

'Am I supposed to say how shocked I was?' Audience responses to *Mad Men*

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Abstract

This essay is the result of an audience research study of the US television series *Mad Men*. Based on the assumption that there is a postfeminist sensibility embedded within the show, the study uses data drawn from focus groups and email questionnaires with US, UK and Spanish viewers of *Mad Men*, to determine to what extent this sensibility is felt and shared – if at all – by different viewers. The essay concludes that the postfeminist sensibility might be an entrance gate to the show, but later engagement with the series differs, especially with regard to gender. Although the postfeminist spirit might have feminist consequences in female viewers' interpretations, male viewers tend to read the show in more unproblematic ways. On the other hand, national distinctions have turned out to be very slight.

Keywords

Audience, feminism, gender, *Mad Men*, past, postfeminism, television

Introduction

This audience research study of the TV series *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007) is a consequence of a postfeminist reading of the show that I myself produced 1 year ago, a reading that left me moderately unsatisfied. Interested as I was in the ambiguous ways in which *Mad Men* represented gender roles in a fictional New York advertising agency in the 1960s, I chose to look at this historical fiction as a postfeminist text. My first claim was that the postfeminist sensibility allowed a nostalgic view of those old times as well as a self-indulgent sentiment towards our current situation, which, compared to the unjust world

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of *Mad Men*, seemed a much better time to live in. At the same time, the series would tend to mourn the prefeminist world – its glamour, coolness and simplicity – and would try to lure the viewer using a nostalgic tone. This appealing contradiction could be understood under a ‘postfeminist climate’, a particular sensibility with which the viewers could engage, thus enjoying the show (Agirre, 2012).

Somewhat uncomfortable with my claims about how the audience could ‘feel the postfeminist sensibility’ or how the viewers ‘related to the postfeminist characters’, I decided to turn to the audience itself and so this reception study was born. The responses I have gathered from actual viewers of *Mad Men* in three different countries – United States, United Kingdom and Spain – have been later juxtaposed to my own analysis of the representation of the past and gender roles present in *Mad Men*.

I have approached the audience with the ‘postfeminist hypothesis’, the assumption that there is a postfeminist sensibility embedded within the show that should be shared, to some extent at least, by the audience. This hypothesis provides the necessary tools to inform the debate, but should be flexible enough to accommodate the results of the contrast between text, academic analysis and audience. An academic, textual reading of a fiction has been confronted with viewers’ accounts of that same fiction, without ignoring the always problematic nature of this challenge: as Moseley (2002) has pointed out, the intractability of the relationship between these two procedures ‘needs to be acknowledged. [I]n the process of conducting interviews and performing textual analyses one necessarily informs the other’ (p.219).

As a result, some of my previous claims were endorsed, but many others were defied. In the process, my wish has been to shed some light on how viewers deal with the representation of gender roles in the past and how these representations resonate in their present experience, as well as to test the relevance of the postfeminist sensibility that, I argued, permeates the series: to what extent is this sensibility perceived, felt and shared –if perceived, felt and shared – by viewers of different ages, genders and nationalities.

Transnational audiences confronting postfeminism

The scholarly interest on audience studies goes as far as the times of the World War I, but the rise of this kind of research is a direct consequence of the influence of cultural studies in communication, and its stress on the two-way relationship between the text and the viewer. This new concern leads to the abandon of *the spectator* as a textually constructed subject and puts the focus on *the audience* ‘as actual empirical, viewers belonging to distinct socio-historical contexts’ (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003: 128). When it comes to reception studies, ‘feminist researchers have been responsible for some of the most influential and pioneering work’ (Brooker and Jermyn, 2003: 213).

The study of romance fiction and its female readers carried out by Janice Radway (1987) and Ien Ang’s (1985) research into *Dallas* audiences are groundbreaking works in the field of feminist reception studies, incited by a concern about potential dissonances between feminist theory and real women’s experience of gender. In recent years, significant contributions include the study of viewers’ response to *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Rockler, 1999) – a combination of critical analysis of the teenage programme and interviews with female viewers – a survey on sex differences in pleasures among viewers of

Ally MacBeal (Cohen and Ribak, 2003) or the extensive study conducted by Acosta-Alzuru on a Venezuelan *telenovela*, research that interestingly enough combines a critical analysis of the show with interviews of three kinds: writers, actors and viewers (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003).

The term postfeminism has very recently entered the picture of reception studies. Proof of that is the study on lesbian viewers of *Ally McBeal* (McKenna, 2002) in which postfeminism is defined in connection with *lesbian chic*, and the research on young Australian female viewers of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* (Robinson, 2011), which, pertinently enough, not only addresses the postfeminist discourses embedded in those two fictions but also reveals the way in which popular representations of gender and sexuality parallel some of the postfeminist pressures and anxieties being experienced by young women today.

Postfeminism is a term in dispute from its birth, even though it has become 'one of the most important [notions] in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis' (Gill, 2007: 147). Defined initially as a symptom of the 'backlash', a mere attempt to undermine feminist gains (McRobbie, 2004: 255), in recent years it has also been considered an example of 'instrumentalized feminism' (McRobbie, 2009: 1) or as 'feminism incorporated into popular culture' (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 4). Postfeminism is neither a movement nor a theory: it is rather a tone, a mainstream media tendency made upon a number of inter-related themes that, together, form 'a sensibility' (Gill, 2007).

If postfeminism is a sensibility, how does this sensibility, this 'particular form of engagement' (Grossberg, 1992: 55), operate within the audience? How do the postfeminist themes resonate in viewers' memories and/or present lives? How do demographic circumstances – gender, age, nationality – influence this engagement?

There is a call for a multiple approach to the study of television, because 'comprehensive empirical studies are still the weakest aspect of communication research' (Acosta-Alzuru, 273). This requirement is particularly noticeable when dealing with such a contradictory and hybrid concept as 'postfeminism'. Approaching the audience and evaluating its response to a previously identified sensibility seems the right path not only to clarify the cultural impact of postfeminism and deal with its definitional difficulty, but also to examine the real meaning of this sensibility in the lives of those who engage with postfeminist texts.

Furthermore, *Mad Men* is a cultural text with transnational impact. Aired in more than 70 countries so far, it has attracted wide critical claim and an extraordinary amount of media attention. However, it has been seen as 'something of an underperformer' (O'Connell, 2012) in terms of audience. As Ang has noted, when TV dramas cross national boundaries nowadays, they do not do it in the same massive way as those in previous decades – *Dallas* being one of the most characteristic examples of a past global success. Currently, when TV dramas succeed internationally, they 'tend to do so in more limited and culturally specific ways' (Ang, 2004: 304). *Mad Men* is a piece of quality TV and, as such, it is 'defined in relation to its aesthetics, mode of production and audiences' (Bignell, 2007: 162). This audience is usually 'small but dedicated and demographically desirable' (Pearson, 2007), because it is considered an affluent, educated group (p.249). A quantitative audience research in the United States demonstrates that *Mad Men* holds 'the strongest concentration of upscale viewers [...] among all original scripted series'

(Nurdyke, 2008). More than appealing to a national audience, the show charms a highly educated and affluent transnational niche; however, this study also seeks to explore national discrepancies together with gender and age differences.

Approaching the audiences: questions of method

During this study, a total of 66 *Mad Men* viewers have been interviewed. Of these, 19 UK viewers shared with me their impressions of the show via focus group¹ and thanks to the responses gathered during these meetings I composed a questionnaire that 23 US viewers and 24 Spanish viewers later completed via email. The focus groups took place in Norwich (England) between January and April 2012. The US interviews were completed in May and June 2012, and finally the Spanish responses were gathered in September 2012.

The focus groups and subsequent email questionnaires addressed the following topics:

- Pleasures and pains in watching *Mad Men*. Do the viewers enjoy or suffer the politically incorrect landscape portrayed in the show?
- Identification or distancing. Do the markers of differentiation actually achieve a feeling of historical distancing or can the viewers relate to the events portrayed?
- What characters does the audience relate to the most? What characters do they admire or despise?

While interaction between research participants is the clearest advantage of the focus group, digression is also advantageous, because it allows the group as well as the moderator to move the discussion to unexpected and often rich topics. However, it is also dangerous if the digression extends for too long and distances from the starting point. The online questionnaire, composed right after the focus groups data were analysed, has allowed me to refine and focus on the previously identified controversial aspects of the show, particularly those more related to the representation of gender roles in the fictional world of *Mad Men*, avoiding unnecessary deviations. For example, while a comparison between the past and the present arose spontaneously during the focus group sessions, in the online questionnaire, there was a direct reference to how different would the world of *Mad Men* be if it would be set in our times. The email question ‘why do you think Don Draper is so successful with women?’ also came from a remark made by a focus group member, and led to a refinement of a topic that was recurrently being addressed during focus group sessions.

The online questionnaire relies mainly on the respondents’ will, and while some responses have been rather short, some other people have developed rich and very well structured answers. During the focus group sessions, a continuous encouragement on the part of the conductor is required, but discrepancies between the more loquacious and less talkative participants also arise. The clearest advantage of the use of email has been the possibility of reaching geographically distant people through a computer screen.

I have tried to contact a wide range of viewers: different genders – although a slight bias towards women has been forced – and different ages – trying to reach those who

might have known the period in which the fiction is set and those unfamiliar with the 1960s. By extending the research to three different countries, my aim has been to test the different implications of the understanding and experience of postfeminism related to the country of origin. The first interviewees have been reached using my own network of colleagues, friends and acquaintances, and the sampling has been completed using the snow-ball method, asking those first volunteers to refer to other possible *Mad Men* viewers.

In the majority of the cases, the interviewees were committed fans of the show. In some particular cases, they had been just casual viewers with no strong attachment to *Mad Men*, and in only a few – and extremely interesting – cases the viewers agreed to participate for the sake of showing their displeasure towards the show.

Reaching people over 60 years of age has been a rather easy task in the United Kingdom and the United States, but among Spanish viewers, no one over 50 years responded. In Spain, the configuration of the audience seems to be rather young. This might be a result of two circumstances: on the one hand, a great deal of the audience have watched *Mad Men* online – while older viewers tend to watch regular television – and on the other hand, people who lived in the 1960s in Spain do not seem to have much to relate to when looking at 1960s New York.

Although when conducting the interviews in the United States, the fifth season of *Mad Men* was being aired, the questions discussed during this research refer to seasons 1 to 4 only.

Travelling to the past and back

Mad Men is set in the mythic decade of the 1960s. Time dislocation is one of the key elements to understand the success of this acclaimed show. Almost everybody I have spoken to finds the historical setting very appealing. Sometimes it is the glamour, the fashion and the decor, and other times the historical events or cultural climate that have called the attention of the audience in the first place.

The explicit historical context is in fact a substantial part of the narrative strategy of *Mad Men*. The show counts on ‘historical markers to generate anticipation via retrospection, and interpretation, of narrative events’ (White, 2011: 153). Period objects and meticulously designed clothing work as historical markers as well. But there are certain details of the show that appear to be there not only to recreate the historical context, but most notably to act as markers of differentiation between then (the diegetic era of the drama) and now (the time of production or reception of the show). The accentuated abuse of alcohol and cigarettes – especially by pregnant women – is only one of these shocking markers. Glossy period objects, casual child battering, homophobia, racism and, most notably, sexism are others.

It could be argued that this historical vantage point is at the inception of the postfeminist sensibility that pervades the series. We can deal with and even aesthetically enjoy the gender injustices of the early 1960s because we are at the same time reminded that such sexism is something from the past. As Whelehan (2000) has argued in her discussion of ‘retrosexism’, the use of retro imagery and nostalgia is a key device in the construction of the new sexism. Referencing a previous era, embracing its iconography, becomes ‘an

important way of suggesting that the sexism is safely sealed in the past' (p. 11). The time setting becomes an alibi, an ironic vantage point, or, as Rosalind Gill (2007) has put it, 'a way of "having it both ways", of expressing sexist or homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually "meant"' (p.158). Or, as in the case of *Mad Men*, while claiming this is really something we have got over.

My hypothesis made me expect responses like the one I got from Jimmy (US, 35 years)² who explained how he overcame the shock of watching the gender politics of the 1960s:

At first the way women are treated in the show was shocking, but once you get used to it you don't notice it anymore. You have to remember it was like that in that time and most of these men would be hit with a sexual assault case if they acted that way now.

After the shock, comes contextualization, and after that, a feeling of reassurance that nowadays certain attitudes would be punished, and therefore we are safe now. This is a clear postfeminist response: sexism is a past problem, the situation is under control now (by suing, according to this viewer), so we can just enjoy the show without questioning the state of affairs. But my 'postfeminist hypothesis' was not going to prevail for long. Jimmy's opinion did not seem to be the general trend, and most of the viewers, while suspecting that the show was somehow using the shock as a distancing device, agreed that we are not so different after all.

This refusal of the main foundation of my hypothesis has come from female viewers. Some young women, for example, have found *Mad Men* hard to watch, proving that sexism and other discrimination forms are not so sealed in the past. In other words, they cannot enjoy the show as something isolated from their own experiences and backgrounds. Louisa (Focus group A, 30), for instance, stated that 'it kind of annoyed me at the beginning because it's very sexist' but she eventually got used to it and became a big fan. 'Sometimes it's hard to watch the racism and discrimination, even though the show is trying to be truthful to that time period' said Lisa (US, 29). The case of Irene (Focus group A, 30) is more extreme because she just quit watching it and was very eager to show her total disagreement with the show: 'I didn't like it maybe because of my background in gender studies, and I found it very strong [...] I disliked the whole idea of the series'.

Gina (Focus group C, 34) tried to rationalize the displeasure she felt when encountering the show for the first time:

The drinking and smoking is shocking, yeah, and I think that even the gender roles ..., maybe not shocking because you knew this stuff, but when you see the lobby and all the secretaries and the way they treat all the girls, it's not shocking but ... unpleasant.

When asked about the possibility of *Mad Men* set in our times, many affirmed that it would not be a very different show, although it would require a change of setting – banking instead of advertising – a change of habits – less alcohol and cigarettes, but more cocaine and pills – and – sadly for many – a change of wardrobe. Greg (US, 53) has managed to graphically bridge the gap between the past and the present:

Not that different. Go to the golf courses of New Jersey, Palm Beach, Palm Springs, Long Island and Scottsdale and you will see these men still around ... but they don't smoke as much. Now they pop pills. Think of the 2008 financial collapse – mostly men of this type.

Virtually all the interviewees agreed that basic plotlines and characters could be very similar if *Mad Men* was set in the present time, although 'less interesting', 'less pretty', 'less glamorous' and 'less innocent'. Many viewers have also made reference to a better situation for women in a hypothetical 21st century *Mad Men*. 'Women would be far more bolshie', 'women would play a more upfront role' or 'the sexism the women deal with would be less obvious' are some of the cautious responses. The general impression can be summarized by Jennifer's words (US, 29):

The costumes, set design and cultural references would have to change, of course, but apart from reducing on some blatant racism and sexism in the work place, I think the entire show could be reshot in the present and no one would even notice.

However, many of the viewers I have interviewed seem to admit that there might be an average viewer for whom sexism and other forms of bigotry might be shocking as well as delusive. Justin (US, 30) was quite clear about it:

Am I supposed to say how shocked I was to see such pronounced gender roles in America in the '60s? Cause I wasn't. Things haven't changed all that much. The gender roles still exist. We just have to pretend not to acknowledge it.

Many participants could imagine an average viewer for whom the rampant sexism of the series would be shocking, but they tried to differentiate themselves from that average viewer. In Jennifer's words again,

I would imagine that many people find the sexism in the show shocking [...] but not for me. However, what I find shocking is the reaction to this sexism and racism, specifically, the attitude of 'that was then' and 'this is now'. I think the prejudice shocks many people because they are ignorant to the equally blatant reality that we still live in a very misogynist and racist society, especially in the United States.

A very similar remark was made by Amaia (SP, 29) who stated that 'if somebody is shocked at the sexism in *Mad Men* they have never worked in an office these days'. Whoever these easily 'shockable' people are, I haven't encountered any of them during my research.

A reviewer of the first season argued that 'Mad Men flatters us where we deserve to be scourged'. and that in the case of this show, 'criticism of the past is used to congratulate the present' (Greif, 2008: 16). The responses I have gathered suggest instead that once involved with the drama, time dislocation is the least important thing about it. The postfeminist stance of the viewers is the exception rather than the rule. Some of the situations portrayed can actually work as reflections of current scenarios regarding gender disparity rather than becoming auto-celebratory rites for an unjust world we have allegedly defeated.

Meeting Jackie and Marilyn

Rosalind Gill (2007) has pointed at the reassertion of sexual difference as one of the key features of a postfeminist text. As *Mad Men* is a historical drama, set in a time when femininity and masculinity codes were stronger than today, the 'unashamed celebration of true or authentic masculinity' (p. 158) and – I add – femininity could be the predictable choice. Actually, many viewers have remarked with pleasure upon specific features of *Mad Men* that are lost in contemporary life. 'I wish men could dress like that for work' said Jimmy, or 'Everyone knew who they were supposed to be' stated Elizabeth (US, 34).

And women, back in the 1960s, were supposed to be either a Jackie or a Marilyn. That is what adman Paul Kinsey explicitly proclaims in *Maidenform* (E206). According to his cataloguing, the ultimate Marilyn is Joan, the voluptuous office manager or, as Kinsey puts it, 'Marilyn is really a Joan'. She deliberately exploits the sex-bomb image, and by controlling this *to-be-looked-at-ness*, she manages to exercise some power over the male executives. The Jackie of the show is Betty Draper, the gorgeous suburban wife. Educated but modest, beautiful but discreet, she is the perfect partner for the perfect man.

About Joan, female viewers admire her 'curves', 'most beautiful skin', 'dresses' and 'voluptuousness', which, according to Judy (Focus Group C, 56), 'is rare for American television'. Also Cristina (SP, 24) has stated that it is 'wonderful and not very frequent to see someone my size on television'. Ursula (Focus Group B, 60) agrees, 'it's so nice, especially in our days, that she's big ...'. Men also admire Joan for how 'hot' and 'sexy' she is, and Iñigo (SP, 37) even attributed to the actress Christina Hendricks alone the success of the series.

It could be asserted that *Mad Men*, as a historical fiction, rebuilds old styles of femininity that are absent on regular TV and viewers respond positively to them. This statement is easily arguable when it comes to the reaction that the character of Betty provokes. Betty Draper, the heroine of countless family sitcoms of that period, is for these viewers, regardless of her 'Grace Kelly look', 'a spoiled brat', 'grossly immature', 'annoying', 'cold', 'never happy or grateful', 'a terrible mother' and 'a hideous person'. Even if they recognize her as 'very representative of her time' and 'the model housewife from the time', this recreation of 1960s womanhood and motherhood does not seem to provoke anything but antipathy and aversion. Joan's womanhood is, on the contrary, applauded:

It was kind of seen in Europe that Americans were very infantile about sex because they had this obsession with breasts [...]. And she [JOAN]... she is absolutely that. And yet very quickly that's the least important thing about her. But just when you think, you know, they're not making a big thing of it, and she's in character, dealing with difficulties ..., suddenly she appears in an incredible dress, you know, really tight dress, and a lot of the blokes are going like 'oooooh', and you know that all the blokes watching at home including me are going 'Oh my god, she's fantastic!'.

I think Johnny's (Focus Group B, 61) opinion reflects a general view on Joan and her likeability: it is related to the pleasure of seeing a Playboy-like woman who can effectively exercise some power over a hostile environment using traditionally feminine traits. According to Pete (Focus Group B, 64), she seems quite happy with her role 'and doesn't want to change it'. Can Joan embody the postfeminist idea that a woman 'can have it all',

namely, sexiness and power? Some women disagree. Maria (SP, 48) can see the danger of ‘an underrated brain trapped in an overrated body’. ‘It’s really difficult to watch beyond her beauty, and she pays for it’ commented Sonsoles (SP, 46), while Amaiur (SP, 29) stated that ‘she has believed the big lie, but little by little she is coming down to earth’.

This ‘coming down to earth’ is illustrated by the constant humiliations, disappointments and aggressions that Joan starts to suffer from Season 2 on (Cox, 2012). She is mercilessly replaced for a script reading job she was very good at, outmanoeuvred by a younger secretary who uses her same tactics and mocked by the new generation of male executives who do not succumb so easily to her game. Not to mention her awful choice of husband.

Pete insisted that ‘she’s not really a victim of who she is’. That is why when another participant reminded him about the episode in which Joan is assaulted by her fiancé (*The Mountain King*, E212), Pete was taken aback:

Oh, yes! And he rapes her virtually! Oh, yeah, what was that about? [...] This sort of semi-rape situation, which it was, shows the weakness of the men to me.

He was reluctant to use the word *rape* in all its crudity and subsequently tried to read the whole scene as a failure of the man. Anna (Focus Group A, 34) is more realistic about it: ‘with her husband situation, she is ... she’s failing miserably there’. But viewers were optimistic about Joan’s prospects, considered a brave and clever woman. June (Interview SP, 25) stated, ‘Joan is being fucked, but hopefully she will recover as she always does’.

The alleged ‘unashamed celebration’ of femininity gets problematized when the respondents’ sympathies lean towards only one of the feminine types, that of Joan, refusing Betty’s display of traditional femininity. And even the character of Joan is not an uncomplicated portrayal of successful feminine tactics in a hostile environment, à la Gurley Brown.³ In her analysis of the ‘feminist temporality’ present in the representation of Joan, Fiona Cox (2012) has stated that ‘the rape is a dramatic moment in which the scopophilic object experiences a narrative event directly related to her investment in sex as her greatest weapon, directly problematizing audience enjoyment of such behaviour’. The development of Joan problematizes the enjoyment of her erotic display as she becomes the suffering subject, thus questioning all her power and command. The female respondents are particularly aware of the declining prowess of Joan’s femininity, and as Bea (SP, 46) stated, ‘that is painful to watch’.

Relating to Peggy

However sympathetic the viewers might be towards Joan, in terms of identification, a large number of women participants chose Peggy. Young and older women have revealed that they ‘relate to’ Peggy Olson, the young secretary that rapidly becomes the first copywriter of the agency. From the ‘I was a Peggy until I was 30’ to the ‘I’m sometimes called Peggy in the office’, the young copywriter seems to be a reflection of women’s youth or present alike. Peggy is a young, talented and hard-working woman who does not fit the Jackie–Marilyn dichotomy. She does not use her sexuality to control men nor long for a

proper marriage. The press has named her a ‘feminist icon’⁴ as well as a ‘feminist trail-blazer’,⁵ and Elizabeth Moss herself, the actress who plays Peggy, considers her ‘the ultimate feminist’ (cited in Bolonik, 2009). However, my preliminary analysis suggested that Peggy shares a lot of traits with a postfeminist character and certainly many viewers see her as very contemporary:

I think a lot of young modern women can relate to Peggy’s struggles to be taken seriously at the office and her domestic choices. Both in my personal life and my previous work in the media industry, I can certainly relate to a lot of what Peggy has dealt with in recent seasons. (Jennifer, US, 29)

‘I understand her and I want her to succeed’ said Olga (US, 30). And Peggy, alone in a men’s world, certainly struggles to succeed. But is that enough to call her a feminist?

She has to fight against her family – who do not support her career choice – and against her colleagues – who do not take her seriously. But her struggle is private, based on her own ambition and talent and not related to any political movement whatsoever. She maintains even hostile relationships with female co-workers, to the extent of becoming clearly abusive when she has to deal with subordinate women.

She is also individualistic and states that she is ‘not a political person’ (*The beautiful girls*, E409). According to her, self-determination is the key to ending not only gender discrimination but also any other form of bigotry. ‘I’m sure they could fight their way in like I did’, she says to leftist journalist and potential boyfriend Abe Drexler when talking about how black people are excluded from advertising agencies (*The beautiful girls*, E409). Feminism, and other liberating movements, lose their social nature and appear, in Peggy’s words, as optional, private endeavours.

When in the first episode Joan suggests Peggy ‘go home, take a paper bag and cut some eye holes out of it; put it over your head, look in the mirror and try and evaluate your strengths and weaknesses’ – one piece of advice directly inspired by Gurley Brown (Cox, 2012) – Peggy’s face reveals astonishment. A similar point is made by Pete Campbell, who passes judgment on the new secretary and asks her with disdain if she is ‘amish or something’. When Peggy denies that, Pete offers this beauty tip: ‘If you pull your waist in a little bit, you might look like a woman’ (*Smoke gets in your eyes*, E101). Instead of following this beauty tips, Peggy gets fat – she is actually unknowingly pregnant – which does not seem to deter her promotion from secretary to copywriter.

But something changes in Season 2, as if Peggy would have understood the *makeover paradigm*, a ‘prominent trope’ in the history of both film and television (Moseley, 2002: 303) that has also become a key trope in postfeminist culture. This paradigm is based on the belief that when life is flawed, it is time for ‘reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts’ (Gill, 2007: 156). If, during the first season, Peggy denies any appearance improvement the same way she denies her own pregnancy, in subsequent seasons things will change. First, her wardrobe will evolve from a collection of frumpy frocks to tailored suits. Second, she will let the first openly homosexual character of the show, Kurt, cut her hair into a more modern style (*The Jet Set*, E211) and, finally, she will move from Brooklyn to Manhattan (*The arrangements*, E304). ‘It’s been great fun to see Peggy progress and develop confidence, charisma, even

sexiness' confessed Jennifer. 'She's the ugly duckling, transforming into a beautiful swan' noticed Ursula. So, what else can we expect from this clever and talented young woman?

Viewers' prospects on Peggy are all bright when it comes to the professional sphere – 'she'll end up running the agency' or 'setting up her own agency' have been frequent predictions – although not so much on the private sphere. 'She'll have the choice of either staying single and becoming the boss or getting married and settling down' summarized Suzanne (Focus Group A, 32), and when asked by another participant if she could not have both, she was quite sure in her reply: 'I think that's something women are trying to reconcile with themselves now, let alone in the sixties, it was one or the other ...'.

In their recreation of a key decade for the women's movement, *Mad Men* has chosen the individual and individualistic struggle over a more general picture. Haralovich (2011) has noted the profusion of images of Civil Rights and politics in general in contrast to the lack of 'period references to women's movement' (p.162). Feminist issues are all related to the private sphere – abortion, contraception, divorce. And, unlike other postfeminist texts – *Sex and the City*, to name one – it does not celebrate female friendship. Being set in a professional space, it has chosen to portray a hard-working woman worried about being taken seriously in a male-dominated work environment, but disconnected from ongoing political and collective struggles. Her experiences are very close to contemporary women's experiences. 'I'm sometimes treated like that by my bosses' said Laura (Focus Group C, 34). Peggy's postfeminist touch – individualism, reliance on self-appearance, lack of female bonding and political inspiration – makes her very accessible to contemporary audiences.

'Why are modern women attracted to a guy like Don Draper?'

At the beginning of Focus Group A, Louisa urged us to address a topic she considered intriguing: 'I think it's really interesting why women, and even modern women, are attracted to a guy like Don Draper'.

After all, Draper represents a strong and traditional masculinity type: his robust physical appearance, taciturn temperament, secret scars and lack of any male bond remind us of a lonely cowboy riding his horse towards the sunset. And yet, Louisa was right. Women I have talked to find protagonist Don Draper 'alluring', 'attractive', 'extremely handsome', 'confident' and 'powerful'. Also men pick him when asked to choose their favourite character, on the grounds of his 'security', 'charisma' and 'wit'.

Creative genius of Sterling Cooper, he is a complex, masculine and attractive alpha male very rare in contemporary Hollywood, in which, a different type of 'more sensitive, domesticated male' has been predominant since the 1990s (Peberdy, 2010: 237). However, what I contended after an analysis of the representation of Draper, is that what made him so appealing was the combination of old-school masculinity with pure post-feminist traits. I argued that Don's masculinity was outlined in contrast to Pete's 'critical' and insecure masculinity, and participants' responses seem to confirm that impression:

Don is regarded in positive terms while Pete is just ‘arrogant’, ‘annoying’ and ‘a schemer’.

My reading suggested that Pete was a paradigm of masculinity in crisis, while Don would represent a further step of masculinity, namely, a postfeminist masculinity. In my analysis, I highlighted his individualism, tendency to promote Peggy regardless of her gender, sensitivity, propensity to choose strong and progressive female lovers, rejection of violence and skills as a father as examples of Don’s postfeminist touches.

Some of these characteristics have been identified by the participants. Maider (SP, 31) described him as someone who is ‘understanding and does not look for the typical female stereotypes’. Diana (US, 39) mentioned his ‘vulnerability that is perceptible in rare moments’ and Karol (SP, 47) also confirmed that he ‘awakens tenderness’, while Ursula (Focus Group B, 60) complained that he was getting very ‘touchy-feely’. Megan (US, 26) described Don’s two faces:

He has a broken charm to him. He is at once strongly masculine, in that All-American way, yet has an emotional sadness about him that I can see women wanting to fix – to save him from himself essentially.

Don is not just an old-school macho man, a ‘socially dominant gentleman and a fantasy of stable and secure gendered expectations’ (Mukherjea, 2011: 1). These viewers have remembered that Don cries, nurtures a ‘bohemian side dream’, ‘respects women, unlike his colleagues’ and ‘admires Peggy for her brains and morality’.

Don is regarded as appealing and admirable, or, in the less enthusiastic cases, is forgiven for his flaws. His more admirable traits are highlighted by contrast. His areas of expertise – creativity and women – are the areas of failure for Pete Campbell. And viewers are merciless with the young executive, a ‘dangerous mixture of insecurity and ambition’ according to Laura (SP, 30). In the best cases, they have confessed that they ‘love to hate him’ but more often he is perceived as ‘weak’, ‘laughable’, ‘cruel’ and ‘pathetic’. ‘I’d just love to give him a slap!’ summarized Rachel (Focus Group C, 25). The same goes for Betty, whose parental skills have been censured often: ‘I dislike Betty because of the way she treated her children, especially Sally’ said Barbara (US, 56). ‘I think she’s hilarious, the way she treats her children: “go watch TV, go watch TV” ... I mean, even for those times that’s being a terrible mother!’ commented Pete (Focus Group B, 63). On the other hand, Don has been recognized as a good father:

As questionable and absent a father he can be, he understands his children as children – which is also the main thorn in my side when it comes to Betty. Especially after the divorce, the children are especially vulnerable but Don responds as a father. (Jennifer, US, 29)

As Byers noted in his analysis of *Forrest Gump*, the ‘new man’ fantasy combines ‘a certain apparent accommodation of feminism with a deep-seated misogyny’ (Byers, 1996: 432), since the good father needs a negligent mother to glow by contrast. To make Don a more likeable character it is necessary not only a neglectful mother but also a masculinity in crisis, such as that of Pete Campbell, who responds with anger, frustration and cruelty to the changeable gender roles starting to shape in the 1960s.

On the other hand, Don is comfortable as one can be in his masculinity, and can also accommodate feminist traits without undermining his manliness. This is the combination that makes him so captivating: ‘No doubt we would be very successful in our days’ said Cristina (SP, 47). I can only agree to that.

As a conclusion

The first episodes of *Mad Men* seem entirely devoted to demonstrating how mean, cruel and negligent men – and women – were at that time. Men harass women. Women put up with it as a part of their job. Doctors sermonize while prescribing the pill. Discovering a woman with ideas is ‘like watching a dog play the piano’. The message seems to be that we are very different nowadays, and therefore, we can laugh at the erratic attitudes of these miserable people of the past. This was one of the first claims of my ‘postfeminist hypothesis’.

But viewers’ responses, with some exceptions already mentioned, have proved to be more elaborated than that. Even if they perceive that they *should be shocked* by the politically incorrect attitudes and remarks, especially regarding sexism and racism, they are not; because they are aware of the historical context, and, more interestingly, they do not think that we have changed all that much. The postfeminist sensibility is not felt so straightforwardly.

What I have found talking to actual *Mad Men* viewers is that the feeling of distancing from those ‘bad old times’ that the audience is invited to enjoy dissolves very quickly. The historical setting, with its gorgeous looks and hideous vices, might be one of the first appeals of the show for many – and even a deterrent for those who stopped watching the show at the very beginning – but loses importance as the show develops a faculty to reflect on and critique contemporary situations and attitudes. The 1960s façade, as a young viewer told me, ‘puts things in a perspective we can digest’ (Rachel, US, 23), but once engaged with the show time setting starts to be considered irrelevant. This is particularly true of American viewers, who seem to be more aware of their history and context, which makes it easier for them to connect with their own past. British and Spanish viewers often compare the 1960s New York with their own national past. For instance, UK viewers remembered that divorce was very rare in the United Kingdom at that time. Some Spanish participants went further and expressed that some of the situations and liberties that the characters enjoy were ‘utopian’ in Spain during the 1960s (i.e. during the Franco dictatorship). But the comment that ‘we haven’t changed all that much’ also arose when talking specifically about work environment or gender roles, proving that national discrepancies are not so relevant beyond details.

The two characters I had identified as the ones with more postfeminist traits coincide with those held in higher regard by female and male participants: Don and Peggy. These are characters the audience can relate to (Peggy) or admire (Don), and this closeness has been achieved using contemporary, that is, postfeminist traits in their construction.

It is when dealing with the narrative arc of particular characters that the dissonances start to appear. Joan’s dramatic development or Peggy’s struggle to reconcile her private and professional facets are identified and sympathized with, but mostly by female viewers. Interestingly enough, older women have related to Peggy as a model of how things

were back in the 1960s and 1970s for career girls, but also younger women have compared their current professional situation to that of Peggy. The lack of divergences for age reasons is the more remarkable point here, and it does not speak very highly of women's progress at work.

Even if these issues are not explicitly defined as feminist, there is an implicit acceptance of the values and criticisms of second-wave feminism when talking about these characters on the part of older and younger women. On the other hand, men tend to read the characters of Peggy and, especially, Joan in a more unproblematic light. According to most men I have spoken to, Peggy is a pioneer – not particularly related to contemporary female workers – and Joan a character who has the situation under control thanks to her curves. Reminding some viewers about the loss of agency when Joan gets raped, has taken many male viewers aback, as if that dramatic episode could not fit Joan's persona. Moreover, at this key point, viewers from the three nationalities converge.

This is the most significant demographic difference encountered by this study. Discrepancies among viewers of different countries or even among different ages are surprisingly slight, but the gender discrepancies arise recurrently. Men viewers do not seem to engage with Peggy's struggle, and admire Joan for her looks and command without recognizing the decline in her sexual power and its feminist consequences. They also admire Don and engage with his mysterious past and interesting present, but only women seem to admire Don's postfeminist traits – tenderness, parental skills and progressiveness.

In any case, the show goes beyond the historical fiction and, via a postfeminist sensibility, becomes engaging for contemporary audiences. In other words, the historical context seems to be the main entrance gate for the audience, but its postfeminist consequences are acknowledged by many viewers, enabling parallels to be drawn with the present. But the most surprising conclusion of this research study is that the postfeminist intention of the show has different consequences among viewers, even more so as the fiction develops and characters evolve. While women can draw feminist conclusions regarding our current situation from Joan's and Peggy's trajectory, male viewers tend to develop less problematic views on characters and situations, and as a result, they respond in a more self-congratulatory way. This diversity is provided by the prolonged narrative arc typical of serial television, but it is also a consequence of the postfeminist spirit itself, an ambiguous, uncertain way of approaching feminist issues, that nevertheless can in some cases become a viable environment for emancipatory discourses.

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Notes

1. Three focus groups with UK viewers. A: men and women 20–30 years old; B: men and women over 60 years old and C: women of different ages.
2. All names have been changed for privacy reasons.
3. In her successful book *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), Helen Gurley Brown advised young women to use their sexuality to get everything they could, since their brains would not be enough in an underprivileged world for women. Series creator Matthew Weiner has repeatedly referred to Gurley Brown's book as a source of inspiration for *Mad Men*.
4. <http://www.stylist.co.uk/people/peggy-olson-feminist-icon>
5. <http://vintagefashionlondon.co.uk/mad-men-series-feminist-trailblazer-peggy-olsen-and-how-to-get-her-look/>

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