1. Introduction

The situation comedy, or sitcom, is a genre of television that has been popular since the emergence of the medium. The sitcom is a broad category that many scholars have experienced difficulty defining. The difficulties in determining a definition rise from the great variety of comedy programs that have commonly been accepted as sitcoms. Some scholars classify the genre by its formal structures, such as the use of a multiple camera setup, filming in front of live audiences, 30-minute episodes, and so on, however it is widely agreed that not all sitcoms fit this formula (Mills 28; Newman & Levine 59-79). For example, in the last decade or so, single camera sitcoms have increased in popularity, and fewer sitcoms are now filmed before a live audience or contain a laugh track. Despite the difficulty in providing a definitive definition for the sitcom, scholars have researched this field extensively. Scholarly analysis of sitcoms has focused on the way the genre and specific series' address social issues, and how they represent gender, sexuality, and race (Rabiovitz 144). On the importance of the sitcom, Dow claims, “we can link sitcom's general ideological potential to the social commentary that has been a part of comedy from its classical beginnings” (36). The sitcom has many unique features that enable it to address social issues in a way that other forms of television cannot. The use of comedy techniques such as parody and satire allows the sitcom to reference current events and critique them while still providing entertainment. Furthermore, the comedy within sitcoms is often multiply coded, so that it can be read in a number of different ways, therefore appealing to different audiences.

The feminist sitcom is a subgenre of the sitcom. The term ‘feminist sitcom’ has been used by academics since the genre emerged, which coincided with the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s. It is characterized by its specific
interest in female characters and women's issues, often addressing the prominent feminist concerns of the day (Rabinovitz 145). Historically, the sitcom genre has been among the most open of genres to representations of women. There have been many sitcoms throughout television history centering on a female lead character, a sight uncommon in many other genres. The feminist sitcom not only shows women on screen, but it challenges gender roles, presenting female characters with more diverse personalities and liberated ideologies, and in less traditional positions outside of the home. The feminist sitcom is an important feature in television studies because of the representations of women and the issues it addresses that are neglected by other genres. Furthermore, the feminist sitcom has raised new archetypes, such as the 'new woman', a concept that has been explored by academics such as Robert H Deming, Bonnie J Dow, and Lauren Rabinovitz. The 'new woman' can often be recognized by the presence of progressive female lead characters in the workplace, often trying to prove themselves in a 'man's world' (Deming 155). The 'new woman' is generally seen to be progressive, independent, and opinionated. As the genre has evolved, the position of the women in the workplace in many feminist sitcoms has improved from entry-level work to managerial roles. This evolution of the genre has in many ways coincided with the evolution of feminism and its social progress.

2. History

The feminist sitcom emerged in the 1970’s, marked by the success of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977). Although there were other important sitcoms prior to this, such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is commonly recognized as the first sitcom to present a female character in the workplace out of ambition rather than necessity (Dow 1996). There have been a number of key sitcoms in the history of the feminist sitcom that have drawn significant scholarly attention because of their contribution to the genre. Following *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, sitcoms such as *Kate and Allie* (1984-1989), *Designing Women* (1986-1993), and *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), each
provided a new approach to the ‘new woman’, progressing her position within society.

There are a number of influencing factors that can be attributed to the emergence of the feminist sitcom. The rise of second wave feminism in the late 1960s and its prominence in the 1970s played an important and influential role in the content of television programs. Second wave feminism was focused on liberating women and giving them a voice in society. It was also concerned with gaining independence for women to establish careers and to have a choice about family life. Feminism during this time took a number of forms, with the most media-friendly being liberal feminism, which sought to liberate women while remaining relatively non-threatening (Dow 29). One of the primary reasons for the establishment of feminist sitcoms was the appeal to advertisers (Rabinovitz 146). The changing sociopolitical conditions of the time led to an increase in women in the metropolitan workplace, therefore with an increase in disposable income. Creating programming that appealed to this audience was considered good business by the networks and advertisers (Rabinovitz 145). Scholars, such as Rabinovitz, have discussed the connection between sitcoms and social, cultural, political and ideological issues and how these issues have been worked into onscreen representations. The feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s was a prominent topical issue and its popularity therefore found relevance on television.

Over time, the feminist sitcom evolved, as did feminism itself. Representations were initially quite reserved, although groundbreaking for their time. For example, Mary Richards, the feminist lead of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, could still be perceived as the wife/mother, simply replacing a home family with a work family (Dow 38-43). She still maintained the traditional, stereotypical femininity of earlier sitcoms, with a changed environment and more ambition. One of the subsequent landmark sitcoms, Murphy Brown, demonstrated the changes and growth in the feminist sitcom genre. Murphy Brown addressed what was then a highly controversial social issue of the unwed mother (Rabinovitz 144). It also explored expectations of women and portrayals
of women who lack traditional femininity, particularly during motherhood. The controversy around the representation of women and their life choices in feminist sitcoms demonstrates the important link sitcoms have with contemporary issues.

In the 1980s, post-feminism began to take hold, and feminist sitcoms tackled the confusing landscape of feminist women in a postfeminist world (Dow 86). Post-feminism has proved even more complicated for scholars than feminism, due to the multiple interpretations of the term. It is important when considering any feminist or postfeminist writing to understand which interpretation of the term the author is referring to. Karen Boyle (2008) recognized this difficulty and attempted to deconstruct the different positions that post-feminism can represent. These positions include periodising feminism, rejecting feminism, and developing feminism (Boyle 174-184). Sitcoms in the 1980's tended to shy away from feminist representations because feminism had become far less popular, facing a backlash from society, embracing the ‘rejecting feminism’ position of post-feminism. This post-feminism presumed the achievement of second-wave feminist ideals such as women’s equality in the public sphere and disregarded radical feminist ideals as irrelevant or threatening (Dow 88). This post-feminist attitude was reflected in television, with a reduced focus on women ‘making it in a man’s world’ and an emphasis on femininity and family. By the 1990s, feminist sitcoms were focused on postfeminist issues of female sexuality and lifestyle. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) is often discussed as an example of this position, however its classification as a feminist sitcom is debatable, as it borders on drama, rather than comedy. Nonetheless, this series exemplified the changing representations of women, not only on television, but also in the broader media and society. The sexually liberated woman was a mainstay of the postfeminist era, and *Sex and the City* represented this. The women of *Sex and the City* had achieved the feminist goals of earlier feminist sitcoms; they all have successful careers and make their own choices about their sexuality and reproduction.

3. Approaches to feminist representations
The feminist sitcom has addressed a variety of women’s issues throughout its history and scholars have been interested in the way that sitcoms have addressed and represented these issues. Both the textual qualities of comedy, such as multiple coding and the functions of parody and satire, and the quality of the social critique are frequently analyzed. They look at what is being said, how it is being said, and to what effect. This is important to analyse, particularly in mainstream entertainment such as sitcoms, because of the large and diverse audience that consumes these messages and the cultural implications of this.

3.1 Sitcom structure

Network sitcoms are intended to appeal to a wide audience, and therefore the content generally cannot be too controversial. When sitcoms attempt to incorporate jokes or storylines that are controversial, for example either regarding politics or social issues, they are written and performed in a manner that they can be read in multiple ways (Deming 156; Morreale xii). Deming discusses this as the integration of “oppositional and resistant forces ... by absorbing and naturalizing them” (155). This makes the show more accessible to people from different ideological standpoints. The underlying ideology of these controversial sitcoms is often layered with more acceptable and mainstream ideals, and therefore these layers allow viewers to read as much or as little into the meaning as they like. It is important to note that not all sitcoms are interested in taking a critical or progressive position, and those that do take this position do not necessarily do so at all times. Furthermore, not all sitcoms manage to pull this off, and it is often shows that are considered to have high quality writing that are successful in this. The feminist sitcom uses this approach to promote feminism but also maintain some level of a traditional representation of women to decrease the threat of the successful woman (Dow 160; Silva et al. 486). They push the boundaries but they don’t push them too far, so as not to alienate audiences.
The multiple levels or codes in sitcoms are often created through use of comedic techniques such as parody, satire, and irony. These approaches to comedy enable sitcoms to reference current events or popular culture and critique them through use of wit. This is important in the feminist sitcom because it enables audiences to read into the jokes as much or as little as they want, interpreting one of multiple readings, while still being entertained (Dow 37). The joke can be appreciated on face value with no further understanding of the issues, and also on a deeper level if the viewer has an understanding of the background of the joke. Use of these comedic techniques has allowed feminist sitcoms to be subversive, while also maintaining mass appeal. When a sitcom satirizes something, such as the stereotypical representation of women, the viewer can either get it and be in on the joke, or not get it and still enjoy the scene as they had enjoyed past sitcoms.

3.2 Approaching issues

Feminist sitcoms, as well as sitcoms in general, are often criticized for raising serious issues within their storyline but not adequately addressing or resolving the issue. This can occur because of the episodic nature of sitcoms, where everything must return to normal at the end of each episode. This episodic nature means that characters cannot grow and change easily when confronted with new situations (Dow 36). While it is possible that the viewer may feel compelled to re-evaluate some of their views or beliefs following a controversial storyline, the failure of the characters to commit to change is considered by some scholars to be a failed attempt in challenging an issue (Silva et al. 486). Although some scholars have criticized feminist sitcoms for their failure to do enough, others have praised them for making an effort to being with. This view takes the opinion that the episode as a whole is what is important, not just the final position (Dow 49-54). Therefore, just raising an issue and approaching it, while not subscribing to it, is seen as an important step and is worthy of analysis. This is a prevalent theme in feminist sitcom criticism, and many overall opinions of a series or a specific episode appear to be grounded on the opinion of the scholar regarding the success of the attempt to
address an issue and provoke change, or whether it’s just enough that they raised the issue to begin with.

Many feminist sitcoms have been concerned with representations of women in the workplace and the changing gender roles associated with this. The sitcom approach to gender has tended to be quite stereotypical. The 30-minute comedy format rarely allows for three-dimensional characters, and therefore writers lean on stereotypes for comedic effect. Feminist sitcoms challenge female stereotypes and traditional gender roles through the use of new situations, such as the woman in the workplace, and giving female characters unconventional character traits (Dow 140; Silva et al. 486; Rabinovitz 156). The history of the single woman workplace comedy has seen women progress in their positions in the workplace, with increasing responsibilities and authority. Feminist sitcoms today often feature female lead characters in positions of authority, for example in mid-level managerial roles overlooking a number of staff, however they also frequently have higher up male bosses that they answer to. Diversity of the personalities of female characters is also an important part of feminist sitcoms. Some scholars see this as perpetuating the feminist lead as the ‘other’ against the ‘normal’ female characters, which take up more traditional, feminine roles, while others see this as expressing the diversity of women, acknowledging the difference of opinions and personalities among women (Dow 46-47; Rabinovitz 156). This diversity of personality was present in Designing Women, which avoided the politics of the ‘feminist workplace’ trope, focusing instead on discussion between women about women’s issues (Dow 104-108). While this series did not challenge gender roles as strongly as other feminist sitcoms, it did present the diversity of personalities of independent women.

4. Representations and empowerment

Representations of women’s role within the family have remained important in feminist sitcoms. Scholars have recognized how feminist sitcoms set in the workplace replace the home family with the work family (Dow 38). In earlier feminist sitcoms, this transition did little to disrupt the role of the woman
within the family dynamic. Scholars such as Bonnie J Dow have analysed how *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* portrays this, with Mary Richards becoming the wife and mother of the workplace, maintaining much of the traditional femininity and nurturing traits of women in family sitcoms (43). The representations of women in feminist sitcoms have progressed over time and female characters have become less nurturing and motherly. However, as their position in the workplace has increased, the mothering role can still be seen as they manage their employees. For example, in the more recent feminist sitcom *30 Rock* (2006-2013), the main character, Liz Lemon, is often shown having to look after her staff as if they were her children, however this is often due to the incompetence of everyone around her, rather than a warm, mothering character trait.

4.1 Having it all

New women’s issues arose in feminist sitcoms in the 1980s and 90s. With the postfeminist belief that women had achieved equality in the social sphere, the idea of ‘having it all’ became a prominent concern to female characters on television (Boyle 178-81). ‘Having it all’ refers to the belief that women can make whatever life choices they want, and therefore have the ability to have both a successful career and raise a family. However, rather than being empowering, in many ways the idea of having it all became another way to pressure and control women, as they were socially pressured to successfully juggle both a career and a family (Gill 153-54; McRobbie 261). Feminist sitcoms in this time addressed concerns such as balancing work and family, single-motherhood, and the ticking biological clock. A common theme in this time included the single, mid-30s career woman desperately searching for a husband to have children with, before it’s too late for her. This was used in a number of ways for different effects, such as to critique the quality of available, single men, such as in *Sex and the City*, and to question the desirability of women who put their career first. Many feminist sitcoms in this time critiqued the social pressure to meet the postfeminist expectations of society.
Murphy Brown was a prominent feminist sitcom with regard to a number of these issues. It serves as an example of the real world influence of feminist representations. Murphy Brown, the lead character, represented the issues of lifestyle choices and single-motherhood. She became pregnant and chose to remain unmarried and raise her child by herself. This choice drew dramatic, politicized criticism from Vice President Dan Quayle, who objected to the promotion of the choice to be an unmarried mother (Rabinovitz 144). The controversy around this issue at the time prompted political debate and inspired numerous pregnancy storylines in other sitcoms in the years to come (Rabinovitz 162-163). Furthermore, Murphy Brown’s attitude towards work resisted previous representations of women in the workplace in that she was a respected professional in her field. She was also not a natural at motherhood, which went against many social and ingrained beliefs that all mothers are naturally intuitive and nurturing (Dow 159). Although these representations were progressive, they were often critiqued by scholars and media commentators as being confined to white, middle-class women and were not representative of women’s issues more broadly (Dow 52; Rabinovitz 150-160). This is a critique often used against feminist sitcoms and feminism itself. The lack of racial, ethnic, sexual and socio-economic diversity in feminist sitcoms has been a problem for the genre and television more broadly.

4.2 Sexual liberation

Sexual liberation and empowerment was a strong theme in feminist sitcoms of the 1990s and 2000s. The sex lives of single female characters became more prominent and openly addressed. Not all feminist characters in sitcoms embrace their sexuality, but feminist progress and the post-feminist landscape has made it more acceptable for those who do. There are many debates regarding the benefits and consequences of such representations. Some believe that sexually liberated representations in media, such as the female characters of Sex and the City, demonstrate the oppression of women with false empowerment that actually objectifies them, while others see these representations as a positive step in women owning their own bodies and sexuality (Gill 151-152;
McRobbie 259). Either way, these views fit within a larger framework of feminist discourse. This is a larger feminist debate that goes beyond representations in television. Scholars such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill analyse these types of representations in their work on post-feminism and the media.

4.3 Female friendship in feminist sitcoms

The representation of female friendship is an important feature of the feminist sitcom. Female friendship is typically rarely shown or inaccurately represented in film and television. Women have often been depicted in competition with one another in other genres of television, rarely shown engaging in meaningful friendships with other women. Along with the progressive representations of women, many feminist sitcoms include female friendship as a prominent theme. With the disruption to hegemonic practices by the feminist movement, feminist sitcoms have been open to depicting women in new ways and female friendships have become an important feature to demonstrate women’s lifestyles (Deming 163-164; Dow 34). Many feminist sitcoms, and particularly postfeminist sitcoms, focus directly on female friendship. Such sitcoms include *Kate and Allie* and *Sex and the City*. These sitcoms establish solid relationships between women and demonstrate the compatibility of diverse female personalities within friendships, which in other genres would often be pitted against each other.

5. Conclusion

The feminist sitcom has continued to evolve since its emergence in the 1970s alongside the feminist movement. Academics have theorized the significance of the genre since it began and have continued to build upon these foundations with new theories and arguments regarding the representations of women. As the genre has progressed, new landmark sitcoms have emerged for academics to analyse in order to expand feminist sitcom theory and propose new approaches to women’s issues and explore different types of representations.
WORKS CITED


