



“Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Don’t Rape”: Subverting Postfeminist Logics on *Inside Amy Schumer*

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ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates the possibilities of perspective by incongruity for feminism, while also noting its limitations, through an analysis of the sketch comedy series *Inside Amy Schumer*. Series creator Amy Schumer openly identifies as a feminist and utilizes her series to forward feminist politics. As I argue, *Inside Amy Schumer*'s comedy relies on three incongruous strategies: mimicking patriarchal logics, inverting the grotesque, and juxtaposing serious feminist issues with parodies of frivolous pop culture texts. While flawed, the biting satire of the series pairs with Schumer's offstage activism to debunk the justifying myth of postfeminist culture: that feminism is no longer needed. This study illustrates how irony remains a vital tool for feminist comics even as it recognizes the importance of distinguishing irony from pseudosatire and celebrity feminisms that reproduce dominant ideologies.

KEYWORDS

Amy Schumer; celebrity feminism; perspective by incongruity; postfeminism; women in comedy

In her 2015 HBO comedy special, Amy Schumer tells her audience, “I’m labeled a sex comic. I think it’s because I’m a girl. I feel like a guy could get up here and literally pull his dick out. Everyone would be like, ‘He’s a thinker!’” (Schumer & Rock, 2015). This joke perfectly captures Schumer’s persona—unfiltered, raunchy, and unapologetically rooted in “the female experience” (Schumer, quoted in Paskin, 2014). Moreover, the joke features Schumer’s signature feminist commentary by drawing attention to sexual double standards. Through projects like the Comedy Central series, *Inside Amy Schumer*; her 2015 autobiographical feature film, *Trainwreck*; her stand-up comedy career; and popular appearances on various award and talk shows, Schumer has become a powerful presence in pop culture. Schumer openly aligns her comedy with feminist political positions and is defining contemporary feminism for her audiences. And, as the opening joke indicates, Schumer’s feminism is defined by incongruous humor that highlights the sustained need for feminist activism.

Perhaps what is most astounding about her popularity is how explicitly Schumer ties her career and comedy to feminist projects. Indeed, many critics label Schumer a contemporary feminist icon (see Paskin, 2014; Vilkomerson, 2015; Weiner, 2015; Zinoman, 2013). The *New York Times* recently branded Schumer “a feminist hero, able to transform the butt of her own jokes into a savvy debunker of double standards” (Ryzik, 2015). For her part, Schumer openly identifies as feminist, noting it is the cause she is most interested in helping (Vilkomerson, 2015). *Inside Amy Schumer* may be “sneakily feminist,” as critics

have noted (see Paskin, 2014; Ryzik, 2015; Weiner, 2015; Zinoman, 2013), but the show clearly represents a (young, White, cisgender, and famous) woman's perspective on everyday life. This study follows in the footsteps of Campbell (1998), Demo (2000), and Lowrey, Renegar, and Goehring (2014) by examining how perspective by incongruity stimulates feminist subversion. Specifically, I argue that Schumer's comedy relies on three incongruous strategies: mimicking postfeminist discourses, inverting the grotesque, and juxtaposing serious feminist issues with parodies of frivolous pop culture texts. Ultimately, Schumer's comedy pairs with her offstage activism to debunk the "justifying myth" (Campbell, 1998) of postfeminist culture: that feminism is no longer needed.

Before creating her successful series, Schumer gained national attention in 2007 when she won fourth place on NBC's reality series *Last Comic Standing*, but Schumer's stardom is more directly tied to her success on Comedy Central. She broke out as a participant in Comedy Central's celebrity roasts, often with journalists singling her out as the best performer (see Hibberd, 2011; Vilkomerson, 2015). Moreover, Schumer's 2012 stand-up special *Mostly Sex Stuff* was Comedy Central's second-highest rated special of the year (Zinoman, 2013). Her Comedy Central sketch series, *Inside Amy Schumer*, follows in the tradition of Comedy Central sketch comedy shows that tackle larger social issues, like *Chappelle's Show* and *Key and Peele*. Schumer's is the first female-led sketch comedy series on the network.

Clearly, *Inside Amy Schumer* has been successful on a large scale, challenging widespread cultural assumptions that feminist humor, and women's comedy more broadly, does not appeal to men or mainstream audiences (Carlson, 1988; Krefting, 2014; Mizejewski, 2014). In 2016, the show finished its fourth season and is scheduled to return for a fifth—though it's currently on hiatus to accommodate Schumer's booming film career. In its first four seasons, *Inside Amy Schumer* won the first-ever Primetime Emmy award for Outstanding Variety Sketch Series as well as a Peabody Award. The show's 2015 faux commercial about women's difficulty obtaining birth control went viral to such an extent that New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand said, "It's the ripple effect Amy Schumer can reach a whole class of young men and women who can now understand the issues better now that she's delivered it so effectively with humor" (quoted in Bilger, 2015, p. 21).

The series has also catapulted its star to megastardom. According to a 2016 survey of 100 female comics from WomenInComedy.org, Amy Schumer is one of the five funniest women on the planet, alongside comic heavyweights Melissa McCarthy, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Kate McKinnon (*Elle* Staff, 2016). In 2016, Schumer became the first woman to appear on the annual list of the world's top-paid comedians, published by Forbes, and the first to headline a stand-up concert at Madison Square Garden (Berg, 2016). For better or worse, *Inside Amy Schumer* is helping define contemporary feminism for Schumer's audiences. Not only does the series mock postfeminist narratives but its star uses her celebrity for feminist causes, including serving as a leader and mentor for other female comics and gun-control activism.

The feminist implications of Schumer's work are foregrounded by her offstage persona and activism, which encourage audiences to read *Inside Amy Schumer* for feminist content. Schumer practices what Krefting (2014) labels "charged humor." Her comedy "calls into question social hierarchies, builds community, and lobbies for social change"; however, as Krefting argues, the key to charged humor is to make sure the comic's offstage behavior matches the onstage message (p. 30). Schumer excels in this arena, often converting her

comedy into real-life activism. Outside of her series, Amy Schumer launched Twitter campaigns to encourage women to send her makeup-free selfies (Messer, 2015), challenged her label as a “plus-size” comic (Eakin, 2016), and corrected Chris Harrison, host of reality television series *The Bachelor*, after he implied that “complicated” female contestants have more difficulty finding love (Mizoguchi, 2016). Schumer is also an advocate for women in comedy, often using her series as a platform for her favorite female comics. Comedians Rachel Feinstein, Nikki Glaser, Greta Lee, Margaret Rose Champagne, Grace Edwards, Bridget Everett, and Alana O’Brien have appeared in several episodes of the series since its inception, usually playing significant roles, or, in the case of Everett, delivering a cabaret performance at the end of each season. Through her close relationships and endorsements of other female comics, Schumer makes clear that her career is not an exception to the adage that women are not funny; funny women are everywhere.

Schumer also uses her celebrity to support political causes, most notably gun control. In 2015, a gunman killed two women at a screening of Schumer’s film *Trainwreck*. After this event, Schumer explicitly entered the political realm when she teamed up with her cousin, New York senator Chuck Schumer, to call for new gun-control legislation that would expand background checks and end a loophole that allows people to forgo background checks by purchasing firearms online and at gun shows (Johnson, 2015). Her activism also extends to her comedy. Schumer (2016) dedicated a chapter of *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo* to the importance of gun-control legislation, even including a list of Congress members and senators who take money from the gun lobby. Schumer also endorsed Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election and was photographed alongside Gloria Steinem at the 2017 Women’s March on Washington (Goodman, 2017, p. 19). Through her public activism, Schumer makes clear to fans that she is not adopted the feminist label as an identity marker; feminism requires activism. While her onstage persona embodies postfeminist discourses, Schumer’s offstage persona is explicitly feminist. While it is possible for audiences to view Schumer as another harmless postfeminist subject, her offstage activism invites viewers to read her through a feminist lens, closing off readings of her work as apolitical.

While Schumer has been embraced by some feminist audiences, others have rightly pointed out some glaring flaws in her feminism. Notably, Schumer has consistently been attached to a specific brand of White feminism, thanks to a history of casual “ironic” racism (Butler, 2016; Goltz, 2015; Master, 2016; Shepherd, 2016; Theriault, 2015; Zeisler, 2016). In many ways, *Inside Amy Schumer* embodies what Blay (2016) calls “white feminist TV” or “television that filters the world through the prism of the white female experience in a way that suggests it is not just *an* experience, but the *only* experience.” While this ignorance of other lifestyles fits with Schumer’s ditzy comic persona, it also reinforces a problematic embrace of White privilege in pop culture and in popular conceptions of feminism. Schumer’s focus on White women’s issues reflects her enthusiasm for liberal feminist goals that have historically backgrounded the concerns of women of color and antiracist feminists. Despite these weaknesses, it is worth noting that *Inside Amy Schumer* does not have to be a flawless representation of progressive politics to advocate for specific feminist positions.

While her brand of feminism is far from perfect, this essay highlights the feminist potential of Schumer’s comedy. In this essay, I argue that perspective by incongruity is a key strategy on *Inside Amy Schumer* and that it functions to subvert postfeminist logics

in three distinct ways: mimicking patriarchal logics, inverting the grotesque woman, and juxtaposing pressing feminist concerns with parodies of frivolous pop culture texts. In the next section, I review literature regarding the intersections of postfeminist culture and perspective by incongruity. Then, I conduct a critical reading of *Inside Amy Schumer*, highlighting the show's use of incongruity through mimicry, inversion, and parody. I conclude by discussing the limitations and possibilities of Schumer-style comedy and ironic feminism.

(Post)feminist politics and incongruity

Inside Amy Schumer is rooted in a postfeminist cultural moment. In academic circles, postfeminism refers to “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined” (McRobbie, 2007a, p. 27). That is, postfeminism describes what Butler (2013) calls an ambivalent sensibility, one that “simultaneously rejects feminist activism in favor of feminist consumption and celebrates the success of feminism while declaring its irrelevance” (p. 44). In postfeminist discourses, “patriarchy escapes responsibility,” and feminism itself becomes the cause of women's unhappiness (Dow, 1996, p. 88). Postfeminism is generally tied to figures of optimistic young women and girls, as “girls are too young to have discovered that they ‘can’t have it all’ and therefore are much more fun” for popular media (Projansky, 2007, p. 45). Further, postfeminist media texts typically assert that because feminism succeeded and women have choices, individual women must fend for themselves, erasing the need for collective action or large-scale social critique (Levine, 2008, p. 376). Finally, Douglas (2010) describes postfeminist discourses as a mixture of “embedded feminism,” in which women's achievements have been taken into account by pop culture, and “enlightened sexism,” which insists that, because women have achieved full equality and feminism succeeded, “it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women” (p. 9). At its core, postfeminism centers on women's empowerment through choice and consumption, hypersexuality, and unbridled confidence, ultimately insisting that feminism is unnecessary because women have finally achieved equality.

This combination of inflated power and ironic sexism makes postfeminist discourses particularly insidious, as postfeminist discourses “make patriarchy pleasurable for women” (Douglas, 2010, p. 12). It is in this spirit that scholars of postfeminist media have engaged the uneasy allure of texts such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* (McRobbie, 2007a), reality series like *The Bachelor* and *My Super Sweet Sixteen* (Douglas, 2010), and comedies about unhappy career women like *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* (Busch, 2009). Importantly, Dosekun (2015) points out that while most scholars situate postfeminism as a distinctly Western phenomenon, it is “readily transnationalized,” because, as a mediated and commodified set of practices, postfeminism circulates through global media platforms (p. 961). Ultimately, postfeminist discourses are “gentle, nonpolitical, and non-threatening alternative[s] to feminist empowerment” (Dubriwny, 2013, p. 118). Understanding postfeminism is crucial to reading *Inside Amy Schumer*, as the series both exploits and exposes the hollow empowerment of postfeminist culture and makes clear that women remain policed in significant ways.

Inside Amy Schumer is also rooted in a long-standing and complex relationship between feminism and irony. Strategic humor is one of the key strategies that distinguishes

third-wave feminism from other feminist movements (Sowards & Renegar, 2006). Sowards and Renegar (2006) explain, “Humor becomes an outlet for addressing oppression and discrimination The strategic use of humor creates a space for third wave feminists to enjoy their lives and feminism in the present rather than focusing on the omnipresent issues that confront modern feminists” (p. 63). The use of collective humor and perspective by incongruity are also common to the second-wave practice of consciousness raising and to feminist rhetorics more generally (Dubriwny, 2005). While Schumer is explicitly political in her offstage activism, *Inside Amy Schumer* relies on incongruities that might make her messages more palatable to mainstream audiences.

Rooted in a Burkean conception of irony, perspective by incongruity “involves deliberately bringing together opposites, without resolving the tension that exists between them,” thereby allowing audiences to hold competing ideas (Lowrey et al., 2014, p. 63). Because of this complexity, irony requires that audience members participate in meaning making. Perspective by incongruity produces cognitive dissonance to encourage audience members to check commonly held assumptions, ideally turning people into students of themselves and their social locations (Burke, 1989). That is, it highlights the limits of any one cognitive framework and produces new ways of seeing the world. Demo (2000) explains that incongruity produces “demystification rather than revolution,” by quietly and subversively challenging dominant ideals (p. 135).

Several scholars have linked perspective by incongruity to the larger feminist rhetorical project, including Lowrey et al. (2014), Dubriwny (2005), Demo (2000), and Campbell (1998). Campbell (1998), Demo (2000), and Dubriwny (2005), observe the overlap in perspective by incongruity and the feminist goal of “violating the reality structure” (Dubriwny, 2005, p. 397). This essay focuses on the centrality of perspective by incongruity to feminist comedy which questions the inevitability of traditional gender roles (Merrill, 1988). Popular press critics have noticed Schumer’s use of incongruity. Audrey Bilger (2015) of *Ms. Magazine* applauds *Inside Amy Schumer*’s “incongruous” jokes about living in a post-feminist world that highlight the targets of its satire, adding, “because the show grotesquely exaggerates the consequences, the satirical message comes across vividly” (pp. 22–23). As I argue, by utilizing incongruities, *Inside Amy Schumer* exposes the contradictions and limitations at the heart of postfeminist culture.

My analysis unfolds in three sections that represent *Inside Amy Schumer*’s strategic uses of perspective by incongruity. First, I trace how Schumer enacts mimicry by personifying lingering patriarchal logics that continue to police women and following them to their horrifying conclusions. Then, I trace how Schumer inverts the image of the grotesque woman by challenging cultural interpretations of her body and highlighting her postfeminist personality as truly grotesque. Finally, I examine the way Schumer’s comedy juxtaposes brutal, underreported feminist concerns with frivolous pop culture parodies. By combining traditional pop culture parodies with serious feminist commentary, Schumer makes clear that practices such as rape in sports and military culture, and difficulty obtaining birth control, are unacceptable in fictional utopias and, by extension, the real world.

Mimicking postfeminist surveillance

One of the most sustained targets of *Inside Amy Schumer*’s satire is the postfeminist cultural logic that women are finally liberated. To tackle this myth, the series regularly

features characters who subscribe to postfeminist tenets only to be crushed by the realization that they remain second-class citizens. Most of Schumer's characters operate on the misguided delusion that they are free from the effects of institutionalized sexism, but *Inside Amy Schumer* consistently exposes the way they remain policed, as well as postfeminism's inability to account for these structural imbalances. This incongruity between liberation and constraint represents a specific form of mimicry. Feminist mimicry usually involves "a playful repetition" of hegemonic femininity to make visible the masculine logics that dictate women's lives (Irigaray, 1977/1985, p. 76). That is, women deliberately and excessively stereotype themselves according to how patriarchal structures see them to highlight the inequity in traditional gender roles (Mock, 1999). Ultimately, mimicry is used "to expose the incongruity of a normative standard" (Demo, 2000, p. 141). However, instead of excessively stereotyping women, *Inside Amy Schumer* flips the power differential and presents exaggerated versions of patriarchal authority that prevent women from accessing postfeminist liberation, destabilizing the subject/object split (Mock, 1999). The series mimics the everyday sexist practices that women are expected to endure without argument. By doing so, *Inside Amy Schumer* exposes these logics as sexist and ridiculous while also mocking postfeminist insinuations that women are liberated.

Throughout the series, Schumer only plays characters named Amy, all of whom share one common trait: They are overwhelmed and unsatisfied with postfeminist culture. In fact, one of the most consistent targets of critique on *Inside Amy Schumer* is the culture of surveillance that accompanies postfeminism. Rosalind Gill (2007) lists surveillance as one of the defining traits of postfeminist media, as women's lives are under new forms of scrutiny. In postfeminist culture, women are expected to celebrate their liberated status by making the right decisions; pursuing luxurious, perfectionistic domestic lives; and managing the pressures of time, career, and consumer choices (Negra, 2009). Indeed, "The resulting affective hallmark of postfeminism is composure—by contrast, feminist women or women whose lives are 'off script' tend to be depicted as angry, melancholy, or paralyzed by ambivalence" (Negra, 2009, p. 139). Gill (2007) argues this surveillance is particularly directed at women's bodies. She writes: "Surveillance of women's bodies constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms. Women's bodies are evaluated, scrutinized, and dissected by women as well as men, and are always at risk of 'failing'" (p. 149). This bodily surveillance often culminates in an obsession with makeovers to achieve personal serenity (Chen, 2013; Negra, 2009; Gill, 2007). In particular, women are encouraged to buy into commercial beauty culture and highlight their femininity through what Chen (2013) calls "a discourse of empowered beauty" (p. 441). To be good postfeminist citizens, women are encouraged to become empowered through "choosing" traditional expressions of femininity (McRobbie, 2007b).

Inside Amy Schumer regularly undermines postfeminist surveillance by juxtaposing optimistic women with the structures that limit their choices. Schumer's characters often revel in their liberated statuses only to realize that they do not have access to things like health care and birth control and—most dishearteningly for her characters—that they are still subject to gendered double standards. The series mimics patriarchal logics by personifying the everyday and legal practices that surveil women and drawing attention to the sexual double standards women continue to face. These strategies highlight that women have not achieved true liberation and feminist activism is still needed.

One of the clearest through lines on *Inside Amy Schumer* is that women's choices remain limited in significant ways. The series illustrates how women are monitored by several sources, such as corporations, media outlets, legislators, and women themselves. As the show points out, women are policed in ways big and small. The series tackles larger, more destructive practices, like rape culture, and it mimics smaller, everyday surveillance practices, like the way women hide their tampons on their way to public restrooms (Caramelle et al., 2016c), or the way women are encouraged to snack in private because they are taught to be "humiliated by basic human desires" (Caramelle et al., 2016b). Not surprisingly, given Schumer's public criticisms of plus-size labeling practices, *Inside Amy Schumer* draws attention to the ways women's bodies remain heavily scrutinized in everyday interactions. By showing optimistic, liberated women alongside the barriers that impede them, the series exposes the incongruities at the heart of postfeminist "freedom."

Inside Amy Schumer emphasizes that women are policed by an overwhelmingly male-dominated legislature. The series dedicates several skits to women's difficulty obtaining birth control and reproductive health care. In a season four skit titled "Dr. Congress," Amy visits her gynecologist only to find that her doctor has been replaced by a group of congressmen who insist on performing her Pap smear themselves. The congressmen consistently mimic patriarchal rhetorics and expose the ridiculousness at their core. The skit uses incongruity in several ways. It exaggerates male regulation of women's health, pointing out the ridiculousness of allowing men to legislate women's bodies. Their ignorance becomes clear when one of the congressmen refers to Amy's period as her "lady curse" and another becomes perplexed that Amy is unmarried, childless, and sexually active. This discussion also highlights the disconnect between conservative views of women as sexually pure, and women's lived realities as they warn Amy that "even though we're doing this [Pap smear], we are not your boyfriend."

Finally, the skit highlights the incongruities between science and gender expectations. Although the congressmen are fundamentally unqualified to perform medical exams, they feel confident that their elected positions and knowledge of how women are "supposed" to act make them experts. As one of the men explains, "We're the House Committee on Women's Health, so I think we have a better idea than a bunch of science-y nerdles" (Caramelle et al., 2016e). When Amy asks if there are any women on the women's health committee, the congressmen laugh and one says, "That would be like letting the lions run the zoo." The skit foregrounds how public policies about women's health render women less than human, which is particularly biting given the current political climate surrounding women's health. Schumer takes a clear political stance in favor of women's free and easy access to health care in a time when Congress regularly threatens to remove funding for organizations like Planned Parenthood. *Inside Amy Schumer*'s mimicry of postfeminism becomes a decidedly political act. As Demo (2000) argues, feminist mimicry reaches transcendence through an "appropriation and ironic repositioning of conventional patriarchal symbolic codes" (p. 140). In a similar vein, *Inside Amy Schumer* utilizes postfeminist discourses to expose the contradictions at the heart of postfeminist culture.

Postfeminist mimicry appears throughout *Inside Amy Schumer*. The series invites anger over the structures that exist to erode women's confidence and limit their ability to move freely in the world, including the Internet. In one skit, Twitter introduces a new "I'm Going to Rape and Kill You" button because, as a Twitter spokesperson explains, "Over 120 percent of Tweets directed at women refer to raping and/or killing them" (Caramelle

et al., 2016f). While the 120% statistic is an exaggeration, the series mimics a very specific expression of gendered violence that women face for daring to speak publicly (see Hess, 2014). While postfeminist culture insists women should be endlessly confident, *Inside Amy Schumer* reminds viewers that everyday moments of Internet violence routinely undercut women's feelings of safety and their abilities to voice their opinions.

Inside Amy Schumer also mimics the way women are socialized to police themselves, often through language and social rituals. Each season features a skit with the same formula: A group of women get together, mindlessly spout some new mantra women are expected to employ to make themselves look compassionate and humble, and then one woman breaks the script, leading to total chaos. Season four sees a group of pregnant women propose more extreme birthing plans while insisting selflessly that their idea is "better for the baby" (Caramele et al., 2016d). One woman brags that her doula is a three-month-old baby, while another touts her Sea Turtle birth plan: "It's when you give birth on a beach, and you dig a small hole, and you kick sand on the baby, and you see if it crawls into the ocean or into your arms. It's better for the baby." The group eventually gives birth to demons after one of their friends says her birth plan is to go to the hospital and do whatever the doctor suggests.

This collection of skits highlights the particularly insidious verbal practices women adopt to reinforce their femininity (and the femininity of others) in everyday interactions. Other episodes see women deflect one another's compliments, chastise themselves for eating too much, continually apologize, and dream of opening a bakery in Maine (see Dunnigan et al., 2013; Altman et al., 2014c; Cantor, Caramele, Dunnigan, Glaser, et al., 2015a; Cantor, Caramele, Dunnigan, Edwards et al., 2015). Because this series never repeats skits or characters, this is its closest approximation to a recurring sketch. Viewers can see that these verbal practices recur in different ways. By mimicking these commonplace discourses, *Inside Amy Schumer* highlights the ways women become complicit in their own surveillance. Exaggerating patriarchal discourses draws attention to the sexist and incongruous implications of everyday practices that shame women into complicity, sneakily limiting their "choices" in postfeminist culture.

Inverting the grotesque

On *Inside Amy Schumer*, Schumer's various characters act as perfect postfeminist subjects; however, by appropriating the language and artifice of postfeminist culture, she exposes the grotesque effects that adhering to postfeminist ideologies can have on women. As a female comedian whose persona hinges on excessive speech, sexuality, diet, and alcohol consumption, Schumer embodies what Kathleen Rowe (1995) dubs the Unruly Woman. Based in traditions of carnival and the grotesque, the Unruly Woman unsettles social hierarchies, makes femininity laughable, and revels in excess, often producing ambivalence in audiences (Rowe, 1995). Like Schumer, Unruly Women are associated with grotesque bodies through "fatness, pregnancy, age, loose behavior," and other violations of traditional femininity (Rowe, 1995, p. 33); however, Unruly Women use their nontraditional bodies to comment on gender norms. Schumer follows in a line of unruly women—from Miss Piggy to Margaret Cho to Sarah Silverman—who utilize notions of the grotesque female body to unsettle gender ideologies (see Mizejewski, 2014; Pelle, 2010; Rowe, 1995). While grotesque bodies have long been celebrated in comedy (Mizejewski, 2014), *Inside Amy*

Schumer inverts this trope by celebrating her unconventional body and vilifying Amy's personality instead.

As a strategy, ironic inversions involve reversing tropes and expectations so that the target of ridicule changes (Hutcheon, 2000). That is, "What goes forth as A returns as non-A" (Burke, 1989, p. 260). Through ironic inversions, "that which is unquestioned can become questionable" (Galewski, 2007, p. 87). In this vein, *Schumer* extends the concept of the unruly woman by inverting the source of her hideousness. While audiences expect *Schumer's* characters to be grotesque by virtue of her untraditional beauty (by incredibly restrictive Hollywood standards), *Inside Amy Schumer* demonstrates that truly grotesque behavior results from following postfeminist standards.

Inside Amy Schumer is interesting for distorting the image of the grotesque woman in incongruous ways. Throughout the series, it becomes clear that *Schumer's* body is attractive, but her characters' postfeminist personalities are truly grotesque. By featuring characters who so thoroughly embody postfeminist tenets—they are hyperfeminine, hypersexual, self-obsessed, and obsessed with consumer culture as the path to happiness—*Inside Amy Schumer* presents the dark side of adhering to postfeminist culture: a generation of stylish narcissists who are incapable of empathy. The series accomplishes this incongruity in two ways. First, the series exposes the hypocrisy and sexism inherent in labeling her body unattractive. Then, the series shows how the characters who most closely adhere to postfeminist tenets are the most monstrous.

Inside Amy Schumer regularly critiques how only certain types of women are allowed to be sexy. For example, in one skit, Amy's husband shares graphic stories about his favorite sexual encounters with her, which horrifies his male friends because Amy is off-limits as a sex object: She is married (and therefore sexually unavailable), maternal, and mutual friends with these men (Altman et al., 2014c). His friends don't want to hear that Amy gets turned on by their "sick [tax] return" or when "the kids were at their Gran-Gran's" because, to them, she is "Mrs. Christmas," and therefore pure and asexual. *Inside Amy Schumer* highlights that only particular women are allowed to be sex objects. In the viral sensation skit called "Last Fuckable Day," Tina Fey, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Patricia Arquette teach Amy about an actress's last fuckable day, or the day every actress ages out of attractiveness. While there is no official declaration, signs include when "the only thing they have for you to wear [in a movie] are long sweaters" or "the poster for your movie is just, like, a picture of a kitchen" (Cantor, Caramelle, Dunnigan, Glaser, et al., 2015b). The skit inverts ideas of beauty as they point out that, by Hollywood standards, men like Jack Nicholson, Bruce Willis, and Larry King are considered "fuckable forever," while the obviously attractive Julia Louis-Dreyfus has reached her expiration date. The series also makes clear that maintaining beauty standards is an unwinnable game. As Fey and Louis-Dreyfus point out, actresses can try to delay the aging process through plastic surgery, but "then they end up looking like a purse that melted in a car accident" or "when a kid draws a face on its hand." The series points out that postfeminist culture dictates that sexually attractive women can only be young, White, traditionally feminine, single, thin, playfully flirtatious, and easily commodified.

These skits provide an important contrast to others that treat *Schumer* as desirable, helping foreground the arbitrary nature of beauty standards. She can play hypersexualized Russian tennis stars, center several skits on her sexual encounters, and embody "Amy Lake Blively," a celebrity It Girl whose physical attractiveness and knowledge of *Star Wars* brings

an entire studio audience to orgasm. In fact, Schumer's entire persona centers on her sexuality. *Grantland* describes Amy's onstage persona as "the slut with the heart of gold" (Lambert, 2014). Several of Schumer's skits, interviews, and stand-up segments focus on aspects of sex, often presenting Amy as sexually voracious. She even "brags" that during her first encounter with the paparazzi, TMZ "asked me, like, a slut question, 'cause I'm the It Girl for that" (Altman et al., 2014a). *Inside Amy Schumer* features skits and stand-up bits about "dick pics," buying pregnancy tests, getting herpes, and having sex with magicians, alongside interviews with phone sex workers, porn cameramen, and self-proclaimed perverts. While the show's content verges on hypersexual, by and large *Inside Amy Schumer* promotes sex-positive attitudes. Her characters are rarely judged for the amount or type of sex they have. But it consistently attaches Amy's body to the sexual content, demonstrating that she is sexually desirable and knowledgeable.

By refusing conventional readings of her body as unattractive, Schumer makes an important feminist intervention. Like Margaret Cho before her, Schumer utilizes comedy as "a social and political tool to challenge the restrictive ways she has been categorized" (Pelle, 2010, p. 22). That is, comedy becomes an important strategy to reexamine the ways mainstream culture labels bodies that do not conform to Hollywood ideals. As someone who fluctuates between a size six and eight, Schumer is not plus-size, but has been labeled plus-size throughout her career (Eakin, 2016). This activist work carries into Schumer's offstage life, as well. While accepting *Glamour UK's* 2015 Trailblazer Award, Schumer announced, "I'm probably, like, 160 pounds right now, and I can catch a dick whenever I want. Like, that's the truth" (Shechet, 2015). Further, by framing Schumer's body as both appealing *and* repulsive, Schumer undermines women's beauty standards writ large, framing them as contradictory and meaningless.

Postfeminist grotesqueness reaches its nadir in a season four music video about women's limitless choices. In it, Amy and her friends sing an ode to female self-esteem (Sara Bareilles supplies their singing voice) to reassure women that all of their choices are amazing simply because they are women. Bareilles sings: "You are gorgeous, no matter what you do. You are perfect, no matter how you act. Where my glamorous girls at? You better accept the fact, you're beautiful" (Caramele et al., 2016d). Through its over-the-top chorus, the song encapsulates postfeminist culture's insistence that women are fabulous and strong no matter what. Schumer and her attractive friends become the faces of postfeminism and are explicitly labeled beautiful and gorgeous to establish their desirability; however, their behavior quickly turns the characters grotesque as they follow postfeminist girl power discourses. Throughout the song, Amy and her friends "make a Kickstarter page to fund your fake cancer," "claim a miscarriage when no pregnancy occurred, or do karaoke rap so you can scream the n-word," and engage in "Catfishing your autistic neighbor with a pic of Spider-man." The song highlights the asininity of the claim that any and all "choices" are feminist as long as they are "chosen" by women. After all, focusing on individuals and their choices "quickly obscures the larger role that systems of sexism, racism, and capitalism play in defining and constraining those choices" (Zeisler, 2016, p. 113). Furthermore, the women become villainous through their vile behavior, which culminates in the women robbing bank tellers at gunpoint.

The song quickly shifts from run-of-the-mill female empowerment to "a celebration of sociopathic entitlement" that exposes the horrific behavior associated with postfeminist culture (Stephens, 2016). Explicitly revealing the satirical message of the skit, a DJ

interrupts the song and encourages the crowd to “keep your chin held high and your empathy nonexistent. You do you, girl.” While Schumer and her friends are presented as attractive, their behavior turns them grotesque, signaling to audiences that adhering to postfeminist discourses is more heinous than the appearance of a nontraditional body. Ironic inversions can reveal how sexism turns women into the “misshapen product of a misguided process” (Galewski, 2007, p. 96). Through this perspective by incongruity, *Inside Amy Schumer* exposes a gap between what postfeminist discourses promise (happiness and freedom) and what they deliver (self-centeredness and judgment). Throughout the skit and the series in general, Schumer points out that in the real world this unchecked confidence in one’s choices can create a generation of narcissists, too concerned with instant gratification to care about the people around them.

Inside Amy Schumer equates postfeminist girl power with a total focus on the self that leads to loneliness, vapidness, and despicable behavior. In a season two skit, Amy bargains with God to take away her herpes. To restore balance in the universe, she is willing to let God wipe out an entire village in Uzbekistan, but she refuses his offers to abstain from alcohol or aerosol hairspray and call her mother more often. Their interaction prompts God to lament, “I really need to stop making so many White girls” (Altman et al., 2014d). Another skit sees Amy and her friends judge a group of strippers, wishing “they could draw their self-worth from something else” and that they had better relationships with their fathers, only for the camera to reveal that Amy and her friends are attending a pole-dancing class, thereby drawing their own self-worth from their sexuality (Altman et al., 2014b). While postfeminist culture promises women that they are finally liberated, it also creates a culture of hypersurveillance and judgment, opening all of women’s choices to scrutiny and encouraging women to label one another sluts, bitches, and dumb blondes (Negra, 2009). By inverting notions of the grotesque, *Inside Amy Schumer* argues these postfeminist behaviors and judgments are much more horrific than feminist values like empathy, allyship, or body positivity.

Feminist pop culture parodies

In addition to mimicking patriarchal logics and inverting the grotesque, *Inside Amy Schumer* utilizes parody in ways that provoke incongruity. Parody represents another ironic rhetorical strategy (Hutcheon, 2000). At its core, parody replicates some original text or dominant discourse to expose the limitations of its message (Hariman, 2008; Hutcheon, 2000; Peifer, 2013). As Hutcheon (2000) explains, parody is “imitation with critical difference” (p. 36). Successful parody also “refracts reality” to expose absurdities or contradictions in the social order (Peifer, 2013, p. 170). Finally, as Hariman (2008) notes, parody exposes the limits of hegemony, as it “replicates some prior form and thereby makes that form an object of one’s attention rather than a transparent vehicle for some other message” (p. 253). By reworking prominent apolitical pop culture texts into vehicles for feminist rage, *Inside Amy Schumer* demonstrates to viewers that certain cultural practices are unacceptable in real and fantasy worlds and calls on viewers to be aware of sexist and misogynistic practices.

By placing pressing, often graphic or uncomfortable feminist issues in inappropriate pop culture contexts, Schumer emphasizes how horrific these issues are in the real world. For example, a famous season two skit finds Amy playing her boyfriend’s *Call of Duty*-style

war video game as a female soldier, and her character is immediately raped by her supervising officer. The objectives of the game immediately shift, as Amy has to fill out paperwork, appear in court, and undergo character assassination only for a commanding officer to overturn her attacker's guilty verdict. In a biting twist, her boyfriend does not believe that her character was raped, insisting, "I checked the message boards, and it doesn't say anything [about rape], so obviously, you did something wrong. It's probably best if you don't play" (Altman et al., 2014c).

In another skit, Steve Buscemi announces the Academy Award nominations for Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture. As the reel of nominated performances runs, it reveals that all of the actresses have been nominated for playing supportive wives, far removed from the action of their films. In the ensuing montage of nominees, five clips of various actresses are on the phone with their husbands, begging them to come home. In one clip, Julianne Moore stars in *The Time-Traveler's Wife's Husband*, pleading, "Our baby's due tomorrow. You need to come back to our past ... for his future" (Caramela et al., 2016a). The series utilizes parody to expose the repetitive, one-dimensional, and highly gendered nature of the roles available to women. Buscemi insists, "Without the five beautiful, talented women we're honoring now, their movies would only have five names on the poster instead of six," drawing attention to how poorly represented women remain in mainstream cinema.

These interventions represent significant departures from postfeminist culture. As Angela McRobbie (2007a) notes, in postfeminist culture "the new female subject, despite her freedom, is called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl. Indeed, this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom" (p. 34). By drawing attention to topics like rape in football and military contexts, reproductive rights, ageism, and the limited roles available to actresses, Schumer breaks with postfeminist warnings to remain silent.

This juxtaposition of pop culture parody and feminist issues is exemplified by the season three skit "Football Town Nights" (Cantor, Caramela, Dunnigan, Glaser, et al., 2015b). A parody of the critically acclaimed series *Friday Night Lights*, the skit follows the new coach for a local high school football team. As his first order of business, the coach institutes a no-raping policy, earning the hatred of his small town. The skit parodies the idyllic small-town ethos of *Friday Night Lights*, which was set in Dillon, Texas, often replicating the blue-collar imagery of the show. It also turns the Southern charm of that series into something more sinister. The townspeople are outraged by the no-raping policy because they see rape as "boys being boys." The football players are equally outraged, as they believe their heroic status entitles them to rape. The players run through a litany of rape culture tropes, asking their coach if rape still counts: when the victim is wearing a sexy Halloween costume; if the rapist's mother is the district attorney and will not prosecute; or if the victim is drunk, has a reputation, or changes her mind about having sex. By taking a wholesome, idyllic setting and introducing devastating rape culture discourses, the skit provides incongruity for viewers who expect a utopian, supportive fantasy realm. Thus, the series reminds viewers that sexist and misogynistic practices exist everywhere—including the real world.

Because the coach is the gateway character for viewers, viewers are invited to match the coach's perspective, seeing rape as inexcusable and horrific. Furthermore, as the counterpart to Coach Taylor, the hero of *Friday Night Lights*, the coach is immediately associated with nobility and heroism. The players and ignorant townspeople become objects of

ridicule, exposing the grotesque, illogical nature of rape culture myths. The message of the skit becomes clear when the coach finally snaps at his team:

How do I get through to you boys that football isn't about rape? It's about violently dominating anyone that stands between you and what you want. Now, you gotta get yourself into the mind-set that you are gods. And you are entitled to this! That other team? They ain't just gonna lay down and give it to you! You gotta go out there and take it!

The skit invites viewers to become outraged by drawing attention to the cultural practices and values that allow rape culture to exist. Significantly, Schumer and her writers lay the blame for rape culture in patriarchal values like domination, aggression, and ruthless ambition by once again personifying patriarchal logics.

By parodying specific pop culture genres and texts, the feminist messages of the series become both more explicit and more palatable to mainstream audiences. Mainstream audiences can derive safe, apolitical laughs from seeing pop culture texts being lampooned, while feminists will recognize the feminist commentary of the sketches. As an example, "Football Town Nights" provides devastating commentary on rape culture; however, it also features a recurring joke where the coach's perpetually tipsy wife enters scenes drinking from an increasingly larger wine glass. These pop culture parodies induce incongruity as Schumer presents misogynistic practices in utopian worlds, implicitly reminding viewers that feminism is needed everywhere as a corrective to gender imbalances.

The rhetorical limits of celebrity feminist irony

Inside Amy Schumer's use of perspective by incongruity is novel for the way it exposes the ironies at the heart of postfeminist logics. That is, the series makes clear that we cannot be postfeminist when so much feminist work remains to be done. Mimicking postfeminist discourses, inverting notions of the grotesque, and combining pop culture parody and feminist commentary all unsettle notions that feminism is located in the past. These forms of perspective by incongruity work in conjunction to serve as timely and necessary reminders that, despite feminism's status as the preeminent indicator of which celebrities are "woke," feminist action is still needed. The series exposes contradictory demands women face, structures and practices that police women, impossible standards of beauty, and misogynistic cultural frameworks. It also twists notions of the grotesque to turn postfeminist subjects into attractive monsters, insinuating to viewers that postfeminist discourses create narcissistic, unsatisfied, delusional subjects. While *Inside Amy Schumer* also features innocuous sketches, including one where Liam Neeson owns a funeral home that refuses to bury "cowards," postfeminist culture remains the most consistent target of Schumer's comedy. The series is remarkable for balancing biting feminist commentary with mainstream comedy in a way that allows Schumer to become successful on a large scale, indicating that feminist comedy might be becoming more palatable to audiences.

There are many positive aspects of *Inside Amy Schumer's* ironic reappropriations of postfeminist discourses. Notably, Schumer is not the only comedian who ironically embodies the postfeminist hot mess. Petersen (2015) namechecks *Trainwreck*, *The Mindy Project*, and *Girls* for featuring characters who are "inconsiderate, self-indulgent, and total assholes. [Because] that's the point. Trying to fulfill the contradictory demands of postfeminism would turn any woman into a dick." Postfeminist discourses are contradictory, harmful, and demeaning to women, and comedy provides a surrealist atmosphere for

women to personify postfeminist subjects, turning their characters into “total assholes” to show audiences that postfeminist culture is failing women.

While this type of irony can be difficult to decode, it still has important feminist potential. Women comics’ roles are already riddled with irony and contradiction, as hegemonic femininity precludes demanding attention, speaking publicly, or challenging power structures. As Gilbert (2017) explains, many marginalized comics serve contradictory roles as “‘part time bomb and part time capsule,’ at once preserving cultural memory and containing potentially incendiary critique” (p. 65). Furthermore, because “stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision,” women often rely on ironic strategies to ingratiate themselves to audiences, which may explain why Schumer is accused of “sneak-attack” feminism (Greenbaum, 1999, p. 33). It is often by utilizing irony that feminist comedy allows the speaker to appear to initiate a dialogue with the audience, introducing them to women’s lifestyles and values “without exercising an obvious editorial statement” (Merrill, 1988, p. 277). Although they can—and have—become co-opted, ironic strategies are vital to feminist projects.

While I argue that Schumer’s use of perspective by incongruity highlights the inconsistencies at the heart of postfeminist culture, there remain serious limitations to ironic humor. As her recent controversies indicate, Schumer criticizes but does not fully escape postfeminist discourses. Part of this failure lies in the limitations of irony as a comedic practice. As Galewski (2007) notes, “Irony affords a particular ‘intimacy’ with the discourses that it is attempting to question, and this proximity risks turning into complicity as well” (p. 87). In this vein, *Inside Amy Schumer* can mock the limited representations of women in pop culture in one episode and dedicate a skit to the first female president getting hysterical during her period in the next.

As an element of postfeminist culture, irony deserves continued scrutiny. Operating on the assumption that feminism has succeeded, it has become fashionable to resurrect sexist imagery with a “knowing wink” (Douglas, 2010, p. 13). Terrill (2003) argues that irony may be too confusing for audiences and ultimately promote inaction, while Lowrey and colleagues (2014) point out that Sarah Silverman’s ironic humor risks alienating audiences who are unable to decode the joke. As Goltz (2015) asserts, irony “is never stable enough to eliminate any potential ambiguity” and requires audiences to filter jokes through their own positionalities (p. 283). By adopting an ironically postfeminist persona, Schumer invites audiences to take her message less seriously; however, when combined with her explicitly feminist commentary, she may also be inviting the audience to view her feminism as ironic. For example, viewers may know that *Trainwreck* is an autobiographical film about Schumer’s life, but develop confusion over whether Schumer is self-identifying as a trainwreck or mocking postfeminist trainwrecks. Furthermore, it is important to separate productive irony from pseudosatire, which contains “irony without satire, merely to deride” and reproduces dominant ideologies (Medjesky, 2017, p. 197). Schumer herself often engages in pseudosatire when she makes racist jokes, such as an aside to Black comic Patrice O’Neal that she assumes his grandmother raised him (see Goltz, 2015). Goltz (2015) points out that while other comedians utilize White ignorance to “unmask and interrogate privilege,” Schumer conjures something “more sinister, inhumane, and difficult to negotiate” (p. 276). Despite her feminist credentials, Schumer demonstrates the limits of embedding herself in postfeminist culture.

Because of her hypervisibility and influence, it is important to note that Schumer's feminism is decidedly imperfect. Both her comedy and her sketch series largely center hegemonic White, heteronormative, privileged, cisgendered perspectives. While Schumer has publicly committed to broadening her worldview, she continues to court controversy. In October 2016, Schumer released an homage to Beyoncé's "Formation" music video starring herself, Goldie Hawn, Joan Cusack, and Wanda Sykes. Although intended as a tribute to women's empowerment, many viewers pointed out the racist implications of erasing Black women from a song about celebrating Black womanhood, prompting the Twitter hashtag "AmySchumerGottaGoParty" (see Butler, 2016; Master, 2016).

Schumer also received criticism for her 2017 film *Snatched*, based on the inherently racist premise in which she and Goldie Hawn play a mother and daughter who are kidnapped while on vacation in Ecuador. One critic labeled the film a "neo-colonialist comedy caper masquerading as mommy-and-me time" (Anderson, 2017). Schumer's frequent excuse for this type of humor—that the joke is on her ditzzy White girl persona—illustrates Pérez's (2017) observation that "by suggesting that the insults, slurs, and stereotypes that target whites and non-whites carry equal weight, the continued significance of race and racism is minimized and trivialized" (p. 88). As Goltz (2015) observes, Schumer's progressive gender politics makes her racial jokes more glaringly shallow. This does not mean Schumer is not a feminist, but it does mean she forwards a particular version of feminism that is largely constrained by whiteness.

After only four seasons, *Inside Amy Schumer* may be past its prime as a critique of post-feminism. Critics considered the most recent season of *Inside Amy Schumer* weak, accusing the series of losing its satirical edge due to its overwhelming focus on Amy's adjustment to becoming an A-list celebrity (Grierson, 2016; Miller, 2016; Sims, 2016; VanDerWerff, 2016). The format of the show also changed, switching from Amy's woman-on-the-street interviews with strangers to bar-side interviews with her closest stand-up comic friends. In short, critics and audiences view *Inside Amy Schumer* as increasingly unrelatable, with its ratings dropping to series lows in 2016 (VanDerWerff, 2016). While her ties to Hollywood may lead to insightful pop culture criticisms, they also serve as a liability that highlights her privilege. As it grows in influence, perhaps *Inside Amy Schumer* is engaging in navel gazing more than biting feminist commentary. As Dow (1996) warns readers, there is no danger in taking pleasure in pop culture iterations of feminism, but there is in "in mistaking them for something more than the selective, partial images that they are" (p. 214). Pop culture texts like *Inside Amy Schumer* will always have limitations.

Schumer's limits as a feminist ally are also connected to the limitations of celebrity feminists. In many ways, Schumer sidesteps the biggest downside of celebrity feminism—that "too often, what's emphasized is not the right to be equal and autonomous, but simply the right to have the existence of feminism itself acknowledged as legitimate" (Zeisler, 2016, p. 126). However, Schumer's feminism aligns with the popular media tendency to spotlight "feminism that does or does not 'sell well'" (Dow, 1996, p. 205). Schumer's version of feminism is hypersexual and foul-mouthed, making her popular among young men. Her comedic persona relies on the juxtaposition between her traditionally feminine appearance and her raunchy jokes. *Inside Amy Schumer*'s first season was an anomaly for drawing 50% male viewers (Zinoman, 2013), and the series is cocreated by Daniel Powell, ensuring that men's voices are prominent within the series. In addition to her popularity among young men, Schumer's charming award- and talk-show appearances have been so well received that

Entertainment Weekly published a satirical guide called “How to Talk to Your Parents About Amy Schumer,” warning young people that Schumer’s charming talk-show appearances may lead to uncomfortable conversations if parents seek out Schumer’s work (Keith, 2015).

Schumer serves as an example of Dow’s (1996) warning that the feminisms that receive the most attention are the ones that are the most media friendly. Schumer is cute, writes scandalous jokes, and has an army of celebrity feminist friends, including Jennifer Lawrence and Lena Dunham. As a media commodity, *Inside Amy Schumer* is always going to present a limited version of feminism, albeit one that has clearly hit a cultural chord. Whether the show’s feminist political potential has been hijacked by Schumer’s own success remains to be seen. Nevertheless, *Inside Amy Schumer* illustrates the possibilities of perspective by incongruity as a rhetorically powerful comedic intervention into a postfeminist media culture. Women in comedy have always courted controversy from feminists, from Joan Rivers’s and Phyllis Diller’s reliance on self-deprecation to Sarah Silverman’s older pseudosatirical race jokes. Despite her weaknesses, Schumer remains remarkable for consistently undermining postfeminist culture and its false promises to empower women—a worthy and vital feminist project.

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