

Feminism in *Parks and Recreation*:

A Narrative and Audience Analysis

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Introduction

Television has the capacity to captivate audiences and in many ways can shape audience understanding of the world (VandeBerg, Wenner, & Gronbeck, 2004). This influence of television is important to explore, especially as new forms of streaming media have, to some degree, reinvigorated television. (Luckerson, 2016). The depth of influence of any television show can vary depending on a number of factors, including the narrative elements of a television show and the way in which the audience responds to plot, setting, and character. In this study, I investigate elements of narrative and how they work to influence viewers of the popular situational comedy, *Parks and Recreation*. This study will work to determine whether and how *Parks and Recreation* utilizes comedy in order to promote social change for gender equality, and if the show does so successfully. Two broad research questions guide my study: 1) How do narrative elements in *Parks and Recreation* reflect feminism? and 2) How do audiences respond to these narrative elements in terms of attitudes about gender and social change?

Parks and Recreation, which aired on NBC 2009 to 2015, is a hit situational comedy starring Amy Poehler as the show's main character, Leslie Knope. Knope could be described as a dedicated public servant, a loyal friend, a thoughtful caregiver, and, most notably to this study, a passionate feminist. The show, first airing in 2009, follows public servant Knope's journey to improve the lives of citizens of Pawnee, Indiana. During its seven seasons, *Parks and Recreation* gained an incredible following. Attracting over 4.2 million viewers on television, and even more once the show hit Netflix, it has made waves in the genre of comedy (Maglio, 2015). Critics have called the show "TV's smartest sitcom" and a "feminist comedy" (Engstrom, 2013).

With an office full of photos of inspiring women in politics that includes Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Condoleezza Rice, an affinity for pant suits, and a job with government responsibility, Knope serves as a prime example of a feminist in a prime time situational comedy. The type of feminism reflected by Knope in *Parks and Recreation* is unlike anything audiences have ever seen in situational comedy. It goes beyond the empowering female representations of the past by bringing real issues such as a lack of women in government, sexist laws, and systematically perpetuated sexism to the forefront throughout many of the show's episodes. Dow (1996) describes many early "feminist" shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Designing Women* as representing "lifestyle feminism," or a sort of feminism that is represented by the choices of an individual woman. *Parks and Recreation* goes beyond this lifestyle feminism, and presents feminism not just as the empowerment of an individual, but as a matter which influences a community, reflected within the public sphere, and within government. Engstrom (2013) calls the text ground-breaking due to its visual representations of feminism, noticeable mentions of feminism throughout the series, and a central motif that focuses on feminism and empowered women as means of institutional change.

Knope hit the small screen in what might be considered a precursor for what was to come in American politics. As each season of the show progresses, the leading lady finds herself one step closer to leading a city, a state, and finally, a country. Within *Parks and Recreation's* situational comedy narrative, audiences watched a woman fight inequality in government. The show tackles issues such as the sexism in city council, outdated laws which oppress women, and a lack of representation of women in all areas of government. Just as Knope blazed a new path to office in Pawnee, another powerful female candidate, Hillary Clinton, emerged in real life America, making the show more timely than many imagined when the show was first created.

Parks and Recreation is notable in its brand of comedy. While some have compared it to *The Office* due to the mockumentary style of filming, it is distinctive in its use of comedy for social change, focusing on Knope and how she uses her position in government to make public policy change regarding gender equality. The goal of this study is to examine this intersection between situational comedy and social change. As viewers watch *Parks and Recreation*'s main character reflect feminism in her everyday actions, the question is whether they are affected by this recurring narrative. This study will first investigate the feminist elements embedded within the show through a narrative analysis. Next, using an audience analysis, this study will explore whether audiences are aware of this underlying theme in the narrative, and, if so, how they are affected by it.

In order to gain a better understanding of *Parks and Recreation*'s particular form of comedy, and how it may impact social change, relevant literature related to comedy and social change must first be explored. Audiences can better understand how *Parks and Recreation* promotes institutional change regarding gender equality once they understand the elements of a narrative, the genre of comedy, and how mediated narratives have been shaped in order to promote social change.

Literature Review

Comedy can be defined as "everything that is actually or potentially funny, and the process by which 'funniness' occurs" (Palmer, 1994, p.1). The genre of comedy got its start from Shakespeare, who developed original "dramatic comedies." Shakespeare's comedies included a comic individual, a comic action, and a solution (Denton, 2009). The comic individual is essentially the main character of a comedy, the character who is generally foiled or deceived in order to entertain the audience. The comic action is the action which the comic individual takes

due to his or her deception, and the solution is reached when reality is again achieved (Denton, 2009). While comedy as a genre has evolved since the time of Shakespeare, it is still based on the idea of incongruity, or something that appears to be out of place or unexpected, like the foils that appear in Shakespeare's work. Incongruity is not the only way that comedy can be framed, however. Comedy can also be used to unify groups. One example of how comedy has been used to unify is found within the ACT UP campaign of 1989, which addressed AIDs in society. This campaign used a comedic frame in order to make fun of church officials who were not contributing to education that prevented AIDS (Christiansen & Hanson, 1996). According to Christiansen & Hanson (1996), this campaign brought AIDs to light as a community issue, and unified individuals to take action, thus proving that comedy can be unifying as well as divisive.

Comedy has many sub-genres, including stand-up, sketch, and situational comedy. Situational comedy is common in television, and is the genre to which *Parks and Recreation* belongs. According to Dow (1996), situational comedy reflects central tenets of "regularity, circularity, and predictability in terms of character function and plotline" (p. 150), which can be attributed to the appeal of this form of humor. This means that audiences enjoy watching situational comedy because they typically know what to expect from each character, what types of problems may arise in each episode, and how they may be solved. When the concept of repetition is applied to *Parks and Recreation*, audiences can predict that many of the problems that arise are centered on social issues that impact Knope, and she will solve them by garnering support from the community and implementing change of some kind. It is because of this repetition that situational comedy has the potential to be a conduit for social change, as it can repeatedly bring up cultural issues and deem them solvable.

Parks and Recreation is not a show that exists solely to make audiences laugh, however. The show brings issues of gender equality and politics to the forefront of its narratives. This is accomplished through the intersection of issues of discrimination in government, specifically gender discrimination. The use of comedy to highlight social issues has been done in a number of other shows and utilized to make an impact on many different issues, including race relations, public perception of homosexuality, and gender equality.

Comedy for Social Change

The traditional objective of the genre of comedy is to make people laugh. However, this laughter can have a serious impact, especially when it is used to unify audiences to take action, as seen in the ACT UP campaign. According to *The Laughter Effect*, comedy can have an impact on social change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes, and intended behaviors of audiences. Chattoo (2017) cites five main attributes of the format of comedy which enables it to contribute to successful social change: attracting attention, persuading through emotion, offering a way into complex social issues, breaking down social barriers, and encouraging sharing. Comedy as a discourse has the potential to promote powerful social movements by bringing issues to light and exposing new dimensions of these issues to general audiences. In fact, comedy historically has been used to do just that. Aristotle's writings on comedy defined it as a genre used to make fun of those considered to be morally inferior (Heath, 1994). Freud also saw the potential for comedy in influencing society, stating that jokes can provide a "non-threatening way to raise culturally taboo subjects" (Downe, 1999). The trend of using comedy for social change is reflected in modern situational comedy shows such as *Parks and Recreation* and *The Mindy Project*. Additionally, stand-up acts by comedians such as Amy Schumer and Margaret Cho use comedy

to bring issues to light. These texts utilize the format of comedy in order to influence their audiences to consider social issues that range from race relations to gender equality.

Race in Situational Comedy

Mindy Kaling, writer, actor, and executive producer of *The Office*, began writing and producing her own show, *The Mindy Project*, in 2012. The show reflects Mindy's real life experiences in the genre of situational comedy. Mindy is South Asian, and her ethnicity is a common element of the show's plot. The humor within *The Mindy Project* contains implications of race, size, and physical appearance. According to Nihawin (2015), Mindy uses the show to highlight her own "otherness" in culture as an Asian American, and presents herself as outside of the dominant culture of white American male, especially within her profession as a doctor on the show. In addition to using her race as an element of the humor within the show, Mindy intersects her race and gender to highlight issues of discrimination. One example of how this is done is found within the episode "Mindy Lahiri is a White Man." In the episode, Mindy is interviewing for a position as a head doctor at her hospital, and feels she is treated unfairly during the interview process. She then wishes to be a white man and in the true spirit of comedy, turns into one and completes the interview again. Interviewing as a white man proved to be a completely different experience. When Mindy has a much easier path as a man, it encourages viewers to laugh at the silliness of sexism, while also laughing at Mindy in the body of a man. This episode has been described as smartly tackling issues of race and gender by "infusing humor into realistic and sexist situations" (Jensen, 2017, p. 1).

Aziz Ansari is another well-known American comic who uses his comedy as a forum to bring issues of race relations into mainstream media. In fact, Ansari's Netflix original series, *Master of None*, even references Kaling in an episode devoted to Hollywood diversity, or lack

thereof (Poniewozik, 2015). The episode titled “Indians on TV” uses satirical comedy in order to highlight typical ethnic casting practices in Hollywood by creating a situation between Dev and his good friend, also an Indian-American, both competing for roles in a new sitcom. They are told they cannot both be cast because “there can’t be two Indians in one show.” According to Poniewozik (2015), *Master of None* stands out as a show that obviously strayed from these ethnic casting norms, and features a truly diverse cast, rather than the “typical culture-clash setup” which contrasts a single family or individual against dominant white culture.

While *Master of None* may have a masterful cast, some shows that reflect this “typical culture clash” still have been viewed as successful in bringing to light issues of race relations. Freeform (previously ABC Family) produces a situational comedy called *Black-ish* which features an upper-middle class African American family navigating how to stay true to their ethnic roots in a mostly white, upper-middle class neighborhood. The show’s premise invites discussion of race relations and particular episodes have been praised for raising consciousness of racial issues. One of these episodes is “THE Word,” which features the family’s youngest using the N-Word in a school performance, and sparks a school and family debate about the history and power of the word (VanDerWerff, 2015). The situation is made funny to audiences through the discussion the family has and the many different viewpoints within one family. This element of comedy allows audiences to relate and sweetens the tough subjects the show is tackling. According to VanDerWerff (2015), “this is an episode about how we sometimes think getting rid of horrible words will get rid of the impulses that animate them- and how wrong that idea can be” (p. 1). *Black-ish* has been praised as a show that tackles important topics of not only race relations, but gun control and sustainability, while remaining funny and inviting to viewers (VanDerWerff, 2015).

Sexuality in Situational Comedy

More and more, situational comedies are featuring homosexuality in their plots and challenging audience perceptions of homosexual relationships. One example of this is NBC's hit situational comedy *Will & Grace*, which aired in 1998. The show has been praised for having a positive effect on the gay community by bringing representations of homosexuality to prime time with humor. However, this show's positive impact comes with some caveats. According to Shugart (2003), the gay men in *Will & Grace* are accepted by mainstream audiences because they are desexualized, and presented as a best friend figure to a heterosexual female. Within the relationship between Will and Grace, Will's sexuality is used as a foil for Grace. Thus, homosexuality is successfully framed as control over female sexuality (Shugart, 2003). The problematic representation does not come in the visibility of homosexuality, but within the agency Will has over Grace. Grace and Will dated in the past, and Grace still holds hope that they will one day be together. Will's control over her is depicted not only through Grace's attraction to Will, but also through the fatherly advice he often gives her, which she nearly always follows. *Will & Grace* represented homosexual males in a positive light, while representing females negatively.

Will & Grace serves as an example of how comedy is utilized in order to promote social change. Since their production, more comedies that represent homosexuality and work to influence audience perception of homosexuality have been produced. Perhaps the most recent of these texts is *Transparent*, an Amazon original show which tackle issues of homosexuality and gender transitions. *Transparent* takes place partially in the 1970s, as the show features a transgender main character, Maura. The flashbacks to the 1970s take viewers to Maura's past as Mort, and serve as a reminder that many of today's cultural issues reach further into the past than

today's society realizes (Kornhaber, 2015). According to Kornhaber (2015), "the show evokes a time when feminism, racial equality, and sexual openness felt like new and very radical projects. It also examines, quite provocatively, how the mentality of constant revolution and social permissiveness has filtered into a generation's personal decision-making—in ways that are not altogether good" (p. 1). Through representing real and complicated issues faced by a transgender character, some have defined the show as a part of a transgender movement in media (Kornhaber, 2015). However, Kornhaber (2015) believes that the show attempts to humanize, and to create a capacity for understanding within viewers. *Transparent* also represents a young lesbian couple coming of age and questioning their sexuality and commitment to one another. The show's representation of the complications and heartbreaks that can be faced in a society that does not yet fully accept gender fluidity forces viewers to reflect on the world in which they are living (Kornhaber, 2015).

While shows like *Transparent* have attracted buzz for their representation of transgender and homosexual individuals, there is no data behind changing attitudes or opinions as a result of *Transparent*. ABC's *Modern Family*, which features gay couple Cam and Mitch married and raising an adopted daughter together, is breaking the mold in that regard. The show has actually proven to change audience opinions on gay marriage in some cases. In fact, viewers of *Modern Family* have credited the show for a change in their opinion about gay lifestyles and gay marriage (Kornhaber, 2015). According to Kornhaber (2015), Cam and Mitch, who were married on the small screen in 2009, have paved the way for other gay couples to be featured on television shows by normalizing homosexuality in the media and facilitating audience acceptance of it. This kind of change can be seen on television not just in terms of how audience view homosexuality, but in how they view other issues of equality, such as gender equality.

Feminism in Stand-Up

Many recent and well-received comedy pieces, from children's cartoons to adult-only stand up, work to push forward gender equality in some capacity. One example of this can be found in Margaret Cho's 2005 stand-up tour: *Assassin*. The tour, fueled by Cho's own dissatisfaction with the political environment of the United States and lack of gay rights, attempted to make social change by serving as a call to action for her fans (Pearson 2007). *Assassin* spurred response both from Cho's fans and those who disagreed with the messages she pushed forward. Those who responded negatively sent politically-fueled hate mail to Cho, and her fans quickly banded together to form "al-Gayda," a group committed to defending her and her political ideas. This response proved that stand-up performances such as *Assassin* have the potential to influence already engaged audiences to move into actions (Pearson 2007). These forms of comedy do so by utilizing public forums and leveraging media discourse already surrounding them.

Another comedian who has been reported to successfully use her comedy for social change is Amy Schumer. Much like Cho, Schumer's comedy is stand-up, and the majority of her acts are laced with jokes that advocate for gender equality. Schumer stars in her own sketch show, *Inside Amy Schumer*, which airs on Comedy Central. Schumer's work has been praised in *Time* Magazine for the ways in which she tackles gender equality within the context of comedy by challenging gender expectations and highlighting her own sexuality (Stein, 2014). She has been defined as a feminist comedian, due to the gender politics that inform her work. Many women have flocked to Schumer as a feminist inspiration. However, her fan base is made up of a mixture of men and women. According to the president of Comedy Central, Schumer may be

popular with audiences who may not be feminist because they are not aware of the feminist implications of her work (Stein, 2014).

In addition to her stand-up work, Schumer represents feminism in sketch comedy, a world that is predominantly male. However, Samantha Bee is performing in an even more male-dominated subgenre of comedy: satirical late-night news. Bee is the star of her own late night television comedy *Full Frontal*, and is the only female host of a political comedy show. Bee's work directly combats the issues of gendered expectations that she faces in her role as a political comedian (Paskin, 2016). In fact, the opening scene of the show's debut combatted these expectations by portraying journalists asking Bee questions such as "is it hard breaking into a boy's club?" The show utilized its comedic formats to make fun of such beliefs by over exaggerating them. According to Paskin (2016), the show "owned gender's importance to *Full Frontal* while also complicating it- acknowledging and impaling the gendered expectations surrounding it, all while being very funny" (p 1.) Comedians such as Bee, Schumer, and Cho take on social issues in their live performances, while many of primetime's most popular comedies share the same themes within the format of situational comedy.

Feminism in Situational Comedy

We can see that scholars have discussed comedy and its impact across a wide variety of identities, but this research will focus on feminism and its articulation in situational comedies. Dow (1996) has discussed the history of feminism in primetime through her discussion of several different comedies. According to Dow (1996), shows such as these have the potential to make a political statement, due to the way they are received by an active audience. For the purpose of this review, feminist television is defined as television which reflects women's issues, rights, women's empowerment, or gender equality.

The first noteworthy prime time television show that depicted a woman outside of gender norms was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. This situational comedy, which ran on CBS from 1970-1977, featured a single woman, Mary Richards, and her job at a television station. The show's creators denied that it was designed with politics in mind, but admitted that the intention was to produce media that deliberately reflected the feminist movement that was taking place at this time (Dow, 1996). Richards fit the description of the "New Woman" by featuring a single woman in a successful career, while still holding some traditional feminine qualities, which were reflected in her relationships with her co-workers. This depiction gave female audiences something to connect to, and many women were inspired by Richards' success. Because of its ability to depict feminism without completely abandoning tradition while using comedy to sweeten the subject, *The Mary Tyler Moore* show was a successful promotion of social change and set precedent for others to safely follow.

One Day at a Time also fits within the trend seen in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The show, which began airing in 1975, blazed even more new trails by marking the first ever situational comedy to depict a divorced woman, Ann Romano, as the main character. The show is credited as a reflection of "lifestyle" feminism, meaning feminism that is reflected within the life choices of an individual (Dow, 1996). *One Day at a Time* was a ground-breaking situational comedy because of its portrayal of the struggles of living as an independent woman in a society that had not yet accepted feminism. According to Dow (1996), the show presents more political issues between men and women than *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, yet often trivializes these issues by solving them through personal discovery by Ann, rather than through any kind of collective movement.

Perhaps the most noteworthy representation of feminism in prime time television was *Murphy Brown*. The situational comedy, which aired from 1988-1998, focused on the life of Murphy Brown, a single woman with a successful career as a news anchor. According to Dow (1996), Murphy was a media portrayal of postfeminism due to her focus on her career, lack of romantic success, and lack of feminine clothing. *Murphy Brown* went further than any show of its time in making political statements about feminism through the plot of the show. In the season of the show which aired in 1990, Murphy discovers that she is pregnant, and decides to raise the baby by herself, out of wedlock. This shift in the plot of the show made it infinitely more political, and sparked outrage from some members of the public (Dow, 1996). This decision, meant to highlight Murphy's independence, caused backlash even from the Vice President of the United States, Dan Quayle. The reaction of some Americans to the show proved where the public stood on issues related to the agency and independence of women, yet *Murphy Brown* continued to present a character with more agency and independence than America had ever seen.

The classic feminist prime time shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day at a Time*, and *Murphy Brown* are not the only representations of feminism in situational comedy. More recently, even children's comedy television has been shown to reflect a feminist "Girl Power" narrative. Popular early-2000s Nickelodeon children's shows *Clarissa Explains It All* and *As Told by Ginger* have been praised for utilizing comedy in order to empower children (Banet-Weiser, 2004). These two shows have been reported as ground-breaking because of their ability to empower young children, both male and female, even while portraying feminist issues through a female lead role. It is believed that the reason these shows have found success is

because they depict topics that are relevant to young adolescents and use humor as a means for empowerment.

Empowerment and social change through situational comedy can go beyond the “girl power” movement, however. ABC’s situational comedy *Ellen*, which aired from 1994 to 1998, used humor as a conduit for challenging gender norms. Shugart (2001) outlines three strategies of humor that are employed in the show in order to make a social statement: relief, incongruity, and superiority. Relief is the use of humor in order to relieve tension in a situation. Incongruity is the presentation of something socially inappropriate or unexpected in order to produce laughter, and superiority is humor that is found when an audience finds themselves superior to the person or object that is the punchline. Shugart (2001) states that, because Ellen is depicted as a gender ambiguous character, not traditionally feminine, her performances of femininity reflect all three of these tactics of humor, most notably incongruity. Shugart (2001) argues that Ellen’s performance of femininity as incongruent with her personality, or a parody, serves to denaturalize gender, rendering it something constructed rather than natural. By denaturalizing gender, the door is open for audiences to reconsider traditional femininity.

Comedian Tina Fey, in addition to spending several years starring on *Saturday Night Live*, has written and produced several situational comedies. Most well-known among these shows is *30 Rock*, which has been widely celebrated as a television show that represents feminist ideals. *30 Rock*’s main character, Liz Lemon, is based on Tina Fey herself, and is a depiction of female occupational success. The narrative focuses on Lemon’s career and uses humor to bring to light the issues she has faced as a female producer in Hollywood. Additionally, the show subtly pushes forward feminist ideals by positioning Lemon as the possessor of the “gaze” (Patteron 2012). The “gaze” is, simply stated, the viewpoint through which audience is invited to

look. Mainstream media generally invites audiences to adopt the “male gaze,” or to identify with male protagonists and objectify females (Mulvey, 1975). By choosing to position the female protagonist, Liz, as the possessor of the gaze, Fey puts the power of the text in the hands of the female and invites viewers to identify with the issues faced by Lemon. Fey’s work has been celebrated for representing social change and her humor has been defined as “feminist humor” (Lauzen, 2014). In addition to reflecting feminist issues in *30 Rock*, Fey brings light to gender equality issues by identifying as a feminist and speaking about feminist issues within the media.

30 Rock is not the only show of Tina Fey’s that has produced some buzz about its feminist nature. Her most recent work, *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, is a Netflix original comedy series about a female cult survivor, Kimmy Schmidt, who was abducted and forced to join the cult of a white male for fifteen years. The show is about Kimmy’s reentry into society, and how she deals with the trauma while remaining optimistic about her future. With an opening segment that features the line “females are strong as hell,” viewers of the show have reported that it is lined with plot kernels about the strength of females (Cruz, 2015). According to Cruz (2015), the show sends the message that women can do the impossible, and push through even the toughest of situations with optimism and humor.

Much like Kimmy Schmidt, Leslie Knope, the main character of *Parks and Recreation*, is known for her optimism in the face of adversity. Fey’s former *Saturday Night Live* costar Amy Poehler plays Knope in the NBC comedy *Parks and Recreation*. The show works to push forward social change and has, like *30 Rock*, been defined as a feminist text. The show goes further than other series by making the personal political, and representing not only feminism, but social and political change within the narrative of the comedy itself (Engstrom, 2013). Engstrom (2013), finds feminist meaning in *Parks and Recreation* through investigating Leslie’s

relationship to the town of Pawnee. Pawnee, she states, represents obsolete patriarchy, and Leslie is the one who diminishes this patriarchy through the change she pushes forward in the plot. Audiences are invited to laugh at the town of Pawnee for its patriarchal ways. Thus, the central motif of many episodes is feminist in meaning. Engstrom investigated the symbolism of the setting of *Parks and Recreation*, but the current study will investigate other elements of the narrative, such as character and theme, as well as the comedic elements of the text, to determine how audiences respond to the meanings made by these narratives.

The literature explored throughout this review has shown that the format of comedy can be used to present serious issues that focus on race, sexuality, and gender equality while still capturing audiences and remaining humorous. In some cases, such as in *Modern Family*, comedy has even contributed to a mindset change in audience views of cultural issues. *Parks and Recreation* focuses its comedic narrative in a way that is more direct than many of the texts that have been explored. It places the social issue of gender equality into a context that is completely public, and moves it from a cultural issue to an issue of public policy. As the studies reviewed have highlighted, many shows have been revolutionary in terms of changing representations of oppressed groups or public opinions on cultural issues. *Parks and Recreation* has the potential to do the same in shaping public opinion on gender equality, and its setting within government has the potential to push this change of opinion even further in encouraging audience action and involvement in the gender equality movement.

Methodology

Two episodes of *Parks and Recreation* are analyzed in this study: “Women in Garbage,” Season 5, Episode 7, and “Article Two” Season 5, Episode 19. These episodes were selected because they contain narratives that explicitly deal with women’s rights in a public matter, and

focus on the implementation of institutional changes to law and public policy. This study seeks to understand how the narrative of *Parks and Recreation* is shaped so that, within the situational comedy, feminist values are represented. Furthermore, this study seeks to understand if audiences notice these values, and how these values affect audiences. In order to study narrative constructions and audience responses, the study is broken up into two parts: a narrative analysis of the episodes, which seeks to understand the meaning that *Parks and Recreation* attempts to portray in terms of the feminist social movement, and an analysis of the audience, which seeks to understand if the feminist meanings are successfully communicated to viewers. In order to accomplish this two-part task, two methodologies are employed. For the textual analysis of *Parks and Recreation*, a narrative criticism approach will be used. An audience reception study will also be conducted, wherein participants watch the television episodes, then complete a questionnaire and participate in a focus group.

Narrative criticism is essentially an analysis of the way in which stories are told. A narrative approach for this study is the most appropriate because it will provide insights about how the narrative elements of *Parks and Recreation* are shaped in a way such that viewers are encouraged to learn from what they are viewing, and replicate the feminist ideals placed within the show. Additionally, narrative criticism will serve as a way to evaluate what elements of the plot, setting and characters are portrayed as humorous, and how these elements of humor relate to the feminist movement as a whole.

Narrative criticism stems from the narrative paradigm theory, which assumes that all humans are storytellers and base their reasoning or decision-making based on stories (Fisher, 1989). The method builds from the elements of a narrative and holds several important assumptions. First, stories serve as a guide for how to live for viewers. Second, that humans use

narratives or stories to construct an understanding of themselves, other people, and the world (Vande Berg, Wenner, & Gronbeck, 2004). By applying these assumptions to *Parks and Recreation*, one is able to determine how viewers may form an understanding of themselves and the world through viewing the show, and how the show can serve as a guide to living.

An audience reception which combines group viewing, focus groups, and questionnaires will be used to complete the audience analysis portion of this study. An audience reception study works to understand how audiences make sense of and draw meaning from what they view on television (Vende Berg, Wenner, & Gronbeck, 2004). Audience reception uses a strategy called triangulation, which allows the audience to be observed using multiple measures in order to gain more credibility and information (Vende Berg, Wenner, & Gronbeck, 2004). Triangulation will be applied to this study by observing the audience as they view each episode in addition to requiring each participant to fill out a questionnaire and then take part in a focus group discussion.

The same episodes that are used for the textual analysis will be used in the audience reception. According to a report by TV Week, *Parks and Recreation* has the highest concentration of young adult viewers of shows aired on popular primetime networks (2013). In order to gain an accurate measure of how audiences are reacting to *Parks and Recreation*, this young adult demographic will be replicated in this study. Due to the scope and size of the study, participants will be recruited on a volunteer basis from the Wittenberg University student listserv. In order to gain further insight on how both males and females react to the show, one audience will be made up entirely of females, and one will be made up of a mixture of males and females.

In viewing *Parks and Recreation*, participants of this study were observed and their reactions to the show were recorded. The points of the episode at which viewers laughed were noted, along with any comments viewers made throughout the episodes. After the viewing, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that detailed their opinions of the show, to determine whether or not they were influenced by the feminist narrative within the show. The questionnaire (Appendix A) asked the viewers whether or not they identify as a feminist, asked them to define what feminism means to them, and asked them if they found *Parks and Recreation* to be a feminist show. If they answered yes, they were asked to list which elements of the narrative made the show feminist. If they answered no, they were asked to list which elements of the narrative made the show not feminist. Immediately following the completion of the questionnaire, participants took part in a focus group, where they shared their responses in a discussion format. The focus group allowed the audience members to clarify points and engage in discussion with other audience members. It also allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on the audience's responses to the questionnaire. The goal of the focus group was to pinpoint the areas of the narrative which could be construed as feminist, and whether or not audience members were encouraged to change their attitudes or behaviors after viewing such a text.

The narrative analysis portion of the study will work to determine the meanings that are encoded within the text. It will determine whether the encoded meanings are meant to encourage beliefs about gender equality. The audience reception portion of the study will serve as a comparison between what meanings are encoded within *Parks and Recreation* and the meanings that audiences decode as they view the show. The audience reception portion will determine whether the audience is aware of any references to gender equality or inequality encoded in

Parks and Recreation, and if they decode this meaning as positive. Furthermore, if the meanings are decoded as positive, the audience reception will determine if participants are encouraged to change viewpoints or actions regarding gender equality.

After completing the narrative analysis and audience reception study, the elements of the narrative of *Parks and Recreation* that encourage gender equality should become apparent, and this study will be able to determine whether or not the audience is aware of these elements of the narrative. Additionally, this study will be able to determine if the audience is moved to change their actions or intentions due to the support of gender equality pushed forward in the show.

Analysis of Narrative in Parks and Recreation

Narrative criticism investigates the way stories are told, not just that they are told. Before analyzing a narrative, it is important to understand the elements of a narrative. A narrative is a story that encourages a response from viewers by creating a world that is “particular, sharable, and personal” (Foss, 2009, p. 308). A narrative is particular because it contains details that require viewers to use their imaginations and build from their own experiences. A narrative is sharable because it is centered around experience and invites viewers to connect to the story in order to make meaning. A narrative is personal in the response that it requires from viewers. As someone interacts with a narrative, he or she is invited to respond by making evaluations of the actions in the narrative. In the case of gender representation in *Parks and Recreation*, it is particularly interesting to look at how the show’s narrative may serve as a guide to living for women and men and help construct an understanding of gender.

Parks and Recreation focuses on the life of Knope, employee of the Parks and Recreation Department in Pawnee, Indiana. Throughout its seven seasons, the show follows Knope’s rise to the top of government, and her daily life and interactions with coworkers. The show’s other main

characters Ron Swanson, Tom Haverford, April Ludgate, Jerry Gergich, and Donna Meagle are all members of the Parks and Recreation department. Even Leslie's best friend Ann Perkins, and husband, Ben Wyatt, eventually accept jobs in Pawnee government, making the cast's main interactions take place within the public sphere as opposed to a private home setting. The majority of the screen time for the show takes place within the parks' department office, and presents Knope almost entirely in work-related environments. Very rarely does the show depict Knope's home, and the narrative of most episodes is focused on a government-related dilemma faced by Knope. Issues of her personal life are intertwined into the narrative, but often come secondary to issues of public policy or her career goals.

The themes within *Parks and Recreation* create an intersection between gender and politics, making gender into a political issue and constructing a meaning of feminism that is both gendered and political. The overarching narrative of the show encourages viewers to construct an understanding of females that is in some ways traditionally feminine, but politically equal to males. Additionally, when viewers utilize *Parks and Recreation* as a guide to living, they are encouraged to take the fight for gender equality into their own hands, and make successful political change as a result.

The placement of *Parks and Recreation* within the genre of comedy adds to the conclusions viewers may draw about gender and politics. The narrative of *Parks and Recreation* follows the traditional structure of a situational comedy. Situational comedies feature recurring main characters whom audiences know and become attached to, as well as many minor characters who are featured in the plot (Tafflinger, 1996). According to Tafflinger (1996), the majority of situational comedies are designed to model societal norms. Throughout the plot of these programs, the norms are broken, and this incongruence is the source of humor (Tafflinger,

1996). This pattern is established within *Parks and Recreation* in the way that political change is accomplished by Knope. While one would traditionally expect political change in government institutions to occur through the expected pathway of input from the community and careful considerations of representatives, *Parks and Recreation* does not reflect this kind of change. Instead, the audience is encouraged to laugh at the ways in which Leslie reaches political change, though personal and sometimes ridiculous situations.

The features of a narrative can be utilized for interpreting the plots found within *Parks and Recreation*. In order to interpret the meanings that are communicated within a narrative, the features of a narrative that are most important to evaluate must be established. Foss (2009) discusses many different features of a narrative that might be important to a critic doing narrative analysis. In this study, the narrative elements of setting, character, and events are most important to understanding what drives the overall feminist theme in these episodes. Foss (2009) states that, in analyzing characters, one must look at their actions and traits. The characters within *Parks and Recreation* are important because many characters are established as feminist through their actions and traits that are established within them through dialogue. Foss (2009) also discusses setting as important in analyzing a text, stating that critics must look at changes in setting, and how the setting relates to the text's characters and actions. The setting of *Parks and Recreation* is an important element of the narrative because the show takes place within a government department, where social change is talked about and implemented.

Throughout the series, the narrative forms a pattern such that Leslie finds a gender-related government dilemma, fights for equality in rectifying said dilemma, and achieves her intended goal relationally rather than through traditional pathways of government change. The comedy within these episodes comes from the way in which Leslie rectifies the dilemmas; often

through a personal, comedic situation. The dominant narrative in *Parks and Recreation* leads viewers to create an understanding that is twofold. First, viewers construct an understanding of the world such that gender equality can be reached on a political and policy level if one simply directly combats adversaries to the movement. However, this confrontation is generally done in a relational manner rather than through traditional paths to public policy, creating humor but in some ways complicating the narrative of feminism as a public issue.

The first example of this narrative structure found within *Parks and Recreation* is reflected within the seventh episode of the fifth season, “Women in Garbage.” This episode opens with five women in government meeting together. One is a retired city councilwoman whom Knope requested a meeting with to talk about the issues she faced as a woman in city council. Knope speaks to the camera about the meeting she called, saying “women have come a long way in Pawnee, but we still have a long way to go. I mean technically, I’m not allowed to reserve this conference room without my husband or father’s signature.” The elderly councilwoman begins the meeting by stating that, in her time in government, it was a boy’s club. She describes issues of sexism she faced in her time in city council, such as the calendar of her menstrual cycle that the other men on the council kept. Knope says that she would like to start an equal gender employment commission in Pawnee. Her employee, April, jokes that she thinks women should not be in government and that men are more able to lead. Viewers who are familiar with April’s character know these statements are intended to be sarcastic, and are encouraged to laugh. In this case, April’s sarcasm is used to highlight the silliness of sexism.

This opening scene reflects the narrative pattern within *Parks and Recreation* by determining a gender-related government issue, which Knope will spend the episode working to resolve. Additionally, Knope is introduced as the main character with whom audiences are

expected to identify. By choosing a main character that directly references feminism, and combats issues of gender equality in a completely political context, the narrative encourages viewers to relate to Knope, and shape an understanding of gender equality that is in connection to policy issues.

The idea of gender equality in the public sphere becomes a theme throughout the episode. Later in “Women in Garbage,” Knope calls a meeting about the equality commission and requires all departments of government to send two employees. When the meeting begins, Knope realizes each department sent only men and points to this as a problem. As the meeting unfolds, it is determined that the sanitation department has the worst gender diversity ratio. The sanitation men say that it is because sanitation is a man’s job, and women do not want to do it. Knope and April set a wager with the men that they will work in sanitation for a day, and that if they do so, the department must hire more women.

The wager that is set between Leslie, April, and the sanitation department is the center of the narrative of the comedy found within this episode. Leslie and April, two government officials, performing the duties of sanitation employees by picking up garbage, is the comedic situation. The episode encourages viewers to laugh as they witness Leslie and April in a new setting, outside of their normal office environment. The genre of situational comedy, in this case, draws on the personal element of the narrative, inviting viewers to relate as it attempts to highlight sexism in government through a humorous situation; however, it invites viewers to make an evaluation about the way in which they see Leslie and April making change, and the way they see the sanitation department workers attempting to stop that change. The way that Leslie and April make change is central to the humor of the episode. They create change in a

way that is not what the viewers expect. The two women make change in the back of a garbage truck instead of an official government office and this incongruence becomes funny to audiences.

When Leslie and April begin their day as sanitation workers, the scene shows them dressed in jumpsuits hanging from the back of a garbage truck. Leslie says to April: “We have some stereotypes to overcome.” The women begin the day ahead of schedule, picking up garbage under the guidance of organizational binders created by Leslie. When the sanitation men realize the women are ahead of schedule, they tell the women that they will be making an unexpected stop to pick up an old refrigerator at the bakery. Leslie and April travel to the bakery, and quickly realize that they will not be able to lift the refrigerator by themselves. Leslie tells April that they must do it saying that they are hauling a “symbolic feminist obstacle onto a truck of women’s advancement.” The women spend the rest of the day trying to get the refrigerator to budge. Finally, when Leslie says “If I can’t move that fridge onto that truck then feminism is over in this town,” an employee of the bakery comes out. He states that the sanitation men had tried, and failed, to move the refrigerator earlier in the week. Leslie realizes they have been set up. She asks the employee if the refrigerator is still operating, and when he says yes, she comes up with a plan. Leslie calls three women who work at the local soup kitchen, and they help April and Leslie load the refrigerator onto the truck and keep the refrigerator for the soup kitchen. At the end of the episode, the sanitation department hired three new women, and Leslie and April head off to “commemorate the feminist victory.”

The narrative found with “Women in Garbage” communicates the clear pattern found within *Park and Recreation*. First, Leslie identifies a gender-related issue. In this episode, the issue is the lack of women hired by the city of Pawnee government. Second, Leslie rectifies this dilemma in a way that is personal and relational rather than traditional. In “Women in Garbage,”

Leslie tries to rectify the issue by creating the gender equality commission, a traditional pathway of change. However, she eventually convinces the sanitation department to hire more women through her contest with them. This contest is important in terms of the gender stereotypes performed. There is a clear distinction made between Leslie's femininity and the masculinity of the men in the sanitation department. This is exemplified within the struggle over the refrigerator. Hyper-competitiveness, a traditionally male gender performance, was displayed by the men of the sanitation department and Knope. The men of the sanitation department could not move the refrigerator, so they used it in an attempt to foil Leslie and April. However, Leslie displayed the traditionally feminine quality of nurturing and caring for others when she thought to donate the refrigerator to the soup kitchen. Additionally, she displayed cooperation in recruiting other women to help her. These elements of the narrative shape viewers' understanding of gender equality as political and personal. In watching Leslie's actions of directly combating adversaries lead to social change, viewers come to understand that they too can create social change, while performing traditional gender roles associated with femininity and masculinity.

Additionally, the comedic situation presented within the beginning of the episode was rectified when Leslie and April performed all the duties of a sanitation department worker. Viewers are encouraged to view the episode as funny because of the way in which the change was made. While viewers may expect gender equality to be combatted in government through successful meetings with the commission set up by Leslie, they do not see Leslie finding success through these traditional pathways. Instead, they see change made by women wearing an orange jumpsuit, working with garbage all day. Thus, the incongruence between the situation that is presented and the situation that is expected encourages them to laugh.

The same narrative structure unfolds within the nineteenth episode of the fifth season of *Parks and Recreation*, “Article Two.” “Article Two” begins with a celebration of “Ted Day” in Pawnee. This day is a town tradition in which members of Pawnee throw a man named Ted into a pond due to a misprint in their town laws. The law was supposed to state that they shall dump tea into the pond, but instead states that the town citizens should drop ted into the pond. This law begins a conversation within Pawnee government about obsolete or outdated laws. Leslie soon realizes that many laws in Pawnee are outdated, including one that states “all menstruating women should be confined to their bath tubs.” Leslie is bothered by these laws, and drafts a bill to repeal ten sexist laws.

However, she is foiled by a man who says he is passionate about history, and blocks the bill from passing by filibustering the city council meeting. Much like “Women in Garbage,” Leslie sets a wager with the man. The two will live on a historic homestead the same way they would when the original laws that Leslie is attempting to repeal were made. If Leslie lasts in this environment longer than her foe, he will stop the filibuster and allow the bill to pass.

Again, Leslie must solve political issues using pathways that are not traditional. Viewers may expect that in a traditional government the bill would pass after some debate and voting from government officials. However, *Parks and Recreation* creates a comedic situation: Leslie must fight for her equality outside of the city council meeting by living as she would have in the 1800s.

As the situation unfolds, Leslie and Garth move into the historical homestead, and he lasts much longer than Leslie anticipated. Leslie believes him to be cheating by using technology, so she has her colleagues check his phone to see if he has corresponded with anyone. When they realize he has received no contact from the outside world while they are there, Leslie

understands that he is enjoying their time on the homestead because he is lonely, and connecting to simpler times makes him forget that he does not have friends. Therefore, in order to end the contest, Leslie offers him membership into the Pawnee Historical Society, which provides him an opportunity to socialize in his otherwise lonely life. In response, Garth agrees not to filibuster again and the outdated sexist laws are repealed.

“Article Two” follows the same narrative pattern as “Women in Garbage.” The episode begins when Leslie identifies a gender-related policy dilemma. In this case, it is the outdated laws that restrict the rights of women in Pawnee. Leslie tries to combat the issue quickly using traditional modes of government, but finds an adversary. She defeats the adversary on personal terms through a relational situation. In this case, Garth serves as the adversary, standing in Leslie’s way just as the sanitation men did in “Women in Garbage.” Just as Leslie was not able to achieve gender equality through action from the commission she created in “Women in Garbage,” she is not able to repeal the outdated laws by passing the bill she drafted immediately. Instead, she must take matters into her own hands, and combat the adversary through a wager on her own personal terms. Leslie eventually defeats Garth by understanding that he is standing in her way because he is lonely and longing to feel included. Viewers end the episode with a humor created through incongruence, as instead of watching a bill become a law promoting gender equality within a city council meeting, they have watched Leslie fight for gender equality by churning butter and tending to the chickens on a historical homestead. The setting in the historical homestead also contributes to the humor of the episode, as viewers see a modern man and woman living as they would have when such sexist laws were created.

The narratives of “Women in Garbage” and “Article Two” both follow the same narrative pattern: Leslie finds a gender-related government issue, tries to solve it through traditional

pathways, and does not find success in doing so. In response to this, she takes the situation into her own hands, and solves it in a way that is relationally focused. However, Leslie's display of feminine qualities can be read as a way to further the values of gender equality. Leslie is able to solve the problems she is handed in a way that the men she works with may not. She is able to be nurturing, kind, empathetic, and thoughtful while still accomplishing social change. However, Leslie is not portrayed as a character who reflects only feminine stereotypes. She has qualities, such as her competitiveness, which are considered to be masculine. This contributes to the narrative of gender equality by complicating public perceptions of gender performance. Leslie represents a character who is successful in performing characteristics of both genders. The elements of the narratives of "Women in Garbage" and "Article Two" both contain clear messages that attempt to push forward public support of gender equality. The theme of each episode is focused on the fight for gender equality, each one references gender equality and feminism in some way, and each episode ends in public policy change regarding gender equality. These elements of the narratives within *Parks and Recreation* make it clear that the messages encoded within the show are ones of support for gender equality. However, an audience reception study is needed to determine whether the encoded messages are consistent with the meanings that are decoded by viewers.

Audience Reception

Stuart Hall's developed model of communication is fundamental in modern understanding of cultural studies and media. Hall believed that the media had too much control over the dominant ideologies of society, and that different forms of mass media are easily "able to shape public opinion of marginalized populations" (West & Turner, 2007, p. 390). The media's ability to shape culture comes from the ideas which are encoded into texts. The producer

of a text has vast control over the ideologies that are promoted. The textual analysis of this study investigated how *Parks and Recreation* promotes gender equality through the messages encoded in the text by its producers.

However, the meanings encoded within *Parks and Recreation* are without purpose unless the audience recognizes them. The process by which an audience makes meaning of the messages they receive through media by comparing them with messages previously stored in their minds is called decoding (West & Turner, 2007). Audiences bring their own experiences and perspectives forward when interpreting a text and this can affect the way they perceive meaning. Audiences can make meaning of texts by reading them in three ways: the dominant reading, the negotiated meaning, and the oppositional meaning.

A dominant reading occurs when an audience decodes a text in a way that is consistent with the meanings encoded by the text's producer (West & Turner, 2007). This means that the producer of the media has some power over how the audiences perceive things. In terms of *Parks and Recreation*, the dominant meaning is that gender equality is an important issue. This reading is explored in the textual analysis of this study. Audiences reading the text through a dominant lens would see the humor as being used to highlight the importance of gender equality. An audience member reading through the dominant lens most likely has an ideology which aligns with that of the text. For *Parks and Recreation*, this would be an audience member who cares about gender equality and might even identify as a feminist. A negotiated reading occurs when an audience member accepts the dominate ideologies encoded within the media, but with some exceptions (West & Turner, 2007). For an audience member with a negotiated reading of *Parks and Recreation*, this could mean he or she member accepts that gender equality is important, but does not think that sexism is as much of a public problem as the show presents it to be. An

audience member reading through a negotiated reading may think that gender equality is portrayed as important in *Parks and Recreation*, but not a central theme of the show. The third way of reading a text is an oppositional reading. This is a reading that decodes a message alternative to that which is encoded within a text (West & Turner, 2007). In *Parks and Recreation*, an oppositional reading could be one that finds the show to be promoting sexism through its humor, rather than promoting gender equality. An audience member who might take an oppositional reading could be someone whose ideologies are not aligned with those encoded within the text, someone who does not place an importance on gender equality or has sexist attitudes and beliefs.

The purpose of the audience reception study was to discover whether the meanings that the textual analysis section of this study determined were encoded into the show are consistent with the meanings decoded by general audiences of *Parks and Recreation*. In order to evaluate how audiences decode the texts, two focus groups were held. The audiences viewed “Women in Garbage” and “Article Two,” and then they were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire served multiple purposes. First, it recognized elements of the narrative audience members enjoyed and found humorous. Second, it determined if audience members decoded the texts as feminist, and why. Third, the questionnaire evaluated whether they felt the humor within the texts worked to reinforce or undermine any feminist meaning they perceived. After filling out the questionnaire, participants were invited to discuss their responses as a part of a focus group.

Two focus groups were conducted, one which consisted only of females, and one which consisted of males and females. Three females attended the first group, and five females and three males attended the second group. Nine of eleven members of the focus groups stated that they would consider themselves to be feminists. The other two stated that they agree with

feminist values, but struggle to identify as feminist due to the negative stereotypes associated with the word. The high level of participants who defined themselves as feminist could be due to the nature of the study. As the study was volunteer-based, many members who volunteered were fans of *Parks and Recreation*, and could have been attracted to the show due to the feminist values it reflects. After analyzing the results of the questionnaires, and participating in focus group discussion, the audience reception to *Parks and Recreation* can be summarized in three categories: first, the text is read by viewers as containing overt feminist ideals. Second, these viewers decode the humor within the text as designed to reinforce their perceived feminist ideals. Finally, that these ideals serve in many cases as inspiration for viewers to stand up for gender equality. In short, the results of the focus group showed that audiences decode the text in a way that is consistent with the dominant reading that this study found to be encoded within *Parks and Recreation*.

The post-viewing questionnaire that participants were asked to complete required them to share their own definition of feminism. Next, it asked viewers whether they considered “Women in Garbage” and “Article Two” to contain feminist elements within the narrative. Nine of the eleven participants stated that they decoded both episodes as containing elements of a feminist narrative, while the remaining two only found the narrative of “Women in Garbage” to contain feminist elements. However, once engaged in discussion, these two participants stated that “Article Two” also contained elements of feminism, though they were subtler than that of “Women in Garbage.”

Participants gave specific examples of the elements which they found to be reflective of feminist ideals. The characters within the show were an element cited by audience members. Every participant stated that there were characters they would consider to be feminist in one or

both episodes. One female viewer who is a longtime fan of the show and has seen every episode would not consider herself to be a feminist, yet she connects to Knope's narrative and considers Knope to be inspiring in her empowerment of females. This viewer stated that she reads the show to be a feminist text because of the characters within it: "I think of the show as overtly feminist based on how often it is talked about in the show and how often Leslie actually openly stated that she is a feminist, or references feminism directly."

In addition to pointing to Leslie's character as a driver of the feminist ideals within the show, this viewer also stated that the majority of the characters in the show are openly in support of feminism, and those that are not are portrayed in a negative light. She pointed to April, a coworker of Leslie who is throughout the series presented as a character who does not take things seriously or truly care about many things. The female viewer stated that, while April is not serious about a lot, she is always serious about feminism. As an example from the narrative, she pointed to April's work alongside Leslie to improve women's presence in government in "Women in Garbage."

All three male participants also pointed to the characters as the elements of the narrative that they considered to reflect feminist ideals. One male who defined feminism to be "the belief or movement focused on eliminating any gender gap, whether it be social, political, or financial," stated that both episodes reflected what he would consider to be a feminist movement. In "Women in Garbage," he stated Leslie started the movement in Pawnee, and that April and city manager Chris were driving supporters of this movement. In "Article Two" he stated that "Ted," who pointed out the sexist laws, and Leslie were the driving force behind the feminist elements of the narrative, because they highlighted inequality of the laws in Pawnee's government. Both

other male participants said Leslie's character was an important element of the feminist narrative they decoded within *Parks and Recreation*.

The characters were not the only element of the narrative which participants found to be feminist. The subject of the plots within "Women and Garbage" and "Article Two" stood out as feminist as well. Participants pointed towards the nature of the problems within these episodes as feminist. First, that equality in government was the prevailing plotline in "Women in Garbage." Second, that equality of policy was a driving force within the plot of "Article Two." One participant even pointed to the humor within the episodes as an element of the narrative that she would consider to be feminist. This female participant pointed to a scene within the opening of "Article Two." The scene featured Ted acting according to an outdated law in Pawnee which stated that any man may crack an egg over the head of a female who raises her voice at him. This participant called the scene a "humorous tidbit" that helped put outdated laws into perspective, drawing attention to gender inequality in laws.

This participant's example of her reading of feminism within the text is reflective of the audience's views on how humor intersects with the meaning of the text. In addition to reading *Parks and Recreation* as feminist, audience members felt that the humor within the show reinforced the feminist ideals reflected within the text. Nine of the eleven participants stated that the humor within the show reinforced the feminist ideals. One participant, however, stated that the humor reinforced feminism within "Women in Garbage," but undermined it in "Article Two." Another participant stated on the survey that the jokes from Leslie's character reinforced feminism, while statements from the councilmen and April undermined the feminist ideals this audience member read in the text. However, during the discussion portion of the study, this participant stated that while April and the councilmen's jokes may have undermined feminism

on the surface, their purpose was to draw attention to the silliness of sexism, highlighting sexist jokes and actions as stupid.

The audience members that viewed humor as reinforcement of the feminist ideals in *Parks and Recreation* cited two reasons for their belief. The first reason was prevalent on all of their surveys and stated that the comedic elements of the text were meant to exaggerate sexism in a way that made it laughable, but brought these issues to the forefront. One audience member wrote: “I think (the humor) reinforced it, because the humor exaggerated sexism to the point where it seems ridiculous- until you realize that many of those frustrating things still happen today.” This point was reiterated by several participants in the discussion portion of the study. One female participant stated that the humor encouraged her to laugh, but also to be outraged by the sexist comments made by some characters who opposed Leslie. “I wasn’t quite laughing at some points, but was scoffing because the portrayals are so true.” According to this female participant, some of the jokes reminded her of sexism many women in society face and caused her to connect with the feminist ideals within the show.

In addition to making sexism a laughing matter, participants also stated that the humor in the show allows viewers to connect with the cause of gender equality in a “non-threatening” way. A female participant who was familiar with *Parks and Recreation* before participating in this study stated that bringing issues such as gender equality up in the framework of comedy allows feminism to be received in a more comfortable and positive light. A member of the first focus group said “comedy allows us to get to the heart of the issue while still being able to relate.”

The feminist meanings decoded by audience members did not only serve as a plot point which they enjoyed or an element of comedy within the show. Many participants stated that the

push for gender equality within *Parks and Recreation* inspired them to think more about gender equality or take action to promote equality. Seven out of the eleven participants stated that the feminist ideals they saw reflected within the show either inspired them to take action for gender equality or reinforced their preexisting commitment to take action. Respondents who were more familiar with the show were more likely to report that they were inspired to take action. Those that did report an inspiration cited two reasons for doing so: positive regard for Leslie Knope's character or a connection to the issues presented in the show.

A female member of the first focus group who was very familiar with the show before participating, cited both reasons for her inspiration to stand up for gender equality. In connecting to the issues presented in the show, she stated "I'm the president of a group on campus, and I went on a trip with said group over spring break. One of my group members actually made comments about how women and minorities had no right in government positions, and they are the reason white men are suffering." She continued by sharing that Leslie's character inspires her to be confident as a female leader and to fight for equality.

One male participant who originally stated on his survey that the show did not encourage him to take action in terms of gender equality restated his answer in a different way during the focus group discussion. The participant originally said that the show did not encourage change because he felt he was already in the habit of standing up against discrimination. However, when engaging in conversation about the show's influence on action against gender-based discrimination, he stated: "Watching this show has not encouraged me to go to a women's march or anything, but I think it has helped prime me to realize and think about gender equality."

The three main findings of the audience reception studies were consistent with the messages that the textual analysis determined were encoded in *Parks and Recreation*.

Participants of this study determined *Parks and Recreation* to be a feminist text which uses humor to reinforce the feminist ideals encoded within the text. This is consistent with the textual analysis, meaning the majority of participants decoded *Parks and Recreation* from the dominant reading of the text. Furthermore, audience members shared that the text encourages them to stand up for gender equality and get involved in the movement that is at the forefront of the show. This audience response has interesting implications in terms of media's effect on human's understanding of the world around them, and the way they interact with the world. *Parks and Recreation* does not only impact human understanding, but has the ability to impact human action and interaction and promote social change for gender equality.

Conclusion and Further Studies

In comparing the messages that the textual analysis of this study found to be encoded within *Parks and Recreation* to the messages decoded by the audiences, several conclusions can be drawn about the meaning and effects of the show. Both the messages encoded within the text and those decoded by audiences are ones of support for institutional change in terms of gender equality. These messages are encoded within *Parks and Recreation* through the narrative pattern of Leslie solving gender-related issues in government, Leslie's character supporting feminism throughout the series, and the use of humor to highlight sexism as ridiculous. These elements of the narrative are consistent with the meanings drawn from audiences. From this, a conclusion can be drawn that humor can indeed impact audiences, and that the humor within *Parks and Recreation* is successful in communicating an attitude of social change for gender equality. Furthermore, it seems that these meanings had an impact on audiences in terms of change in their mindsets, actions, or intended actions. Audience members not only decoded messages of support

for gender equality, but stated that these messages inspired them to become involved with the movement. It is here that there is opportunity for further study.

Participants of this study stated that *Parks and Recreation* encouraged and inspired them to fight for gender equality mostly on a personal level. No participants joined a gender equality commission or involved themselves in local politics as a result, but many who were fans of the show stated that it inspired them to make lifestyle changes. Some female participants ran for a leadership position as a result, or reported more confidence in the leadership positions that they already held. Male participants reported feeling more inspired to stand up against inequality by calling out the sexism they witness in their day-to-day lives. These responses reflect what Dow (1996) considers to be lifestyle feminism. The responses of individual lifestyle changes are interesting when compared to the policy and social change reflected within the narrative of *Parks and Recreation*. It seems that the show encourages a cultural change, yet elicits change on an individual rather than public level. This study could be continued, however, by investigating the extent to which this inspiration affects viewers.

A continued study could also improve upon few limitations of this study. For instance, this study was limited to participants who were college students at a liberal arts institution and may have shared similar viewpoints on gender equality. However, if the study were adapted to include multiple generations of participants, with more diverse views on gender equality, these audiences may read the episodes differently. In the same regard, if the study were conducted by adult fans of the show with political careers, their action and intended actions could vary from that of college students. In this case, the participants may, like Leslie, take action regarding institutional change for gender equality, because this is an action readily available to them.

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Appendix A

Parks and Recreation Survey

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary. Please take the time to reflect on the two episodes of *Parks and Recreation* that you just viewed. Answer the questions based on your opinions and perceptions of the show as reflected within each episode.

1. Please indicate your gender: M F Other Prefer not to identify
If other, describe:
2. Before participating in this study, how familiar were you with *Parks and Recreation*?
3. While viewing “Women in Garbage,” which parts of the narrative or episode did you most enjoy?
4. Which parts of the narrative or episode caused you to laugh most? Why?
5. While viewing “Article Two,” which parts of the narrative or episode did you most enjoy?

6. Which parts of the narrative or episode caused you to laugh most? Why?
7. How do you define feminism? Write *your* definition of feminism below::
8. Were there elements of the narrative in “Women in Garbage” that you would consider to be feminist?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. If yes, which elements do you consider to be feminist?
9. Were there characters within “Women in Garbage” that you would consider to be feminist characters?

- a. Why or why not?
 - b. If yes, what qualities did they display throughout the narrative that define them as feminist?
10. Were there elements of the narrative in “Article Two” that you would consider to be feminist?
- a. Why or why not?
 - b. If yes, which elements do you consider to be feminist?
11. Were there characters within “Article Two” that you would consider to be feminist?

- a. If yes, what qualities did they display throughout the narrative that define them as feminist?
12. If you found one or more of these episodes to display a feminist narrative, did you think that the humor in the episode reinforced or undermined said feminist narrative?
13. If you found one or more of these episodes to display a feminist narrative, did you connect to this narrative?
14. If you found one or more of the episodes to display a feminist narrative, did it lead you to want to take action for gender equality?

15. Do you have any other comments or observations about elements of gender or feminism within these episodes?