

## Feeling Better: Representing abortion in 'feminist' television

Cordelia Freeman<sup>\*a</sup>

*Department of Geography, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK<sup>a</sup>*

\*Corresponding Author: Cordelia Freeman Email: [c.freeman@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:c.freeman@exeter.ac.uk)

### Abstract

Abortion is a common and safe gynaecological procedure. Yet in film and television it is disproportionately represented as risky, violent, requiring hospitalisation, and affecting young, white, wealthy women. This reinforces stigma, fear and misunderstanding surrounding the procedure. While the majority of television storylines still inaccurately portray abortion, a small minority are directly showing abortion and presenting it as a positive decision. This paper analyses four such storylines in the television shows *Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW*, and *Euphoria*, as well as media discourse around these plotlines, to understand how contemporary, 'feminist' television shows are representing abortion. The paper argues that contemporary television is increasingly representing abortion in an empathetic way that upholds women's choice to access abortion, but that these portrayals can be read as post-feminist. Individual choice and empowerment are prioritised in these shows at the expense of showing the complex and unequal power structures that affect how women make reproductive choices. 'Feminist' television still prioritises the abortion storylines of young, white women who face no obstacles to abortion access and so the realities of abortion are still not fully represented on screen.

**Keywords:** abortion, reproductive health, representation, television, stigma

## Introduction

Abortion is common and it is safe. In the USA and England and Wales respectively, 18% and 24% of pregnancies end in abortion (Jones, Witwer and Jerman 2019; ONS 2020). Around 56 million abortions take place every year and the mortality rate of safe abortions is extremely low at 0.3–0.5 per 100,000 abortions (Fathalla 2020). Yet, in the public domain, abortions are disproportionately represented as risky and shameful. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in abortion storylines on mainstream television (Herold and Sisson 2020). In this paper, I take four such television programmes (*Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW* and *Euphoria*) and explore how they represent abortion on screen, how these representations are received by the media, and to what extent the abortion storylines can be understood as ‘feminist’.

The labelling of television as feminist is not new. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was lauded as the first work of ‘feminist television’ in the anglophone world for its direct dealing with issues of second-wave feminism and depiction of female relationships (Dow 2005). This was followed by shows such as *One Day at a Time* and *Maude* which laid the ground for women-centred shows such as *Sex and The City* and *Ally McBeal* (Dow 2005). Programmes such as *Girls* then addressed sexuality and sexual pleasure in more nuanced ways, but such shows have been critiqued by scholars for being ‘post-feminist’ for their focus on women’s issues without any disruption of the patriarchy (Nash and Grant 2015).

The term ‘post-feminism’ emerged in the 1990s to describe the rejection of feminism based on the belief that women had achieved equality. Popular culture has been a key site for the dissemination of post-feminism where neoliberal ideals can be celebrated (McRobbie 2007), and in post-feminist shows, individualism, choice and empowerment are emphasised while structural issues are ignored or negated (Gill 2017). *Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW* and *Euphoria* have all been celebrated as ‘feminist’ and ‘authentic’ representations of abortion across a variety of media outlets (Tannenbaum 2017; Seline 2019; Bentley 2019; Zach B. 2019) and this paper will critically analyse these descriptors in the light of post-feminism.

Abortion stigma has been defined ‘as a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to ideals of womanhood’ (Kumar, Hessini and Mitchell 2009, 628). One strategy to reduce abortion stigma is the refusal to frame abortion negatively (Thomsen 2013), so in this paper I examine what this refusal (or attempted refusal) to show abortion negatively looks like. I argue that the four examples analysed here represent abortion in an empathetic way that upholds women’s choice to access abortion services,<sup>1</sup> but that they still do not accurately reflect who accesses abortions, how abortions are administered, and that they disregard structural barriers to abortion access in favour of post-feminist narratives of choice.

### ***The four television programmes***

*Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW*, and *Euphoria* were selected for the following criteria: the shows aired in recent years, an abortion takes place on screen, the abortion is treated as ‘normal’, and the show is a narrative drama that has been described as ‘feminist’.

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<sup>1</sup> While it is not only women who get pregnant and seek abortions, the abortion storylines analysed here all centre around cisgender women, and so the term ‘women’ is used with the recognition that this research cannot account for trans and non-binary experiences.

*Sex Education* is a British comedy-drama that first streamed on Netflix in 2019 with its second series airing in 2020. It centres on a teenage boy, Otis (Asa Butterfield), the son of a sex therapist who teams up with his classmate Maeve (Emma Mackey) to sell sex advice to other students at his school. In the first season, Maeve, a smart but socially outcast 'bad-girl', discovers she is pregnant and in episode three obtains an abortion.

*Shrill* is an American comedy on Hulu that premiered in 2019 with its second series running in 2020 and is based on the memoir *Shrill* by Lindy West. It is a story about Annie (Aidy Bryant), a twenty-something journalist dealing with love, family issues and self-esteem in a society that rebuffs her fat positivity. In the first episode, Annie becomes pregnant with Ryan (Luka Jones), her immature regular hook-up, and decides to get an abortion.

*GLOW* is an American Netflix production that has had three series, airing in 2017, 2018, and 2019. It is a fictional comedy-drama based on the real-life professional women's wrestling series from the 1980s, *Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling*. The main character is Ruth (Alison Brie), a struggling actress who joins GLOW and becomes the wrestler Zoya the Destroya. In series one, Ruth discovers she is pregnant from an affair with her best friend's husband and in the eighth episode gets an abortion.

*Euphoria* is an American drama that premiered in 2019 on HBO and follows the struggles and exploits of teenagers as they deal with addiction, sex, and growing up. It is based on an Israeli television series from 2012 but includes different characters and storylines. One of the teenage characters Cassie (Sydney Sweeney) becomes pregnant with her boyfriend and ends the pregnancy through abortion in episode eight.

All four characters who get an abortion are white despite other contemporary television programmes showing women of colour having abortions, including *Scandal*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Dear White People*, and *Jane the Virgin*. However, these did not meet the criteria to be included for analysis. *Scandal* did not treat the abortion storyline with 'normalcy' (Stewart 2017) as the viewers did not know about the character's pregnancy until the abortion scene which gave it a narrative shock factor, *Grey's Anatomy* is a medical drama rather than a narrative drama (and thereby covers healthcare such as abortion differently from other dramas), and in *Dear White People* and *Jane the Virgin* the abortion itself takes place off-screen. The four selected are therefore not representative of all television but this paper is responding to calls to directly study how positive and feminist portrayals of abortion are represented and how they are received in the media (Press and Cole 2001; Sisson 2019).

## **Abortion on Screen**

Television studies as an academic discipline interrogates what is represented on screen, how this is received by audiences, and why this matters societally (Bignell 2012). What is watched on screen does not stay neatly bounded in its own sphere, instead, television actively shapes viewers opinions and understandings of a variety of issues and cannot be neatly separated from the rest of viewers lives (Grindstaff and Turow 2006). What gets represented, and how, is shaped by the systems in which cultural products are produced (Peterson and Anand 2004), but television is also a site where struggles over meaning occur (Fiske 1987). It is in this context that how abortion is represented on television is important.

Public discourse continues to stigmatise abortion (Purcell 2015) with wider repercussions for society (Cockrill 2014). Abortion storylines reflect the cultural and political arguments around abortion in the context in which they were created, but they also *shape* understandings of abortion (Condit 1990). As research has shown, watching fictional abortion

storylines impacts people's opinions and beliefs about the procedure (Sisson and Kimport 2016a). Thus, it follows that accurate, empathetic and nuanced representations of abortion may help to educate viewers about the realities of abortion. The misrepresentation of abortion has centred on two themes.

Firstly, the way abortions are accessed, and the consequences of those abortions, are misrepresented. Abortions on screen are disproportionately surgical (Herold and Sisson 2019) even though medical abortions (the taking of the medications mifepristone and misoprostol) make up the majority of first trimester abortions in the UK and a significant minority in the USA. Sisson and Kimport (2014) studied 310 plotlines between 1916 and 2013 and found that 13.9% of these ended in the death of the pregnant woman who considered an abortion. This is an absurdly inflated prevalence when safely performed abortions statistically have a mortality rate of zero (Fathalla 2020). In addition, when complications occur in fictional portrayals, they tend to be major, even though this is incredibly rare and complications are mostly minor in real life (Sisson and Rowland 2017).

Secondly, the demographics of who accesses abortions is misrepresented. Sisson and Kimport (2016a) studied US television storylines about abortion and found that characters that terminate their pregnancies are disproportionately white, young, wealthy and not already parents. This is inaccurate and programmes are vastly underrepresenting particular populations such as women of colour and parents. An additional problem is that fictional storylines rarely show the barriers that women face to procure an abortion, and when they are shown, they are surmountable (Sisson and Kimport 2017; Herold and Sisson 2020). Barriers to abortion disproportionately affect certain demographics, notably poor women, women of colour and women in rural areas, but this is absent in representations of abortion in TV and film (Wayne 2016).

This raises the question of why such misrepresentation is an issue and why accuracy is important. Inaccurate tropes reinforce the assumption that abortion is violent and dangerous and the underrepresentation of particular groups could fuel stigma within these groups (Sisson and Kimport 2014; Sisson and Kimport 2016a). Given the stigmatisation of abortion, popular culture may be the primary means that many people receive information about the procedure. Accurate popular culture representations of abortions (in terms of how an abortion is accessed, what will happen during the procedure, what will happen after, and who accesses abortions) may help to provide safer information to those who only access information about abortion through popular culture. Misinformation about abortion can exaggerate the risks of abortion, stigmatise women, and intimidate them (Bryant and Levi 2012), and so popular culture can play a role in disseminating more accurate information in order to combat dangerous myths surrounding abortion.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of programmes showing abortions (Herold and Sisson 2020). The contribution of this study is to focus specifically on those few storylines, or 'counter narratives' (Baird and Millar 2019), that attempt to reject the shame and stigma of the majority of representations, and even celebrate abortion. In particular, comedies, which comprise three of the four programmes here, have traditionally not shown abortion storylines but are increasingly doing so (Sisson 2019). This paper therefore analyses how contemporary, feminist television programmes are representing abortion.

## Methodology

This study is an in-depth analysis of how abortion is represented in four contemporary television programmes. In order to explore how they do this and how the representations are received, the study focuses on narrative analysis (within the television shows themselves) and media analysis (of how online and print media discussed these television shows). This begins from the understanding that television narratives help to shape the nature of reality (Fiske and Hartley 1978) and that popular culture messaging about abortion can shape public understanding of abortion (Condit 1990).

Narrative analysis was chosen to provide in-depth, qualitative analysis of how abortion is represented. This involved an initial watch of the selected programmes to draw up a set of codes within four broad sub-sections: narrative, technical, audio and representational. Special attention was given to the narrative aspects as these showed the abortion story arc and character development (Porter et al. 2002). This was key to highlight how abortion acted as a 'kernel scene', a moment in the story that drives the narrative in a particular direction (Kozloff 1992). Technical, audio and representational codes were used to reinforce this with specific abortion-related codes such as 'camera shots during the procedure', the 'language used to describe the procedure by medical staff', and the 'language used to describe emotions after the procedure'. Given the small sample size (n=4), the goal was to provide in-depth, qualitative analysis of how abortion was being portrayed.

Like television, news and commentary shape societal understandings of issues such as abortion (Macleod and Feltham-King 2012; Purcell, Hilton and McDaid 2014). The analysis of the programmes themselves was therefore supplemented by analysis of how online and print media discussed these portrayals of abortion. These specific tools of mass communication were chosen for being easily searchable and for covering a range of publications. The articles were chosen by selecting the first ten articles that directly addressed the topic of abortion when '[series name] abortion' was searched in Google. I chose this search function to encompass smaller media publications as well as mainstream newspapers, and it meant that the articles were selected for specifically writing about abortion in the shows rather than allotted by type of news media. The articles encompassed traditional news media (*The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*), feminist publications (*Bitch*, *Femestella*), entertainment media (*Hollywood Reporter*, *ET Online*) and conservative outlets (*MRC Culture*, *The Federalist*).

With a relatively small sample size (n=40), these articles are intended to give a sense of critical reception rather than to provide a quantitative analysis. Not all of the programmes had many more than ten articles directly on this topic and so choosing ten meant there was consistency across the four programmes. Once selected, the articles were coded using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an approach that analyses how language is used by individuals and institutions, and how this language (re)produces social relations (Richardson 2006). Codes were drawn up across categories regarding how abortion was being written about with a focus on the function of language used.

This analysis highlighted three themes that are used to structure the rest of the paper: the idea of individual 'choice' in the characters deciding to have an abortion, how the procedure itself is represented, and how the abortion marks a narrative shift for the characters and transforms their life in some way.

## Deciding to Have the Abortion: The Narrative of Choice

The four characters who have abortions in *Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW*, and *Euphoria* experience different journeys to their decision. For Ruth in *GLOW*, the decision is an easy one, described by one journalist as ‘matter-of-fact and non-emotional’ (Strause 2017). She makes the decision internally, without discussing it with her friends or colleagues and books the appointment before asking her boss to drive her there. Maeve in *Sex Education* goes through a similar process to Ruth as she makes the decision by herself, only asking her friend Otis to collect her afterwards.

Meanwhile, Annie in *Shrill*, and Cassie in *Euphoria*, both discuss the abortion with others, their best friend and boyfriend, respectively, and both consider motherhood. Annie contemplates having a baby as she does not know if the opportunity would arise again but decides against it with a clarity that is described as ‘matter-of-fact’, ‘authentic’ (Butler 2019), and ‘refreshing’ (Sheffer 2019). In *Euphoria*, Cassie discusses keeping the baby with her boyfriend and when he swiftly rejects the idea, she tells him ‘I’m not saying I want to have a baby, I just wanted to dream about it for a minute’. Cassie appears to be more conflicted about the decision than the other three characters. This was an addition suggested by Sydney Sweeney, who plays Cassie, to show the complex emotions of partly wanting to have the baby despite knowing that it is not the ‘right’ choice for her (Lambe 2019). Chaney (2019) described this scene as ‘a powerful testament to the war Cassie wages, internally and externally, over control of her physical self’. While there are factors linked to short-term negative post-abortion emotions, longitudinal research found that an ‘overwhelming majority of women felt that the abortion was the right decision for them at all times’ (Rocca et al. 2020, 8). Scholars of abortion stigma have therefore argued that media representations that focus on narratives of abortion as a difficult decision, a minority experience, can fuel abortion stigma (Baird and Millar 2019).

The other three storylines refute the dominant discourse that abortion is a difficult decision (Millar 2017). Ruth, Maeve and Annie do not arrive at their decision after ‘agonising and soul searching’ and they are not helpless and distressed victims (Millar 2017, 13). The majority of the media articles analysed praised this approach. The journalists commended *GLOW*, *Sex Education*, and *Shrill* for presenting abortion as a decision that can be arrived at fairly easily, without it being a painful one (McNamara 2019; Maple 2019; Jao 2017).

However, all four representations reduce the issue of abortion to one of women’s choice. When abortion is shown as a purely individual decision it can create the impression that the decision takes place in a vacuum (Millar 2017). From this perspective, these examples can be seen as forms of post-feminism, where women’s individual choice and empowerment are emphasised (Ferreday and Harris 2017). Banet-Weiser (2007) argues that the post-feminist focus on the individual is at the expense of a focus on coalition politics or structural change, and here, the individualisation of abortion as a personal choice abstracts it from being a political, structural issue.

As in television abortion storylines more generally (Sisson and Kimport 2017), the four characters face no barriers to abortion access even though in reality, logistical issues such as childcare, accommodation, transport costs and taking time off work prohibit access to abortion services for a great number of women (Doran and Nancarrow 2015). These barriers disproportionately impact lower-income women and although only Maeve in *Sex Education* is explicitly portrayed as working class, the other three characters are all struggling financially. Despite this, the cost of the procedure, if there is one, does not appear in any of the storylines.

The lack of barriers to access in these four representations gives the impression that an abortion is an option if you just choose it, that reproductive rights are 'won' in the UK and USA and, in a trope of post-feminism, that feminist struggles are no longer needed (McRobbie 2007). This disregards the experiences of women who would like to have an abortion but cannot access one.

Moreover, abortion can only be a true 'choice' if parenting is an accessible and acceptable option for women, economically and socially (Millar 2017), but the external factors that make parenting unattractive or unacceptable for these characters are not dealt with in the shows. In *Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW*, and *Euphoria*, 'choice' is portrayed as individual rather than structural, furthering the post-feminist, liberal ideology that frames reproductive care as an individual choice.

## The Procedure

The four television programmes, *GLOW*, *Sex Education*, *Euphoria*, and *Shrill*, were purposefully chosen for showing a character go through the abortion on screen. This is a recent development in television portrayals as the majority of television abortions take place off-screen (Herold and Sisson 2019). The four characters all have surgical abortions in medical facilities which are portrayed as calm, clean spaces where the women are treated professionally and promptly by the clinic staff. So promptly in fact, that Ruth's boss Sam (Marc Maron), who accompanies her to the clinic in *GLOW*, exclaims 'fuck, that was quick', when Ruth is called in to the room for the abortion. In *GLOW*, *Sex Education*, and *Shrill* we see the waiting areas which are all peaceful and bright. *Sex Education* was praised by one nurse practitioner interviewed by *Teen Vogue* for its 'true to life' portrayal of the abortion scene as 'the staff was very professional, the clinic space was clean and bright, and Maeve was well cared for... That truly is what independent abortion clinics are like' (McNamara 2019).

In all of the programmes the women are shown having surgical abortions on hospital beds, often with their feet in stirrups. They are walked through the procedure by medical staff, told to expect 'a little pinch' (*Euphoria*), 'a little pressure' (*GLOW*), some 'light cramping' (*Shrill*) and a 'sharp scratch' as a canula is inserted in Maeve's hand (*Sex Education*). These explanations of what to expect are reassuring of the professionalism and knowledge of the abortion practitioners but they also reinforce the idea that abortions are invasive and require hospitalisation (Herold and Sisson 2019). According to one nurse, the use of general anaesthetic for Maeve's abortion in *Sex Education* is improbable and 'could create unnecessary anxiety for those seeking abortion care' (McNamara 2019). When in reality medical abortions are common, the predominance of surgical abortions in these storylines, especially with all of the pregnancies appearing to be under twelve weeks, is disproportionate. While surgical abortions form an important part of abortion healthcare, their inflated presence on screen and the prominence of anaesthetic can give the impression that abortions are always serious and invasive medical procedures.

A clear similarity between the four representations of the procedures is the close camera work on the women's faces as the abortion takes place. We see their discomfort (*Euphoria*, *GLOW*), their calmness (*Shrill*) or their nerves (*Sex Education*). This specific camera shot serves to show the minutiae of expressions and draws us into the complex emotional

state of the characters (Balázs and Mast 2003). This is a common shot in contemporary abortion portrayals, and it shifts the focus from the medical procedure to the emotion and experience of the character (Herold and Sisson 2019). The depth of emotion and nuance that this shot can portray is important here because women are expected to feel emotions around their abortion, but these are limited to negative emotions including sadness, grief, and remorse (Millar 2017). This camera technique individualises the procedure and again feeds into the post-feminist narrative of abortion being an individual choice rather than a structural issue.

One clear development in how the abortion procedure itself is represented on screen is the increased input of advisors (Herold and Sisson 2020). *Sex Education* employed a clinical expert (Romero 2019), *GLOW* worked with the Planned Parenthood Federation of America to make the storyline seem 'honest, 'relatable' and 'normal' (Strause 2017), and the producers of *Shrill* collaborated with Planned Parenthood on the script and even filmed it inside a Planned Parenthood clinic (Stern 2019). The use of advisors in three of the four programmes is perhaps one element in making the storylines feel 'compassionate' (*Sex Education*, King 2020), 'incredibly realistic and honest' (*Shrill*, McLain 2019) and 'wonderfully complex' (*GLOW*, O'Keefe 2017). And it is perhaps the *lack* of advisors on *Euphoria* that makes that particular abortion storyline feel dated and with the potential for inducing stigma.

Representations of abortion procedures can be educational opportunities. One journalist described the *Sex Education* portrayal as educational but without lecturing or preaching to the audience (Rao 2020), and *Shrill* was described by another journalist as informative since Annie falls pregnant because she had taken the morning after pill but only found out too late that it isn't effective for women over a certain weight (Griffith 2020). It was therefore acclaimed 'for bringing to light little-known facts about contraceptives and the abortion procedure itself' (Griffith 2020). Moreover, none of the characters suffer from any physical adverse effects to the abortion procedure. This is realistic as adverse effects are uncommon. As Herold and Sisson (2019) note, misinformation about abortion may create unnecessary and unfounded fear and anxiety for those considering an abortion, and so these storylines could serve to correct such misinformation.

However, while the four storylines were overwhelmingly hailed as 'authentic' and 'realistic' portrayals of abortion in the majority of the articles analysed, there are disconnects between these representations of abortions and the reality of abortions. The procedures portrayed are all legal, surgical, and occur in a medical setting. As with most abortion storylines (Sisson and Kimport 2016a), the four women are either teenagers or in their twenties, are white, non-parents and are based in the UK or the USA. The abortions are therefore not representative of abortions on a global scale, but nor are they even representative of how young, white, middle class women access and experience abortions in the USA and UK. If these depictions were to be demographically accurate then we would expect to see at least one character who is a woman of colour, an older woman, and/or a parent.

The overrepresentation of white women here is particularly important as it can fuel the misconceptions that people of colour are not procuring abortions and that they do not face racialised barriers to abortion care (Herold and Sisson 2020). For (Springer 2007, 251), post-feminism has a racial agenda, one that makes 'racial difference, like feminism itself, merely another commodity for consumption'. Therefore, racial diversity must not be included for racial diversity's sake (Banet-Weiser 2007), instead specificity is required to highlight the realities of racialised inequities in abortion access. The four programmes perpetuate the



stereotype that those who seek abortion are young, white, childless and not in a committed relationship, ignoring the many older, co-habiting/married women of colour already with children who also seek abortions. Representations of the abortion procedure in contemporary television are showing greater detail and depth of emotion but increased diversity of abortion types and of demographics could continue to improve public understandings of the procedure and help tackle abortion stigma.

### **The Post-Abortion Transformation**

After the procedure, the four characters return to their lives. Ruth, in *GLOW*, gets back to work without telling her co-wrestlers, Annie, in *Shrill*, relaxes contently at home with her roommate, Maeve, in *Sex Education*, is collected by her friend Otis who gives her flowers and walks her home, and Cassie, in *Euphoria*, attends a school dance. They also describe themselves as feeling 'fine' (*Sex Education*) and 'better' (*Euphoria*, *Shrill*). Millar (2017) writes that women are expected to mourn the aborted embryo or foetus, an emotion she terms 'foetocentric grief', but these four programmes disrupt that expectation. The language used by the characters and the scenes we see them in suggest that they believe their choice to have the abortion was the right one for them.

In the four programmes, the abortion marks a moment of transformation for the character involved in a longer-term way too. Television storylines require an arc, they need character development, and in these four examples, the abortion provides an impetus for change and development. This development varies between the characters. In *Shrill*, *Euphoria*, and *GLOW*, it marks a move towards independence. In *Shrill*, Annie takes 'back some aspect of ownership over her fate and her body that she hasn't felt in a long time' (Maple 2019) with the 'ultimate act of self-care' (Lancaster 2020) where the character describes herself as feeling 'very fucking powerful right now'. One journalist views the abortion in *Euphoria* as a moment where Cassie 'pointedly decided to nurture her sense of independence', particularly as we have learnt more about her childhood of being abandoned by men in her life (Saunders 2019). These examples differ from Maeve in *Sex Education*, for whom the abortion leads to a moment of vulnerability. In asking her newfound friend and sex-clinic co-worker Otis to pick her up from the abortion clinic (even though he doesn't realise he is doing so), she realises she does have someone in her life who cares for her. Maeve was abandoned by her family so the moment of asking Otis to collect her is her 'dealing with letting people in' (Forney 2020).

Cassie, in *Euphoria*, and Maeve, in *Sex Education*, are both still in high school but for Annie in *Shrill*, and Ruth in *GLOW*, the abortion decision affects their career choices. Strause (2017) calls Ruth's development in season one 'phoenix-like' as '[s]he officially rises from the ashes'. This is Ruth's transformation into being a wrestler as they film their TV pilot and Ruth describes herself at the abortion clinic as a wrestler. For O'Keefe (2017) the abortion is 'a defining moment for the character', Ruth began the series as an out of work actress relying on her parents for money and sleeping with her best friend's husband. By the end, she is a wrestler with plans for independence and success. Annie's abortion, meanwhile, is also a 'turning point' (Butler 2019), and 'epiphany' (McLain 2019) and she refuses to be treated

badly by her boss. These narratives are consistent with post-feminism in popular culture where women are expected to be in control of their independent, fulfilling careers (McRobbie 2007).

Receiving support from people close to them is shown as an important part of their character development. In all four of the programmes, the characters getting an abortion receive some kind of emotional support. In *Sex Education* and *GLOW*, the women are both supported by male friends/co-workers. Cassie in *Euphoria* received little support from her boyfriend and so is supported by her mother and sister while in *Shrill*, Annie does not tell the man she is sleeping with until after the procedure and instead is accompanied by her best friend. Therefore, in all four shows it is primarily non-romantic support that we witness, and this is likely key to showing what a positive abortion experience looks like. It is somewhat unfortunate that none of these portrayals show these women already happy and in control of their lives, but these depictions are important for showing abortion as having a positive impact on women's lives.

These positive representations of the benefits that can come with an abortion are important to see on mainstream television. Despite the liberalisation of abortion across much of the West, abortion continues to be framed as undesirable, morally suspect, and as a 'necessary evil' (Millar 2017). The primary emotion that women feel after an abortion is relief (Rocca et al. 2020), but the expectation that women should publicly express sorrow or doubts prevails (Løkeland 2004). Therefore, when Annie in *Shrill* describes herself feeling 'really, really good' in what Maple (2019) calls 'an especially daring twist to put on mainstream television' and reiterates in season two that 'it's good actually, like, it was the right thing you know? And I really, I feel good about it', she is challenging expectations of how women should express their post-abortion emotions. As Millar (2017), notes, it is often assumed that all women experience abortion uniformly, but these 'counter-narratives' are improving the diversity of emotions expressed about abortion in the public sphere.

Dramatic events are commonly used in television to drive the narrative or provoke some sort of change (Kozloff 1992). This raises the question of why these four programmes all chose an abortion as this event. One answer to this question may be that as contemporary television shows that largely focus on women, the abortion storyline signals a certain type of feminism. Popular culture is a crucial site where the boundaries of feminism are drawn and contested (Ferreday and Harris 2017), and I argue that the inclusion of an abortion storyline can stand in as a proxy for feminism. For McRobbie (2007, 27), popular culture is effective at 'appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to "feminism"', so by representing abortion as a viable and even positive option for women, as these four programmes do, the shows are signalling that they believe in a woman's right to an abortion, a right that is associated with liberal, often predominantly white, feminism. The kind of feminism we see on mainstream television is an 'appropriate' feminism that suits television's commercial needs (Dow 2005), resulting in limits on how radical the feminist politics shown on television are likely to be.

It is in this more conventional understanding of feminist politics that we can understand the representation of abortion in the four programmes. A woman's right to an abortion and the fact that it can improve her life is upheld, but the focus on individual choice can be understood as post-feminist. Post-feminist culture places a much stronger emphasis on happiness over other emotions (Gill 2017), and the abortion storylines serve to empower the four characters and allow them to take control of their narrative. This is post-feminist in

the sense that they all 'freely' make their life 'choices' (McRobbie 2009), but the power structures behind these decisions are absent.

## Conclusion

*Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *GLOW* and *Euphoria* form part of the increase in abortion storylines on television that directly address abortion, show the procedure, and show the character as happy with their decision. Framing abortion as a positive event in a person's life, and as something that can be celebrated, can help to reduce abortion stigma in society more widely (Baird and Millar 2019, Thomsen 2013). 'Counter narratives' of abortion are under-researched (Baird and Millar 2019), but they have real potential to communicate new, more diverse stories about abortion (Sisson 2019). Advisors can play a key role in this and three representations analysed here (*Sex Education*, *Shrill*, and *GLOW*) all used experts to craft a more 'realistic' abortion storyline. While the four programmes studied are not representative of all television, they do show how television, even comedies, are able to tackle abortion in a direct and empathetic manner and this was largely positively received by the media in the articles analysed.

However, there are still aspects of abortion that we are not seeing: medical abortions are absent, certain groups are vastly underrepresented, and the challenges women can face, including cost, transport and getting time off work, are not adequately represented on television. Positive and nuanced representations of abortion help to shape understanding and opinion of the procedure (Sisson and Kimport 2016c), and so more accurately reflecting who accesses abortions and how can aid the reduction of stigma and inform viewers about the realities of abortion (Herold and Sisson 2020). Moreover, while the four representations of abortion have positive aspects, the decision to have an abortion and the impact this has on the characters' lives can be understood as post-feminist. The portrayals all frame the 'choice' to seek an abortion as highly individualised, as a decision to empower women particularly in terms of their career and independence, and as disparate from the complex and unequal power structures that affect how women make reproductive choices. The abortion storyline therefore becomes a way to signal feminist politics, but this is a narrow, bounded form of feminism.

I end by suggesting four future avenues for studying the representation of abortion. Firstly, people of colour are vastly underrepresented accessing abortions (Sisson and Kimport 2016a), and with the prevalence of white, liberal feminist abortions on television, greater research is required to diversify representations and to explore the intersections between race and post-feminism, when people of colour are represented (Joseph 2009). Secondly, queer, trans and non-binary pregnant people often experience specific barriers to abortion access (Calkin and Freeman 2019) but are rarely portrayed accessing abortions. Research could examine how their abortion experiences do get shown, in those rare instances. Thirdly, most television representations of abortion show abortions in medical spaces so analysis of medical abortions, including self-managed abortions, could explore how these abortions are portrayed. Fourthly and finally, analysis of representations of abortion have focused on mainstream North American and northern European film and television so a move beyond

'prime-time feminism' (Dow 1996), and beyond these particular geographies, could reveal more diverse portrayals of abortion.

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