

How far we've come?: Nostalgia and post-feminism in *Mad Men*

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Abstract:

Mad Men, the AMC drama set in the world of the 1960s advertising industry, is heralded as a hallmark series within the contemporary landscape of 'quality television'. It nostalgically represents an era that may be designated as pre-feminist, yet its place within the modern-day televisual landscape also positions it within a broader cultural milieu that is often regarded as post-feminist. *Mad Men* affords an avenue through which to explore the nostalgic representation of mid-century gender politics of both domesticity and women's place in the working world, and how those representations reflect changing social mores. This study examines how self-identified feminists engage with these pre-second wave female characters, how that engagement is enabled and constrained by the post-feminist era in which the series is produced, and how nostalgia functions as a method to critique the series' pre-feminist representations.

I argue that feminist viewers of the series trouble the assertion that *Mad Men* should be read solely through a sense of longing for the past; the representations of the series' cultural environment provides justification that mid-century nostalgia primarily benefits men and normative masculinity. However, viewers also contend that the representation of female characters provides women with an amount of agency unrepresentative of the time, which suggests that the series contains traces of post-feminist media culture, and is thus necessarily influenced by the contemporary cultural environment. Despite this, viewers highlight the ways in which the overt discrimination represented in *Mad Men* offers a way for feminist audiences to reflect on contemporary gender relations and subsequently problematize the assertions of post-feminism.

Keywords: *Mad Men*, nostalgia, post-feminism, quality television

Introduction

In November 2016, Americans will have had the opportunity to cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton, the first female presidential candidate representing a major political party. On its surface, Clinton's candidacy should represent the culmination of a cultural shift into a truly post-feminist era; taking 'post-feminism' to indicate that the feminist mission of equality broadly defined is outdated and irrelevant given that its aims have already been achieved (Boyle, 2008), a woman set to occupy the highest elected position in American politics points to the strides made through decades of feminist politics. Yet, a significant portion of Clinton's platform hinges on highlighting the way that the goals of second-wave feminists in the mid-twentieth century have yet to be realized. On her campaign website, Clinton advocates for such women's issues as closing the gender wage gap, fighting for paid family leave, and protecting women's health and reproductive rights ('Women's rights and opportunity').

Despite her ground-breaking position, Clinton's campaign has highlighted the ways that misogyny still undergirds the American cultural milieu, especially as it relates to women in power. Writing for *The Atlantic*, Peter Beinart (2016) maintains that Clinton's candidacy is illustrative of decades of research suggesting that women who '[violate] traditional gender roles' (para. 9) contribute to the emasculation men fear most: subordination to women. As the misogynistic rhetoric surrounding Clinton's campaign and her continued focus on gender-based policies reflect, the feminist aim of gender parity in the United States is far from accomplished.

During Clinton's first primary bid for the Democratic presidential nominee in 2008, *Mad Men* was just beginning its eight-year run on AMC. The series was the network's first foray into original scripted programming; as AMC's mid-2000s tagline 'Story Matters Here' suggests, *Mad Men* was reflective of the network's desire to provide premium programming on basic cable (Lacob, 2010). Indeed, this mission fit within the broader context of television's proliferation of 'quality television,' a marker used to designate the narratively complex, high production value prime-time dramas that began to appear in the early 2000s. Although the content of quality series varies, Lotz (2014) contends that the primary focus on masculine anti-heroes central to many quality television era programs (e.g., *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*) was a reaction to the gradual incorporation of second-wave feminism into contemporary gender norms. Specifically, these programs allowed men to wrestle with contemporary notions of masculinity in 'crisis,' in which traditional forms of masculinity were being replaced with emasculated 'wusses and pussies', particularly in the era of Barack Obama's presidency (Albrecht, 2015, p. 20).

Although nostalgia is not a feature unique to the 21st century televisual landscape, there has been an abundance of nostalgic representation of previous eras in recent years, particularly for programs featuring traditional gender norms. Dowd (2011) observed that the fall 2011 television schedule in the United States aired *Pan Am* and *The Playboy Club*, featuring 1960s stewardesses and Playboy bunnies, respectively, as well as *Charlie's Angels*, a reboot of the 1970s series focused on a beautiful crime-fighting trio. Dowd cites an

unnamed female television executive who postulates why this type of series specifically has experienced a surge in popularity:

It's not a coincidence that these retro shows are appearing at the same time men are confused about who [sic] to be. A lot of women are making more money and getting more college degrees. The traditional roles of dominant and submissive roles are reversed in many cases. Everything was clearer in the '60s (para. 12).

In contrast with programs set in present day, nostalgic representations '[show] a world where men were men and women were thrust into the background' (Strachan, 2011, para. 14). While quality television dramas set within modern times grapple with expectations of contemporary masculinity in crisis, those set in previous eras provide a script of normative gender roles that temper masculinity's current state of anxiety.

Mad Men fits squarely within contemporary televisual trends of both masculinized, quality television drama and the nostalgic period piece. Set in 1960s New York City, the series follows the employees of the Sterling Cooper advertising agency. *Mad Men's* protagonist, Don Draper (Jon Hamm), is exemplary of the male anti-hero focus in quality television dramas. In their character description of Don on the *Mad Men* series page, AMC notes that Don 'has made a career selling the promise of happiness, but the reality continues to elude him. His marriage ... appeared picture-perfect, yet Don always felt he was missing something, seeking comfort in affairs, alcohol and an obsessive dedication to his advertising agency' ('Don Draper,' 2016, para. 1). Albrecht (2015) posits that Don's nostalgic masculinity is 'both pleasurable and painful' (p. 64), suggesting that the hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity Don represents is at once a longing for and repudiation of the past. Lotz (2014) further points out the way *Mad Men's* nostalgic depiction of Don emphasizes the changing nature of the norms of masculinity. She notes, '*Mad Men* frequently displays behaviors and aspects of masculinity common among straight, white, upper-class men that were hegemonic at the time but that now seem shockingly unacceptable' (p. 40). That is, viewing *Mad Men's* nostalgic setting in present day makes clear that masculinity must shift in order to retain dominance and alleviate its position of crisis.

While Don is the focus of *Mad Men's* narrative development, the series' three primary female characters provide insight into the expectations of and possibilities for mid-twentieth century women. Don's wife, Betty Draper (January Jones), is a Bryn Mawr graduate who is fluent in Italian, yet after marrying Don, she is tasked with raising the three Draper children in Ossining, New York. Betty's suburban housewife ennui is often characterized as the embodiment of the 'problem with no name' in Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The other two female leads are reflective of the independent, workforce women Helen Gurley Brown envisioned in *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962). Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) begins her first day of work at Sterling Cooper in the series pilot as Don's new secretary, but later in the first season, her creative prowess is recognized and she

is promoted to a copywriter at the agency. For the first three seasons, Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks) is the office manager for Sterling Cooper, though later in the series she becomes a partner of the retooled Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce agency.

Mad Men's place within the modern-day televisual landscape also positions it within a broader cultural milieu that is often regarded as post-feminist. Although its ostensible focus is on the evolution of masculine anti-hero Don Draper, the series' female characters offer an avenue through which to explore the nostalgic representation of mid-century gender politics of both domesticity and women's place in the working world, and how those representations reflect changing social mores. In particular, this study examines how one segment of *Mad Men* viewers, self-identified feminists, engage with these pre-second wave female characters, how that engagement is enabled and constrained by the post-feminist era in which the series is produced, and how nostalgia functions as a method to critique the series' pre-feminist¹ representations.

To this end, I argue that feminist viewers of the series trouble the assertion that *Mad Men* should be read solely through a sense of longing for the past; the representation of the series' cultural environment provides justification that mid-century nostalgia primarily benefits men and normative masculinity. However, viewers also contend that the representation of the three primary female characters affords women with an amount of agency unrepresentative of the time, which suggests that the series contains traces of post-feminist media culture (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007) and is necessarily influenced by the contemporary cultural environment. Despite this, viewers highlight the ways in which the overt discrimination represented in *Mad Men* affords a way for feminist audiences to reflect on contemporary gender relations and subsequently problematize the assertions of post-feminism. To frame this analysis, I first delineate the functions of nostalgia, followed by a discussion of post-feminism and its role in contemporary media culture. I then highlight the ways feminist media studies have previously been used to understand the negotiation of gender politics.

Nostalgia

Although initially understood to be a pathological condition (Werman, 1977), 'nostalgia' is conceived of as emotion of longing in contemporary popular lexicon. For instance, psychologist Erica Hepper describes nostalgia as 'the warm, fuzzy emotion that we feel when we think about fond memories from our past... It often feels bittersweet — mostly happy and comforting, but with a tinge of sadness that whatever we're remembering is lost in some way' (as cited in Leardi, 2013). Central to this interpretation is the belief that nostalgia derives from viewing the past in a more positively valenced way than the present. Drawing from Williams' (1977) notion of 'structure of feeling', Tunnock (1995) suggests that nostalgia has primarily been understood as an emotion that 'invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world' (p. 454).

Yet, scholars have problematized this view of nostalgia, and have begun to reconceptualize its function in examining re-articulations of the past. In his discussion of the

ways nostalgia has become increasingly commodified in modern times, Grainge (2000) notes that nostalgia can be represented through mode, or stylistic elements, and mood, 'a form of idealized remembrance ... [nostalgia] is ... a grounding concept of longing or loss' (p. 28). In this way, nostalgic representations of the past have come to signify a culture in transition or crisis, as new values take hold and challenge previous assumptions about social life. However, Grainge provides an alternative understanding of how nostalgia can be used as an avenue to view the past critically, noting, 'Retro America need not describe a culture in crisis, but may rather suggest a moment distinguished by its re-evaluation and re-representation of the forms, contexts, and values of the past' (p. 33). Tunnock's (1995) critique of nostalgia theory echoes this assertion; while he contends that 'nostalgia approaches the past as a stable source of value and meaning' that should not be 'conflated with the desire for a stable, traditional, and hierarchized society' (p. 455) in the present. Nostalgia, then, not only represents a longing for the past, but through a contrast with contemporary society, can also function as a commentary on social politics.

Nostalgia has proven to be a fruitful lens through which to examine *Mad Men's* representation of the post-World War II move into modernity. However, to fully understand the function of nostalgia in *Mad Men*, it must be contextualized within the present-day social and political climate. Tudor (2012) contends that contemporary postmodern and neoliberal ideologies give way to 'representations that allow viewers to shift from nostalgia for *Mad Men's* fashion, sexism, and racism of the 1960s, to the importation of the neoliberal idea of post sexism/racism that makes celebrating the series' sexism/racism acceptable' (p. 334). She goes on to conclude, 'Public notions of political classes, whether that is defined by gender or sexual orientation, race, or economics, can be dismissed under postmodernism because they are irrelevant, and should be consigned to history' (p. 338). Thus, because *Mad Men* is produced in an era that emphasizes individualism, post-racism, and post-sexism, viewers are invited to contrast the way things *are* with the way things *were*.

Spigel (2013) offers a different understanding of how nostalgic representations in *Mad Men* engage with the cultural mores between the 1960s and present day. Noting the rise of nostalgic television in recent years, she contends 'in the postfeminist age there is considerable nostalgia for pre-feminism, that moment right before second-wave feminism emerged as a political movement' (p. 271). Spigel argues that *Mad Men's* glamorization of women's social positions in the 1960s obfuscates the political work required of second-wave feminists; the series, she points out, never addresses feminist politics directly, but instead 'provides a vision of the past in which women of the 1960s were already hoping to be post-feminists: independent, career-focused, yet hyperbolically 'feminine' in their embrace of fashion, shopping and dating' (p. 273). Spigel contextualizes *Mad Men's* nostalgic pre-feminist representation within a post-feminist culture; although she does also acknowledge that 'nostalgia can be a complex and useful mechanism for thinking about the past and for dealing with the present' (p. 278), she is not optimistic that *Mad Men's* 'sleek,' apolitical nostalgia could generate productive discourse about feminist politics.

Post-feminism and Media Culture

As evidenced by Spigel's analysis of the interplay between nostalgia and feminist politics, feminist reception of *Mad Men's* nostalgic representation of mid-century American cannot be understood without situating it within the post-feminist media culture in which it is produced. While some have conceived of post-feminism as a reactionary backlash to feminist politics (e.g., Faludi, 1991), Tasker and Negra (2007) contend that the emergence of post-feminist ideology is far more complex than is allowed by the 'backlash' argument. As they conclude, 'Feminist activism has long been met with strategies of resistance, negotiation, and containment, processes that a model of backlash – with its implications of achievements won and then subsequently lost – cannot effectively incorporate within the linear chronology of social change on which it seems to be premised' (p. 1). Thus, while backlash has always existed concurrently with feminist politics, contemporary post-feminist ideology selectively appropriates elements of feminism in order to 'emphasize that it is no longer needed' (McRobbie 2004, p. 255).

Post-feminist culture and the media texts produced therein contain a number of common features that highlight feminism's accomplishments while simultaneously repudiating the continued necessity of feminist politics. McRobbie (2004), for instance, argues that post-feminist popular culture highlights women as individualized, liberal subjects who are responsible for making correct choices for their own lives. Consequently, structural challenges women continue to face are dismissed as individual problems. This individual agency is further constrained by intersectional identity; Tasker and Negra (2007) underscore postfeminist culture's mandate of women as the 'empowered consumer' (p. 2), which makes post-feminism 'white and middle class by default ... a strategy by which other kinds of difference are glossed over' (p. 2).

To explore post-feminism's place in the current media landscape, Gill (2007) maintains that post-feminism should be conceptualized as a sensibility, noting that post-feminist media culture 'should be our critical object – a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire rather than an analytic perspective' (p. 148). In other words, rather than conceptualizing post-feminism as a critical tool for analyzing contemporary texts, Gill advocates for analyzing post-feminist media culture itself. She notes that adopting the approach of post-feminism as a sensibility 'does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media' (p. 148).

Through this articulation, Gill (2007) identifies a number of themes present in post-feminist media culture. Among these characteristics is a preoccupation with the female body; Gill points out that the female body, rather than social or psychological concerns, shapes notions of femininity, and thus it is under constant surveillance and discipline by oneself and others to meet these expectations of femininity. While Gill suggests that the intense sexualization of girls' and women's bodies is also characteristic of pre-feminist media culture, the contemporary version of this sexualization works differently than

previous iterations in that women are presented as desiring sexual subjects rather than passive objects. Female agency is also central to another of Gill's themes: an emphasis on individualism and empowerment. She contends post-feminist media culture presents an 'almost total evacuation of notions of politics or cultural influence' (p. 153), and the portrayal of women, even their sexualization, is presented in the context of individual choice.

Post-feminist media culture, then, is inherently influenced by the feminist aims of generations past; it is only through the accomplishments of feminist politics that the contemporary notions of agency and 'choice' are viable options for post-feminist representation. Pre-feminist gender representations offer a way to analyze the impetus for the second-wave feminist politics that eventually gave way to post-feminism. *Mad Men* is a text embedded in a post-feminist media culture, yet its representation of pre-feminist gender mores make it an avenue through which to examine how nostalgia enables and/or challenges the notion that feminist aims have been accomplished.

Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies have long been concerned not only with how gender is represented in texts, but also with the ways in which women engage with media texts to make sense of their own identities and the social worlds they inhabit. Feminist reception studies have a storied history of uncovering the varied uses and pleasures women derive from feminized media, often derided as 'low' culture. Feminist audience scholarship regarding romance novels (Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984), situation comedies (Press, 1991), soap operas (Ang, 1985), and talk shows (Wood, 2005) all reveal that women's engagement with popular culture serves a variety of purposes, from escapism to identity negotiation. However, as Bourdage (2014) points out in her own feminist analysis of *Mad Men* fans, studies that investigate how women and feminists consume quality television are relatively absent.

Fewer studies explore audiences who explicitly identify as feminist, yet this work offers important insight into how a critical feminist lens influences the reading of texts. Thomas (2002), for example, argued that feminist fans of British radio program *The Archers* and television show *Inspector Morse* apply a feminist lens to their understanding of mediated cultural mores, specifically by using representations in the programs to facilitate discussions about changing gender norms in British culture. Petersen (2012) similarly engaged with self-identified feminist audiences of *Twilight* to determine what pleasures those readers gain from a text ostensibly identified as anti-feminist, ultimately concluding that readers were critical of what they viewed as the text's regressive elements, including Bella's lack of autonomy and 'thinly veiled conservative allegories' of 'abstinence porn' (p. 62). Similar to Thomas' (2002) conclusions, Petersen suggests that *Twilight's* regressive elements offer the opportunity to engage in broader social discourse about the role of patriarchy and gender normativity. As both of these studies illustrate, feminist readings can offer reflexivity about media's role perpetuating or problematizing gender-based ideologies.

Given its legitimated status as quality television and the critical praise the series received throughout its run, *Mad Men* has been the subject of significant textual analysis, much of which examine gender politics and feminist engagement with the series. Several textual analyses posit that the women of *Mad Men* attempt to harness power within the patriarchal context to rewrite scripts for their lives, to differing ends. Specifically, Akass and McCabe (2011) argue that working within a patriarchal system has had detrimental results for both Joan Holloway and Peggy Olson. While Joan utilizes her sexuality to gain favor with men in the agency, her self-objectification ultimately takes away her subjectivity and reifies the patriarchal structure. Their analysis of the ways in which the text positions Peggy is equally pessimistic; they note her rejection of the typical role of a 1960s working woman leaves her isolated from both men and women in the office and places limitations on her personal life. Contrarily, Haralovich (2011) posits that Peggy's ability to work within the constraints of the system allows her to reconstruct what it means to be a single, working woman in the dawn of the women's liberation movement. Moreover, Wilson and Lane (2012) suggest Betty Draper illustrates the way that female dissatisfaction can problematize the notion of the 'traditional' American family. They conclude, '*Mad Men* reminds us that the most commonly cited and politically potent idealization of 'the American family,' the White, heterosexual, suburban, middle-class, single-breadwinner family of the 1950s was not, and is not, exactly what it appears to be' (p. 86). Indeed, Wilson and Lane's analysis reflects how uncritical nostalgia may portray an unrealistically optimistic view of the past.

Fewer scholars have undertaken reception research to draw conclusions about feminist readings of *Mad Men*. Agirre's (2014) transnational examination of *Mad Men* viewers based in the United States, United Kingdom, and Spain revealed that the post-feminist sensibility of the show was an entry point for many viewers, but the reading of feminist politics were divided along lines of gender. Specifically, her female participants were more likely to find gender representation in the series problematic than their male counterparts. Further, in her interviews with five intergenerational feminist fans of the series, Bourdage (2014) concluded that participants, despite their age, were 'cautiously optimistic about the potential for feminist awakening in the series' female characters and audience members' and they expressed 'a desire to witness continued progress for the series' women' (p. 172). Responding to Bourdage's call for further reception studies of *Mad Men* due to the 'complexity of the text and the related multiplicity of interpretations' (p. 164), and to further engage with Agirre's (2014) conclusions about the role of post-feminist sensibilities in the series, I investigate the role of mediated nostalgia in feminist reception of *Mad Men*.

Interviewing Process

Textual analyses of *Mad Men* lay the groundwork for ideological constructions of gender in the series, but they stop short of providing a nuanced understanding the ways viewers engage with the text. Viewing reception work as a necessary complement to text-based analysis, Radway (1986) argues that the meanings assigned to a message are only

meaningful insofar as they derive from an audience's interaction with the text. She emphasizes, 'The content of any message, whether textual or behavioral, is not simply found in that message but is constructed by an audience interacting with that message' (p. 96). Radway acknowledges that mass culture critics may likely interpret a text's meaning differently than its audience, and by exploring the 'linguistic and conceptual forms used by real people to give order and meaning to the material situation in which they find themselves' (p. 118), cultural studies scholars are better able to understand the ways media audiences' interpretations are re-circulated into their everyday lives. Watkins and Emerson (2000) offer that feminist perspectives on media reception in particular 'have revealed the ways in which women appropriate the media as a site of meaning construction, actively engaging and, occasionally, contesting images and themes of gender domination' (p. 157). It is important to realize that these ideological assumptions do not manifest at an individual level, but are rather 'cultural products that bind societies and social groups' (Lewis, 1991, p. 88). To uncover the ways *Mad Men* has been appropriated and understood by feminist audiences, I employ focus group research, a technique that Lunt and Livingstone (1996) suggest emphasizes the social nature of communication.

Feminist fans of *Mad Men* responded to calls for participation that were posted on flyers and on list serves for academic institutions and women's organizations in two mid-sized Midwestern towns. Once initial fans agreed to participate, I encouraged them to bring friends or family members who also self-identified as feminists and were fans of the series. Between August 2011 and July 2012, I conducted seven focus group interviews with a total of twenty-seven self-identified feminists who considered themselves fans of *Mad Men*. The semi-structured interviews ranged from seventy to one hundred and twenty minutes, and included questions about the plots, themes, and characters of *Mad Men*, personal beliefs about feminist identity, and feminism's relationship to the series. Participants were mostly female (twenty-four), White (twenty-three), and heterosexual (seventeen). Ages ranged from twenty to sixty-three years of age; the average age was thirty-four. All of the participants had seen multiple seasons of the show, and many were current with the series at the time of their interviews. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to guarantee anonymity.

Because the definition of feminism is often misunderstood, contentiously debated, or variant based on identity, I asked participants to articulate what being a feminist meant to them personally; these personal interpretations are what guide their understanding and criticism of the media they consume. Thus, before providing their interpretations of the series, it is important to first briefly explicate their self-professed definitions of feminism. Several participants described feminism simply as an emphasis on equality, including Elise (32, White, professor) who stated that she understood it as 'being treated as an equal, having equal opportunities,' and Tina (34, White, librarian) concluded, 'Really what it just comes down to is believing that women and men are equal people', Further, Jason (23, biracial, graduate student) articulated his desire for equality through the perspective of a male feminist. He noted, 'There's the different dynamic of I could just sit back and enjoy my

male privilege, you know? ... [But I think] more women in stronger positions would be better for everybody', Linda (58, White, professor) pointed out that although 'in [her] lifetime legally things have come a long, long way ... they are just a tremendous number of laws and customs that have developed or have been squelched that were overtly sexist,' equality is still a central goal of feminism because, as she maintains, 'the mindset that still influences culture and individual lives is that it's still better to be a man. There's still a sex hierarchy',

Other participants' articulations of feminism emphasized the importance of intersectional identities, a key feature in contemporary understandings of feminism. For example, Sara (26, White, graduate student) expressed that, 'It's gender, but for me it's also largely class that I am interested in, or being able to be aware of the different things that occur to individuals and groups of people based on those identities', Kristen (20, African-American, student) described feminism as 'looking out for everyone ... racial contexts and sexual orientation contexts, it's just putting it all together and just evening everything out', Participants also conceptualized feminism as something that intimately affected their personal lives. Andrea's (34, White, professor) definition emphasized micro-level concerns: 'The personal is political, but also the political is personal. ... How can I take that and apply that to my everyday life?' Michelle (24, White, graduate student) similarly said feminism is 'about not letting male dominance and power influence, on a personal level, my day-to-day, even though I can't really escape it structurally',

Still others emphasized the role activism played in their personal constructions of feminism. Erica (44, White, lawyer) noted that, 'In some way, shape or form, I think activism needs to be part of that [feminist] conversation', Kim (age 27, White, professor) elaborated on this idea, highlighting the intersectional identities feminist activists speak for: 'Being committed to fighting [oppression] and being committed to social justice issues and recognizing that there are connections between the oppression of women, of gays and lesbians, of men, of minorities, of all these different groups that face injustices', Those participants who chose to focus on the day-to-day pragmatic use of feminism and those who hoped to enact social change both saw feminism as an active tool in their desire to combat oppression. Finally, a number of participants described their view of feminism simply as the lens through which they interpret their lives. Lisa (42, White, health care administrator) suggested that she thinks of feminism 'as a lens, it's a paradigm in how I see the world and how I view everything', For Aabish (23, South-Asian, medical student), the critical feminist lens she applies to her life is the first step toward enacting change. She shared, 'It's a lens where I start noticing things and that would then hopefully move me to think about it, dissect it, analyze it, act upon it',

Each of the participants' definitions of feminism converges around themes of the desire for equality, the recognition of a hierarchy of power along categories of identity and the utilization of oppression to maintain that hierarchy, the desire to enact change on both micro and macro levels, and the lens through which to critically examine their worlds. These definitions influenced the way these self-identified feminist viewers of *Mad Men* read the

representation of the series' characters and gender politics, beginning with how they understood the function of nostalgia.

***Mad Men* and Nostalgia**

As Grainge (2000) details, mode and mood influence how a text constructs the nostalgic, and participants attributed both to *Mad Men's* nostalgic appeal, though to differing ends. Dubbing the series 'nostalgia porn,' Andrea shares that a major draw of the show is the mid-century aesthetic, concluding 'the clothes, the sets ... it's a sexy show', Ann (52, White, program coordinator) recalled how nostalgia was established through relics of her own childhood during the 1960s:

I want to go home and find my Barbies because I have an evening dress that looks very much like what [Betty] wore to a wedding [in the show]...maybe that's what resonates with women my age, because we look at her and we're like, oh my God, it's Barbie from our childhood.

Donna (56, White, writer) similarly recognized mid-century aesthetic features in the home of some of *Mad Men's* minor characters, indicating, 'In Pete and Trudy's apartment, there is a trio of giraffes and I had friends who had that in their homes. To me, it's all very familiar, the houses, it's all very familiar', Importantly, and reflective of the older participants' comments of familiarity, fans attributed the nostalgia crafted through aesthetic choices to a desire for representational authenticity of the era. Beth (21, White, student) described *Mad Men* as 'well researched,' concluding, 'Part of the reason it works so well for people for nostalgia is because they did a really good job of the costumes and...working with a premise that already existed. So that makes it more engulfing',

Aligned with the perception that the *Mad Men* creators' attention to detail contributed to representational accuracy in nostalgic mode, feminist fans contended that representation of traditional, mid-century gender expectations also impacted the cultural verisimilitude of the series, which shapes nostalgic mood. However, the negative way in which they spoke about the era problematized the conflation of nostalgia with a sense of 'longing,' and was more consistent with the perception of nostalgia as a critical framework to examine the past. The series' primary settings – the Sterling Cooper advertising agency and the Draper home – were largely entrenched in pre-feminist gender expectations, and thus contributed to a nostalgic mood benefitting men and normative masculinity. Feminist fans, for example, suggested that the occupational roles of men and women were clearly demarcated in Sterling Cooper, and these roles reflected a hierarchal culture rooted in a patriarchal gender structure. A number of participants, including Rachel (25, White, graduate student), described the representation of the agency as 'a boy's club'; Cassy (21, White, student) also used this description, adding that, 'the women [are] there to serve the men primarily ... for whatever their boss may need. They're making appointments, they're getting children's presents', Candice (29, Korean-American, professor) further pointed out

that women's roles of servitude extended beyond traditional secretarial duties to include caretaker responsibilities: 'Joan tells Peggy really sometimes you're a mother, sometimes you're going to be sort of a nurse, like these roles you have to play as a woman in the workforce',

The establishment of a pre-feminist cultural mood was further discussed in terms of the hostile work environment at the advertising agency. Aabish pointed out that the women in the office were represented as having 'only two roles, secretary and operator' and they were otherwise expected to 'shut up, get stared at, get poked, get groped, and you put up with it', Emily (26, White, counsellor) maintained that the effect of this culture was established from the first episode of the series, noting:

On Peggy's first day, they show you what it's like for the women because Joan's giving her the tour and there's a girl crying in the bathroom. And even though we never see that again, Joan talks about it like this happens all the time. So then we don't have to see it again. The stage is set.

Although Emily did not explicitly relay any specific examples of 'what it's like for the women,' her comments allude to fact that they were recipients of repeated negative treatment in the workplace. Participants condemned this treatment of *Mad Men's* women as ranging from disrespectful to blatant sexual harassment, and they contextualized it within its nostalgic framework. Rachel, for instance, said, 'I think sexual harassment was just something that happened, I think to some degree [their frustration] has to be [about sexual harassment]. And frustration about nobody's listening to you, or even caring what they say to you, is offensive',

The advertising agency was not the only space firmly rooted in pre-feminist gender norms; the Draper's domestic life was also structured around traditional notions of masculinity and femininity in the home. Jeff (35, White, writer) believed Don viewed his role in the home as a provider of financial support for his family. He observed, 'I think he looks at things as all I need to do is provide, provide, provide, earn money, then everything else I could do doesn't matter,' supporting the traditional domestic model of men as simply family breadwinners. Kim (27, White, graduate student) reiterated this point: 'He has little to no involvement with the family other than expecting [Betty] to have dinner cooked for him and patting the kids on the head. ... There are no expectations for him to do anything but be the breadwinner', While other participants mentioned that he did seem to care for his children, pre-feminist domestic expectations meant that that care was manifested in his role as financial provider, a nostalgic depiction privileging normative masculinity.

Participants additionally viewed the Draper's home life as a very specific contextual space: that of mid-century, White, wealthy, suburban domesticity – which heavily contributed to their reading of the Draper's home arrangement as pre-feminist. In particular, Beth noted that Betty was 'socialized to be less than useful. So it's not like she would be alone in this whole vapid housewife thing. I mean, those women weren't born that

way', Similarly, Andrea contended that Betty was 'infantilized by being a rich, White, woman in 1960... She has no role', In nearly every interview, fans suggested that Betty's domestic ennui was a clear personification of Friedan's (1963) pre-feminist 'problem with no name', As Lisa shared:

No wonder women were on Valium back then. I remember the first time I read *The Feminine Mystique*, I was too young to really grasp the whole, I mean, my mother talked about how you got married and you went to the suburbs and that was it. I read the book and I remember thinking about the despair and depression and, boy, [Betty] epitomizes it to me. Like, what a lousy life ... it's just a lousy way to live.

Participants attributed Betty's dissatisfaction to her position as a suburban housewife; thus, the reading of Betty's character as pre-feminist is less about the character herself, and more a reflection of the cultural milieu she occupied.

As Andrea concluded, 'I think that all the women [in *Mad Men*], the thing that bonds them all together, is that all of them have to exist in a world that does not allow room for women'. Respondents articulated that *Mad Men* established a nostalgic glamorization of mid-century America through its stylistic mode. However, insofar as nostalgia can be understood as a sense of longing for a bygone era, participants troubled the assertion that *Mad Men*'s nostalgic mode would produce this feeling of longing for feminist viewers. As evidenced in their personal articulations of feminism rooted in equality and activism focused on dismantling hierarchical oppression, it is unlikely feminists would profess a sense of yearning for a pre-feminist era.

Importantly, however, the series' representations cannot be divorced from the post-feminist cultural context in which it is produced, and the way post-feminist milieu shapes audience understanding of the series. Although participants contended that the diegetic world of *Mad Men* illustrated pre-feminist gender relations, echoing popular press analysis of the series (e.g., Strachan, 2011), their readings of the pre-feminist femininities of Joan, Peggy, and Betty are shaped by traces of post-feminist media culture, particularly the individualized, empowered sexual subject.

Joan, Peggy, and Betty as Post-feminist Subjects

As the head of Sterling Cooper's secretarial pool, participants perceived that Joan wielded a significant amount of power within the agency, despite previously describing it as a 'boys' club', Some fans, like Elise, mentioned that Joan 'runs the show,' and Cassy described her as 'the backbone of the office', Importantly, most attributed her authority to the ways in which Joan utilized her sexuality and hyper-femininity as a resource to leverage power. Linda remembered Joan 'dressing as voluptuously as she possibly could and definitely using that'. Similarly, Jeff explained Joan's sexuality as 'this physical force ... guys, they literally can't

turn their eyes away from her and she's found a way to use that'. Andrea elaborated, noting the connection between Joan's sexuality and her power:

Joan does embrace stereotypes about herself in order to manipulate the system. ... With that pen necklace that just sort of dangles between her bosoms and, you know, she never pays for lunch because she can manipulate the boys... But she runs that office with an iron fist and if you piss off Joan, like, you're done for. Your work is done.

Complicating Mulvey's (1975) notion that the female body is an object of to-be-looked-at-ness that exists to serve the male gaze, participants suggested that Joan's performance of sexuality was not only purposeful, but also strategic. Emily, for instance, argued that Joan is 'playing the game the way the game is set up. She's really smart. She knows exactly what she's doing'. Despite Sterling Cooper's designation as a pre-feminist representation, participants' evaluation of Joan's power positions her as a post-feminist actor within that world. Indeed, fans' belief that Joan was 'playing the game the way the game was set up' acknowledges her environment as pre-feminist, but colludes with the post-feminist assumption that the deliberate use of her sexuality was a tool that gave her the power to transcend it.

As Douglas (2010) argues, contemporary media texts are situated in a context of 'enlightened sexism,' which, similar to post-feminist media culture, 'sells the line that it is precisely through women's calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and indeed will embrace' (p. 9). Despite the power many said Joan was granted through her sexualized body, others indicated that her power was only nominal because it failed to result in economic compensation or influence in the office. In this way, participants found the powers granted by post-feminist sexualized subjectivity unsatisfying. As Lisa pointed out, 'Joan never goes outside these very carefully defined parameters of the office. You never see her in a planning meeting or a creative meeting,' and Erica argued, 'When you look at the organization, she's just a glorified secretary', Michelle further contended, 'She runs that office to a certain extent, but she doesn't get paid as much as the dudes at the top. They know what she's worth, but they don't have to give her what she's worth because she's a woman'. Beth echoed this sentiment, asserting that the respect she gained through her sexuality was illusory: 'Yeah, she gets ahead because of her sensuality, [but] then that just shows you, like, okay so you can get 'x' amount far with that, but there isn't any respect that is accompanied with that'. Even so, the question of respect is minimized in favor of the notion that Joan is 'working within the system'; for instance, while Rachel acknowledged that 'she's definitely very objectified ... at the same time, she's used it to get an upper hand on a lot of the guys in the firm and she kind of runs the office'.

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, actress Christina Hendricks commented on the evaluation of her character as feminist, remarking:

Some people have called her a feminist, but I would not. ... I think she's smart and able. I think she knows that she deserves to be treated in a certain way, but her methods are not technically what you would call 'feminist', Maybe now you would, but I don't think you would have at the time (as cited in Bahr, 2013, para. 3).

Hendricks' statement reflects how an emphasis on women as sexual subjects is more characteristic of a current, post-feminist climate than the pre-feminist one her character inhabits. Similarly, participants' reading of Joan's sexual agency illustrates the contradictory construction of the post-feminist subject; Joan's power within the context of the pre-feminist space of the ad agency suggests we may read her portrayal as feminist, yet her characterization is also post-feminist in its substitution of sexual power for political or economic power.

Also central to post-feminist discourse is a de-politicization of gender issues through discourses of individualism and empowerment. Participants used this to discuss Peggy's ascension from secretary to copywriter at Sterling Cooper, emphasizing her subversion of traditional gendered expectations and characteristics, and the self-serving, empowered choices she made to advance her career. Although most women on the series, even those with education and careers, were represented as expecting to get married and return to the home, feminist fans observed that Peggy's trajectory differed from those normative expectations. As Rachel stated, 'I'm not sure that Peggy cares as much about [marriage and family]. She was never really on the wealthy track, to marry a wealthy guy. That wasn't her point in the series at all', Instead, participants noted that she was more interested in career advancement in a pre-feminist milieu that usually relegated women to secretarial roles. Elise described a conversation Peggy had with Don in which she expressed her reluctance to marry her then-boyfriend: '[Peggy] says, "I know what I'm supposed to want, but nothing with [my boyfriend] ever feels as important as what I'm doing [at work]"', Participants lauded this choice, often using positive terms such as 'ambition' and 'drive' to describe the character.

Further, a number of fans attributed Peggy's success in the patriarchal space of the advertising agency to her willingness to adopt a masculine style. Barb (63, White, professor) pointed out that Peggy's career ascension was rooted in the way she 'role models the men ... In some ways she has more of the masculine work traits. ... She follows the style of the men rather than being comfortable enough to find her own style', Aabish indicated that other characters in *Mad Men* perceived Peggy as masculine in her approach to work: '[Peggy] tries to [act like] a man and then Jimmie Barrett's wife has said, "Don't try to be a man, you can't. Be a woman, that's the most powerful thing".' Thus, participants did understand Peggy as an example of progressive gender ideals in terms of her career, but her occupational success came at the expense of her personal life. The either-or dichotomy created in her character's life serves as a cautionary tale for ambitious women, particularly

those who adopt traditionally masculine characteristics in order to succeed, which give does given some credence to the post-feminist backlash rhetoric Faludi (1991) identifies in the years following the movement's second wave.

Essential to understanding Peggy is the notion that participants believed her subversion of gender expectations to be entirely guided by her free and empowered choices, and were thus consistent with post-feminism's ideological assumption of human agency. Kristen, for example, noted that Peggy 'seems to do what she wants to do and gets what she really wants to get', Laura (26, White, copy editor) similarly cited her assertiveness, noting that while Don was responsible for promoting her to copywriter, a job for which she never applied, 'she is the one who is going in asking for a raise, never gonna get, but still asking for things'. While Emily acknowledged that Peggy could be read as a subject of circumstance, she quickly dismissed this passive characterization and argued that she took advantage of the limited options available to her within the pre-feminist context:

Sometimes I think when I'm looking for feminist characters that I'm not really being fair because I'm taking some glorified ideal of what a feminist is and trying to apply it to a human being, which there's nobody who's like that, you know what I mean? And she's, first of all, before second-wave feminism, so we can't expect her to be all third-wavey. Yeah, she's working in an advertising agency, which is evil, but second-wave feminism was about equal access in the workplace and places that have power. And she's doing that. And yeah, I can see what you're saying about some of the things she does are things that are impressed upon her, but if you don't know you can do something, it takes a very special person to go out there and start busting down walls. But when she sees an open door, she goes through it. She doesn't stay away from it out of fear of what might be on the other side.

In other words, Peggy makes empowered choices; success does not simply happen to her, it occurs because of her ambition and drive and, importantly, her willingness to adopt what fans identified as masculine characteristics.

When fans spoke about Betty, the archetype of women's limited options in pre-feminist culture, they also framed her character within the context of choice. Rachel, for instance, suggested that Betty's role as a stay-at-home mother was driven by desire rather than pre-feminist gender expectations: 'I think it's social standing she's motivated by, but it's a different type [than success at work]. I think Betty want to be a suburbanite with the nice big house', Yet even when participants acknowledged Betty's consignment to the gender expectations of the era, it was viewed as an unwillingness to harness a feminist ideology of agency. For example, in contrasting Betty with Don's mistresses, Michelle postulated about the mistresses' appeal: 'I think, especially in comparison to Betty, both of them are more independent women, at least compared to Betty. And they're doing things that they want to do', Linda shared that she felt like 'Betty has no idea what she wants. She

can't even articulate goals or dreams even. She got on a path passively and is playing this role of doll wife'. Similarly, Jeff questioned whether or not Betty would seek a different life, emphasizing her choice to do so: 'I'm not convinced that she's the kind of person that would take hold of any opportunities were they to present themselves to her'. Consistent with the post-feminist assumption of independence and empowerment, participants attributed Betty's failure to self-actualize and her ultimate unhappiness with her own moral failing, not the pre-feminist domestic context in which she was situated.

Fans' articulation of the nostalgic mood that privileges normative masculinity and the personal agency afforded to the women in workplace highlights an interesting contradiction that reifies the pervasive nature of post-feminist ideology. That is, even for a series participants contextualized within a pre-feminist gender hierarchy, individual women were able to harness the power of their sexuality and carefully calculated decision-making to transcend limitations of the pre-feminist milieu. This parallels Spigel's (2013) claim that, 'Rather than directly referencing feminism, *Mad Men* (in the tradition of melodrama) focuses on individual struggles so that issues of social justice are dealt with in terms of personal triumph and failure' (pp. 272-273). While participants did speak about the characters' employment of feminist strategies and ideologies, though the characters did not speak directly about feminist motivations in the series itself, they ultimately attributed character success to individual achievement.

Post-Feminism's Need for Feminism

Participants' reading of the series was shaped by what they recognized as a pre-feminist nostalgia primarily benefitting normative masculinity; yet, they spoke of the series' primary female characters in a way consistent with post-feminist ideologies of empowered sexual agency, independence, and choice, illustrating the pervasive influence post-feminism has on shaping gender discourse. As Spigel (2013) maintains:

The most unfortunate consequence of this new form of nostalgia is that despite its sophisticated cosmopolitanism and aspiring 'liberated' career girls, it forgets feminism as a political struggle – both its battles against patriarchal injustices and its own internal struggles among women of different sexual orientations and from different class, racial, national, religious and political backgrounds (p. 270).

Paradoxically, older participants in some ways provided justification for these post-feminist ideologies, using discourses of the progress achieved in their lifetimes to illustrate 'how far we've come'. For instance, Donna, who considered herself a political feminist activist in the 1970s, pointed to *Mad Men's* treatment of women's issues and struggles as a value of the series, particularly for contemporary young women: '[*Mad Men* shows] younger women that it was not always like [it is today]. That the world was a really different place for women when we were fighting for the equal rights amendment and for *Roe v. Wade*', Further, Linda

connected her experience to the characters in the series, observing, 'The women at work ... it made me very grateful to be born just a bit later, you know, than Betty Draper and Joanie,' indicating she had reaped the benefits of the mid-century feminist movement in a way the characters were unable to do.

For most of the self-identified feminists with whom I spoke, their post-feminist assessments of the characters did not negate a critical feminist reading of the series' gender politics as a whole. In their personal articulations of feminism, participants expressed a desire for equality along intersectional identities through the dismantling of oppressive hierarchies, and they found value in comparing *Mad Men's* nostalgic 1960s representation of gender politics to those of modern day. Aabish, for example, suggests that '[*Mad Men*] reflects a lot of the issues that I think people still grapple with today, like the role of women in the workplace, the role of race ... those themes are still incredibly relevant to everyone's lives today', A conversation between Leah (40, White, office administrator), Donna, Susan (58, White, high school teacher), and Tina compared *Mad Men's* pre-feminist culture to our contemporary, ostensibly post-feminist one:

Leah: I don't think [sexism] is wrong with the show, I think it's just wrong with the time.

Donna: The time, exactly. It was a problem with the era and the mores and the attitudes.

Susan: Well, I don't think you have to look under very many rocks to find that it's not just that era.

Tina: Just open up a newspaper. ...There's a lot feeling that feminism has somehow succeeded and therefore it's over and what's happening now is just reeling back what is already been won without actually discussing the fact that there's so much that hasn't been won.

Ann echoed this belief, noting the problematic way in which misogyny manifests in a post-feminist age: 'When there's sexism and racism, all of those things have become far more subtle now, and almost more insidious This stuff still happens', Angela (20, White, student) similarly shared, 'Since second-wave feminism, I don't really think we've gotten that much farther after that. I think that the show's on at the right time,' indicating its relevancy to contemporary gender relations. Thus, although these fans' understanding of Joan, Peggy, and Betty was consistent with traces of post-feminist media culture identified by McRobbie (2004), Gill (2007) and others, they also acknowledged that sexism significantly shaped *Mad Men's* diegetic world, as well as the continued necessity of feminism to combat modern misogyny. *Mad Men's* feminist viewership, then, cannot be reduced into a dichotomy of either representing post-feminism or representing pre-feminism to justify a need for feminism; critical feminist viewership suggests that it simultaneously does both.

Conclusion

As Ruddock (2007) contends, cultural studies of popular media allow scholars to understand what texts mean to particular audiences, and other studies of feminist audiences (e.g., Petersen 2012; Thomas 2002) indicate what this particular group of fans does with media texts. Johnson (2007) argues that feminists ‘take what we need from the available culture ... the kinds of pleasures available to women in the current media culture include the pleasures of oppositional readings as well as the pleasures of seeing feminist concepts dramatized on television’ (p. 11). I found that fans of *Mad Men* readily discussed gender politics within the series through their personal feminist lenses, identifying elements of the show as both pre-feminist, reflective of the era in which *Mad Men* is set, and post-feminist, reflective of the era in which the series is produced. Indeed, this highlights the contradictory representations that characterize the post-feminist media climate. Moreover, although the series presented post-feminist characters as desiring sexual subjects and agents of empowered choices, feminist fans suggested that the overall diegetic world of *Mad Men* also served as a stark reminder of how those struggles continue to manifest in contemporary culture.

Gill (2007) notes that another hallmark of post-feminist media culture is irony, which functions through the employment of ‘sexist, homophobic, or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually “meant”’ (p. 159). In doing so, she argues that, ‘Referencing a previous era becomes an important way of suggesting that sexism is safely sealed in the past while constructing scenarios that would garner criticism if they were represented as contemporary’ (160). Participants in this study did not view the misogyny of the series as ironic, but rather as an accurate reflection of the pre-feminist era. Yet, like all texts, *Mad Men* is polysemic and may be read in multiple ways by different audiences (Hall, 1993). For some viewers, then, the series’ depiction of historicized sexism may seem so egregious and excessive as to be ironic, making it difficult to see how misogyny still exists in contemporary culture. Thus, future audience studies about the series may explore how non-feminist viewers understand how *Mad Men*’s gender politics relate to our current culture. Moreover, unlike Agirre’s (2014) previous reception analysis of the series, no discernible differences existed between women and men in the reading of the series, perhaps because all participants identified as feminists and articulated similar views about feminist ideology. While minor generational discrepancies existed regarding feminist progress from the second-wave to modern day society, it was beyond the scope of this project to make claims along lines of age. More extensive research that purposefully divides the *Mad Men* feminist fan base would add greater nuance to this discussion.

Interviews with series creator and showrunner Matthew Weiner (e.g., Matlack, 2009) reveal that *Mad Men* was heavily influenced by mid-century works that prompted calls for feminist awakening, including the aforementioned *Sex and the Single Girl* and *The Feminine Mystique*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the years following *Mad Men*’s premiere, popular press critics frequently debated whether or not the series should be dubbed a

'feminist show', Coontz (2010), for example, called *Mad Men* 'TV's most feminist show,' arguing that feminism as we know it today was not yet a cultural option for women in the series. She pointed out, 'If anything, *Mad Men* sometimes gives its female characters more decisiveness and self-confidence than most women would have been able to muster in 1965' (para. 15). Contrarily, Engoron (2010) concludes, 'The men get off scotch-free (if not scotch-free) while the women are subjected to repeated humiliation and misfortune, which is invariably attributed to their own flaws and poor choices' (para. 3). Both of these evaluations, however, echo the traces of post-feminist media culture made apparent through the characters' representation of agency, despite the pre-feminist era of the narrative. But, as Johnson argues, contemporary media texts 'contain a mixture of feminist, post-feminist, antifeminist, and pseudofeminist motifs' (p. 19), revealing the complex nature of women's representation on television. While feminist reception analysis' aim is not conclude whether or not *Mad Men* is a 'feminist' text, it certainly provides an avenue to explore how feminists negotiate contemporary gender politics through a nostalgic representation.

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Note:

¹ In this essay, I am using 'pre-feminist' to mean the period between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.