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The Implications of Female American Ideals Presented in Popular Television and Advertising

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The Implications of Female American Ideals

Presented in Popular Television and Advertising

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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ABSTRACT

Matty, Siobhan Genevieve

The Implications of Female American Ideals

Presented in Popular Television and Advertising

My thesis examines the ways in which media and popular television reinforce stereotypes of femininity. Throughout the chapters, I assess whether or not various outlets of media leave space for improvement. For television series, I have focused on *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds*. The two series incorporate several important aspects of the female American experience and lifestyle. The two television series also highlight, reinforce, and sometimes challenge the stereotypes that American women are judged by. The thesis also examines magazine. For this thesis, I have taken three magazines in particular into consideration: *Cosmopolitan*, *InStyle*, and *New Beauty*. The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine how images of beauty, sexuality, and experience in the domestic sphere (work, family, and parenting), either contribute to or go against past stereotypes for women. More specifically, I am looking at how popular media contributes to and reinforces, sometimes blindly, the stereotypes of women as subordinate.

In the first chapter, I place an emphasis on the examination of beauty. This chapter focuses solely on magazine articles and advertising in an attempt to understand how American images of beauty reinforce stereotypes about the American woman as powerless. I examined the magazine, *New Beauty*, which largely discusses cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery. The magazine portrays surgical procedures in a positive light, and even recommends which doctors are best to consult when getting plastic surgery. Additionally, I used advertisements and articles in *InStyle* to ensure that messages provided by the media were not simply in one particular magazine. Both

American men and women learn from young ages that beauty is linked with good, while ugly is associated with evil. I use Susan Douglas' *Where the Girls Are*, which discusses how the images of beauty are ever-present.¹ I describe how unrealistic images of beauty contribute to a negative self-concept, thus causing women to feel inadequate. In reality, I argue, the images that are populated in magazines are not real. Also, I argue that in order for women to overcome subordination, they must accept the fact that these magazines are not real, and stop criticizing one another. The images of beauty represented by popular magazines contribute to self-criticism, the criticism of other women, and ultimately the degradation of women. The image of beauty is linked with power. Women attempt to be "beautiful" by what the American standards are, or, by what the media publishes. The woman who becomes engrossed in beauty culture is unable to succeed as she is spending so much effort on her looks. Naomi Wolf argues that the woman is subordinate as she continues to listen to advertisement. According to Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, women are used for economic purposes: the cosmetic industry profits greatly from degrading women.² The woman who believes power and success ultimately puts herself in a subordinate position again, believing that they are, in fact, inadequate beings. Then, the male once again is able to be successful and dominant, faced with no threats by the inferior woman.

Second, I examine the way that sexuality is represented in popular media. First, I examine *Cosmopolitan*. Largely, *Cosmopolitan* is degrading toward women as it reinforces that the woman should be responsible for tending to her man. Many of the issues mentioned ways to "please your man," which I criticize as degrading.

¹ Douglas, Susan J., *Where the Girls Are*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995.

² Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002, 64.

Additionally, I examine how the media shapes the acceptable or unacceptable views of sexuality. *Cosmopolitan* disregards the entire population of individuals who do not fit into the category of being in monogamous, heterosexual relationships. If any alternative form of sexuality is mentioned, it circles back to “his perspective.” I looked at *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds*. I was able to understand that *Desperate Housewives* revealed more of a standard, stereotypical view of sexuality. Additionally, any queer relationships throughout *Desperate Housewives* proved to fit a heteronormative lifestyle. Many of the characters who were gay either were monogamous couples where one character was masculine and one character was feminine. *Weeds*, however, illustrated various types of sexuality, and all proved to be acceptable. Nancy has various sexual pursuits, many of which do not result in a long-term relationship. Additionally, *Weeds* acknowledges polyamorous relationships, homosexual relationships, bisexual relationships, and relationships where partners are of different ages. I use Catharine MacKinnon’s *Feminism Unmodified* to explain how pornography and several uses of media construct female desire: women are unable to separate themselves from expectations of sexuality.³ I argue, however, that shows such as *Weeds* could open up a space for alternative sexuality, and that if more shows similar to *Weeds* existed, women may be able to create their own desires independent of what popular media dictates. However, I also argue that in order to do so, individuals must make the female leads less irrational, reckless, and irresponsible. Essentially, if the taboo were removed from women leading active sexual lifestyles, women may feel more comfortable expressing sexual desire in ways that are not constructed solely from the male perspective. However, I believe that the women in

³ Mackinnon, Catharine A. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard UP, 1987. Print.

these shows should be shown as strong women with educations, or careers. Often, the progressive aspects of the show fall apart as Nancy Botwin, the female lead, makes dim-witted decisions.

In the last chapter, I examine the ways in which the work, family, and parenting are represented in popular media. In *Desperate Housewives*, women are forced to leave their jobs in order to tend to their households. In *Weeds*, Nancy Botwin, the main character, is forced to make a career for herself in order to support her family after the death of her husband. I observed how the careers of the women in *Desperate Housewives* were largely based off of stereotypical careers for women. The women have careers in the catering business, as art teachers, as children's book publishers, as real estate agents, as models, and even jobs that are as degrading as stripping. In a particular instance, one character, who is portrayed as the masculine female, has a career in marketing that she has on-and-off as the seasons progress. I have looked at the way in which stereotypes are reinforced about women, but also challenged. The women in *Desperate Housewives* are caring mothers, and often wish to do what is best for their children. However, the women of *Desperate Housewives* also find themselves failing at times. Additionally, it recognizes the idea of not wanting to have children altogether. Gabrielle Solis, an ex-model, does not want to have children at all, but eventually does. The viewer often empathizes with the characters for their failures. *Weeds* illustrates Nancy Botwin's inability for a housewife to transition and attain a career because she spent so many years as a housewife. Nancy Botwin engages in the sale and distribution of marijuana, which is thought to be a masculine career. Nancy often makes irrational decisions, however she still truly cares for the well-being of her children. The two shows parallel each other as in

both instances the women find themselves in ironic situations due to the competing roles and identities as a mother, parent, and worker. I draw attention to the fact that women are increasingly being asked to serve both as a mother and the bread-winner. I examined the structure of the families as they relate. In *Desperate Housewives*, the women are without a job, unless a financial situation or separation from their spouse puts them in the role. In *Weeds*, Nancy Botwin's family seems to be fraught by her decisions as they relate to relationships and her career.

Chapter One: Introduction

I first became interested in the representation of women in popular television and media while taking a course during my first year at Union College, entitled *Feminist Film*. Over the course of the 10-week trimester, the class concentrated on reading the works of several political thinkers, most notably: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Jessica Benjamin's *Bonds of Love* and Catharine MacKinnon's *Feminism Unmodified*. The in-depth analysis of these texts in collaboration with the assigned films led me to develop a new understanding of film, popular television, and American media in general. From this work, I was able to understand that stereotypes of women have remained, to some degree, unchanged. Women are told that there has been a great deal of progress made for them. Women begin to settle for this promise of achievement. *After all*, women *are* told that they are sexually liberated, have the ability to receive an education, and have the ability to choose their own professions.

Throughout this essay, I will explore prevalent topics in the American media that manipulate the ways in which women view themselves, and sustain the status quo. More specifically, I will be examining the topics of beauty, sexuality, and the domestic or working sphere as represented in American media. I will be focusing how representations of women in television, advertising, and media contribute to or undermine the empowerment of women in American society.

First, I delve into the subject of American beauty. Most fascinated by the definition of "beautiful," I surveyed several magazines in order to understand what the American definition or guidelines of beauty were. As I began to research, I found that

there were two specific values attributed to American beauty: sexuality and youth. During this chapter, I explore the importance of beauty, and how beauty shapes the actions of women in society. I also look at standards of beauty for men and women, in order to determine whether or not the ideals for men are as extreme as they are for women. As body alteration by means of plastic surgery becomes more prevalent, I examine the features that are thought to be beautiful. I attempt to understand where American society derives its images of beauty. I was most interested in examining the association between beauty and female subordination. Women often feel inadequate, and therefore remain subordinate to men. Because the media provides women with unattainable expectations of beauty, women often lack confidence, thus causing them to regress: women remain subordinate because they believe that beauty is inseparable from power. Women feel that if they are not beautiful, they will not be taken seriously in the workplace. In particular, I have decided to look at *New Beauty*, a magazine that appears to be targeted toward wealthy adults, specifically middle-aged women. Additionally, I have examined articles and advertisements in the magazine *InStyle*, which appeals to young adults and older women alike. The chapter about beauty focuses on magazine advertisements and articles in order to illustrate the role of beauty in the American woman's life.

Next, I explore sexuality as it is represented in American media. I elaborate on articles in *Cosmopolitan*, as the magazine often provides tips on how a woman should "please her man." *Cosmopolitan* articles often further the stereotypes of the woman as subordinate, uneducated, and completely dependent on a male partner. I discuss how the views of sexuality impede women from forming their own views of sexuality or desire.

As I am most interested in revealing expressed ideals of sexuality and standards of sexuality in the media, I look at two shows in particular: *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds*. *Desperate Housewives* is a television series that has aired on ABC, and is available to mainstream viewers. Conversely, *Weeds* has a niche audience as it is available to viewers only if they purchase the episodes through Showtime (a premium channel), DVD, or Netflix. I am interested in examining how female sexuality is represented through these television series, but also how queer (non-heteronormative) relationships are illustrated in both series. I investigate whether or not women remain subordinate to men, or if they are perpetually seen as sex-objects. I analyze how the queer relationship is portrayed, to see if there is any acceptance for alternative views of sexuality. Most importantly, the chapter addresses how the roles represented in these television shows may or may not open up space for women to create their own views of female desire. I argue that most often women inadvertently engage in sexual activity that furthers female degradation; women often mistake the desires of men for their own desire. Ultimately, I observe how women degrade themselves as they wrongly believe that they have sexual agency. In reality, the sexual activities that women partake in are constructed solely from the male viewpoint of desire, women understand sexuality based on what men find attractive.

In the last chapter, I analyze the ways in which work, family, and parenting are illustrated in popular television series. In the past, the domestic engineer was prevalent, and the male as the “bread-winner.” Once again, I consider *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds* in order to understand how one’s participation in the domestic sphere contributes to their ability to be self-sufficient. I elaborate on the jobs that several of the women have

in *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds*, in order to determine whether or not the jobs reveal that women are able to obtain careers outside of the domestic field, which are *not* feminine in nature. This chapter also examines how each woman's parenting skills are either critiqued or commended. In *Desperate Housewives*, women often renounce their identities as career women in order to care for their children. In several episodes, if a woman is the "bread-winner," the man feels emasculated. The women either decide to work because they are bored, or because they are having some financial hardship. The women in *Desperate Housewives* often find jobs relevant to those which accent talents associated with the domestic sphere or degrade themselves by obtaining careers when they are, in fact, desperate, which are sexual in nature. On the contrary, the women in *Weeds* are often forced to work because they have no choice: they are either widowed or divorced. This chapter reviews the reasons why each woman works respectively. It also examines whether or not the woman's ability to work interferes with her ability to parent. As women are increasingly expected to work and to take care of their households, I look for an understanding of how these factors contribute to our understanding of the individual. Can a woman successfully be the "bread-winner" of the family, or does that compromise her ability to be a mother? Is it an expectation that all women should wish to be a mother? How do these presentations of the woman as a parent, in the workplace, or as a housewife either contribute to or defy stereotypes about women's' abilities to parent, be independent, or have successful careers. Are women judged if they choose work over their families?

This thesis examines several issues regarding stereotypes about the American woman. I examine several works of literature, such as: Betty Freidan's *The Feminine*

Mystique; Susan Douglas' *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*; Susan Douglas' *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild*; Catharine MacKinnon's *Feminism Unmodified*; Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*; Jessica Benjamin's *Bonds of Love*, and Daniel Delis Hill's *Advertising to the American Woman: 1900-1999*. The texts are incorporated to provide an alternative understanding of the instances represented throughout the thesis. Several of these are used to interpret and analyze the material in the magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *New Beauty*, *InStyle*, *Women's Health*, *Men's Health*, and *Men's Fitness*) as well as the popular television series (*Weeds* and *Desperate Housewives*). I use these magazines and television shows in order to understand how the media may or may not provide space for alternative understandings of beauty, sexuality, and work for the American woman. More importantly, I am interested in understanding whether or not the depictions of women in magazines, advertising, and television contribute to the position of women in American society.

The so-called "progress" that women have made is purely a fabrication. Women, regardless of status, are still held in a subordinate position to men. Women are unable to make the same salary figures as men; women are held to a double-standard when exploring their own sexuality. Moreover, American media presents its viewers with the idea that women are strong, powerful, and sexy—a misleading and often damaging invention. Often, these images and understandings of women's progress cause women to disregard how much work actually has to be done in order to gain a position of equality in the male-dominated society. Instead, women strive for perfection. In most instances, this perfection comes in the form of beauty.

Why is perfection associated with beauty? The idea of beauty has most recently taken a change as it encompasses the qualities of power and confidence. Without beauty, a woman is unable to acquire a position of power. Beauty is also linked to youth and sexuality. Several magazines advertise how to look younger, or use the word “hot,” which is undeniably linked to “sexy.” The repetitive use of the word “sexy” reinforces the woman as a mere sex-object. Beauty also affects a woman’s credibility, and her ability to get a job. The pure judgment of beauty affects several spheres in the American woman’s life, and therefore, it is an important subject to analyze. In America, magazines are ever-present in locations including: doctors’ offices, dentists’ offices, pharmacies, grocery stores, gas stations, and hair salons. Women who are on magazines are also on television. Therefore, women are unable to separate themselves from the values and ideals that the American media exhibits.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Throughout history, the ideals presented through media have ultimately constructed the views that women have developed both about themselves and other women. American media strongly emphasizes the ways in which women should conduct themselves. Social constructions of beauty, sexuality, motherhood, and employment as dictated by the media have become the precedent by which women lead their lives. The media also constructs the limitations that women face, and perpetuates the notion that women are subordinate to men. The direction of this thesis will be to analyze the implications of prescribed gender roles as represented through popular media and magazine advertising during the years 2010-2011 in order to analyze the most recent influences in today's media. More specifically, the primary focus of this thesis will be to examine advertisements and popular television series which are targeted toward a female viewing audience. The examination of popular media, advertisement, and magazine will be utilized in order to understand the implications and prescribed gender roles that are expressed through media that women and young girls are exposed to daily. Moreover, this thesis assesses the representations of beauty, sexuality, female friendships, motherhood, parenting, and work in the media to reveal how all of these factors contribute to as well as influence women in American society.

Many of the stereotypes reinforced in American media today are deemed post-feminist. In this sense, it appears that many of the characters in popular television shows don't have to work because "it is their choice." However, many of the stereotypes reinforced in these shows reveal that women are not in fact in a "post-feminist" movement. The representations of women in popular media reinforce the ideals that have

been challenged in the past by the feminist movement. For example, Douglas affirms that women believe that the feminist movement is over, and that they should allocate their time to bettering themselves.⁴ Women are encouraged to engage in activities and behaviors that reinforce femininity. Women undermine the feminist movement by perpetuating and following the standards perpetuated in popular media. Douglas affirms that America believes that it is in “post-feminist” phase, where women are convinced that their work is done through images representing “liberation” as sexy, cool, and beautiful. However, Douglas argues, women are in fact challenging their own capabilities to work toward the feminist movement, by taking on the image which she describes as that of enlightened sexism.

In reality, the decisions and choices made by women are often clouded by their understandings of how the woman should act and behave in American society. Some women argue that making choices such as body modification through plastic surgery is empowering, because the woman is *choosing* to modify her own body.⁵ Is this really true? Do women modify their bodies because they choose to do so? Or, are women perpetually exposed to advertisements and other media outlets that reinforce and structure the standards of beauty? These standards convince women that beauty is linked with power, influencing women to understand that they should look a certain way, thus influencing the choices that American women make in regards to their lifestyles and bodies.

⁴ Douglas, Susan J., *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010, 10.

⁵ Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, 233.

Susan Douglas, the author of *Where the Girls Are*⁶, and *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*⁷ has spent time analyzing the stereotypical roles of women throughout the media. Moreover, Douglas has looked at the objectification and negative associations made about women throughout the mass media. Douglas has analyzed films, television shows, magazines, songs, and even popular books. Although the book *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* was published in 2010, this current thesis represents the gap of time that had not been covered as several series would have been omitted from her book as it was published in 2010. Moreover, Douglas focuses mostly on shows in the 1990s rather than shows that have been more recent. The present thesis examines the recent television series and advertisements that are viewed by the American audience. In *Where the Girls Are*, Douglas examines the influence of growing up as a female in a country where the media contributes to an individual's overall growth. However, Douglas' book was published originally in 1994 and the emphasis of *Where the Girls Are* was heavily focused on earlier advertisements from 20th century America; shows such as *I Dream of Genie*, *Bewitched*, and *Charlie's Angels*. Additionally, Douglas reviewed advertisements for various cosmetics and products for women, as well as how women have been objectified in advertising for a large variety of products. In this thesis, the focus will be geared toward understanding the importance of the role of recent seasons of specific television series. Also, recent magazine articles and advertisements will be analyzed in an attempt to illustrate or define the universal images of beauty, sexuality, and motherhood as they pertain to the American woman.

⁶ Douglas, Susan J., *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995.

⁷ Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*.

Specifically, this thesis is an examination of the images of beauty, sexuality, and the representations of parenting, motherhood, female relationships, and work revealed in recent popular media. What are the impressions that the viewing audience receives regarding women living in America? The focal point of this thesis will be to elucidate the contradictions of the various aspects of the female expectations as represented in the popular television shows *Desperate Housewives*, and *Weeds*. *Desperate Housewives* is particularly relevant to this thesis as it is about four women who live in the suburbs, who consistently struggle with issues related to being a woman in suburbia. First, the relationships that the characters in *Desperate Housewives* have with spouses or significant others are commonplace in most American households; the arguments between spouses are typical and the issues (financial, parenting, familial) that they combat as a team reflect those of modern society. The family dynamics are rather conventional, upholding traditional values.

Second, the show exemplifies negative character traits associated with women such as envy, jealousy, betrayal, and the inability to maintain a friendship without an ulterior motive. Even among the four closest friends, the main characters, there is a limit of disclosure; the women refuse to share shortcomings for fear of judgment. Women in this show are depicted as dramatic, over-reactive, judgmental, and at times, self-absorbed. Competition among women is ever present in this television series. To a large degree, many of these women have poor self esteem, and struggle with issues that revolve around domesticity. Moreover, the members of the community expect these housewives to be perfect mothers. When perfection isn't reached in the domestic sphere, or when a female

lead finds herself failing in her main role as a mother, she discreetly self-loathes, as to keep the issue personal.

Additionally, sexuality is depicted as the most important factor in a male-female relationship. In many instances, women in *Desperate Housewives* appear to be overtly sexualized in order to gain the affection and sustain the attention of a partner. *Desperate Housewives* exemplifies the very characteristics which are ascribed to the ideal American woman. The television series was chosen on the basis that it is on a major television network, ABC, and has been running since it premiered in 2004. Currently, *Desperate Housewives* is in its eighth and final season, in 2011.

In contrast to *Desperate Housewives*, the Showtime television series *Weeds* is incorporated into this thesis due to the fact that it supports rather unconventional values. *Weeds* is a show that represents an atypical family situation. Moreover, it is rather interesting to observe how the main character, Nancy Botwin, manages to adapt to her unforeseen life as a widow in the suburbs. The Botwins live in Agrestic, California, and after Nancy's husband passes from an unexpected heart attack, Nancy struggles to make ends meet. The suburb where Nancy raises her two sons, Shane and Silas, is a suburb which can be noted as prestigious; Nancy's husband was a roller-coaster engineer, and there are several doctors, lawyers, and accountants throughout. Nancy, in many situations throughout the show, is a highly sexualized, impulsive character who is willing to take risks throughout, often making decisions that lead to challenging circumstances for herself and her family. There are many aspects that are open to interpretation such as her styles of parenting, working, and the ways that both beauty and sexuality are depicted in *Weeds* and contribute to her success and shortcomings throughout the series. The show is

not available on mainstream television, which means that there is a specific viewing audience. The show is not particularly geared toward a specific sex or gender, but it is a controversial show due to the variety of topics that it addresses. Various episodes of *Weeds* will be used to reveal how stereotypes associated with the female gender role are undermined or supported.

The two television series demonstrate different scenarios of motherhood, parenting, sexuality, work, love, and relationships. *Weeds* details the story of a wealthy suburban housewife who is forced to work after the unanticipated death of her husband. She must work in order to maintain the lifestyle that she and her children had. In *Desperate Housewives*, women also survive compromising financial situations which force them to drastically alter their lifestyles. In both *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds*, the women appear to be of similarly privileged social classes. However, the presentation of attitudes and opinions of the women of *Desperate Housewives* differ drastically from those of *Weeds*. *Desperate Housewives* chronicles the lives of four main female leads, thus creating a set of expectations for the American public. By watching this show, the viewer is able to understand what is socially acceptable in terms of parenting, sex, and relationships. In both *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds*, women endure situations that are unusual, and are usually the result of imprudent or irrational decisions.

In addition to analyzing television series, this thesis underscores the importance of magazine articles, and magazine advertisements as well as how all three media outlets contribute to and influence the way that an American woman presents herself in the personal sphere as well as in the working and domestic spheres. Magazine articles and advertisements have been at the forefront of establishing precedents across all aspects of

the female persona. The growth of popular media, such as television, lends itself to a broader spectrum of influence. Now, the ideals that have historically been represented in magazines are ever-present in American television series, too. Individuals who are performers, models, actors, actresses, and TV personalities are also often those seen on the covers of magazines. Americans consistently observe the identities of models, actresses, and TV personalities, and embrace these observed constructions of femininity. By observing the qualities, values, and attributes of celebrities, Americans form their own respective identities and aspire to these unrealistic standards. The magazines that will be analyzed in this thesis are *Cosmopolitan* and *New Beauty*.

New Beauty, a magazine targeted toward middle-aged women, is a magazine that advertises not only temporary corrective procedures, and how you can “achieve the look,” but how you are able to alter your body. The magazine is generally for individuals who are in the upper class or upper-middle class as one may observe by the advertisements for expensive products contained within. The ads tend to differ from those of magazines like *Cosmopolitan* in that they are for specific products: fillers, Botox®, and medical procedures. Many of the products and cosmetics advertised in addition to those related to cosmetic surgery are far more expensive than those advertised in leading magazines. The magazine does not contain the common Cottonelle®, L’Oreal® or Maybelline® advertisements. Instead, products such as Restylane®⁸, StriVectin™⁹, and Radiesse®¹⁰ dominate the advertisements as well as several pages of the magazine, implying that the magazine endorses the products. There is even a resource guide in the

⁸ *New Beauty* Spring/Summer 2011, Northeast ed.: 60-61

⁹ *New Beauty* Spring/Summer 2011, Northeast ed.: 85

¹⁰ *New Beauty* Spring/Summer 2011, Northeast ed.: 109

back of each issue noting “our beauty experts” and providing information about top plastic surgeons revealing before and after images of the surgeon’s “artwork” and alterations. The magazine targets middle-aged women and even encourages young women, to start beginning to look at these procedures. According to this magazine, beauty is inextricably linked to youth.

InStyle has been reviewed for this thesis on the basis that it is another women’s magazine that focuses on a large variety of topics including: fashion, health, fitness, hairstyle, makeup, and other beauty tips. *InStyle* does not appear to appeal to one specific age range, but rather a wide variety of individuals. More specifically, it appears that readers include young adults as well as older women. While reviewing the magazine, it was important to look at whether or not advertisements were consistent throughout women’s magazines, or if advertisements for women differed depending on the specific magazine.

Alternatively, *Cosmopolitan* examines various topics. The magazine encompasses the topics of beauty, health, and more broad topics, but especially places emphasis on sexuality. The magazine consists of several articles of individuals who have told stories about incidents that have happened with their men; the magazine provides advice and embodies the idea that the woman is subordinate. *Cosmopolitan* provides advice on how to appropriately please one’s man. The use of *Cosmopolitan* primarily shows the subordination represented in magazines, when virtually every article is about “Sex & Love,” “Bedroom Blogs,” “Sex Tips from Guys,” and several other topics relating to the objectification of the female body. *Cosmopolitan* provides women with the message that they should participate in sexual activity, at the discretion of “their man.” Wolf regards

Cosmopolitan as a magazine that has “ a focus on personal and sexual relationships that affirms female ambition and erotic appetite; and sexualized images of female models that, though only slightly subtler than those aimed at men, are meant to convey female sexual liberation.”¹¹

Additionally, *Women’s Health*, *Men’s Health*, and *Men’s Fitness* will be incorporated into the thesis in order to explain how these magazines view beauty for both men and women. *Men’s Health* largely contributes to the understanding of female beauty, and the ways in which women are sexualized and therefore subordinate. The ways in which the male viewer sees women in magazines are also the ways in which he views women in his day to day life. Therefore, unattainable images of beauty represented in men’s magazines also negatively affect the female self-concept as she consistently strives for perfection, but is unable to succeed. As the woman is unable to feel beautiful, she lacks confidence, thus compromising her position in society, as she believes that beauty and power are inextricably linked.

In Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Freidan maintains that the choices that women make regarding their bodies and their roles in society is largely associated with a failure to develop an independent identity, causing them to rely heavily on the ideals presented through consumer culture. The more that an individual buys, the more appealing she may be. Freidan also regards these venues of popular media (television, magazines) as a larger part of a market geared toward the woman. Freidan notes that women have “...ate chalk called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink the size of the thin

¹¹ Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002, 69.

young models.”¹² Additionally, Freidan asserts, “Department-store buyers reported that American women, since 1939, had become three and four sizes smaller.”¹³ Similarly, in Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf recognizes that “Until seventy-five years ago in the male artistic tradition in the West, women’s natural amplitude was their beauty; representations of the female nude reveled in women’s lush fertility.”¹⁴ In contrast, Wolf remarks,

But female fat is the subject of public passion, and women feel guilty about female fat, because we implicitly recognize that under the myth, women’s bodies are not our own but society’s, and that thinness is not a private aesthetic, but hunger a social concession exacted by the community. A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience.¹⁵

Women are now expected to be thin to an unreasonable and unhealthy standard. The media portrays women as thin, and Wolf argues that the image of beauty is a mechanism to continue subordination; a woman’s negative self-concept interferes with the other spheres of her life, causing her to believe that she is incapable of achieving success. Wolf asserts, “The more financially independent, in control of events, educated and sexually autonomous women become in the world, the more impoverished, out of control, foolish, and sexually insecure we are asked to feel about our bodies”¹⁶. Wolf, referring to the issues of beauty with a specific chapter titled “Hunger” in *The Beauty Myth*, comments on how women become fragile and essentially incapable of completing their daily tasks. Wolf also suggests that women strive for perfection that develops into eating disorders, and Wolf argues,

¹² Freidan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997, 59.

¹³ Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 59.

¹⁴ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 184.

¹⁵ Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 187.

¹⁶ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 197.

The anorexic may begin her journey defiant, but from the point of view of a male-dominated society, she ends up as the perfect woman. She is weak, sexless, and voiceless, and can only with difficulty focus on a world beyond her plate. The woman has been killed off in her. She is almost not there. Seeing her like this, unwomaned, it makes crystalline sense that a half-conscious but virulent mass movement of imagination created the vital lie of skeletal female beauty.¹⁷

In essence, women are surrounded by images of unattainable beauty. The constant ways in which women are addressed are highly sexualized and “beauty” in America is often thought to be attainable through thinness. The ideal “American” woman proves to be thin; women are supposed to ascertain this ideal, healthy or not. Almost every magazine has a feature describing methods of weight loss, and measures as well; magazines instruct a woman how she may be able to lose weight, and not just how much weight to lose, but how fast. The images of beauty, unrealistic and sometimes dangerous, have become mainstream and prevalent in the majority of American households.

According to Benjamin, women lack agency over their sexual desires. Often, women are depicted as objects and subordinates and women are supposed to refrain from acting on sexual desires. Wolf writes, “Images that turn women into objects or eroticize the degradation of women have arisen to counterbalance women’s recent self-assertion.”¹⁸ Frequently, the media represents women in ways which reveal envy. Women often envy each other, the relationships that others have, and in an attempt to gain attention or affection, a woman may subject herself to objectification. In many television shows, as well as magazine articles, the idea of “pleasing your man” is a main feature. Often, women in popular television shows are shown as obsessed with finding a boyfriend, or even obsessed with maintaining a relationship.

¹⁷ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 197.

¹⁸ Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988, 88.

Sexuality is at the forefront of many television shows. More specifically, women in shows on popular media are overtly sexual because it is portrayed as the appropriate role of a woman. Female sexuality in many shows as well as magazines is seen entirely from the male perspective. In *Feminism Unmodified*, Catharine MacKinnon argues that female desire is constructed solely from the male perspective, and that women only wish to partake in sexual activity because they feel as though it will gain the attention of a male. Additionally, she acknowledges that many sexual acts are unfavorable for women, and further female degradation, such as sadomasochism. MacKinnon argues that the female is subjected to a sense of worthlessness as violence increasingly becomes part of sexuality.¹⁹

In reality, many sexual acts which women engage in offer neither pleasure nor a sense of pride, and are coerced, or “feel it is their duty” to comply to the wishes of the male. Women adorn themselves in specific clothing that appeals to men, exercise to maintain the perfect physique, and often reveal themselves, at least in recent television series, as promiscuous. However, do women really want to engage in the sexual encounters in the same way that men do? As media presents it, women are entirely willing to partake, sometimes even initiate sexual encounters. In a common television scenario, a woman is essentially waiting for her husband or boyfriend to return home for the sole purpose of satisfying him. Conversely, many women do not feel this way, do not initiate these promiscuous behaviors, and these sexual practices become an expectation for women. Both male and female viewers are drawn to watch some television series regularly. As Susan Douglas writes,

¹⁹ Mackinnon, Catharine A. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard UP, 1987. Print.

But it's the way girls and women get depicted when sex becomes so foregrounded that is of concern, and not without reason: there's evidence that watching such shows encourages gendered stereotypes about sex. Whether it's through jokes, insults, and innuendo of sitcoms or the semi-random bed-hopping and terminally dysfunctional relationships of nighttime soaps, TV serves up a menu of scripts that play a central role (especially in the fantasyland of "abstinence only" sex education) in shaping young people's understandings about sex. It's a gradual and cumulative process, and since young people still—despite Facebook and their cell phones—spend more time with TV than any other mass medium, what TV conveys about girls, women, and sex matters.²⁰

Thus, men and women may develop skewed perceptions of sexuality. With women as subordinates who prove to have little autonomy over their own sexual desires and pursuits in everyday American living, television shows and magazine articles begin to dictate and influence the ways in which women act. Moreover, a pressure to conform to the standards represented of those on television becomes prevalent, causing women to engage in behaviors that they would not otherwise consider; women feel forced to submit to these behaviors because of the influence or appeal of acceptance through sexual action. Wolf asserts, "Only recently, now that society is best served by a population of women who are sexually available and sexually insecure, "beauty" has been redefined as sex. Why? Because unlike female sexuality, innate to all women, "beauty" is hard work, few women are born with it, and it is not free."²¹

Additionally, the shows on television have depicted sexuality as powerful. Women in several shows who have been sexualized are often granted liberties that other women are not. The media portrays sexuality as powerful in the sense that it is an attribute that women possess that may keep them subordinate in a way to men as well. In addition, the more sexualized the woman, the more she is capable of "getting away with." Women in television and reality shows act promiscuous in order to get away with things,

²⁰ Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, 169

²¹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 151

or get better served. The depiction of the sexualized woman as powerful is evident across many forms of media. In reality, using one's looks is another form of classifying oneself as subordinate; only useful for one thing—sex.

In recent years, the demands of being a mother have become increasingly more difficult. Aside from fulfilling the domestic role, and caring for one's children, women are expected to maintain careers. Women are consistently working, and in the domestic sphere, often competing with each other. Shows in the media often reveal the difficulties of attempting to stay perfect despite the problems that the individuals are having in their lives. The media often illustrates situations where women in trouble resort to self-loathing, and taking on overwhelming responsibilities in order to accommodate to the issues that they face. However, the women are also depicted as incapable of working, subordinate to their husbands, and, when a decision needs to be made about who leaves the workplace, it is almost always the woman.

Benjamin also makes the argument that the mother neither has power over her sexual desires, nor does she have power over her route in life as she expected to tend to the needs of her children.²² Wolf suggests that women in the workforce are kept subordinated by images of beauty. Wolf discusses the position and development of the role of the woman in the workplace, stating, “The transfer is complete—and, coincidentally harmful—when through this dream, women's minds are persuaded to trim their desires and self-esteem neatly into the discriminatory requirements of the workplace, while putting the blame for the system's failures on themselves alone.”²³ The

²² Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 88-89.

²³ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 29.

shows that will be analyzed in this thesis will reveal the controversy over proper parenting as well as the inability to manage all of the prescribed gender roles; it will also examine the implications of not being able to fulfill gender roles as expected or dictated by their communities. Media reveals mothers to be maternal, and if they fail to be maternal, or choose to take an alternate route, they are often criticized.

In sum, the sources used throughout are particularly relevant as they directly relate to the ways in which the media provides interpretations of beauty, limitations or representations of female sexuality, motherhood, parenting, and the world of work. The ways in which the media significantly and detrimentally continues to perpetrate these values through characters and images is decidedly negative to one's self-concept and may lead a viewer to self-assess in a self-deprecating manner. Mass media also leads female viewers to believe that the prescribed roles for women are their only option; it influences and establishes their relationships with their mothers, fathers, children, friends, siblings, and significant others.

Women achieve their identities through what is learned, obvious, and ubiquitously represented through popular culture, media and advertising. As Freidan affirms, "As the motivational researchers keep telling the advertisers, American women are so unsure of who they should be that they look to this glossy public image to decide every detail of their lives."²⁴ The continuous investigation of television shows and advertisements as those mentioned above provide images that are ever present in popular media and advertising. The ability to undermine the messages and ideals represented in the media

²⁴ Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 126-127.

could provide individuals with the opportunity for growth of a positive self-concept as well as empowerment for women.

Chapter Three: American Beauty

Standards of beauty vary with culture. Depending upon geographic location, time, and context, there are varying perceptions of what is beautiful. According to Merriam-Webster, beauty “is the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit.”²⁵ When Google-ing, “beautiful,” Google merges a vast array of definitions to gather that the meaning of “beau·ti·ful” is “pleasing the senses or mind aesthetically,” or, “of a very high standard; excellent.”²⁶ The synonyms include: handsome, pretty, fine, fair, and nice.²⁷ Beauty is linked with aesthetically pleasing features, but also becomes associated with character.

The idea that character is judged by beauty is ever-present in our society. From a young age, both men and women are introduced to protagonists and villains alike through the images that are presented in movies. When examining each movie written by Disney, for instance, the princess is represented through her beauty, elegance, and demeanor. Conversely, the villains are perpetually represented by their unattractiveness. At a young age, both men and women are taught that “beautiful” is good, and “ugly” is therefore, bad. As we age, the values represented in these films become the values that rule our lives. Women and men both strive to be the antithesis of the villain, taking extreme measures to do so. As a result, standards of beauty for both men and women exist.

²⁵ "Beauty." *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster. Web. 04 Mar. 2012.

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beauty>.

²⁶ “Beautiful.” Definition. Google. Web. 04 Mar. 2012

http://www.google.com/search?source=ig&hl=en&rlz=1G1SNNT_ENUS475&=&q=beautiful+definition&oq=beautiful+definition&aq=f&aqi=g8g-m2&aql=&gs_sm=3&gs_upl=186313702101382411111101010101204182713.3.11710

²⁷ “Beautiful.” Definition. Google. Web. 04 Mar. 2012

However, the female body is more commonly scrutinized, and more extreme standards exist for women than men.

In “Fractured Fairytales,” a chapter in Susan Douglas’ *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Douglas maintains that,

These cartoon dramas put that little voice in our heads, always warning us to beware of the other girls, especially pretty ones or ones with too much makeup, and installed the little surveillance camera in there too, the one incessantly scanning others—and ourselves—to scrutinize who *was* the fairest of them all. For, in truth, we were damned if we were vain and damned if we weren’t. We learned, through these fairy tales, and certainly later through advertising, that we *had* to scrutinize ourselves all the time, identify our many imperfections, and learn to eliminate or disguise them, otherwise no one would ever love us. But we also learned that we had to be highly secretive about doing this: we couldn’t appear to be obsessed with our appearance, for then no one would love us either.²⁸

From this, Douglas contends that women understand that they *should* judge each other. However, when women do judge each other, they are simply furthering the concept that there is in fact something wrong with them. Additionally, by making the association between beauty and fear—where women “beware of beauty,” women find there to be an association between beauty and power. The beautiful women become powerful because they are pretty. The self-monitoring and monitoring of others becomes problematic as in works in direct opposition to furthering the position of the woman in American society.

As women learn to judge each other, and scrutinize each other on the basis of beauty, women begin to believe that they will not be powerful unless they are beautiful, for beauty is a threat. If beauty is a threat, then women who are

²⁸ Douglas, Susan J., *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995, 27-32.

beautiful are almost masculine in a way, as they are able to be *more* powerful than a woman lacking beautiful attributes.

It is important to understand not just what is beautiful based on magazines or media, but through first-person accounts. What do people find beautiful? From a case study in *Experiencing Youth: First Person Accounts*, the topic of adolescent sexual intimacy is discussed. In a passage titled “The Magician: To Misdirect His Audience, He Must Misdirect Himself,” an individual comments on what unattractiveness is. The account, published in 1986, addresses several of the “flaws” that women have. He writes,

To begin with – and perhaps to end with – Ellen was not at all pretty. One couldn’t really point to any particular flaw in her face – except perhaps her lips, which were overfull in a Charles Laughton sort of way. Certain photographs, such as the one in her yearbook, would not cause a viewer to remark on her unattractiveness; but those were photos. Her figure was far from what it should have been. Her body, if it had to be described in a word, might be said to sag. Though not really fat, Ellen was “thick-waisted” with a slight paunch below the waist; low-slung breasts and flat buttocks. She carried herself in a rather unfeminine manner, and by the time that most girls learn to walk from the hips rather than the waist, Ellen still strode almost as if she were climbing uphill. That naturally and socially induced transformation which produces high-school-fuls of Sandra Dees and Annettes and their myriad less attractive, gum-chewing, orthodontured disciples seemed to have passed dateless Ellen, and while these facts were not lost to her, she remained cheerful and usually happy.²⁹

What is the message? The woman should have a round bottom, wear bras to keep breasts in place, have a flat stomach, and a beautiful face. Her lips were “overfull,” suggesting that there is a certain volume that her lips should have. She was “thick-waisted” with “a slight pauch below the waist,” most likely lower-belly fat. In short, he criticizes her for having a poor figure, which is the determinant of whether or not she is attractive. In the above segment, Ellen is judged even by how she walks.

²⁹ Goethals, George W., and Dennis S. Klos. *Experiencing Youth*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1986.

Although we now see that “youthful-looking lips” are full, and voluminous, the case study suggests that there is a fine line between beautiful and ugly.³⁰ Women are instructed to lose weight—but in all of the “right” places. Her “flat buttocks” are unattractive because her butt is too slim. Her waist isn’t attractive because it is too large. Today, these are still areas of the female body that are consistently critiqued. Women are told to have flat abs, “curvy” hips, and perky, large breasts. The woman should have flat abs—but shapely. She should have “curvy” hips, but not as curvy as they are fat. She should have a rounded buttocks, but not with fat as to have cellulite. As a woman, everything should be perky, especially her breasts. When reviewing this segment of the case study, it seems as though the woman is being judged by the American Kennel Club (AKC) to deem whether or not she is a purebred “show dog.” The segment, written by a male, appears to reinforce the qualities and criticisms that women judge most about themselves.

Scrutiny and judgment do not just occur among women. Men also judge women based on their looks. Men judge other men about how they look, too. Standards for beauty exist for men just as they do for women. However, Naomi Wolf implies that this judgment occurs due to the way that men are taught in sexual education. In *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf writes, “This asymmetry in sexual education maintains men’s power in the myth: They look at women’s bodies, evaluate, move on; their own bodies are not looked at, evaluated, and taken or

³⁰ “The Surgery-Free Way to Look 10 Years Younger.” *Age Reversers: Secrets to Looking Younger. New Beauty*. Fall 2011, Northeast ed.

passed over.”³¹ Truthfully, men’s bodies are not objectified in the same way which women’s bodies are objectified and scrutinized.

In *Men's Health*, there were several advertisements for supplements. For men, the ideal achievement of beauty is through the ability to be muscular, fit, and well-toned. The April 2012 edition of *Men's Fitness*³² largely focuses on muscle and fitness due to the nature of the magazine. In many ways, the magazine may be comparable to a body-builder’s magazine. It appears that the prevalent theme throughout the magazine is becoming “bulky,” or extremely muscular. In contrast, in *Men's Health*, there are advertisements for “All Whites,” or egg-whites, due to their association with protein.³³ Aside from a few supplement advertisements such as: *EAS Sports Nutrition*,³⁴ *Six Star Pro Nutrition*,³⁵ *N.O.-XPLODE™ 2.0*,³⁶ *BodyBuilding.com*,³⁷ *Hydroxycut*,³⁸ and *Dymatize*,³⁹ there are only advertisements for cars, beer, razors, shoes, watches, and *Men's Health* itself.

The magazine contains a large amount of advertisements for cars, for Nissan in particular, including a two-page advertisement for the Nissan LEAF™ where Ryan Reynolds appears on the first page, with a caption stating, “Ryan Reynolds performs well on-screen and off by maintaining a healthy, environmentally-conscious lifestyle, and he relies on clean, efficient energy to

³¹ Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002, 152.

³² *Men's Fitness*. Apr. 2012.

³³ “Crystal Farms, All Whites.” Advertisement. *Men's Health* January/February 2012:55.

³⁴ “EAS Sports Nutrition.” Advertisement. *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 39.

³⁵ “Six Star Pro Nutrition: Professional Strength Whey Protein PLUS” Advertisement. Advertisement. *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 49.

³⁶ “N.O.-XPLODE™ 2.0.” Advertisement. *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 63.

³⁷ “BodyBuilding.com.” Advertisement. *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 39.

³⁸ “Hydroxycut.™” Advertisement. *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 85.

³⁹ “Dymatize.®” Advertisement. *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 89.

keep him going.”⁴⁰ Men are told to be strong and muscular, and that is well understood through these advertisements. The articles tell men to be healthy—for important reasons such as preventing diabetes. But there is no mention of how they should shape their eyebrows, or pamper or primp in any particular way. The only slight mention of pampering, which they refer to as “grooming,” is an article about skin protection and maintenance.⁴¹ Among this, the article mentions applying sunscreen and face washes—which are not particularly difficult regimens.

However, *Men’s Health* does more than just focus on how only men *should* look. It also focuses on how women should look, and how women should act. The magazine takes several beautiful women and asks them for sex tips, which are usually generalized across the entire population of women. In a demoralizing way, these women say things that “turn them on,” almost in a revolting manner. In the “Your Year in Sex”⁴² article in the January/February 2012 issue of *Men’s Health*, they firstly show somewhat subordinate and exposed images of an actress, Sarah Shahi, of *Fairly Legal*. Before any actual in-depth article, the magazine viewer sees a double-page photograph of Shahi laying on her back, with her pelvis up, wearing nothing more than a pair of lacy underwear, a lacy bra, a garters, and thigh-high stockings.⁴³ The image is shot in black-and-white. Most startling, however, is the quote that is on the main upper-left corner of the first page, where Shahi states, “As much as men like to think they’re in

⁴⁰ “Nissan LEAF™.” Advertisement. *Men’s Health* January/February 2012: 80-81.

⁴¹ Nygaard, Sandra. “Stop Time.” *Men’s Health* January/February 2012: 66.

⁴² Piercey, Naomi. “Your Year In...Sex.” *Men’s Health* January/February 2012: 120-123.

⁴³ White, James. “Your Year In...Sex.” *Men’s Health* January/February 2012: 120-122. Photograph.

charge, it's really women who run the game."⁴⁴ This beautiful woman states that she is "in charge." The message states that it is okay to engage in sexual acts simply because one woman says that *all* women are in charge, thus implying that women must like the types of sex that men choose.

Shahi's comments continue onto the next page, and under a sub-heading, "try new scripts" she writes, "I've had lots of kinds of sex, from angry sex to sweet sex to wild sex."⁴⁵ Then, beauty becomes sexy. The sexual subordination of "angry sex" associates sexuality with violence. Women are unable to divide beauty and sexuality as separate entities. If a woman is not a sexual entity, she surely is not a beautiful one either.

Next, there is a brief article on "What Women Find Sexy,"⁴⁶ the woman featured in the article is also featured on the issue of *Women's Health* for the same exact month. Who is this woman? Marisa Miller. Marisa Miller, best-known as a model for Victoria's Secret, is featured in the January/February 2012 issue of both *Women's Health* and *Men's Health*. So, of course, the woman who is chosen for this article is one who represents an unrealistic image of beauty. However, it is constructed through the male point of view once again. The man finds Marisa Miller attractive, and therefore, she is able to provide the answers to questions about women. Presenting men with these false representations of women distorts the way that men look at women. It not only alters the way that men think of sexuality, but also of beauty. When men look at Shahi or Miller, and see that these

⁴⁴ Piercey, Naomi. "Your Year In...Sex." *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 120.

⁴⁵ Piercey, Naomi. "You Year In...Sex." *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 123.

⁴⁶ "What Women Find Sexy" *Men's Health* January/February 2012: 46.

women are beautiful, it causes them to scrutinize women who are anything less than supermodels. Therefore, men create standards for beauty that women then interpret. Men constantly tell women that they are not beautiful enough, and that women, therefore, remain inadequate.

Marisa Miller is presented in *Women's Health* as the sage who knows everything about how to live a sexier life, because, in a man's eyes, she is beautiful. She is essentially revered as the "know it all" because she is a sex symbol. The unattainable image of beauty falsely represents women as a whole, and shows men what it takes to have a "beautiful woman," therefore also creating an unrealistic idea of what *all* women want. Men then have these expectations for women, often scrutinizing women's beliefs, actions, and looks. Therefore, women have a negative self-concept, and women, in turn, are subjected to criticism by men. The female body is critiqued by men and women alike; the feelings of inadequacy that result from this scrutiny often keep women in a position of subordination. Male mass-media is covered with images of women who represent unattainable images of beauty. Due to this, men find *only* these women beautiful, and essentially worship women like this, unaware that these are completely fabricated images of beauty. Thus, men treat women in demoralizing ways if they do not look like this. The insecure woman then strives to achieve the look which the man finds attractive. The men's magazine shows unrealistic images of women, the women's magazine tells women that they should look this way in order to be beautiful. Ultimately, this standard causes the majority of women to be lacking and images of beauty are indistinguishable from images of sex.

It is most interesting to make a comparison between the magazines *Women's Health* and *Men's Health*, from the January/February 2012 issues. In *Women's Health*, the article "The Secret to Living a Sexier Life" features Marisa Miller's take on living a sexier life. The article starts by saying "Model and actress Marisa Miller didn't get that body by riding the couch and munching on cheese curls. She works hard to look this hot! Take your health, fitness, and relationship to the next level by following her advice for getting everything you want."⁴⁷ The article focuses on a few different things, but especially on health tips, revealing Marisa's "stay-slim strategies." Miller is a 5'8" blonde. When the reader thinks about her body, and then sees the dieting tricks and several exercises and transformations that she could do for her body, she *does* feel inadequate. The reader seeks out information in order to see how she could embody these characteristics of beauty. Because men find Miller beautiful, women strive to look like her, and are told that she doesn't just sit there—that she *works* for it. With this language, the female reader feels as though she isn't doing enough in order to fulfill the attributes of beauty when compared to this "5'8" blonde goddess." However, realistically, Miller is a model, and it is her full-time job to maintain her appearance.

In the Fall 2011 edition of *New Beauty*, an article titled "The Surgery-Free Way to Look 10 Years Younger" presents a variety of areas of the face which dictate a "youthful look." Dr. Bomer, the doctor who was consulted for this article, writes, "I never overdo the lips—I just like to give them a bit of volume so that they look very natural. If you

⁴⁷ Schaefer, Caroline. "The Secret to Living a Sexier Life." *Women's Health* January/February 2012: 36-39.

leave the lips out of the equation, the eyes automatically gravitate toward them.”⁴⁸ In the article, Dr. Bomer labels six areas that contribute to a youthful face: the forehead, the hollows of the cheeks, the area between the under eyes and the upper cheeks, the jawline, the outer corners of the mouth, and the lips.⁴⁹

Most terrifying, however, are the measures that the modern woman is willing to take in order to achieve the look of beauty. Plastic surgery has become the modern day means of achieving looks that items such as corsets would do. Corsets and other items of clothing would modify the body by creating the appearance of a thin waist, thus causing internal organ damage. Now, women take diet pills, over-exert themselves at the gym, and go under the knife in order to obtain results that render them beautiful. In the Fall 2011 edition of *New Beauty*, one article is particularly disturbing: “\$50,000... the price of the perfect body?” The article quotes, “For the most part, women are constantly on the quest for the perfect body. Some are dedicated to a “better body plan” that includes regular workouts and specialized diets; others stick to procedures and count noninvasive treatments and surgical procedures as the key to looking good. No matter how much, or little, you have to spend, we break down what it really costs to get the body of your dreams, and the multiple approaches to do so.”⁵⁰

Unfortunately, the magazine encourages women to take the extremes in order to look beautiful and strive for unattainable images of beauty. Suggested procedures include: a skin tightening treatment, a tummy tuck, a bust-enhancing product, a celebrity

⁴⁸ “The Surgery-Free Way to Look 10 Years Younger.” Age Reversers: Secrets to Looking Younger. *New Beauty*. Fall 2011, Northeast ed.: 92.

⁴⁹ “The Surgery-Free Way to Look 10 Years Younger.” Age Reversers: Secrets to Looking Younger. *New Beauty*. Fall 2011, Northeast ed.: 92.

⁵⁰ “\$50,000...the Price of the Perfect Body?.” Body. *New Beauty*. Fall 2011, Northeast ed.: 138-148. Print.

trainer, and a delivery diet. As you flip through the pages, however, one must understand that they focus on specific areas. For the “perfect butt” there are three suitable options: liposuction, fat transfer, and a “butt-building workout.”⁵¹ Next, the magazine focuses on a “tight tummy.” Suggestions? Women should either go for one or more of the following options: personal training (at a cost of \$20,000), a tummy tuck (\$10,000), a skin tightening treatment (\$500), toning serum (\$56), or a delivery diet (\$14,000).⁵² For breasts? One could get a breast lift (\$7,000), a good-fitting bra (\$60+), or breast implants (\$8,000).⁵³ The magazine supports the idea that women are not beautiful; women are lacking, women are inadequate.

In the Spring/Summer 2011 edition of *New Beauty*, there is also an emphasis on the “perfect body.” With a circle surrounding a woman who is stretching, there are terms such as: tighter tummy, sexier breasts, firmer butt, thinner thighs. All of these concerns with the female body were also addressed above. The article says, “Improving our bodies seems to be at the top of almost every woman’s to-do list. And, while some of us opt for more invasive procedures that garner permanent results, others choose to rely on diet and exercise to make a drastic change. Whatever path you choose, remarkable changes can be made. When one plan doesn’t produce your desired results, know that there are always other options available to help you achieve the body of your dreams.”⁵⁴ The article then goes through the “quick fixes,” or the procedures that could achieve “dramatic results,” even walking individuals through various types, shapes, and sizes of breast implants in detail. Ironically, these are all parts of the body that Naomi Wolf believes are eroticized.

⁵¹ “\$50,000...the Price of the Perfect Body?” Body. *New Beauty*. Fall 2011, Northeast ed.: 140-141. Print.

⁵² “\$50,000...the Price of the Perfect Body?” Body. *New Beauty*. Fall 2011, Northeast ed.: 142-143. Print.

⁵³ “\$50,000...the Price of the Perfect Body?” Body. *New Beauty*. Fall 2011, Northeast ed.: 144-145. Print.

⁵⁴ “Get a Perfect Body.” Body. *New Beauty*. Spring/Summer 2011, Northeast ed.: 178-189. Print.

When Wolf discusses the role of pornography in how women view themselves, she understands that women begin to believe that there are problems with their bodies, and as she states, “She may resent *Playboy* because she resents feeling ugly in sex—or, if “beautiful,” her body defined and diminished by pornography. It inhibits in her something she needs to live, and gives her the ultimate anaphrodisiac: the self critical sexual gaze.”⁵⁵ Therefore, women begin to critique parts of their body, “Breasts, thighs, buttocks, bellies; the most sexually central parts of women, whose “ugliness” therefore becomes an obsession.”⁵⁶

Even though the magazine does address some issues with *natural* health, such as spices and foods that could prevent inflammation,⁵⁷ the magazine concentrates on the fact that by taking these spices, you may achieve “beauty from the inside out.” Essentially, the magazine sells beauty in a way which causes the American woman to critique all of the flaws that already exist within her own body. The magazine also encourages younger women to get procedures done at an early age in order to prevent further deterioration in the future. In the article, “Can Fillers Slow the Aging Process,”⁵⁸ one doctor comments that “It’s been proven that fillers can slow aging.”⁵⁹ Another doctor asserts, “Sculptra® and Radiesse® stimulate collagen production by causing mild inflammation. A study by the University of Michigan showed the same effect with hyaluronic acid fillers: stimulating fibroblasts through injections wakes them up, causing the skin to make more

⁵⁵ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 149.

⁵⁶ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 150.

⁵⁷ “Boost Your Health and Skin with Spices.” Spring/Summer 2011, Northeast ed.: 50-58. Print.

⁵⁸ “Can Fillers Slow the Aging Process.” Over-Injected Celebrities. *New Beauty*. Spring/Summer 2011. Northeast ed.:102-103.

⁵⁹ “Can Fillers Slow the Aging Process.” Over-Injected Celebrities. *New Beauty*. Spring/Summer 2011. Northeast ed.:103.

collagen and act younger.”⁶⁰ Therefore, women are convinced that they must take necessary steps at an early age, or cause an intervention in order to prevent themselves from aging.

The media is presenting young women with a fear that if they do not act now, they may experience irreversible signs of aging. Naomi Wolf addresses the fears of aging in *The Beauty Myth* as a form of separation due to competition. Wolf writes, “Competition between women has made part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another. Youth and (until recently) virginity have been “beautiful” in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance.”⁶¹ Women are provided with the “beauty myth” in order to ensure that they will not feel confident enough to overcome their position of inferiority.

The magazine promotes surgical procedures. In each issue, there is a “*New Beauty* Expert Guide” which details several surgeons, including photographs of their work, qualifications, concentrations (specialties), and locations. There is a different guide for each region, so the magazine emphasizes how to get plastic surgery in a good way: a “natural-looking” way. Not only does the magazine mention that plastic surgery happens, it presents a full line of surgeons who are willing to make the “quick fix.” Not only is this providing women with the plasticized version of beauty, but it is instructing them that, if they are feeling insecure, they should seriously consider plastic surgery. Often, these procedures cost exorbitant amounts of money, cause serious pain, and sometimes leave the patient disfigured or with unfavorable results. In men’s magazines, there is not a

⁶⁰ “Can Fillers Slow the Aging Process?” Over-Injected Celebrities. *New Beauty*. Spring/Summer 2011. Northeast ed.:103.

⁶¹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 14.

mention of this. Women are severely scrutinized, and because the image of beauty is associated with power, women feel that they must become beautiful, based on America's standards, in order to be taken seriously or achieve an advanced position in the career track of their choice.

Women are taught that confidence comes with beauty. In a recent commercial airing in late 2011 through 2012, singer Jennifer Hudson states, "I was strong before Weight Watchers, but I'm stronger with it. I believe Weight Watchers can do the same for you. I believe you have more power than you think you do. I believe because it works."⁶² Although people lose weight for a variety of reasons, this commercial and print advertisement assures women that they will be "stronger" if they lose weight. Once more, an image of beauty is linked to an image of power. The viewer is taught that weight loss, body image, and beauty are indicative of success. Women are falsely told that if they become more attractive, they will become more powerful.

Another example where advertisers link beauty with power is in a Kenneth Cole advertisement in the March 2012 edition of *InStyle* magazine. The advertisement quotes, "Beware of naked ambition. Few seem to care about apathy, many are questioning the answers, revolting is now appealing, and movements are being started...one step at a time. How you see the world depends on how you look. –Kenneth Cole."⁶³ When observing this advertisement, it is evident that the entire background is pavement. To set the context, the woman appears to be walking through a city. She is wearing a business suit, holding a clutch, and sunglasses; she appears confident. The message: beauty affects

⁶² "More from Jennifer." *Jennifer's Weight Watchers Story*. Weight Watchers, 2012. Web. 06 Mar. 2012.

⁶³ "Kenneth Cole." Advertisement. *InStyle* Mar. 2012: 52-53. Print.

the way that you see the world. If a woman does not have confidence that comes with beauty, then she is unable to see the world in a favorable way. Perhaps, the advertisement suggests that a woman may struggle if she is not beautiful.

In comparison to *New Beauty*, advertisements and articles in *InStyle* are not focused solely on youth serums, injectables, and plastic surgery websites. However, a few still exist. *InStyle* focuses more on fashion, which is apparent through its advertisements. Many of the advertisements are for specific designers including: Dianne von Furstenberg, Lacoste, Dolce & Gabbana, 7 for all Mankind, bebe, as well as several others. However, there are a few advertisements for filler such as Radiesse®,⁶⁴ as well as another filler, Juvéderm XC®.⁶⁵

However, one advertisement in particular was extremely fascinating. Everything about the advertisement appeared “un-lady like” to say the least. In a recent Lacoste advertisement in *InStyle*,⁶⁶ there is a woman sitting on a stool, she has somewhat of a gap-tooth, and her entire top is covered to the neckline: her coat is covering her neck to a point where you cannot see her neck at all. Her demeanor is somewhat interesting. She has her hand only partially covering her mouth, and is yawning. Her legs are split, but her shorts are covering long enough as to not show any of her body parts. She is clutching a bag which is placed on her lap, with her right arm over it. The advertisement was most interesting because usually women are shown in a somewhat vulnerable or sexualized light. In this particular Lacoste article, which writes, “Unconventional Chic, Lacoste,” the

⁶⁴ “Radiesse.®” *InStyle* Mar. 2012: 325. Print.

⁶⁵ “Juvéderm XC®” *Instyle* Mar. 2012: 395. Print.

⁶⁶ “Lacoste: Unconventional Chic.” *InStyle* Mar. 2012: 157. Print.

reader sees a different interpretation of the woman in advertising. The woman is posed in a fairly masculine way.

In magazines, advertisements, and other forms of mass-media, it is also understood that a large component of American beauty is rooted in sexuality. In advertising, it is evident that many of the women place themselves in vulnerable situations. In an advertisement in *InStyle* magazine, there is an advertisement for “Missoni” where a woman is sitting with her legs open.⁶⁷ The woman has a rose in her mouth, and is sitting on the floor, apparently looking happy. After seeing this article, I understood that the underlying suggestion for this article was blatantly sexual. When Catharine MacKinnon critiques *Playboy* magazine, she writes,

"To say that *Playboy* presents the natural beauty of women's bodies and promotes the sexual liberation of women--here I draw on *Playboy* itself, which says it does these things--reveals a liberal concept of the relation between nature and freedom. It starts with the idea that people, even people who as a group are poor and powerless, do what they do voluntarily, so that women who pose for *Playboy* are there by their own free will. Forget the realities of women's sexual/economic situation. When women express our free will, we spread our legs for a camera."⁶⁸

Essentially, *Playboy* asserts that women are “free” and “powerful” and “sexually liberated” because they become subordinate and *beautiful* by revealing their exposed bodies. A woman is never more vulnerable than she is when she is naked. In this instance, the body is being publicly viewed as an object of sex—even as the “natural body” depicts the woman as subordinate. She is bare, exposed, and vulnerable. The message conveys that women are beautiful if they are sexually available. The message is not just illustrated in *Playboy*; advertisements everywhere use naked women, even in

⁶⁷ “Missoni.” Advertisement. *InStyle* Mar. 2012: 99. Print.

⁶⁸ Mackinnon, Catharine A. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1987. Print.

women's magazines and on prime time TV in order to show that if this product is purchased, the woman purchasing the item could be beautiful, too.

If the woman is sexual, she is beautiful. This message ultimately undermines women's sexual liberation, mainly because this form of alleged "sexual liberation" is supposed to be attributed to all women. As Naomi Wolf writes, "The sexual revolution promoted the discovery of female sexuality; "beauty pornography"—which for the first time in women's history artificially links a commoditized "beauty" directly and explicitly to sexuality—invaded the mainstream to undermine women's new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth."⁶⁹ This model not only affects those who wish to live by this model, but it serves as an understanding of beauty for *all* women. If natural beauty can be expressed through nudity, and "sexual liberation" may be achieved, then women must be sexualized in order to be beautiful—or to be able to make their own decisions about sexual desire.

The American woman is constantly told that her vulnerabilities could lead her to a position of power. By dishonestly convincing the American woman that nudity is an expression of sexual liberation, she begins to feel as though these otherwise vulnerable attributes could provide her with the opportunity to gain a position of power in society. As the woman compares herself to the images in *Playboy* and the ubiquitous bombardment of mass media advertisements, she begins to understand that maybe she *could* achieve sexual liberation if only she was beautiful, and understands that beauty is rooted in the way that she showcases her body through overt sexuality.

⁶⁹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 11.

Unattainable images of beauty cause women to feel inadequate. As a woman *feels* inadequate, she acts in ways which are demoralizing and degrading. Ultimately, the woman compromises her capabilities as she is constantly told that she is not “good enough.” Women wish to alter their appearance because they are taught that it will heighten their confidence. However, if presented with unrealistic, unattainable images of beauty, women will maintain their position of subordination. The inability to feel confident in daily life ensures that women will be held in a subordinate position, and men will remain in a dominant one. Not only does the image of beauty cause women to fixate on their flaws, it also distracts them from thriving in other facets of life such as education, work, and liberation. Women become bound by the societal standards of beauty, and learn to ask for nothing more than that.

Women who constantly strive for “excellence” in terms of beauty become engrossed with beauty culture, making their image and their actions inseparable entities. The simulated replicas of women that are presented through magazines and media present obstacles for women to overcome. Wolf comments, “Most urgently, women’s identity must be premised upon our ‘beauty’ so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air.”⁷⁰ Because the woman is told that success may be determined by her ability to be beautiful, she constantly undermines her capabilities, exacerbating her already negative self-concept. How could this change?

Women mustn’t entertain the idea that the artificial images in magazines are *real*. Women should not judge, critique, or compete with other women. Self-criticism

⁷⁰ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 14.

contributes to the concept of the American woman as inadequate, as does the criticism of other women. Negative self-concept stems largely from the inability for women to address the fact that the American magazine *is not* our friend. If women continually critique features on their bodies, they essentially ascertain that women *are* lacking. Women secure a position inferior to the American male by amusing the idea that beauty is an outlet and tool for success.

Chapter Four: Sexuality

Popular media dictates sexual experiences and identities in American culture. Prescribed images and expectations sexuality are ever-present in American society. What are the images portrayed? The images and messages implicitly state that women remain subordinate to men and should continue to give into the needs and demands of men. Women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* affirm that it is the woman's duty to sustain a relationship with her partner. Furthermore, popular women's magazines suggest that the only suitable relationship for a woman is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship.

How do the various outlets of American media contribute to prescribed roles of sexuality? If women are consistently instructed how to please men, is there any sense of female agency in regards to sexuality? Women are not cognizant of the fact that their views on relationships and sexuality are constructed solely from the male perspective. Catharine MacKinnon's *Feminism Unmodified* elaborates on the ambiguity of female desire. Can American women convey images of sexuality independent from those represented by the media? Do recurrent themes exist between popular television and media (magazines, advertisements, newspapers)? If so, how do these outlets contribute to or shape the way that the American woman views her own sexuality?

In *Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin alludes to the concept of the sexy woman as powerful in most regards. Benjamin writes, "The "sexy" woman—an image that intimidates women whether or not they strive to conform to it—is sexy, but as object, not as subject. She expresses not so much *her* desire as her pleasure in being desired; what she enjoys is her capacity to evoke desire in the other, to attract. Her power does not

reside in her own passion, but in her acute desirability. Neither the power of the mother nor that of the sexy woman can, as in the case of the father, be described as the power of the subject.”⁷¹

Desperate Housewives and *Weeds* are two television series which present a variety of relationships and sexual encounters. In some of these sexual encounters, the parties involved are married. In other situations throughout the two series respectively, the parties involved in sexual acts are single, widowed, or having an affair. Not only is it important to understand actual events that occur in regards to sexual encounters, but how the viewer feels in response to these sexual encounters. In these series, how is sexuality used to establish and sustain relationships? Which encounters are seen as acceptable? Acceptable practices of sexuality in America undoubtedly arise from incessant exposure to popular television and media.

In Susan Douglas’ *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, she writes that *Ladies Home Journal* reinforced the stereotype that a woman should be the one to take care of the relationship. Douglas notes, “Here my mother’s generation learned that women could not ‘argue about politics and religion,’ or be ‘good at cracking wise and making pointed remarks.’⁷²” continues, “Every column, month in and month out, drilled into its readers that ‘the happiness of the marriage and the home depends primarily on her’—the wife.”⁷³ Here, Douglas refers to 1960s America. While speaking about Jackie Kennedy, Douglas suggests that being more educated was seen as rare, and honorably, but “This was important because women’s magazines were still

⁷¹ Benjamin, *Bonds of Love*, 89.

⁷² Douglas, Susan J., *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995, 52-53.

⁷³ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. 53.

telling girls that the way to land a man was to pretend you were dumber than he was.”⁷⁴ Isn't this still true? Teens and young ladies are constantly taking quizzes about love and relationships, reading into horoscopes about how to “get the right man,” and revealing their looks over personality.

Douglas discusses the monologue as represented in film, or the voiceover of an individual's thoughts. She explains how the voice of the “authentic female” became heard and “the female of the species could now be preoccupied with what she allegedly cared about most: herself, and finding Mr. Right.”⁷⁵ In addition to taking responsibility for their children, women are responsible for ensuring that relationships with spouses do not fall apart.

Women's magazines continue to degrade women, and ensure that these women are responsible for their husbands, and must tend to the needs of their husbands before even considering taking care of themselves. The ideals represented in popular magazines and media reveal prescribed gender roles associated with the past, thus suggesting they haven't actually been properly addressed. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf asserts,

The new wave of post-women's movement magazines gained ground from the anxiety that such caricature provoked in achieving women. Nonetheless, the new wave—initiated in 1965 by the revamped *Cosmopolitan*—is indeed revolutionary compared with earlier service magazines that Freidan had attacked. Their formula includes an aspirational, individualist, can-do tone that says that you should be your best and nothing should get in your way; a focus on personal and sexual relationships that affirms female ambition and erotic appetite; and sexualized images of female models that, though only slightly subtler than those aimed at men, are meant to convey sexual liberation. But the formula must also include an element that contradicts and then undermines the overall prowoman fare: In diet, skin care, and surgery features, it sells women the deadliest version of the beauty myth money can buy.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 41.

⁷⁵ Douglas, Susan J., *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010, 102-103.

⁷⁶ Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002, 69.

Cosmopolitan, a popular magazine geared toward teen women and young adults, illustrates ideas of popular American sexuality. The magazine emphasizes how important it is to “please your man.” What else does this say about American sexuality? American women are expected not only to be subordinate to men, but also to compromise their desires and needs in order to please men. The magazine emphasizes what is important in relationships: sex. In the April 2010 edition of *Cosmopolitan*, the front cover mentions phrases such as “Easy, Fun Ways to Fall More in Love with Your Man.”⁷⁷ In this article, there are several subtitles all suggesting what you can do for him in order to “Fall More in Love with Your Man.” Some suggestions: “Secretly do his most dreaded chore...giving him a hand behind the scenes boosts his mood and feelings for you more than doing it out in the open,”⁷⁸ “While he’s showering, steal his robe and towel...and anything else he can cover up with. Love thrives on sexy, mischievous deeds.”⁷⁹ The suggestion implies that being sexy, flirty, and proving to him that you want to be sexually engaged with him will make you fall more in “love.” Again, the woman is expected to act sexually in order to gain the attention of her partner.

Douglas has examined the topic of sexuality, and understood that women achieve what she sarcastically refers to as “true power,” control over men through beauty. Douglas affirms, “True power here has nothing to do with economic independence or professional achievement (that’s a given): it has to do with getting men to lust after you and other women to envy you. Enlightened sexism is especially targeted to girls and women and emphasizes that now that they “have it all,” they should focus the bulk of

⁷⁷ Rush, Colleen. "Fun, Easy Ways to Fall More in Love." *Cosmopolitan* Apr. 2010: 115-17.

⁷⁸ Rush, Colleen. "Fun, Easy Ways to Fall More in Love." *Cosmopolitan* Apr. 2010: 116.

⁷⁹ Rush, Colleen. "Fun, Easy Ways to Fall More in Love." *Cosmopolitan* Apr. 2010: 116.

their time and energy on their appearance, pleasing men, being hot, competing with other women, and shopping.”⁸⁰

Next, *Cosmo* suggests, “Slide your hands down the front of his pants and graze his goods when you can tell he’s had a hellish day. In those moments, he really doesn’t want to answer questions...but your caress still sends the message that you’re picking up his vibe.”⁸¹ Now, the magazine suggests that sexuality over communication is important. The woman should not ask questions, but rather communicate using sexuality. Each suggestion in this article explicitly entails a service for the man. Not a single reference is made to how these could improve the relationship in any other way but by using the female to please a male sexually, thus implying that the use of sex will allow you to keep your man engaged, at least for a while. According to this article, women are supposed to service men, to boost their self-esteem and confidence, and make their lives easier in any way possible. The woman is unable to overcome the overwhelming affects of male dominance, even in the 21st century.

In our society, sexuality appears to be the base for everything, which is not surprising as contemporary television shows focus on relationships as the main plot. Musicians, actors, and several other women use their sexuality to achieve financial and professional success. To clarify, the word “actress” was not selected due to the association that it has to being “lesser than.” *Cosmopolitan* essentially renders the American woman an object of male desire.

⁸⁰ Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, 10.

⁸¹ Rush, Colleen. "Fun, Easy Ways to Fall More in Love." *Cosmopolitan* Apr. 2010: 117.

Furthermore, *Cosmopolitan* fails to recognize the “queer” population. In this chapter, the word “queer,” signifies relationships (sexual, emotional) that do not adhere to heteronormative views of sexuality, love, or relationships. Often, relationships that deviate from the norm are avoided. *Cosmopolitan* is a magazine for women, but disregards a queer viewing audience. Based on the featured articles throughout *Cosmopolitan*, the woman as a member of society is unable to be anything but heterosexual. When looking through articles and noting the front covers of magazines, it is evident that women are only expected to be in relationships with men. Apparently, contemporary society negates queer relationships including, but not limited to: polygamy, homosexuality, and bisexuality. If the magazine truly intends to advertise to all women, it certainly reassures the idea that queer relationships are wrong, and that all women should be in monogamous, heterosexual relationships.

The July 2010 edition of *Cosmopolitan* features an article written by Bethany Heitman titled, “Why More Girls Are Kissing Girls.”⁸² In the author’s response, she first mentions the celebrities who have admitted that they in fact are “bisexual.” Again, the media is establishing how women think introspectively. Heitman discusses how a woman “opening up” about her bisexuality is progressive. However, none of these women prove to be in a relationship with a woman. Heitman the author consults scientist Stephanie Sanders, PhD, from the Kinsey Institute. Sanders claims, “There’s no exact definition of what bisexual means, so it’s really up to each individual.”⁸³ Heitman instructs the reader to experiment to find out if she is actually interested in another woman. The author seems to discuss the subject in a way that deems bisexuality or relationships with women as

⁸² Heitman, Bethany. “Why More Girls Are Kissing Girls.” *Cosmopolitan* Jul. 2010: 32.

⁸³ Heitman, Bethany. “Why More Girls Are Kissing Girls.” *Cosmopolitan* Jul. 2010: 32.

negative when she writes, “Schedule some time with a trusted friend to help you hash out your feelings. If you’re truly freaked out by your feelings for another woman, you may want to talk to a therapist about it.”⁸⁴ So, the author suggests that this is an issue that requires therapy, thus suggesting that it may be seen as a *problem*. The article also looks at “his perspective,” writing, “Did he think it was hot or was he bummed?”⁸⁵ The article began by suggesting that bisexuality is becoming more and more prevalent and acceptable. However, the article does not discuss the possibility of these women as lesbians, or having relationships solely with women. It appears that the centralized focus of this article shifts, as it discusses whether or not “your man” will feel intimidated by your sexuality. In reality, the main title of the article is never actually answered, but pondered. Shouldn’t women have the ability to decide whether or not they wish to be in relationships with women?

Popular television reinforces the sexual dynamic of the man in power. When the man is not in power, he feels threatened. In *Desperate Housewives*, the episode “There is No Other Way” recognizes the threat that a man faces when the roles are reversed. Lynette becomes Tom’s boss, which is threatening as he is not the “bread-winner.” In a specific scene, Tom and Lynette are about to have sex, and Tom misinterprets Lynette trying to “get on top” as Lynette trying to take control. Tom becomes overly defensive of the situation. As Lynette thought that her placing herself on top of Tom would be a way to “please” Tom, she did not understand why he was so upset. Tom angrily says, “You were bracing. You were bracing with your leg. I was trying to lie on top of you, and you were bracing yourself against the mattress so you didn’t have to get on your back. Try and

⁸⁴ Heitman, Bethany. “Why More Girls Are Kissing Girls.” *Cosmopolitan* Jul. 2010: 32.

⁸⁵ Heitman, Bethany. “Why More Girls Are Kissing Girls.” *Cosmopolitan* Jul. 2010: 32.

deny it. Try and deny it. You can't."⁸⁶ Evidently, Tom feels as though his masculinity is threatened, expresses that he feels as though he has no control over his life at work or in his relationship with Lynette. Later in the episode, Tom says, "I have been giving you a lot of grief lately about being the boss. But it's just hard for a guy to feel like he's not in charge of any part of his life."⁸⁷ Violence associated with masculinity achieves the idea that women are forced to objectification through male supremacy; women become sexual objects for men to dominate in order to assure themselves of their masculinity.

In the episode "Lovely,"⁸⁸ of Season Six, Tom instructs Lynette to finish the laundry. Lynette tells Tom to finish it if it is so important and throws his clothes at him. Lynette then sees that there is a jewelry box where the clothes were, containing a ring that the two had seen at an antique shop. Later in the episode, Lynette finds Parker in his room with three of his friends, looking out the window with binoculars. When Lynette enters, the boys say that they have to go to school. Lynette takes the binoculars and sees what the boys were looking at. Much to Lynette's dismay, she discovers that Parker and his friends were looking at Robin, the stripper that moved in with Susan after Susan told her to quit her job at the strip club. Lynette walks over to the house and asks Robin to close the curtains when she showers because the boys were receiving a "free show." Then, Robin tells Lynette that Parker is not so innocent, and that he asked Robin to have sex with her. When she refused, Parker offered her money to sleep with him.

⁸⁶ "There is No Other Way." *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Bruce Zimmerman. Dir. Randall Zisk. ABC, 2006. DVD.

⁸⁷ "There is No Other Way." *Desperate Housewives*.

⁸⁸ "Lovely." *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Sixth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry, and David Shladweiler. Dir. David Warren. ABC, 2010. DVD.

In shock, Lynette returns home where she and Tom have a conversation with Parker about sex. Tom makes a suggestion to Parker that he doesn't have to pay and that when he meets the right girl he will have sex. When the conversation ends, Tom asks Lynette "Do you think he bought it?" Lynette responds by saying "Bought what?" Tom then states, "Guys always pay for sex in some way: dinner, flowers, antique rings." Lynette replies, "Whoa, Whoa. You think that is the only reason we are having sex tonight?" Tom responds, "Of course not, it's our anniversary. It's a given, like turkey on Thanksgiving. Although I am hoping the ring gets me an upgrade from missionary." Lynette tells Tom that she will not be having sex with him. Later, when Tom tries to have sex with Lynette, Lynette says, "We're not having sex, Tom."

Lynette, still upset about what Tom previously said, asserts, "Do you really think women only sleep with men if they buy them things?" Tom replies "No, I think supermodels sleep with 80 year-old millionaires because they love to hear stories about when bread was five cents a loaf." Lynette demands an apology from Tom because she "is not a model" and he "is not a millionaire," and she found his comment extremely offensive. Tom then goes into detail about their first few dates, and mentions how it was only on the third date, where Tom spent two-hundred dollars on dinner that Lynette "put out." Lynette then corrects Tom, stating that the reason she had sex with him that night was because he brought over a light bulb and changed the light bulb in her apartment because it was in a bad area, and he cared about her. She said that all he had to do was to show her that he cared.

Lynette then agrees to have sex with Tom. Again, Lynette appears to have sex with Tom because it is his "anniversary gift." Tom previously suggested that

“anniversary sex” was akin to “Thanksgiving turkey.” What message does this convey? Women are expected to engage in sex regardless of whether or not they want to. Additionally, the episode suggests that women are motivated solely by material objects. Because women are manipulated by material goods, men prove to be dominant. Women are seen as subordinate, giving into the demands of men merely to satisfy superficial desires.

Gabrielle Solis’ relationships illustrate the use of sex in trade for financial support. Gabrielle, involved in three relationships throughout the show, evidently chooses two men, who are both wealthy, and adorn her with jewels, clothes, and the “champagne lifestyle,” so to speak. In the first episode, we are introduced to Gabrielle Solis, who appears to be a high-maintenance woman, who is solely married to Carlos Solis for his money. Gabrielle, a beautiful woman, is the “sexy” woman that Benjamin describes in *Bonds of Love*. Gabrielle gains power through her overt sexuality. The episode narrates, “Since her modeling days in New York, Gabrielle had developed a taste for rich food and rich men. Carlos, who worked in mergers and acquisitions, proposed on their third date.”⁸⁹ Gabrielle often presents a façade in front of her friends, as though she is happy with her life. However, Gabrielle is lonely.

Gabrielle is married to Carlos, and throughout the series the couple separates and gets back together. Gabrielle frequently becomes bored and frustrated, feeling alone as her suitors are successful, but are also incredibly busy. Gaby alludes that her relationship with Carlos started off more intimate, but now he provides her with material possessions

⁸⁹ “Pilot.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and David Schulner. Dir. John David Coles. ABC, 2005. DVD.

to make up for time lost. In the second episode of Season One, Carlos comes home late from a dinner, and throws jewelry at Gabrielle. Gabrielle says, “You know, Carlos, I didn’t marry you so I could have dinner by myself six nights a week. You know how bored I was today? I came this close to actually cleaning the house.”⁹⁰ Carlos replies, “When a man buys a woman expensive jewelry, there are many things he may want in return. For future reference, conversation ain’t one of them. Hey, that was a joke.”⁹¹ Carlos’ comment echoes *Cosmopolitan*’s suggestion to not engage in conversation, but to satisfy the man sexually.⁹²

Carlos, often over-protective of Gabrielle as she is a “beautiful woman,” appears to be somewhat of a father figure. From a psychological standpoint, Benjamin might understand this as a relationship that makes up for her loss of having a father figure in her life. Benjamin quotes, “Such early disappointment may well lead to relationships of subordination or passivity—with or without sexual enjoyment. Unfortunately, this solution has the cast of normalcy for women. But we must note that women seek a form of reparation in these relationships. They are drawn to ideal love as a second chance, an opportunity to attain, at long last, a father-daughter identification in which their own desire and subjectivity can finally be recognized and realized.”⁹³ From this, we may understand why Gabrielle puts herself in subordinate and dependent positions. Gaby’s character may identify with the following statement: “The belief that the man will

⁹⁰ “Ah, But Underneath.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2005. DVD.

⁹¹ “Ah, But Underneath.” *Desperate Housewives*.

⁹² Rush, Colleen. “Fun, Easy Ways to Fall More in Love.” *Cosmopolitan*. Apr. 2010: 115-17.

⁹³ Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 116.

provide access to a world that is otherwise closed to her is one of the greatest motives in ideal love.”⁹⁴

Desperate, Gaby continues an affair with her gardener throughout Season One. Although married to Carlos, who is her provider, it is evident that she cares for John, and continues to care for John even after their illicit affair comes to an end. In the first episode, “Pilot,” Mary Alice Young narrates, “Gabrielle liked her Paella piping hot. However, her relationship with her husband was considerably cooler.”⁹⁵ In “Ah, But Underneath,” John, her gardener, selects a rose for her, mentioning that it is not just any rose, but that each petal was perfect. It is evident that John does not find this to be an insignificant, sexual relationship.⁹⁶ In Season Six, Gabrielle appears jealous and still feels affection for John Rowland after he begins to make passes at Gabrielle’s niece, Ana. Gabrielle realizes that she is in love with Carlos, or has cared for him, and sends John photo strips in order to show that she no longer has feelings for him, which the viewer may find hard to believe.⁹⁷

During Gaby’s separation from Carlos, Gabrielle meets a politician named Victor, who is wealthy, significantly older, and is able to provide her with a rich lifestyle. Once again, Gabrielle finds that he is never around, and she is upset—she begins cheating on Victor with her ex-husband, Carlos. However, Gabrielle and Victor separate once she overhears that Victor only married her in order to win the election as she was Latina, which was actually what Victor’s father intended. Due to the campaign, Victor becomes

⁹⁴ Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*, 116.

⁹⁵ “Pilot.” *Desperate Housewives*.

⁹⁶ “Ah, But Underneath.” *Desperate Housewives*.

⁹⁷ “The God-Why-Don’t-You-Love-Me Blues.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Sixth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Alexandra Cunningham. Dir. David Warren. ABC, 2010. DVD.

extremely busy and has no time for Gabrielle. He is continually traveling, and Gaby becomes frustrated by the fact that she is once again alone, and separates from Victor.

Over the course of several episodes of *Desperate Housewives*, the viewer learns of Gabrielle's tortured past; Gabrielle was raped by her stepfather at the age of fifteen. However, she never told her mother, Lucia, because she feared that her mother would never believe her. In "Thank You So Much," Carlos visits Gaby's mom at a hotel that Gaby dropped her off at. Carlos hopes to resolve the differences between Gabrielle and her mother, which revolved around the issue of sexual assault, for which Gabrielle was unable to forgive her mother. He mentions the incident, and Gabrielle's mother asserts that Gabrielle wanted to have sex with her stepfather. Lucia quotes, "She was always jealous of me. You don't know how many times I caught her wearing my shoes, trying on my jewelry and I'd scream at her to leave my things alone, but no, she wanted whatever I had. Then one night, she set her sights on Alejandro. Believe me, no one got raped."⁹⁸ Gabrielle's own mother did not believe that she was assaulted. In this instance, *Desperate Housewives* proves to heighten awareness of sexual assault, and issues revolving around the female. The woman is often seen as "asking for it." In this instance, Gabrielle's mother does not believe her, which does illustrate the disregard for acknowledging victims of sexual assault and rape.

Later in the series, Gabrielle returns to her hometown, where she grew up extremely poor. Her therapist suggests that it is important that Gaby confronts her past. More specifically, it is important that Gaby addresses the issue of sexual assault which

⁹⁸ "Thank You So Much." *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Dahvi Waller. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2006. DVD.

was so damaging. Gaby faces a nun who she once confided in, who also did not believe her. Gaby thus felt terrible about herself, and the sexual abuse was neither addressed nor prevented. Gabrielle, like most victims of sexual abuse, felt so embarrassed by the abuse and the way that others judged her by this. In *Feminism Unmodified*, Catharine MacKinnon addresses this issue in full, writing, “Very young women, and also older women, are afraid that they will be kicked out of the house. Women who have been victims of incest are particularly likely to feel this. Women also feel fear and despair of police, hospitals, and the legal system.”⁹⁹ MacKinnon believes that women do not report this rape because they fear that they will be ostracized, or that they will lose credibility. Although not all of the relationships in *Desperate Housewives* contribute to a positive understanding of women, Gabrielle’s situation reveals the truth about rape and sexual violence, which contributes to a positive aspect of the media. Additionally, the fact that her husband supports her through this traumatic event could open up a space for understanding in law, which is generally constructed through male dominance.

Bree’s character also gives into the demands of men as she wants to please Rex, her husband, even after learning that he had an affair. Rex had hired a prostitute to partake in some of the sexual activities that he was too embarrassed to ask his wife to partake in. Primarily, Rex was interested in sadomasochism. Rex suggests that he does not want Bree to judge him, which is why he will not ask her to partake in S&M; instead, he hires a prostitute. However, this is yet another act that stems largely male domination. MacKinnon asserts, “Subjection itself, with self determination ecstatically relinquished, is the content of women’s sexual desire and desirability. Women are there to be violated

⁹⁹ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified*, 82.

and possessed, men to violate and possess us...”¹⁰⁰ However, when speaking to her son, Andrew, Bree affirms, “Yes, I’m angry with him. I am going to divorce him. I may even marry someone else, but make no mistake about it, your father is, and always will be, the love of my life. He gave me the best eighteen-year marriage that I could have ever hoped for. For that, you will respect him.”¹⁰¹ In the end, Bree ends up engaging in sadomasochism in order to keep her relationship stable, and to prevent Rex from committing adultery. *Desperate Housewives* illustrates the vicissitudes that women endure in order to accommodate the needs of their sexual partners. More specifically, the series unintentionally underscores the difficulty of lacking agency over one’s own sexual desires. A woman finds sexual acts to be desirable merely because she knows of nothing other than what men find attractive. Thus, what men find attractive become the female standards of sexuality.

The woman is encouraged to stimulate the relationship. She is also told that she is the one who must step forward and take action to make a relationship work. Just as *Cosmopolitan* mentions how women should take steps to “Fall More in Love,”¹⁰² mainly reinforcing that women should make relationships work by “pleasing their men.” When Robin and Bree make a cake together, Robin states, “It must be tough having him in a wheelchair.” Bree replies, “Challenging.” Robin then continues, “They say you can get through anything if you have a solid marriage.” Then Bree pauses, suggesting that there are marital problems. Robin apologizes for prying. Robin says, “Look, my grandmother always said, if you want to save your marriage there’s only one room to do it in—the

¹⁰⁰ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified*, 172.

¹⁰¹ “Move On.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and David Schulner. Dir. John David Coles. ABC, 2005. DVD.

¹⁰² Rush, Colleen. “Fun, Easy Ways to Fall More in Love.” *Cosmopolitan* Apr. 2010: 117.

bedroom.” Bree replies, “It’s not about sex, it’s about closeness--we’ve lost our intimacy.” Robin retorts, “Honey, sex is how men get intimate.” Robin suggests that Bree should try to have sex with Orson or try to be visually stimulating in order to satisfy him. Again, it is evident that the woman’s purpose is to serve. Although the episode closes without the two having sex, it is evident that Bree was supposed to arouse Orson. Even if Bree did not want to engage in this form of sexual activity, she felt compelled to because she wished to sustain her marriage.¹⁰³ Bree takes part in sexual acts that are reminiscent of those represented in pornography—she wants to give Orson a lap dance because it is what “men find attractive.” Catharine MacKinnon argues, “...because, like all women, we inseparably *are* identified as women, the values of pornography are the values that rule our lives.”¹⁰⁴

All sexual encounters appear to result monogamous or long-term relationships, with the exception of Edie Britt’s sexual endeavors. In each instance, it is possible that the women of *Desperate Housewives* meet a man, have sex with him, and begin dating regularly. None of these women appear to have casual sex, with the exception of the neighborhood divorcée, Edie Britt.

Edie Britt is seen as promiscuous, and negatively so. Edie is seen as a threat, and is slighted, as the only single character whose sexual relationships do not result in long-term ones. The viewer sees that Edie is a misfit; the values which she maintains are not appropriate. Edie is continually judged by others. With the majority of the neighborhood against her, the viewer develops a negative perception of Edie as well. From one angle,

¹⁰³ “Lovely.” *Desperate Housewives*.

¹⁰⁴ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified*, 133.

the show may critique how women judge each other. Or, the series could simply reinforce the concept that a woman should not have the ultimate authority over her decisions in regards to sexuality. Women should not sleep around, or have sex with whomever they choose. Why? The concept of sleeping around is masculine. Women are not supposed to be able to sleep around, but men are.

Desperate Housewives also explores homosexual relationships. The episode “Free” focuses on the heteronormative homosexual relationship between Bob and Lee. More specifically, the couple appears to conform to the model of heterosexual relationships. In the episode, the two are making arrangements for their wedding ceremony, and begin to fight over an ice sculpture design. Bob, the masculine partner, wants to have a simple cherub. Lee, the feminine character, argues that ever since he was young, he wanted a castle with a moat around it.¹⁰⁵ *Desperate Housewives* normalizes gay relationships by establishing gender roles for each partner. Bob proves to be the “masculine” partner in the relationship. Bob, the bread-winning lawyer, is always nicely dressed and appears well-kept. Lee, on the other hand, evidently reveals emotional instability and immaturity, qualities usually associated with the female gender role. Lee is a real estate agent, and appears to be Bob’s feminine counterpart in their homosexual relationship. Does this relationship actually lead to an alternative understanding in media? *Desperate Housewives* acknowledges the gay relationship, but transforms it into a relationship that is no different than that of a heterosexual couple.

¹⁰⁵ “Free.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Fourth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Jeff Greenstein. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2008. DVD.

Furthermore, in “The Chase,¹⁰⁶” the sixteenth episode in Season Six, Gabrielle is forced to leave her house because her children get the chicken pox, a virus that she had not yet had. Carlos informs Gaby that, as an adult, the virus can be symptomatically more severe. During this time, Gaby catches a glimpse of the glamorous “gay lifestyle” where parties, nice clothing, and cocktails are ever present: a sharp contrast to her daily life as a mother. Carlos Solis calls to inform Gaby that her children no longer have the chicken pox, but Gaby pretends to have a stomach bug so that she can continue to stay at Bob and Lee’s home. Gaby is startled when she accidentally walks into a room to answer a call that is evidently a nursery. She then realizes that Bob and Lee want to be parents. Gaby feels as though she has neglected her own children, and soon returns home to her family.

What does this episode reveal about homosexual relationships? The episode reveals that on the surface, there is a “gay” lifestyle which involves the stereotypic parties, drinking, and socializing, but that Bob and Lee *really* wish to adapt to heterosexual norms, and take on the roles of heterosexual couples. Essentially, the homosexual couple is living by acceptable standards of sexuality; the partners each adhere to normal societal standards of sexuality, even if the two *are* gay.

Another gay character that we see in *Desperate Housewives* is Vern, Gabrielle Solis’ personal stylist. In the show, he speaks with a “flamboyant” accent, and his occupation coincides with the American stereotype of careers for homosexual males. Additionally, in the episode “Beautiful Girls,” Vern asks Gaby to help him with schooling for female beauty pageant preparation, thus reinforcing that gay men have

¹⁰⁶ “The Chase.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Sixth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry, John Pardee, and Joey Murphy. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2010. DVD.

careers in the beauty industry, or clothing industry. *Desperate Housewives* reinforces the popular misconception of homosexual lifestyle, rendering Vern to be a flamboyant gay. In a way, this image in media negatively alters the perception of gays to the American public, and associates the homosexual male with attributes such as limited intelligence, similar to the depictions of housewives. The show repeatedly illustrates gay men as flamboyant, with a few limited exceptions.

Desperate Housewives appears to take a progressive step when we learn that Andrew, the pot-smoking, trouble-making adolescent is gay in the episode “Impossible.”¹⁰⁷ Zack Young decides to have a party on Wisteria Lane. When Susan fears that her daughter might be at Zach Young’s party against her wishes, Susan goes to Zack’s house, and proceeds to his backyard. She then walks by the pool, and fears that Julie and Zack are in the pool naked together when she sees a pair of boxers. Susan realizes that she is mistaken, and that Andrew is in the pool with another boy, Justin. Justin and Andrew are caught kissing in the pool. Andrew screams out “I’m not gay,” making it evident that still, Andrew’s sexuality is clearly unacceptable, especially in his community.

In the episode “I Know Things Now,”¹⁰⁸ Andrew is once again seen engaging in a deviant relationship. Throughout the show, Andrew disagrees with his mother often. Andrew finds out that his mother’s boyfriend, Peter, was a sex-addict, and had experimented in college with other men. Andrew, attempting to “get back” at his mother, decides to engage in sexual activity with Peter. Stereotypically, younger gay men often

¹⁰⁷ “Impossible.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Tom Spezialy. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2005. DVD.

¹⁰⁸ “I Know Things Now.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry, Kevin Etten, and Bruce Zimmerman. Dir. Wendy Stanzler. ABC, 2006.

experiment sexually with older homosexual men. Peter's character supports the idea that gay men are highly sexual, as he is a recovering sex addict. Although it is not specifically stated what occurred, Bree walks in and sees Peter and Andrew in her bed. After this event, Bree realizes that she cannot have Andrew around her anymore. Bree tells Andrew that she is going to take him to a college to tour, but stops mid-way. Bree steps out of the car, and tells him that she has packed some of his belongings and some money, but makes it clear that can no longer be around him. Andrew, crying, states that "he knew this day would come," claiming that one day his mother would stop loving him because he was gay. Bree did not drop Andrew off because of his sexuality, but rather because of his incessant defiant behavior. Clearly, the situation acknowledges that acceptance for homosexuality is not universal. Yet, the viewer is still able to empathize with Andrew.

After Andrew and Bree eventually make amends, he returns to Wisteria Lane. Andrew has a partner, who he becomes married to and lives with. In "Everything's Different, Nothing's Changed," Andrew develops problems with alcohol. In this episode, the viewer understands that Alex is a doctor who works full-time, and Andrew is the stay-at-home "housewife." Bored and alone, he turns to drinking. The relationship between Andrew and Alex mirrors the relationship of a typical, heterosexual couple.

Lastly, the *only* lesbian relationship shown throughout *Desperate Housewives* is that between mentally unstable Katherine Mayfair, and the stripper, Robin, in the episode "Lovely."¹⁰⁹ The lesbian relationship represented appears to be a relationship that is favorable through the eyes of men. Both women are attractive, so the show depicts a relationship that would be attractive from the male point of view. During this episode,

¹⁰⁹ "Lovely." *Desperate Housewives*.

Katherine and Robin go out on the town for drinks, and are invited to dine with two men. The men are fascinated by Robin, but ignore Katherine. Because the men are not acknowledging Katherine's beauty, Robin suggests that they leave. Robin essentially states that if they won't have her, she will keep Katherine to herself— and then she proceeds to kiss Katherine, as if to say “this is what you missed out on.”

From the male point of view, this is an idealized fantasy. In this sense, the lesbian sexuality was used to gain the attention of men. Akin to the article from *Cosmopolitan*, providing why more girls are kissing girls, this episode stresses that Katherine should work through her thoughts about her dream because she is “seriously freaked out” by her feelings for Robin. In the episode, we see Katherine in her psychologist's office, discussing her sexual dreams about Robin. What does this suggest about lesbian relationships? The acceptable lesbian relationships are those which are of beautiful women, very similar to those produced in pornography. As Catharine MacKinnon writes, “...pornography freely enslaves women and bodies inseparably, normalizing the terror that enforces silence from the women's point of view.”¹¹⁰ Again, female desire is dictated by the male perception of female sexuality. In reality, the relationship between the stripper and the older woman is not representative of realistic lesbian relationships. This presentation of lesbian interaction is attractive to men. It is important to note that this episode *was* in fact written by men.

In *Desperate Housewives*, sexuality is largely a part of marriage. Moreover, women in this show engage in sexual activity in order to nurture marriages and to please their husbands. MacKinnon argues that violence implicitly is a base for sex, asserting,

¹¹⁰ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified*, 156.

“Maybe they were forced-fucked for years and put up with it, maybe they tried to get it over with, maybe they were coerced by something other than battery, something like economics, maybe even something like love.”¹¹¹ The recurrent image of the woman as subordinate is ever present in *Desperate Housewives*. Although there are attempts to integrate deviant sexuality into the show, all are normalized in a way that does not change the status quo or shock the viewing audience. This incorporates these qualities without provoking controversy. Male homosexual relationships are represented as heteronormative. Lesbian relationships are almost nonexistent in this television series, and the one female sexual relationship presented in this series is favorable to the male viewer. There are few interracial relationships in *Desperate Housewives*. With the exception of Danielle and a black neighbor, Matthew Applewhite, there is an absence of interracial relationships. Matthew, who is a threat and murdered his last girlfriend (who was Asian), is the only example of a black male in a relationship throughout the show, reinforcing stereotypes of black male violence. Aside from this, there is an underrepresentation of blacks altogether. Matthew comes from a house headed by a single black mother, Betty Applewhite. The initial introduction of the family is so suspicious that the audience fails to notice the reinforced racial stereotyping.

Most importantly, the show renders female sexual agency to be unacceptable, and the sexual encounters between men and women in the show are prolonged. If the woman is sexually active and so chooses to be single, she is scrutinized by her friends and neighbors. Although most representations of American sexuality in *Desperate Housewives* reinforce degrading stereotypes about women, it is important that the writers

¹¹¹ Mackinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified*, 88.

and directors integrated the topics of sexual violence, abuse, and rape. Drawing attention to the female experience in relation to sexual abuse as well as the vulnerability that women experience in result could lead to a more constructive awareness of the link between sexuality and violence.

In *Weeds*, Nancy appears to be an independent woman. However, when analyzing her relationships with men, it is evident that she finds herself subordinate and not in control of the outcomes. She has several sexual relationships, which is unique. *Weeds* provides an alternative view of sexuality. In fact, the entire cast engages in sexual acts that are deviant, or “queer.” This is important to recognize because *Weeds* is a show that airs on a premium channel: there is a niche audience for such a show. There is a greater amount of profanity. The sexual encounters of the characters provide an important base for how the plot of the show unfolds. Generally, Nancy finds herself in strange situations due to her sexual relationships with others. Her sons, as well as her brother-in-law, and friends all have various sexual relationships, both homosexual and heterosexual. Additionally, some heterosexual relationships include deviant sexual behavior.

Most likely, deviant behaviors and sexual encounters are represented in *Weeds* because it is on a premium channel: the entire population is not exposed to this comedy. Therefore, *Weeds* can address topics that mainstream shows cannot. For instance, the idea of a “pot-dealing” mom would not go over so well on ABC, ABC Family, Fox, or any channel that a child could have access to.

A large amount of the entertainment in *Weeds* comes from its sexual humor. In the first episode of *Weeds*, Nancy Botwin is sells pot to Josh, Doug Wilson’s son. She

instructs him not to sell to any young children. She then finds out that he has been selling to young children. Silas is Nancy's son, and Silas and his girlfriend plan to have sex. Silas' girlfriend (Quinn) is also the daughter of Celia Hoades. Quinn and Nancy discuss Silas and Quinn having sex while they are sitting on Nancy's rooftop. Then, Quinn spots with binoculars that Doug Wilson's son is in the pool with a neighbor, another male. Quinn mentions how Doug would "kill Josh" if he knew that he was gay. So, in order to get Josh to stop selling to minors, Nancy makes her way to the house and warns Josh that she will tell Doug that he (Josh) is gay if he continues to sell marijuana to children as young as ten years of age. Clearly, while Nancy does not appear to have a problem with Josh's sexuality, she knows his father will. This is a comedic circumstance; the writer of *Weeds* hints at how, once again, homosexuality is not universally acceptable. Nonetheless, the viewer surmises that there is no overt criticism.

Silas and Quinn plan to have sex, and then do have sex.¹¹² Celia, Quinn's mother, appears to be nosy and wants to make sure that they do not have sex by suggesting that Nancy place a conspicuous pink teddy bear with a camera in his room. Nancy seems to realize that they are teens and they will have sex if they so choose. Nancy requests that the two not have sex under her roof, so the two have sex in the guest bedroom underneath the skylight as they are technically not under her roof. Youth sexuality seems acceptable here, even though Nancy feels as though she is failing as a mother. Silas then also has a relationship with a deaf girl, named Megan. Their relationship is also sexual, but lasts far longer than his relationship with Quinn, as Celia sends Quinn to boarding school in

¹¹² "You Can't Miss the Bear." *Weeds: Season One*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Brian Dannelly. Showtime, 2005. DVD.

Mexico.¹¹³ In “He Taught Me How to Drive By,” Silas begins to date a young Christian girl, Tara, who also begins to help them sell marijuana, although a sexual relationship is absent as she is abstinent.¹¹⁴ Silas also has a relationship with his neighbor’s mother, Lisa.¹¹⁵ Silas at this point, is underage. He continues a sexual relationship with Lisa even though he knows that their relationship is not realistically sustainable. Although it would seem as though this relationship would be unacceptable, *Weeds* seems to show that there is some knowledge to be gained for both partners, and that the relationship is in fact beneficial to both parties involved. Due to family circumstances, the Botwins are on the run, and move to Seattle. Silas enrolls at a college under an alias and meets yet another girl, and begins to enjoy the college experience. Silas is seen having sex in the shower with his girlfriend at the college.¹¹⁶ However, Silas is forced to leave the area because his uncle, Andy, registered the van under Shane’s name. The Botwins are left in a compromised position. Silas takes off in his girlfriend’s car, and doesn’t return. Silas’ relationships are all heterosexual, but the women who he dates or sleeps with all have drastically different outlooks and values. To the viewer, none of these relationships are representative of typical teenage love.

In the first episode of *Weeds*, we find out that Dean Hoades cheats on his wife with an Asian tennis instructor, who sticks a tennis racket up his butt while they’re having sex.¹¹⁷ Deviant? Yes. Not only is he cheating on his wife, but he is cheating on his wife in a queer or deviant way. This type of sexual activity is not even mentioned on

¹¹³ “Fashion of the Christ.” *Weeds: Season One*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Burr Steers. Showtime, 2005.

¹¹⁴ “He Taught Me How to Drive By.” *Weeds: Season Three*. Writ. Matthew Salsberg. Dir. Paul Feig. Showtime, 2007. DVD.

¹¹⁵ “Yes I Can.” *Weeds: Season Four*. Writ. Matthew Salsberg. Dir. Scott Ellis. Showtime, 2008. DVD.

¹¹⁶ “Boomerang.” *Weeds: Season Six*. Writ. Jenji Kohan, Stephen Falk, Dave Holstein, Brendan Kelly, and Carly Mensch. Dir. Scott Ellis. Showtime, 2010. DVD.

¹¹⁷ “You Can’t Miss the Bear.” *Weeds*.

shows similar to *Desperate Housewives*. Celia and Dean Hoade's youngest daughter is cast as a lesbian, as we see her making out with another young girl.¹¹⁸

Celia, who appears to be a cold, jealous woman, is not an attractive character. More specifically, Celia's character is rather intimidating, as she constantly wishes to seek revenge on those she envies. Celia later then has an affair with Doug Wilson.¹¹⁹ Celia also has sex with Sullivan Groff, a man who is trying to merge the towns of Agrestic and Majestic.¹²⁰ After Celia and Dean get divorced, Celia even asks her daughter, Isabelle, what is it like to be a lesbian. Celia then goes on a pursuit to determine whether or not she is interested in women after selling "You're Pretty Cosmetics."¹²¹ Celia's relationships underscore the common troubles that women face while married, including the disappointment that results from the desire for an ideal marriage. The show also reveals the chaos and drama that result from being a housewife, and having no other means to make a living.

Nancy's sexual pursuits are most varied and irrational. At the beginning, we understand that Nancy is upset, frustrated, and confused by the death of her husband, Judah. However, it is evident that she overcomes this as the viewer begins to see her as sexually active. In Season Three, Nancy has several sexual encounters. Nancy begins to have sex with her boss, Sullivan Groff, who is in charge of trying to create the Agrestic-Majestic merger.¹²² Nancy goes into Groff's office and she mentions that he should have sex with her right on the desk; and she puts her leg up on the desk, suggestively. Groff

¹¹⁸ "The Godmother." *Weeds: Season One*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Lev L. Spiro. Showtime, 2005.

¹¹⁹ "Bash." *Weeds: Season Two*. Writ. Rinne Groff. Dir. Christopher Misiano. Showtime, 2006.

¹²⁰ "The Two Mrs. Scottsons." *Weeds: Season Three*. Writ. Rolin Jones. Dir. Craig Zisk. Showtime, 2007.

¹²¹ "Suck 'n' Spit." *Weeds: Season Seven*. Writ. Brendan Kelly. Dir. Michael Trim. Showtime, 2009.

¹²² "He Taught Me How to Drive By." *Weeds*.

comments that she would have been great in business. Groff has all of his work in order she begins to carelessly knock all of the papers off of the desk, which makes him angry. As the episode ends, we see him having sex with her from behind, which appears to be aggressive. In the background, Celia Hoades watches, who had also been sleeping with Sullivan Groff.¹²³

Later in the third season, in the twelfth episode, titled “The Dark Time,” Nancy has sex with Conrad, the black man who she used to run a grow operation with.¹²⁴ Although there previously had been sexual tension, Nancy had not had sex with Conrad. In *Weeds*, there is a presence of interracial sexuality. The show proves that an upper-class suburban housewife *can* have sex with who she chooses to, regardless of race, class, or gender.

The most important relationship throughout this television series is the relationship with Esteban and Nancy. Nancy meets Esteban while running a maternity store that serves as a front for drugs. In the maternity store, there is an underground tunnel for the drug cartel to transport drugs from Mexico to the United States. Nancy and Esteban meet in the episode “Yes I Can.” Nancy requests that she have some of the marijuana, after the middle-man, Guillermo, refuses to let her have a part of the shipment. In “Yes I Can,” Esteban spans her, but Nancy appears to enjoy it.¹²⁵ When she returns home, she looks at the mark in the mirror, as though it is an affectionate impression that Esteban has left: similar to the way an adolescent would reflect upon a hickey. At the beginning of their relationship, we understand that Nancy and Esteban have an intimate

¹²³ “Roy Till Called.” *Weeds: Season Three*. Writ. Victoria Morrow. Dir. Craig Zisk. Showtime, 2007.

¹²⁴ “The Dark Time.” *Weeds: Season Three*. Writ. Victoria Morrow. Dir. Ernest R. Dickerson. Showtime, 2007.

¹²⁵ “Yes I Can.” *Weeds*.

physical relationship.¹²⁶ She finds herself pregnant with Esteban's child. Nancy moves into Esteban's estate in Mexico, where Silas and Shane join her. Nancy loses the ability to control where she goes, and as Esteban is running for to be the Governor of Mexico, Nancy is often left in the shadows. Nancy becomes enslaved by her home, as Esteban will have any number of his workers get her what she needs. Nancy feels trapped. Nancy is often degraded because she is white, and told when she is allowed to be present at social events. In order to win the position of Governor, Esteban's relies on his friend, Pilar Zuazo, who controls most of his interactions and public relations. Pilar often controls when Nancy and Esteban can be together. Frustrated, Nancy feels that she has no freedom. Because Shane kills Pilar Zuazo, Nancy understands that staying in Mexico could put the entire family in a dangerous situation. Frightened, she takes off to Seattle with Andy, Silas, and Shane.

When Nancy is once again on the run after Shane kills Pilar, the family decides to buy a cheap RV, and settle in a trailer park. In Season Six, in the episode titled "Gentle Puppies," Nancy has sex with the owner of a bar, who she does not know is married to the woman in the RV next door to them.¹²⁷ Again, Nancy makes an unfortunate mistake because she has a sexual pursuit that ends up causing them to have to move again. Nancy gets the family fake passports, as Andy has spoken of his dream of going to Copenhagen. She feels that in Europe, her family will have a chance to start over. In "Theoretical Love is Not Dead," Nancy confesses to the murder of Pilar Zuazo in order to protect Shane. In result, she agrees to serve time in jail.

¹²⁶ "I Am the Table." *Weeds: Season Four*. Writ. David Holstein and Brendan Kelly. Dir. Adam Bernstein.

¹²⁷ "Gentle Puppies." *Weeds: Season Six*. Writ. Victoria Morrow. Dir. Scott Ellis. Showtime, 2011. DVD.

In the episode “Bags,” featured in Season Seven of *Weeds*, we learn that while in prison, Nancy develops a relationship with another woman, Zoya, and Nancy is seen as a lesbian.¹²⁸ It seems that the pair developed an intimate and sexual relationship. However, when Nancy leaves prison, she reverts to her hypersexual lifestyle. While Zoya is in prison, Nancy has an affair with Zoya’s brother, Demetri. Zoya sees the two making out in “Vehement vs. Vigorous.”¹²⁹ Zoya becomes envious, as she truly thought that Nancy was the “love of her life.”¹³⁰ For the first time since Judah’s passing, Nancy experienced a feeling of closeness that she had not even experienced with Esteban. Nancy is uncomfortable with Zoya’s attachment. Zoya takes a “masculine” role in protecting Nancy from others: jealousy and control are typically attributed to males. This relationship is somewhat normalized, as Nancy is the incredibly feminine drug-dealing mother, and Zoya is dominant and controlling.

Andy Botwin’s character is also a sexually explicit and interesting character throughout the entire show. In *Desperate Housewives*, deviant sexual practices are not prevalent in regards to sexual relationships. *Weeds*, however, reveals the various “deviant” practices as they exist, without stigma. Andy, in the first season, has sex with Shane’s friend’s mother.¹³¹ As Shane’s friends are limited because he continues to have difficulties coping with his father’s death, Nancy informs Andy that he must continue to have sex with the mother in order to maintain the friendship. Later in the show, Andy

¹²⁸ “Bags.” *Weeds: Season Seven*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Scott Ellis. Showtime, 2012. DVD.

¹²⁹ “Vehement v. Vigorous.” *Weeds: Season Seven*. Writ. Carly Mensch. Dir. Scott Ellis. Showtime, 2012. DVD.

¹³⁰ “Synthetics.” *Weeds: Season Seven*. Writ. Victoria Morrow. Dir. Michael Trim. Showtime, 2012. DVD.

¹³¹ “Higher Education.” *Weeds: Season One*. Writ. Shawn Schepps. Dir. Tucker Gates. Showtime, 2006. DVD.

becomes involved with the pornography industry.¹³² His involvement furthers, and he begins to perform deviant sexual behavior on camera including fetishes such as “foot-fucking.”¹³³

Andy at one point meets a young lady named Maxeen who he has sex with. However, he discovers that Maxeen is in a polyamorous relationship with her husband, who is dying of cancer.¹³⁴ Andy’s sexual relationship with Maxeen appears to be a positive representation of a sexually deviant relationship. Maxeen’s husband feels that this lifestyle is more rewarding, especially as he is sick. Maxeen is still his companion, and he loves her, but does not seem to be phased by the fact that she sleeps with other men, just as she is not phased by their open relationship.

Andy later develops an intimate relationship with Audra, who is an obstetrician and gynecologist. Too mature for Andy, she leaves him. Later in the series, the couple reunites. During his relationship with Audra, Andy makes it clear that he is the “love-sick fool.” Audra appears to be in control of the relationship, and Andy attempts to please Audra. Essentially, this is a role reversal. Typically, women obsess over how they should gain the affection and attention of a man: this is exactly what Andy proves to do. He is neither of the same academic or career level as Audra. In order to show that he is serious, Andy requests Nancy’s wedding ring, he buys a mini-van for them and their future family, and he cooks her dinners, proving to be a gentleman. Andy, when in love, is compassionate, loyal, and dedicated. There, the viewing audience may understand that

¹³² “He Taught Me How to Drive By.” *Weeds*.

¹³³ “The Two Mrs. Scottsons.” *Weeds*.

¹³⁴ “A Hole in Her Niqab.” *Weeds: Season Seven*. Writ. David Holstein. Dir. Eric Jewett. Showtime, 2012. DVD.

individuals can engage in both deviant sexual practice as well monogamous loyal relationships.

Each relationship in *Weeds* stems from a foundation of sexual activity. Sex causes trials and tribulations that the Botwins face, but it also provides leeway, power and access. Throughout the series, many of the incidents where the characters have sex work to benefit the characters in some way. The characters' engagement in a variety of sexual practices opens up possibilities for them to succeed as a family. Additionally, there are also some difficulties that occur in regards to the sexual relationships. For instance, Nancy's relationship with Esteban causes many problems for the family as a whole, especially because she becomes pregnant with his child. Although sexually free, Nancy Botwin is still forced to be subordinate to the man who she is with. In many cases, the ways that she has sex are raunchy and spontaneous. Nancy does not appear to have a single intimate relationship with any one person that is meaningful with the exceptions of Judah and Zoya. In a way, she continuously reinforces degradation and compromises herself as a powerful character. Her dim-witted decisions regarding love and lust ultimately cause her to lose autonomy. Nancy becomes dependent on everyone around her, including her sons, Andy, and several of those who she has slept with. However, the show does suggest that it is okay to be involved sexually with whomever you choose.

Women in this show seem to have a strange sense of control over their destiny and the destinies of those who surround them. Andy, Silas, and Shane all appear to follow Nancy, even when she fails to make rational, reasonable decisions. Andy always appears to want the comfort of Nancy, and this often interrupts his relationships with other women. Even though he is highly sexualized, he truly proves to be compassionate, and

caring, which are characteristics not typically attributed to males in popular television series. Andy's becomes increasingly feminized as he follows Nancy on her endeavors.

In terms of sexuality, *Weeds* certainly provides a space for understanding sexually deviant practices. The practices are not judged by anyone else in the show. I believe that this enables individuals to understand alternative sexual lifestyles; people are able to think "outside of the box" when it comes to sexual practice. *Weeds*, a series that comes from a premium channel, reveals more freedom and opportunity for sexual agency, especially for women. Ultimately, the acts within this show are constructed from viewpoint of male sexual desire. Nancy often submits and has "rough sex," which is deemed attractive by her male suitors. In many ways, the show does not focus on the flaws with non-heteronormative relationships, but rather embraces differences in sexuality. Nancy engages in sexual acts freely, and appears to have always participated in such acts. Quite possibly, Jenji Kohan, the creator of *Weeds*, has acknowledged and critiqued popular television series, often involving her characters in situations that parallel those of other television series, but with a twist.

Weeds and *Desperate Housewives* reveal that men do ultimately control the sexual identities of women, as do magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*. Catharine MacKinnon suggests that women's bodies are essentially enslaved through pornography,¹³⁵ and Naomi Wolf agrees. Wolf quotes, "The influence of pornography on women's sexual sense of self—which was just beginning to take hold at the time this book was first written—has now become so complete that it is almost impossible for younger women to distinguish the role pornography plays in creating their idea of how to

¹³⁵ MacKinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified*, 133.

be, look, and move in sex from their own innate sense of sexual identity. Is this progress? I do not think so” (Wolf, 5). Thus, women are unable to separate themselves from sexual identities or desires as represented in magazines and media. Although Nancy’s character does represent an independence and liberation from values associated with popular television, her irrational decisions that result sexual interactions make her a weaker character than she otherwise would be.

Women’s perceptions of sexuality *could* change if television series similar to *Weeds* were more prevalent. Additionally, if television shows such as *Weeds* were able to successfully depict the woman as strong, educated, relentless, and sexually independent, then there could be space for an altered understanding of female sexuality in America. Television shows must change the reinforced stereotypes of race, homosexuality, and “deviant” sexuality in order to allow for female sexual agency and expression. If sexuality through the male gaze was not consistently visible in all outlets of media, then women would be able to construct desires independent of those represented in modern American society.

Chapter Five: Work, Family, and Parenting

In contemporary American society, women are often faced with the difficult decision whether to focus on career or family. Increasingly, women are forced to adapt to the role of the housewife, as well as the role of a career woman. In popular media, women consistently judge other women based on their roles as mothers. If a woman is to choose her career over her family, she is consistently judged as inadequate. Women also tend to judge other women on their parenting styles. Many times throughout series of shows, the gloating and competition that occurs in these towns is seen as the norm.

In Douglas' *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, she quotes, "Most of the shows I watched then were telling me that I, some dumb girl, could change the world. No, these shows had a different message. I would not change the world; I'd watch my boyfriend or husband do that. I did not have my own destiny; my fate, my life, would be dependent on my man's."¹³⁶ In reality, when we watch popular television today has this changed? Frequently, women are perpetually viewed as dependent.

In regards to Douglas' book, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, women believe that they are indeed independent and that they are equal because they are mothers by choice. Douglas argues that this is in fact "enlightened sexism," as she remarks, "Enlightened sexism is a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist

¹³⁶ Douglas, Susan J., *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995, 27.

stereotypes of girls and women.”¹³⁷ Truthfully, the popular television show exemplifies the enlightened sexism that modern America faces. Women are surrounded by degrading stereotypes in a “comedic” way. Although presented this way, the message is still carried that women are by no means equal to men. The perpetuating dramas that permeate modern television illustrate how we have progressed. In reality, these programs reconstruct and disguise the female view of gendered stereotypes, and present it in a non-offensive manner. Societal expectations and critiques of parenting, motherhood, and careers are ever-present on American popular television, contradicting the idea that women have somehow overcome negative female stereotypes.

Aside from television, magazines and advertisements play a large role in the way that women are viewed in the workplace. Young populations are beginning to be exposed to these degrading stereotypes as well. In the April 2010 edition of *Cosmopolitan*, there was an article titled “Want a Kick-Ass New Job?” What were the careers listed? Women could have kick-ass jobs with titles such as the following: Speed decorator, doggy flight attendant, professional tweeter, globe-trotting teacher, undercover diner, style guide, tropical talent tamer and floating chef.¹³⁸ Intellectual abilities really show through when you are a “professional tweeter.” It appears that *Cosmopolitan* has taken over for *Ladies Home Journal* and now pollutes the minds of young magazine readers. Sadly, many women will believe that these are “kick-ass” jobs. Are the views of career choices and motherhood of pre-feminist America reflected in magazines also reflected in popular television?

This chapter will elaborate on the importance of understanding of American television as a key outlet for expression of cultural ideals and expectations. *Desperate Housewives* and *Weeds*

¹³⁷ Douglas, Susan J., *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2010, 9.

¹³⁸ Segrest, Susan. “Want a Kick-Ass New Job?” *Cosmopolitan* Apr. 2010: 138-140.

concentrate on suburbia and suburban struggles of the modern housewife. Women in these shows incessantly scrutinize their own lives and choices, and are constantly judged by other men and women in their lives. In both series, a woman's family life is inextricably linked to her as a person; she is judged based on her role as a mother. In *Desperate Housewives*, women have chosen to step out of the career world in order to tend to the needs of their children. When these women do in fact enter the career world, they are scrutinized as they do not pay proper attention to their children. In contrast, *Weeds* provides an example of a housewife turned career-woman. Nancy Botwin is forced to adapt to a role that she did not have for several years; she was dependent, and thus is unable to find a proper occupation. In desperation, Nancy finds herself selling, distributing, and eventually growing marijuana in order to maintain the lifestyle that her family lived before her husband passed.

In both shows, the women make careless and daft decisions rapidly and repeatedly, often causing several repercussions. Modern television includes the ideas of women in the workplace, but also in the home. How is the interaction between the domestic sphere and the career world represented in these two series? In these series, are women able to successfully manage or balance their careers or achieve their goals, or must they renounce one responsibility to pursue the other? Furthermore, how do these series exemplify the challenges that a woman faces as she constantly is judged by society in total? Why are women so frequently ridiculed for their independent choices in regards to work, family, and parenting?

Desperate Housewives is a show that revolves around issues that occur most frequently in suburbia. Therefore, the show underscores the problems that each woman faces with work, family, and parenting while living in the suburbs. More specifically, the women all face seemingly different problems as the show progresses. However, the women often have problems or resolve problems using their talents stereotypically

associated with their gender. *Desperate Housewives* is shown on primetime television, and therefore, the ideals represented on this show would most likely be more influential than those shown on other networks. More importantly, the show depicts the lifestyles of a range of middle-class families, which makes the show “relatable” in a sense. In this show, the four female main characters are those whose roles most effectively dictate the values of middle-class women as depicted by *Desperate Housewives*. When analyzing this show, it is important to understand that five years pass between Season Four and Season Five, changing the family dynamics in each household in Fairview. As this chapter concerns work and parenting, it is important to see how the characters adapt, and whether the actions repeat themselves over time. For this reason, episodes throughout various seasons were selected.

Susan Meyer (Teri Hatcher) is introduced as vulnerable; in the first episode viewers understand that Susan has been cheated on, and is weak in result. Throughout the series, Susan does not always make the most thoughtful decisions, often consulting her daughter, Julie, for advice. In the first few seasons, Susan works for a publishing company, completing illustrations for children’s books. Later in the series, Susan becomes an elementary school art teacher, which, also seems to fit a feminine role. When Susan and her husband run into financial problems, Susan takes a job with an online webcam company, run by her landlord, where she cleans houses in lingerie for male viewers. Susan sacrifices her integrity to make money on the side, and therefore, loses her job as a teacher. Essentially, the jobs that Susan has throughout the show lead the viewer to believe that she would be able to have little financial success independently. Additionally, Susan, often troubled by her situations with boyfriends, is not the most

attentive parent. Julie spends exorbitant time devoted to helping her mom become untangled from poor situations, and the viewer is able to see that Julie, in essence, is her own parent.

In the “Pilot” episode, Susan walks into Mary Alice’s wake with a macaroni and cheese that she advises people not to eat. At the wake, she meets Mike Delfino, a plumber who moved into their neighborhood. After the wake, Julie confronts Susan and asks her why she will not go out with him, and mentions that she saw them flirting. In order to gain some information about Mike, Julie kicks a ball in Mike’s backyard, and casually starts conversation to learn about him. Julie must then educate her mother, and provide her mother with dating advice. Julie also asks her mother when the last time she had sex was, a topic that Susan felt rather uncomfortable discussing with her daughter.¹³⁹ In “Guilty,” Episode Eight of Season One, Susan confronts Julie and essentially uses her as a sounding board for decisions. When prompted to go away for the weekend with Mike, Susan accepts. However, she feels uneasy when she finds a large amount of cash and a gun in one of his kitchen cabinets. When Susan returns home, Julie informs Susan not to worry, and to have a good weekend away with Mike because Julie advises, “I really need this weekend to go well...Because, I’m going to have a husband of my own someday, and I really don’t want you living with us.”¹⁴⁰

What do we learn about Susan? That she is incapable of being a responsible mother, and also incapable of being financially and emotionally independent. Susan exemplifies the idea that women who are not successful mothers and not successful

¹³⁹ “Pilot.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and David Schulner. Dir. John David Coles. ABC, 2005. DVD.

¹⁴⁰ “Guilty.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Kevin Murphy. Dir. Fred Gerber. ABC, 2005. DVD.

workers amount to nothing. Susan does not have a career that will become lucrative, and she compromises her reputation in order to make more money. In doing so, she is no longer able to work at the school which she once taught at. In essence, the show reveals that a woman will take a degrading position insofar as she makes a substantial profit. Susan's career as an art teacher is one that is thought of as matronly. Susan is represented as ditsy, and her common sense seems to be lacking. No position that she has provides access to advancement. She always ends up in positions that are unfortunate, and rather embarrassing. Truthfully, Susan's character appears to possess attributes analogous to those of a clumsy, inept teen.

Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria), who takes the role of a former model on *Desperate Housewives*, comes across as a high-maintenance house-wife. In a sense, she appears to be the epitome of a "gold-digger," and although she once was able to be financially independent, she evidently no longer has the option. The only time that Gaby works is when Carlos is in jail, and she makes money by working to model cars at the mall. Not only is she desperate in this sense, but it is feasible that she possesses no useful skills other than her beauty. Similarly, Douglas mentions, "To be success as a girl and then as a woman, I learned early that I was to be obsessively self-centered, scrutinizing every pore, every gesture, every stray eyebrow hair, eradicating every flaw, enhancing every asset, yet never, ever letting anybody see me doing this."¹⁴¹ However, Gabrielle evidently does do this, as she constantly appears to be self-critical and judgmental of other women. How does this contribute to her role as a wife and her role as a mother?

¹⁴¹ Douglas, Susan J. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 27.

Gabrielle is continuously reinforcing values that she had seen as important; her daughters are not to be particularly smart or funny or possess intellect, but they should be beautiful.

From the beginning of the show, Gaby expresses her disinterest in becoming a mother, specifying that it was a condition of her marriage to Carlos Solis. In episode eight, “Guilty,” Carlos tells Gaby that he would like to have children because they would make everything worthwhile.¹⁴² Gaby mentions that not having children was a condition of their marriage. Carlos counters her comment by stating that “deals are meant to be re-negotiated.”¹⁴³ However, Gaby retorts by saying, “Well, we’re not negotiating my uterus.”¹⁴⁴ In this situation, it is evident that Gaby has no interest in parenting. Too self-absorbed, it appears that she would be negligent if she had children.

In the episode “Move On,” Episode 11 of Season One, Gaby finds herself financially strapped as Carlos is currently in jail for selling products made by slave labor. With her bank accounts frozen, Gaby decides that she should return to work. She goes to an agency, where she brings her portfolio. The modeling agent quotes, “They need a model to demonstrate the new Buick LaCrosse at the Fairview Mall. It is just going to be you and the car on a revolving platform. Three-hundred bucks for the day.”¹⁴⁵ When Gaby realizes the job is not good enough for her, she begins to prompt the agent for other jobs. He mentions that the Sci-Fi convention needs a “Warrior Princess,” but Gaby declines and agrees to work at the car show. Consequently, when Gaby is at the mall demonstrating the Buick LaCrosse she sees Tom and Lynette Scavo descending toward

¹⁴² “Guilty.” *Desperate Housewives*.

¹⁴³ “Guilty.” *Desperate Housewives*.

¹⁴⁴ “Guilty.” *Desperate Housewives*.

¹⁴⁵ “Move On.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and David Schulner. Dir. John David Coles. ABC, 2005. DVD.

her on the escalator. Mortified, Gaby attempts to hide herself. She does not want to admit that she took a job, let alone a job demonstrating a car at the mall. In the episode “Beautiful Girls”¹⁴⁶ in the third season, Gaby takes another job, as a modeling coach. Yet again, Gaby takes the position of a superficial, insignificant, and dim-witted woman.

Gaby is not represented as a good mother. She is constantly critiquing her children, and manipulates them into doing things that make her seem like a good parent. Therefore, when Gaby finds out that Bob and Lee’s adopted daughter is entering the talent show, Gaby wants to prove in competition that her daughter is just as talented, if not more talented than Bob and Lee’s daughter. Mary Alice narrates, “The suburbs are full of parents. And each parent has their own style. There’s the disciplinarian, the smotherer, and the negotiator. But, the one thing they all have in common is that they love to judge the parents next door.”¹⁴⁷ However, the viewer is presented with the idea that Gaby wants to prove that she is a better parent, not to better her child. When Gabrielle asks what Juanita has planned for the talent show, Juanita responds by saying, “Oh, it’s going to be great, watch.”¹⁴⁸ Juanita then makes a farting noise with her armpit. Gaby warns that if Juanita does not pick a talent, she will pick one for her; Gaby asks Juanita return to tap because it was the hobby that she stuck with the longest. After Juanita practices for weeks on tap dancing as her talent, Gaby finds that she is not as skilled as expected; embarrassed, Gaby pulls Juanita from the show by hiding her tap shoes. Then, after seeing Bob and Lee’s daughter make mistakes, Gaby learns that it is not about *winning*; instead, it is about seeing the one you love feel as though they have

¹⁴⁶ “Beautiful Girls.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Third Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry, Susan Nirah Jaffe, and Dahvi Wahler. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2006. DVD.

¹⁴⁷ “Searching.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Seventh Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Jeff Greenstein. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2011.

¹⁴⁸ “Searching.” *Desperate Housewives*.

accomplished something. Gaby is understood as immature, and self-centered. The spectator notices that Gaby does not possess characteristics of a good mother; she is not selfless as mothers are expected to be.

According to the “Pilot” episode in Season One, Bree (Marcia Cross) is the perfect wife and mother, as in the first episode Mary Alice narrates that Bree “brought baskets of muffins that she made from scratch. Bree was known for her cooking, and for making her own clothes, and for doing her own gardening, and for reupholstering her own furniture. Yes, Bree’s many talents were known throughout the neighborhood, and everyone thought of Bree as the perfect wife and mother. Everyone that is, except her own family.”¹⁴⁹ The wife of a successful doctor, Bree proves to be the ideal affluent housewife. Bree’s talents lend themselves to those that are most typical of housewives. However, Bree learns that her husband, Rex Van De Kamp, is cheating on her with another woman in Fairview. Throughout the eight seasons, Bree appears to constantly represent the façade that her family is indeed perfect. Bree presents herself as a flawed June Cleaver, from *Leave it to Beaver*. Douglas refers to the idea of “harmonious nuclear families and wasp-waisted, perfectly coiffed moms who never lost their tempers.”¹⁵⁰ Bree also expects her children to maintain the values that she has taught them. Much to her dismay, Bree finds that her family is fraught with malfunction.

Despite the malfunction of the family, Bree handles situations in ways similar to those that 1950s housewives did: without emotion. In a section of *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Douglas alludes to the idea of suppression of

¹⁴⁹ Pilot.” *Desperate Housewives*.

¹⁵⁰ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 26.

emotion, which might explain Bree's marital problems and familial differences. Douglas writes, "No matter what girls did behind closed doors, in front of their mirrors, they were never supposed to act self-absorbed in public. We were supposed to be as self-abnegating, and as cheerful about it, as Cinderella or Snow White. The message to women and girls in the 1950s wasn't just 'Be passive, be dumb, keep your mouth shut, and learn how to make Spam-and-Velveeta croquettes.' It was worse. It was "To really have it all, be a martyr."¹⁵¹ During the first season of *Desperate Housewives*, Bree's character encompasses all of these attributes. She often sacrifices herself in favor of her children; in many ways, Bree is a martyr. Bree is the Disney princess carrying a basket of muffins to her neighbors' house. Apathetic, Bree fails to express her emotions simply to illustrate the ideals of the "perfect housewife." Bree's character parallels Douglas's description of Jackie Kennedy, the intellectual housewife and home decorator. Is there a parallel between the characters? Bree comes across as the well-spoken, eloquent, classy housewife. She, in a sense, represent the ideals of Jackie Kennedy. Douglas speaks on the subject of Jackie Kennedy's intriguing intellect, her "masculine" qualities, arguing, "...she was smart and loved intellectual pursuits, she was knowledgeable about history and the arts, she wore pants, and she had big feet—yet she was still completely feminine, a princess, a queen. She knew how to take charge, and also knew how to be gracious and ornamental."¹⁵²

In the first episode, Bree presents herself as a woman who is essentially a stone wall. Bree always attempts to be perfect; consequently, she avoids showing any sign of human emotion. Her views and outlooks cause her take drastic measures when punishing

¹⁵¹ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 27.

¹⁵² Douglas, Susan J. *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 27.

her children, even though she wants to do what is truly best for each child. In “Anything You Can Do,” Bree fights with her husband Rex, and claims that he is “buying” the children’s affection when he chooses to purchase them substantial gifts. Andrew receives a car, and Rex informs Danielle that he will pay for her to attend a modeling academy in New York. Infuriated, Bree demands the children to return the gifts. When the children choose not to, she changes the locks on the doors and clears their belongings from their rooms, leaving them on the lawn. Later in the evening, Andrew visits his father, Rex, at the motel where he is staying. Andrew proposes that he live with Rex, but Rex refuses to have Andrew live with him. Feeling rejected, Andrew takes off and meets a friend to drink with, the same night that he gets his car. Andrew ends up hitting Carlos Solis’ mother, Juanita, with his car in a drunk driving accident. Confused, Andrew returns home and asks his mother for help.¹⁵³ In the next episode, “Guilty,” Bree and Rex assist Andrew in disposing of the evidence, the car that was purchased for Andrew.¹⁵⁴ Bree defends her son, even though she does not agree with his decisions. Bree proves to be a good mother by protecting her children, an assumed attribute of motherhood.

Episode 15 of Season Six, “Thank You So Much,” opens with Bree drinking wine at a restaurant that she and Rex used to eat at frequently. As Bree listens to the music, she consumes far too much alcohol. She begins to speak to her waiter about her situation, and the viewer sees that Bree is evidently depressed. The waiter, fearing that Bree has had too much to drink, offers to call her a cab. Upon her arrival home, Bree falls over, and passes out on the front lawn; she is found by her neighbor, Karen McCluskey, who is an older

¹⁵³ “Anything You Can Do.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry, John Pardee and Joey Murphy. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2005. DVD.

¹⁵⁴ “Guilty.” *Desperate Housewives*.

woman, in the morning. Mrs. McCluskey tries to wake Bree, but is unsuccessful. Concerned, Mrs. McCluskey notifies Andrew of the circumstance. Andrew expresses that his mother has been drinking a lot, and that she “falls asleep in strange places.” Andrew seems to be addressing his disappointment with resentment, as he turns on the sprinklers in the yard to wake her up. When asked about the incident, Bree claims that she was not drunk; rather, she asserts that she had a bad reaction to her allergy medication. It is evident that her children do not believe her, as they give Bree looks of condemnation. Bree then states that she will suffer through her allergies. Andrew, coyly retorts, “So, basically you would rather drink than to not have allergies?”¹⁵⁵ The concludes when the family is interrupted as Lynette shows up with her children, asking Bree if she could watch them. Bree becomes irritated when the twins play the keyboard, and begins drinking wine to sooth her “headache.” When Bree falls asleep, the twins attempt to wake her. When Bree is unresponsive, the boys take off with their sister, who is an infant. Lynette is then notified at work that her children are at the hair salon. Lynette inquires as to whether or not Bree was drinking while babysitting for her children.

The relationship between Bree and her son, Andrew, is strained to say the least. In “I Know Things Now,” Bree invites her new boyfriend who she met at Alcoholics Anonymous to dinner. After listening in on a phone conversation, Andrew learns that her mother’s boyfriend was a member of Sex Addicts Anonymous. Andrew is angry at his mother, and convinces his sister, Danielle, to tease their mom’s new boyfriend, Peter. Then, Peter leaves abruptly, but returns the next day to drop off a college brochure for Andrew. Andrew then asks Peter about his experience at the college, and brings up

¹⁵⁵ “Thank You So Much.” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Second Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Dahvi Waller. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2006. DVD.

Peter's sex addiction. Peter discloses that he did have experiences with many people during a "dark phase," leading Andrew to understand that some of those were with men. Bree comes home to find her son in bed with her boyfriend. The next day, Bree takes Andrew in the car, informing him that the two will be taking a trip to Perkins College. Surprised, Andrew agrees, but is unaware of Bree's intentions. Bree pulls over the car at a seemingly deserted gas station, and informs Andrew that she has packed some of his things, and left him some cash to live on until he finds himself a job. She apologizes for being unable to love her son unconditionally, and essentially blames herself for the decisions and actions that Andrew has made.

In Season Three of *Desperate Housewives*, Bree finds out that her daughter, Danielle, is sleeping with her history teacher.¹⁵⁶ Later in the season, Danielle admits that she is pregnant with Austin's child.¹⁵⁷ Danielle is promiscuous throughout the season. In order to hide the pregnancy, Bree decides that Danielle will go with her and Orson on their honeymoon, and when they return, she and Orson will inform the neighborhood that she decided to go abroad. Bree and Orson decide that they will raise Danielle's child. Then, Bree pretends to be pregnant. However, Danielle makes an appearance at a neighborhood Halloween party, dressed up as Bree Van De Kamp. Unfortunately, Danielle's water breaks and Danielle goes into labor. Bree attempts to hide this entire hardship in order to protect Danielle's reputation, as well as her own. Because Danielle does not want to get an abortion, Bree and Orson decide that they will care for her child. However, Danielle finds Bree to be a bad parent because she won't let her "have fun."

¹⁵⁶ "Like It Was." *Desperate Housewives: Season Three*. Writ. Marc Cherry, John Pardee, and Joey Murphy. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC. 2006. DVD.

¹⁵⁷ "My Husband, The Pig." *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Third Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry, Brian Alexander. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2007. DVD.

However, in this instance, viewers are able to conclude that Bree, once again, is doing what is best for her family.

Later in the show, Bree opens what becomes a successful catering business with her friend Katherine.¹⁵⁸ In Season Five, we see it progress. Namely, Bree writes a cookbook, *Mrs. Van De Kamp's Old Fashioned Cooking* "traditional family values."¹⁵⁹ In other words, it is likely that individuals will purchase more cookbooks if they see Bree as she is, a traditional woman. When she finally has a career, it not only is in an industry that is considered a duty of the domestic housewife, but she furthers it by representing "old fashioned cooking." When Bree finally has a career, it is in a role that doubles as an expectation; an expectation that all women should know how to cook well, and be "perfect wives," so to speak.

In a way, Bree's character is laden with flaws. The viewer may gather that Bree, the "perfect housewife" is a terrible mother. As narrated by Mary Alice in Season One, "Bree Van de Kamp believed in old fashioned values. Things like; respect for God, the importance of family, and love of country. In fact Bree believed so strongly in her values that it was always a shock whenever she was confronted with those who didn't."¹⁶⁰ However, what is it that makes her a terrible mother? In many instances, the same problems applied to a man would be less severe. Thus, because she is a mother, expectations of character are higher. Overall, Bree's alcoholism severely impacts the viewer's judgment of Bree. Once the viewer learns of Bree as a mother, he or she finds

¹⁵⁸ "Hello, Little Girl." *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Fourth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry, Susan Nirah Jaffe, and Jamie Gorenberg. Dir. Bethany Rooney. ABC, 2008. DVD.

¹⁵⁹ "You're Gonna Love Tomorrow." *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Fifth Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2009. DVD.

¹⁶⁰ "Impossible." *Desperate Housewives: The Complete First Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry and Tom Spezialy. Dir. Larry Shaw. ABC, 2005. DVD.

that her personality and role of motherhood should be inextricably linked. In other words, the choices that a woman makes outside of the home drastically impact those that she makes within the home. Women are unable to detach themselves from their roles as mothers.

At the beginning of *Desperate Housewives*, Felicity Huffman's character, Lynette Scavo, is introduced as a mother of four, thus leading her to give up her job in order to raise her children¹⁶¹. The children always appear to be misbehaving, leading to a rather chaotic lifestyle. Throughout all eight seasons, Lynette struggles with the inability to work without interruption. The vicissitudes of home life appear to be no match for Lynette's competent character. Regardless, Lynette cares for her family and children. Eventually, we begin to see Lynette's character metamorphose into more of the housewife stereotype. One could argue that the focus on Lynette's career is a step in the right direction. On the other hand, Lynette ultimately ends up subordinate to her husband, and passes time caring for her children instead of following her own career goals.

As previously mentioned, Lynette begins the show with four children, and appears to despise her role as a mother. In the first episode, "Pilot," Lynette is evidently frustrated when her three boys jump in Paul Young's swimming pool during the wake held for Marcy Alice. Later in the episode, we see Lynette leaving a voice message for Tom, seemingly oblivious of the fact that her twins are running around the supermarket with a shopping cart. When she realizes the twins are not with her, she walks briskly to find them, only to be stopped by an old co-worker, Natalie Klein. Lynette and Natalie discuss the firm that Lynette once worked at, and Klein mentions that if she hadn't left

¹⁶¹ "Pilot." *Desperate Housewives*.

she “would probably be running the place by now.” In an effort to continue conversation, Klein asks, “So...How’s domestic life? Don’t you just love being a mom?” Mary Alice narrates, “And there it was, the question that Lynette always dreaded...For those who asked it, only one answer was acceptable. So, Lynette responded as she always did. She lied.” Lynette responds with hesitation, “Well, to be honest...it’s the best job I’ve ever had.”¹⁶² The previous scene illustrates Lynette’s dissatisfaction with her current life. Of all of the women on *Desperate Housewives*, Lynette proves to be the most dedicated to her work; consequently, she is also the least interested in motherhood. Lynette’s character neither obeys nor defies standards that women are held to. Judgment is an important role in understanding Lynette’s actions. For example, as one can see, she responds in the way that she is expected when asked about her role as a mother.

Moreover, Lynette expresses frustration that, due to circumstances, she can no longer have her “dream career,” but also is unsure of how to be the perfect mother. In Season One, Lynette finds that her ideas are not taken seriously by the PTA because she is new to join. Therefore, she is forced to prove herself in order to gain respect. Despite the fact that Lynette finds the competition among mothers foolish, she still partakes in it. As a result, Lynette begins to take ADD medication when she is expected to create costumes for the school play, after she learns that other mothers take it in order to complete their work. Consequently, Lynette becomes addicted to the ADD medication. In “Anything You Can Do,” Episode Seven of Season One, Lynette is frantically cleaning the house. Tom asks her to host a dinner party because he will be pitching an idea to a few people in two days, and Lynette asserts that she is unsure how she will achieve this

¹⁶² “Pilot.” *Desperate Housewives*.

on such short notice. When Tom mentions that Bree Van De Kamp, the “perfect wife and mother,” does it all the time, Lynette agrees at a sign of defeat. Lynette realizes that she has no ADD medication left, and she resorts to taking some from one of the child’s friends while at their house.

Lynette successfully puts on a dinner, but steps in and begins mentioning her marketing ideas. However, overstepping her boundaries, Lynette causes Tom to feel inferior because she was such a successful worker before she had children. Lynette then affirms, “These days if I’m competing with anyone it’s the ‘Bree Van De Kamps’ of the World with their spotless kitchens and their perfect kids who throw fabulous parties, where nothing ever goes wrong. I try so hard to keep up but I can’t. And when you work on a pitch or you bring the partners over I am reminded of a world I left behind, where I was the winner, and people tried to keep up with me. I can’t go back. I can’t win where I am. I am stuck in the middle and it is really starting to get to me.”¹⁶³ Tom then commends her and asserts that everyone thinks that she is the “perfect wife and mother.” The episode suggests that if a woman is able to complete the tasks necessary in order to be a “good mother” and a “good wife,” then she is indeed a “happy housewife.”

In “Guilty,” Lynette has a breakdown after having a dream that she was handed a gun from Mary Alice to escape her problems with parenting. She takes off and leaves her children with Susan. Afterward, Susan and Bree begin to look for Lynette. Bree and Susan find Lynette in a soccer field, and they begin to talk to her about the stresses of

¹⁶³ “Anything You Can Do.” *Desperate Housewives*.

motherhood¹⁶⁴. The episode confronts the issues of motherhood, and the inability to express the stressors that they each experience.

At the end of Season Five, Lynette begins to work for Carlos, and finds out that she is pregnant with twins. When she finds out she is pregnant, she refrains from telling Carlos, because she is afraid that he will not hire her again after she gives birth. Lynette expresses concern that he will not think that she is a dedicated worker as a pregnant woman. When Carlos does find out that Lynette is pregnant, he offers to “promote” her. In other words, he offers her a promotion, and if she refuses, she will be fired. Lynette knows that the pregnancy is the reason for this “promotion.” Her last child marks the end of her career. In Season Six, Lynette stops working for Carlos. At the beginning of Season Seven, in “Remember Paul?,” Lynette sits with her family at breakfast as she is holding her baby. At this time, the children and Tom begin listing places that they need Lynette to go. Lynette, irritated by their demands, suggests that each of them can take care of themselves. Preston responds by saying “You know, the good moms enjoy doing stuff for their families.”¹⁶⁵

In comparison to the other mothers in *Desperate Housewives*, Lynette appears to be the most contemporary woman. She is educated, has a career, and often suffers in result. Lynette feels as though she cannot achieve greatness in either way, as represented throughout the various seasons. Lynette’s rather dominant attitude suggests that she could be the head of household. However, Lynette’s inability to keep a job due to parenting proves that Lynette simply is a woman, both financially and emotionally dependent. Her

¹⁶⁴ “Guilty.” *Desperate Housewives*.

¹⁶⁵ “Remember Paul?” *Desperate Housewives: The Complete Seventh Season*. Writ. Marc Cherry. Dir. David Grossman. ABC, 2010. DVD.

character echoes the description of Betty Friedan's idea of a "schizophrenic split-image" of women. In the *Feminine Mystique*, Freidan writes, "In an earlier time, the image of woman was also split in two—the good, pure woman on the pedestal, and the whore of desires and flesh. The split in the new image opens a different fissure—the feminine woman, whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman, whose evil includes every desire of the separate self. The new feminine morality story is the exorcising of the forbidden career dream, the heroine's victory over Mephistopheles: the devil, first in the form of a career woman, who threatens to take away the heroine's husband or child, and finally, the devil inside the heroine herself, the dream of independence, the discontent of spirit, and even the feeling of a separate identity that must be exorcised to win or keep the love of husband and child."¹⁶⁶

Thus, the show leaves the viewer with the understanding that the average woman cannot overcome the success and career of her husband because she is too preoccupied with vanity, parenting, and being a proper "mother," suggesting that there is no hope for a career woman. If she does, in many instances, she sacrifices her ability to be a good parent. Furthermore, *Desperate Housewives* emphasizes the value of prescribed gender roles, even if the characters do not follow them. However, *Desperate Housewives* does maintain that becoming a mother comes with burdens that are challenging, binding, and for the most part, cause women to renounce their own desires in order to attend to those of their children. Mostly, the show reveals that women are constantly scrutinized for the choices they make, whereas men are unaffected. Mainly, the show concerns the chief role of judgment in the American woman's life. The viewer is left judging the women

¹⁶⁶ Freidan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997, 95.

based on the choices that each woman makes respectively both in her home and at work analogous to how the women on *Desperate Housewives* judge each other.

Weeds is a show that reveals unusual family values, as Nancy Botwin, the lead of the show, sells marijuana in order to support her children. Nancy Botwin is a widowed housewife. In comparison to *Desperate Housewives*, the ideals represented in *Weeds* appear to be drastic, as well as opposite. Nancy does not uphold the values that other mothers appear to in *Desperate Housewives*; she also does not appear to be shaken by other peoples' impressions of her. Often throughout the series, Nancy curses at people, bosses them around, and threatens them in order to protect her children. She is often sweet, flirty, and helpless. The show parallels *Desperate Housewives* with some of Nancy's "feminine" character traits. However, the show involves far more male interaction than *Desperate Housewives*, and Nancy appears to be in control of her actions with men. Nancy interacts with other men as equals; in some cases, Nancy is even superior. Nancy exerts authority and control in many situations, which makes her such an interesting character. However, in many instances, Nancy becomes overwhelmed, and appears helpless. Nancy, often indecisive and impulsive, cannot always make suitable, logical decisions for her family. Consequently, the children as well as those who she strings along essentially bear the responsibility for Nancy's rash decisions.

In the first season, Nancy is seen with Celia Hoades, a friend of hers, at a PTA meeting. It appears that Celia and Nancy are not necessarily friends, but rather acquaintances. The question of what should be in vending machines comes up at the PTA meeting, and Nancy states that all sugary drinks should be removed as well as soda. Celia argues against Nancy, stating that most of the girls are on diets, so diet soda should be

kept in the vending machines.¹⁶⁷ Nancy, who appears to care for the overall well-being of the children, states that she does not believe that all of those chemicals should be placed in girls' bodies, as they are only children. Celia asks the PTA to vote whether or not to keep diet soda in the vending machines, and the PTA agrees that diet soda should be a staple so that girls abstain from indulging in sugary beverages. From this scene, viewers identify with Nancy, as she does not wish to damage the bodies of these young girls and boys.

As Nancy appears to be the “good mother” in this show, Celia appears to be the “bad mother.” Celia, a well-kept housewife of a successful lawyer, appears to have no desire to care for her children or husband. She is too selfish for domestic life. At the end of the first episode, viewers learn that Celia often is too strict, but not for the purpose of character development. Celia used to put a teddy bear that contained a camera in the pantry to watch when her daughter, Isabelle, was eating. However, Celia is unaware that her older daughter, Quinn, knows that the teddy bear has a camera in it. Celia intends on using the bear to keep tabs on her older daughter Quinn, in order to determine whether or not she and Nancy's son, Silas, are having sex. Quinn, knowing this, tells Celia that she would like to put the bear right in her bedroom. At the end second episode of Season One, Celia watches the reel of the video filmed by the teddy bear, and watches as Quinn flicks her off and mouth “fuck you” to the camera.¹⁶⁸ Then, without hesitation, Celia decides to send her daughter to Mexico. In contrast, we see Nancy both caring for, as well as providing advice to her children. When Nancy realizes that Silas is upset because

¹⁶⁷ “You Can't Miss the Bear.” *Weeds: Season One*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Brian Dannelly. Showtime, 2005.

¹⁶⁸ “You Can't Miss the Bear.” *Weeds: Season One*.

Quinn left, she tries to comfort him. Then, Shane falls off the roof while watching a video of his father, and he needs to go to the hospital because he broke his arm.¹⁶⁹ Because he broke his arm, Nancy is left without money. She gives up her Range Rover in order to get more marijuana in advance. It is evident that she is just trying to support her family and make life as comfortable for her children as it was before her husband died. In Season One, Episode Three, the viewer understands that Celia is abusive toward her children. In the episode “Good Shit Lollipop,” Celia substitutes her daughter’s secret candy stash for chocolate laxative bars, in order to “teach her a lesson” about staying on a diet.¹⁷⁰ Isabelle then has an accident in school because she ate the chocolate bars, and later overhears her mother discussing how she replaced her daughter’s chocolates with laxatives. Isabelle then replaces all of Celia’s laxatives with Imodium®.

In Episode 15 of Season Three, Nancy realizes that she is in trouble and that the DEA is onto her grow operation. Thus, Nancy decides to burn down her home during the pre-existing wildfire that is occurring. Nancy’s action is justifiably irrational, but it is also a decision that renders her a caring mother. She lights fire to her home in order to ensure that her children will succeed rather than suffer the negative consequences of their mothers’ decisions. Nancy and her family pack up their belongings and head to the fire shelter; Nancy begs the officers who are in charge of the fire control and evacuation to let her in the house. She makes it in, and covers the house in gasoline to ensure that the entire house will set on fire. She strikes a match and leaves the house.¹⁷¹ By taking all

¹⁶⁹ “Free Goat.” *Weeds: Season One*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Brian Dannelly. Showtime, 2005.

¹⁷⁰ “Good Shit Lollipop.” *Weeds: Season One*. Writ. Jenji Kohan and Roberto Benabib. Dir. Craig Zisk. Showtime, 2005.

¹⁷¹ “Go.” *Weeds: Season Three*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Craig Zisk. Showtime, 2007.

measures necessary to set the house on fire, Nancy is proving that she wishes to start over, and does not want her family to be plagued by her actions.

In Season Five, there is a lot of emphasis on Nancy's past and how she chose to raise her children. Nancy believes that she has "ruined" her children because Silas did not complete additional schooling, and they do not live the life that she had once expected them to live. However, Esteban, her husband, claims that he has brought his daughter up with proper education, and that she is out of Silas' league.¹⁷² When Nancy asks why Silas is out of Adelita's league, Esteban replies that he is a "nice, simple boy," and that he is not educated enough. In this episode, Adelita calls for Silas to assist her. When he comes to her room, she asks him to retrieve her laptop, which Silas deems a ludicrous request seeing as Adelita is nearby her laptop. He then discovers that Adelita is by his terms a "junkie," or a heroin addict. In this sense, *Weeds* contradicts the norm.¹⁷³ More specifically, Nancy has been the unconventional mother in that she was a single mother, and instead of working a job, she sold marijuana. However, Nancy still proves to be the better parent because she "held her kids close to her." In this sense, the viewer may interpret Nancy as a suitable parent, because she nurtured her children.

In sum, popular television reinforces the stereotypes that it indeed criticizes. Due to the fact that the women of *Desperate Housewives* appear to live somewhat glamorous lifestyles, women do tend to associate the ideal lifestyle with that of a woman who dedicates her time to the domestic sphere. Ultimately, the women in *Desperate Housewives* do not appear to be successful mothers unless they give up their careers in

¹⁷² "Glue." *Weeds: Season Five*. Writ. Jenji Kohan and Ron Fitzgerald. Dir. Michael Pressman. Showtime, 2009.

¹⁷³ "All About My Mom." *Weeds: Season Five*. Writ. Jenji Kohan. Dir. Scott Ellis. Showtime, 2009.

the workplace. Each role that the women take, aside from Lynette, is a job that reinforces female talents: cooking, beauty, teaching, and parenting. The men of *Desperate Housewives* feel emasculated when their wives have more successful careers. Although the women of *Desperate Housewives* make mistakes, the show exhibits American values. The viewer is left to draw his or her own conclusions and opinions of the characters based on their own parenting strategies and careers. Showtime's *Weeds* proves to reveal that Nancy, even as a drug dealer, cannot successfully parent and have a job, as she constantly finds herself and her family in compromising situations. Formerly a housewife to a successful engineer, Nancy appears to have no plan or purpose aside from parenting. Once more, women are shown as weak, unreliable, unsuccessful workers.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

After researching this topic, I was able to come to a few conclusions. First of all, I was able to understand that little progress has been made since *any* of the works cited in this thesis were published. More specifically, women have not achieved any sense of agency over their lives. It is evident that women are still bound by stereotypes which place women in a solidly inferior position to men.

After researching the topic of beauty, I was able to understand that beauty is more complex than simply a definition. Beauty has several associations, which prevent the woman from succeeding in her day-to-day life. For example, individuals learn at a young age that beauty is a determinant of character. If a woman is beautiful, she is understood as a threat. Susan Douglas mentions this concept in “Fractured Fairy Tales,” elaborating on how women self-monitor, and judge other women in result.¹⁷⁴ Additionally, as both Naomi Wolf and Catharine MacKinnon point out, beauty is associated with sex. Therefore, women must be sexualized, again compromising their positions in society, in order to be seen as beautiful. Most importantly, however, is the link between beauty and power. Women learn that beauty may achieve power. Therefore, women strive to become beautiful in order to become powerful.

It was evident that in the magazines that I reviewed, many of the advertisements linked beauty to youth. Additionally, these magazines presented all of the “sexualized” flaws of women. Wolf comments in *The Beauty Myth* about the areas of the body that are

¹⁷⁴ Douglas, Susan J., *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995.

battered and abused by men.¹⁷⁵ These are also the areas that are associated with beauty. I was able to understand that women mustn't judge each other, or ascertain the position of subordination in relation to men. If women continue to *act* in ways which render them incapable of achievements that men *are* capable of achieving, women will never become equal to men, reinforcing their inferiority.

When researching sexuality, I found that *Cosmopolitan* by no means contributed to any alternative views of sexuality other than those which represented heteronormative values. The magazine especially highlighted sexual acts which men found most favorable. Often times, *Cosmopolitan* associated love and sexuality as inseparable entities. Moreover, I found that *Cosmopolitan* revered sex as the glue that binds relationships together. After looking at the representation of female sexuality in *Weeds* and *Desperate Housewives*, I arrived at the understanding that *Desperate Housewives* illustrated ideas about sexuality which are widely accepted by the American public. If *Desperate Housewives* did acknowledge homosexual relationships, it did so in a way which was either eroticized (lesbian relationship) or was normalized, meaning that there was a masculine partner and a feminine partner in the relationship. In other instances, the characters seemed to either be flamboyant if they were homosexual, or were experiencing some form of mental illness or instability in their lives.

Conversely, *Weeds* explored several different expressions of sexuality. Most of these forms of sexuality were not normative. It is not possible to make a conclusion about whether or not this show positively contributes to the way in which a woman has authority over her own sexual actions, as in many cases, her independent sexual actions

¹⁷⁵ Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002, 150.

often also caused her to be in subordinate positions. I did find that *Weeds* opened up space for alternative types of sexuality, as it acknowledged several non-heteronormative relationships. I, as a viewer, was not left judging individuals based on their sexual experiences. In *Desperate Housewives*, however, many of the characters judged other characters who freely expressed their sexuality, thus causing the viewer to have a negative interpretation of the character. I conclude that there could be space in shows found on cable channels for women to engage in their own types of sexuality independent of those presented in mainstream television.

The ways in which work, family, and parenting were expressed through popular television were indicative that not much progress has been made in this area. Women in *Desperate Housewives* often had careers related to domestic work. Occupations of the women included: model, caterer, art teacher, and children's book illustrator. The one character who maintained a professional career outside of the household, Lynette, was thought to be masculine. Additionally, Lynette emasculated her husband as she was constantly in control of the household. This was further exasperated when she became his boss at work. When women were forced to work, they often compromised their relationships with their children, thus implying that the women should give up their jobs to be domestic engineers. In many cases, this is exactly what happened. *Desperate Housewives* reinforces past stereotypes about women in the household. There is an expectation that the woman should cook, take care of the house, be there to support her husband because he has had a "difficult day at work." She must sacrifice her own career for her family. Little attention is given to how difficult her life as she is forced into domesticity.

In *Weeds*, Nancy was unable to work in a professional career as she had been dependent on her late husband, Judah. Nancy is viewed as a more suitable mother than Celia, another character in the show, as she truly loves and cares for her children. The only reason that she begins her career as a drug dealer is to support her children, and make sure that they are provided with the same lifestyle that they had prior to Judah's death, as the family lives in Agrestic, California, a fictional, wealthy suburb of Los Angeles, California. I did also see Nancy as a caring mother, who truly wants the best for her family. In reality, Nancy's children appear to be self-sufficient and have a grasp on the world that other children in the show do not have. As Nancy's children (Shane and Silas) grow throughout the show, it is evident that the two children will be able to one day lead a successful life as they often learn from Nancy's mistakes. Moreover, it is also evident that the Botwins remain a close-knit family throughout the series. I saw Nancy as a somewhat weak character due to the irrational decisions that she makes throughout the course of the show. Nancy was, with minimal help, able to raise her children independently. Nancy adapted to the circumstances that occurred due to the death of her husband. If Nancy had worked while her husband was alive, Nancy inevitably would have become a stronger character and been more likely to have a better career. However, the entire series most likely would not exist if the idea of Nancy as a pot-selling mom disappeared. The drama that revolves around the entire drug trade is what makes the show so radical and unpredictable, also allowing for non-heteronormative sexual relationships.

The investigation of this topic obviously is not limited to merely the topics which I have explored. The role of women in society must be thoroughly examined in order to

assess the priorities and strategies that individuals must take in order to establish a system of equality in America. A large amount of work still needs to be done in order to assess women's positions. Women essentially must separate themselves from the ideals represented through the male perspective. Women are constantly told that they are in control of their lives, their destinies. However, women are consumed by the ideals as represented through magazines, often perpetuating their own subordination to men. The ideals represented are often constructed from the male perspective. Because the media still maintains that women are subordinate to men, the values that the media portrays are the values that form the schema which women live by.

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