

Broad City and the Madonna-Whore Dichotomy

The Madonna-whore dichotomy has largely influenced the way we view women in everyday life and even more so in media. The concept leads us to categorize and label women based on the way they perform femininity. It tells us that women are considered "good" Madonnas when they adhere to gendered norms, or they are "bad" whores when they do not. As closed minded as this is, it is largely what we still view in television and film. We view it in shows like Jane the Virgin where it is based on Jane's virginity and the importance of saving sex until marriage. Fortunately, we also have shows like Broad City that depict funny, independent women who enjoy having sex, smoking weed, and being feminists. It is through the main characters Ilana and Abbi that we see that women can be authentically themselves and not adhere to gendered norms while still being good people.

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Broad City is a comedic television show that is produced, directed, and written by the two female lead characters (IMDB 2019). The show follows the lives of Ilana Wexler and Abbi Abrams who are best friends navigating their twenties and living in New York City. Through this viewpoint, the audience gets to watch Ilana and Abbi restructure television and film's ideas of how women should act. This is because Ilana and Abbi are funny, sex-positive, have attainable bodies and beauty, smoke weed, hate their jobs, and are unapologetically themselves. As a type of stoner comedy *Broad City* is ground-breaking because it fundamentally eschews the typical focus on men smoking weed while objectifying women (i.e. Pineapple Express, Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle, How High) (Teitel 2014). In contrast, Ilana and Abbi smoke weed because they enjoy it and it is a form of meaningless fun (Teitel 2014).

These traits are uncommon in the majority of comedic television because it is typical to have a male-centred cast due to the stereotype that men are funnier than women and because society holds women to a different standard than men. Typically, when people think of stoner comedy or casual sex, they tend to think of men in those roles. For example, Charlie Sheen is well known for his character Charlie on *Two and a Half Men* where he has sex with many women (Teitel 2014).

In an interview with *Glamour*, Ilana Wexler notes that women are forced to repeat themselves in order to be heard and for that reason it is important for women like herself to create funny content not only for feminism but also to change the world of comedy into one that is not curated just for men (Morris 2016). In this sense, the creators feel that they are making strides for feminism by breaking down stereotypes and by showcasing and normalizing a different kind of woman. This female archetype does not have to be perfect and hyperfeminine, rather she can be funny, enjoy sex, smoke weed, and just be herself.

The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy

Kahalon et al. (2019) suggest that women in North American society tend to be framed within a Madonna-whore dichotomy in which women are either good and pure 'Madonnas', or they are bad and promiscuous 'whores'. This Madonna-whore dichotomy stems from Freud's psychoanalytic complex in which he believed men felt affection and sexual desire for their mothers (Kahalon et al.

2019). They argue that Freud believed that men grow up and feel anxiety over these feelings of attraction, so they categorize women into women they admire or women they are sexually attracted to. This results in men valuing and loving women they admire and devaluing and hating women they are sexually attracted to (Kahalon et al. 2019).

The feminist perspective of the Madonna-whore dichotomy is that conventional societal attitudes perpetuate the idea that women are either virgins or they are whores (Kahalon et al. 2019). It is the idea that women could not possibly be both feminine and act in typically perceived masculine ways. It puts women into the position of being forced to choose what box to put themselves into. This leads to heterosexual women feeling shameful but also confused because they are supposed to strive to be desired by men while they are also supposed to not desire men (Kahalon et al. 2019). It is the ultimate lose-lose situation because no matter if they chose to be a “Madonna” or a what is considered a “whore”, they will face some consequence. For example, heterosexual men are culturally expected to have sex with as many women as they can, but women are not supposed to have sex unless it is in a committed relationship with one person (Kahalon et al. 2019). The women who choose to be a “Madonna” may feel pressure from their male partners to have sex earlier than they would like or they may feel as though male partners lose interest in them because they are not willing to have sex with them until there is a commitment. Women considered “whores” are willing to have sex in an uncommitted relationship but they face the stigma of being called a “whore”. Replicating the continued stigmatization of sex workers and women alike.

Through this script, women are taught to be good girls or else they will not be accepted (Kahalon et al. 2019). This dichotomy works to control women by penalizing individuals who deviate from acceptable sexuality and these messages are internalized by women, so they self-objectify and gain sexist beliefs (Kahalon et al. 2019). Through this dichotomy, virgins are placed on a pedestal being viewed as pure and desirable, which means women who are sexual are viewed as less than (Kahalon et al, 2019). This causes the “Madonnas” to feel superior and the “whores” to feel inferior (Kahalon et al. 2019).

Broad City vs. Jane the Virgin

I examine the Madonna-whore dichotomy through a comparison of *Broad City* with another sitcom, *Jane the Virgin*. According to this theory, Ilana and Abbi would be considered ‘whores’ because they have casual sex and speak openly about sex. For example, in the opening scene of the first episode, [What a Wonderful World](#), Abbi is holding a vibrator and then puts it away to FaceTime Ilana where they talk about how Abbi schedules time to masturbate. Then, as they are talking, Abbi realizes that Ilana has been having sex while they have been on the video call and instead of ending the conversation, Abbi says hi to Lincoln who is Ilana’s “friend with benefits” and they carry on their conversation as if nothing happened. From the onset of the show, the audience can already tell there is an element of sex positivity and that the lead characters are extremely close (Trimmel 2018). On the other hand, *Jane the Virgin* would be the perfect example of a Madonna. The first episode, [Chapter One](#), starts with a young Jane being taught by her abuela, through the symbolism of a white rose, that once the rose is crumpled it is impossible to put it back to as perfect as it was before. Her abuela explains that this is a metaphor for sex and once you have sex, you cannot go back to the way you were before; you are damaged. Because of this lesson, years later Jane still has the rose framed in her bedroom to remind her to stay a virgin until marriage. Jane will not have sex with her boyfriend until they are married, whereas, Ilana and Abbi are shown having sex with men the first day they meet.

Furthermore, this Madonna-whore dichotomy seems to be very prevalent in *Jane the Virgin* but not in *Broad City*. In *Jane the Virgin*, Jane is viewed as being pure and a good girl due to her virginity, whereas, the women who have sex in the show are viewed as having loose morals in the way that

they are either dating around, are teen moms, or are cheaters. For example, Jane's mom is viewed negatively by her family because she got pregnant as a teenager with Jane and she told everyone that the father was just some guy in the army. Years later, the mother dates multiple people. Jane loves her mom, but she talks about her in a way that makes it clear that she has purposely lived her life to not end up like her. Moreover, other women in the show are shown having sex with someone else more times than they are shown having sex with their partner. These depictions feed into the dichotomy by showing that women like Jane who remain virgins are good girls, whereas, women who have multiple sex partners are immoral and have no consideration for monogamous relationships.

On the other hand, *Broad City* boldly asserts that there is no right or wrong way to have sex as a woman, rather they simply show women having sex and enjoying themselves. For example, in season two in the episode [Knockoffs](#), Abbi is shown finally having sex with her neighbour Jeremy that she has had a crush on since episode one. In this episode, Jeremy misunderstands Abbi when she says she wants to switch sex positions and he thinks that she means she also likes pegging and wants to be the one penetrating him. After he brings this up, he feels embarrassed that it was not what she meant but is comforted when Abbi does not take it the wrong way and says she has to go to the bathroom. While in the bathroom, she calls Ilana to ask for advice, to which she gets Ilana's response of telling her it is a great opportunity and it is something she has always wanted to do. Because of this, Abbi ends up pegging Jeremy and it goes well. She calls Ilana after the experience and Ilana screams that it is the happiest day of her life. Later in the episode at Ilana's Grandmother's funeral, Ilana's mom is going through Abbi's purse and finds the dildo Abbi bought for Jeremy, which sparks a discussion about the pegging with Ilana's family. During this conversation, Ilana's dad says that he thought only gay men liked to be penetrated anally, to which Ilana's gay brother responds that both gay and straight men can enjoy being anally penetrated due to their prostate and it does not mean they are gay. Ilana's mom then tells Abbi that she is proud of her for trying something new and that what she did was terrific.

This conversation with Ilana's family not only breaks apart the stereotype that parents are uncomfortable with talking about sex but pushes towards a progressive sex-positive engagement in which Ilana's brother breaks apart the stereotypes surrounding pegging and helped normalize it. *Broad City* in comparison to other television shows normalizes multiple forms of sex and sexuality and creates space for discussion instead of marginalizing or making fun of someone for having a different sexual preference. While *Jane the Virgin* adheres to the Madonna-whore dichotomy as central to its plot, *Broad City* refuses it. In *Broad City* sex is just sex, women are not better or worse for having it or not having it. Moreover, they take sex acts that are not normally shown on television or talked about and normalize them in a way that does not shame the characters for having different sexual preferences (Trimmel 2018).

Sneak-Attack Feminism

Drawing on an interview with co-writer Abbi Jacobson, where she states "if you watch one of our episodes, there's not a big message. But if you watch all of them, I think, they're empowering to women" (Angelo 2011), Megan Angelo has described *Broad City* as "sneak-attack feminism". Since the show does not adhere to typical gendered norms that most other shows do, *Broad City's* characters defy gender stereotypes. Abbi and Ilana enjoy sex, they are comfortable with their bodies (though they go through insecurities like other people), and when they show affection it is often towards each other and not towards the men in their lives (Morris 2016). Given these characteristics, many people have read the lead female characters as more masculine and they are quick to see them as one of the guys (Morris 2016). This is problematic because it suggests the only way people can be comfortable with women not being stereotypically feminine is to picture them as "one of the guys" which is another take on the Madonna-whore dichotomy that attributes masculine

characteristics to women who refuse the dichotomy itself. Women are only seen as acceptable when they are stereotypically feminine and take on typical gendered roles, but they are unacceptable when they do not conform by acting in ways that are viewed “masculine”. In *Broad City* there is a new type of acceptance only when considering the girls as “one of the guys”. Yet, Ilana and Abbi are neither “one of the guys” nor easily put into the Madonna-whore box, instead they are engaging in relationships that affirm who they are as people, subverting the male gaze.

Broad City is a Feminist Stoner Comedy

Broad City is also a feminist stoner comedy. The characters act in ways that ignore or eschew what is typically deemed acceptable female behaviour and refuse to create plot lines determined by the male gaze (Medved 2014). Where *Broad City* differs compared to other shows is that it is created from a feminist vision where women are shown in a way where they are “meant to be loved, not to be understood” (Teitel 2014). This means that they resist the stoner comedy tropes by refusing to perform gendered stereotypes. Judith Butler describes this by claiming that when it comes to sex, sexuality and gender, society distinguishes people in categories of normal or perverse (Trimmel 2018). So again, women are forced into these categories of being normal Madonnas, or perverse whores. Through this, what is deemed normal is often heterosexual and cisgender, and perverse is anything other than that (Trimmel 2018). In *Broad City*, these categories of normal or perverse sexuality are not found due to the unpredictability of the show (Trimmel 2018). *Broad City* is unpredictable through its use of stoner-style cringe-comedy in the way that the embarrassment the girls face on the show is embarrassment viewers can feel themselves (Trimmel 2018). The embarrassing things the girls go through is unpredictable which makes them flexible and adaptable (Trimmel 2018). This flexibility creates space for the show to challenge ideas around sex and social conventions (Trimmel 2018). Therefore, unlike most shows, *Broad City* allows the audience to understand the girls in both their best and most embarrassing moments, but it also allows them to love the girls because they are relatable.

Lucia Aniello, one of the show’s directors, producers and writers describes it as being, “about a kind of woman who does not have it together, who can be a lazy slacker, who’s just looking to have fun. Saying that she is cool for being herself- not for her accomplishments, just for being herself, and for having cool friendships with other women” (Menta 2019). In this sense, *Broad City* is about women being their genuine selves and enjoying life, rather than trying to fit in and obsessing over being desirable or successful. Therefore, this sneak-attack feminism is allowing women to be themselves and normalizing it for other women. Which helps to make strides in accepting women as they are, instead of accepting women only when they are good girls or one of the guys.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Broad City* is a show that breaks down and challenges the typical Madonna-whore dichotomy that the majority of other shows put on women. Too often women are classified as either a good and pure Madonna, or a bad and impure whore (Kahalon et al. 2019). By comparing this show with *Jane the Virgin* where characters are held in high regard and viewed as pure or viewed as having loose morals in which they sleep around, I show that *Broad City* completely eschews the dichotomy altogether. Ilana and Abbi are both sex-positive and any type of sex on the show is never stigmatized. The girls talk openly about sex and no one is ever made to be viewed as pure or impure for their sexuality. Finally, *Broad City* preforms a sort of sneak-attack feminism in the way that it empowers women in ways that most shows do not (Angelo 2011). *Broad City* normalizes and portrays women who are not hyper-feminine, who do not have their lives together, who can be lazy, who like to have sex, and who prioritize fun (Menta 2019). Ilana and Abbi create a new narrative for women where they do not have to be categorized into a dichotomy, rather they can be their authentic selves and people will love them for it.

Author:

Chelsea Brake (she/her) is a 4th year student doing a double major which include Social Development Studies at Renison University College and Sexuality, Marriage and Family Studies at St. Jerome's University College (two campuses within the University of Waterloo). After this degree she plans on getting her Master's degree in Social Work to work towards her goal of being a therapist. When she is not in school, she enjoys rock climbing, yoga and spending time with friends.

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