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EDITORIAL

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Editorial: Post-feminism in contemporary television

ABSTRACT

The editorial summarizes current debates on post-feminism and also on women and girls in the media. After that, the editorial outlines articles in the issue and connects them to outlined debates on post-feminism and women and girls in the media.

KEYWORDS

series
popular culture
women
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A common argument in the news media and the general public is that women have achieved equality and that feminism is no longer necessary. By extension, this would mean that popular culture should be presenting women as heroines and tough rather than enforcing expected traditional gender roles, which was the historical situation. The popular culture indeed has more female heroes than ever before, but has the representation changed entirely or are these heroines presented as heroines until they find the right man? If the main character is a heroine and presented as tough, what about sporadic characters such as female family members or bosses? Besides, is there a difference between women and girls and their representation on TV? How

are professionalism and mental health of women represented in popular TV? How are young girls presented in wide audience series and entertainment TV? What kind of women are portrayed as feminists?

However, addressing contemporary TV from a post-feminist media studies perspective presents a double challenge. Firstly, the popular TV encompasses a vast area of constructions and representations, from hard news to entertainment and fiction. Secondly, the post-feminism itself has been a contested idea given its different interpretations (Papagianni 2020; McRobbie 2007). Post-feminism was first used in 1919 by a group of women who claimed they supported people despite their gender, but it was only used in late twentieth century, following second-wave feminism and 'nowadays it is widely used or called on in various contexts ranging from popular culture to neoliberal discourses, and to the academy through advertising, journalism, literature, and film, but also through postmodernist rhetoric and feminist analyses' (Papagianni 2020: 1). Gill (2016) corroborate other authors by presenting different understandings of this concept: as a backlash against feminism, referring to a historical shift – a time 'after' (second wave) feminism; as a result of an epistemological break within feminism to grasp other 'post' movements, as post-structuralism, postmodernism and postcoloniality; and as a proposal of connections to the third wave. McRobbie (2007) builds ground to a post-feminism application to popular culture as she draws on Susan Faludi's ideas of *backlash* as an antifeminist discourse in the media that undermined feminism, that is, a conservative response to feminist achievements applied to journalism. Faludi was also criticized for ignoring that popular culture and media can be a site of struggle for feminism (Adriaens and van Bauwel 2011), which is explored in the diverse contributes in this Special Issue. Following McRobbie's argument, post-feminism may be explored from an intersectional angle using Butler's ideas of a 'double entanglement': post-feminism combines the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life with processes of liberalization in choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations (McRobbie 2007). Also, Adriaens and van Bauwel (2011: 3) state that for many scholars post-feminism is created by media and the advertising business to increase sales by means of using empowered representations of women in their campaigns, which implied 'post' in the sense of 'after' or even 'anti' feminism. Therefore, they attribute the second-wave feminist criticisms on post-feminism to its vision as an academic or media related construction that lacked feminist universal action. Inversely, some third-wave feminists started using post-feminism as a discussion point for the use and praxis of current feminism: contemporary representations of women in western popular TV often reveal post-feminism's deviation from what has been regarded as the quintessential feminist principles (Papagianni 2020).

This issue is thus dedicated to exploring this view of twenty-first-century post-feminism in popular TV, as new feminism represented in media culture, consumer behaviour, attitudes and as general ideology, in the sense of works by Douglas, Gill, McRobbie, Negra and Tasker (Banet-Weiser 2018). As Gill claims, there is a need to address 'the complexities of a cultural moment seemingly characterized by a multiplicity of (new and old) feminisms which co-exist with revitalized forms of anti-feminism and popular misogyny' (2016: 3) and hence post-feminism is here also a critical analytical term related to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life. Popular TV is emphasized as a 'site of struggle' and field of analysis of individualism, choice and agency

in the changing face of feminism in televisual discourse (Kim 2001). As Cefai (2020) states, the consciousness of gender inequality and the intersection of gender, ethnicity and racism within neo-liberalism, now circulates in mainstream contexts and new discourses and feminist cultures arise. Such transformations in televised discourse remain a concern for studies in gender, media and communication.

To that end, in this issue, authors offer a variety of examples from the popular culture to discuss the representation of women and girls, both those that would fit a post-feminist narrative showing empowerment and negotiating identities and those that portray women and girls in a way that still rely on the patriarchal portrayal of women and their 'place', thus showing that the representation of women is still a problematic area. Nevertheless, authors come from social sciences as well as humanities, thus using different methods of analysing this complex problem and this also enriches this Special Issue.

Marta Fernández-Morales and María Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez analyse the portrayal of Arya Stark in the *Game of Thrones* and argue that Arya's path was a feminist journey of freeing herself from gender roles ascribed to women of her caste of the time. Besides, Arya also rejects sex as a burden of the patriarchal system that imposes subordination onto women through sex and also marriage. As such, Arya's character is challenging the patriarchal gender roles, which are typically binary and Arya's journey in the *Game of Thrones* is not typically male or female, but according to authors, feminist in which she shakes off social restraints to achieve autonomy, empowerment and self-fulfilment. What is particularly relevant to Arya's character is that she embraces her girlhood whilst demanding the right to behave and dress as she likes and she refuses to accept patriarchal gender roles and demands freedom to decide. As such, this character fits into a post-feminist representation of women in popular TV.

Nataša Simeunović Bajić and Mira Moshe analysed the representation of military women in TV series and argue that the inquiry into popular images of Israeli and Serbian female soldiers reveals that both popular cultures reject the accepted image of post-feminist young women as those focusing on consumerism, 'girl' culture and traditional concepts of glamour. Popular TV female soldiers are attractive, well-groomed women who maintain a feminine aesthetic, even at moments of severe military crisis. At the same time, they manage to adhere to their female individuality and freedom of choice. And, they capture the dilemmas of contemporary feminism by hybridizing 'me' with 'we', individuality with collectivity, a moral stand with personal commitment, and a blend of femininity and masculinity. The visual design of the scenes, the stories, the behaviour and the appearance of female soldiers in these series indicates an abandonment of former social boundaries and the development of new perspectives for perceiving the identity of women in modern reality. Therefore, when it comes to the portrayal of military women and the military has historically been associated with patriarchy and male domination, it seems that a post-feminist discourse emerges in which women can be both feminine and masculine, however, this points back to works that speak of blokish women and the fact women have to embrace cultural masculinity to succeed in what is apparently still a man's world (Mills 2014, 2017; North 2016, 2009; Topić 2018, 2020).

Batya Weinbaum discusses the *SuperGirl* series and the way the SuperGirl character transformed and changed throughout the series. In other words, while the SuperGirl originally started as a helpmate in a male world and

with a woman boss who fits into that male world by being blokish or culturally masculine (Mills 2014, 2017; Topić 2018; North 2016, 2009), she grows to develop into a strong female character. This portrayal fits into post-feminist argument of women achieving equality and thus popular culture portrayal also changing. However, Weinbaum challenges the character of SuperGirl being white, thin, blond and non-disabled and thus calls for diversity in portrayal of the SuperGirl arguing that the character as it is has a potential to transform both the individual psyche of the viewer and the collective unconscious of the culture in which she was created.

Katie Fredericks brings a similar argument to Weinbaum through an exploration of girl-centric reality TV, *Dance Moms* and *Bring It!* She sees the girl-centric reality TV as part and parcel of post-feminist culture and mediascape, so girl-centric reality TV docudramas are rich with insight into the continuously shifting cultural construction of girlhood. Fredericks argues that the contradictory demand that tween and teen girls be performatively 'sexy' is present in both *Dance Moms* and *Bring It!* Throughout seasons of *Dance Moms* the cultivation of a hetero sexy subjectivity is intentionally enforced through the betrayal of chronological age and white dancers' momentary relegation into heterosexual action in the name of successful performance. The packaged product of the reality docudrama that is *Dance Moms* and the participants in the show, purposefully draw attention to issues tangential to girls' sexualities in attempts to maximize their success in post-feminist culture. Strongly desiring their daughters' occupancy in the category of successful, 'can-do' girlhood, the moms employ panicked claims of innocence and denials of children's agency to keep their girls within the bounds of 'sexy, but not sexual'.

Samantha Gray analyses the works of Aaron Sorkin and argues that in popular culture, 'brilliant women are tolerated as long as they are beautiful or conform in some way, and while their intelligence and strength enable them to change the system in some ways, they are also limited' (Berila 2007: 158). In the same way, two characters, Sloan and Molly, are so successful, not only because they have the intelligence for the tasks required, but because their beauty allows them opportunities that may not be open to them if they were not conventionally attractive. The brilliant and beautiful women, in both Sorkin's work and popular culture, on the whole, are able to hide their intelligence within their beauty, enabling them to gain access to the areas normally dominated by powerful men. However, Gray argues that this access to the world of masculine power poses a significant risk to the female genius's livelihood and personal safety, from which neither their beauty nor intelligence can ensure protection. In other words, whilst the portrayal of two women is favourable and they are shown as geniuses (which has historically not been associated with women), they are still portrayed as beautiful and beauty is what gives them entry to the man's world, which again shows patriarchal founding of the story and a portrayal that women can only achieve something if men allow them to do so.

Sallyann Halliday shows that the portrayal of women working in what has historically been a masculine industry (the police), in this case, Sergeant Catherine Cawood in *Happy Valley*, is still gendered and reinforces gender norms that can have an impact on women's treatment at work. This is the case because, as argued by Halliday, Cawood is portrayed through emotional labour and emotionality is commonly ascribed to women. While studies in employee relations often show that women being more empathetic and emotional are seen as positive by other women employees, these studies also

show that organizations are still a man's world in which feminine characteristics of supportiveness, empathy and relationship-building are not always appreciated (Alvesson 2013, 1998; Bourdieu 2007; Topić et al. 2019, 2020; Topić 2020). Therefore, Hallyday argues that although *Happy Valley*'s representation of a female police officer also arguably represents a progressive and positive professional feminine identity in a male-dominated occupation on our screens, the true value of women's professional working style, specifically the ability to make use of 'emotional labour' as a work required 'skill' to perform their roles, has yet to be rewarded and lead to progression in a range of workplace and professional contexts, including the police force. In other words, this portrayal reinforces existing expected roles and perpetuates gender stereotypes on what is women's work and what is man's work. Halliday also argues that rather than 'emotional labour' being represented in the media as a stereotypically female trait, the value of such a 'trait' should be re-framed. If the effective performance of 'emotional labour' is part of the police work role, both male and female police workers should display these behaviours in any television representations of this work.

Finally, Mirela Holy analyses the TV series *Westworld* to explore whether the series transcends genders stereotypes in the portrayal of series characters. In that, she finds that male characters are portrayed stereotypically and the situation is similar with all supporting characters. Whilst the non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the series could lead the reader in concluding that the series is empowering, Holy argues that this is not the case because characters that transcend gender stereotyping are not humans but creations of a male-created technology, thus the final message of the show is that gender stereotyping is natural while transcending these binary hierarchies is unnatural. In other words, this show also shows the necessity of a feminist analysis because while on the outset the series appears progressive, some of the writing is still underpinned by stereotypes that show societies and popular culture as their part, are still working on old prejudices and expected roles.

The Special Issue, therefore, shows that whilst post-feminity is present in the portrayal of women and girls in popular culture, there are still programmes that use patriarchal underpinning in their story writing. However, what emerges from this Special Issue is that it seems that a post-feminist woman is portrayed as the one who can also embrace masculinity, thus shifting the discourse again in favour of keeping the status quo and all organizations remaining (in practice and the popular culture's portrayal alike) a man's world in which women need to fit in, negotiate their identities and get the power from men. Therefore, whilst there is a shift in the sense that femininity is not always denigrated, there seems to be an issue on how this femininity is defined. Further research should look at cultural masculinities and femininities to further explore this portrayal and whether post-feminism is just another mask for patriarchy with some concessions.

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