, it's sitting around talking about being single" ("Today I Am Ma'am"). Then she and Rhoda call potential romantic interests and invite them to Richards' apartment for drinks. Immediately things start to go wrong for comedic value. Rhoda's man is married so his wife joins them for drinks, while Richards' date, Howard, is over the top. Richards describes him as "too much" ("Today I Am Ma'am"). In addition, the guests assumed that they were having dinner that Richards would make for them. She is assumed to be the perfect hostess. Eventually, the guests leave and the date is a disaster leaving Rhoda and Richards still single.

Another episode in which there is direct conversation about Richards being single is "The Care and Feeding of Parents" (season two, episode 20). This episode is focused on Phyllis and her daughter, Bess. Phyllis wants Richards to get a paper by Bess published. Throughout the episode Phyllis reminds both Richards and Rhoda that they are unmarried and childless. She enters the episode by saying: "Oh, am I intruding? I don't want to butt in on any single gals type chatter" ("The Care and Feeding of Parents"). Richards and Rhoda are apparently used to this type of comment from Phyllis and ignore it or make fun of it. These comments continue through this episode along with comments on Richards' childlessness. Ultimately, Bess' work is not published. However, by the end of the episode Richards understands why Phyllis was so insistent on publishing her child's work and is more empathetic to motherhood.

The other two episodes that were sampled did not include discussions or comments about Richards' singleness, but they were focused on the dating lives of some of her coworkers. In "Almost a Nun's Story" (season 4, episode 14) her friend Georgette is cheated on by Ted, a news anchor where Richards works. Georgette then decides that she wants to become a nun and asks Richards to support her in this decision. Georgette starts the episode as a stereotypical subordinated woman in a relationship who is lost without her man. When she decides to take Ted back, she has a list of demands and is empowered in her decision to continue dating him. In "Lou Douses an Old Flame" (season 6, episode 10) Richards' boss, Lou, gets a call from one of his exes and confronts her at the end of the episode. During this episode Richards throws a bachelor party for Ted, even though he and Georgette are already married. Both episodes certainly provide opportunities for Richards to date or discuss her singleness, but it is never discussed. Her singleness is present in every episode sampled, but it is only directly discussed in half of the sample.

### Multi-Channel Transition

The mid 1980s to early 2000s resulted in more choices for viewers and defines the multi-channel transition era of television (Lotz 2007 7). Increased channels, subscription channels, and technological advances including the remote control and the video cassette player increased the amount of shows available to viewers. Shows and advertisers could now target specific demographics, because they only had to appeal to a small group. The changes to television also brought changes to advertisers. Advertisers were able to "adopt and benefit more from new commercial practices than other areas of the industry—like broadcasters—for which a network-era status quo remained preferable" (Lotz 2007 164). However, this also signified the start of a

loss of community around television. Unlike the network era, the multi-channel transition offered more choices and more channels, which fragmented the mass audience that existed in the network era. The increased choices, while fragmenting the audience, did provide more opportunities for diversity in characters and series. *Murphy Brown*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Sex and the City* exemplify the diversity in characters that existed during the multi-channel transition. These series all have a single woman as the main character, but that character is portrayed differently in each series.

### *Murphy Brown*

*Murphy Brown* follows the life of Murphy Brown, a news anchor, working in a male-dominated workplace. The opening credits use a different Motown song for each episode, as each character is shown with the actor's name similar to credits for a new show. The show mostly focuses on her professional life in the workplace, but as the series progressed her personal life was more of a factor in the plotlines. At the news station all of her coworkers are men, except for one of the other anchors who is also female. In later seasons the news station gets a new producer who is also a woman. Most of the episodes take place mainly at her work. Brown remains single throughout the series, but dates in a number of episodes. Her home life changes drastically over the seasons as she has a baby and becomes a single mother.

Of the episodes sampled only one directly deals with her singleness. In "Back to the Ball" (season five, episode 15) Brown receives an invitation to the inaugural ball, but she does not have a date. She tries to get one of her coworkers to go with her, but they already have dates. Her coworkers and other friends try to set her up with a date after commenting on her status as a single female. Frank comments, "You haven't had a date in a really long time" to which Murphy responds, "Oh right. Not since I went to the prom with Nostradamus back in 1509...I date plenty

of men” (“Back to the Ball”). Her coworkers also comment on how hard it is to date a powerful woman. Corky tells the group “But it’s not her fault. It’s not easy being a woman like Murphy. How many men do you know that are secure enough to ask out a woman who’s famous, successful...” (“Back to the Ball”). She is frustrated by her friends and goes home where her painter, Eldin, has another friend over. Brown is attracted to this friend and they go to the ball together. At this point in the series, she is already a single mother, but Eldin helps her with the baby. As a single mother, she feels out of practice with dating and is not sure whether she wants to date again. At first, Brown tries to convince herself that going to the ball with this man is not a real date. However, after discussing her outfit with Eldin, she realizes that it is actually a date. Due to the plot being focused on her personal life, this episode takes place mostly outside of the workplace, which is an anomaly in the sample.

The other episodes that were sampled are more focused on the news team and her professional relationships. In “The Last Laugh” (season three, episode seven) one of the other news anchors laughs during a broadcast and then quits until he is convinced to return to the show. Brown interacts almost exclusively with her coworkers in this episode. Like “The Last Laugh”, “The Awful Truth” (season eight, episode two) presents a problem in the workplace. Brown is faced with a new vice president of current affairs who tries to get her to anchor a new show. Originally, she is intrigued by this offer, but when the show becomes entertainment-based news she has to confront him. Over the course of this episode she only interacts with one other woman and her personal life is not discussed. The last episode in the sample was a Christmas episode that took place entirely at work. “From the Terrace” (season ten, episode 11) takes place over the course of a night when the four main characters and Brown get stuck on a balcony at the news station. This episode is a later season so they have a new producer, who is female, and a

new workplace. When they are on the balcony, the characters plan ways to escape and discuss the White House tree lighting ceremony, which is taking place down the street. They do not really discuss work and only briefly mention their personal lives or relationships. While the news team is stuck on the balcony, a couple watches them from across the street. This couple is in the process of breaking up. However, when the White House tree lights up, they start to discuss their future. This couple also believes that the news team watches the lighting ceremony together every year. This is a false assumption as they are stuck outside, but it helps the couple stay together. Even though this episode is workplace centered for Brown, it still has elements of romance.

### *Ally McBeal*

The series *Ally McBeal* follows the professional and personal life of Ally McBeal, a lawyer in Boston. She works for the same law firm as her ex-boyfriend. The law firm, her coworkers and the cases are highly sexualized. The cases often deal with sex or harassment. While McBeal is working these cases, she also deals with dating and relationships. Often the cases will reflect something in her personal life. At the law firm, she works with a mix of men and women who are lawyers and secretaries. Her ex-boyfriend is married (for some of the series) to another partner in the firm. While he is married to another law partner, a lot of the episodes focus on McBeal dealing with this personal crisis. Throughout the series she goes on dates or is pursued by a man and she often views herself as a sexual object. Her singleness is a topic of discussion in three of the episodes. In the other episode she is in a committed relationship so that relationship becomes the major topic of discussion.

“The Kiss” (season 1, episode three), “Just Looking” (season two, episode eight), and “Pursuit of Loneliness” (season three, episode 13) all show McBeal going on dates and discussing her personal relationships while prosecuting cases for the law firm. In “The Kiss” McBeal prosecutes an ageism case while starting a new relationship; however, the relationship fails by the end of the episode. McBeal is prosecuting a case on behalf of a woman who was fired from a news station for being too old and unattractive. This case causes McBeal to question her own beauty even though she considers herself a “sexual object” (“The Kiss”). She ultimately wins the case. While she is working this case she also goes on a date with a man. She decides to follow a set of rules for attracting men. The date does not end with a kiss as she was expecting and she then assumes the man is gay. He continues to pursue her and she then becomes interested in him again, but he gets annoyed with her behavior and dumps her by the end of the episode. In the episode “Just Looking” McBeal dates the opposing council while she is defending a case about a mud-wrestling establishment. The relationship does not go anywhere; however, she does win the case. “Pursuit of Loneliness” is about a court case in which a man is suing his wife for annulment after his wife comes out as gay. She starts dating one of the judges on the case until he tells her that he is bisexual. McBeal wants to date him, but cannot get over her bigotry. While she is dating him, she goes into detail about her dating life. She says that when she dates she is “auditioning future husbands” (“Pursuit of Loneliness”). This means that she is dating for romantic reasons rather than sexual reasons. This is also apparent in later seasons as she gets a long-term boyfriend.

Her long-term boyfriend is Larry and they have a serious relationship in later seasons. He is also a lawyer, which plays heavily into the plotlines. The episode “Cloudy Skies, Chance of Parade” (season four, episode 20) shows McBeal’s dealing with her birthday. She gets depressed

on her birthday due to a fear of aging. She is in a committed relationship, but she is still afraid of being alone. She mentions her eggs drying up and being too old to have children. In addition, her roommate and best friend tells her that McBeal should not be depressed on her birthday because “it’s not like you’re a pathetic, lonely, single, desperate woman on the verge of spinsterhood like you were last year” (“Cloudy Skies, Chance of Parade”). McBeal and her roommate both value being in a relationship with a man, especially as a woman ages. McBeal does have a boyfriend, but he is busy for most of the episode with a case. He does come to her birthday party at the end of the episode and surprise her by singing a duet with Sting. This surprise gets her out of her birthday depression. This episode is unique because McBeal has a boyfriend in a long-term relationship and McBeal does not work on a case. She actually spends most of the day alone in her room due to her birthday depression.

### *Sex and the City*

*Sex and the City* follows the lives of four women in New York City who are single, on and off, for the duration of the series. The main character, Carrie Bradshaw, is a writer for a weekly column called *Sex and the City*. She writes about her dating experiences and her friends’ dating experiences. Due to the flexible nature of her work, the episodes do not revolve around a traditional workplace. Her columns narrate the episodes making her work a focal point of the show; however, she does not have coworkers or a traditional job. This also means that the plots are more focused on her personal life and the personal lives of her friends. Bradshaw dates and has long-term and short-term relationships during the series, so in some episodes she is single and others she is not; however, the constant in *Sex and the City* is the female friendships.

In three of the episodes that were included in the sample, Bradshaw is only single in one of them. However, in each of the other three episodes she is dating a different man. In “The Monogamists” (season one, episode seven) Bradshaw is debating the merits of monogamy with her friends and in regard to her own relationship with Mr. Big. She and Mr. Big have been spending a lot of time with each other, so her friends demand that she spend time with them. While they are all at dinner, Bradshaw sees Mr. Big on a date with another woman. She assumed that they were in a monogamous relationship and is disappointed that he did not feel the same way. At the end of the episode he promises to remain monogamous. However, their relationship does not last. In “Attack of the Five-Foot-Ten Woman” (season three, episode three) Bradshaw must deal with Mr. Big’s marriage to another woman. Bradshaw meets his new wife in a dressing room and gets invited to the same luncheon as her. She spends the whole episode getting ready to face this woman, only for her to not attend the luncheon. Mr. Big’s new wife threatens Bradshaw because she is single and getting older: “You know she’s shiny hair, style section, Vera Wang and I’m, you know, the sex column they run next to ads for penile implants” (“Attack of the Five-Foot-Ten Woman”). Bradshaw, and her friends, feel threatened by this marriage, because they are still single.

In the episodes “My Motherboard, My Self” (season four, episode eight) and “Lights, Camera, Romance” (season six, episode five) Bradshaw is in a relationship, but in a relationship with a different man in each episode. In “My Motherboard, My Self” Bradshaw is in a committed relationship with Aidan. At the beginning of the episode they exchange keys to their respective apartments. However, their relationship becomes strained in the episode because Bradshaw’s computer dies and Aidan’s help frustrates Bradshaw. They do not break-up and remain in a relationship. A similar relationship pattern occurs in “Lights, Camera, Romance”

when Bradshaw dates a fellow writer, Berger. She gets an advance on her book from her publisher at the same time that his book is dropped from the same publisher. Her success over his failure in the same business causes some tension in their relationship. They remain in the relationship, but the episode leaves them with an uncertain future. This episode is focused on a power shift in Bradshaw and Berger's relationship. This power shift is commented on through a conversation about gender roles that Bradshaw and Samantha have. Bradshaw also writes about this topic in her weekly column: "As women's roles evolve and change we assume that men's do as well...Are the men of today less threatened by a women's power or are they just acting?" ("Lights, Camera, Romance"). This question may be answered in the fact that her relationship with Berger is uncertain by the end of the episode.

#### Post-Network Era

The post-network era is the era of the most diversification of ways to watch and consume television from the mid 2000s to the present (Lotz 2007 7). The increase in choices that started in the multi-channel transition has continued to the present. The digitization of content through Amazon, Hulu, Netflix, and other streaming services have made shows available to a more viewers than before. Advertisers were forced to change their strategies in order to keep up with the changing mediums: "Advertisers' desire to reach young, upscale demographic groups enabled the production of content defying previous norms, while the multiplicity of financing strategies likewise diversified the range of programming commercial models could support" (Lotz 2007 156). In the post-network era advertisers utilize a few main strategies. The first is product or brand placement. This strategy has different variations including paid or unpaid placements and basic or advanced placement (Lotz 2007 166). For this strategy to be effective

the product must be organic, so the product must make sense in the context of the show.

However, this strategy amounts to “only \$1.88 billion, out of an estimated \$60 billion in annual total television advertising spending” (Lotz 2007 169). Other strategies include brand integration, single sponsorship, and sponsored programming (Lotz 2007 172-173). In the post-network era, the rise of niche audiences led to more specific advertising and advertisers are most effective when using multiple strategies at once. The diversification of advertising and of consumption methods has only increased the diversity of series and characters on television. *Girls* and *Being Mary Jane* present diversity in series about single women.

### *Girls*

*Girls*, like *Sex and the City*, follows the lives of four women in New York City. The main character, Hannah Horvath, is single and a writer, but she does enter into an on-again and off-again relationship during the series. Romantic and sexual relationships are important, but the female friendships are almost more important throughout the series. Like *Sex and the City*, the fact that Horvath is a writer allows for the series to forgo workplace plotlines and focus solely on the personal lives of the characters. Due to the personal nature of the series nudity, sex, and drugs are all open topics. Horvath spends most of the series in a contentious on-again and off-again relationship with Adam, an actor. Her friends also spend time in different relationships throughout the series. This series is still on going so the future of the characters is unknown.

Horvath and Adam’s romantic and sexual relationship starts in the first season and continues until the fourth season. They become official in “Welcome to Bushwick aka The Crackcident” (season one, episode seven). They start this episode in an undefined relationship that becomes official at the end of the episode: “Do you want me to be your boyfriend?” Horvath

does not answer this question on screen, but the next scene implies that she has said yes. Their relationship is also chronicled in the episode “Truth or Dare” (season three, episode two). In this episode Horvath has Adam drive her and Shoshana to pick up Jessa from rehab. The reason for the car trip results in a fight between Horvath and Adam. Adam believes that Jessa is not ready to leave rehab while Horvath thinks that by picking up Jessa from rehab she is being a good friend. Ultimately, Jessa leaves rehab with Horvath and Adam. Horvath and Adam end their fight and remain together.

In later seasons Horvath and Adam are broken up, but he is still a major character in her life. One of their breakups occurs in “Sit-In” (season four, episode five). Horvath returns from Iowa after leaving New York City indefinitely. She is shocked to see that Adam is living in her apartment with a new girlfriend. Horvath assumed that she and Adam were still together even though she left the state for an undetermined amount of time. To deal with this shock, she stages a sit-in in the apartment bedroom. Adam calls her friends and tries to have them convince her to leave. Each of her friends visits her individually; however, none of them help her move on from the relationship and she continues to stage her sit in. At the end of the episode she confronts Adam and realizes that their relationship is over and she is single. Horvath is still dealing with her feelings for Adam in “I Love You Baby” (season five, episode ten). Adam is now dating Jessa, formerly one of Horvath’s best friends. Jessa is coming to terms with the fact that she and Hannah are no-longer friends, which causes a fight with Adam, who would rather forget about Hannah. While they are fighting, Horvath’s parents visit her to see how she is handling Adam and Jessa’s relationship. Horvath decides to enter a storytelling competition about jealousy at the Moth as a way of dealing with her feelings. Her story shows that she is coming to terms with their relationship and with herself: “I knew that I needed an end to my story, a real end...when I

showed up I heard screaming, and I heard my name, and I heard madness and I knew that I was free at least for tonight” (“I Love You Baby”). This story demonstrates her maturity in the end of a romantic relationship and a friendship. She also asserts her singleness, but is empowered in being single.

### *Being Mary Jane*

In *Being Mary Jane* the main character, Mary Jane Paul is a news anchor in Atlanta, Georgia. She is the only main character of the sampled shows that is black. She is also the only character to interact with her family on an episodic basis. The first few seasons are focused around her different relationships with men and this trend continues in later seasons, but in a broader sense. Her singleness is a crucial component of the plot lines of the episodes. Her family is very present in her life, as opposed to the other series. The series is still ongoing so the characters and storylines are continuing and uncertain.

Paul is single in all of the episodes that were sampled. She is the least single in “Girls Night In” (season one, episode 3). Paul was having an affair with a married man, Andre, and he makes the decision to leave his wife for Paul. Therefore, Paul must decide whether she wants to stay with him or not. She spends most of the episode contemplating this decision. At the end of the episode she texts Andre to let him know that she is ready to commit to the relationship. The episode does not provide a solid next step in their relationship. However, most of this episode is not focused on their relationship. It is focused on a “girls’ night in” party that she throws for some of her friends and coworkers. At this party they tell stories and share secrets about their personal and professional lives. Andre and Paul’s relationship does not continue through the series, as she is single in the other episodes in the sample.

The episodes tend to be evenly split between her professional life at her workplace, the news station, and her romantic relationships and her family. In “Mary Jane Knows Best” (season two, episode three) Paul freezes her eggs as part of a news series for her show. This causes her to consider her future, having children, and her relationship status. She recognizes that she is aging and she may be alone because she is childless and single. Paul has to cope with her niece, who is in her early 20s, having her second child. She also has to face one of her ex-boyfriends in order to go to an exclusive party for work. She ends the episode alone at her house. Paul is also single in the episode “Reading the Signs” (season two, episode eleven). However, in this episode she does go on a date, but she insults the man and she remains single. During this episode she also is experiencing a lot of success at work. One of her interviews goes viral and makes her a household name. This interview goes viral because she calls out her guest for not explaining her position and Paul says: “When I look at you, I see an ugly black woman too” (“Reading the Signs”). This line becomes a rallying cry for women and others who feel their voices have been silenced. This popularity puts Paul up for a promotion; however, this promotion comes at the cost of another woman losing her job. The other woman is being pushed out of her job. Paul still wants the promotion, but the executives feel differently about her: “the last thing we need around here is to have an ugly black woman running wild” (“Reading the Signs”). Her promotion is about popularity and race. The episode leaves Paul’s future uncertain.

In “If the Shoe Fits...” (season three, episode seven) it is Paul’s birthday, but no one in her family remembers. Her coworkers celebrate it with her, as do her friends. This episode is a tribute to the movie *Sixteen Candles*. Paul ends up buying a Tesla and a Birkin bag, symbols of wealth, as a birthday present to herself. Buying material possessions does not compensate for the lack of support from her family. She confronts her father while also confronting her own issues:

“I had an abortion. I did the...the reasonable, responsible thing because I couldn’t look at my dad and have him see a burden, a pathetic burden. But instead I’m here pissed that my entire family forgot my birthday and I could have been home blowing out 39 candles with my six-year-old” (“If the Shoe Fits...”). After confronting her father she returns to her home and finds her friend waiting for her with a cake. The last shot is setup like the ending of *Sixteen Candles*. She did not resolve her own uneasiness with being single or her relationship with her family, but she did confront it.

### Overall Trends in the Sample

The majority of the series are workplace comedies and/or dramas; however, the time spent in the workplace varies by series. The characters in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Ally McBeal* spend most of their time in their workplace per episode and overall. Paul in *Being Mary Jane* splits her time fairly evenly between work and home. The characters in *Girls* and *Sex and the City* do not have a professional life and, thus, spend their time focused on their personal lives. The workplaces in the earlier shows, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown*, are male-dominated, but in the main characters’ personal lives, they interact more with other women. *Girls* and *Sex and the City* are the exceptions because the main characters are writers who work from home. These two series rely on their personal lives for the plotlines. While in the other four series, the time at work and in the workplace is equal to their personal lives. When taken as a whole the series are equal with time in the workplace and at home. However, individual episodes sometimes focus on one more than the other. These series often interweave workplace drama with personal relationships. All of the main characters personal lives are focused on female friendships, especially *Girls* and *Sex and the City*.

Friendships often take the place of family on the series. In *Girls*, Horvath does interact with her parents somewhat regularly and in *Being Mary Jane*, Paul often interacts with her family.

*Being Mary Jane* Paul is black as is her entire family, who she interacts with on an episodic basis. Her best friend and the producer of her show is Latina. Paul's other best friend, who is another anchor on the same news channel, is black and gay. Her romantic and sexual interests are also men of color. One of the episodes deals directly with her race and gender when she coins the phrase "ugly black woman" and starts a movement ("Reading the Signs"). Paul and her family often directly or indirectly mention their race and its implications. In "Mary Jane Knows Best" Paul tries to help her niece, Niecy, lose weight. When Niecy is being stubborn and claims she is just "thick" Paul makes her argument about race: "Why does every overweight black woman in the hood think she's thick? We don't eat well. We don't exercise. And then we justify our diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure by saying 'I was born this way'..." ("Mary Jane Knows Best"). Paul's argument convinces Niecy to lose weight while also addressing a current racial issue. By featuring, almost exclusively, people of color *Being Mary Jane* is an exception to the racial norm of television. In addition, the series directly addresses racial issues and culture. Finding scholarship on *Being Mary Jane* was challenging and there was a lack of coverage of the series. This could be due to the fact that the series is still on television; the series is shown on BET (which is not a major network); and the show is about a minority woman.

Race is omitted from the other series. The main characters of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, and *Girls* are all white. They also do not feature any character of color, meaning that the episodes that were included in the sample do not have a character of color who has a name or who interacts with the main characters.

Furthermore, none of the episodes that were sampled included race as a plot, storyline, or topic of discussion. These series created a world in which everyone looks like them. The general lack of diversity is also apparent in the lack of sexual diversity.

While all of these series show the main characters going on dates, there is a difference between romantic partners and sexual partners. Heterosexuality is the norm in all of the shows and is assumed by all characters. None of the episodes that were sampled showed a LGBTQIA+ relationship. However, *Ally McBeal* does include storylines featuring LGBTQIA+ people. Sex is not shown on screen until *Sex and the City*. This is probably due to the changing attitudes in society that are now reflected on screen. Sex is shown on several series: *Sex and the City*, *Being Mary Jane*, *Girls*, and *Ally McBeal*. However, sex is also implied in *Murphy Brown* because she becomes a single mother during the course of the series. *Sex and the City* often shows the main characters and secondary characters having sex. Sex is shown on screen as well as implied throughout the series. In “The Monogamists” Samantha and Miranda are shown having sex with men. The four main characters also have an honest conversation about blowjobs. In “My Motherboard, My Self” Bradshaw is shown post-coitus with her boyfriend. In “Mary Jane Knows Best” from *Being Mary Jane* Paul has sex with a continuous hookup, but she is not in a romantic relationship with him. In *Girls* the main characters also have open discussions about sex. The episode “Truth or Dare” shows Horvath having sex with her boyfriend, Adam. McBeal from *Ally McBeal* is a sexualized character, but she is also portrayed as sexually innocent. She is only shown having sex when she has a long-term boyfriend in the episode “Cloudy Skies, Change of Parade”. While she is portrayed as sexually innocent, she is mildly obsessed with men and dating. The topic of relationships dominates her conversations, except when she discusses work with her colleagues.

The Bechdel Test is a test for film and television that looks at three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two [named] women in it, (2) who talk to each other, (3) about something besides a man. Only two episodes failed the Bechdel Test. The first was “Back to the Ball” from *Murphy Brown*. Brown does speak with Corky, a female co-anchor; however, their conversation is only about finding Brown a date for the inaugural ball. Their interaction is at the beginning of the episode and Brown does not speak to another woman during the episode. The other episode that fails the Bechdel Test is “Lights, Camera, Romance” from *Sex and the City*. In this episode Bradshaw is in a romantic and sexual relationship with Berger and she spends the majority of the episode with him or talking about him. Bradshaw talks to Charlotte, Miranda, and Samantha, but only about her relationship or their relationships with men.

The main character of each series interacts with a varying number of men and women during each sample from each series. Who the main characters interact with is a decision made by the writers and directors of each episode. The main characters are all single women, so though the course of an episode they interact with other women and men. These men were coworkers, romantic interests, or sexual partners. Who these single women interact with demonstrates the overall priority of the series. The main characters actions are dependent on the writers and directors of the series. Of the episodes sampled, men directed eight episodes and women directed sixteen episodes. Women were credited as the main writer on nine episodes, while men were the main writers on twelve episodes. Both men and women wrote three episodes. Although all shows that were sampled were narrative fiction, three series were comedies and the other three series were comedies/dramas. The different genres had no significant effect on how many women the main character interacted with during the episode. However, the main characters in comedies/dramas interact with more men during the episodes. Comedies had an average of 2.92

men as compared to an average of 4.00 for comedies/dramas. The increase in men present in comedies/dramas demonstrates the prevalence of men in the workplace and may speak to larger stereotypes about how men are perceived as more serious than women. The genre of the series only affected how many men the main character interacted with.

There were slight variations among the number of men and women the main character interacted with based on the gender of the director and writers for an episode. The average amount of men that the main characters interacted with was 3.6 with a female director and 3.5 with a male director. With a female writer the character interacted with 3.2 men as opposed to 3.8 men, on average. For both female and male writers the average men the character interacted with was 3.3. The amount of women that the main character interacted with for female directors was an average of 3.25. With male directors the average was higher at 3.56 women. However, female writers had the main character interact with an average of 3.56 women compared to male writers at an average of 3.25 women. Female and male writers had the main character interact with an average of 3.00 women. Surprisingly the difference in the total number of men and women that the main characters interacted with only had slight variation between episodes with male or female directors and writers.

The main characters, on average, interacted with more men who were sexual partners when women were the directors and writers of the episode. With female directors the mean was 0.50 men as compared to 0.44 men for male directors for the main characters interacting with men as sexual partners. The difference was more significant between female and male writers. The mean for female writers was 0.67 male sexual partners, but for male writers the mean was only 0.42 male sexual partners. Men as romantic partners also varied by male and female directors and writers. Episodes directed by women had the main character interacting with an

average of 0.88 romantic partners, while male directors had an average of 0.69 romantic partners. Female writers also had the main characters interact with more romantic partners (1.00) than male writers (0.67). When men and women were both credited as writers, the main characters interacted with an average of 0.33 romantic interests. Female writers included more men as sexual and romantic partners. Not all men that the main characters interacted with during an episode were sexual or romantic interests.

The main characters in many of the shows also interacted with their coworkers frequently. Most of the coworkers in each episode were men, but this trend changed to be more equitable in more current series. Episodes directed by men had the main character interacting with more male coworkers, an average of 1.94. Female directors had the main character interact with an average of 0.88 male coworkers. The difference between the amount of male coworkers the main character interacted with had a smaller difference between the male and female writers than the difference between male and female directors. Female writers had the main character interact with an average of 1.11 male coworkers as opposed to male writers who had the character interact with 1.83 male coworkers. The episodes that credit both female and male writers had an average of 2.00 male coworkers. The large amount of male coworkers that male directors and writers include in the episode could be related to the larger amount of men in the comedies/dramas genre.

## Conclusion

### Summary of Research

The rise of single women in America is reflected in the differing portrayals of single women on television. Single women now equal married women in the United States. The amount of single women in the United States has been steadily increasing since the 1960s. The term “single women” includes three categories: never-married women, divorced women, and widowed women. While the rates of single women have been increasing, in recent years the number of single women has remained relatively stable around 45.3 per 1,000 marriages (National Center for Family and Marriage Research 2016). This unprecedented number of single women in America has not only affected the institution of marriage, but single women have also affected politics, economics, and social institutions including television. Television is an expanding cultural force in America. In 2015, 79.9 percent of the US population watched television averaging about 2.78 hours per day of television (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). Television is a cultural force that has proliferated the American public. Television reflects and is reflective of American society including its portrayal of single women. Television affects the way that Americans perceive themselves and others. Two theories about audiences and television explain why television matters to its audience. Reception studies show that consumers make active choices about what television they watch. The uses and gratification perspective further explains that these active choices are based on the needs of the individual. The audience searches for television that fulfills these needs. Seeing oneself on television, in other words seeing representation, often fulfills these needs. Reflection theory also demonstrates why representation matters and it can be applied to television because television is a reflection of American society and it is also a representation of society.

Accurate and diverse portrayal of single women on television is beneficial to single women in the United States. Examining television series from the 1970s to the present is a longitudinal study of the portrayal of single women, which demonstrates the perception of single women by American society through the history of television. Television series were first chosen based on the main character meeting criteria about being single, and then the series were evaluated on popularity and cultural importance. Ultimately, six series were chosen across all decades of American television: *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, *Girls*, and *Being Mary Jane*. Four episodes of each series were watched twice and coded for questions regarding demographic indicators, gender, and sexuality. Qualitative data was also collected during coding about the episode and the characters.

The qualitative data showed trends over time, across genre, and throughout each series. The workplaces in the earlier shows, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown*, are male-dominated, but in the main characters' personal lives, they interact more with other women. The characters in *Girls* and *Sex and the City* do not have a professional life and, thus, spend their time focused on their personal lives. These two series rely on their personal lives for the plotlines. While in the other four series (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Being Mary Jane*) the time spent at work and the workplace is equal to the time spent on their personal lives across the episodes sampled. There is no chronological trend as this trend is more about the occupations of the women. All of the women in the sample had similar occupations, but they were all portrayed in different ways. All of the women in the sample were also heterosexual and all, except Mary Jane Paul, are white. Ultimately, television is has not and is still not representative of the demographic of single women, especially in regards to race and sexual orientation.

Female and male writers or directors had varying influence on the portrayal of single women. All of the series were narrative fiction and most were comedies, but some were comedies/dramas. The difference in genre only had influence on how many men the main characters interacted with. In the comedies/dramas, the main character interacted with more men than in the comedies. The men in these series could be coworker, romantic partners, or sexual partners. The number of male coworkers increased when men wrote or directed the episode; however, female writers included more men as sexual and romantic partners. Male writers and directors included more male coworkers overall. As more women are involved in the behind the scenes production of television series, a more equitable number of men, in all different roles, may be possible.

### Implications

The findings from the qualitative and quantitative data from the chosen sample have larger implications for American society. Reflection theory says that media reflects the society in which it operates, especially in regards to values, and structures in society. Using reflection theory to judge the values and social structures of America through the sample of single women television series is not an accurate portrayal of the current society. The overall lack of racial and sexual diversity in series about single women is not representative of American society. In fact, race and discussion of race is omitted from most series. While this is not representative of the general demographics of the United States, this speaks to current race relations. The overall lack of representation in these series has negative effects on the consumers. The Geena Davis Institute states that, “with a male/female ratio of approximately 3:1 [family films, primetime TV and Kid’s television], the message is that women and girls are not valued in our society commensurate with their true population” (Geena Davis Institute). The lack of representation in

media “can generate life-long imprints that can shape feelings of self-worth and behavior” (Geena Davis Institute). The Geena Davis Institute is only focused on the representation of women in the media and they are less focused on racial diversity and diversity in sexuality. GLAAD reports, “the number of regular and recurring lesbian and bisexual women is down from last year on both broadcast and cable after a very deadly year for queer female characters, from a combined 98 across both platforms last year to 92 this year (GLAAD 2016). There is a further lack of racial diversity within diversity of sexuality. Television in the United States does not reflect the current demographics of the country. Furthermore, the rise of single women is not reflected on television. There were single women on television before the trend of single women increased drastically in the United States, but the drastic increase has not resulted in a drastic increase of single women as main characters on television. However, more equitable representation is possible as television continues to show the lives of single women.

### Recommendations

The representation of single women on television has improved, but work must continue to ensure there is accurate representation. Subsequent scholarship should continue to research on representation and how it affects audiences. This research is increasing through organizations like the Geena Davis Institute and The Representation Project. However, more data and analysis of that data needs to be done on current series and past series. Continuing to track trends over time will provide better points of comparison across different series. Another area of study is examining why single women are represented similarly on past and current series. The series that were sampled all featured main characters that are heterosexual and all, but one series only

featured white women. In addition, all of the series are narrative fiction and workplace-based series. This heterogeneity detracts from representation, yet it is pervasive.

To continue positive and accurate representation of women on television, individuals must become better consumers of television. Reflection theory and uses and gratification perspective both discuss how consumers make active choices in their viewing habits. To consumers should be even more active in their choices. The Representation Project is an online campaign that advocates for positive representation in the media:

Using film and media as catalysts for cultural transformation, The Representation Project inspires individuals and communities to challenge and overcome limiting stereotypes so that everyone, regardless of gender, race, class, age, religion, sexual orientation, or circumstance, can fulfill their human potential (The Representation Project).

The Representation Project uses online social media campaigns to show how damaging movies and television can be for minorities. They also focus on sexism and racism within advertisements. Advertisements themselves can be damaging, but it is also damaging to have certain companies supporting sexist and racism depictions. Advertising, especially product placement, is how television series make money and understanding power of advertisers can effect the representation of single women. The boycott of products or advertisers can be an effective way of telling media that viewers are #NotBuyingIt (The Representation Project). By making smarter and more active choices about programming and advertising, viewers can influence the characters and series on television.

Viewers can also influence television producers and writers to improve representation of single women on television. Series should include more diversity in the representation of the characters of single women. The characters should be less sexualized, unlike the portrayal of

Ally McBeal. There should be an increase in diversity of sexuality, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. While none of the series that were sampled were perfect depictions of single women, they all had positive traits and showed an overall positive trajectory of the representation of single women. Series like *Sex and the City*, *Being Mary Jane*, and *Murphy Brown* (especially the later seasons) operate as starting point for television series in the future. These series all feature positive representations of single women, but more can and should be done by television directors and producers.

Appendix 1: Coding Sheet

Season & Episode:	Main Character:	Qualitative Notes:
1.Type of show		
2.Social Age	children or adolescents young adults middle-aged or settled adults elders	
3. Age of character		
4. Race/Ethnicity		
5.a.Does the character interact with men? How many?	Yes No	
5.b. If yes, is that man a coworker?		
5.c. If yes, is that man a romantic interest?		
5.d. If yes, is that man a sexual partner?		
6.a. Does the character interact with women? How many?	Yes No	
7. Does this episode pass the Bechdel Test?	Yes No	
8. Does the character interact with her family?	Yes No	
9.a. What is her job?		
9.b. Is it a male gendered occupation?	Yes No	

9.c. Is it a female gendered occupation?	Yes No	
10. Occupations of other women?		
11. Occupations of other men?		
12. Are women portrayed in sexualized/subordinated roles?	Yes No	
13. Does the main character have sex?	Yes No	
14. Is there direct discussion of the main character's singleness?	Yes No	

Director: Male Female  
 Writers: Male Female  
 Producers: Male Female  
 Title Card/Theme Song Notes:

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