

Gendered Mediation in Political and News Satire: *Saturday Night Live*

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## Introduction

Beginning in 1976, *Saturday Night Live* has become a cultural phenomenon, providing social commentary on accepted social practices, trends and political news. Garnering millions of viewers over its now 43-year existence, its commentary has reached a massive scope of audiences, and has become the pinnacle of American comedy. As the show itself has reached so many people over the years, so have its writers' opinions on political topics. An easily accessible topic for all Americans to enjoy, as the government touches each American in some way, political sketches have been a cornerstone of *Saturday Night Live* comedy. Additionally, the introduction of Weekend Update sketches has increased this accessibility by satirically reporting on real American news stories. However, as each episode is only 45 minutes to an hour long, the topics which each political sketch and Weekend Update segment addresses are carefully selected by a team of writers in order to ensure cultural relevance in each episode while also hand-picking topics with the most comedic and ironic potential. The combination of the show's massive viewership and its writers' role in gatekeeping the information communicated to the public each Saturday night has important implications for gender studies, as the show has such potential to influence modes of thought on the subject through gendered character portrayals. In this way, I was drawn to study the role of gender portrayals in the show because of its vast and wide reach, allowing for the potential of equally large societal impact as we think about gender. However, measuring these effects exactly would be quite the undertaking, so this study intends only to understand the role which gender plays in the show.

This study has been based off of what can be defined as "gendered mediation" and its effects on postfeminist discourse. For the sake of this study, we will adhere to Burke and Mazzarella's definition of gendered mediation, which refers to the use of gendered language and

topics as a way of constructing a frame through which to view the world. Burke describes gendered mediation as also doing so to render gender an important category of analysis in topics which do not necessarily inherently relate to gender (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008). Through this definition of gendered mediation, this study will seek to understand how these gendered aspects relate to modern postfeminist discourse on the show, as well. Postfeminism has been defined as the widely-held cultural belief that our society no longer needs feminism, that we are “past” feminism, having achieved its goals of gender equality. This refers to a movement away from collective action to oppose patriarchal social conventions, as well as a general lack of acknowledgment of feminist ideologies, as they are rendered unimportant (Patterson, 2012).

In order to examine these notions and gain more clarity on the role of gender portrayals in *Saturday Night Live*'s political sketches and Weekend Update segments, I pose several hypotheses regarding perpetuated gender stereotypes, parody's potential to unlock unspoken societal truths, the portrayal of women in particular, and how *Saturday Night Live* conforms to postfeminist ideals. Based off of prior research and this study's objectives, I have chosen to analyze political sketches and Weekend Updates of four different episodes throughout the show's existence: S2 E1 on September 18, 1976 with host Lily Tomlin; S33 E5 on February 23, 2008 with host Tina Fey; S34 E1 on September 13, 2008 with host Michael Phelps; and S42 E10 on December 17, 2016 with host Casey Affleck. This allows me to analyze episodes over time in order to understand how gender portrayals might have evolved with the show and American culture.

I first delve into research which has informed this study, my hypotheses, methods and analysis in the literature review. Then, I pose several hypotheses which I will attempt to prove or disprove in my analysis. I then outline my methodology, justifying the steps I've taken to

research the show. In doing so, I outline variables through which to observe and analyze the role of gender in each segment. Through the analysis of these variables, I then prove, disprove, or decide that further research is needed for each of my hypotheses. I then relate these hypotheses to one final conclusion that *Saturday Night Live* falls prey—and has historically fallen prey—to gendered mediation which reflects postfeminist ideology. Lastly, I discuss this study’s limitations and ideas for future research.

### **Literature Review**

Several bodies of research have been done to examine the role of parody in society, both specific to *Saturday Night Live* and spanning other satirical news texts. Having read several sources regarding parody, I have found several common threads which have contributed to the formation of my hypotheses, methods and analysis.

#### *The role of parody as it relates to news and politics*

[Journalism] is a rhetoric written to serve particular social and psychological needs ... a process that continually makes and remakes social problems, crises, enemies and leaders (Achter, 2008, p. 4).

It is imperative to understand the impact which comedy has on audience perception of a certain topic in order to analyze the underlying meaning of the text and its delivery as it relates to gender representations in each segment. The literature suggests that comedy has the ability to critique accepted cultural norms through the dialogic nature of “carnival” (Achter, 2008), derived from characteristics of medieval carnival. As Achter notes, medieval carnival critiqued institutional power by constituting “the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (Achter, 2008, p. 6). From this notion of carnival, Achter creates the definition of parody as a “composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise

exaggerated for comic effect” (Achter, 2008, p. 7). Achter applies this definition of parody to satirical news media by discussing its ability to reframe traditional news media as limited and one-sided. Through imitative language styles and physical structure, the satirical media is also given authority. For instance, The Onion, a satirical news media which pokes fun at the traditional American news media through absurdist stories, looks physically like a traditional newspaper and is therefore borrowing the authority of real news media in order to make an impactful commentary on the shortcomings of real news media in American society. Particularly relevant is the entertainment factor of these satirical pieces. As Esralew & Young (2012) explore, viewers are finding it harder to separate entertainment and news because both “maintain political relevance in today’s postmodern media environment . . . Viewers do not make a cognitive distinction between legitimate and illegitimate sources of political information” (Esralew & Young, 2012, p. 2). This sort phenomenon can be illustrated by what has been called the “Fey Effect” (Esralew & Young, 2012) On October 18, 2008, *Saturday Night Live* brought in its largest audience in over 14 years—10 million viewers during the live show and nine million online—on account of a particular political sketch starring Tina Fey as Sarah Palin campaigning to become Vice President. In this sketch and five subsequent others over Palin’s 10-week campaign, Fey portrayed Palin as “unintelligent, inexperienced, ultra-conservative, and rural” (Esralew & Young, 2012, p. 4). As more Americans watched the sketches than Palin’s real interviews, off of which the sketches were based, Fey’s portrayal of Palin had a palpably negative effect on her candidacy (Flowers & Young, 2010). According to Esralew & Young, “33% of independents believed that the caricature was hurting the Grand Old Party (GOP) ticket” (Esralew & Young, 2012, p. 4). The parody happened to take place at a time when Palin was relatively unknown to the American citizenry and she had little communication with the

press pool, contributing to Fey's influence in crafting Palin's public image. According to Time Magazine's "Person of the Year 2008" issue, "[Fey] proved that comedy can still have serious political clout: her winking impression of Governor Sarah Palin defined the governor before she had a chance to define herself" (Esralew & Young, 2012, p. 4).

*Parody's agenda-setting potential*

Research has also shown that parody plays an active role in setting the agenda for discourse regarding politics. Particularly in the case of *Saturday Night Live*,

The 'Weekend Update' news segment allowed viewers to laugh at the show's unorthodox and irreverent interpretations of the nation's actual headlines. As the show evolved, the writers often chose to spotlight unusual or seemingly trivial news, introducing viewers to stories they might not consider newsworthy. Thus, *Saturday Night Live* possesses the ability to set the political agenda (Leano, 2014, p. 2).

As a theory, agenda-setting and priming are rooted in "ideas and concepts becoming more accessible in memory after recent and frequent activation" (Esralew & Young, 2012, p. 2). Three factors contribute to the accessibility of information effecting aggregate opinion: recency and intensity of a message will enhance its perceived importance and make it appear more salient in the mind of the receiver, while consistency increases its prominence in the mind of the viewer. Importantly, humans are wired to avoid exhausting our mental resources and find ways to reach conclusions as efficiently as possibly. In doing so, we rely on preexisting networks of information to make logical assumptions through cognitive shortcuts. When applied to news media, Leano posits that political parody works within a two-step process to shape viewers' minds and opinions. According to Leano,

Issues spotlighted on television programs are often perceived by viewers as the most important. The authors identify agenda setting as the first step in a two-step process of television's political influence. The second step, called 'priming,' takes place when viewers evaluate political figures according to the program's positions on the issues or characterizations promoted during the agenda-setting phase (Leano, 2014, p. 2).

The theory of agenda-setting and priming serves to inform this study as it seeks to understand the gendered representation of political characters in parody and its possible implications in a cultural context.

*Gendered mediation in political parody*

A new understanding of parody as it relates to notions of carnival and uncovering societal truths and limitations (Achter, 2008) both contributes to and is informed by a wider understanding of a notion which Burke and Mazzarella have dubbed “gendered mediation.” Burke defines gendered mediation as incorporating gendered language and metaphors when gender is not salient to the topic at hand, making it seem as though gender is, in fact, relevant. Particularly in the case of the news, media frames work to organize the world in three different ways: through cultural resonance, sponsor activity, and journalistic practices. For the sake of this study, it is important to focus on the notions of cultural resonance and sponsor activity. Cultural resonance refers to the relevance, familiarity, and salience of certain frames for the audience. In this way, news media act as a sort of gatekeeper of information as outlets choose which stories to report to the public. Writers on *Saturday Night Live* and reporters on *Weekend Update* do the same as they choose news stories with the most comedic potential. Sponsor activity, on the other hand, refers to “organizations or individuals ... who, guided by their own agendas, influence journalists” (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008, p. 3). As NBC is a for-profit organization, it must create content on *Saturday Night Live* that is going to gain a large enough audience and make a profit for the show. In this way, writers choose topics that are going to appeal to the widest possible crowd. As news sources have such an impact on the kinds of information we know about the world, the way they do so affects our understanding of the world in a more general sense. Studies have shown that news sources use gendered language in reporting the news and spend a

disproportionate amount of time on female politicians' personal lives and looks (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008). Burke defines "gendered language" as

any descriptive word or phrase related to an individual that could have been replaced with a gender-neutral word or phrase. Specifically ... 1) gratuitous use of gendered descriptors such as 'male nurse' or 'female engineer' and 2) the use of gendered words or titles rather than their gender-neutral counterparts (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008, p. 11).

It is also helpful to understand feminist responses to this sort of news discourse. As I am studying a comedic text, I found it to be particularly relevant to research feminist humor. Case and Lippard, for instance, studied 1700 jokes labeled as women's or feminist humor to explore the assertions being made. According to the study, "the jokes attempt to discredit men and more broadly, patriarchy, by pointing out their flaws or putting men, as well as women, in their stereotypical roles. Few jokes, however, go past stereotypical assumptions to fully critique the gender" (Case & Lippard, 2009, p. 12). Additionally, Case and Lippard discuss the response to such feminist humor attacking the patriarchy, noting that

Ironically the same 'defenders of the faith' (patriarchy) who have for centuries winked, nodded, and chuckled at racist, sexist, homophobic and other humor aimed at out-groups are among those who are the most outraged by the use of humor to present perspectives critical of their entrenched stereotypical ideologies and tendencies. (Case & Lippard, 2009, p. 12).

To further support this notion that humor, feminist or otherwise, tend to pigeonhole people within gendered stereotypes, studies on particular political sketches show that these stereotypes are, in fact, the basis of humor. Falk discusses *Saturday Night Live's* portrayal of Hillary Clinton as being particularly problematic, noting, "the humor of the sketches is based in the depiction of Clinton as violating traditional gender norms for women (i.e., submissiveness and domesticity) and thus conclude that these sketches rely on rather than repudiate traditional stereotypes" (Falk, 2017, p. 13). Similar research has been done to examine the role of gender stereotypes in political satire, arguing that *Saturday Night Live* "derives humor from candidates' failure to

uphold traditional masculine and feminine ideals rather than critique the candidates' levels of competency in upholding presidential ideals" (Weinhold & Bodkin, 2017, p. 1). Particularly, these studies have focused on the tension between homophobia and homosociality in sketches featuring Alec Baldwin as Trump, representing Trump as overtly homosocial in order to make a homophobic commentary by joking "that a man would kiss other men" (Weinhold & Bodkin, 2017). In this way, Baldwin's portrayal represents Trump as less than a real man as a result of his homosocial tendencies.

I was also interested in investigating the role of media as a postfeminist gatekeeping mechanism. This helped to further contextualize the effect that Weekend Update's choice of reported topics might have on public discourse regarding gender. Research has discussed the role of popular 1998 series character Ally McBeal as a representation of postfeminism. In the show, "a twentysomething female lawyer obsesses about her appearance and romantic prospects the way feminist activists used to worry about gender inequality—as a sign that feminism was no longer relevant to today's young women" (Ouellette, 2002, p. 1). This research has also extrapolated the cultural phenomenon of *Ally McBeal* to a "female identity in crisis," in which

the media presented the stereotypical career woman as an unhappy and 'lost soul' who had rejected her most important role in life: motherhood. At the same time, popular texts from the television drama *thirtysomething* to *Good Housekeeping's* 'new traditionalism' advertising campaign presented career women's happy return to the domestic sphere as an enlightened postfeminist choice (Ouellette, 2002, p. 6).

As the media acts as a way of controlling the type of information that enters public consciousness, it is important to understand the history of certain ideologies present in such media discourses, like postfeminism.

*The writers' room*

In order to fully understand gendered mediation, it is helpful to analyze the source of these texts: writers. Historically, female writers have used humor to express the challenges faced by women. Tina Fey has been quoted as an expert in doing so, describing herself navigating through a dangerous and difficult world as a young girl through tongue-in-cheek humor. Her “tough girl feminism” is a “complex, spirited, intelligent kind of funniness, which has the effect of laying bare some of the more insidious, unspoken, ridiculous assumptions behind our standard pieties and official narratives” (Hanrahan, 2011, p. 3). In other words, her witty style of describing women’s trials and tribulations uncover unfair truths about our culture’s accepted social scripts. Previous research on *Saturday Night Live*’s writers’ room has described Fey’s becoming the show’s first female head writer in 1999 as a welcome change in the culture at Saturday Night Live. According to Patterson, 2012, the show was known to have an “inhospitable legacy toward female comedians. John Belushi famously ranted that women weren’t funny, and he threatened to resign unless Saturday Night Live’s producer, Lorne Michaels, fired all female writers” (Patterson, 2012, p. 7). This sort of sexism in the writers’ room was especially pervasive in the first few seasons of the show, illustrated by the fact that “Frequent guest host Buck Henry thought it was terribly kind of Lorne Michaels to allow ‘all his secretaries’ to attend pitch meetings, assuming the female writers were administrative assistants” (Cacace, 2017, p. 19). Research also describes a general public disdain for female comedians on account of the notion that comedy is inherently associated with masculinity, as “Women do not find their own physical decay and absurdity to be so riotously amusing ... this is so rare” (Patterson, 2012, p. 8). Patterson notes, “Comedy, as it is discursively constructed, places women within traditional patriarchy as the butt of the joke, or the passive respondents of humor” (Patterson, 2012, p. 8). Much like the notion of news media as gatekeepers, the writers’ room serves the same purpose.

Murphy, 2013, writes, “Material that received a positive response in the read-through stage moved forward for dress rehearsal on Saturday, and sketches that worked well there were then performed on stage. For pitches and sketches to succeed, they had to be ‘funny in the room,’ and the majority of the people in the room (cast, crew and often host) were men” (Murphy, 2013, p. 175). As this process remains the same today, there are several layers of approval which each sketch must go through in order to be brought to the public eye. Depending on the gender demographics of the writers’ room and which gender is more prominent, it is likely that more male- or female-centric sketches will be brought to the show. In this way, it is important to understand the cast of writers and actors on the show in order to fully contextualize sketches and their meaning.

*Elements which allow for humor to be perceived as such*

In order to properly analyze the role of humor in gendered representations in *Saturday Night Live*, it is imperative to understand elements of performed parody which allow for media to be interpreted as humorous. As described by Flowers & Young, 2010, mental images or impressions of political figures are “embodied in ‘communicative acts’ generated within various emblematic, iconic, pointing, and pragmatic gestures ... Other ‘parodic techniques’ such as direct quotation involve ‘doubling,’ where ‘direct speech is always shadowed by a marked copy of itself’ (Flowers & Young, 2010, p. 4). Other verbal parodic elements include reiteration, inversion and exaggeration. This study looked at both the physical and verbal transformations of Tina Fey as Sarah Palin in order to find variables which contribute to the success of a parodic sketch. Flowers & Young, 2010, focused on her body gestures and verbal parodic techniques—exaggerations, direct quotations, inversions and reiterations of discourses from actual events. The study has concluded that the exaggerated realism of these elements as compared to the attributes

which they were based off of contributed to the success of the sketch. It was accessible enough for audiences to understand because it was so realistic, and this made it hard for audiences to separate real from parody, contributing to the negative effect on the GOP ticket. In this way, these elements of physical and verbal parody are useful in analyzing gendered attributes' potential effect on the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in political sketches and Weekend Update sketches on *Saturday Night Live*.

### **Hypotheses**

Existing research has informed five different hypotheses to be explored in this study.

*H1: Character representations in Saturday Night Live are gender stereotyped in order to present a “comedic other.”*

*H2: The topics and language chosen for jokes on Weekend Update perpetuate gender stereotypes.*

*H3: When principles of comedy are applied to delivering the text and language in both types of sketches, the true intention of the statement is revealed. This furthers the notion that parody unlocks the potential for societal truths to be presented.*

*H4: Over time, women have been presented on Saturday Night Live in a more positive light through both the text itself and these elements of delivery.*

*H5: Saturday Night Live conforms to postfeminist ideals.*

### **Methods**

In order to address these five hypotheses, I chose to examine political sketches and Weekend Update segments within four different episodes of the series: S2 E1 on September 18, 1976 with host Lily Tomlin; S33 E5 on February 23, 2008 with host Tina Fey; S34 E1 on September 13, 2008 with host Michael Phelps; and S42 E10 on December 17, 2016 with host

Casey Affleck. As discussed in the literature review, parody is able to play an active role in reframing and restating truths in the news, thus specifying the scope of research to sketches involving politicians and Weekend Update segments, which provide commentary on stories found in the news. These specific episodes were purposefully chosen to span several years of the show's existence in order to address the evolution of gender representation over time, if any. Additionally, the latter three episodes were chosen for the popularity of their political sketches and their occurrence within a politically polarizing time in the United States. There has been ample research on the political relevance of these sketches, but very little research on this relevance as it relates to gendered representations of politicians involved.

To properly contextualize each segment, it is important to summarize the plot of each political sketch. I did not find it necessary to summarize each Weekend Update segment, as the structure of each segment remains the same—anchors sit behind a news desk and mock stories which they find to be culturally salient. The first political sketch takes place at the 1976 Presidential Debate. It includes the moderator of the debate, Ruth Clusen (Lily Tomlin), a panel of three journalists posed to ask the candidates questions regarding their campaigns (Jane Curtin, John Belushi, Garrett Morris), and two presidential candidates, Gerald Ford (Chevy Chase) and Jimmy Carter (Dan Aykroyd). Throughout the sketch, Ford is depicted as a fumbling idiot as he spills drinks, falls over himself, and does not know how to answer any of the questions asked by the panel. Jimmy Carter is depicted as a sly politician, skirting around each issue brought up to him by the panel with methods of backtalk and avoiding the subject at hand. The second political sketch takes place at the 2008 Democratic Debate between Hillary Clinton (Amy Poehler) and Barack Obama (Fred Armisen). The debate is mediated by Campbell Brown (Kristen Wiig), and features a panel comprised of John King (Jason Sudeikis) and Jorge Ramos (Will Forte). The

sketch revolves around Campbell, King and Ramos's admiration and mere obsession with Obama, as they criticize Clinton and portray a clear bias. The third political sketch is entitled "A Nonpartisan Message from Palin and Clinton," and focuses on Sarah Palin's (Tina Fey) and Hillary Clinton's (Amy Poehler) concerted effort to cease sexism in the media regarding their respective political campaigns. The sketch also pits Clinton's hard policies and ambitions for the White House against Palin's "accidental" success. The last sketch to be analyzed portrays a fictional interaction between Kellyanne Conway (Kate MacKinnon) and President Donald Trump (Alec Baldwin) around Christmastime. They discuss Trump having to hire a Press Secretary before Melania Trump (Cecily Strong) enters and requests that Trump take a break. During this time, Vladimir Putin (Beck Bennett) arrives through the chimney as a Santa-like figure to take advantage of Trump's perceived naivety and bug the White House. It serves as a commentary on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

I have chosen to analyze each of these segments qualitatively. The qualitative variables analyzed in each political segment are as follows: gendered language as defined by Burke; head writer on the show at the time of the segment; gender of the characters; and costumes and aesthetics. For the Weekend Update segments, I analyze the topics chosen by writers for reporting as they relate to the head writer(s) at the time. Additionally, in order to examine both H3 and H4, it is important to analyze actors' delivery of the text. This is addressed by examining elements of parody outlined by Ouellette. I investigate two factors of humorous performance in order to understand the context in which the joke is being told. These two factors are as follows: exaggerations and audience receptiveness, measured by volume of laughter. I also look for exaggerated body gestures in actors' delivery. Specifying my research to these seven variables appropriately addresses each hypothesis.

## **Findings: The Portrayal of Gender**

### Political Sketches

#### *Gendered Mediation: Language, Aesthetics, Roles*

As included in Burke's definition of gendered mediation, gendered language is used frequently to make gender a relevant category of analysis in a topic that does not require it to be. In the case of political sketches, the text of each political sketch had some element of gendered language. In the first political sketch analyzed, the "Presidential Debate 1976," Gerald Ford requested that the senior linesman of the National Football League toss the coin to determine who would get the first question—Gerald Ford or his opponent, Jimmy Carter. On a broader scale, by comparing the debate to a football game, historically a sport played by and made available only to men, this political space is gendered as decidedly male. Secondly, the use of the word "linesman" perpetuates this notion by eliminating the possibility that a woman could play this role. Another instance of this gendered language can be found in Ford's response to the female moderator, Ruth Clusen, as she asks him, "Mr. President, rebuttal?" Ford responds, "Oh, no, thank you. I just had dinner" (O'Donoghue, 1976). First, interesting to note is that Clusen is in a secretarial role, mediating the conversation and keeping time. In this way, the position of moderator is already gendered female. This response then insinuates that Ford interpreted the moderator as offering to make food for him, which is a traditionally gendered female duty. In this way, Ford's response to an unspoken question is furthering the stereotype of women in the domestic space, doing domestic duties like cooking. Lastly, the candidates' discussion about abortion contributes to gendered mediation through language itself. After being asked about his stance on the issue of abortion, Ford responds that his policy would "enable a woman who

wishes to have an abortion to move to another state,” labeling the topic of abortion, an experience through which only women are biologically capable of going through, as “bad.”

The second political sketch, taking place 32 years after the first political sketch during the 2008 Democratic Debate, also incorporates gendered language. This gendered language takes place during a discussion regarding Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for president. After introducing Obama to the crowd, the moderator introduces Clinton by noting,

In 1992, Hillary Clinton’s husband, William Jefferson Clinton, became the 42<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States. A few years after that, he cheated on her again and she was able to ride the ensuing wave of sympathy into the US Senate, against a weak republican opponent in an overwhelmingly democratic state. She is known as a good listener, with an excellent attendance record (Steele et. al, 2008).

There are several gendered implications involved in this introduction. First, the moderator defines Clinton only as she is related to her husband and his scandal. She given an identity not of her own, but only in relation to her husband. Secondly, in doing so, the moderator’s description of Clinton focuses only on her role as a wife and defines her only through marital, domestic roles. When the moderator actually addresses her skills and candidacy, Clinton is described as having marginally important skills like being a “good listener with an excellent attendance record.” This would not be as much of a problematic statement if it were not prefaced by the gendered implication that she is only successful because of her husband’s fame and an “ensuing wave of sympathy.” The gendered language in this first statement works to shade the next statement regarding her listening skills and attendance record as decidedly female traits.

Gendered language also plays a role in Clinton’s self-deprecating humor in this situation. As she has already been discredited by being described as a wife and nothing else relevant to the office of president, her admission that she expects to lose several states and that “getting blown out by Obama since childhood has been a dream of [hers],” implies a problematic passivity. Instead of

employing skills necessary to win these states, Clinton is comfortable with taking a backseat and just “dreaming” that she will lose to Obama. This sort of passivity is problematic, as it is shaded by the gendered assumption that she relies on others, like her husband, to help her succeed.

Gendered language also contributes to the representation of males in this sketch, as well. Ramos is portrayed in this sketch as a “stalker,” hopelessly obsessed with Obama. The language used in these jokes insinuates a homosexual attraction for Obama, as Ramos says, “it is destiny that you and I will one day be together” (Steele et. al, 2008). The way in which this language makes a joke out of the implication of homosexuality is problematic and perpetuates this opinion as a result. The second instance of gendered language takes place at the end of the sketch, when King and Ramos respond to Obama’s answer to a question with, “Bull’s-eye. Nothing but net.”

Similar to the inclusion of a linesman in the 1976 Debate sketch, this language applies sports rhetoric to the world of politics, furthering its categorization as a “man’s world,” as sports are typically gendered male.

The third political sketch, “A Nonpartisan Message from Palin and Clinton” is ridden with gendered language, as it tackles the issue of sexism in the media by perpetuating gendered stereotypes of female politicians. However, due to this fact, this sketch is particularly hard to dissect for gendered language, as Clinton and Palin are denouncing acts of gendered language and sexism in the media. As this sketch intertwines elements of realism through real words uttered by Palin with elements of farce through Clinton’s fictitious dialogue in response to Palin’s dialogue, I focus mainly on Clinton’s dialogue, as it was manufactured by the writers of *Saturday Night Live*. For instance, as Palin notes, “One thing we can agree on is that sexism can never be allowed to permeate an American election. So, please stop Photoshopping my head on sexy bikini pictures,” to which Clinton adds, “and stop saying I have cankles” (Myers, 2008). It

is important to note that Clinton flinches when she says the word “cankles.” In this way, the notion of cankles is gendered as an issue which only women have, when juxtaposed to the issue of Palin’s bikini photos. Clinton is also covertly sexualized as she asks the media to stop calling her a “boner-shrinker.” Palin’s joke about hockey moms is especially gendered, as she asks, “What’s the difference between a hockey mom and a pit-bull ... lipstick.” It assumes that only women wear lipstick, and that aggression must be feminized in order to be palatable for the public. The last line of the sketch also serves to perpetuate stereotypes of male strength and conviction as Clinton begs the media to “grow a pair ... If you can’t I will lend you mine.” Although on the surface, this line is meant to feel empowering, this allusion to male genitalia as a source of strength and conviction furthers male stereotypes and serves the opposite purpose.

The last political sketch analyzed only has hints of gendered language and aesthetics. For instance, Kellyanne Conway and Melania Trump are both portrayed as conventionally beautiful and made-up. The first small instance of gendered language occurs when Melania Trump encourages Donald Trump to take a break from his presidential duties and celebrate the holiday, saying “Enough with the working, let’s do the Christmas.” In doing so, this loosely frames the male in the scene as the hard worker and bread-winner, and the female in the scene as a frivolous homemaker. The second small instance of gendered language occurs when Kellyanne Conway is the only character to allude to her appearance as making her look like Scrooge. Throughout the rest of the sketch, it is interesting to note that, although Trump is a male in power, his two advisors are women who know better than he does.

#### *Gendered Mediation: Writers*

The next element contributing to gendered mediation which is important to analyze is the head writer of each episode analyzed. These cast members serve as gatekeepers of information in

each segment, as they have the final word regarding which sketches pass through to the live show. Especially interesting to note that throughout all of the seasons analyzed, there were only two female head writers present in the writers' room. Michael O'Donoghue served as head writer during the second season, followed by the trio of Andrew Steele, Seth Myers and Paula Pell in Season 33, Seth Myers in Season 34, and Bryan Tucker, Sarah Schneider, Chris Kelly and Kent Sublette at the end of Season 42 (Head writer, n.d.). The overwhelmingly male nature of the head writers' room contributes to the gendered elements of these segments, as they are likely written, for the most part, from a male point of view. As discussed by Burke, it makes sense, then, that sketches feature women's appearance, domestic abilities or relation to their husbands, as they are approved from an overwhelmingly male perspective (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008). These writers decide on the information and worldview which is communicated to the public, and are therefore partially responsible for the gendered elements of these segments.

### Weekend Update

#### *Gendered Mediation: Topics Chosen and Writers*

As discussed earlier, *Saturday Night Live* writers serve as gatekeepers of information. In the case of the Weekend Update segments, this is especially true as they choose which stories to feature and mock on the show, thus highlighting certain topics and calling attention to their relevance in viewers' minds (Leano, 2014). Important to note is the frequency of male-centric topics on the show and the possible correlation to the presence of a female head writer. In this study, male-centricity can be defined by a topic pertaining to or about males, or typically gendered as male. In the first episode analyzed, under head writer Michael O'Donoghue, nine out of the eleven topics discussed in the Weekend Update were male-centric, featuring stories about male diplomats and artists. In the two sections of this segment that included female actors,

one of them died and the other was portrayed as a silly old lady who called in to ask Chevy Chase about the difference between a crustacean and a Croatian. In this way, there could be a correlation between the frequency of male-centric news stories and the gender of the head writer(s).

The next segment for analysis, taking place during Season 33, features 10 male-centric topics of the 18 total topics accounted for. Objectively and numerically, this is an improvement from the first episode analyzed, as male-centric topics account for 55% of the topics discussed, as opposed to 82% in the second season. However, it is important to note that the majority of the non male-centric topics are still sexist. Tina Fey hosts her own section of “women’s news” at the end of this Weekend Update segment, presenting a problematic view of what is important to all women. These news topics address trivial, typically female gendered issues including weight-loss remedies like Activia yogurt and Jenny Craig, celebrity news and aging. Additionally, Fey conforms to postfeminist thought as she frames women as being unable to make their own informed political decisions by joking that “women have come so far as feminists that they don’t feel obligated to vote for a candidate just because she’s a woman. Women feel free to make whatever choice Oprah tells them to” (Steele et. al, 2008). This sort of rhetoric renders feminism as irrelevant, as we no longer must fight the patriarchy by voting for a woman, and that we as women are not informed enough to make a political decision without someone telling us what to do. Although there is some improvement in these numbers, possibly correlated to the fact that a woman joined the head writers team during this season, this sort of traditionally gendered news is reflective of a male perspective.

The third segment shows even more objective improvement, as only six of the 14 topics discussed are male-centric. This is a 13% decrease from the prior episode just a few months

prior. Within those months, as the show switched over from Season 33 to Season 34, Seth Myers was left on his own as head writer. There are several cultural factors that could contribute to this decrease, including the explosion of Sarah Palin's fame after Tina Fey's impressions on the show during the prior season. Additionally, although the head writer is male, when comparing American culture in 2008 to when the show last had one writer who was male in 1976, this more recent season took place during a much more progressive time in American history.

Unexpectedly, in the last segment analyzed, the percentage of male-centric topics discussed on Weekend Update jumps back to 55%. Importantly, this takes place during a time when there are three male head writers and one female writer, in addition to two male co-anchors. Culturally, as our society continues to progress in gender equality, this statistic does not make much sense. When Burke's agenda-setting perspective and the theory of postfeminism are considered, however, this increase in male-centric topics becomes more feasible. As there are now three male head writers and two male co-anchors to approve the Weekend Update content that goes to the public, it makes sense that there are more male-centric topics accepted for the show, as these men are gatekeepers of information, wanting to communicate that which is relevant to them. Secondly, as our culture wrestles with the implications of a postfeminist society--one in which we believe that feminism has run its course and achieved its objectives, and that we no longer need to intentionally fight for women's rights—we become less incentivized to perpetuate stories revolving around women as a way of fighting a male-dominated society. According to postfeminist theory, we have achieved equality and the goals of feminism.

*Comedic Delivery: Exaggerations and Audience Receptiveness*

Delivery techniques throughout these four drastically different seasons are interestingly consistent. In political sketches, it is usually slapstick, physical comedy which gets the loudest audience laugh. Exaggerated movements, like Ford falling over his podium and rolling around the floor during the first episode for analysis, appeals to audiences. The same sort of exaggerated movement and emotion can be seen in the way the Ramos, King and Brown clap emphatically for Obama to show their affection for him. As news reporters are meant to stay unbiased, this sort of action was an exaggeration of what might be going through a real reporter's head during a time such as this, which the audience found to be particularly humorous based off of the collective volume of their laugh during this point in the sketch. In the next sketch, Palin begins gesturing to the audience like she might at a pageant, blowing kisses and mouthing the words "thank you." This is an exaggeration of her public image, as she is known to have participated in pageants in her past. In the last political sketch, both Putin's and Trump's exaggerated physicality contribute to the humor of the scene. Putin appears shirtless in Trump's chimney—an exaggerated depiction of Putin's real political aggression translated into physical aggression. Trump is depicted as excessively pouting his lips to form an exaggerated expression which is similar in nature to Trump's face in reality. Weekend Update segments feature exaggeration in a different way: anchors exaggerate the seriousness of the stories and jokes they are reporting in order to incite laughter from the heinous juxtaposition of their serious expressions and the comical words they are saying. For instance, throughout the entire first segment of Weekend Update, Chevy Chase does not crack a single smile at his own jokes, contributing to this juxtaposition and inciting laughter from the audience.

### **Discussion of Findings: Addressing Hypotheses**

This study has focused on addressing six main hypotheses in order to better understand *Saturday Night Live*'s role in gender portrayal and perpetuating gender stereotypes. These main hypotheses were:

*H1: Character representations in Saturday Night Live are gender stereotyped in order to present a "comedic other."*

*H2: The topics and language chosen for jokes on Weekend Update perpetuate gender stereotypes.*

*H3: When principles of comedy are applied to delivering the text and language in both types of sketches, the true intention of the statement is revealed. This furthers the notion that parody unlocks the potential for societal truths to be presented.*

*H4: Over time, women have been presented on Saturday Night Live in a more positive light through both the text itself and these elements of delivery.*

*H5: Saturday Night Live conforms to postfeminist ideals.*

H1, informed by research conducted prior to this study, can be confirmed through the research conducted prior to this study and the insights gained from this study. The prevalence of gendered stereotypes, even through the most recent seasons, serves to create a greater juxtaposition between what is "normal" and what is meant to be the joke. For instance, in the 1976 Debate sketch, all characters conducted themselves as any politician or reporter on camera might, except for Gerald Ford. Ford's discombobulated attire and fumbling movements caused him to be seen as absurdist. The way in which these other characters conducted themselves was stereotyped, as the women maintained their decorum and the men their assertiveness. This adheres to Falk's notion of stereotypes as the basis of humor.

H2 can also be confirmed, though the prominence of gendered gatekeeping has declined over time. While gendered topics still exist and set public agenda, the statistics show that their prominence has decreased over time. These gendered topics set the agenda for the types of news that are relevant to the different genders, thus perpetuating stereotypes.

H3 requires further research. While principles of comedy like exaggeration craft audience perception of the intended message, it is impossible to imply causation in this situation. The intended message rarely ever adheres to the message received by audiences. This hypothesis is far too subjective to prove within the scope of this study.

H4 can be confirmed. In comparing the first analyzed sketch and Weekend Update segment to the last, women are given far more agency and power in sketches, thus confirming that they are placed in a more positive light. For instance, in the first political sketch, the two women present are put in lower places of power than their male counterparts, and Tomlin is even placed in a secretarial and motherly role as moderator, pressing the buzzer and babysitting the two candidates as they wrestle with one another.

H5 is partially confirmed, as these postfeminist ideals did not originate until the later seasons of *Saturday Night Live* were taking place. In this way, it cannot be generalized that every season of *Saturday Night Live* has conformed to ideals of postfeminist discourse. However, based off of the insights presented in H1-H4, regarding gendered language and mediation, it is confirmed that in the later seasons of the show, writers have conformed to postfeminist ideals by referring to the notion that our society has come far enough as feminists that we don't have to vote for a female candidate just because she's a woman. Additionally, I did not find elements of collective activism in any of the segments I analyzed, which also conforms to postfeminist ideals. In this

way, the use of gendered mediation through language and choice of topics for Weekend Update contributes to this perpetuation of postfeminist ideals.

### **Conclusion**

This study has analyzed political segments and Weekend Update sketches from four different episodes of *Saturday Night Live* to understand the show's use of gender portrayal and mediation in perpetuating postfeminist ideals. In order to explore this notion, the study was split into five different hypotheses to be declared confirmed, debunked or neither due to a need for further research. It has been found that there is a correlation between postfeminist rhetoric in recent seasons of the show and the use of gendered language and gendered topics of discussion. The most prominent example of this sort of gendered mediation contributing to postfeminist rhetoric took place in Season 34, with Tina Fey's discussion of "women's news." Most of her discussion is extremely gendered female and essentially labeled frivolous. This perpetuates the notion that women's agendas center around celebrity news and weight-loss techniques, categorizing women as vapid and vain. Fey also openly perpetuates postfeminist rhetoric by declaring that "women have come so far as feminists that they don't feel obligated to vote for a candidate just because she's a woman" (Steele et. al, 2008).

### **Limitations**

There are several factors at play in the analysis of gendered Weekend Update segments, as they reflect upon the real news. In this way, these segments were also reflective of the demographics of our political landscape and our culture's perspective on gender roles. It is hard to entirely confirm a correlation in this context when there are so many societal factors at play. In order to fully understand these correlations, research would have to be far more in-depth regarding societal trends and history being made at the time of the sketches. There was a time

and space limitation, in this way. Additionally, as NBC is a for-profit organization, I must not neglect to mention that the sketches are written to cater to broad audiences. In this way, it makes financial sense to conform to larger societal trends in order to appeal to a larger number of viewers, debunking some of my critique of this postfeminist discourse. Again, this is a time and information constraint, as financial data on the show's viewership and profit generation for these specific seasons would have been hard to come by in a timely manner.

### **Future Research**

Further research must be conducted regarding a correlation between societal and political gender trends and the rhetoric used on the show, as mentioned in the limitations of this study. Additionally, as I conducted my research of the show, I found that the cast—even to this day—is overwhelmingly white, and that there is little discussion about race on the show. This sort of postracial ideology would be interesting to research in conjunction with the postfeminist discourse present on the show, as a way of conducting an intersectional analysis of the show. Given more time, as mentioned above, it also would be interesting to investigate a correlation between these types of postracial and postfeminist discourses and the profit generated by the show in each season analyzed, in order to provide a larger social commentary on the types of values our society prioritizes when it comes to gender and race in the media.

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