

THESIS

REPRESENTATION AND LEGITIMATION IN  
STREAMING TELEVISION'S TEENAGE GIRL TRAUMEDIES

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## ABSTRACT

### REPRESENTATION AND LEGITIMATION IN STREAMING TELEVISION'S TEENAGE GIRL TRAUMEDIES

My objects of study for this project are three streaming television series: Hulu's *Pen15* (2019-2021), HBO Max's *The Sex Lives of College Girls* (2021-), and Channel 4/Netflix's *Derry Girls* (2018-2022). These series comprise a hybrid television genre I term "teenage girl traumedy." I argue that teenage girl traumedies lend teenage girl characters empathy and emotional complexity not historically afforded to them on television. Using these three series as case studies, I argue that the genre is legitimized culturally and industrially in two ways: 1) through textual appeals in narrative and visual form to feminist discourse and 2) paratextual branding in trade press and interviews with creators that centralize these series' feminist messages of teenage girls' trauma as a distinctive, competitive quality in streaming television. My three case studies depict emotional and bodily traumas on different levels, from the intimate and individualized, interpersonal and institutional, to the national. I show trauma growing and spreading as my thesis develops, as a way to show how teenage girl trauma manifests as personal shame and how the coping process for teenage girls bumps up against interpersonal, institutional, and national spheres. Industrially, my thesis explores the tension between creators who produce subversive, feminist art and the commercially driven streaming services that employ them. I am interested in understanding how these creators write television that delves into themes of young women's sexual and psychological trauma, developing out of previous decades of television that portrayed teenage girls as one-dimensional.

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## INTRODUCTION

In an interview on the ending of her show, *Pen15* creator and star Maya Erskine responded to a question about how she found inspiration to write her show:

[When I was young] there was no sharing between girls. There was nothing on TV that reflected my experience. Even now, it's still hard for me to talk about. But what we came to find was that all the things that we were most scared about sharing were the things that people were like, 'I did exactly that.' Or, 'I had a version of that.' It taught us to really go for the specific stories that are true.<sup>1</sup>

Her answer shows the motivation for women creators in television telling stories about their experiences of girlhood. *Pen15* is an example of a larger contemporary trend in the television industry that focus on teenage girl's lives through the perspectives of women creatives telling autobiographical stories about themselves. My objects of study for this project are three streaming television series: Hulu's *Pen15* (2019-2021), HBO Max's *The Sex Lives of College Girls* (2021-), and Channel 4/Netflix's *Derry Girls* (2018-2022). These series comprise a hybrid television genre I term "teenage girl traumedy." I argue that teenage girl traumedies lend teenage girl characters empathy and emotional complexity not historically afforded to them on television. Using these three series as case studies, I argue that the genre is legitimized culturally and industrially in two ways: 1) through textual appeals in narrative and visual form to feminist discourse and 2) paratextual branding in trade press and interviews with creators that centralize these series' feminist messages of teenage girls' trauma as a distinctive, competitive quality in streaming television. My three case studies depict emotional and bodily traumas on different levels, from the intimate and individualized, interpersonal and institutional, to the national. I

show trauma growing and spreading as my thesis develops, as a way to show how teenage girl trauma manifests as personal shame and how the coping process for teenage girls bumps up against interpersonal, institutional, and national spheres. Industrially, my thesis explores the tension between creators who produce subversive, feminist art and the commercially driven streaming services that employ them. I am interested in understanding how these creators write television that delves into themes of young women's sexual and psychological trauma, developing out of previous decades of television that portrayed teenage girls as one-dimensional.

I am writing and analyzing these shows from my own interest in them and joy they bring me in representing issues of girlhood. In their humanization of teenage girls and narrativizing of traumatic events while coming of age, these shows offer comfort. They normalize teen girls' emotional and sexual hangups and also consider teenage girls as human beings. In this contemporary moment, teenage girls' lives are front and center in public discourse, as we see them struggling at unprecedented rates of low-self esteem and suicidal ideation, coming of age during a fraught time when identity and sexuality are being questioned in political discourse, and taking part in traumatizing, worldwide movements that will affect their lives forever. Teenage girls right now are leading the way for gender justice, and television is probably going to continue representing outspoken, feminist girls like those we see on the news and the ones in my analyses, at least for the time being, as these girls proliferate media culture. I am also aware of how media organizations continue to use teenage girls as "punching bags, cash cows, and gatekeepers,"<sup>2</sup> and am interested where, how, and in what historical moments they attain some cultural power. My thesis advocates for television about the lives of teenage girls that is important and meaningful and necessary in disrupting dominant ideology.

In this introductory chapter, I provide an industrial and historical overview of teenage girl traumed. I discuss what constitutes the genre, how it functions as a cultural product in Bourdieu's field of cultural production, and the historical conditions allowing for teenage girl traumed to develop in the television industry. The following three chapters examine cases of teenage girl traumed, where the trauma grows from intimately personal, to interpersonal and institutional, to national. I map teenage girl traumed this way to show how industrial developments in the television industry alongside political feminist activism defined the ways in which the genre engages with depictions of teenage girls and taboo subject matter regarding their adolescence. Through each of these chapters, I argue that these novel portrayals of teenage girlhood traumas are culturally and industrially significant, functioning as feminist interventions in media, and cultural capital for their respective streaming services to compete in the television industry.

### **What is Teenage Girl Traumed?**

On the reception of her show *Derry Girls* among women fans in Northern Ireland, creator Lisa McGee said, "they'll start talking to you about *Derry Girls* and Northern Ireland and it starts funny, and then they'll be telling you other stuff isn't funny. [For us] there's a lot of trauma and a lot of ghosts."<sup>3</sup> McGee's statement highlights the core aspect of the hybrid genre I am theorizing here called "teenage girl traumed," which is use of humor in exploring issues related to trauma during girls' adolescence. McGee here is specifically referring to how she wanted to capture the bleakness of The Troubles period in Northern Ireland, but through the eyes of teenage girls going through major life changes in their personal lives, capturing a time that was traumatizing and funny on larger and smaller scales at the same time.



In this *Derry Girls* example, trauma includes the psychological effects of the low-level war in conjunction with the bodily, hormonal experiences the girl protagonists are going through during adolescence. In this case, the trauma I'm analyzing is more complex than the aftermath of one situation. Trauma includes interpersonal and intrapersonal harm and exposure to traumatic cultural events. Trauma can be broadly defined as "emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking experiences that might result in lasting impact on individuals involved in the situation."<sup>4</sup>

Psychological studies have explored the impacts of trauma on adolescents, who seem particularly vulnerable, with school-related trauma such as emotional and physical bullying impacting their lives in significant and long-lasting ways.<sup>5</sup> Narrowing trauma research to teenage girls, studies have explored socially stigmatized and body-centric issues like menstruation and virginity loss related to girls' emotional development, resulting in possible traumatization of those events in subsequent years.<sup>6</sup>

The shows I analyze explore impacts of traumatic events affecting teenage girls, like first sexual experiences, menstruation, family conflicts, conflicts with other girls, as well as those larger cultural events happening around them to offer historical context. In the case of *Pen15*, personal traumas revolve around the return of patriarchal control in media and cultural obsessions with girls' bodies and sexuality in the 1990s and 2000s. In *Sex Lives*, incidents of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and questions over girls' sexual agency surround the current contemporary moment informed by an empowered feminism and #MeToo. Last, in *Derry Girls*' case as I mentioned, there is the combination of girls' adolescent development and sexual discovery paired with the political turmoil of the Northern Ireland's potential separation from the United Kingdom.

Each of the series I analyze are, first and foremost, comedies. The comedy genre relies on the setting up of jokes and punchlines, and depicting humorous situations. So, how does trauma, something that would be usually taken seriously, become funny? How does an ostensibly comedic show evolve into the portmanteau “traumedy?” Laughter and joking intertwined with trauma recalls the presumption in contemporary society that people use humor as a coping mechanism to deal with life’s difficulties. Humor coping “refers to how people use humor to cope with problems or stress.”<sup>7</sup> In thinking about the definition of trauma I offered earlier, emotionally disturbing events with long-lasting impacts, and the ways that trauma is creatively explored by someone like Lisa McGee, comedy and trauma’s link becomes clear. A major life event such as realizing you are a lesbian at 17 years old, as protagonist Clare does in *Derry Girls* is relatively serious and there are social repercussions that the character considers, that realization is mined for comedy, specifically cringeworthy sexual encounters and joking among friends. Even the emotionally-heavy scenes of *The Sex Lives of College Girls* involving sexual assault disclosure are juxtaposed with scenes of the victim, Bela Malhotra, joking about being horned up at school when not dealing with the assault. For these characters, humor is utilized to cope with distressing situations. For the women writing these characters, humor is a way to come to terms with their own trauma they’ve written into these autobiographical characters. Humor also can be used to resist and subvert dominant ideology, which I will delve into next.

I identify teenage girl traumadies as subversive texts to dominant patriarchal discourses associated with teenage girls. Subversion is understood as behavior or activities meant to upend socially constructed meanings or political systems. In the context of my analysis that explores a humor that punches up at power structures, like patriarchy, and prejudices such as sexism, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque is useful. Bakhtin believed that the carnival

celebrations and the larger “carnival sense of the world” is the attitude of people rebelling against the state and the church that put on more official ceremonies. In a broader sense, carnival acts, specifically those that mock, are inappropriate, eccentric, and profane, are aimed at demystifying the hierarchical worldview and opposing the conditions of social order.<sup>8</sup> While we don’t really have carnival ceremonies anymore, the humor found in traumatizing situations regarding sex, women’s bodies, menstruation and more on these shows strips away their objective, patriarchally-imposed sacredness. When Maya and Anna from *Pen15* talk about how embarrassed they are to masturbate and proceed to humorously engage in some failed and some successful attempts, the society that has told them female pleasure is immoral, or not normal, is scrutinized. This humor, seen on the other two shows as well, is meant to upend the shame that teenage girls feel when they begin to understand and act upon their sexual urges. Humor like this is subversive in an even more meaningful way when it’s deployed by people like Erskine and Konkle who can embody this carnival attitude as young women who felt stigmatized when they were teens and still grapple with that trauma today.

Teenage girl traumedies’s textual traits involve the exploration of larger, cultural traumas and personal ones, humor and joking that makes light of these traumatic events as a way to cope with them, and a subversive attitude that deems teenage girls’ lives as important. But, all of these themes don’t come together out of thin air. I understand teenage girl traumedies as a cultural forum constructed by representations of teenagers in media, feminist historical discourse, feminism in media industries, and the gendered cultural value of television texts and their productions. In the next section, I consider the role of consecration in media production for this hybrid genre.

### **Teenage Girl Traumedies in the Field of Cultural Production**

Television shows and their genres, narratives, and production cultures do not independently arise in the industry. Television shows are “situated and constrained by their relationship to other forms of cultural discourse” and emerge as “products of their time.”<sup>9</sup> Teenage girl traumedy is situated in a specific historical moment involving feminism in popular culture, industry discourses about women’s representation, and authorship of media texts. Television shows also do not gain value on their own. My analysis follows Bourdieu’s concept of the field of cultural production, by locating teenage girl traumedy as part of a “system of objective relations between agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate.”<sup>10</sup> Teenage girl traumedy is a genre that recalls aesthetics, genres, and authorship tropes already held in high regard among agents in the TV field, and its feminist intervention is the contemporary cultural capital helping its parent streaming companies compete in the television industry. Consecrating agents, such as industry executives, creatives including stars, producers, and directors, and journalists covering the TV industry in the trades and popular press bestow what Pierre Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital” upon the genre through discursive bids for status and prestige.<sup>11</sup> Symbolic capital is “economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized, and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees ‘economic’ profits.”<sup>12</sup> Teenage girl traumedy is consecrated as a legitimate genre in the TV industry through discourse produced among creatives and executives in the industry and trade and popular press journalists covering the industry that point out the genre’s feminist interventions in media. This latter discourse, feminist intervention in media, serves as cultural capital for teenage girl traumedy, as the genre builds off of feminist activism in political culture. The genre considers popular feminism, industry fatigue with television’s masculinization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and women’s autobiographical authorship.

Discursive associations with established, culturally valued concepts like the ones mentioned above give value to the genre in terms of symbolic and cultural capital, which is turned into economic capital by supporting the commercial goals of the companies producing teenage girl traumedies.

In thinking about the tension between feminist art and commerce, the television shows I analyze are not exactly “pure” art given their financing in a creative industry and marketing at consumers, however, they offer feminist resistance to commercial mass media that otherwise reproduces hierarchies and dominant ideas. Creators engaging in this textual resistance, like the writers, directors, showrunners and stars such as *Pen15*’s creators, Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle who I identify in my analyses, are semi-challengers who “break the silence of the *doxa* and call into question the unproblematic, taken-for-granted world of the dominant groups” in the field of cultural production.<sup>13</sup> I say semi-challengers because while on a textual level and in their authorship practices Erskine and Konkle upend the status quo, they simultaneously are agents employed by an institution that dominates the field, The Walt Disney Company, which attempts to utilize dominant frames to market their series for broader, commercial appeal. The tension between creators who produce subversive, feminist art and the commercially driven streaming services that employ them is noteworthy because of the feminist possibilities presented in the texts of teenage girl traumedies and the authorship behind them. In advertising and promotional campaigns that use visual representations of female friendship, a teenage girl traumedie may appear to viewers as another popular feminist television show, but underneath the surface, these shows interrogate more taboo subjects about adolescence and offers character complexity not historically afforded to teenage girls. Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle (*Pen15*), Mindy Kaling (*The Sex Lives of College Girls*) and Lisa McGee (*Derry Girls*) demonstrate that women

television creators can exercise agency over their shows and produce subversive, feminist content even within the constraints of their industry that privileges profits and masculinized content.

The current landscape of streaming television is veiled in a rhetoric of democratization that posits more accessibility and choice as analogous to creative autonomy and social progress in media. Many streaming television companies are engaging in increased conglomeration and monopolization, rejecting this utopian vision of the industry. Ultimately, the veneer of a democratized television industry, with more streaming services, more women, more diversity of identities on and off-screen, and even invocation of liberal politics in texts themselves, is a reflection of advanced neoliberal capitalism, supporting Bourdieu's idea that "the more the field is capable of functioning as a field of competition for cultural legitimacy, the more individual production must be oriented toward the search for culturally pertinent features endowed with value in the field's own economy."<sup>14</sup> In this way, the more streaming services exist that need to vie for consecrated art as well as economically powerful audiences who can legitimize them with their dollar, i.e., subscriber membership, the more they need to tap into culturally valuable concepts like popular feminism, comedies taken "seriously," and character complexity. Consecrating agents make appeals to legitimized television genres like dramas, innovative visual styles, complex narratives, auteurism, and topical discourse, like popular feminism, which all help these shows gain cultural capital.

Teenage girl traumedy is a cultural artifact that has emerged at a particular historical conjuncture and is used by industry creatives, executives, and streaming services to compete for cultural prestige, utilizing some aesthetics already consecrated within the industry by parent institutions, such as making characters complex to garner greater audience interest, blending

genres and subverting expectations to play with the form, privileging the auteur as an “anchor of meaning,” and airing “important cultural topics.”<sup>15</sup> The genre invokes feminist resistance by humanizing teenage girls, a demographic often ignored or looked down upon in society, representing emotional and bodily traumas associated with teenage girlhood, and granting women creators unique authorial agency over their text through autobiographic authorship practices. Feminist understandings of media representation, authorship and autobiography are noteworthy for my analyses, which I will explore next.

### **A Historical Trajectory of Teenage Girl Traumedy**

The hybrid genre “teenage girl traumedy” is a cultural product emerging at the intersection of concurrent feminist, industry, and political discourses, emergent in the sense of new ideas and practices are positioned as alternatives that arise in discourse to confront to the status quo.<sup>16</sup> This includes popular feminism in television, backlash among critics and creatives to prestige TV’s preoccupation with “complex” leading men and masculinity in crisis as markers of quality, and cultural reckonings with the political moment after the 2016 election, the #MeToo movement’s mainstreaming, and teenage girls’ historically limited portrayals in media. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, all these discourses were at play simultaneously within and around the television industry, providing the historical conditions and economic contexts to consecrate the hybrid genre of teenage girl traumedy. Building off of these discourses, teenage girl traumedy is concerned with humanizing teenage girls by delving into their emotions and traumatic experiences in adolescence, and involves the creative input of women directors, writers, and producers to tell those stories. While I contend that teenage girl traumedies are textually subversive in the ways they portray teenage girls’ plights, and autobiographic authorship practices in the genre are a very welcome trend that involve embodied feminist

resistance, I am also aware that television is the very industry that still fuels teenage girls' poor self-esteem, shapes their consumer habits, and invokes oftentimes shallow feminist politics to gain a viewership and subscriber base who will buy into popular feminist branding. Despite their industry producing potentially harmful ideologies about teenage girls' adolescence, the creators I analyze are afforded unique creative authority in streaming television that resists masculinist understandings of television authorship, storytelling, and production, and connects their series to feminist aims of reflexivity and solidarity. However, these opportunities for feminist intervention did not happen without shifts regarding the gendered cultural value of prestige television. In the next section, I look historically at how we've arrived at teenage girl traumedies and how the genre functions as a contemporary form of cultural capital.

#### *Limited representations of teenage girls*

In my analyses, I explore how the genre of teenage girl traumedie is legitimated by journalistic criticism, interviews, and in-house marketing through references to teen girls' historically limited portrayals in media, giving the series a feminist stamp of approval as being subversive to the patriarchal status quo in society. Since television's inception, teenage girls have been crafted as "spectacular," in that they invite a constant, potentially leering gaze, and they are omnipresent as symbols of gendered social anxieties, consumer trends, and the feminist movement.<sup>17</sup> Celebrity teenage girls were a specific target of media spectacle and vitriol in the 1990s and 2000s, including young performers such as The Olson Twins, Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and Paris Hilton, who were the subjects of media scrutiny over their sexualities, tumultuous personal relationships with family and significant others, on whether they would "crash and burn."<sup>18</sup>



In media, teenage girls have largely existed as a set of contradictions: “either the girl was a quasi-angelic creature, praised for her bubbly charm, her obedience to authority, and her chastity, or else she was an exasperating agent of chaos who challenged the boundaries and hierarchies of a patriarchally organized society.”<sup>19</sup> Character types abound in teenage television of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who are nerds, bimbos, plucky go-getters, countercultural/emo outcasts, good girls, bad girls, sluts, and virgins.<sup>20</sup> Through these easy categorizations, “the teenage girl unfailingly appears either more or less than human, never simply a whole person with her own three-dimensional subjectivity.”<sup>21</sup> If and when puberty is mentioned in television, such as first periods or new romantic desire, it’s treated an exciting life event to be happy about, as it signifies a teenage girl’s transition into womanhood. Such stories color puberty with rose-tinted glasses so that girls watching these shows believe that when they have their first period or first sexual experience, it should cause excitement, when in fact, most of the bodily traumas of teenage girlhood are likely more upsetting, awkward, and traumatizing.

Representations of teenage girls have largely been informed by whiteness, heteronormativity, middle class life, and the biological time clock reinforced to girls so that they grow into mature, educated women who marry the right person and have children. Few stories interrogate the emotional complexities and bodily traumas occurring during the time between childhood and adulthood for girls, usually relying on the tired trope of losing one’s virginity as the most critical, exciting event of this period. “Very special episodes” teenage television of the 1980s and 1990s, on shows like *Saved by the Bell*, *Degrassi*, *Full House*, *Moesha*, and *Boy Meets World* featured issues such as pre-marital sex, eating disorders, social anxiety, racism, and drug use, however, they were addressed in a manner “that emphasized moralizing and ‘talking down’ to teens.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, teenage girls have been “defin[ed] teen protagonists as travelers on

a path to adulthood...the teen years [are] a time of opposition to adults and adult values.”<sup>23</sup> Even representations of teenage girl friendships in media, seemingly feminist in their positioning of girls’ relationships as important, still reify a traditional life path, where teen girl friendships are “marked by competition and sometimes antagonism” and their identities are more often located in childhood and are concerned with “growing into heterosexuality” whereas films about friendship among boys are about their “explor[ation] of sexual relationships with women.”<sup>24</sup> Identity and sexual exploration afforded to teenage boy protagonists has been disproportionately more visible and multi-dimensional, seen in most family sitcoms of the broadcast era that feature older sons/patriarch relationships, in edgier teen shows like *Freaks and Geeks*, and in a multitude of raunchy Hollywood comedies exemplified by *American Pie* and *Superbad*. As with many culturally ubiquitous texts, the most visible and popular teen media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century did not center on girls of color, queer girls, sexual girls, feminist girls, and non-American girls.

The current iteration of teenage girls that I identify in my three texts negotiate all of these dichotomies and stereotypes in their lives and are probably closer in characterization to the girls of *Girls* or *Broad City* than those in teen soaps of the late 90s such as *Dawson’s Creek* or *Degrassi*. Considering this historical context, my project is informed by an interest in how teenage girls are portrayed in the contemporary television landscape and how they combat limited representations of teenage girls of previous eras of television. Additionally, I aim to understand why teenage girls’ trauma is a narrative focus in streaming television, and how it is portrayed across these three series, specifically related to identity exploration, gendered expectations, and sexuality.

*Prestige television’s masculinism*

Cable series such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* were ur-texts of a multitude of prestige series of the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century that “probe[d] the trials and complexities of contemporary manhood,”<sup>25</sup> specifically for straight white men who negotiated flawed understandings of gender roles. Like the hybrid genre that I theorize, masculinity-in-crisis television was born out of sociopolitical and industrial shifts specific to an era of history and television production. Lotz attributes male antihero television in the late 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> century to “the activist work and consciousness raising begun during second-wave feminism,”<sup>26</sup> particularly related to the flipping of gender scripts in the home and work, in which women increasingly became breadwinners, or began contributing to a two-wage middle-class household, and men’s assumed patriarchal duties were questioned, interpersonally and on a structural level in the spheres of politics and economics. Alongside this shifting of gender representations was the introduction of niche and premium cable networks, such as HBO, and later the re-branded AMC, which produced content aesthetically associated with film, such as high-definition images, stereo sound, and the employment of Hollywood male directors, and was more subversive, explicit, and against the mainstream for an audience that could afford the cable channel add-on. By airing content not typically associated with the medium’s history, layered characters with moral complexity who grappled with taboo subjects and gender expectations became characters of the prestige TV brand. However, after almost two decades of this kind of television, many television critics in the mid-2010s expressed growing fatigue over the men (and one-dimensional women) of the new golden age of television and creatively ambitious, “serious” shows<sup>27</sup> that were being privileged over other aestheticized, women-focused series with just as much audience and critical support, such as *The Mindy Project* (FOX), *UnREAL* (Lifetime), and *The Good Wife* (CBS), all airing around 2015-2016, which were viewed as less prestigious given their genres

(situational comedy, reality TV spoof, serialized legal drama) and networks.<sup>28</sup> Fatigue in the critical community and the industry leads to the next era preceding teenage girl traumedies, which is the rise of popular feminism in media culture.

### *Empowered feminists on television*

According to Banet-Weiser, popular feminism involves hyper-visibility in commercial media, people and group's attention and interest, and serves as a site of struggle over meanings of feminisms and resistance to gender inequality.<sup>29</sup> Popular feminism makes the feminist movement "accessible to a broad public,"<sup>30</sup> and "happy,"<sup>31</sup> in terms of showing empowered women who are confident in themselves and in solidarity with other women, while obscuring the structural ways that gender inequality persists in society. Popular feminism shares the goals of liberal feminisms of the 1960s and 70s to integrate women into society on an equal playing field with men, includes elements of a postfeminist sensibility, which marks a shift in feminist discourse that emphasizes critical evaluations of femininity and gender,<sup>32</sup> and contains aspects of neoliberal feminism, namely the focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment.<sup>33</sup> Under popular feminism's umbrella are also celebrity feminism, which links stars' personal brands to the feminist cause, and corporate feminism, which celebrates women who break the glass ceiling of boardrooms and "lean in."

Across media, popular feminist discourse may include sisterhoods or female friendships on fashion magazines and in advertising, popular press articles that describe women who disrupt spaces, such as the overused descriptor Women in Comedy,<sup>34</sup> or celebrities publicly showing support for the feminist movement by posting #feminist spon-con on social media. Because feminism is in the zeitgeist in the contemporary moment and is hyper-visible across various forms of media, popular discourses are leveraged by media producers to compete in capitalist

economy of visibility,<sup>35</sup> where what is in the spotlight, perhaps online, on TV, in print journalist, or in politics, is marketed, branded, and commodified to sell products to consumers. Popular feminism posits that “seeing or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures”<sup>36</sup> which could involve anything from posting a hashtag on Twitter or buying a pink pussy hat for a women’s march.

In the context of the television industry, popular feminism is used as a branding strategy by television producers, trades covering the industry, and legitimating organizations like the Television Academy to convey “cool” feminism, “where a feminist identity proves a certain cultural capital.”<sup>37</sup> Many television series of the mid 2010s and early 2020s celebrate strong female characters,<sup>38</sup> trade publications such as *The Hollywood Reporter* feature cover stories on “Women in Entertainment,”<sup>39</sup> and Emmy voters signify their support of “feminism” by nominating Lead Actresses who play morally ambiguous women struggling over gendered oppression.<sup>40</sup> As I will demonstrate in my analyses, the marketing of teenage girl traumedies and discourses of authorship surrounding the series’ women creatives fit within these parameters of popular feminism at times, but on a textual level, the series reject popular feminism’s broad, palatable quality by interrogating thornier aspects of feminist discourse and young women’s trauma. Teenage girls in teenage girl traumedies are still confident and happy at times, but they are also a little bit angrier and agitated, representing characters shifts reflective of larger, cultural pop feminist criticism that I will delve into next.

Representations of teenage girlhood that involves more taboo subject matter and are generally more anxiety-ridden related to women’s oppression are a result of popular culture’s “traffic in feminism” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and increased criticism of palatable, fun feminism among viewers, journalists, and media workers in the industry.<sup>41</sup> The popularity of feminism in

recent years is due to the “political and material advancement of some privileged white cisgender women,” with figures like Hilary Clinton signaling this achievement.<sup>42</sup> Magazine covers, television shows, films, and advertising featuring prominent women in entertainment and politics like Clinton, Senator Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, director Greta Gerwig, and women superheroes in film proliferated the 2010s, contributing to “feminist ascendancy” discourse during the decade.<sup>43</sup> The character Leslie Knope from NBC’s *Parks and Recreation* is a model for this imagined, impossible feminist character of the 2010s who “tirelessly strives to break through the glass ceilings imposed on them, confronts patriarchal power structures directly, and demands recognition for their accomplishments.”<sup>44</sup> The 2019 film *Booksmart* featured two bossy, man-hating, striving-for-perfection teenage girl protagonists who also worshipped at the feet of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The unflinching, empowered title characters from streaming comedy series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix), and *Emily in Paris* (Netflix), are all representative of this faux-feminist, neoliberal character type that became prevalent during the decade. The cultural ubiquity of popular, easily consumable feminism during the decade informed many of the “seemingly feminist narratives [that] offer[ed] a halting fantasy to viewers who might take pleasure in the image of strong white women characters”<sup>45</sup> that preceded the series I analyze in this project.

As I discuss above, teenage girl traumedies engage with taboo subject matter from perspectives of girls who are not the vision of confident pop feminism. This emerging representational trend is a part of converging moments in history involving the increased visibility of women’s oppression in media and #MeToo.

Each of the shows I analyze were developed by their respective creators between 2016 and 2019. The convergence of popular/post/neoliberal feminism, creative backlash to

associations between quality and masculinity in the TV industry, and an interest by women creatives to tell stories about teen girls' trauma in this period speak to a specific moment in which women's oppression is front and center in political discourse. The 2016 election and political environment was especially rife with hyper-visible misogyny, by the candidate and his supporters, which was matched by hyper-visible feminist activist efforts to bring women, other marginalized folks, and allies together. Feminist activism, along a continuum of popular feminism, commodity feminism geared at youth, celebrity feminism, corporate feminism, and postfeminist ideas reached new heights of visibility during this time. People around the world participated in movements such as the Women's March, hashtag activism such as #NotOkay and blogging on sites like *Crunk Feminist Collective*, were "filled with passionate defenses and celebrations of feminism and exhortations towards feminist and antiracist activism,"<sup>46</sup> and prestige television shows such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Insecure*, *Broad City*, and *Fleabag* explored feminism in the age of Trump and women's malaise and disappointment in the contemporary political moment.<sup>47</sup> Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement, which achieved virality and cultural ubiquity in 2017 following investigations into Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual abuse of women also informs the emergence of the teenage girl traumedy genre, especially in its references to sexual shame and trauma. The series I analyze explicitly deal with sexual shame and some feature storylines about sexual abuse, contributing to an ongoing conversation in media industries about sexual harm, and combatting pervasive slut/virgin stereotyping and myths about sexual violence and victim-blaming.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Feminist affective dissonance in contemporary media culture*

The protagonists and storylines of *Pen15*, *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, and *Derry Girls* combat popular feminist media from the previous decade that centered on strong white women

who “signal[ed] a frontier of feminist imagination.”<sup>49</sup> Emerging alongside pop-feminist characters like Leslie Knope were those who expressed affective dissonance, or “anger, insecurity, anxiety, and misplaced confidence” regarding gender norms and expectations and perfection and confidence complexes.<sup>50</sup> Characters such as Hannah Horvath and the cast of *Girls*, Abbi and Ilana from *Broad City*, and Issa from *Insecure* are examples of young women characters on television who were angry, anxious, and resistant to the idea that they should be resilient and empowered. The teenage girl characters of the series I analyze are unlike the empowered, Knope-like feminist characters of the 2010s, and in fact demonstrate significant frustration and anger in their lives like the girls from *Girls*. Affective dissonance is articulated by young women in response to powerful cultural messaging around their “capacity,” in other words, what women “can do” as now that they have supposed equality and are economically empowered.<sup>51</sup> These imagined cultural figures, called “top girls,” can balance physical attractiveness and desire for heterosexual romance, and are driven to achieve economically, in their career and academics.<sup>52</sup> This impossible figure showcases the contradictions inherent to postfeminist culture and the myth that young women can be truly empowered through choice and self-definition. In fact, studies of girls’ blogs illuminate how young women online utilize humorous memes, GIFs, and self-deprecation to showcase taboo gendered anxieties about their bodies, emotions, intelligence, friendships with other young women, and heterosexual romance perpetuated by popular feminism.<sup>53</sup> Girls online share their knowledge of unspoken rules around their feelings and these topics through humorous posts, but they do not completely rebel against their gendered burdens and pressure to be a “top girl.” Rather, they express disappointment and the capacity to manage their feelings, and simply decide to “get on” through harsh neoliberal feminist conditions. The same dynamics occur interpersonally among many young women who



rely on their bonds with other girls and form youthful feminist collectives as refuge from “conventions of relentless productivity” targeted at their demographic.<sup>54</sup> Thus, young women’s capacity to manage, and their creative agency in “shaping their own debates, producing their own media, and negotiating the contradictions presented by feminism” is key to the narratives and authorship practices on the three shows in this project.<sup>55</sup>

Until this point, teenage girls have been absent from shows exploring affective dissonance and #MeToo primarily because they are derided demographic in media culture and society and older women have occupied that narrative space in prestige TV. Now, with the older generation taking a step back, more millennial and Gen Z women are making strides in the industry, as performers, writers, and directors, and creating stories that center on them, or at least on youthful versions of themselves. Because of this lineage of evolving, complex women characters, there are now more feminist girl figures visible in media who are critical of society, politically engaged, and still “desirable, stylish, and fashionable.”<sup>56</sup> These outspoken girls are the subjects of teenage girl traumedies, adding an underseen perspective to feminist prestige television.

My analysis builds upon scholarly analysis of women-focused prestige comedy television that emerged during this era, including the series *Broad City*, *Insecure*, *Girls*, and *Orange is the New Black*. These series were part of a wave of feminist television that wasn’t “impossibly empowered” like *Parks and Rec*, and much more invested in women’s plights in a society that is capitalistic, racist, and sexist. These series were also no longer interested in telling stories about white men with problems. While airing across broadcast, cable, and streaming TV, these series were met with significant critical acclaim in journalistic discourse and were lauded as part of the new “feminist quality television”<sup>57</sup> that negotiated a previous era of masculinism in quality

television and foregrounded “gender politics and feminism as a historical political movement”<sup>58</sup> both in the text of these shows and in their productions by hiring women showrunners, directors, and writers. Characters like Liz Lemon, Hannah Horvat, and Ilana and Abby, who existed on shows that reference contemporary politics around women’s subjectivities, their personal desires, their bodies, and their relationships, became symbols of the progressive feminist television landscape, representative of “triumphant feminism and diversity on television, [they] account for a representational realism that lends programs novelty value.”<sup>59</sup> Because of the television industry’s competitive need to reflect “cool” popular feminist attitudes, it is logical to see how the complex or strong female lead narrative trend is applied to teenage girls by streaming services for the purposes of consecration.

Teenage girl traumedy is attuned to the masculinism of 21<sup>st</sup> century television, but is situated in television’s feminist roots as a medium that programs content for and about women, and a history of feminist quality television productions such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*,<sup>60</sup> *Cagney and Lacey*,<sup>61</sup> *Girls*,<sup>62</sup> and *Broad City* and *Insecure*.<sup>63</sup> Nygaard and Lagerway suggest a reconnection of “the term quality to stories for and about women as well as with its legacy of legitimating all forms of television,”<sup>64</sup> and my analysis follows suit by adding teenage girls and women’s embodied authorial agency to the quality feminist television field.

Overall, post-network television in the mid-to-late 2010s was marked by a clash between quality masculinist narratives and feminism’s mainstreaming. The creation of teenage girl traumedy by young women authors is a response to television of the previous era that centered on character types such as the family man in crisis and the empowered girlboss. Furthermore, the creators’ autobiographical authorship offers feminist resistance in television that is grounded in lived experience. Even though the series function as part of the marketization of feminism by

companies like Warner Bros., Disney, and Netflix, the messaging they promote and their novel authorship present feminist possibilities in television storytelling and production.

### **Autobiographical authorship**

The three series I analyze resemble many girl-friend-focused prestige comedies that came before them, including HBO's *Girls* and Comedy Central's *Broad City*. These comedies share "sororal discourse and imagery" with prestige dramas like *Big Little Lies*, *GLOW*, and *Orange is the New Black* through displays of women's kinship and solidarity.<sup>65</sup> Creators and stars of these shows who discuss their creative partnerships, close friendships, and admiration for other women in television and magazine interviews also supports these ideas of sorority in television.<sup>66</sup> Sororal discourses invoke second-wave feminism by celebrating women banding together and succeeding and offer a corrective to the industrial dominance of male-focused shows that also share the prestige label. They also invoke popular feminism, or commodity feminism, where viewers will watch a show and label it feminist simply because it features women protagonists and is about women's stories. *Pen15*, *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, and *Derry Girls* visually represent feminist sisterhoods and sororal imagery in posters and thumbnails on their streaming services that feature all the girls standing together, conveying messages of friendship and allyship, much like the comedies and dramas I mentioned before. Their trailers focus on the girls' close-knit friendships and features many of the cringey/raunchy comedic jokes on the shows, demonstrating a counternarrative to the overabundance of teenage boy and male-centric raunchy comedies. However, beneath these pop-feminist paratexts lies subversive feminist narratives and aesthetics challenge dominant ideology. As cultural products that exist for streaming services' commercial interests, especially in their references to popular feminism, but demonstrate textual feminist resistance, teenage girl traumedies offer new ways of

conceptualizing the field of cultural production that allows for more creative autonomy of its agents and “working the cracks” feminist action.<sup>67</sup> Creators can use their insider knowledge of the field and “speak multiple languages of power convincingly,” such as the language of prestige television’s aesthetics and genres, and popular feminism visual signifiers.<sup>68</sup> These working the cracks strategies ultimately break through the cracks and fissures of dominant ideology and consecrate new narratives, aesthetic styles and production cultures.

Autobiography in their texts, which signifies higher cultural status as a work of personal experience, is an explicitly feminist practice by involving one’s embodiment “in the flesh” in their activism, in which the “physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born of necessity.”<sup>69</sup> Necessarily, feminist politics begin with affective dissonance, specifically an emotional rupture when someone realizes they are bumping “into a world that does not live in accordance with the principles [they] try to live.”<sup>70</sup> Women’s dissonant positionalities are formed by the realization that their ways of knowing, or epistemologies, and participation in society reproduces their gendered, racialized, and sexual oppression and self-judgement, or ontological being, resulting in activism, solidarity, and the desire for imagining alternatives and justice in relation to the existing social order.<sup>71</sup>

This reflexive attitude is present in the works of the authors I analyze, as they bump up against “the long-held masculinism of quality television as a system of evaluation that prioritizes television premised upon male-anti-heroes and the sexist and abusive treatment of women”<sup>72</sup> and must “negotiate how to pursue women-centric and feminist content within mainstream channels.”<sup>73</sup> First, their hiring by streaming services disrupts male auteurism traditions of quality TV network branding like HBO’s courting of auteurs like Martin Scorsese, David Chase, Alan

Ball, Mike Judge, and Adam McKay, who signify a guarantee of artistic quality through their singular creative visions and cinematic aesthetics.<sup>74</sup> Another way they can create dissonance and imagine alternatives is by writing about their lived experiences in relation to a society that perpetuates their oppression. Telling stories about ourselves and difficulties we've faced can lead to things like empathy and perspective-taking and self-reflection. Autobiographical storytelling in media makes lived experiences and knowledge into something material and less abstract or feeling-based. There are plenty of men in prestige television who have been able to filter personal experiences into fictionalized narratives, like David Simon's work as a homicide reporter that informed *The Wire* or David E. Kelley's experience as attorney before writing *L.A. Law*.<sup>75</sup> I am not saying that this authorship is less valuable, but simply pointing out that women have not been historically afforded such opportunities, however, women's stand-up routines provide a solid basis for my explorations of autobiography in television storytelling.

Feminist studies of stand-up comedy reflect the power of autobiography and self-definition in women comedians' creative works. For many women comedians, "a strong rebellious humor empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishized and to what extent we have been led to perpetuate this objectification."<sup>76</sup> Women stand-up comedians utilize autobiography to "negotiate myriad selves as they commodify both insights and insults, reminding audiences that to be human is to be involved in power relationships—a reality that shapes and defines who we are."<sup>77</sup> The authors I analyze reflect on their adolescent trauma by interrogating their sense of self, specifically their teenage selves and the media they consumed and discourses that shaped their experiences. In an interview, *Pen15* co-creator Anna Konkle stated that writing and starring in *Pen15* was "the most expensive kind of therapy," and was about "giving her younger self grace."<sup>78</sup> Reflections on trauma in these shows is a liberatory

therapeutic exercise, where someone gives their younger self grace, empathy, and understanding so they can live better lives in the present.

Autobiographical authorship in these texts then functions as a familiar consecrating trope of crafting self-expression for cultural capital, and as feminist resistance for women to ground their creative work in lived experience, as outlet for expressing pain, joy, and hope and finding healing out of trauma. This increased visibility of women's authorship in journalistic and trade press discourse and autobiographical stories about girlhood are products resulting from historical and industrial contexts surrounding representations of teenage girls in media, the textual and paratextual aspects of developing prestigious, quality television in the post-network and streaming era, and political strides in feminist activism within and beyond media production.

## **Methodology**

I use textual analysis throughout each chapter when analyzing scenes from three streaming television series: 1) *Pen15*, a Hulu original comedy from creators Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle that depicts middle school in the year 2000 and features Erskine and Konkle acting as their 13-year old selves; 2) *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, an HBO Max Original comedy-drama from comedy writer and actress Mindy Kaling that focuses on the lives of four first-year students at the fictional Essex College in the present who explore sex, romance, and newfound freedom; and 3) *Derry Girls*, a Channel 4-produced comedy created by Lisa McGee, distributed internationally by Netflix, that centers on a group of Northern Irish teen girls living everyday life at the end of The Troubles period in the late 1990s.

Each of these series fit within industrial parameters I associate with the teenage girl traumedy genre: they were all developed in the same time frame of the late 2010s, they are distributed by streaming television companies, they all have mentions of their autobiographical

authorship in trade publications and promotional materials, they are all linked in critical evaluations to (popular) feminist politics, and they include tropes I identify with teenage girl traumedy, specifically emotional, bodily, relational, and national traumas.

I will also use discourse analysis to highlight how the trades and popular press characterize the development, production, and reception of these shows. My sources include trade press articles from *Variety*, *Deadline*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and interviews with the creators, stars, producers, and television executives in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *Vulture*. Additionally, I provide close readings of these series' paratexts, including advertisements and promotions to understand the series' marketing of feminist ideology to gain legitimacy among viewers and in the industry.

## **Chapter Descriptions**

Chapter 1 looks at the Hulu series *Pen15* (2019-2021), a middle school-set comedy where creators/writers Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle play the 13-year-old versions of themselves. I analyze *Pen15*'s narrative and formal inventiveness in depicting emotional and bodily shame for middle school teenage girls as a feminist, yet risky, creative endeavor in the first years of Hulu establishing a brand of original programming. Specifically, I closely analyze scenes where the protagonist Maya Ishii-Peters menstruates, masturbates, and performs oral sex. All of these depictions involve sexual subject matter for teenage girls still deemed taboo in society because of the sexual double standard imposed on them.

In Chapter 2, I analyze how the HBO Max series *The Sex Lives of College Girls* (2021-) portrays incidents of sexual harassment and assault from the perspective of Bela Malhotra, a young Indian woman in college in the post-#MeToo era. This narrative choice is made possible because of #MeToo activism in Hollywood resulting in more television dramatizations of real-

world sexual violence issues than ever before, and #MeToo vocabularies functioning as industrial cultural capital for HBO's expanding brand. Bela's conflicts over minimizing the assault as serious trauma, silencing another victim, and ultimately taking justice into her own hands are narrative choices indicative of the post-#MeToo era and contradicting attitudes in contemporary sexual culture, where young women, and particularly teenage girls, experience conflicts regarding personal empowerment, institutional reporting, and allyship with other survivors. *Sex Lives* expands the personal trauma from *Pen15*, showing the effects of trauma manifesting in personal relationships and clashing with an institutional structure in Title IX.

My last case study in Chapter 3 focuses on the antics of a group of Northern Irish teenage girls in the Channel 4/Netflix series *Derry Girls* (2018-2022), who are coming of age during the later years of The Troubles. *Derry Girls* is produced and distributed by Channel 4, an independent broadcast channel in the United Kingdom, but Netflix has international distribution rights for streaming. *Derry Girls'* sitcom format and narrative focus on girls during The Troubles are textual aspects representative of taste-clustering and nichification strategies at Netflix as the streamer acquired television shows outside of prestige dramas to generate subscriber viewing data for personalization and deepen their library of content. In this chapter, I examine how *Derry Girls* uses the national trauma of the ethnoreligious conflict as the backdrop to the teenage girls' attempts to live their lives normally. This series brings the level of trauma to that of a decades-long violent national struggle, which affects the girls' processing of their identities and relationships, resulting in dark humor that helps the girls build resiliency while they witness the tragedy in their community.

The fourth and final chapter concludes with a discussion of a current crisis facing teenage girls' well-being and future directions for the genre. I present a variety of contemporary case



studies involving teenage girl trauma that illustrate the thematic fulcrum of my thesis and a likely theme that will continue for the foreseeable future; that right now, teenage girls cannot rely on formal relationships or institutions to address their mental and physical traumas, they must rely on support from other women and other teenage girls. Numerous political events like the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the elections of politicians who use fear-mongering tactics to generate crises about adolescent sexuality and identity, and new statistics about teenage girls' unprecedented levels of isolation and hopelessness have tempered some of my optimism with regard to the genre. But each of my case studies gives me hope to counter any pessimism. Ultimately, it is politically and industrially significant that narratives about teenage girls that combat sexist and ageist discourse historically perpetuated within media industries broke through the cracks in television and offer avenues for resistance and solidarity for teenage girls.

## CHAPTER 1 – INTIMATE TABOOS OF ADOLESCENCE ON *PEN15*

“The 13-year-old inside of you is always there,” is Maya Erskine’s mantra regarding her middle-school set Hulu comedy series *Pen15*.<sup>79</sup> Erskine, along with real-life best friend and co-creator Anna Konkle, based their series on their own middle school lives. Besides creating, writing, executive producing, and occasionally directing *Pen15*, Erskine and Konkle also star as the thirteen-year-old versions of themselves, wearing every popular 2000’s fashion brand, wigs, fake braces, and minimizing bras to make their chests flatter. Maya’s character, named Maya Ishii-Peters, grapples with issues of being a first-generation mixed Japanese Asian American, a period she keeps secret, her discovery of masturbation, and finding the right person for her first kiss. Konkle’s character, called Anna Kone, finds out that her parents are getting a divorce during the first season and she wrestles with her sadness and anger over this throughout the series.

The series premiered in February 2019 and aired a second season split in two halves, the first airing in August 2020 and the second airing in December 2021. Over the course of its run, *Pen15* received numerous accolades from the Writers Guild of America, the Peabody Awards, and the Television Academy, with a nomination for “Outstanding Comedy Series” Emmy nomination by the latter organization in 2021. Maya Erskine received several nominations for “Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series” from the WGA and Television Academy.<sup>80</sup>

This beginning chapter analyzes teenage girl trauma regarding highly intimate body issues and taboos including menstruation, masturbation, and sexual activity. Here, I argue *Pen15* uses the effects of cringe comedy in explicit depictions of teenage girls’ menstruation, masturbation, and sexual activity to highlight social stigmas around intimate body insecurities

and sexual traumas for this demographic. *Pen15* is attuned to the emotional and sexual traumas of young teenage girls in society. It serves as a reflection on the infantilized and sexualized media cultures at the emergence of the teenage girl consumer market. Through provocative representations of young teenage girlhood trauma, the show makes an intervention in feminist discourse, which manifests as cultural capital for Hulu helping brand its streaming platform Hulu among increased competition. *Pen15* combats the historical silencing and derision of teenage girls' puberty and sexual desire that are evident adult women's (and the series creators') shame and sexual trauma. *Pen15* exemplifies the genre of teenage girl traumedy by exploring intimate taboos of adolescence, as a response to prior decades of representations of teenage girls across media industries that reinstate a sexual double standard. A meta-level of trauma can be read from *Pen15* in Erskine and Konkle's performances of their teenage selves, where we see two adult women grapple with their adolescent feelings of shame.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the sexual culture and infantilization and sexualization in media that *Pen15* aims to combat. Then, I discuss how *Pen15*'s teenage girl traumedy is the necessary feminist comedy to help Hulu compete in streaming TV. Then, I use textual analysis to highlight specific instances of intimate teenage girl traumedy regarding menstruation, masturbation, and oral sex.

### **Teenage girls' era of sexualization**

*Pen15*'s focus on body insecurities and sexual taboos is a response to discourses of sexualization of girls and the establishment of the teenage girl consumer market that emerged in the 1990s. Girl-focused products, advertising, and magazines touting empowerment and female friendship are the media texts indicative the era *Pen15* alludes to in its nostalgic setting. Teenage girls' establishment as a lucrative demographic in advertising and consumer products was born

out of institutional and sociological crises regarding girls' exclusion from STEM school activities and reports about low self-esteem, body-image negativity, and eating disorders in response to sexualized and perfected media representations.<sup>81</sup> Due to this crisis, media about and directed at young teenage girls revolved around anxiety, and was "grounded in notions that these girls might be growing up too fast, more specifically that they are precociously sexualized."<sup>82</sup>

This discourse is prevalent in the marketing of girls' consumer goods, parenting books such as *What's Happening to Our Girls: Too Much Too Soon* (2008), coverage of young celebrities in teen magazines, music, and music videos aimed at young teen girl listeners as this demographic became recognized as an important market.<sup>83</sup> For example, thematic analyses of teen magazines *CosmoGIRL!*, *Teen People*, *Seventeen*, and *Teen* showed that teenage girls are exposed to messaging such as "girls are not OK as they are, girls' natural bodies are out of control, [and] every body must be perfected."<sup>84</sup> Britney Spears, who was crowned "Teen Queen" as an idol for young girls, was also a subject of anxiety over the sexualization of girls.<sup>85</sup> The ridicule directed at her by media outlets and fans in the 1990s demonstrated the sexual double standard presented to girls, since she embodied "both lust and purity, virtue and vice" in her lyrics, music videos, and media appearances.<sup>86</sup> Institutional reports such as *Corporate Pedophilia* (2006) also legitimized this discussion, warning parents and policy makers of the threat of sexualizing images in popular media aimed at young girls.<sup>87</sup>

Broadcast television featuring teenage girls going through puberty and sexual discovery capture these moralistic values. Television shows aimed at teens like *Beverly Hills 90210*, *My So-Called Life* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also depict a developing sexuality as "a rite of passage and part of the transition into adulthood" and negative consequences of sex as "foreshadowing issues that lead into young adulthood."<sup>88</sup> Teenagers in television were portrayed

as knowledgeable about the intricacies of sex, while also suffering consequences related to poor sexual decision making. Few examples exist that portray an interplay between humor, trauma, cringe worthiness, and empathy for girls going through puberty outside of more dramatic and disturbing portrayals of teenage girls' sexualities such as the Todd Solondz film, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), Harmony Korine's *Kids* (1995), and Catherine Hardwicke's *Thirteen* (2003). Each of these films tackles teenage girlhood in provocative and disturbing ways, showing teen girls experimenting with sex and substance abuse, but their fates are depressing with little hope for their future after they dabbled in adult activity, and as characters they are mostly unpleasant. *Pen15* is also disturbing at times, however, Maya and Anna are written importantly as very sincere characters, as opposed to the more ironic teens of these film examples.

Prior to feminist interventions in portrayals of women in explicit sex scenes in film and television through creators like *The L Word*'s Ilene Chaiken, *Girls*' Lena Dunham, and *Broad City*'s Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, women were largely absent from modeling sexual scripts for women viewers beyond sexist and objectifying portrayals. Specifically in the genre of comedy and cringe comedy, men's sexual activities, embarrassments, and triumphs are prevalent. Analyses of comedy films *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and *American Pie* (1999) showed how males were stereotypically portrayed as being "obsessed with sex and sexual performance," using masturbation to perform better sexually, not necessarily for personal pleasure.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, young women analyzed in these media texts were portrayed as being responsible for condoms, contraception, pregnancy, and preventing STDS, as opposed to pursuing sexual pleasure in any way other than to exist for their male partners' pleasure.<sup>90</sup> Sexual activity and health during puberty are also topics of embarrassment and humor in media, however, the gendered connotation of that embarrassment is particularly fraught and dramatic for

girls.<sup>91</sup> For example, there are numerous jokes on *South Park* about boys' pubic hair, and on *American Pie*, the humiliation of masturbating into an apple pie while a parent walks in is fodder for cringe comedy. Whether we are laughing with or at these boys, the fact that they can discuss this embarrassment and likely overcome it in mass media makes these puberty experiences normal for them.

On the other hand, girls are made to fear their bodies due to cringeworthy embarrassment. In a *CosmoGIRL* article, a young woman is shown next to a hairy monkey, with both confused over the hair growing on their breasts.<sup>92</sup> The embarrassment of bleeding is also prevalent for teenage girls and women, as they are “very concerned about the possibility of staining, leaking, or otherwise displaying the fact of their menstruation and thus violating the concealment taboo.”<sup>93</sup> The conditions of sex education, where intimate subjects are discussed among children who are embarrassed about their existence and not mature enough to deal with their puberty in emotionally healthy ways, dissuades girls from seeking out information or resources for menstruation. In fact, other girls “are among the most valued information sources, filling in the gaps of conventional menstrual education” and providing a comfortable context to talk about menstruation.<sup>94</sup> Similar to *Derry Girls* and *Sex Lives*, *Pen15* makes teenage girls' kinship during traumatic moments an important aspect of the show, since more formal relationships and institutions do not provide them educational or emotional support. Masturbation and oral sex also carry gendered social stigmas with them, and their depiction in teenage girl traumentary reveals how these forays into sexual exploration can be emotionally damaging, which I delve into next.

Masturbation is especially stigmatized in public discourse due to its historical pathologizing as a disease and unnatural practice due to not having a reproductive goal.<sup>95</sup> Medical journals have also reported on adolescent girls' struggles over their sexuality and

masturbation, as survey participants explained their experiences of sexual desire as “strong and pleasurable, yet they speak very often not of the power of desire but of how their desire may get them in trouble.”<sup>96</sup> Psychiatric studies of young adults’ recollections of masturbation also reveal these differences, girls having felt more coerced into sexual situations, experienced more sexual guilt than boys, and having had “far less experience of masturbation, whereas boys were somewhat more active in explorative activities on their own as well as with peers.”<sup>97</sup>

Despite the stigma, medical research indicates that masturbation can be a factor in improving sexual health and is a normal marker of sexual development among adolescents.<sup>98</sup> Sex researchers’ studies of young women’s perceptions of masturbation revealed positive attitudes, especially with regard to effective sexual communication and positive views of the sexual self and sexual activity after masturbating.<sup>99</sup> *Pen15* is attuned to these gender differences in representation and attitudes towards masturbation, since both creators felt significant shame about masturbating in their youth. By cringing through their own sexual insecurities in their performances, Erskine and Konkle help women feel normal about their sexual desires during puberty that historically were disparaged in media culture.

Menstruation and masturbation are highly personal issues that come with social stigmas for teenage girls. But perhaps the most cringeworthy and traumatic shared sexual experience on the series involves oral sex, specifically, Maya performing fellatio for the first time. Like masturbation, oral sex also does not have a reproductive goal, and a common reason people desire and give oral sex is for physical pleasure. While oral sex is often incorporated into sexual repertoires, the extreme physical intimacy of fellatio for women is a factor in more negative emotions compared to penile-vaginal intercourse. Some perceive fellatio as submissive, where the woman is giving oral-penis stimulation to help a male partner ejaculate in the dominant

role.<sup>100</sup> Some women surveyed in medical studies found fellatio “less stimulating, fulfilling and exciting than intercourse or cunnilingus [and] were also more likely to feel bored and disgusted when performing oral sex than they were when engaging in the other two activities.”<sup>101</sup>

Gendered stigmas surrounding reciprocity, in terms of uncertainty on whether partners will “give and receive” in oral sex also account for feelings of sexual awkwardness that may result in cringe and disgust.<sup>102</sup> Researchers have also observed factors such as peer pressure and coercion as factors among adolescent women engaging in oral sex, as well as later feelings of personal inadequacy and self-deprecation, leading to emotional and bodily trauma.<sup>103</sup> The multiplicity of these emotional responses and extreme intimacy of oral sex goes to demonstrate why watching fellatio discussed and performed by an inexperienced teenage girl on television can be cringeworthy.

*Pen15*’s focus on the middle school years allows for stories like these sexually traumatic situations to be represented. Erskine describes middle school as “interminable Hell,” a time period that traumatized her for the rest of her life, with her masturbation causing a serious sense of shame for her when she was around 13 years old.<sup>104</sup> Konkle also described how intense her middle school phase was, when “you’re experiencing sexual things, and your brain is changing, and your body is betraying you.”<sup>105</sup> Both creators poured over their teenage diaries and memorabilia to comedy in how seriously they took their adolescent lives.<sup>106</sup> They thought, “the more shameful was the funnier stuff to us, and we thought that would not be accepted, but more people seem to appreciate the secret-telling, the stuff that we were told not to talk about.”<sup>107</sup> Erskine and Konkle are hopeful that their show will resonate with other women, who can feel catharsis in seeing and talking about periods, masturbating, body insecurity, and bullying.<sup>108</sup>



The circulation of anxiety surrounding teenage girls' sexuality supports the idea that teenage girls lack agency because of their perceived susceptibility to manipulation and limited abilities to process media messages.<sup>109</sup> Actual teenage girls negotiate these representations in more complex ways beyond negativity. Studies of girls' reception of female pop stars like Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus's femininity and sexuality showed that this demographic both distanced themselves from sexist and hypersexual representations of women while regulating their response "in the sexism of the sexual double standard."<sup>110</sup> Teenage girls described being caught in between "competing norms of asexuality and sexual savvy," because of media that describes them both as innocent children but knowledgeable, sexual subjects.<sup>111</sup> Britney Spears herself even sang about this in-between life stage in her song, "Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman." Overall, *Pen15* aims to show the negative, traumatic consequences of being a teenage girl living in these sexual double standard conditions. They show the bodily and emotional tolls of puberty on teenage girls and establish sexual scripts for how teenage girls and women engage with sexual activities. Teenaged characters in film and television model these scripts and norms for young audiences, and if the depictions are stereotypical or unhealthy, "it is less likely that young people will adopt sexually healthy behaviors themselves."<sup>112</sup> *Pen15* aims to intervene in the historical silencing of teenage girls' experiences during puberty and sexual desire that results in adult women's shame and sexual trauma.

In the attempt to induce an extreme cringe reaction for audiences in response to *Pen15*'s explicit depictions of the teenage girls' menstruation, masturbation, and sexual activity, Erskine and Konkle illuminate the social stigma around these topics. Their autobiographical performances meta-textually demonstrate how sexual activity from teenage girl years resulted in a cringeworthy sexual trauma for these women in their adulthood. De-stigmatization therefore,

through cringing at these women's first experiences with sex, is the cultural capital for Hulu to establish a brand, which I will discuss next.

### **Teenage Girl Traumedy on Hulu**

Teenage girl traumedy in *Pen15* helped cement a comedy brand at Hulu to compete with other streaming services in original programming. "Before diving into the show," I return to thinking about streaming television competition as a field of cultural production, constituted "by struggles over possible positions, which often take the form of a battle between established producers, institutions and styles, and heretical newcomers."<sup>113</sup> Agents in the field of cultural production take into consideration "the categories of perception constitutive of a certain habitus" to potentially innovate, depending on present possibilities.<sup>114</sup> Teenage girl traumedy is the innovative course of action developed out of outdated categories of perception, namely, sexist and shallow feminist ideologies of the past directed at young girls and embodied in television. *Pen15*'s focus on body insecurities and sexual taboos combats discourses of sexualization of girls and hollow empowerment of their demographic in the teenage girl consumer market. Attunement to the emotional traumas and structural oppression of girls in society through teenage girl traumedy is an intervention in feminist discourse, manifesting as emerging cultural capital. Therefore, this capital can be taken up in media industries attempting to produce content for today's dominant class with economic capital, notably upwardly mobile and liberal feminists as a coveted sub-demographic.

Before *Pen15*, Hulu was known for streaming broadcast television shows and distributing the award-winning drama *The Handmaid's Tale*. Hulu's roots are in broadcast TV, as it began "in 2007 as a joint venture among the conglomerates that then owned three of the four major broadcast networks, NBC, Fox, and ABC."<sup>115</sup> The streamer was already home to numerous

comedies before it started making original comedy. *The Mindy Project*, *Black-ish*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park* were available on the service before their respective parent companies eventually created their own streaming services, which gave Hulu a built-in comedy audience ready for original comedy programming in the highly competitive streaming TV landscape.<sup>116</sup> Since companies like Netflix, Hulu, HBO, and Amazon had established themselves as competitors making award-winning prestige dramas, the next genre to tackle was comedy.

In 2018, Hulu greenlit a 10-episode straight-to-series order of *Pen15* that would be executive produced by Andy Samberg, Akiva Schaffer, and Jorma Taccone, also known as The Lonely Island.<sup>117</sup> The established comedic brand of The Lonely Island is well-suited for *Pen15*, as both feature pop culture references, vulgar bodily humor, and surprising earnestness. They also give legitimacy to the relatively unknown *Pen15* creative team, since The Lonely Island had been a popular, critically acclaimed comedic voice in television.

The balance of comedy and trauma and specific female voice behind *Pen15* makes it most similar to *Broad City* and *Girls*. In fact, when Erskine and Konkle were pitching the show to various networks and streaming services between 2017-2018, Abbi Jacobson, Ilana Glazer, and Lena Dunham were on TV executives' minds due to the success of their shows and outspoken feminist stances, and the *Pen15* creators got meetings fairly easily because female-authored raunchy comedy was in the television zeitgeist.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, *Pen15* fit into a well-trodden path for women comedy creatives, and also offered something new in performing as their middle school selves. Especially regarding the autobiographical performances and cast of real-life teens, *Pen15* was very creatively risky, however, it had markers of a legit feminist,

comedy brand surrounding it that it ended up being the right kind of risk for Hulu to take in starting to establish their original comedy brand.

The embodiment of cringeworthy girlhood in the two creators/actors is another way that *Pen15* attains cultural capital. In trade press and publicity events for *Pen15*, Erskine and Konkle's committed performances, use of trauma, and innovations in writing and directing were referenced numerous times. Frequent mentions of cringing in trade press, reviews, and interviews made *Pen15* as an innovative must-see in the sea of new original programming: *Pen15* is "brilliantly awkward," a "trenchant study of adolescence" and a "wistful love letter to your middle school self."<sup>119</sup> Cringe, which is a feeling of uncomfortable embarrassment, "is evoked by not knowing whether [one] should be laughing," which becomes subversive when associated with female behaviors and bodies.<sup>120</sup> Cringe comedy in recent years in the mockumentary format achieved critical and industrial acclaim, in series like *The Office*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Parks and Rec*, with awkward situations and silence and aesthetic conventions of single-camera movements and talking heads signifying a new formal achievement in television comedy.

*Pen15* builds off those series by inducing cringe laughter about women's bodies and identities are made that violate taboos and social scripts.<sup>121</sup> On *Girls* and *Fleabag*, women characters made frank observations about social and sexual awkwardness, using the cringe reaction to "explore their characters' violations of social and cultural taboos, many of which are particularly constituted as gendered expectations about appropriate enactments of femininity."<sup>122</sup> Issa Rae on *Insecure* was a "racialized subject of cringe...she expresses exasperated bewilderment at the behavior of those in her social environment as a coping mechanism and survival strategy."<sup>123</sup> These instances of cringe on women-centric dramedies differ from

schadenfreude because instead of getting pleasure from their pain, the viewer is supposed to empathize with their discomfort. Feeling for these women through cringing and laughing “might be material evidence that the joke is doing its subversive work.”<sup>124</sup> Additionally, critical reviews of the show pointed out its feminist messaging, like “it feels like watching a show entirely about the geeks from *Freaks and Geeks*, except it was explicitly written for and by women.”<sup>125</sup> *Pen15* was included in a list alongside *Big Mouth* and *I May Destroy You* of recent television depicting menstruation in non-shameful ways, pointing to the how subversive and important this representation is for women viewers.<sup>126</sup> When *Sex Lives* and *Derry Girls* use cringe comedy, the teenage girls’ disruptive behavior, immaturity, ignorance towards gendered behavioral norms are highlighted. *Pen15* goes to further formal lengths to depict intimate body insecurities and sexual cringe-worthiness of puberty, taking cringe to an extremely personal level. Erskine and Konkle’s performances of their teenage selves take cringing even further, since the performance can be read as deep personal explorations of teenage girl trauma, in relation to the sexual culture of their youth, that affected them in adult life. *Pen15*’s teenage girl traumedrama uses the effects of cringe to imbue the show and therefore this subgenre with political cultural value, further allowing it to compete and gain prestige in streaming TV.

Taking all of this into account, Hulu’s lack of brand identity could result in distributing an on-paper risky teenage girl traumedrama like *Pen15*, using its feminist approach to discussing the intimate bodily traumas of puberty as cultural capital. *Pen15*’s predecessors, *Broad City* and *Girls*, had also already gained prestige in the television industry among viewers and critics for raunchy and feminist comedy aimed at millennial women. In 2019, Hulu announced that its median subscriber age was 31 years old, which was the same age as the *Pen15* creators at the time.<sup>127</sup> Other Hulu comedy originals *Ramy* and *Shrill* similarly focused on identity-based

frustrations and ennui among millennials, religion and fatness in relation to masculinity and femininity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, respectively. As was revealed in a 2019 upfronts presentation, the average age of a Hulu subscriber was 31-years old, and programming was beginning to form around this demographic's tastes.<sup>128</sup> *Pen15*'s millennial nostalgia and look back at teenage girl trauma in the late 1990s therefore serves a generational branding function in addition to the feminist interventions of teenage girl trauma, as Erwich stated, "you want shows that reflect the culture" for the audience.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, Hulu could also participate in the emerging feminist conversations around media labor by backing a female creative duo who write, direct, produce, and act in television.

It's also important to note that three years after *Pen15*'s greenlighting, Hulu would be majority owned by The Walt Disney Company once it acquired 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. The latter studio owns FX, the cable channel known for its prestige TV drama brand. *Pen15* ended at the completion of this acquisition in 2021, not due to any creative problems but rather the duo's feeling that the series had come to an end.<sup>130</sup> Hulu has since become a home for dramedies and prestige dramas, *The Dropout*, *Pam & Tommy*, *Reservation Dogs*, *Dopesick*, *Only Murders in the Building*, and *Fleishman is in Trouble*, all of which were developed between 2019-2020 in the wake of the branding change, showing somewhat of a departure from the millennial comedies developed to establish the brand. Thus, it's clear that teenage girl traumedy in *Pen15* helped cement a comedy brand Hulu to compete with other streaming services in original programming. The series made a specific feminist intervention in its focus on intimate bodily traumas of teenage girlhood through extremely cringeworthy performances that would be appealing to Hulu's subscriber base before the expanded to other demographics. Next, I look at specific instances where menstruation, masturbation, and oral sex provoke cringe in visually upsetting

and potentially disturbing ways. A cringe reaction is a result of these subjects' absence from media representations, as well as the negative emotions surrounding shame and sexual coercion for teenage girls.

## **Menstruating**

The first instance of intimate, empathy-giving teenage girl trauma involves menstruation, where Maya feels fear and shame over having her first period. In the season one episode "Anna Ishii-Peters," Maya has a big fight with Anna, and runs away to the bathroom. She cries sitting on the toilet, and we see Maya express anger and sadness at the small stain of blood in her underwear. She then takes a large wad of toilet paper and stuffs it in her underwear.

In the following episode, Maya deals with having her period at school. Again, we see her take a huge wad of toilet paper to stuff in her underwear. She proceeds to flush down the old bloody toilet paper, when the toilet gets clogged. Maya, getting increasingly anxious, exits the bathroom stall where the toilet is plugged. A friendly female janitor looks at the toilet and tells Maya she "can't flush pads." Maya says it's not a pad, and she doesn't have her period. The female janitor sees Maya's embarrassment, saying "Oh, you know, it's natural. It happens to everyone." Maya responds "Good for them," continuing her streak of embarrassing comments. The janitor hands her a tampon for whenever she needs it. In the next scene, we see Maya's hands holding an exaggeratingly large cotton tampon in her hand, which grows bigger. Mystical tribal music plays in the background as Maya investigates the tampon. The camera then zooms out and we see her holding a relatively small tampon. She attempts to put it in her vagina.

Almost a year later, Maya is still keeping her period a secret. At a sleepover, she gets distracted during a game and feels blood coming out of her and staining her underwear. She again proceeds to take a major wad of toilet paper to use as a makeshift pad. Maya later goes

back to the bathroom to get more toilet paper and imagines a mask on the wall taunting her with the message “secret blood.” In the middle of the night, one of the girls at the sleepover sees that the toilet has been clogged with bloody toilet paper. The girls all say “not mine” very quickly, when a wad of bloody toilet paper is found on the ground. The girls kick and throw around the bloody toilet paper, screaming “EWWWW” until Maya shoves the toilet paper back into her underwear. Anna is visibly upset at Maya for lying about having her period.

Maya calls her mom and goes home. In a yuzu fruit bath, Maya explains how she is embarrassed that her secret is finally out and how her friends think she is disgusting. Her mother explains, “girls and women are like salad bowls, we put everything in one bowl,” and she mimes the different “ingredients” in the salad bowl. One ingredient is “sho miko-chan,” which is a Japanese slang name for “Miss Vagina.” Maya says “she hates it,” and her mother says no, that “it’s beautiful, it’s a little cute wonder.” Her mother tells her to keep what’s important to her, because “there’s not much room in the salad bowl.” Maya and Anna later make up, and Maya explains why she wanted to keep it a secret. She was embarrassed by it, thought it was small and would go away, but it comes once a month. Anna congratulates her, excited that her “best friend is now a woman.” Maya expresses sadness over not wanting this to happen to her.

Close-up shots of Maya’s confused face looking at her blood-stained underwear and large tampon also orient the viewer to intimately, if through cringing, feel these emotions with her. When Maya first discovers she has her period, the scene plays out in real time, very slowly, as her facial expression changes from sadness because of the fight with Anna to sadness over the small stain of blood in her underwear. When Maya utters “no” to herself rather angrily, the camera lingers on the tears streaming down her face. Periods are significant for teenage girls as they signal a maturing body and mind, but the fact that blood comes out of your vagina at



surprising times can feel like body horror. In this intimacy that the camera creates, the viewer can feel her anger, at now having to deal with her once a month visit from Aunt Flo, while laughing at her anger as well, hopefully knowing that she's going to be okay.

In depictions of Maya's period, there are surreal visuals combined with cringe aesthetics. These are cringeworthy scenes, because menstruation is a private topic surrounded with social taboos and the potential for embarrassment, most notably in a visible stain. Maya's imagined blood stain, where we see blood quickly drip out on the sides of her underwear, captures the uncomfortable feeling of blood come out of a vagina, and imagining it staining clothes in an embarrassing way. The large tampon also visualizes the confusion and anxiety of putting a cotton object in a vagina for the first time, let alone anything in small hole of the vagina for the first time.

Depicting puberty through exaggerated surreal visuals shows the personal terror that teenage girls may feel towards their changing body. Of course, a tampon is not actually that large, but it feels that large, and it can be scary for a middle schooler to use one for the first time. For someone like Maya, who is keeping her period a secret, it can be even more scary since she has no idea what to do or where to put it. Additionally, blood isn't going to entirely stain underwear on the first day of menstruation, but that first squirt of blood can feel that massive. While these scenarios are anxiety-inducing for Maya in her world, the repeated mystical tribal music cues, talking mask, and exaggerated visuals make these scenes comedic. We are meant to laugh at how big of a deal this is for Maya, not in a way that makes fun of her, but by empathizing with the horror of her experience. It is truly sad that Maya "hates" her vagina because of its blood and how it makes her horny, but her conversation with mom and her best friend aim to cast aside this insecurity. The intimacy in these scenes through close-ups, silence,

and long-shots of Maya crying help the audience feel for and with Maya, experiencing her misery and therefore lending her empathy. Intimacy is also fostered to more uncomfortable ends in Maya's masturbation scenes.

### **Masturbating**

The second instance of highly intimate teenage girl trauma involves masturbation, where Maya has one of her first sexual awakenings and keeps it a secret from her friend over feeling like what she is doing is supposedly wrong for a teenage girl. While making her My Little Ponies kiss, Maya feels a tingling sensation in her pants. We hear a throbbing sound as Maya stops playing and looks down at her nether regions, which are throbbing through her underwear at a fast pace. Again, we hear mystical tribal music during a close-up on Maya's face. Maya puts her finger in her vagina and starts to finger herself. The next shot is from behind, where we see Maya sitting crisscross on the floor, slumped over, fingering herself at a faster pace. The camera goes back to Maya's face, and she closes her eyes as the tribal music stops, seemingly having had an orgasm. She then confusingly looks at her fingers, which are covered in a sticky substance. Her mother arrives to her room to tuck her in for bed. Maya says goodnight and then looks at a picture of Anna, then turning it down to masturbate again in bed.

At school, Maya is very horny. She is distracted by hair, skin, and almost everything in sight. She tells her bathroom buddy Anna later that she needs some privacy, and she begins to masturbate again, muttering "sex, sexual, sex, vagina" to herself in the bathroom stall. She feels embarrassed around boys talking about their masturbation at school, with Anna calling them pervs for doing that. Maya later skips her after school plans with Anna to masturbate again. She tells her parents that she's taking a nap, and proceeds to grind against her bedroom wall, making out with a boy on a poster in her room, as mystical tribal music plays over the scene. We see

Maya in various positions on her bed and with her legs up fingering herself, until her mother interrupts her. Maya's mom asks about the curious smell in the room, which Maya lies about and says it's her fart.

In bed, Maya screams as she sees the ghost of her dead Ojichan (grandfather) while she's masturbating. She cries and apologizes, and tells Ojichan that she was "just scratching." The next day at school, Anna gets mad at Maya for ditching her. Maya tells Anna that she's been scared recently because she "sees dead people." She explains how she's been seeing her Ojichan, and the girls hatch a plan to use a Ouija board to summon Ojichan. While using the Ouija board, the girls ask why Ojichan is here, and the Ouija board spells out "CLIT," and "MASTURBAT—" before Maya's brother barges in and tells the girls that the Ouija board only works because someone is spelling words from their subconscious. Maya then starts to sob, and Anna looks at her confused.

We then see both girls sitting on Maya's bed. Maya tells Anna, "I'm like Sam, only I'm grosser cause I'm a girl. And I'm a pervert, and I really shouldn't be doing what I'm doing." Anna takes a second, and tells Maya, "Um, when I'm in bed, sometimes, I put my hands between my legs to feel good." Maya asks her if she feels gross, and Anna responds, "How gross can I feel if you do it to?" They pinky promise to each other that they don't think their best friend is a pervert.

Masturbation in today's culture remains an under-discussed topic among adult women unless usually through a whisper or intimate group setting. For teenage girls, this is even more taboo, as they are surrounded by boys who are told masturbating is normal during childhood, mainly in part because of its prevalence in media representations and abundance of pornography that is appealing to men. Erskine found it incredibly powerful to shoot these scenes and

normalizing her own experience, since when she was a teen, “there was no sharing between girls...there was nothing on TV that reflected my experience.”<sup>131</sup> Maya experiences shame, hearing about male classmates at school watching porn on their TV. Maya doesn’t want to be a perv like these boys, so she hides her masturbating. By the end of the episode, she ends up in tears because she is so ashamed of masturbating.

The cringe reactions to Maya’s masturbating are a result of her gendered bodily transgressions. Different camera angles on her face and body capture Maya’s awkward masturbating, switching between close-ups on her closed eyes and quiet moaning sounds, to wide shots depicting her gyrating in the dark. We cringe at Maya’s awkward facial expression, fingering, and body movements, but the laughter that accompanies cringing is evidence that *Pen15* produces empathy for these teenage girls, that empathy also reinforcing the cultural capital of de-stigmatization for teenage girls’ sexual activities. Viewers can feel vicarious embarrassment for Maya when she begins to hide masturbating from everyone, as she alters after school plans and screams “I’m taking a nap, don’t bother me for an hour!” In cringing through her secrecy and shame, the viewer can understand her embarrassment on a level that recognizes these situations as both awkward but very normal.

Maya’s eventual disclosure to Anna about masturbating produces cringe and catharsis. Maya works through tears to tell Anna about her shame, and it’s cringeworthy because she shouldn’t have to feel upset about having sexual urges that are normal for a girl her age. When Anna tells Maya she also puts her hands between her legs to feel good, and she doesn’t feel like a pervert because Maya does it too, there’s a feeling a relief that these girls could normalize masturbation for each other. They still pinky promise that they don’t think the other one is a pervert, ending the scene with cringe humor that still underlines these girls’ deep sense of shame

because of social taboos around masturbating. The most trauma-inducing scene is analyzed next, where Maya is coerced into giving a blowjob.

### **Performing oral sex**

The culmination of sexual trauma on the series involves Maya's coercion and apprehension in giving a blowjob to an older teenage boy. Menstruation and masturbation are both portrayed in humorous and at times surreal ways, and the blowjob takes the cringe reaction to the most extreme in a mundane and uncomfortable scene that shows trauma unfolding in real-time. The quasi-third season (a.k.a. second half of the second season) has some darker narratives compared to the other two, due to these girls approaching an older age and getting themselves into more adult situations. Anna has a boyfriend named Steve, who is a freshman in high school, and Maya meets Derrick, a friend of Steve's. The two girls go to Derrick's house, where they attempt to have sex with the boys. The most traumatic scene of the entire series then plays out in Derrick's room, where instead of Maya getting her first kiss, is asked by Derrick to perform oral sex. The camera hovers over Maya as she makes gagging noises as she attempts to give a blowjob. She tries for a few seconds, and looks at Derrick, who is confused, because he hasn't had an orgasm yet. Maya continues and the gagging sounds get louder and worse. Derrick tells her to stop because he can feel her teeth. She stops, with saliva dripping down her mouth. She tries going down on him again, and Derrick has an orgasm while looking at hand-drawn hentai porn.

The camera rapidly cuts back and forth between Derrick's face and moaning sounds and Maya's blowjob, until there is a squirting sound and Maya pulls her mouth out with ejaculate dripping off her lips. Maya, not knowing what to do with the cum in her mouth, runs away to the bathroom to wash up and immediately spits everything out and rinses out her mouth, saying

“ew” repeatedly. While Anna complains about a bad first kiss with Steve, Maya tells Anna about the blowjob, and Anna thinks it’s exciting. Maya is more hesitant, explaining how she “probably will never do again ever.” Anna leaves the bathroom and Maya continues to rise out her mouth while sobbing.

The blowjob scene elicits less laughter and more terror, showing a “vulnerability that is often so raw that it is painful to witness.”<sup>132</sup> Maya and Derrick’s faces are both filmed in close-ups, and the camera even focuses in on their eyes, mouths, and Derrick’s teeth. Maya is visibly uncomfortable throughout the scene, however, she’s only going through with the situation because she feels social pressure to grow up and do more sexual acts. These shots create uncomfortable intimacy between the two characters and an unsettling feeling that the situation is wrong. Maya pulling her mouth out and asking Derrick what to do only adds more pain to the scene, prolonging the cringe that the viewer feels towards Maya being taken advantage of, and continuing on with a situation that is clearly bad for her.

The lack of any music with only the gagging and moaning sounds results in a painful cringeworthy response towards the invasiveness of the sexual act and Maya’s inability perform it. As the sounds grow louder and the camera focuses in on the hentai porn, cringeworthy tension grows, since the viewer doesn’t know how either party is going to react when he eventually has an orgasm. There’s also some cringeworthy anger here in shots that cut back and forth between the Asian girl porno drawing and Maya, which conveys the idea that this is likely a sexual fetish for Derrick. The end result is nauseating for both Maya and the viewer, as she gets ejaculate in her mouth and all we want her to do is spit it out.

Maya says to Anna that she doesn’t want to give a blowjob ever again which is followed by a lengthy pause, which adds some meta-humor to the scene since it’s probably not the last the

blowjob that she'll ever give. There's relief in seeing Maya telling Anna the blowjob was bad—she doesn't hide that there's no pleasure to be found for her in performing oral sex on a man, and that doing it didn't make her feel cool, as she and Anna maybe expected it would. The scene ends with Maya looking at herself in the bathroom in tears, while she sobs trying to get the taste of ejaculate out of her mouth. This moment of introspection shows the trauma on Maya's face of what she's just seen and done and how simultaneously embarrassed, dirty, and ashamed she feels. The viewer is confronted with a highly intimate moment where this teenage girl looks at herself with a shameful attitude, encouraging the viewer to reflect on themselves, perhaps their own trauma, as well as how men and societal pressures make teenage girls feel coerced into performing sexual acts when they're too young to understand what's going on.

## **Conclusion**

*Pen15* depicts menstruation, masturbation, and sex through awkward visuals, sounds, and conversations, inducing a feeling of cringeworthy laughter. The cringing is not so much as how embarrassing these girls are, but how much the viewer *feels* for them through these intimate traumatic situations. *Pen15* serves as a reflection on the infantilized and sexualized double standard imposed on young teenage girls. In contrast with sexist and shallow representations of girlhood of previous decades, *Pen15* offers possibilities for exploring teenage girlhood with care and nuance by focusing on the intimate body insecurities and sexual desires of young teenage girls not represented on television. Sexual trauma from this chapter is expanded in my analysis of *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, where teenage girl sexualities in the modern era and an incident of assault are negotiated more among a central group of female friends.

*Pen15*'s inspiration is clearly seen in the kid-oriented Pixar film *Turning Red* (2021) which similarly deals with issues of horniness and periods under the G-rating.<sup>133</sup> Hopefully,

*Pen15* and other television and film focused on middle school girls will continue to be developed that treat this demographic as human beings with empathy and affection through comedy storytelling. *Pen15* made important feminist interventions in TV by depicting taboo issues during puberty that are shrouded in secrecy and shame in society. Ultimately, Erskine and Konkle's show illuminates possibilities for a rekindled feminist televisual landscape that combats the sexual cultures of the past empathizes with young teen girls' insecurities and perspectives. In my next chapter, I build from this empathy giving and taking to discuss more interpersonal and institutional responses to teenage girl traumedy within the sphere of sexual trauma and sexual culture on *The Sex Lives of College Girls*.



## CHAPTER 2 – SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE ON *THE SEX LIVES OF COLLEGE GIRLS*

*The Sex Lives of College Girls* centers on an exploration of what it is like to be a young woman attending college in contemporary US society. In comparison to its HBO predecessors, *Sex and the City* and *Girls*, *Sex Lives* is first and foremost a comedy and offers a youthful and diverse perspective across race, class, and sexuality, making it unconventional for the HBO linear channel but distinct along genre and narrative lines for the new streaming service HBO Max. As a show appealing to a younger demographic and developed in a cultural moment where issues of sexual agency and consent are front and center in public discourse, I look at I specifically look at how the series portrays sexual violence. I argue that *Sex Lives* offers a nuanced portrayal of sexual violence in the college setting that addresses issues of intersectional identity and institutional reporting issues. This representation is significant in beginning to understand how Gen Z-targeted television starts to engage in the #MeToo conversation. It also plays a role in touting a feminist identity for the HBO brand, which allows the streamer to compete in the prestige TV space with newer, more diverse identities at the center.

*The Sex Lives of College Girls* was in development in 2019 under the title *College Girls*, co-created by Mindy Kaling and Justin Noble. Mindy Kaling's status as a television auteur and acclaimed comedy writer was especially prevalent while *Sex Lives* was in development, as she had completed her series *The Mindy Project* on Hulu, was already co-creator and co-head writer of the high school comedy *Never Have I Ever* at Netflix, and had premiered *Late Night*, a comedy film she starred in and wrote, at the Sundance Film Festival. The original logline of *College Girls* was "a bundle of contradictions and hormones, these sexually active college girls are equal parts lovable and infuriating."<sup>134</sup> It was announced under its current title in 2020, as

part of the Warner Media streaming service, HBO Max. It would be branded as an HBO Max original, set to premiere in 2021. The series premiered in November 2021. The second season premiered the following November, and a third season was greenlit upon its season finale.<sup>135</sup>

*The Sex Lives of College Girls* centers on a group of four new college students at the fictional Essex College in Vermont. The friend group is comprised of four girls: Kimberly Finkle (Pauline Chalamet), a naïve Arizona girl who has a work study job on campus, Leighton Murray (Reneé Rapp), a closeted lesbian and daughter of a wealthy New York family, Bela Malhotra (Amrit Kaur), a comedy writer and horny extrovert reminiscent of Mindy Kaling herself, and Whitney Chase (Alyah Chanelle Scott), a soccer star who is secretly hooking up with her older male and married coach. The first season focuses on how these girls navigate sex, romance, academics and extracurriculars, and changing relationships with family. The series received positive reviews upon its premiere in 2020, with critics lauding its “mashup of R-rated jokes, thrilling sexual adventures and feel-good friendship.”<sup>136</sup> It was also praised for exploring the microcosms of college experiences, and focusing on the “first tentative steps of giddy transgression” in young women’s lives.<sup>137</sup> The series is also loosely based on Mindy Kaling’s own experience at Dartmouth College as an aspiring comedy writer.<sup>138</sup>

The traumed on *Sex Lives* is less frequent than *Pen15* and *Derry Girls* and the show generally has the lightest comedic tone among my case studies. Of course, trauma is still incorporated, and in my analysis, I discuss a multiple-episode arc involving protagonist Bela Malhotra’s experiences with sexual harassment and assault. Teenage girl traumed, and in this case, trauma in the latter years of teenage life, is well-suited for HBO Max’s more expansive branding, as it attempts to make content outside of the traditional HBO model for people outside of the linear channel’s primary audience. The HBO brand’s symbolic and cultural capital lies in

how the network is lauded as culturally and economically important it is, by industry journalists and executive and creators themselves, and in how it takes up provocative subject matter, in this case, sex and assault. Including depictions of sexual violence for a young audience serves brand functions, but they also make necessary interventions in the deluge of popular feminist narratives that erase structural and intersectional issues related to reporting and disclosure and only tell stories of taking down the system and finding personal empowerment.

In this chapter, I argue that *The Sex Lives of College Girls* combats previous televisual representations of sexual violence through low-key aesthetics that require the viewer to empathize with a teenage girl survivor. Sexual assault in the show is also linked to intersectional neoliberal feminism, where the survivor downplays her own assault to prioritize her professional pursuits in career where she is also a minority. Both the increased visibility of #MeToo in popular culture and shifts regarding how Gen Z women feel about sexual assault and sex positivity are factors in this nuanced portrayal of sexual violence. *Sex Lives* ultimately determines that the endeavor to be believed and to seek justice is futile for survivors, and that interpersonal emotional support with allies can be a way forward for healing. While *Sex Lives* features this very serious storyline, it is first and foremost a situational comedy, which is a genre outside HBO's typical masculine, dramatic, and cinematic content. *Sex Lives* being on HBO Max, focusing on young women, and having these narrative and aesthetic differences points to the brand's attempt to expand its viewership in order to compete in streaming television.

In the next section, I delve into previous televisual representations of sexual violence. Then, I discuss how the #MeToo movement has been taken up in television since the wave of disclosures of assault in 2017 alongside shifts among Generation Z young adults in sexual attitudes. After that, I closely analyze the multi-episode arc about Bela's sexual harassment and

later assault, looking at how the scenes are shot, how the structures that uphold a culture of sexual violence are depicted, and how female friendship serves as a necessary outlet for support in the wake of sexual trauma.

### **Sexual violence and #MeToo on television**

Televisual representations of sexual violence before the wave of #MeToo disclosures tend to reinscribe cultural myths and misogyny. Second wave feminist activists in the 1960s and 1970s worked to make conversations around rape and assault more prevalent and change laws, which was reflected in television at the time.<sup>139</sup> However, episodes of crime dramas from the 1970s “say little about rape law reform or victim rights and experiences, serving instead as a discourse on masculinity...they bolster masculinity by focusing on male protagonists, depicting them as nurturing and concerned for victim rights and feelings.”<sup>140</sup> A prominent intervention in television about violence against women came in 1999 in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, which centers on Capt. Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) who investigates rape and sexual assault cases, and who herself was conceived by her mother’s rape. The series has been criticized for its misogynist feminism that “includes false claims of rape; negative portrayals of feminine characteristics such as intuition, emotion, and manipulation; criminal use of interpersonal power by women; and the figure of the monstrous mother.”<sup>141</sup> Even though she is portrayed as an advocate and Hargitay is active in the non-profit space supporting sexual assault victims, the character Capt. Benson repeatedly questions the believability of rape victims, reflecting the series’ postfeminist disavowal of the justice-for-victims messaging it often tries to advance.

Several teen dramas from the 1990s such as *Beverly Hills 90210* in the form of “very special episodes” featured storylines where teenage girls are assaulted or harassed and end up changing their behavior to avoid being hurt again.<sup>142</sup> Perpetrators of violence and situations

where assaults happen involved teenage girls being “sexually attacked by older males at night in setting that are marked as ‘adult’ spaces, such as night clubs or college parties, after attempting to act and/or dress older than their age,” which is a common storytelling trope seen on the teen series *Dawson’s Creek*, *My-So-Called Life*, and *One Tree Hill*.<sup>143</sup> The technical aspects of these scenes also repeatedly used “shadowy lighting, rapid editing, the use of tight close-ups, and/or heavy movement within the frame,” as well as time jumps, rendering the aftermath of the assault invisible.<sup>144</sup> What is most important to note in bringing #MeToo into the conversation is that on these shows, the assault-related discourse remained confined to individuals, and usually young white women, rather than framing the issue as “a wider-reaching social or political problem.”<sup>145</sup> Additionally, across *SVU* and the teen soaps, “female characters seldom can or do form bonds with each other,” with romantic male partners or no one coming to aid female assault victims.<sup>146</sup>

The #MeToo movement is led by activist and sexual assault survivor Tarana Burke, who began using the phrase online in 2006.<sup>147</sup> Burke used “me too” to spread awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault and invited others to join the conversation by typing “me too” on social media. The hashtag was widely circulated in 2017 in the aftermath of reporting by Megan Twohey, Jodi Kantor, and Ronan Farrow that revealed Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein as a serial sexual abuser.<sup>148</sup> The movement was subsequently taken up by many celebrity women activists who continued the #MeToo conversation online and in the press, thereby harnessing popular feminism to make the movement visible to a mass audience, as well as accessible and admirable.<sup>149</sup> This analysis is concerned with how #MeToo exists in the context of popular feminism as the movement spread virally online and received heavy press coverage in Hollywood, with *Sex Lives* serving as a forum to incorporate the movement into

young-women centric television. I look at how the structures of sexual violence and interlocking oppressions of race and gender may be invoked in televisual representations.

Burke argues that “sexual violence is about power and privilege” and justice should be aimed at dismantling the structures and organizational cultures that perpetuate this violence.<sup>150</sup> #MeToo activism must be channeled instead from focusing on specific individuals as problems to “the material conditions that structure vulnerabilities to gender violence.”<sup>151</sup> The networked communication of #MeToo among victims with shared experiences “allows them to understand sexual violence as a structural rather than personal problem,” resulting in feminist solidarity and hopefully social change.<sup>152</sup> Because the structures of institutions like workplaces and universities are failing assault victims, forming solidarity with other women and assault victims serves as a survival mechanism. While this interpersonal sphere doesn’t immediately dismantle sexual violence and the culture that perpetuates it, this emotional support creates “cultures of empathy, mutual responsibility, and intolerance for sexual violence.”<sup>153</sup>

Two series, Netflix’s *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) and MTV’s *Sweet/Vicious* (2016-2017) engage explicitly with rape culture among teenagers and depict it as pervasive and systemic, combating some of these previous representations that make sexual violence highly individualistic. Close reads of these arcs uncover a reinstatement of some rape myths, specifically in showing “girls as not knowing what is best for them” and “situating rape as inevitable and elevating good guys, as opposed to structural change, as the saviors of girls.”<sup>154</sup> Beyond these teen dramas and SVU, sexual violence is also seen in “quality” cable programming like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Game of Thrones*. However, close readings of these narrative arcs involving rape reveal it “as a stock narrative device designed to act as a shorthand for complex female characters,” with the impacts of these violent acts for these women not seen on

screen, and in multiple cases, advancing the emotional development of the male protagonists even if the female character is given some multidimensionality.<sup>155</sup>

While these examples point to some advancement in terms of giving female characters agency, the #MeToo movement's mainstreaming in popular culture and popular feminist discourse became valuable cultural capital for media creators to alter televisual sexual violence narratives. Several recent series including *Younger*, *The Bold Type*, *The Good Fight*, and the reboot of *Murphy Brown* use the vocabularies of #MeToo, include fictionalized portrayals of real-world stories, and show some institutional struggles over how justice can be given to victims. Few shows however explain the intersectional and multi-directional problem of sexual violence. Overall, they tend to adhere to popular feminist conventions of individual empowerment, rather than show how fighting systems may result in failure. Television is “undeniably a part of social change” in its reflections of shifts in cultural attitudes, while it has also historically perpetuated harmful discourses about sexual violence.<sup>156</sup> *Sex Lives* portrays assault as it exists in the context of U.S. culture's reckoning with #MeToo, as well as changing attitudes among today's young women who have complex relationships with sex, which I will delve into next.

### **Generation Z sexual culture**

Sex is a major part of the series, however these characters' titular “sex lives” are fun and funny in comparison with other HBO shows. They are not awkward, like Hannah and Adam's sex on *Girls*, or overly romantic and melodramatic like Carrie's relationship with Big on *Sex and the City*. The sexual predicaments are specific to a younger audience, such as friends with benefits and casual hookups, loud dorm room sex, your first UTI, the spread of chlamydia on campus, and dating apps. The depictions of sex on *Sex Lives* are mostly played for laughs and

some titillation, as opposed to the male-gaze camerawork of explicit, lite-pornographic scenes in the high school drama/HBO Original *Euphoria*. Characters on *Sex Lives* have consensual sex, they make jokes while having sex, the girls are usually on top, and most scenes stick with depictions of dry humping and post-coitus discussions in underwear, all narrative and filming choices made in the effort to appeal to a specifically feminist-identifying audience, as well as a broader and younger audience in general in showing less explicit scenes.

These depictions also align with contemporary sexual attitudes among Generation Z women, the primary target audience for *Sex Lives*. Mindy Kaling and her co-creator Justin Noble, visited and talked with current young women in college to understand their worlds, and the writers' room is comprised of many young women as well, to infuse the characters and their predicaments with realism.<sup>157</sup> Some scientific studies of Gen Z's sex lives show that teens and people in their 20's are having less sex than ever before, a finding attributed to some declines in young people's alcohol consumption and increases in young people living with their parents.<sup>158</sup> In a lot of ways, this puriteen idea is a way for patriarchal culture to continue to control the narrative around young people, specifically young women, and sex, and to circulate this provocative culture shift in public discourse that has been repeated over generations. I'd rather call this an attitude shift, instead of any serious decline, due to the failures of postfeminist rhetoric and more conversations around the benefits, detriments, and nuances of sexual relationships. Gen Z has grown up with "sex positive" messaging, which largely aims to take away the shame of having casual sex.<sup>159</sup> It also involves the incorporation of queer sex, kinks, contraception, and sexual assault in the conversation about sex. Sexual choice is largely part of postfeminist rhetoric, in that having all these options free from judgment, people can feel empowered to have as much sex as they want, be dominant in bed, and have de-stigmatized



conversations around it with other people. A focus on choice however, as well as domination, has led many Gen Z women to feel shamed for not participating in sexual culture, not enjoying casual sex, or being in situations where they are having a lot of rough sex. Television has also influenced this resistance to sex positivity among Gen Z, with some feeling “like we were tricked into exploiting ourselves [and] tricked into thinking it was our idea...I would say I gathered this mostly from media, *Sex and the City*, *Girls* – HBO somehow did a number on me...it gets really ingrained in your brain that you need to be comfortable having sex with someone you’re not committed to.”<sup>160</sup> Many Gen Z women have found a balance in their current sex lives, viewing sex “in a more understated and accepting way.”<sup>161</sup> Sex can be a good and pleasurable experience according to Gen Z, there’s no need to be afraid of it or feel purity culture’s disdain. For women likely watching *Sex Lives*, having sex is about negotiating the circumstances of having sex and accounting for the potential of negative experiences or danger involved with sleeping around. The production of the series as well is attuned to this attitude shift and discomfort that people are feeling regarding consent and in the post #MeToo era, now using “intimacy coordinators to facilitate authenticity and comfort for the young performers.”<sup>162</sup>

There is an understanding at *Sex Lives* that the sex be portrayed in comedic ways because of this accepting, largely positive attitude toward sexual activity among Gen Z. Sex on *Sex Lives* isn’t always unfulfilling and uncomfortable like it was on *Girls*, it’s also not the end-all-be-all in finding The One like it was on *SATC*. Rather, sex is more of a horny exploit only exacerbated by the social environments and freedom of college. Sex can be liberating, especially for someone like Bela who discusses masturbation and vibrator use and is interested in sexual experimentation for her own pleasure, like having sex with a short king. For Kimberly, having monogamous sexual relationships with different people is a way for her to figure out what she’s

looking for in a long-term partner. In Whitney's case, she gets caught up in a sexual relationship with a soccer coach who she grows attached to, a predicament that young people might face as they date people significantly older than them for the first time. Finally, for Leighton, her journal of sexual discovery involves understanding and accepting her sexuality, as well as experimentation using a lesbian dating app. These girls' sex lives are also not always about having consensual sex, as the Bela assault storyline depicted. Sex is not always liberating, as postfeminist rhetoric would tell us, and there can be dangers associated with having a sex life on a college campus.

All of these characterizations through more accepting, nuanced sexual attitudes reflect the preparedness and precarity of pursuing sex among Gen Z, which are well-suited to a show that is HBO Max's attempt at appealing to young women subscribers. The official character posters released by WarnerMedia depict this perspective as well. Each poster is one of the girls' dorm room desks, with objects from their backpacks and desks spread across the surface. Among their phones, notebooks, deodorant, keys, and student IDs are bras, condoms, and vibrators, showing the balance that these characters are attempting to find in their lives. In these images, we see that preparedness for sex and clitoral pleasure all can be part of the college experience. The series tagline, "No Rules, No Regrets" indicates a more popular feminist message that sells the idea of women's empowerment through a YOLO attitude, which, while potentially shallow, effectively markets the show as a fun time for women viewers.<sup>163</sup> In watching actual episodes of the show, it is clear that the sexual attitude is more nuanced, especially as some of the sexual relationships do fail, while retaining most of the good-clean-fun attitude that the posters promise.

*Sex Lives*'s depictions of (mostly) fun sex in comedic situations fill a content gap at HBO. *Sex Lives* has aspects of the HBO brand, like a provocative attitude towards sex, an auteur

in Mindy Kaling, and elements of trauma, specifically in Bela's assault. However, its light tone and less explicit content is better suited for HBO Max, where a relatively traditional sitcom geared toward progressive Gen Z women could thrive. It exists as a youthful sex comedy attuned to contemporary sexual attitudes, therefore helping the larger HBO brand expand its viewership and diversify the kind of content it distributes both narratively and aesthetically on HBO Max.

### **Teenage Girl Traumedy on HBO Max**

In the historical context of #MeToo, the Trump administration, and discourses surrounding feminism and misogyny, HBO began to focus on the impacts of trauma on women's lives, seen in dramas such as *Big Little Lies* (2017-2019), *Sharp Objects* (2018), *I May Destroy You* (2021), *The Undoing* (2021) and *Mare of Easttown* (2021), otherwise known as the "traumatic arts" by industry journalists.<sup>164</sup> By 2020-2021, these shows also streamed on Warners' streaming service HBO Max, however they are all female-led dramas, taking up the dark, serious, and masculinized aesthetics of male-led HBO dramas in the cultural moment that resulted in depictions of women as morally ambiguous leads dealing with trauma. Half-hour comedies with elements of drama geared towards a female audience were never part of HBO's brand, which typically centered around dark themes, cinematic aesthetics, and complex male characters, with shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and more recently *Succession* and *Barry* defining the channel's brand. Until 2021, there was still no comedy other than stand-up and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* at HBO.

In 2019, Mindy Kaling exited her longtime producing home at NBC Universal for Warner Bros. Television, which is the television production and distribution arm for HBO. Her new overall deal, which says she will "write and produce new television projects for all platforms, including broadcast, cable channels, and streaming" is similar to lucrative deals at

other streaming platforms courting television showrunners, like Ryan Murphy, Kenya Barris, and Shonda Rhimes at Netflix, Jon Favreau at Disney+, and Taylor Sheridan at Paramount Plus. The strategy to sign showrunners with clear creative sensibilities fits within established practices at HBO to develop quality, “legitimate” television in the auteurist tradition.<sup>165</sup> *Sex Lives*’s authorship in Mindy Kaling as a showrunner, executive producer, and writer also expands existing strategies at HBO to platform multi-hyphenate women creators with clear visions that adhere to the overall brand. During the 2010s, a well-established path had been established for women in writing, producing, and performing roles at HBO in Lena Dunham, Issa Rae, and Michaela Coel. Kaling, who is known for candid writing in her bestselling memoirs and semi-autobiographical storytelling about the inner lives of teenage to millennial Indian women in her television and film comedies, has a comedic brand and relationship with women viewers and young fans who want to be “best friends” with her.<sup>166</sup> Kaling thus gives HBO Max an established comedy writer and producer who also provides content that fills a gap at the streamer, namely, half-hour comedies geared towards a younger female audience. Kaling is also prolific on Instagram and Twitter, as are her *Sex Lives* cast members, which also helps explain HBO Max’s decision to have a tech-savvy, youthful ensemble to market the digital streaming service as it expanded its content beyond the traditional HBO audience.

Streaming television services have the conundrum of making content for multiple demographics, age groups, and tastes, and HBO’s quality brand is niche and not as accessible in comparison with its competition. HBO Max then becomes a service for shows that retain the quality brand of HBO while potentially being cheaper to make and advertise and geared towards non-typical HBO audiences. HBO Max’s initial tagline in 2020 was “where HBO meets so much more,” indicating that there would be content on the streaming service for audiences outside of

the traditional HBO subscriber, which had historically skewed male and older than 35 years of age.<sup>167</sup> HBO Max was launched in May 2020 as AT&T/WarnerMedia's competitor in the streaming TV market. It includes the libraries of HBO, Warner Bros., DC Comics, Cartoon Network, Adult Swim, The CW, and other brands. Shows from the HBO subscription cable service are available on the platform branded as "HBO Originals" and original programming exclusive to the streaming service are branded as "Max Originals," *Sex Lives* being the latter. As the service was launching in 2020, digital promotions combined Warners intellectual property, including online ads of "Where Bada Meets Bing Meets *Bang*," "Where Scaredy Cat meets Smelly Cat," and sizzle reels posted on social media feeds that montaged *Wonder Woman* with *Adventure Time* and *Game of Thrones*.<sup>168</sup> Since its launch in 2020, HBO Max has made multiple shows outside of male-centric ensemble dramas, including the romantic drama series *Love Life*, the DC superhero series *Doom Patrol* and *Peacemaker*, stand-up dramedy *Hacks*, R-rated DC animated series *Harley Quinn*, single-cam show business sitcom *The Other Two*, and *Sex and The City* legacy sequel series *And Just Like That...*

What is clear across the new HBO Max shows and *Sex Lives* is the move towards making content for women, children, and families in Warners' streaming arm. HBO Max shows are overall less explicit in language, sex, and violence and cater more to the masses than HBO Originals that air on linear television. *Sex Lives* is for an untapped audience and uses non-cinematic aesthetics and has a general lack of narrative complexity, therefore expanding the kind of content at HBO. *Sex Lives* fills a genre gap for HBO in being a half-hour sitcom, and its more serious moments, like Bela's assault, Leighton's coming out, and Kimberly's socioeconomic insecurity are important secondary plots that give the series some emotional complexity and darker subject matter to make it distinct from both outright comedies and women's trauma

dramas. Bela's assault storyline in particular positions the series, and thus HBO Max, in feminist conversations surrounding #MeToo. This storyline, a more "HBO Original storyline" perhaps, gives the series and its streaming home a stamp of legitimacy in the TV field, as it engages in serious cultural issues like #MeToo and at the same time expands the HBO brand into more traditional situational comedy.

HBO already had symbolic capital as the kind of diamond standard of television programming. The cultural capital of #MeToo and fatigue over popular feminist conventions makes the brand distinctive among its competitors, institutional failure to address sexual violence being the provocative, yet progressive stance to take in the contemporary #MeToo conversation. Including depictions of sex and sexual violence for a young audience serves brand functions, but *Sex Lives* make necessary interventions by showing structural and intersectional issues related to reporting and disclosure.

### **Sexual assault on *Sex Lives***

Bela Malhotra is characterized the most confident, highly sexual friend of central female friend group on the show. She gives multiple handjobs at a Catullan party, is mainly interested in casual hookups over monogamous relationships, and wants to re-brand herself as a horny, vibrator-loving woman in college. She often makes her friends cringe through her explicit sexual joking, but she is not afraid of hiding her sexual desires and feels worthy of sexual attention. In later depicting Bela's harassment and assault, the series avoids putting blame on Bela for her sexual choices. Bela's sexual joking isn't a warning that being promiscuous or saying sexual comments will result in assault, like many teen soaps of previous decades have depicted.<sup>169</sup> Bela likes to sleep around and has a nonchalant attitude towards sex, but her assault is depicted as ultimately shown as something totally unwanted and unasked for from male peers.

Over the course of the first season, repeated sexual incidents affect Bela Malhotra, encapsulating much of the “teenage girl traumedy” on the show. She is trying to join the prestigious comedy writing club on campus The Catullan, which is ran by two upperclassmen, Ryan and Eric. Eric is portrayed as the asshole, often negging and criticizing Bela. Ryan is seemingly more kind, and she even thinks he’s “the nice one,” in comparison to Eric. This changes at a party, when Ryan offers to give Bela feedback on her writing and brings her to his room to show her “something funny,” which ends up being a threesome pornography video on his computer. She nervously laughs and leaves the party, later confiding in her roommates that the incident happened. Bela is convinced that the situation was just “weird,” and decides not to do anything about it.

*Sex Lives* makes numerous interventions here on representations of sexual violence in the era of #MeToo. First, Ryan is first depicted as a rather harmless and kind person, avoiding portrayals of perpetrators “as shadowy ‘bad’ men who are distinct from ‘normal’ men, which operates to obscure the relationship between normative constructions of gendered sexuality and male sexual violence against women.”<sup>170</sup> His characterization demonstrates that there are no personality or visual codes that indicate a person is harmful and violent, it could be an unassuming peer that could do this. Additionally, Bela’s storyline is stretched over multiple episodes, avoiding the didactic lesson-teaching of very special episodes that use sexual violence as a one-off narrative device. These episodes demonstrate that sexual violence is not one kind of assault, as well as not easily dealt with one time. The porno serves as a red flag that Ryan might be dangerous, and Bela’s dismissal of the situation is an unfortunate example of women nearing the point of normalization of sexual harassment, attempting to just move on, rather than confront

it. Bela's problem becomes worse over the course of later episodes, when she is inappropriately touched by Ryan and mishandles the aftermath of the assault.

After dismissing the porn incident, Bela is later officially invited to join The Catullan. Bela, who worships at the feet of former Catullan writers, discovers in one episode that the writing group has perpetuated a "boy's comedy club" mentality that is dismissive of women, women of color, and any comedy they want to write. She is then invited with a group of new writers to an exclusive room where they see Catullan memorabilia. Ryan and Bela admire an image of Julia Louis-Dreyfus, which is followed an act of sexual violence, where Ryan puts his erect penis against her back. Bela moves immediately, excusing herself and running out of The Catullan building.

This scene differs from representations of assault that obscure the situation, since the events play out in real time and there's no shadowing or rapid movements. The scene is brightly lit, and Bela's facial expression is seen during the assault and in the immediate aftermath, as it shifts from amazement at the Julia Louis image to real horror, discomfort, and distress. By watching the assault happen without any technical flourishes or cinematic formal elements, the assault is not spectacularized, in other words, the scene is not eye-catching or attention-grabbing in a way that would objectify Bela. This move toward depicting assault in non-cinematic ways is an example of how "the lack of spectacle makes feminist politics visible."<sup>171</sup> The scene instead portrays the quiet horror of assault for the teenage girl character. The mundaneness and straightforwardness of its portrayal puts the focus on Bela's feelings, emphasizing her emotions, specifically her fear, over the production quality of the scene, thereby allowing the viewer to feel scared for and with her.



The aftermath of Bela's assault and how she fumbles disclosure and grapples with reporting further demonstrates *Sex Lives'* nuanced post #MeToo attitude towards sexual violence. Carla, a fellow writer at The Catullan, discloses to Bela that Ryan pulled his dick out in front of her recently, and asks Bela if something similar had happened to her. Bela lies and says no. Later, Bela finds out that Carla has quit The Catullan, shortly after telling Bela what happened to her. Bela feels guilty over silencing Carla, and finally discloses to Leighton that she was assaulted by Ryan. Leighton takes Bela and Carla to the on-campus women's center, where they share what happened with a confidential source.

In depicting Bela dismissing her assault and silencing Carla, we see *Sex Lives* depict a struggle over believability in the highly visible era of #MeToo. Bela specifically states that she "silenced Carla", positioning *Sex Lives* in the vocabulary of #MeToo discourse.<sup>172</sup> Over the course of these episodes, Bela has continually dismissed Ryan's behavior, calling it weird and creepy, but ultimately prioritizing her goal of being accepted to The Catullan. Even as her roommates tell her to avoid Ryan, Bela maintains focus on starting her comedy writing career. Here, Bela takes up the neoliberal feminist myth that if she works hard and can achieve success based on her merits as a comedy writer, the sexual harassment issue will subside, and her success will ultimately help her prevail.<sup>173</sup>

In Bela's resulting mistakes in minimizing the harassment and assault and silencing another victim because of her tunnel vision, *Sex Lives* unveils the conceit of neoliberal feminism in the context of #MeToo. It also adds some perspective on how Bela's intersecting identities play a role in her handling of sexual violence. Bela's silencing of Carla is linked to her professional goals of dismantling the boy's club of The Catullan, where she wants to make a name for herself as a successful Indian woman in a career and field historically unwelcoming to

people who look like her. Here, an intersectional aspect of neoliberal feminism bumps up against the possibilities for solidarity among survivors of sexual violence. Bela is a young Indian woman who is genuinely conflicted about prioritizing her aspirations in neoliberal times as they are linked to her gender, race, and career she's chosen to pursue over believing another victim. However, in showing Bela's discomfort in the entire situation, the series avoids criticizing her choices, reflecting an attitude shift in post #MeToo representations of sexual violence disclosure. Her guilt over silencing Carla is depicted as a serious internal struggle, and was a mistake that was made because of her own trauma. Bela had effectively normalized these incidents leading her to doubt another survivor, thereby pointing to the larger cultural normalization of women's capacity to endure violence as patriarchal culture encourages men's power.

Later, the two women go to their campus's Title IX office. Bela makes jokes about being an Indian woman reporting a white guy and his soft dick, which read as off-putting jokes resulting from traumatic experiences. The Title IX officer tells the women that they either must drop out of The Catullan to avoid Ryan at all costs or begin the reporting process that will make the incidents public. The Title IX officer is not totally played for laughs, however, her highly specific comments on what the women do next reads as a satirical jab at the ways universities ask sexual assault victims to perform actual labor to make their life circumstances better. Bela wrestles with this dilemma, discussing her options with her roommates. One roommate, Kimberly, encourages her to report Ryan. Another roommate, Leighton, expresses empathy over not wanting the incident to ruin her life on campus. Bela ultimately decides to take the situation into her own hands, rallying other Catullan members to kick Ryan out of the group. There is some tension over whether Catullan writers will believe Bela, but they ultimately listen and effectively boot Ryan out of the club.

This depiction of Title IX reveals how postfeminist choice and empowerment are not the answers to reporting sexual violence in the era of #MeToo. Bela could have been written as an empowered girlboss who reports Ryan in a moment of defiance and uses the power of university punishment to get rid of him. But the university, through the voice of the Title IX officer, is depicted as not caring about Bela's situation, by making her and Carla change their circumstances and stop an activity they love to make their situation better. Title IX's failures to help these women "reveals the cultural nature of sexual violence and its power abuses," in this context, using a university system as representational of societal structures that reinforce sexual violence as normal.<sup>174</sup> The series shows that even in providing these choices, something that seemingly gives survivors agency, sexual assault survivors must function as neoliberal subjects charged with altering their lives under the oppressive structures of university Title IX reporting. Bela's ambivalence shows that reporting sexual assault is emotionally complicated, rejecting the myth that an issue as serious as groping can be addressed in a scene of surprising confidence reflecting a popular feminist perspective. It also avoids the kind of depiction of narrative and visual spectacle, instead opting for a muted and emotionally conflicted response in the character, which reveals horrific, everyday mundaneness of this situation.

This incident also begins to map the structural nature of sexual violence, in how institutions like universities reinforce the idea of sexual violence as an individual problem, a narrative phenomenon attuned to the continuing conversations in #MeToo activism.<sup>175</sup> For Bela, the solution to addressing her trauma is not institutional, she cannot change the system from within to make it better. She finds kinship with a fellow survivor in *The Catullan* and confides her true feelings among her roommates who offer her empathy and understanding. While the unfolding of this situation sounds rather bleak—young women must take this situation into their

own hands because their institution fails them—there is some hope in revealing this complex nature of sexual violence trauma, disclosure, and reporting, and how emotional support among other young women is a possible solution, or at least a starting point for the process of healing. By allowing the story to play over multiple episodes, the series also requires that the viewer see a downhill sequence of events in sexual assault reporting within interpersonal and institutional spheres.

## **Conclusion**

This paper offers a snapshot of current representations of sexual violence and shifting attitudes regarding sexuality. *The Sex Lives of College Girls* engages with the vocabulary of #MeToo and expands the expectations and assumptions of #MeToo by narrowing focus on the specter of Title IX and intersectional neoliberal feminism's impact on disclosure and reporting. For the streaming service HBO Max, *Sex Lives* expands the HBO brand to include half-hour situational comedy and more joyful, youthful programming. Its more serious storylines, reflective of real-world phenomenon like Bela's sexual assault, retain the sense of quality associated with HBO, where darker subject matter is portrayed in a nuanced way.

My analysis demonstrates the grim reality that many college women face in finding support after sexual assault that is unfortunately outside of structures built to provide help. Bela finds kinship with another survivor and empathy in her female friend group, which shows that interpersonal solidarity can be one solution in the #MeToo era. Including sexual assault in the sex lives of college girls represents progress in U.S. television, as a rebuttal to the overwhelming sex positive culture that current Gen Z women are negotiating in their lives. While *Sex Lives* does reflect popular feminism in some ways as a marketing tool for its streaming service, its depiction of #MeToo in the college setting begins to show the structural ways that sexual

violence goes unaddressed in society, and its detrimental effects on college women. *Sex Lives* could do more to expand its representations of sex on college campuses—the show still generally promotes participating in sexual culture and asexuality and aromance are left out of the conversation, as are non-cisgender people who have sex. However, by including a more accepting and nuanced Gen Z sexual attitude, *Sex Lives* begins a conversation on how college women today negotiate ideas surrounding sexuality, sex positivity, and the cultural nature of sexual violence. Overall, this older-skewed teenage girl traumentary includes clear examples of how sexual violence is normalized in society and how refuge with fellow women survivors and allies can serve as critical emotional support outside of institutional structures. My final case study chapter on Derry Girls expands trauma to not only be about emotional or bodily issues as they bump up against institutions, but about the nation, and how teenage girls are constituted in the framing of war.

### CHAPTER 3 – DISRUPTING MASCULINIZED REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR ON *DERRY GIRLS*

“We’re doing this for peace. A piece of that fine Protestant ass.” –Michelle Mallon, *Derry Girls* Season 2, Episode 1

This joke regarding the meetup with a Protestant boys’ school exemplifies the comedic tone of the Channel 4-produced/Netflix-distributed teen sitcom *Derry Girls* (2018-2022) which juxtaposes coming of age among a group of Northern Irish teenage girls with the conflict of The Troubles in their Derry community. The series takes place between 1994-1998, the last years of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles was a decades-long conflict between Catholic “nationalists” in British-controlled Northern Ireland and Protestant “loyalists” in the United Kingdom, the former campaigning for independence from Britain to join the united Republic of Ireland.<sup>176</sup> The series utilizes the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a peace agreement that ended the conflict as the Series 3 finale, paralleling “the day Northern Ireland grew up” with the girls’ coming of age.<sup>177</sup>

*Derry Girls* is just one example of multiple television series developed in the later 2010s utilizing comedic and dramatic narratives to tell stories about teenage girls in the emergent subgenre that I term “teenage girl traumedy.” This subgenre celebrates teenage girls’ chaotic lives, balancing the humor of the situations they get themselves into with the emotional issues of growing up. Other series such as *Pen15* (2019-2022) and the most recent *The Sex Lives of College Girls* (2021-) analyzed in this thesis also revel in showing teenage girl characters who are awkward and nervous but at the same time are highly confident and often narcissistic, capturing the emotional state of what *Derry Girls* star Saoirse-Monica Jackson calls being “mental.”<sup>178</sup> Like those series, *Derry Girls* has a clear authorial voice in a woman creator/writer,

in this case it's Lisa McGee, who based many of the characters and situations on her own life growing up in Derry with her girlfriends during The Troubles. What makes *Derry Girls* unique is its depictions of the Troubles as a trauma event on a national scale, whereas my other case studies have primarily focused on individual issues of coming of age. Through dark humor and unruly behavior from teenage girls, *Derry Girls* undermines masculinized depictions of the Troubles, and tells a hopeful story about teenage girls adapting to a life that is tumultuous and dangerous.

This chapter examines the humorous and unconventional narrative contrast on *Derry Girls* between The Troubles of Northern Ireland and the troubles of teenage girl life. Through textual analysis, I look at how the series writes The Troubles into humorous situations and jokes regarding teenage girls' adolescence. I attribute the success of these seemingly incongruous narratives to the semi-autobiographical authorship of the series creator and sole writer, Lisa McGee, whose goal was to write an ordinary, girl-centric Northern Irish story, "about whatever the gang are trying to do that week, with the Troubles normally getting in the way of it."<sup>179</sup> I also analyze the series from an industry perspective, exploring how its fit at Netflix is indicative of the intense taste-clustering development and acquisition strategy at the company that leaves *Derry Girls* as a potentially less-buzzy but highly rewatchable and valuable sitcom at the streamer.

Teenage girl traumedies function within a cultural moment where a youthful, vocal feminism is touted as the way forward for the movement during a time of serious political panic over women's rights around the world. Shows that depict young women nurturing their female friendships are reflective of these close friendships serving important life functions of coping and support.<sup>180</sup> Autobiographical authorship is also important to my conception of the subgenre,

where creator/writers like Lisa McGee deal with their own memories of teenage girlhood in the comedy/drama writing process. Within the television industry, an increase in women-authored teenage girl traumedies comes from desires from audiences and creators for television that tells specific stories about women for women. Additionally, these shows are part of critical conversations that gender comedy, and specifically abject, R-rated comedy, which is evident in the “female *Superbad*” moniker associated with this subgenre of films in recent years including *Blockers* (2018) and *Booksmart* (2019).<sup>181</sup>

This chapter unfolds in multiple sections. First, I provide some background information about *Derry Girls* and its real-life inspiration. Then, I discuss representations of the Troubles’ masculinization and how *Derry Girls* makes a feminist intervention, before providing a brief overview of comedy television addressing events discursively framed as national traumas. I then discuss how *Derry Girls* as a teenage girl traumedie fits into Netflix’s acquisition and branding strategies of taste-clustering and personalization, and how its teen girl specific story is a valuable asset to the overall library. After that, I delve into how the uses of dark humor and explicit joking within the conventions of sitcom storytelling opens a space for explorations of teenage girls’ trauma in the context of national trauma. *Derry Girls* is unique in my teenage girl traumedie case studies, since it involves mass trauma at the level of a war, right alongside the smaller scale, but still important issues for teenage girls coming of age. Ultimately, I argue that *Derry Girls* upends masculinized depictions of the Troubles by centering teenage girls and their disruptive, unserious, and unruly behavior. Seeing them make light of the Troubles and focus on their lives tells a hopeful story about teenage girls claiming agency, therefore depicting them as persistent and resilient.

#### ***Derry Girls* and Channel 4**



*Derry Girls* is produced by Hat Trick Productions for Channel 4, a publicly broadcast television network in the United Kingdom known for its alternative comedy brand. It has broadcast sitcoms “featuring under-represented groups...and has repeatedly attempted to experiment with the sitcom format.”<sup>182</sup> Channel 4 was home to widely popular comedy shows *Da Ali G Show*, *Peep Show*, *The Inbetweeners*, *The IT Crowd*, and *Father Ted*, the latter which shares the Irish setting and dark comedic themes with *Derry Girls*. The alt-brand of comedy can be attributed to the way television writers are independently commissioned by Channel 4. According to their official website, Channel 4 is “commercially-funded but publicly-owned [which] means that we’re able to offer independent and distinctive, universal content reflecting the interests of different communities across the UK” and “as a publisher-broadcaster, Channel 4 commissions UK content from the independent production sector.”<sup>183</sup> “A major difference between UK television and American television is that few shows have writer’s rooms—many shows are written by a single writer. On their comedy commissioning site, Channel 4 asks that comedy television pitches be “original, bold, and distinctive with a real sense of authorship,” mentioning current series *Big Boys*, *Derry Girls*, and *We Are Lady Parts* (which streams on Peacock) as examples, all sitcoms about groups of young friends navigating issues of sexuality, in some cases religion, school, and coming of age from writers using real-life experience as inspiration.<sup>184</sup> It’s no coincidence that there are multiple shows on Channel 4 that engage with these themes: in 2018, Ian Katz, the Channel 4 director of programmes, announce a \$10 million investment in scripted comedy and comedy entertainment, a decision “aimed at making Channel 4 the unequivocal home of youthful original British comedy.”<sup>185</sup>

Before *Derry Girls*, Lisa McGee had previously worked with Channel 4 on the short-lived sitcom *London Irish*, which ended up being a cult hit. Comedy commissioners at Channel 4

were interested in hiring McGee again after the cancellation, who was pregnant at the time and reflecting on her past and her friends in childhood. At first, she was going to write a sitcom about a group of friends set in the present day, however, her *London Irish* producer persuaded her to include the Troubles, because the stories were funny and joyful, despite the dark period of history. McGee said, “I just wanted to write about me and my friends and the way we behaved in school, leave the Troubles out of it. But that didn’t feel truthful either, because I don’t have an experience without it.”<sup>186</sup> The Channel 4 head of comedy at the time, Fiona McDermott, who greenlit the show, saw a gem in *Derry Girls* immediately: “reading the script I knew it was special because the world was so complete. That just doesn’t happen with every show. The authorship and intensity of Lisa’s vision and the completeness of the gang was there right away.”<sup>187</sup> Upon its premiere, *Derry Girls* was the most-watched comedy since 2004 on Channel 4, and the single-most watched show in Northern Irish history.<sup>188</sup> The success of the show in its home country is due to McGee’s specificity to 90s nostalgia in Derry, and emotional moments that tap into memories deep within the Northern Irish people. While talking about the show’s premise with her friends in Derry and developing the series, McGee stated, “I think there’s sort of layers of trauma that we haven’t even looked in the eye at home.”<sup>189</sup> The explicit use of the word “trauma” by McGee in various interviews and by Irish television critics reviewing the series further justify my association of the show with teenage girl traumedy. This trauma is not so much being bodily changes or the issues that come with school like in the other series I analyze, but instead an actual war that rages on while teenage girls are trying to secure concert tickets and ride English soldiers. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the masculinization of the Troubles that *Derry Girls* disrupts through its comedic storytelling.

### **Masculinity and the Troubles**

Many accounts and commemorations of the Troubles privilege male perspectives in relation to the conflict. Broadly, both Irish Nationalism and British Unionism and their relationship with militarism are guided by masculine ideologies of aggression and superiority.<sup>190</sup> Two issues at the center of the peace process in Northern Ireland involved the “decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and the reform of policing,” which, despite paramilitary groups having women members, were “characterized by a hegemonic masculine ethos.”<sup>191</sup> Analyses of the organizational cultures at the center of the Troubles illuminated how male soldiers performed militarized masculine identity and a sense of duty.<sup>192</sup> In terms of Troubles-related media, several bestselling non-fiction books recount the decades-long conflict from the perspectives of men involved on the frontlines and young boys witnessing the conflict through innocent eyes. This includes *War and an Irish Town* by Eamonn McCann, which actually takes place in Derry, and *Shadows on Our Skin* by Jennifer Johnson, which is told from the perspective of a young man coming of age during the early years of the Troubles. One of the more famous works about the Troubles is the 1993 Jim Sheridan film *In the Name of the Father*, which tells the story about four wrongly convicted Northern Irish people accused of killing British soldiers and a civilian. This is all obviously not to say that these stories are insignificant—they give necessary perspectives on a conflict that is incredibly difficult to recount and grasp. But many Northern Irish women were left out of these stories, despite groups like the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition existing and advocating for women’s civic involvement in Northern Irish politics.<sup>193</sup> Teenage boys, like the protagonist in *Shadows on Our Skin* are in many Troubles tales, while teenage girls were definitely there at the same time, living their lives, and having feelings about the conflict, or at least feelings about something. This is where *Derry Girls* emerges as a wholly new and refreshing perspective on the Troubles. Series creator Lisa McGee’s goal in writing the

show was to center the girls' voices in Northern Irish history, because "a lot of stuff about Northern Ireland is very male. I want my girls to be the people who did the thing you heard about. I want them to be the urban myths themselves."<sup>194</sup> Mediated depictions of the Troubles in films like *'71* (2014) and the more recent *Belfast* (2021) also marked these decades with a sense of generational loss and grieving, which of course, conveys the real serious tragedy of this war, devoid of any humor that would disrupt conventionally appropriate responses of mournfulness.<sup>195</sup> *Derry Girls* intervenes as primarily a situational comedy, that uses the Troubles as a backdrop, often to humorous effect, to the more important events of teenage girls' coming of age. McGee as the authorial voice of the show also helps her (and thus teenage girls) feel ownership over the narratives of The Troubles. Through humor, the Derry girls constitute themselves in this history and national trauma.

### **Television and national trauma**

Even though they usually come after the fact, comedy television shows can negotiate dominant frames of national traumas, often rejecting sadness and anxiety with humor. American sitcoms specifically like *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* used major events like 60's counterculture and second wave feminism, respectively, to show the impact of these national movements on everyday people, turning rather fraught tensions in real life into comedic situations on screen.<sup>196</sup> Using a more war-specific example, the staff of the 4077<sup>th</sup> *M\*A\*S\*H* turned the shuttling of injured Korean soldiers into zany comedy and offered light protest of the actual Vietnam War happening at the time of the broadcast through the characters' wartime frustrations, pranks, and gallows humor. Through their reliable comedy formats, these sitcoms softly but deftly delivered messages to their audience about national issues and sometimes traumatic events and retained an edginess that didn't adhere to more mainstream, serious

discourses. The narrowcasting of television in the post-network era and minimized reliance on advertising in streaming TV has brought on even more controversial and uncensored content responding to national issues. *Family Guy* controversially contended with national traumas like AIDS and 9/11, and “minimized the symbolic importance of events” through inappropriate and “disrespectful” raunchy jokes.<sup>197</sup> On the flip side of this, in more recent years, there has been a turn in mainstream media towards sincerity and political correctness due to several solemn moments in American history and re-evaluations of public remembering.

An example of this turn is the aftermath of the 2016 election, when comedy television shows offered different comedic responses to the mediated sense of shock and disbelief (at least for a majority of the United States) towards Donald Trump’s win. Some comedians doubled down on expressing somber attitudes, like late night television hosts Stephen Colbert, Trevor Noah, and Larry Wilmore, who refused to make jokes and sometimes remained silent instead of providing the typical satirical barbs expected of them.<sup>198</sup> In a character-breaking performance on *Saturday Night Live*, Kate McKinnon played the piano and sang “Hallelujah” dressed as Hillary Clinton, a decision that rang rather hollow and played as comedically surreal, despite the attempt to forgo humor. These examples demonstrate television’s more recent role in articulating national traumas, in these cases opting for mournfulness instead of the cathartic release of a joke.

In my analysis of *Derry Girls*, I’m more interested in how comedic jabs at national trauma and trauma discourse break through, precisely because of the way that people can “comically play with the political and gain a greater sense of ownership over it, and in turn, feel more empowered to engage it.”<sup>199</sup> Humor can call “attention to the status quo and disrupt dominant norms of behavior and systems of knowledge,” the purpose of humor here being especially important to *Derry Girls*’ disruption of serious frames and cultural attitudes

surrounding the Troubles.<sup>200</sup> For marginalized individuals, in this case specifically young women, joking about our experiences in relationship to authority and “the serious” serves as outlet for social critique and self-definition.<sup>201</sup> For a lot of women comedians, rebelliousness through joking and physical excess undermines patriarchal norms and authority, in which the masculinization of war could also be included.<sup>202</sup> *Broad City* strikes a similar comedic tone to *Derry* through this unruly woman character type, showing an interplay between national and personal traumas. In a 2017 episode, Ilana goes to her therapist to discuss why she has a “dead pussy,” and grows increasingly upset that her inability to have an orgasm is because of the recent presidential election of Donald Trump. This episode re-inverts Bakhtin’s idea that the bodily carnival is always disrupting authority, thereby presenting “a scenario wherein the sacred sphere of American politics has come to ruin the carnival of Ilana’s sexuality.”<sup>203</sup> This confluence of traumas and sexual joking about both is useful for understanding how *Derry Girls* profanes the Troubles and the Troubles go around and pose issues for the girls at the same time.

Dark jokes about death and war, and subsequent jokes about adolescence said by these teenage girls, normalizes how simultaneously confusing it can feel to want to normally grow up when abnormal events of war are happening around you. *Derry Girls* has its moments of earnestness, where the weight of the Troubles is depicted as having real negative effects, but for the most part, there’s always a joke to be made by the girls about the circumstances of their lives. For many, “a sense of humor also includes a sense of purposeful playfulness with an eye toward revisions and reconstruction.”<sup>204</sup> In seeing them make jokes at the expense of the Troubles, we see the Derry girls attempting to adapt to, build resiliency, and move on from a difficult time. McGee’s writing of the series based on her personal experiences even demonstrates this resilience on an extra-textual level, as she infuses empathy in the show for their experiences and

a sense of hope that they'll get through this time period in their lives, as she did herself. Taking this autobiographical specificity and feminist perspective into the next section, I look at *Derry Girls*' themes within Netflix's global strategy and taste-cluster marketing.

### **Netflix and Derry Girls**

*Derry Girls* was acquired by Netflix in 2018, during the period when the streamer was making aggressive efforts overseas to license content as part of their global strategy, in addition to self-producing their own Original shows. *Derry Girls* is an "exclusive acquisition," which "provides Netflix exclusive rights—either in country or at the level of service category (internet-distributed services)."<sup>205</sup> Since Netflix has exclusive international distribution rights, the service can brand *Derry Girls* as a Netflix Original.<sup>206</sup> *Derry Girls* as an addition to the Netflix Originals fits within the company's nichification strategy in the later part of the 2010s to shore up a streaming library of television shows in established genres that have some distinguishing element, whether that be in the characters, the time period, or the culture being represented. As a British sitcom about teens, the show can be included what the company calls "taste clusters" or "taste communities," which are formed using data on what genres, moods, actors, and more Netflix subscribers want to see.<sup>207</sup> *Derry Girls* has a narrow focus on Northern Ireland, Troubles-specific references, and, the Derry accents that sometimes might require viewers to turn on subtitles.<sup>208</sup> These specific elements make it well suited as an acquisition for the taste-clustering model at Netflix, where Netflix markets shows based on "psychographic marketing, which defined and segments markets based on perceived values, behaviors, and psychological traits rather than demographic identity."<sup>209</sup> Such marketing "can highlight moments of unexpected affinity between people from different backgrounds," making a rather generic show about female friendship appealing to American or non-UK audiences because of its Irish history and dark

sense of humor regarding the Troubles.<sup>210</sup> Additionally, while the series aired week-to-week in the UK, *Derry Girls* was released on Netflix as entire seasons, and could be watched in a few sittings, adhering to Netflix's commercial-free binge-watching model that has been a defining element of the streaming service's brand. In addition to this, many broadcast sitcoms have thrived on Netflix, like former acquisitions *The Office* and *Friends*, despite not being written for the ad-free platform. Factors like rewatchability, episodic storytelling, and character types viewers can map their personalities onto have kept sitcoms on streaming TV relevant for today's audiences, and *Derry Girls* has these elements along with the light comedy/hang out vibe, making it easy for the viewer to spend a few fun hours with these characters and easily pop-in to watch a standalone episode. Within the taste-cluster model, *Derry Girls* also fits well within a library-based service like Netflix, where "stories [are] more accessible and discoverable," a hidden gem like *Derry Girls* could be found after watching multiple teen shows and quirky British comedies, the latter of which have an established presence on the streaming service.<sup>211</sup> *Derry Girls* is a show that appeals to multiple audience segments, and could be eventually found and loved after going through multiple layers of Netflix content, indicating that the depth of the library is potentially more important than generating the next big 4-quadrant hit. In terms of the show's cost, attaining exclusive distribution rights is more expensive than having a standard license for a show. But, *Derry Girls* has the Netflix Original branding and therefore Netflix money backing its promotions and marketing, which indicates that this show is ultimately strategically valuable content for the library in the effort to keep and maybe gain subscribers. It's even more significant that a show about teenage girls and their everyday troubles could break through and have major success within the platform's vast variety of programming, and attain



high levels of promotional coverage in news magazines and star profiles, drawing attention to its Netflix presence.<sup>212</sup>

*Derry Girls* is a unique example due to some cultural differences related to humor in the United Kingdom and Channel 4's independent operations that allow for more culturally specific and marginalized voices to be heard. However, since it is distributed in the United States on Netflix, I associate it with the streaming phenomenon of my project, where these comedies about teenage girls coming of age are developed and distributed through the internet, reaching and speaking to demographics of women/young women. The raunchy humor and disruptive behavior of unfiltered Irish girls is a niche sensibility that works well for streaming services hoping to gain young women subscribers who don't want to see watered-down depictions of their experiences.

Hulu is a home for formally innovative and modern shows like *Pen15*, and HBO Max's proclivity for sex content is a well-suited match for *Sex Lives*. Each of those shows are also mostly confined to the personal and interpersonal in grappling with personal traumas. *Derry Girls* makes teenage girl traumedie a national phenomenon, as these girls attempt to cultivate their sense of self amidst violence in their nation. *Derry Girls* does cosmopolitan, transatlantic work as well, by not only portraying the lesser-known conflict of the Troubles, but also making Northern Irish girls the protagonists of the history being told, as opposed to soliders or teenage boys. Overall, *Derry Girls* contributes to Netflix's global and taste-clustering strategies, since it exists as a fairly standard sitcom with cultural and historical specificity. Importantly, its feminist messaging in making Northern Irish girls the center of The Troubles' history serves as important cultural capital for Netflix, as the series inserts, through Lisa McGee, Northern Irish teenage girls' relevant cultural knowledge about The Troubles in the media historicizing of that time period.

## Teenage girl trauma in situational comedy

*Derry Girls*'s narrative architecture is a throwback for viewers accustomed to serialized, narratively complex television which has come to dominate original programming on cable TV and streaming TV platforms. Each episode is about 22 minutes in length due to ad break demands and they follow classic sitcom plot structures, with cold opens, A and B plots, and conclusions that resolve underlying social problems and return characters to back to where they started, perhaps with more growth and knowledge.<sup>216</sup> There are no cliffhangers or puzzle boxes in the plot, viewers can assume where an ad break would have occurred on the broadcast, and this lack of complexity results in a show that is refreshingly un-cinematic. Like many sitcoms, the central friend group in *Derry Girls* is the premise of the show, following the sitcom tenet "that a character must not face the world alone: she or he must experience the joys and tribulations of life as part of some larger social unit."<sup>217</sup> Episodes are essentially structured as comedies of errors, where the girls get themselves into a difficult situation due to their own incompetence and misunderstanding, and by the end, they usually fail in achieving their goal (smuggling vodka to a concert, getting laid, etc.) and resolve to live another day in Derry. These episodic narratives are told using relatively simple techniques, as there are jerky handheld camera movements, some visually interesting wide shots, and the occasional voice over, but no unique innovation along the lines of talking heads or fourth wall breaks popularized by mockumentaries in the early 2000s. Overall, this commitment to a purely televisual format is comforting and un-demanding in comparison to spectacle-driven shots and complex narratives seen on TV shows attempting to be more cinematic and prestigious. It provides a sense of predictability and perhaps nostalgia for viewers who watch classic sitcoms for their reliable story structures and relatively uncomplicated characters. The light-touch effect of McGee's writing

adds a delightful tone and sitcom sincerity to a story that could have opted for a dark, serious, and thus masculinized interrogation of Troubles life.

The sitcom form is highly relevant to understanding how teenage girl traumedies can resonate with an audience and create a sense of empathy for the girls. Sitcoms are mostly predictable, very reliable in their story beats, and are even outlets for seeking comfort and negotiate feelings about external problems and national tensions.<sup>218</sup> Characters resolve their problems by the end of every episode and season finales reach satisfying narrative conclusions. There are feelings of connection and gratification for the audience in watching a central friend group grow in their characters over the course of multiple seasons. This pattern of narrative structures provides a sense of comfort in, and thus empathy for the characters on screen, which is significant for that empathy to be given to a cavalcade of girls working through their pubescent urges. *Derry Girls*' broad strokes in storytelling and characterization means that the girls don't have to be anti-heroines, or on the other hand, girlbosses, to make provocative feminist statements in efforts brand the show as "quality" comedy TV.<sup>219</sup> Michelle is certainly outwardly sexual like many outspoken liberated women on TV, similar to *Maya* on *Pen15* or *Bela* on *Sex Lives*, and Erin is a motivated go-getter focused on her education, but these drives are related to their teenage girl identity, not in a way to make them overly complex teen girl characters that symbolize a triumphant feminism. Additionally, in contrast with other teenage girls in my thesis, the *Derry Girls* are situated in a time period of significant national violence that is invoked frequently, making their trauma a gendered, national issue, on scale much broader than the circle of female friends. Their characterization as unruly, overconfident girls living during the Troubles contributes to the feminist messaging of the show, in their disruption of ideas about time period being mostly solemn, as well as mediated depictions of the Troubles and war time as more

masculinized. In the next section, I delve into specific instances of unruliness and gallows humor that explore national trauma from the perspectives of teenage girls.

### **Unruliness and gallows humor**

On *Derry Girls*, gender nonconformity through loud and loose behavior opens up a space for the teenage girls to negotiate their national trauma and personal trauma. Comedy through the girls' indecorum "is not only welcome but also expected, producing a situation whereby comedy is sometimes one of the only spaces in some societies in which social controls can be resisted and interrogated."<sup>220</sup> Kathleen Rowe's "unruly woman" is embodied in these girls, in their ability to undermine the seriousness of the Troubles through their joke-making rebelliousness and sometimes explicit sexual joking that profanes Protestant men and British police officers in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Rowe states that the unruly woman "creates a disruptive spectacle of herself" and is "transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire."<sup>221</sup> These girls are always focusing on their own desires, in having actual sexual desire, and desires to be normal teenage girls wanting to drink alcohol and go to concerts. They articulate these desires in the space of the friend group, which provides refuge from societal controls imposed by the Troubles.

In the background of Erin's house on the TV and the radio, we can hear news of cease fires, bomb incidents, and in season 2, the presidential visit, showing the more serious and expected discourses of the Troubles. The unpleasant sounds of a nearby Protestant Orange walk rattles the Quinn house as well in one episode. These serious and politically controversial moments that depict the dominant framing of the Troubles are immediately relegated to the background when Erin and crew start talking about their problems. For example, when the girls are trying to get out of Derry to avoid confronting the Orange men, Michelle gets a tarot card

reading from Aunt Sarah about her romantic prospects. Sarah predicts that Michelle is going to meet her husband imminently, to which Michelle responds, “to think, I could be starting at him right now,” as she looks out a window at hundreds of men marching in the streets of Derry. Again, Erin calls out Michelle, saying “You can’t marry an Orangeman, Michelle.” Michelle then explains, “that’s a pity, ‘cause I think there’s something really sexy about the fact that they hate us so much.” Later in the episode when the gang discovers an Orangeman hiding in the trunk of their car, Michelle, influenced by the tarot card reading, thinks it’s a sign, that maybe he’s her new lover. While her friends are genuinely concerned about illegally harboring a British army fugitive, Michelle is more worried about not being sexually attracted to the Orangeman because of his mediocre looks and ginger pubic hair, which is a turn-off for her. The Orangeman, who is clearly not interested in Michelle whatsoever, remains totally closed-off to her flirting, even when she confronts him about the sex and hair issues. Michelle’s friends and family show some concern over Michelle’s clear disinterest in the potential danger of the situation, showing a perspective that some of the audience is likely to share. But her confounding confidence in herself, despite the danger, depicts Michelle as a teenager with agency and sexual drive, even if her end goal of getting laid is not achieved. This characterization disrupts norms of control over teenage girls’ emotional and physical desires, especially since her friends and family don’t try to stop Michelle from pursuing the Orangeman, simply seeing this behavior as objectively outrageous but ultimately normal.

Michelle is the main culprit of sexual joking on the show, which we see in Episode One while the girls are on the bus to school. Their mundane bus ride abruptly stops at an army checkpoint. A soldier with a rifle boards the bus shouting “everyone remain seated,” and soldiers load the bus, checking the aisles for potential threats. A shot/reverse shot shows Michelle smiling

at the handsome soldier, who is patrolling the bus filled with young women. Michelle asks her friends, “do you think if I told him I had an incendiary device down my knickers, he’d have a look?” Erin, not amused by her friend’s lust in this serious situation, says “Michelle, he’s a soldier,” shaking her head. Michelle pushes back, with “Ach, some of them are rides. I’m willing to admit it, even if nobody else will, because I am a beacon of truth.” In many ways and encapsulated here, Michelle is the “unruly” comic feminine voice of the series, a character type who subverts social expectations and patriarchal control, in this case, that the girls remain appropriate around these male soldiers. By asserting herself through suggestive language, Michelle also draws attention to the absurd but normal sexual urges for a teenage girl that can happen in situations that would typically be characterized in more dramatic, serious ways. Specifically through her unruliness, Michelle disrupts solemn behavior and discourse of the Troubles, as she’s less interested in the violence that could be inflicted on her and more about how she can hook up with a soldier. The Troubles still seep their way into these girls’ sexual activities, demonstrating an interplay between the carnival spirit of the teenage girl and the heavy hand of sacredness around national trauma. Resiliency here comes in the form of sexual desire in wartime conflict, since Michelle’s libido is not going to be stopped just because some soldiers load a bus looking for bombs.

Dark humor is key to understanding the tricky comedic/dramatic tonal balance of the series. Jokes about dying and death are frequent, even while death due to the conflict is happening around the characters. I specifically use “gallows humor” to describe *Derry Girls*’ comedy, which is defined as “humor which arises in connection with a precarious or dangerous situation,” and functions socially as “ironical humor born out of sad experiences accompanied by grief and sorrow.”<sup>222</sup> Joking about death as imminent and inescapable can serve purposes of

communal coping and resistance as well, especially if those jokes are made at the expense of an oppressor. In that way, gallows humor follows the carnivalesque underpinning of teenage girl traumedy that I discussed earlier, in its demystification of serious rituals in the carnival through comic activities.<sup>223</sup> Television comedy in particular serves as a more malleable genre than serious drama to deftly navigate what is “sayable” in relation to dark subject matter, especially something like national trauma surrounding war. For these girls, joking provides cover to express their teenage anger and desires. Their jokes about violence, death, and terrorism in their town even conveys a sense of fearlessness—everyday, people in Derry are confronted with their demise and loss of nationhood, and so it’s only necessary to make fun of it. Humor in the space of this female friend group provides and strength, and helps these girls exist as normal teenagers attempting to get on with life during a traumatic time.

Gallows humor is very appropriate for a series about Northern Irish culture in the aftermath of the Troubles. First, the humor appealed to the masses in Northern Ireland, because of the way that jokes can comfort in times of tragedy and bring communities together. While writing the show and reflecting on her past, McGee said, “It was so uncertain those times, so unpredictable, and maybe to be able to cope, developed this weird sense of humor about it.”<sup>224</sup> One event in McGee’s life, which did not make it into the show but inspired her to write about Derry’s quirks was an Irish wake with an open coffin she attended as a teenager. She described how “the body’s just there, and people are saying things like, ‘Oh she’s looking well. She looks lovely’ ...and you’re like, she’s dead. She’s looking dead. Even as a tiny kid, going that’s *funny*.”<sup>225</sup> The all-girls Catholic school that McGee attended, which she used as inspiration for Our Lady Immaculate College, was another place where humor could be found out of deeply serious situations. For McGee, being in a highly strict environment run by nuns, comprised of all

girls, was ripe for sitcom writing. In her words, “I find it really funny when you absolutely can’t laugh at something. And I’ve always found women funnier, I think because that’s who I knew.”<sup>226</sup> As these quotes demonstrate, McGee’s semi-autobiographical authorship was necessary in creating the tonal balance. In her adolescence, the Troubles were difficult to understand, but just living life as a teenager and being selfish and narcissistic (a.k.a., true to oneself as a teen girl) was a way to live and behave normally in a time that was confusing, because of all the conflict and death.

Gallows humor is part of day-to-day life for the girls, where Erin threatens to call Childline because her mother joked about “getting her a plot” in the backyard just like the family dog who was killed in a road accident. While studying for a history exam, Michelle summarizes the Irish Potato famine by explaining, “we got the gist. They ran out of spuds, everyone was raging.” James, who can’t tell the rebellions from the risings conflicts is chastised by Michelle, who exclaims, “and whose fault’s that? If your lot stopped invading us for five fucking minutes there’d be a lot less to wade through, you English prick.” These jokes walk the line between dark and funny, but are made digestible because they fit into the context of classic situations in comedy, like parental animosity, teen’s nonchalant attitudes towards generally serious subjects, and making fun of a loser of a friend group, the only boy no less. Speaking of the wee English fella, James’ introduction in the series is even a joke for Michelle, who says that her Auntie Cathy went to get an abortion in England, and “never got the abortion either! Look at you James, eh!” and slaps him on the face, to which he replies, “I didn’t actually know that.” Upon learning that they may have failed their GCSE exams, Clare screams about having no prospects because she’s a poor Northern Irish Catholic girl, while Michelle isn’t too worried about failing and not graduating, telling the girls “our ma’s are gonna fucking wipe us out and dead people don’t need



jobs.” There’s even an incident with the British army coming to detonate an unclaimed suitcase on a bus to Belfast, which is played for laughs when it’s found out that the suitcase is filled with Michelle’s vodka.

Jokes making fun of each other, jokes about the parents, and jokes that reduce the seriousness of the Troubles all function as resistance to the assumed state of solemnity of their life circumstances. These jokes are told in a very angry tone as well, showing that the girls can be pissed off at people and things in their life and reminding the audience that teenage girls are human beings who have wants, complaints, and informed viewpoints. These girls veer between an “I don’t care” opinion to self-deprecation in their dark humor, and through those perspectives subvert ideas of what young women are expected or permitted to speak about in the context of serious frames of discourse. By comically playing with discourses of war, these girls constitute their teenage girl identities and gain a sense of ownership over a situation that is out of their hands. Finally, in prioritizing themselves above the death and seriousness around them, they prove teenage girls can be laughers and jesters in this context, rather than figures of laughter themselves, or symbols of moral panic or sexual anxiety.

These amusing one-liners targeted at dark subject matter by the girls centers them as relevant voices of the Troubles period. While developing the show, McGee was frustrated that there weren’t many women telling stories about the Troubles, and that the men’s stories that did exist weren’t comedic, since “there were never any jokes...I don’t know any Northern Irish person that isn’t funny.”<sup>227</sup> The specificity of the teenage girl’s perspective also allows for an underacknowledged viewpoint to engage with popular masculinized understandings of the Troubles. Many of the girls do prioritize themselves and are deeply narcissistic like any teenager,

and that characterization ends up allowing the audience to take up a teenage girl's perspective in this and have empathy for these girls attempting to adapt to their circumstances.

The season 3 finale, which was also the series finale, is exemplary of the sitcom form working in tandem with teenage girl traumedy as the darkness of The Troubles coming to an end casts a shadow over the girls' celebration of their transition to adulthood. Viewers know that the series is going to end with the Good Friday Agreement, a peace agreement that effectively ended the Troubles, and that the girls are going to have to vote. In this extended 45-minute-long finale, the girls plan their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday parties (the legal age to start voting) and Michelle deals with internal conflict over her brother returning home after being imprisoned because of the Troubles. But by the end of the episode, the girls wrap up their time at Our Lady Immaculate College and celebrate their transition into adulthood, while their Troubles on a larger scale are ended in Ireland and they decide to vote "yes" on the agreement. In this episode, the series delivers a thoughtfully realized conclusion to telling these girls' stories. The referendum vote is just one more hindrance to the literary figures themed birthday party Erin wants to throw. For Michelle, her brother's release captures the feeling of being forced to deal with an adult issue when all you want to do is have a great 18<sup>th</sup> year. The simple format of the show allows there to be a sincere story about the things that matter to teenage girls. The comedy of errors structure shows that these girls' crazy behavior and adolescent urges are all part of the journey in growing up, therefore humanizing their experiences.

## **Conclusion**

*Derry Girls* is a unique case study for teenage girl traumedy because of its use of an actual war as the backdrop to teenage girl antics. Lisa McGee's cultural specificity and knowledge from her own experiences while writing the show was key to the success of the

comedic/dramatic balance. *Derry Girls* humanizes its protagonists by having them joke about taboo subjects during the Troubles. Dark humor and explicit sexual joking allow for these girls to constitute themselves in relation to the death that's around them. By joking about the Troubles, and therefore being "above them," with their teenage girl narcissism, they perform resiliency, showing a capacity for overcoming difficulties in the context of widespread national trauma and in a society where young women need to remain resistive and resilient as patriarchy still looms large.

The series was developed and distributed at a time in the streaming television industry when exclusive acquisitions, taste-clustering, and niche content production was a growth strategy for companies like Netflix to develop their brand internationally, court new subscribers and expand demographics. What makes *Derry Girls* unique in the prestige streaming TV era is that it is a traditional 22-minute teen sitcom dealing with national trauma, and it's likely, given contemporary crises globally involving teenage girls, that the tonal lightness of situational comedy will be used to delve into the emotional and sexual problems that teenage girls face today.

Ultimately, I assert that teenage girl traumedies are platforms for women creatives to draw attention to the realities of teenage girls' lives in an unsteady world. Doing so in a comedic manner allows the audience to empathize with a teenage girls' existence and give some hope to their future, and *Derry Girls* shows this on a historical, national scale. The conclusion of my thesis continues this theme to explore what the present crisis over teenage girls' well-being and health across the United States says about the political significance of teenage girl traumedy and the future of this television comedy genre.

## CHAPTER 4 – CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of teenage girl traumedy that I've outlined in this thesis shows how the genre functions as a response to the absence of teenage girls' trauma from public discourse and media representations. In developing *Pen15*, Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle wanted to create a show that empathized with their 13-year-old selves and depicted the shame they felt as young teenage girls. While creating *Sex Lives*, Mindy Kaling felt it was necessary to depict the complicated circumstances of navigating sexual culture for today's women in college. In writing *Derry Girls*, Lisa McGee felt tired of not seeing stories about girls living through the Troubles and wanted her female friends to tell the story about Northern Ireland's national trauma. For these creators, writing their shows was an exercise in showing love for teenage girls and understanding for their emotions and lives. They didn't have stories to map themselves onto in their teenage lives that weren't centered on teenage boys, or sexist in their representations of girls. In the modern turn towards cultural specificity and feminist activism in media industries, teenage girl traumedy intervenes to shed light on underseen and rarely nuanced teenage girl characters. They each serve industrial functions to brand their respective streaming platforms in addition to being politically significant shows that delve into the traumas of being a teenage girl, building from decades of media representations that dehumanized the teenage girl demographic.

Two new premium cable television shows offer clues about teenage girl traumedy's future. The thriller-drama series *Yellowjackets* (2021-) on Paramount+ with Showtime was developed after series co-creator Ashley Lyle read an article about a planned remake of *Lord of the Flies* with an all-female cast.<sup>234</sup> Lyle "wanted to tell what felt like a very real story about teenage girls," using tropes of survivalist dramas, murder mysteries, and a cannibalism plotline to depict how girls in high school cope with catastrophe, as their jealousy and betrayal turns into

consuming each other, literally.<sup>235</sup> The trauma in *Yellowjackets* is also rather explicit, as the series unfolds in a bifurcated timeline, depicting how a fatal (for some) plane crash and their unresolved resentment from childhood went on to affect a group of women as adults, who reunite when the plane crash is under investigation in the present day. *Yellowjackets* is at times a dark comedy, but it is at its core a psychological teenage girl drama, like if *Derry Girls* was more cutthroat, and the resiliency of female friendship was literalized as needing survive in dire, cannibalistic circumstances. *Yellowjackets* therefore may be indicative of teenage girl traumedy moving towards genre television outside of situational comedy, depicting the traumas of adolescence, like in my case studies, as violent body horror. The bifurcated timeline of *Yellowjackets*, where we see the adult version of the teenage girls, is akin to the autobiographical performances in *Pen15* and in this case, it's incorporated into the narrative, in seeing how women's adult lives can be detrimentally affected by trauma from adolescence. *Yellowjackets* uses this two timelines narrative to also cast an ensemble of talented character actors, including Christina Ricci and Melanie Lynskey. Casting in the prestige television era is largely ensemble-based, with well-known television and film actors joining these series and elevating television material into the cinematic. My three case studies are comprised of mostly relative-unknown actors, writers, and creators, aside from Mindy Kaling, and *Yellowjackets* might also indicate creating more commercial and cinematic fare for television than these lower-key, small-scale teenage girl traumedies.

*The Last of Us* (2023-) on HBO also demonstrates another path forward for teenage girl traumedy. Based on the video game series of the same name, protagonist Ellie Williams is a 14-year-old girl who carries in her blood a cure for an infection that decimated Earth's population. The show and the video game use the apocalypse as the wide-scale trauma affecting a teenage

girl, and the show's writers decided to include some small references to her girlhood. In one episode, she ransacks a run-down grocery store and finds some tampons to add to her backpack, yelling "*Fuck* yeah!" when she finds them. In another episode, she meets a caretaker who leaves her a Diva menstrual cup to help with the period. In these scenes, her period is portrayed in funny, casual ways, and add some unexpected humanness to the high-concept sci-fi narrative. Series showrunner Craig Mazin decided to include these details after his own experiences going to the grocery store at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic shopping for menstrual hygiene for his wife and daughter.<sup>236</sup> The Diva Cup, on top of offering characterization for Ellie, fits within the world of *TLOU*. Mazin said it's "a great solution in the ongoing apocalypse...it's a reusable solution that doesn't require you finding boxes of tampons in infected-ridden cellars."<sup>237</sup> He continued, "The intention was that if you don't know what it is, you can ask someone or you can Google. It's more for the people who *do* know what it is. We do this all the time in shows with things like guns, people don't know how to load guns, and we don't explain it to them. Why should we have to explain this?"<sup>238</sup> While these menstrual moments are small in terms of the larger story being told on the show, the casual ways they are depicted acknowledges Ellie's puberty and other important adolescent struggle she's going through beyond trying to save the world. *The Last of Us* therefore demonstrates the potential for television to include teenage girlhood in these small, normal ways akin to *Pen15* that add human dimensions to teenage girl characters in metaphoric, fictionalized worlds.

Parallel to these genre television shows depicting teenage girl trauma are a range of commercial and indie films telling stories about teenage girls' bodily and sexual traumas. Disney/Pixar's *Turning Red* (2021) uses an animated red panda as a strong metaphor for the experiences of puberty and menstruation. *Girls* creator Lena Dunham turned to teenage girlhood

for her two 2022 film projects, *Sharp Stick* and *Catherine Called Birdy*. The latter, an Amazon Prime original based on the 1994 children's book of the same name, draws parallels between 13<sup>th</sup> century teenage girlhood and the present day. Writer-director Dunham cited the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and teens being denied birth control in some states as important reasons for *Birdy* being available to watch, showing the "barbaric customs that control the way people's bodies are dealt with" across time.<sup>239</sup> In one scene, Birdy discovers she's had her period and responds with terror and fear that she's dying, which later forms into true fear over her future prospects, since starting her period means she's able to be married and carry a child. Bella Ramsey, who has made a name for themselves for playing teenage girl characters in *Game of Thrones*, *Birdy*, and is Ellie in *The Last of Us*, stated how important playing these characters was for them: "They all are living kind of lives that they're forced to live. They all try and make the most of the circumstances they were put into and born into."<sup>240</sup> In light of the election of President Trump and politicians and organizers who are outspoken against abortion and contraception in the public sphere, these topics have become representationally significant in media, as political events unfold that are taking away women's healthcare.

Here, I want to focus on the emerging subgenre of female buddy road/dramedy films emerging out of these discourses that depict teenage girls relying on each other for support when seeking sexual health services: *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), *Unpregnant* (2020), and *Plan B* (2021). Like *The Sex Lives of College Girls*, these three films depict the effects of sexual trauma on teenage girls, and how they take their health into their own hands. The trauma is focused in these films on sexual trauma and sexual violence, which is narrower than my case studies, a subtheme that has emerged in film and television in recent years as debates around

women's healthcare are hyper-visible and even on ballots across the country. In these films, the girls are all traveling across cities and sometimes states to find reproductive health care.

*Never Rarely Sometimes Always* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2020 and was distributed in theaters and on-demand a few months later by Focus Features to critical acclaim. It follows a 17-year-old girl named Autumn (Sidney Flanigan) who travels from rural Pennsylvania to New York City with her cousin Skylar (Talia Ryder) to get an abortion, since in Pennsylvania she needs to get her parent's consent. Autumn first goes to a crisis pregnancy center, where she is shown an anti-abortion video, and later tries to induce a miscarriage by punching herself in the stomach and swallowing pills. She eventually gets to New York with her cousin, who helps her find a loan to pay for the expensive abortion procedure. The title refers to a questionnaire that Autumn is asked by a social worker, referring to the answers that patients must give when asked about their sexual activity. Writer-director Eliza Hittman was gravitated towards this project because of its political importance: "The conversation we are having in this country is that women and people and uteruses need access and care and that needs to be affordable and in their town...nobody should have to take a bus 200 miles to get to an abortion clinic."<sup>241</sup> She was also wanted to tell a story about taboo subject matter, that is "repressed and omitted from narratives that we conventionally see about teenagers' lives."<sup>242</sup>

*Unpregnant* was one of the first original film projects announced for HBO Max in 2019, with its subject matter serving as timely cultural capital to establish a new aspect of the brand in non-typical HBO content. *Unpregnant* is adapted from the young adult novel of the same name, which is about a 17-year-old girl named Veronica (Haley Lu Richardson) discovering that she's pregnant. She enlists the help of her ex-best friend Bailey (Barbie Ferreira) to accompany her to an abortion clinic in New Mexico, since in her home state of Missouri, her abortion cannot



happen without her parent's consent. Much more comedic than *Never Rarely, Unpregnant* has more hijinks with cartoonish strangers the girls meet along the way to New Mexico. The film was greenlit in June 2019, just one month after a trigger law was instated in Missouri that only allows abortions in the case of medical emergency.<sup>243</sup> Director Rachel Lee Goldenberg reflected on her own abortion while making the film, as she states, "I'm proud to be presenting this story where Veronica, from the beginning, is very sure about what she wants to do, which is my experience with my abortion. I was confident in my decision to have it."<sup>244</sup>

Finally, *Plan B*, directed by actress Natalie Morales, is a Hulu Original film about two high school girls, Sunny (Kuhoo Verma) and Lupe (Victoria Moroles), living in rural South Dakota who must travel to their nearest Planned Parenthood to get the morning-after pill after being denied it because of South Dakota's "conscious choice" law that allow pharmacists to deny contraception medication. Its producers include Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, who are known for writing and directing the fourth *American Pie* film titled *American Reunion* (2012), creating the Netflix series *Cobra Kai* (2018-2023) and their directing, producing, and writing work on the *Harold & Kumar* film franchise, in which *Plan B* shares a raunchy comedic tone. The film was pitched to Hulu as a buddy comedy in the vein of *American Pie* and *Superbad*.<sup>245</sup> In *Plan B*, the hijinks center on two brown teenage girls trying to get healthcare, something that director Natalie Morales "hadn't seen before in the scope of an R-rated comedy."<sup>246</sup> Like the other two films, *Plan B* has a quest-like narrative as the girls get lost on their way to the Rapid City Planned Parenthood, and it ultimately ends with a failed mission to get the pill on their own, and they ultimately seek help from Sunny's mother. *Plan B* is the most comedic out of the three films, following an out-all-night plot structure and containing several scenes involving illicit drug use.

While these film depictions may be bleak, since these girls are independent and, in some cases, sacrificing their lives, they share a solution in how teenage girls grapple with sexual trauma that I discovered in my case studies as well: that female friendship is probably the best survival mechanism in these dire circumstances. The search for contraception is also surprisingly well-suited to the road movie format, using the illegality of abortion and Plan B as constraints and tensions for the teenage girl characters. *Unpregnant* and *Plan B* are also primarily comedies, infusing these serious journeys with humanness that is found in these teenage girls joking about how long their road trip is get pills. With legislation continuing to affect teenage girls across the nation that takes away their right to abortions and other contraceptives, it's likely that the theme of female friendship is going to continue, since institutional solutions are disappearing. The broader transition of these teenage girl trauma themes into film is also significant, showing the potential for teenage girl traumedy in broader, more commercial formats and plot structures that have been proven to be successful among audiences, like *Superbad* or *American Pie*, this time including teenage girls in these adventures. Since these conversations about teenage girls' sexual health are becoming more common on a national scale, I find it's likely that teenage girl traumedy will continue in film alongside television, potentially in less explicitly cringeworthy ways in order to be more commercial, fitting within established genres like the road film and buddy comedy, while still relying on the cultural capital of sexual health as an increasingly normalized and necessary conversation in the political zeitgeist to court audiences.

While writing this conclusion in February 2023, a report from the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention was released titled *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021*. The report collected survey data from 17,000 teenagers in 9<sup>th</sup>—12<sup>th</sup> grade in 2021 on their health behaviors and well-being, including questions about “sexual behaviors,

substance use, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and experiences such as violence and poor mental health.”<sup>247</sup> The major finding from the report was that across all these measures, teenage girls were faring worse than teenage boys compared to previous years in the decade. The percentage of mental health struggle significantly increased, with “60% of female students experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness,” which is double the rate for teenage boys, and “25% making a suicide plan.”<sup>248</sup> Twenty percent of teenage girls reported experiencing sexual violence, with 15% reporting having been forced to have sex.<sup>249</sup> Additional findings show teenagers overall engaging in less sexual activity and consuming less alcohol and drugs.<sup>250</sup>

The mental health symptoms presented in this survey have underlying trauma. For teenage girls specifically, they have experienced high levels of sexual victimization, bullying, cyberbullying, and increased rates of depression and anxiety due to hitting puberty earlier.<sup>251</sup> Reliance on digital socialization and increased isolation after the COVID-19 pandemic are also factors in this increased loneliness, a feeling closely associated with suicidal ideation.

It is clear from this survey that today’s teenage girls are experiencing an unprecedented crisis of mental health. These themes are seen in the three case studies in this thesis: in *Pen15*, Anna and Maya experience sexual trauma and internalize their shame; in *Sex Lives*, Bela is traumatized by sexual violence; and in *Derry Girls*, the friend group witnesses violence on a national scale that influences their well-being. The *Risk Behavior* survey encourages “school connectedness” as a solution to addressing depression and isolation among teenage girls, especially connectedness with peers, a solution depicted in my three case studies as well.<sup>252</sup> The teenage girls in these shows all use connection with their female friends to deal with their personal and larger-scale traumas. They cannot turn to more formal or institutional relationships to grapple with sexual trauma. Comprehensive reform through state and federal legislation is

likely needed to fix how educational institutions support students' mental well-being and provide better sex education. But even the CDC advocates for fostering supportive interpersonal relationships as a first line of defense for teenage girls before the creation of school-based mental and sexual health services.

As these film examples and concerning public health data indicate, the relevance of teenage girl traumedy to respond to crises about teenage girlhood will be significant for the foreseeable future. The major theme connecting my analyses of trauma across the three case studies is teenage girls' kinship with each other, and I expect this theme to carry into the future. Each series reflects the enduring futility of being a teenage girl and survival mechanisms such as humor and support used by girls to persist through differing levels of trauma. These series also offer novel settings and time periods like middle school or The Troubles and new character types beyond helpless victims and girlbosses of previous eras of television, and it's likely that specificity along historical and cultural timelines and identity will continue as the genre develops. Contrasting with recent depictions of popular feminist messages of empowerment, these series show how persisting through trauma is likely to be a failed endeavor when seeking support from more formal relationships and institutional structures. While there is a bleakness in depicting that failure, I maintain optimism, noting how these series include clear examples of teenage girls being resilient and using humor and social support to feel hopeful about their relationships and futures.

The alarming statistics on teenage girls' mental well-being released in 2023 serves as a historical moment hopefully leading to more television shows and films about teenage girlhood. The comedy aspect of traumedy is evidently necessary for teenage girl-centric media, as today's teenage girls face extreme levels of sadness and hopelessness. Comedy gives a sense of joy to

teenage girls on television, in showing girls being funny and vibrant amidst their personal, institutional, and national traumas. Comedy across my case studies, including sexual jokes and dark humor, offers relief for the teenage girl characters by helping them survive trauma, from another day of personal shame to persistent national conflict. Teenage girl traumedies depict how postfeminist culture and popular feminism fail young women, and that low self-esteem and shame are normal feelings amidst contradictory messages in culture that tell women to be both youthful and cute as well as sexual and grown-up. The genre also shows the necessity and centrality of nurturing teenage girls' well-being through networks of female friendship to persist through traumas.

Teenage girl traumentary uniquely portrays the complexities of teenage girl life and detrimental effects of postfeminist, sexist, and ageist media cultures on teenage girls. Infusing the trauma narratives of puberty, sexual violence, and national conflict with comedy ultimately breaks taboos surrounding these topics. Teenage girl traumentary as a television genre then provides a useful convergence of innovative comedic-dramatic storytelling and feminist political motivations to depict teenage girlhood traumas ranging from the personal to the national, ultimately and significantly affording teenage girls empathy and understanding.

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