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**The Niche Network: Gender, Genre, and the CW Brand**

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**The Niche Network: Gender, Genre, and the CW Brand**

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## **Abstract**

### **The Niche Network: Gender, Genre, and the CW Brand**

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In 2006, the merger of the WB and UPN broadcast networks created a new network, the CW. As the fifth major broadcast network, the CW occupies an interesting, hybrid space within the television industry. The CW behaves like a cable channel, yet it usually receives the coverage of a broadcast network. Its target audience is women ages 18 to 34, an extremely small target demographic by any standards. Despite its unique status with the television industry, the CW remains woefully under-studied. This project aims first to provide a context for the CW moment and compare the network's trajectory with that of its predecessors in order to illuminate the myriad of changes that have occurred in the media industries. This project considers how the CW's branding strategies shape perceptions of the network, how the CW brand is produced and how the network's branding practices demonstrate an investment in postfeminism. In order to analyze the CW's branding, this paper examines the network's promotional materials and other paratexts, focusing primarily on print ads, since they are the most circulated. This project also asks how the CW constructs its audience in this age of postfeminism. In order to expose the contradictions and assumptions that underpin the network's project of audience construction, this paper considers both statements from network executives and the network's penchant for reviving 1990s programs with nostalgic appeal. Finally, this paper considers how the category of the "CW show" functions as a genre, and, through textual and narrative analysis, how that genre works to limit the possibilities for female representation on the network. This analysis draws attention to the complicated ways that postfeminist ideas are integrated into young women's programming today, and how conversations about female audiences have changed in the last twenty years. This project draws attention to an as-yet-unstudied site dominated by what Rosalind Gill calls the "postfeminist sensibility" (148).

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## TV To Talk About: Introduction

In the fall of 2007, the CW introduced its first hit show, *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012). *Gossip Girl*, based on a successful series of young adult novels by Cicely von Ziegesar, chronicles the lives of teenagers enrolled in Manhattan's most prestigious private schools. Each episode of the show begins with a voiceover from the titular "Gossip Girl," the anonymous blogger who recaps previous episodes' events before narrating the new episode's scandals. Her weekly introductory voiceover perfectly encapsulates the show: "Good morning, Upper East Siders. Gossip Girl here, your one and only source into the scandalous lives of Manhattan's elite." *Gossip Girl* is a show about New York City's most wealthy and powerful high schoolers, and it is not meant to be "relatable" in the traditional sense. The series' first episode begins with return of "It Girl" Serena van der Woodsen, whose reappearance at Grand Central Station prompts Gossip Girl to announce that she has the "biggest news ever." Gossip Girl obsessively tracks these teenagers because they lead glamorous lives that are unattainable to most who read Gossip Girl's blog; these characters are the celebrities of their world. The first episode alone features two glamorous parties, both of which require attendees to dress in exorbitantly expensive outfits. *Gossip Girl* would ultimately become the template for the CW's new shows, and its focus on glitz and glamour extended to the networks' other offerings and helped to establish the new network's brand.

This macro-level study considers how the CW's strategies shape perceptions of the network. I approach this project as a feminist scholar eager to unpack the various

ways that postfeminist discourse emanates from the network's branding and programming. This project asks how the CW brand is produced and how the network's branding practices demonstrate an investment in postfeminism. In order to analyze the CW's branding, I examine the network's promotional materials and other paratexts. I also ask how the CW constructs its audience in this age of postfeminism. In order to expose the contradictions and assumptions that underpin the network's project of audience construction, I consider both statements from network executives and the network's penchant for programs with nostalgic appeal. Finally, I consider how the category of the "CW show" functions as a genre, and, through textual and narrative analysis, how that genre works to limit the possibilities for female representation on the network.

On January 24, 2006, the executives of the WB and UPN broadcast television networks shocked the U.S. television industry with the announcement that they would merge their two small networks into a new venture, the CW. As the new CW executives scrambled to define the new network and its target audience in a crowded marketplace, they did so with high industry and audience expectations. All eyes were on the CW in the months leading up to its launch; it marked the biggest change to the broadcast networks since the emergence of the WB and UPN more than ten years earlier. Immediately after the announcement, speculation about the new network's prospects ran rampant. Some journalists speculated that the merger could result in a network popular enough to compete seriously with the entrenched Big Four broadcast networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox), while others were skeptical. CBS chairman Leslie Moonves (whose network shares a parent company with the CW) declared that the CW would bring together "the

best of UPN and The WB” to immediately become a profitable player (Rice 14).

Moonves’s confidence proved to be overly optimistic.

The CW struggled to gain traction among viewers after its launch and continues, seven years later, to be plagued by stubbornly low ratings. Not only did CW executives face the difficult task of launching the new network, they also struggled to carve out its new identity. At the time of the merger, the WB’s target audience was women 12-to-34-years old (Aurthur E3). Although UPN publicly insisted that their target audience was adults 18-to-34-years old, the network had the most success attracting African American audiences with its comedies featuring black performers and producers (Hill 21). The melding of two networks with different philosophies and target audiences ultimately resulted in a schizophrenic single network identity.

The launch of the CW highlights the tensions of the post-network television landscape, including the ever-increasing importance of branding and the targeting of niche audiences. After its underwhelming launch, CW executives’ decisions and strategies mirrored those of previous upstart networks Fox and the WB. Unlike those networks, however, the CW’s audience continued to shrink despite its decision to eliminate its minority-lead programming and focus entirely on the 18-to-34-year old white, middle or upper class female audience. This demographic was an even smaller audience than the WB or UPN had previously targeted. In order to court this audience, the CW populated its lineup primarily with explicitly sexy primetime soaps. This radical shift in programming ultimately changed the types of programming made for young female audiences.

I am interested in the way that the CW conceives of the young female audience and the types of programming the network provides for this demographic. Its construction of this audience, I argue, is quite different from the young female audience that the WB successfully targeted in its heyday. The CW's is a new generation of young women, the first to grow up with the Disney Channel as a widely available entertainment option. In the 1990s, Nickelodeon dominated kids' programming with its sitcoms and sketch shows starring young performers. The network's embrace of "girl power" was hugely successful with the young audiences that would soon become the WB's target market. "Girl power," a phrase popularized first by Riot Grrrl and later by the Spice Girls, was co-opted by the culture industries as a way to promote girls' empowerment through consumerism. The WB emerged in this peak of commercialized girl power, and it influenced its programming. The Disney Channel emerged as a true competitor for young viewers in the early 2000s, with shows like *Lizzie McGuire* (2001-2004) and *That's So Raven* (2003-2007). While Disney's shows also featured young female protagonists, the network's agenda did not include "girl power" in the 1990s sense. The Disney Channel's audience grew up to become part of the CW's target market. The CW's young female audience is not coming of age during the peak of commercialized "girl power." This is a different historical moment, and I believe a study of the discourses circulating around the CW will illuminate the differences between 1990s and 2000s female-targeted programming. This project will ask what televised "girl power" looks like now, and what, if any, investment the CW makes in it.

As channels continue to proliferate and audiences continue to fragment, the “right audience” for each network becomes more and more specific, with an ideal viewer clearly defined (Turow 5). The CW is able to stay afloat, despite its low overall ratings, because it manages to attract enough “upscale” young women to please advertisers (Adalian 1). Although it is technically a broadcast network, the CW behaves more like a cable channel, focused on attracting only one segment of the population. Its position as the “fifth network” exposes it to greater scrutiny than cable channels usually receive, so the network cannot quietly rebuild or rebrand itself as a struggling cable channel might. The CW’s hyper-exposed attempts to cultivate an audience of young women through branding and promotional material help to reveal how the network constructs its own audience. For virtually all of its programming and promotional discourse, the CW’s relies on sex appeal, including ads featuring barely-clothed actors and series with sexual content as explicit as broadcast standards allow. This is particularly interesting, given that the network cares most about targeting young female viewers. This research project analyzes the ways that executives present the network and its programming to audiences, industry personnel, and advertisers. This is a valuable case study because it reveals a continuation of the histories of smaller networks’ attempts to attract specialized audiences.

The WB’s first true breakout hit was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the WB, 1997-2001, UPN 2001-2003), a show tailor-made for the teen-girl-obsessed 1990s. In a time of the Spice Girls and the enormous, partly girl-driven success of *Titanic* (1997), *Buffy* embodied the popular “girl power” slogan more than any other young female character

on television. Why does the CW not have a similar figure? The CW explicitly aims to attract female viewers, but it does so without producing overtly “girl power” focused programming. Why has this previously successful tactic not been utilized by the network? This shift in the philosophy of programming for young women reflects larger shifts within both popular culture and postfeminism. I hope to tease out the reasons behind the CW’s narrow representations of femininity and perhaps even complicate our understanding of the representation of female empowerment on the network.

The CW presents a somewhat peculiar case for television studies. Although it is technically a broadcast network, the CW behaves much more like a post-network era cable channel. Work on broadcast networks’ strategies will also inform this project, particularly work on the WB and the Big Four in the 1990s and 2000s. Many have wondered (including entertainment journalists) how the CW manages to survive despite perennially low ratings. The CW relies on its ability to package its audience for advertisers eager to reach young female viewers. In many ways, the CW is simply an evolution of broadcast networks’ previous strategies for attracting the “right” kind of audience. In the following literature review, I detail a “history of branding” in order to place the CW’s branding project in conversation with other successfully branded channels. In order to make some sense of the CW’s strategies, I compare the network’s project of audience construction with other successful cable channels, specifically BET (Black Entertainment Television), MTV (Music Television), Lifetime, Nickelodeon, and Bravo. This review of the literature helps explain how and why the CW chose its target demographic by bringing together critical work on the importance of ratings, advertisers,

and demographics to the study of television. Finally, I will consider the emergence of postfeminism and the postfeminist media text in order to contextualize the CW moment.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Emergence of Narrowcasting***

From a critical perspective, the most problematic aspect of the branding process is the commodification of particular audiences and lifestyles. The birth of cable introduced the possibility of narrowcasting, and brought with it a host of complications. As new cable channels sprung up, they differentiated themselves by targeting specific segments of the population. This targeting process often relied on stereotypes or inaccurate assumptions about the viewing public, which in turn led to problematic representations on screen. Targeting certain segments of the population inevitably leads capitalistic networks to ignore less “advertiser friendly” groups, as the early struggles of Lifetime, MTV, and BET demonstrate.

The emergence of cable technology provided the first true alternative to the networks’ dominance. Commentators hoped that the expansion of the televisual landscape would result in a more inclusive, more representative mass medium. In *The Wired Nation*, Ralph Lee Smith’s optimistic account of the rise of cable technology, Smith explains that, for him, “cable’s greatest potential is the ability to cater to specialized communities” (28). In 1972, Smith and others envisioned an expanded televisual landscape with the potential to do “social good” by opening up television to the public (91). They hoped that cable could break up the broadcasters’ oligarchy and

provide viewers with programming that would help to “fix” American society. Of course, Smith’s and other Americans’ hopes for the future of cable were not realized. While cable did provide the audience with more options, these new, commercially owned cable channels rarely sought to *improve* the public good; their primary goal was to become profitable.

When Black Entertainment Television premiered in 1980, there was virtually no competition for African American viewers on cable or broadcast. In “Target Market Black: BET and the Branding of African America,” Beretta E. Smith-Shomade takes the channel to task for its efforts to brand blackness. While the cable channel may have launched with a socially conscious agenda in the early 1980s, its business strategies quickly rendered it a problematic enterprise. As Smith-Shomade explains, BET chose to define “blackness” in the broadest way possible, essentially adhering to the historical notion that a single drop of “black” blood determines one’s racial identity (182). BET (and the television industry in general) operates from a two-pronged assumption about African American audiences: first, that African Americans will want to watch other African Americans on screen regardless of the programming context or personal taste and, second, that the African American community is homogeneous and defined only by their racial identity. Throughout its history, Smith-Shomade argues, “BET’s programming has consistently failed to reflect the diversity of African-American culture in its catering to essentialized notions of blackness” (185). BET’s branding efforts were successful throughout its history, and the channel garnered adequate ratings, but its

construction of the black audience invokes “a very specific and narrow class aesthetic,” one which the WB, UPN, and later the CW would later adopt.

In *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*, Andrew Goodwin focuses on MTV’s schedule from 1981 to 1983 in order to track how the network built its brand and developed into a highly successful cable channel. Much of MTV’s early success was tied up in the channel’s reputation as a trailblazer, and its brand depended on maintaining the channel’s aura of coolness. As Goodwin notes, “it is not just that MTV must be seen as hip and irreverent, but that it must seem always to be hip and irreverent in *new* ways” (132). Indeed, there was an imperative to change constantly in order to keep viewers interested. Goodwin notes that this philosophy of constant change was “drawn directly from rock culture” and fit MTV’s rebellious attitude (132). Before Viacom purchased the channel and targeted broader audiences, MTV aimed for a niche audience of white male rock music fans. In the early 1980s, the channel defined rock music in the music industry’s white-centric terms, and defended its decision to exclude black artists by blaming the narrowcasting principle of American radio that segregated “rock” and “urban contemporary” music. This singular focus on white (often British) rock musicians excluded fans of other genres from fully participating in the “music television” experience. MTV’s early focus on rock also marked the channel as a largely male space, since rock was (and remains) a genre dominated by male performers. Indeed, MTV’s early branding practices were quite exclusionary. As MTV grew, it maintained its commitment to the hip and irreverent, even as it welcomed black musicians and eventually shifted to primarily non-music programming. The channel quite successfully

targets the youth market, and it does so with its reputation as a “cool” network for adolescents. Interestingly, MTV’s target audience today is not explicitly gendered like the other “teen”-oriented networks, in no small part because of the network’s early affiliation with male audiences. As Lisa Lewis explains, the channel’s early privileging of rock “cultivated an address to male youth,” and the association of MTV with young male viewers persisted even after the channel began to incorporate more pop music (32). MTV’s early reputation as a “cool” network for young men shields the channel from being gendered as a “teen” network for women despite MTV’s courtship of young female fans through music programs like *Total Request Live* (1998-2008) and the channel’s recent reliance on reality shows starring young women like *The Hills* (2006-2010), *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012), and *16 and Pregnant* (2009-present).

### ***Lifetime and “Television for Women”***

When the Lifetime network launched in 1984, it became the first channel to explicitly target female viewers in primetime. Many feminist scholars have written about the channel, particularly its evolution from its formative years to its time as a top cable channel. At the time of its launch, industry insiders considered the network a gamble because it effectively eliminated half of its possible audience by focusing exclusively on women. Lifetime was the first niche channel for women, but it would not be the last. The CW, in its own pursuit of female audiences, has adopted some of the tactics employed throughout Lifetime’s history. E! emerged in the 1990s, hoping to attract female viewers with its celebrity-focused programming. Oxygen, WE (Women’s Entertainment), and the

Style channel all debuted at the turn of the century, hoping to replicate Lifetime's success. As Amanda Lotz notes in *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*, all of these channels ultimately end up chasing the same demographic: upscale, educated and young women (47). As a result, the proliferation of women's channels ultimately did little to promote diversity in women's content.

Pamela Wilson's work on *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd* (1987-1988, NBC, 1988-1991, Lifetime) a network show that Lifetime revived after NBC canceled it, highlights Lifetime's early attempts at branding and audience construction. The transplanted show became a "signature piece" for Lifetime and helped the network to define its strategy for attracting a "working women's audience" (103). *Molly Dodd* was part of NBC's shift to "quality programming" in the 1980s, and the series is a dramedy that defied sitcom convention. The unconventional show centered on Molly Dodd, a single mother whose liberal, bohemian lifestyle baffled her mother. *Molly Dodd* also featured a collection of quirky secondary characters, including Molly's son, her musician ex-husband, her doorman, and her boss and sometime-love interest, a bookstore owner. The ensemble series clearly had appeal beyond the female audience, with many interesting male characters. Wilson notes that *Molly Dodd* was not categorized as a "woman's show" in the critical or popular press until its move to Lifetime altered perceptions of the show. After Lifetime began producing new episodes, the trade press took note of the show's popularity among working women and began to classify it as women's programming, instead of programming for a general "quality" audience. The discourses around *Molly Dodd* became gendered only after the series moved to a female-

centric channel best known for its campy made-for-television movies. These discourses asserted the belief that “television for women” could not also be “television for everyone.”

In their history of Lifetime’s first thirteen years, Eileen Meehan and Jackie Byars trace the effects of the regime change at Lifetime. With the introduction of Douglas McCormick as CEO in 1993, Lifetime shifted its attentions from upscale 22-to-44-year old women to upscale, professional, young couples (44). Meehan and Byars note that this shift allowed Lifetime to take advantage of a known bias in the Nielsen ratings system that oversampled dual income, professional, cable-subscriber couples with only one television. The ratings system and its imperfections, then, had a tangible effect on Lifetime’s construction of its audience and subsequent shifts in programming philosophy. Even as Lifetime introduced its signature slogan, “Television for Women,” it actually aimed to have both men and women watching in primetime. Lifetime sold this new target demographic to advertisers through the use of psychographics. Instead of citing numbers and statistics, Lifetime instead presented the scenario of an upscale couple “cocooning” in front of the television during the primetime hours. Lifetime constructed its audience very specifically in this period, and the change in philosophy resulted in higher ratings.

### ***Nickelodeon Nation & Branding for Kids***

Lifetime, MTV, and BET were not the only cable channels to brand themselves successfully in the 1980s and 1990s. Just as Lifetime strove to be *the* network for women, Nickelodeon worked to become *the* network for kids. In *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and*

*Consumer Culture*, Sarah Banet-Weiser details Nickelodeon's highly successful branding strategy. In its effort to appeal to kids, Nickelodeon fostered an "Us vs. Them" philosophy that has resonated with young audiences since the late 1980s. Network executives preached a philosophy of empowerment for kids, and this included an early emphasis on "girl power." Bucking the traditional industry wisdom that suggested that boys would not watch a series starring a girl, Nickelodeon found success with shows like *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991-1994) and *The Secret World of Alex Mack* (1994-1998). Banet-Weiser emphasizes that the network's ambitions were commercial, not political. The network produced what Banet-Weiser calls a commercialized version of "girl power," essentially an early manifestation of postfeminism that encouraged consumption and an investment in the Nickelodeon brand (106). Even though it was commercially motivated, it was nevertheless a feminism that resulted in increased visibility for young girls. In many ways, Nickelodeon represents the premier example of successful niche channel branding. The network built a devoted audience of young children who bought into the philosophy of the Nickelodeon Nation and created a community of sorts around the network. As Banet-Weiser points out, brand culture is all about what's "cool," and Nickelodeon firmly established itself as the coolest network for kids. Unlike Nickelodeon, the CW has struggled to become "cool."

### ***Gayness and the Pursuit of "Hip" Viewers***

In the early 2000s, another network made the leap from mere cable channel to cultural prominence: Bravo. Like Lifetime before it, Bravo sought a "quality" audience of

young women. Unlike Lifetime, however, Bravo used reality programming featuring gay men in order to build its cultural cachet and rebrand the channel. As both Ron Becker and Katherine Sender have noted, Bravo became the de facto “gay network” after the premiere of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) and *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). Becker’s *Gay TV and Straight America* makes sense of the explosion of gay characters on broadcast networks in primetime in the 1990s that made Bravo’s gay programming possible. Becker argues that the major networks (CBS, ABC, NBC, and Fox) hoped to attract an audience of “socially liberal, urban minded professionals” (slumpies) in order to sell this “quality” audience to advertisers. The move toward the inclusion of gay characters, then, was dictated by the economic realities of the television industry. Advertisers paid a higher premium for this “slumpy” audience, and broadcast networks needed to find a way to respond to the continuing fragmentation of audiences. In the post-network era, broadcast networks like NBC no longer sought to attract a mass audience, but rather, the 1990s version of a “quality” audience of hip, young viewers. The inclusion of gay characters and storylines delineated “hip” shows from more traditional primetime fare and enhanced broadcasters’ demographic profiles. Becker argues that, starting in the post-network 1990s, even the major networks were breaking audiences down by identity groups (based on race, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation) instead of simply seeking the largest possible audience of 18-to-49 year olds. Networks’ programming strategies in the 1990s depended less on age and more on lifestyle, a strategy adopted from the early successful cable channels that Bravo employed quite successfully.

In “Dualcasting: Bravo’s Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences,” Sender argues that the growing importance of the gay market in the advertising community made shows like *Queer Eye* attractive to advertisers. The gay audience (especially the gay male audience) was constructed as particularly affluent and more inclined to exhibit brand loyalty (largely through exaggerations championed within the advertising world). Advertisers and the television industry constructed the ideal gay consumer as not only wealthy, but also a trendsetter. Sender argues that including gay personalities on shows like *Queer Eye* invited both gay viewers searching for characters or personalities they could relate to and heterosexual viewers drawn to the trendiness of gay taste. Sender argues, and Bravo executives confirmed, that Bravo was more concerned with attracting young female audiences than gay audiences. Bravo branded itself as a destination for gay programming that appealed to both gay viewers and hip young women. Since the A.C. Nielsen Company does not collect ratings data based on sexual orientation, gay viewers are much more difficult to commodify than young female audiences. Bravo’s decisions were therefore influenced as much by the ratings system as they were by advertisers’ desires.

### ***Teen Television and the 1990s***

As audience fragmentation cast uncertainty over the future of the television industry, cable channels and broadcast networks sought to create and foster their own brands. Just as “working women” were the craze in the 1970s and the gay audience was a craze in the early 2000s, the teen audience was the “it” demographic of the late 1990s. As

Valerie Wee chronicles in *Teen Media: Hollywood and the Youth Market in the Digital Age*, the resurgence of the teen demographic stemmed from both cultural and economic factors. Wee's book examines "millennial" teen media from the late 1990s through the present in order to demonstrate the increasingly multimedia nature of teen media. Wee asserts that television is a consumer-producing industry that constructs the audience (in this case, the teen audience) based on what advertisers and networks would *like* to believe about them. She also acknowledges that the "teen audience" is not defined strictly by age, but rather by lifestyle (37). The teen lifestyle is essential to the project of branding a "teen" network. The WB, as Wee notes, was characterized as a "teen" network despite publicly declaring its target demographic to be 12-to-34-year olds (both male and female). The WB's early programs shared a common philosophy that helped to brand the network as a destination for teens and other young-at-heart viewers: they all featured morally idealistic, teenaged characters exploring coming-of-age experiences with "intelligence, sensitivity, and knowing sarcasm" (146). Wee does not address the later years of the WB, which I would argue slowly moved away from this central philosophy. Before the WB's merger with UPN in 2006, the network saw its grasp on the teenaged audience challenged by increased cable competition. When the two networks merged, CW executives announced that the networks' target audience would be women 18-to-34-years old. This marked a significant narrowing of the WB's target audience, and the move downplayed the importance of teenaged viewers to the networks' success. Clearly, the teen audience was no longer the hot demographic.

It is impossible to completely disentangle networks' branding strategies from the advertising industry and the ratings system. These accounts of successful network branding demonstrate the industrial and cultural influences that hold sway over television producers. In my study of the CW, I consider all of these influences and how they shape the particular industrial moment in which the CW emerges. While industrial changes help to explain some aspects of the CW's strategies, postfeminist media culture also shapes the network's philosophy.

### ***Girl Power and Postfeminist Media Culture***

The CW debuted in 2006, more than ten years after the beginning of the "girl power" craze. The term "girl power," frequently associated with 1990s television shows that feature strong, young female protagonists, originated with the Riot Grrrl movement in the early 1990s. Riot Grrrl, which emerged out of the punk scene, challenged patriarchal norms and celebrated girls. More than just raucous music, riot grrrls produced zines and feminist consciousness-raising groups and embraced a do-it-yourself ethos. The mainstream press soon discovered the riot grrrl community, and their message of "girl power" was expropriated and defanged by the cultural industries (Zaslow 31). As a depoliticized slogan, "girl power" became commercialized and showed girls that they could embrace their "girlyness" and femininity and still achieve just as much as boys could. "Girl power" rhetoric exploded in the 1990s, alongside the growth of the female teenage demographic (Murray 43). This perfect storm of commercialized female empowerment and a large market of teenage girls was perhaps best manipulated by the

WB, the first network to explicitly target teenage girls. Many of the WB's iconic shows, like *Buffy* and *Charmed* (1998-2006), featured strong female heroines who embraced consumer culture and their own femininity while asserting their own "girl power."

Now, more than fifteen years since the "girl power" explosion, the mantra remains a part of popular culture. Unfortunately, the *empowerment* aspect of girl power discourse is less prevalent than it was at the peak of Riot Grrrl's public visibility. The culture industries have deemphasized girl power and adopted postfeminism as their new strategy for appealing to women. As Angela McRobbie explains, postfeminism "takes feminism into account" by both taking the gains of feminism for granted and asserting that feminism is no longer necessary (28). By this logic, it is no longer necessary to circulate the message of "girl power" to a generation of women who are already "empowered." McRobbie also notes that postfeminism works to make feminism generational, making it more difficult for young women to identify with a movement that American culture constructs as passé. Postfeminism also ties a woman's (or girl's) power and sexy body directly to both neoliberal privileging of individual choice and consumerism, encouraging young women to focus their attention on their looks rather than other pursuits. McRobbie points out that postfeminist culture contributes to a "hyperculture of commercial sexuality" by asserting that women now *choose* to be sexy and objectified. For the young women courted by the CW, the prevalence of postfeminist thinking influences every aspect of their lives. This audience's experience of feminism and consumer culture is significantly different than that of young women in the mid to late 1990s, and these cultural shifts impact the CW's approach to television.

In “Postfeminist Media Culture,” Rosalind Gill argues that understanding postfeminism as a sensibility, rather than a movement or a backlash against feminism, allows for more nuanced critiques of media texts (148). Gill lists eight frequently seen characteristics of this postfeminist sensibility, including an understanding of femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference (149). Most of these hallmarks of postfeminism appear either on the CW’s shows or in the CW’s promotional materials, a phenomenon I will explore in more detail in the first and third chapters of this thesis. The CW embodies the postfeminist sensibility. Postfeminist ideas are omnipresent on the CW’s programs and throughout its branding, as the network’s emphasis on beauty, sex appeal, and luxury suggest.

### **Theoretical Perspectives and Methodology**

One of the primary goals of this project is to produce a history of the CW. The network’s low ratings and denigrated status prevent it from receiving much serious consideration from journalists and scholars. A historical analysis of the CW (as well as its predecessors) is therefore required, even though the network is less than a decade old. My interest in the CW initially stemmed from one key question: why did the CW *not* develop into the WB 2.0? I believe that there are many complex reasons why the two networks

have followed different trajectories, and this project ultimately works to find the answer to that seemingly simple question. I wish to situate the CW in its particular historical moment and use it as a case study in order to discuss circulating discourses of gender and postfeminism in the US in the 2000s. How does the CW produce and circulate postfeminist ideas? How does postfeminist media culture influence the network's branding, audience construction, and programming?

This project will be interdisciplinary and will therefore activate a collection of theoretical frameworks. In order to paint a complete picture of the CW, it is necessary to draw from industry studies, critical political economy, and cultural studies. My own feminist perspective inspires this thesis, and feminist theory will inform this entire project. Gender is central to any study of the CW, since the network's programming is firmly rooted in traditionally feminine forms and targets a female audience.

## **Chapter Overview**

The first chapter of this project examines the CW's branding practices while placing the network into historical and industrial context. Understanding the CW is impossible without first understanding the networks that preceded it; historical analysis is therefore critical to this project. The CW network's historical relationship to its immediate ancestors, as well as other networks that have adopted similar strategies, is critical to understanding the network's decisions with regard to branding and audience construction. Additionally, the CW exists in a different industrial context than its predecessors, and the volatile post-network era demands that the CW adopt a different

approach than the WB and UPN did. Amanda Lotz's work on the changing post-network landscape, particularly with regard to gender, helps to situate the CW in its particular historical moment. This chapter also asks how the CW brand is produced and sustained through a consideration of paratexts like critical reviews, print advertisements, and televised promotion. Critics rarely cast the CW in a flattering light, and this chapter examines this disdain through discourse analysis and asks how paratexts determine audiences' approaches to the network. Jonathan Gray's work on the underrated importance of paratexts anchors my analysis of the CW's branding strategies.

Every brand is created with a target audience in mind, and the CW is no exception. In chapter two, I explore how the CW constructs this target audience. I draw on the fields of critical political economy and cultural studies in order to unpack this process. I place Eileen Meehan and Ien Ang's work on the "commodity audience" in conversation with Julie D'Acci's work on audience construction in order to determine the industrial and cultural factors that influence the CW's decision to focus only on a young female audience. This chapter also asks how conversations about and perceptions about what the young female audience wants have changed since the 1990s, paying particular attention to the rise of postfeminism. It also works to disentangle the relationship between the "teen" audience and the young adult audience in order to expose the CW's own ambiguous, confused differentiation between the two demographics. Finally, this chapter explores the CW's predilection for remakes and reboots of older 1990s, female-centric television properties and asks what this strategy reveals about the CW's project of audience construction.

The final chapter of this thesis examines all of the CW's scripted programming and works towards a definition of a "CW show." This chapter employs genre and narrative analysis in order to question why CW shows are so frequently dismissed and belittled by critics and the popular press. Jason Mittell's consideration of the ways in which genre operates beyond the text will be critical to my analysis of the CW and the way it is perceived within the television industry. This chapter also relies on scholarship concerning traditional "women's genres," especially the soap opera. This chapter considers the implications of the CW's alignment with traditionally feminine genres. I place feminist scholarship from Tania Modelski and Ien Ang on the soap opera as a "feminine" and "emotional" genre in conversation with more recent work on 1990s "teen" television (with an emphasis on female protagonists) in order to consider how the CW's blend of soap and "teen" TV genres determines what types of heroines the network can produce. I argue that the CW brand is so narrow and well defined that it functions as a genre does, and that the CW genre shuts down possibilities for diversity of female representation. This project draws attention to the many ways in which gender pervades perceptions of and conversations about the CW and asks what kind of television the young network provides for young women. In this chapter, I examine several hit CW shows, including *Gossip Girl*, *90210* (2008-2013), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-present), and *Nikita* (2010-present) in order to ask important questions about the state of young female characters today. I use textual and narrative analysis in order to ask important questions about how the CW's characters' behavior relates to postfeminism. Finally, I

compare “CW women” to “WB women” in order to draw attention to the important shifts in young female representation that have occurred since the CW merger.

The conclusion of this project briefly examines the state of young female-targeted television today and asks how the decline of “girl power” and the shift to postfeminism has changed women’s programming generally. I explore how the WB’s legacy informs and, in some ways, haunts networks like the CW and ABC Family. I also consider the CW’s recent attempts to attract a broader audience and the network’s struggles to recalibrate its brand and consider what the future possibilities are for the CW.

## Chapter One

### **“Free to Be Together”: The CW’s Branding Strategies**

In the summer of 2006, *Entertainment Weekly* posted a scathing critique of the CW’s first ad campaign slogan, “Free to Be...,” and its accompanying posters entitled “Free to be Mocked.” Reporter Kate Sullivan wrote of the campaign:

Look at these ridiculous billboards for the CW... check out Tom Welling’s weird, soft-focused, open-mouthed shot. Another has Alexis Bledel looking 15. It’s like they’re using old outtakes from promo-photo shoots. Perhaps worse than the photos are the lame slogans: “Free to be cool,” announces Murray’s ad. “Free to be super,” groans Welling’s. “Free to be girly,” chirps Bledel’s. Really? That’s all you got?

Sullivan’s assessment of the ubiquitous campaign points to the difficulties of branding, especially when launching a new network. The CW’s struggle to define itself in its early years is fascinating and fairly unique. Critics and observers like Sullivan had high expectations for the CW’s debut of its new brand, and this ad campaign was the first indication that those clamoring for a network with a cool look may be disappointed. The CW’s green billboards were met with derision because reporters and fans were already invested in the CW’s slate of long-running programs and wanted to see them better promoted. The CW could not simply float under the radar while it tinkered with its formula. The new “fifth network” debuted only eight months after the WB and UPN’s executives announced the merger, and the flurry of activity surrounding the network’s highly publicized launch made visible many processes that often happen quietly and

behind-the-scenes. The public nature of its branding struggle makes the CW ripe for examination.

This chapter has three main goals. First, it will place the CW merger and the network's subsequent decisions within an industrial context and ask how industrial trends factored into the network's strategies. Second, it will examine the CW brand in order to determine what self-defined identity the CW hopes to convey to potential viewers. Third, this chapter will consider the other paratexts that inform viewers' understanding of the network in order to understand how the CW gained its current reputation. Finally, this chapter considers why critics' responses to the network are so dismissive.

### **The CW Merger**

This chapter begins by examining the many factors that precipitated the network's creation. At the time of the WB-UPN merger, the television industry was in a state of upheaval. The cable industry was expanding rapidly, with more channels and more original programming every year. The broadcast networks were hemorrhaging viewers and trying to adjust (or, in some cases, refusing to adjust) to the shifting landscape of the television industry. The Internet opened up new possibilities for networks while simultaneously destroying the old, reliable business model of network television. Additionally, new technologies provided more distractions for potential viewers and introduced the possibility of watching television programming without actually turning on a television. In this uncertain climate, the underperformance of the WB and UPN was no longer palatable to their parent companies. The merger that created the CW, then, was

a direct result of changes within the industry. Before delving into the CW's short history, however, it is necessary to consider why the WB and UPN failed to survive.

### ***The WB and UPN in Industrial Context***

The WB and UPN were both born out of panic. In 1993, it became clear that Congress would repeal the financial interest and syndication rule, clearing the way for broadcasters to own, produce, and broadcast their own shows (Daniels 18). As independent studios, both Warner Bros. and Paramount worried that the major networks would no longer purchase their programming and would opt instead to optimize profits and keep productions in-house. Both new networks arose as part of their parent companies' grander plans for vertical integration. Both UPN and the WB would serve as guaranteed outlets for their respective studios should the larger networks decide not to consider programming from outside sources. The two competitors launched in January 1995. At the time of their launches, broadcast networks were already losing viewers to cable at an alarming rate (Lotz 13).

Writing about the post-network era in 2005, Amanda D. Lotz chronicles the continuing uncertainty and fast-paced change in the television industry. Before the post-network era began in earnest, she argues, the industry underwent the "multi-channel transition," a time from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s that saw the rise of new technologies (like the VCR and remote) and the blossoming of cable channels threaten the traditional three network system. In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Lotz defines the post-network era as the period from the early 2000s through the present

characterized by unparalleled consumer choice and control (7). This choice and control stems from new technologies (e.g., the DVR, online streaming, iTunes) as well as the ever-expanding number of available cable channels. Lotz argues that, in the post-network era, the old business model of television is so outdated that broadcast networks must change their tactics in order to adapt to the new television climate. According to Lotz's definitions, the WB and UPN premiered in the middle of the multi-channel transition, and the CW premiered near the beginning of the post-network era. While her definition of "post-network" television is debatable, this timeline usefully illustrates the differences between the WB-UPN moment and the CW moment.

After rushed, underwhelming launches, both the WB and UPN eventually grew to become respected players in the television industry. The WB, which initially courted African-American viewers with black-cast programs, quickly shifted its focus to teens and young adult viewers. Responsible for hit series like *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* (the WB, 1996-2005, the CW, 2006-2007), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *Charmed*, *Gilmore Girls* (the WB, 2000-2006, the CW, 2006-2007) and *Smallville* (the WB 2001-2006, the CW, 2006-2011), the network attracted advertising rates comparable to those of the Big Four networks due to its ability to consistently attract young audiences (Klaassen 31). UPN found its biggest successes with shows like *Girlfriends* (UPN 2000-2006, the CW, 2006-2008), *Moesha* (1996-2001), *America's Next Top Model* (UPN 2003-2006, the CW, 2006-present), *Everybody Hates Chris* (UPN 2005-2006, the CW, 2006-2009), the *Star Trek* franchise, and *WWE Smackdown!* (UPN 1999-2006, the CW, 2006-2008). Unlike the WB, which was universally considered the "teen network," UPN lacked a

distinctive identity. While the network was very popular in black households, it resisted the label of “the black network.” In the fall of 2004, UPN broadcast seven of the top ten programs among black audiences (Hill 21). Unlike the WB, UPN offered lower rates to advertisers, usually amounting to a thirty percent discount (Klaassen 31). While the WB and UPN’s overall ratings were relatively equal, the WB’s ability to attract teenagers allowed it to draw significantly higher advertising revenue and gain prestige that UPN never achieved.

### ***The Economics of the CW Merger***

When the WB and UPN announced their intention to join together to form the CW on January 24, 2006, those within the television industry were simultaneously shocked and unsurprised. The move itself was unprecedented; the merger of two broadcast networks was unheard of, yet, the move made financial sense. Both the WB and UPN had struggled to become profitable. Time Warner and CBS Corp. (the WB’s and UPN’s parent companies, respectively) would share a fifty percent stake in the network, theoretically halving their financial risk. Just as the emergence of the WB and UPN signaled a new era in the mid 1990s, the arrival of the CW symbolized how drastically the television industry had changed in ten years. As audience fragmentation continued to erode the broadcast networks’ audience, the system simply could not support six broadcast networks. In the most telling moment to emerge from the merger, the new network announced that its target audience would be women 18-to-34-years old,

a demographic smaller than the previous targets for the WB and UPN. Narrowcasting was king, even for broadcast networks.

By January 24, 2006, both the WB and UPN were well known as money-losing enterprises. Anonymous industry sources told the *Wall Street Journal* that the aggregate losses of UPN and the WB were “in the neighborhood of \$2 billion” during their twelve year runs (Flint 1). Others estimated their losses to be “tens of millions of dollars between them in more than a decade of operation” (Elliott C1). Despite those sobering numbers, executives like Leslie Moonves (of CBS) and Barry Meyers (of Time Warner) involved in the merger insisted that the new network could become profitable almost immediately (Rice 14). However, television networks are not designed to be highly profitable. Studios, when they produce successful programming that either syndicates well or transfers well to foreign markets, stand to earn significantly more revenue than networks. In the case of the CW, the network itself was never expected to make a serious profit. Instead, it was its parent companies (which produced all of the CW’s programming) that profited from the network’s existence. Moonves and Meyers’ public declarations set high standards and led many casual observers to perceive the network as a failure. While some of the network’s shows (and a mega-deal with Netflix) have turned a profit for Warner Bros. and CBS, the network as a whole has not. Those high expectations set the CW up to fail. In the spring of 2006, however, enthusiasm for the new venture extended beyond television executives to television critics.

Optimism about the CW’s prospects stemmed, in part, from the belief that the combination of the WB and UPN’s best programming would result in a new network

greater than the sum of its parts. Shortly after the announcement, speculation ran rampant about which programs the CW would decide to keep from each network. Reporters made lists and speculative schedule grids, furiously trying to figure out which shows would make the cut. *Variety* took a highly mathematical approach to the problem (Kissell 17). The “shoo-ins” were those shows that garnered a 6 share or better among adults 18-to-34-years old: *America’s Next Top Model*, *WWE Smackdown*, and *Everybody Hates Chris* from UPN and *Smallville*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Beauty and the Geek* (the WB, 2005-2006, the CW, 2006-2008) and *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* from the WB. The next tier included those shows that pulled a 5 share, including *Supernatural* (the WB, 2005-2006, the CW, 2006-present), *One Tree Hill* (the WB, 2003-2006, the CW, 2006-2012), *Reba* (the WB, 2001-2006, the CW, 2006-2007) from the WB and UPN’s *Girlfriends* and *All of Us* (UPN 2003-2006, the CW, 2006-2007). Of the bubble shows, most of those to make the cut, like *Veronica Mars* (UPN, 2004-2006, the CW, 2006-2007), *All of Us*, proposed *Girlfriends* spin-off *The Game* (the CW, 2006-2009) earned their spots partly because they paired well with shows already on the schedule. *All of Us* and *The Game* helped to fill out the CW’s new Sunday night black comedy block, while *Veronica Mars* provided a critically acclaimed, female-centric drama to air alongside veteran *Gilmore Girls*. While some critics mourned the loss of WB family drama *Everwood* (2002-2006), no mainstream critics in major publications expressed regret at the elimination of many of UPN’s lower-rated African American comedies, like *Eve* (2003-2006) and *One and One* (2001-2006).

### ***The CW and the Fox Formula***

Immediately after the CW merger was announced, there was concern among black critics and commentators that the move would signal the end of black-cast sitcoms on broadcast television. Historical precedent informed this fear. As Kristal Brent Zook chronicles in *Color By Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*, Fox used black cast and produced programming in order to establish itself as a cool, alternative network. As the network began to gain traction and seek larger audiences, it cancelled its black programs in favor of those with more “mainstream” appeal. In 1994, Fox cancelled four of its six black programs, shortly after the network acquired a hugely expensive National Football League sports package (Zook 102). The acquisition of football marked the arrival of Fox onto the main stage, and the network left its black shows behind. As Fox cancelled its black programming, the WB and UPN launched and copied Fox’s formula. In its early years, the WB used programming featuring African-Americans in order to attract an audience. After the success of teen dramas like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, however, the network relegated its black shows to undesirable time slots and stopped developing new black sitcoms. The network’s only successful comedies starred black performers (e.g., *The Jamie Foxx Show* (1996-2002), *The Steve Harvey Show* (1996-2002)) and those shows no longer fit the WB brand. Even though they still drew good ratings in tough time slots, the WB slowly cancelled all of its black-cast sitcoms by the 2002-03 season. The CW venture threatened once again to whitewash another network.

In a column for *Flow TV* written shortly after the announcement of the CW merger, Jonathan Gray astutely points out that the CW could not successfully chase an

“odd combination” of two niche audiences and notes that the youth audience has proven, historically, to be more important to networks than the African-American audience. Gray (correctly) predicted that the CW would eventually jettison its black shows in order to focus all of its attention on the youth audience. In other words, the CW adhered to the “Follow in Fox’s Footsteps Plan” (Gray). Professionals within the industry worried if the merger would negatively impact their job opportunities. In *Back Stage*, actors expressed concern that the end of UPN would ultimately mean the end of steady network jobs for minority actors (Horwitch 3). Their fears were ultimately justified. In an editorial for the *Chicago Defender*, Ken Parish Perkins expressed doubt that the black sitcoms that did manage to find a place on the first CW schedule would survive beyond the network’s first year (14). Parish compared the case of critically acclaimed *Everybody Hates Chris* to that of *The Bernie Mac Show* (Fox, 2001-2006), another acclaimed sitcom featuring a black family, and noted that *Bernie Mac* had been cancelled by Fox earlier that week. While *Everybody Hates Chris* and *The Game* would ultimately survive for three seasons on the CW, the shows were under-promoted and placed in unappealing time slots. *Girlfriends* creator Mara Brock Ali complained to the *Los Angeles Times* that the CW did not publicize her veteran show, despite assigning it a new time slot on a different night (Braxton E1). Although the CW’s president of entertainment Dawn Ostroff assured fans of the network’s support for *Girlfriends*, she did so by accenting the series’ ability to “bring in women.” Ostroff’s support of the black-cast and black-produced show neglected to mention the show’s massive popularity among African-American audiences and instead chose to focus on the show’s success among female audiences. Statements

like these foreshadowed the CW's decision to focus entirely on the young female demographic.

When Fox and the WB decided to shift their focus to more “mainstream” programming, each network saw its fortunes increase. Fox eventually developed into a worthy competitor with the Big Three networks, while the WB's focus on teenagers and young adults helped the network become relevant and earn higher ad revenues. However, the WB's decision to shift from black sitcoms to sitcoms with white casts (e.g. *Reba*) contributed to the network's falling ratings in the early 2000s. The WB's white-cast sitcoms never attracted followings as large as hits like *The Steve Harvey Show* and *Sister, Sister* (ABC 1994-1995, the WB 1995-1999) did. Despite the cautionary tale of the WB, the CW decided, in 2009, to cancel its two remaining comedies and focus entirely on drama development. The cancellation of *Everybody Hates Chris* and *The Game* firmly established the CW as a network with one goal: to attract young female audiences. The cancellation of these shows indicated that the CW's executives had no interest in building the “ethnic” audiences that the UPN once courted. Unlike Fox and the WB, which cancelled their black sitcoms to broaden their appeal, the CW cancelled its comedies in order to further narrow its appeal.

### ***Establishing a Niche Audience***

Like the WB's before it, the CW's executives announced their intention to target a young, female audience. However, there was an important distinction made between the WB's previous target demographic and the CW's demographic: the CW did not announce

any intention to target teenagers explicitly. The WB, especially in its most successful years, always included teen viewers in its target demographic (defined as women/adults 12-to-34 years old). However, in the WB's later years, the network found it increasingly difficult to attract a teenaged audience consistently. This stemmed in part from lackluster programming, but it was also the result of an increase in teen-oriented programming on cable channels like MTV and ABC Family (160). The CW's rhetorical strategy of excluding teenagers from their target demographic allowed the network to distance itself from the WB's recent struggles with the demographic. Although they were not explicitly part of the target audience of 18-to-34-year-old women, much of the CW-developed programming was teen-friendly. The network was not opposed to attracting teenaged viewers; after all, those teenagers would enter the CW's target demographic in a few years. The CW executives hoped that zeroing in on an audience of young women (rather than teenagers) could allow the network to "be cool" with teenagers while simultaneously not relying on that unreliable audience.

Even though the CW did not seek to be labeled the "teen network," most of its successful shows featured teenaged characters. This was not a coincidence; rather, the CW adopted the former tactics of the WB in order to attract a young audience. As Mary Kearney notes, "teen" shows are not targeted to exclusively teenaged audiences. Rather, teen texts work to attract an audience with a "youthful sensibility," regardless of their age (19). According to Kearney, teen texts achieve popularity because they attract the teenaged audience as well as those audiences who are "reading up" or "reading down." The "tween" audience, for example, will "read up" in order to feel "cool," mature, and

more like the older generation. Viewers who have aged out of the teenage demographic can “read down” and enjoy adolescent texts for several reasons, including a desire to challenge normative adulthood (22). The CW, then, improved upon the WB’s business plan. Instead of focusing on teenaged audiences, which are notoriously elusive, it focused on older, adult audiences (who were more attractive to advertisers because they had more disposable income) while allowing teen trendsetters to determine which CW programs were “cool.”

This strategy of welcoming teen viewers without announcing them as the target audience worked incredibly well for *Gossip Girl*. In its first season, *Gossip* won its timeslot for the teen demographic (ages 12 to 17) every week, while the show initially struggled to attract women ages 18-34 (Fitzgerald). Teens “discovered” the show, and young adult women slowly followed. *Gossip Girl*’s ability to attract the teen audience garnered the new show (and its network) significant media attention, further raising the network’s profile. Even though *Gossip* rated well among teenagers, there was a noticeable gap between the series’ “buzz” factor and its low ratings. Gary Levin of *USA Today* prominently featured the show in a story on “redefining the TV hit,” noting that the show’s modest Nielsen ratings were not an accurate reflection of its total audience.

### ***Multimedia Strategies***

After its initial launch and disappointing first year ratings (the CW averaged about 3 million viewers in its first season, about the same number that the WB and UPN each averaged on their own), the CW began to incorporate new technology into its branding

and programming (Gold E26). CW executives started to call their target audience “Generation Digital,” acknowledging the challenge of drawing young people away from their computers and phones to older technologies like television (McClellan 15). In 2007, the network introduced the new shows *Online Nation* (2007), a collection of short online videos akin to *America’s Funniest Home Videos* (ABC, 1989-present), and *CW Now* (2007-2008), an entertainment newsmagazine geared for a young audience, in order to appeal to this crowd. The influence of technology was an integral part of the CW’s first signature show, *Gossip Girl*, which featured an anonymous blogger as its narrator. Characters regularly used their (Verizon) phones to check the *Gossip Girl* blog. In the fall of 2009, the CW fully embraced its audience’s online lifestyle with the new slogan “TV To Talk About.” Promotional spots on the network would substitute the word “talk” for online activities, like “chat,” “blog,” or “text,” encouraging viewers to take their fandom online. The CW’s campaign encouraged multiple-screen viewing; and hoped to cultivate an audience of young, socially engaged viewers. The CW constructed its audience as technologically savvy. Being the “technology network,” however, was not an attractive brand to sell to advertisers. Advertisers purchase commercial spots specifically for those who watch telecasts live, so viewers who watch the show off of their televisions are inconsequential to those who purchase thirty-second spots on the network. Still, the CW’s engagement with fans online introduced new revenue streams and promised those advertisers whose products were integrated into the narrative (including Verizon and Victoria’s Secret, for *Gossip Girl*) that the network’s reach extended far beyond the television screen.

## **Sex Sells: The CW Brand**

While most new cable channels and networks enter the television landscape to relatively little fanfare, journalists and other commentators closely monitored the CW's launch and subsequent attempts to cultivate a distinctive brand identity. The CW's executives' decision to launch with a schedule comprised almost entirely of established WB and UPN properties led to an even more intense focus on the network's branding strategy. Without new shows to introduce, the CW needed only to introduce itself to the world (while reminding potential viewers why its slate of the best of the WB and UPN was worth watching.) While the major networks will alter their slogans and color schemes every few years, these adjustments do not usher in a dramatic change to the networks' identities. In 2006, the CW launch was the biggest story of the television season, and it brought attention to the process of network branding in a way that no network or cable channel had before.

Why does branding matter? After all, viewers usually tune in to watch a particular show, not a particular network. As Jonathan Gray explains in *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, audiences always approach texts (in this case, television shows) with prior knowledge informed by promotional material, reviews, or even, I would argue, the network's reputation. As Gray points out, it is impossible for even the most avid media consumer to have experienced every media text firsthand, so many consumers use reviews, promos, or other material to draw their own conclusions about a particular show. Our reliance on paratexts imbues them with the power to “amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning” to texts, which is why they are particularly

remarkable (46). The network's branding, even beyond promotional materials, acts like a paratext. It provides the viewer with information that colors his or her understanding of the show. I would argue that the network's overall brand is just as powerful a paratext as advertisements for individual shows. Branding is critical because it colors viewers' perception of the network before the broadcast even begins. As a new network with shows that were recognizable to many, it was critical that the CW's first branding campaign establish what kind of attitude and philosophy the network would adopt.

### ***Introducing the CW Brand***

In order to prepare for the network's launch, CW executives teamed with Troika Design Group to create their first brand identity. On Troika's official website, the company states that their new CW brand identity "bridged the former UPN and WB audiences with its positive, empowering message and style" (*Troika Designer Group*). The CW's new logo, designed with curvy, conjoined letters, reinforced the coming together of the WB and UPN. Executives designed the CW's new mantra, "Free to Be...(fill in the blank)" with the hope of creating a cohesive brand identity. The "Free to Be" campaign was engineered to be flexible, with various promotional spots asserting that the CW was a place where viewers were free to be "different," "real," and "together." Promotions for the new network would often feature animations drawing lines from one show to the next in order to create the impression that the CW's shows truly belonged together. The network also applied the mantra to individual shows, in order to

rebrand them as shows belonging to the CW. This tactic recalled the WB's effort to frame its network as a distinctive place and its shows as interrelated.<sup>1</sup>

The CW's initial launch campaign relied heavily on its bright lime green color scheme and familiar faces from old WB and UPN shows. Executives assigned each show a slogan. For example, the *America's Next Top Model* promotional image featured Tyra Banks and the tagline "Free to Be Fierce." While some show's taglines were fairly obvious (*Smallville* was "Free to Be Super," *Everybody Hates Chris* was "Free to Be Funny"), others were vague (*One Tree Hill* was "Free to Be Cool"). The "Free to Be" slogan was used in print, on billboards, television, and online. As Levent Ozler wrote in his review of the campaign, "the goal was to develop a look that was in-sync with the sensibilities of The CW's core audience— young, hip, urban viewers from UPN, and Gen Y suburbanites from The WB" ("Troika"). This initial marketing campaign confirmed the CW's desire to be considered a lifestyle brand rather than simply a network. While the Big Four broadcasters utilized more generic slogans like "So Fox" or "Start Here" (ABC), the CW worked to foster a sense of community, despite pulling its programming from two networks with different identities. Many of the CW's self-promoting ads on the new network ended with "Free to Be... Together," in order to signify that these shows were made for each other, despite their origins.

Of course, a green color scheme and new slogan were not enough to link the CW's disparate programming, so the network set about branding itself as a sexy network.

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<sup>1</sup> These ads created the impression that the WB stars were one big, happy, and cool group of friends and worked to establish the WB as a hip place for teenagers and other youthful people to hang out.

In a half-hour special previewing the CW's first fall slate, *Supernatural* star (and *Gilmore Girls* alumnus) Jared Padalecki introduced the new schedule alongside *Girlfriends*' Tracee Ellis Ross. The preview's script worked overtime to establish the CW as a new, sexy network. The contrived and awkward flirtation between Padalecki and Ross often required them to refer uncomfortably to each other as "hot" or "sexy." In its show packages, the special often trumped up the romantic and sexy elements of its dramas. In the most egregious example, this preview special went out of its way to highlight the "sexy" elements of *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, a chaste family drama about the life of a minister and his family. This segment included snippets of scenes with Reverend Camden complaining to his son-in-law about his wife's renewed sex drive and his ordained daughter announcing at the pulpit that her husband is "hot." These snippets, combined with a disproportionately heavy emphasis on the romantic and sexual elements of shows like *Gilmore Girls* and *One Tree Hill*, tried to brand the CW as a network for those interested in seeing attractive people in sexy situations. While this "sexy" brand felt forced in the network's first year, new shows like *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries* quickly established the network as one that would regularly feature racy content and half-naked actors.

### ***Looks Do Kill: Promoting the CW Show***

In the fall of 2007, the CW premiered *Gossip Girl*, a primetime soap from the creator of *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-2007). *Gossip Girl* would ultimately become the CW's signature show, and its success helped set the tone for the network in the years to follow.

The soap, which had a modest debut, steadily built buzz in its first season. Before the drama returned from hiatus with new spring episodes, the network launched an aggressive and controversial campaign designed to generate interest in the series. Rick Haskins, the network's executive in charge of promotion and marketing, came up with an idea that would bring the sexiness and technological savvy of the series together. The print ads featured a production still of two teenaged, half-dressed characters in the throes of passion with a simple, boldfaced message: "OMFG." The acronym, which included both a letter representing a word forbidden on broadcast primetime television and the name of a higher deity, stirred up plenty of controversy and free press for the show. In the lead-up to the next season's premiere, *Gossip Girl* ads featured comments from the Parents' Television Council condemning the show and its racy content. Phrases like "mind-blowingly inappropriate" prominently appeared in ads featuring two (nearly naked) teenaged characters lying in bed. Another ad featured a *New York Post* quotation, "a nasty piece of work," printed on top of an image of two teenagers making out in a pool. These ads would set the tone for future CW programming and help to establish the CW in the larger cultural imagination as a network of sexy primetime soaps.

After *Gossip Girl*'s ad campaign successfully increased interest in the show, the CW employed similar tactics to promote its other, new soaps. Each fall, a new CW soap would be announced on billboards and in magazines featuring scantily clad women (and occasionally men). One year after *Gossip Girl*'s premiere, the CW launched *90210*, a reboot of 1990s Fox hit teen drama *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000). The heavily promoted new series' ads featured the young, tan cast members (wearing tiny bathing

suits) posing in a pool in the shape of that famous zip code. The tagline, “New Drama. Same Zip Code,” promised viewers another teen-centric soap. Much of the hype built around *90210*’s premiere, however, was tied to the return of the Fox soap’s original cast members. Some characters from the original series were incorporated into storylines, while others merely made brief cameo appearances. Even though the veteran cast members were one of the main draws of the new show, they were never actually included in any of *90210*’s print ads. This exclusion highlights the CW marketing department’s obsession with using young, normatively sexy bodies to sell its shows.

The following fall, 2009, the CW introduced three daringly sexy soaps with explicit marketing campaigns. The first, *The Vampire Diaries*, continued the massively successful trend of vampire-themed media for teens. The show’s initial marketing campaign featured its three stars (one teen girl and two attractive male vampires) lying in a meadow. Placed in the middle of the shot, Elena (the teenaged girl) displays ample cleavage and long, slender legs while she and the mysterious vampire figures, who are fully clothed, stare into the camera. The show was a huge hit for the CW, and its marketing campaigns became increasingly sexy as the show aged. The show’s most recent interstitial TV ads feature Elena and the two vampires completely naked, shrouded in moody lighting. Each of the vampires is poised to kiss or bite Elena’s neck, and the ad clearly suggests that this love triangle has developed into a threesome. The ad’s tagline, “SeducTV,” further reinforces *The Vampire Diaries*, and the CW by extension, as sexy, romantic, and dangerous.

The second drama to premiere in the fall of 2009 was *Melrose Place* (the CW, 2009-2010). Piggybacking off the success of *90210*, the CW revived Fox's 1990s soap, which was itself a spin-off of the original *Beverly Hills, 90210*. The show's promotional ads featured characters lounging near the pool of the iconic apartment complex. While most of the actors were fully clothed (in tight clothing), the taglines for these ads were quite racy. The first, "Ménage à Tues," was featured on an ad featuring two female characters and one male. The second, "Tuesday's are a Bitch," featured three female characters, one of which was scantily clad in a small bikini. Those ads, however, paled in comparison to the controversial images for *The Beautiful Life: TBL* (2009), a show about the modeling industry. These ads, which were ubiquitous prior to the series' launch, featured a nude model with her arms covering her nipples and the show's title and tagline ("What are you looking at?") covering her pelvis. Despite such provocation, the ads did not lead to impressive ratings; the show was cancelled after two episodes.

In 2010, CW executives introduced *Nikita*, a remake of the 1990s spy drama *La Femme Nikita* (CTV/USA, 1997-2001). The action series, starring Maggie Q, features the first tough girl to star on the CW since the cancellation of spy drama *Veronica Mars*. The ads for *Nikita*, however, relied on the star's sex appeal rather than her toughness to hook viewers. Several ads, all with the tagline "Looks Do Kill," feature Maggie Q in scandalous outfits. One variation of the ad presents the action star lounging in a chair without pants, revealing her legs to the hip while brandishing a gun. Another places Nikita in a fire-engine-red evening gown with a hip-high slit, stilettos, and a heavy-duty firearm. The marketing materials for *Nikita* played up star Maggie Q's beauty without

featuring her “in action.” This strategy kept the show, which marked a departure from the CW’s standard soapy fare, on brand. The promise of sex established it as a CW show.

### ***Selling Sex to Women: Postfeminist Branding***

As Angela McRobbie notes, we now live in a “hyperculture of commercial sexuality,” and the postfeminist subject (in this case, the ideal CW audience member) withholds critique of this troubling development in order to count as a “modern, sophisticated girl” (34). The “modern” girl is “cool” with the proliferation of sexual images, so the CW audience is constructed as sophisticated by virtue of its compliance with the network’s exploitation of women’s sexuality. For younger, teenage viewers who are “reading up,” the network’s frank presentation of sex provides a window into a forbidden world. The network seems cooler for its embrace of adolescent sexuality. At the same time, these sexy ads subtly invite male viewers to the network without declaring them a target audience and setting up the expectation that the network will have “failed” if it does not attract enough men. The show’s ads are not exactly false advertising, either; most of the CW’s shows feature fairly graphic sex scenes, especially for broadcast television. The scantily clad men and women on the CW’s billboards also take their clothes off on their respective shows. Sex is everywhere, and it provides the CW with one way to stand out from the crowd.

Why would a network targeting young female viewers use nearly-naked women in the majority of its advertising? As Rosalind Gill explains, women are not “straight-forwardly objectified” in postfeminist media culture, rather, they “are portrayed as active,

desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interest to do so” (151). Most of the CW’s ads provide very little information about a show’s premise or story. Instead, they focus entirely on sex appeal. This strategy constructs the CW viewer and the CW’s female characters as postfeminist subjects. These characters appear nearly naked because *they* want to, and the CW’s viewers sanction this objectification. The network does not aim to attract female viewers to its programming through sex, rather, it hopes to tap into postfeminist ideas about women as strong, sexy subjects in order to appeal to female viewers.

The CW’s marketing ultimately presents an extremely narrow vision of the CW woman. The network’s obsession with youth (informed by its narrow target audience of young women) reflects what Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra characterize as postfeminist media culture’s fetishization of youth (10). Tasker and Negra also note that girlhood “is imagined within postfeminist culture as being for everyone; that is, girlhood offers a fantasy of transcendence and evasion, a respite from other areas of experience” (18). The CW’s laser-like focus on youth aligns the network with postfeminist thought. Indeed, the network targets 18-to-34 year old women, but presents very few non-parent figures over the age of 25. The CW’s older audience is encouraged to “read down” and reconnect with their girlhood. While many older viewers appear willing to do just that, reviewers of the CW’s shows scoff at the network’s focus on youth.

### **High School Kids in Expensive Clothes: Critical Reviews of the CW**

The CW's controversy-courting ad campaigns color viewers' perception of the network and its shows, but critical reviews also play an important role. While reviewing the network's shows, critics frequently go out of their way to make their distaste for the CW known, and those critics that do not dismiss the network often simply ignore it. Writing about *Gossip Girl* and the network's reversal of fortune, *The New York Times'* Bill Carter characterizes the network's formula as "high school kids in expensive clothes," eliminating any consideration of these shows outside of their aesthetics (C1). Commenting on the CW's upfront presentation in 2009, Elena F. Maria of the *Los Angeles Times* noted that the network would "only air dramas and reality shows starring young, attractive people in alluring settings" (D1). Critics' disdain for or dismissal of the network often stems from the CW's exclusive focus on shows featuring wealthy, beautiful characters, a focus highlighted by the CW's own branding strategies. Television has also historically favored "attractive casts," but the across-the-board glamour of the CW is unprecedented. The network's shows feature mostly young casts, with a scant few characters over the age of 25. David Hinckley, in his review of *Life Unexpected* (the CW, 2010-2011), noted, "co-stars Shiri Appleby and Kristoffer Polaha shouldn't be on a CW network show at all. They're like, OMG, 32, which by normal CW age standards means they belong in a geriatric-care facility" (80). Indeed, many critics bristle at the network's exclusive focus on those characters under the age of 30. Reviews of the network often dismiss its programming as juvenile, "guilty pleasure" programming unworthy of serious critical attention.

## *Conclusion*

The CW's cultivation of its brand illuminates how the process of branding creates and circulates messages about the network and its potential viewers. The network's focus on a niche audience of young women necessarily leaves out many other segments of the population, including the African-American audience once courted by UPN.

Additionally, the CW's constructs its audience as postfeminist subjects and renders them "unserious" in the eyes of some reviewers and non-viewers. All of the CW paratexts—both ads and critical reviews—inform how a potential viewer approaches the CW, but they also inform how we conceive of the CW viewer. While the network's ratings are not exceptionally high, the CW's shows attract enough viewers to keep the network on the air, and it is understood that many more watch the network's programming off of the television screen. The CW's branding strategies inevitably influence the construction of its audience.

## Chapter Two

### The 18-34s: The Construction of the CW Audience

In the winter of 2008, the CW cancelled its second highest-rated show, *WWE Smackdown*. The move was shocking, considering the network's tenuous ratings and the wrestling program's reliable performance on Friday nights. When asked about the network's decision to sever ties with the profitable franchise, network president Dawn Ostroff explained,

“We felt that, in order to really have the network flow from night to night to night, in order to capitalize on the advertising and the marketing of the network so that everything made sense and sort of felt cohesive as a brand ... we needed to really focus the network more... There are a lot of advertisers who want to reach young women. We have strategically put ourselves in a position where there was white space and we filled that white space.”

(Adalian 1)

Ostroff's comments made clear what many already suspected about the new network: it was largely unconcerned with how many viewers it attracted outside of the young female demographic. The cancellation of *Smackdown* announced the beginning of the CW's single-minded pursuit of the young female audience, but *Smackdown* was not the only show to be cancelled because it did not fit the CW's plans for targeting young women. Successful black sitcoms *Everybody Hates Chris* and *The Game* were both cancelled in

the spring of 2009 when the network decided to abandon half-hour sitcoms altogether.<sup>2</sup> After those shows were removed from the CW's schedule, all of the network's shows targeted a young female audience.

This chapter will examine how the CW constructs its audience and why it employs those strategies. It also asks what assumptions the network makes about its audience and what contradictions are inherent in the network's construction of its audience. Finally, this chapter asks how conversations about and conceptions of the young female audience have changed since the "girl power" craze of the 1990s by examining the trends in the network's programming strategies and using textual analysis to establish how the network's shows differ from their predecessors. In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider first how television audiences are constructed as commodities by advertisers and networks.

### **The Commodity Audience and Audience Construction**

Critical political economists have debated the theory of audience as commodity for decades. In 1977, Dallas Smythe started the "Blindspot Debate" in his essay "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism" with a simple question: what does media make? Smythe argued that media produced only one commodity, audiences, and that media assembled, packaged and sold audiences to advertisers. Smythe argued that the relationship between advertisers and media produced the commodity audience. These

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<sup>2</sup> While I do not have space to discuss this further here, it is interesting that both the WB and the CW struggled to develop successful sitcoms that did not feature black casts. This speaks to the difficulty of representing young (white) women's experiences when confined by the sitcom's conventions, and perhaps a younger audience's rejection of the "old" sitcom formula as passé.

assertions generated a lot of debate, especially from those scholars interested in “decoding” the meanings that media produces. Smythe saw no real merit in cultural studies’ focus on meaning. In his response to Smythe, Graham Murdock, another Canadian political economist, diffused Smythe’s assertions by claiming that it was necessary to differentiate between those media supported by advertisers (television, magazines, newspapers) and those supported by audiences (film). Murdock called for cultural studies to be brought in conversation with Smythe’s claims and asserted that any media artifact operates on both an economic and a cultural level.

In her essay “Gendering the Commodity Audience: Critical Media Research, Feminism, and Political Economy,” Eileen Meehan seeks to further complicate these ideas about the commoditization of the audience from a feminist perspective. Meehan is particularly interested in the way that the U.S. ratings system works to produce “audience commodity” (212). Meehan argues that a feminist perspective reveals the gendered assumptions underpinning the ratings system. While women were (and continue to be) the assumed viewer for daytime television, men were sought after as *the* audience for the primetime hours. Meehan notes that the discursive decision to call white male viewers *the* audience instead of a “men’s audience” marks white, male viewers as inherently more desirable primetime viewers than other groups (216). With the introduction of cable and the fragmentation of audiences, *the* audience narrowed even further. By the 1980s, Meehan argues that the networks defined *the* audience as white, male, 18-to-34-year old cable subscribers. Even as more and more women began to earn an income outside the home, women were still considered a niche audience. As women’s salaries rose and their

buying power increased, theoretically, they should have been included in *the* audience. Meehan argues that women remain a niche audience because the television industry is “an instrument of oppression” designed to discriminate against anyone outside of *the* commodity audience (220). Meehan’s theories highlight how integral audience construction is to the entire structure of the television industry.

In her book *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, Ien Ang also takes on gendered assumptions about television audiences. Unlike Meehan, however, Ang writes from a cultural studies perspective. Ang deconstructs fantasies about the “control” networks have over television viewers while drawing attention to the importance of those fantasies to the advertiser-supported industry. Like Meehan, Ang argues that audience is a “socially-constituted and industrially-produced” category (3). By its very nature, any mass audience is comprised of a heterogeneous gathering of viewers. In order to sell their audiences to advertisers, the television industry defines its audiences in certain ways. The television industry’s insistence that its audience (especially the female viewer) is passive is one of the most formative and historically significant myths necessary for the project of audience construction. Ang contests this assertion and argues that it is based on gendered assumptions about the female television viewer. If television executives were to concede that they did not have control over their viewers, she argues, the entire structure of the television industry would collapse. Therefore, the myth of the “passive, female viewer” (stereotypically considered to be the housewife who watches soap operas while either doing or avoiding housework) is essential to the survival of the ad-supported television industry. Any reclamation of the passive viewer would necessitate an admission that

viewers are not as susceptible to television advertising as once thought. The arguments of both Meehan and Ang highlight the ways in which female television viewers are constructed as inferior to male viewers.

In this age of fragmented audiences and countless cable channels, theories of audience commodity illuminate the motivating factors behind networks' decisions to target certain audiences. However, the television business is not ruled entirely by economic decision-making; it is also influenced by cultural shifts. In her seminal work, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*, Julie D'Acci chronicles the process of audience construction for the CBS drama, which aired from 1982-1988. D'Acci argues that the television industry, in its attempt to construct a "working women's audience," worked "to *produce* gender in its viewers" and to shape femininity along particular lines" (64). Advertisers "discovered" the growing demographic of "working women" in the 1970s and quickly began to tailor advertisements for this underserved audience. At this time, psychographics (a new way of describing audiences that relied more on lifestyle factors than mere demographics) became increasingly important to audience construction. Instead of characterizing this demographic as "women who work outside the home," advertisers instead used psychographics to explain that this audience was comprised of women who were "go-getters" (69). Personality (especially one's relationship to conspicuous consumption) was more important to advertisers than a woman's employment status. D'Acci reminds us that middle-class (primarily white) women have *always* been the main consumers of the products television advertises, even though there has rarely been primetime programming specifically designed explicitly for

them. With more women working during the day and unable to watch daytime TV, advertisers felt it imperative to reach those women at night.

### **Defining the CW Audience**

In the post-network era, it is even more important for a network to establish a target audience desired by advertisers. The CW attracts advertiser interest by targeting the same niche audience with all of its programming; each night the CW hopes to bring young women to the television sets. There is no “guy’s night” on the CW. During its first seven years, the CW’s declared target audience has been young women between the ages of 18 and 34. Most nightly ratings reports on the five networks include either this demographic or women ages 18-49 in their consideration of how the network is performing. The CW’s overall ratings pale in comparison to the Big Four networks (and even some of the most successful cable channels), but the network is able to stay afloat because of its ability to successfully court the advertiser-coveted young female audience.

In a piece for *Broadcasting & Cable*, Paige Albiniak explains that advertisers now value this young female demographic because women control the majority of household spending and watch considerably more television than their male counterparts (10). Advertising and network executives wax poetic to Albiniak about the power of female audience to control both the purse strings and the remote. Fox’s Executive Vice President of Current Programming Marcy Ross articulated several heteronormative assumptions about television audiences, namely that women choose what to watch, and then men follow their lead. These executives also shared their thoughts about the fundamental

differences between male and female audiences. Many express similar sentiments, namely, that men watch television in order to *learn* something while women watch television to *feel* something. CW president Dawn Ostroff frames the differences between male and female audiences slightly differently, citing an attachment to character as the most unique aspect of female viewing. Ostroff told reporters that the CW's viewers "find themselves extremely invested in our characters in ways we can't even describe. They are obsessed with these characters and relationships" (11). Albinia also explains that the young audience that the CW chases desires multimedia engagement with their shows. Ostroff compared the experience of watching a CW show to reading a magazine; viewers approach each show eager to learn about the latest fashion, technology, and music (12). In another interview before the CW's launch, Ostroff stated, "The 18-34s are people who like to try a new product, they go to the movies the first night they open, they're into pop culture. They are not risk takers, but they are open to new things" (Atkinson 32). Of course, it is obvious that that is not *literally* true. If it were, the multiplex would be overrun every Friday night with 18-34 year olds eager to see that week's new releases. It does, however, paint an attractive picture of the CW audience for advertisers. These purported trendsetters' interest in the network (and, presumably, the products it advertises) will inevitably inspire the less trendy to purchase the same products, or so the conventional thinking goes. This collection of executives' thoughts about audiences contains many assumptions, both explicit and implicit, that require further exploration.

These executives' candid statements reveal the gendered, classist, ageist, heteronormative and essentialist thinking that structures the relationship between

television and advertisers, which in turn shapes the CW's own strategies. First, the dividing of male and female audiences by their supposed approaches to television presents an obviously gendered binary. This overly simplistic characterization of the emotional female audience is easy to sell to advertisers eager to capture female viewers.

In *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era*, Amanda Lotz writes that narrowcasting has fundamentally changed the way that advertisers and networks talk about audiences. Building on Julie D'Acci's examination of *Cagney and Lacey's* "go-getter" audience, Lotz notes that the larger television industry has been swept up in the promise of psychographics. Instead of strictly citing ratings or marketing research, "psychographic measures" segment audiences by bringing together data related to "lifestyle, life-stage and attitude" and more traditional demographic measures (51).

Therefore, the CW viewer is not just a female between the ages of 18 and 34. Instead, she is a tech-savvy, pop culture enthusiast who is up on all of the latest trends. Not only that, she also demonstrates "investment" in the CW's shows, implying that she will be a loyal viewer of the network and a loyal consumer of advertised products. Adherence to this conception of the female audience as inherently emotional explains the CW's predilection for soap-influenced programming.

### ***The CW and the Teenage Audience***

While the CW does not publicly express a desire to attract viewers younger than 18, its programming's consistent inclusion of teenaged characters and adolescent themes indicates that the network is interested in fostering relationships with teenaged viewers.

Obviously, teenagers soon age into the CW's target audience of young adult women, and teenagers are a highly valued demographic among advertisers (Fitzgerald). The CW is happy to attract as many teenaged viewers to the network as it can, but it is not prudent to express that desire publicly. While the CW wishes to attract as many young female viewers to the network as possible, it focuses on adult women in part because the age range of 18-34 is significantly larger and more lucrative than the 12-17 year-old demographic. The CW likely distances itself from the teen demographic for three reasons. First, while women may watch more television than men, teenagers watch significantly less television than adults (Stelter). With several cable channels competing for teenagers' attention, including ABC Family and MTV, gambling on the teenage audience is a risky proposition.

Second, teens are no longer the "it" demographic. As Susan Murray explains in her examination of teen stardom in the 1990s, networks like the WB worked tirelessly to attract the "echo boomers" (the children of the baby boomer generation) to their programs (43). Corporations nurtured teen stars' careers across film and television in order to encourage teen audiences to follow their favorite stars to new projects. Murray traces Sarah Michelle Gellar's career and notes how ads for her latest teen-targeted movie would air during *Buffy*'s commercial breaks, sometimes even alongside her Maybelline cosmetics ads. While the teen audience is still attractive to advertisers, networks no longer go the same lengths to cultivate those audiences. The teen market became saturated in the late 1990s as every network sought to duplicate the success of the WB's teen dramas and web-based content came to compete with television for teenaged media

consumers. As *Variety* explained, the teen bubble burst at the turn of the century, and networks became disillusioned about their ability to attract large teenage audiences (Schneider 21). The inability to consistently attract the teenaged audience ultimately doomed the WB, a fate that the CW is anxious to avoid.

Finally, changing technologies have disrupted traditional understandings of television and have introduced the possibility of watching television in a myriad of ways. Teens are often “early adopters” of new technology, so they are less likely to watch television on their televisions. As Brian Stelter reported, children and teenagers are watching less television on TV than ever, but they are still consuming the same amount of content. In the 1990s, the Internet and video games were viewed as the two technologies most threatening to television. Now, streaming services and mobile technology also erode television’s hold on its audience. Indeed, in *Gossip Girl*’s first season, the show consistently ranked as one of the best selling shows on iTunes (Schneider 21). While the show’s ratings were not record-breaking, the show’s tech-savvy viewers clearly found alternative ways to watch. The CW initially tried to fight the introduction of streaming and famously stopped allowing viewers to watch *Gossip Girl* online at the end of its first season. That experiment failed to goose the show’s ratings, and the network has since embraced their digital audience. In a historic deal in 2011, the CW signed a one billion dollar, exclusive deal to stream all of its scripted shows on Netflix (Grossman 30). The deal essentially serves as a syndication deal for the network, since its highly serialized shows (even hits like *Gossip Girl*) have yet to attract lucrative syndication deals from other cable networks. The Netflix deal indicates that the CW is

primed to embrace the convergence of television and digital media and acknowledges its difficulty attracting technologically savvy viewers to its live broadcasts.

The network also boasts a significant online presence. Its shows now stream online the day after their original airdate, and the CW's website features many interactive features designed to engage viewers both while they watch and after their show has ended. Sharon Ross suggests in *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet* that today's plugged-in teens (and young adults) now *expect* what she terms "tele-participation" from their shows (127). The CW works to provide a link between viewers and programs with a mobile app for each show (which features exclusive content like behind-the-scenes footage), as well as live Twitter feeds and special interactive contests. These live Twitter feeds, of course, encourage fans of the shows to watch the show's original broadcast in order to interact with cast and crew members as the episode airs. The network's website also features music playlists for every episode of every show and a "CW Pinboard" that features messages and tweets from fans. Finally, the CW hosts online contests and games to further engage fans. In 2009, the network offered a summer internship to whichever fan cut the best *Supernatural* trailer out of 30 minutes of footage. The premiere of *The Carrie Diaries* (the CW, 2013-present) brought the "Purse-analyzer," a game that allows you to create a colorful handbag similar to the one Carrie paints in the show's first episode.

Will Brooker, writing about *Dawson's Creek's* website's early attempts to engage with fans, details how committed the WB was to expanding the show's universe online. Brooker notes that the network would even link to independent, fan-run sites in order to

keep viewers immersed in the world of *Creek*'s Capeside community (459). While the WB worked to make the fan experience last between episodes, it knew that *Dawson* viewers' engagement with the show would begin on their television. Unlike the CW, the WB did not have to worry that the majority of its viewers would watch its programs online after they aired. The industrial shifts within the last twenty years of the television business require the CW to pursue an audience with different technological capabilities than the WB and UPN did, while cultural shifts have tested the industry's ideas about what women want.

### **The Post-Girl-Power-Craze Moment**

When *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered in 1997, "girl power" was all the rage in American popular culture, as well as society at large. As Emilie Zaslow explains, Riot Grrrl introduced the term "girl power" to the popular contemporary lexicon, but the term quickly came to represent a "cultural moment in which girls not only had an increase in purchasing power but also required industry executives to create a new consumer profile" (3). Concern about female adolescents in the 1990s peaked with cautionary books like Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, which warned parents and other concerned parties that female adolescence was more fraught with violence, low self-esteem, and sexism than ever. During the WB's heyday, the concerns about girls' fraught adolescence brought third-wave feminist ideas to the cultural forefront. As Sarah Projansky points out, American girls became the subject of increased media attention in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, and this "cultural obsession"

with girls manifested on the cover of magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* (41). The cultural panic about the state of female adolescence inspired adults to create “empowered” young female characters as role models for girls. Commodified and repackaged as “girl power,” the basic tenets of feminism reached a wide audience, albeit in a corrupted, commercialized form. Nevertheless, “girl power” or the variations of “girls rule!” slogans are political in their assertion that being a girl is something to be celebrated. The success of the Spice Girls’ commercialized version of “girl power” demonstrated that the teen market could be lucrative, and the WB was one of the first television networks to capitalize on the buying power of the young female demographic.

Indeed, the late 1990s introduced several strong heroines to broadcast and cable television. *Xena: Warrior Princess* (syndication, 1995-2001) and *La Femme Nikita* both introduced empowered women to the cable landscape. Both of these shows featured strong and beautiful female fighters. Teen shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995) featured female adolescents navigating their angsty teen years and together established a formula that would later inform the WB’s teen dramas. Of course, these were not the only shows of this decade to feature female protagonists. Indeed, kid- and family-targeted programming also featured several girl-led shows, including *Clarissa Explains It All*, *The Secret World of Alex Mack*, *Sister, Sister*, *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo* (Nickelodeon, 1996-1998), *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (ABC, 1996-2000, The WB, 2001-2003), and *The Powerpuff Girls* (Cartoon Network, 1998-2005). It is not mere coincidence that children’s programming developed a strong slate of girl-led programming before the WB and other networks followed. Sarah Banet-

Weiser explains that Nickelodeon challenged commonly held beliefs about the kid audience, namely, the notion that young boys will not watch shows featuring female protagonists (111). Shows like *Clarissa* and *Alex Mack* disproved that theory and helped build Nickelodeon into the dominant channel for kids in the 1990s. The audience that grew up with *Clarissa*, *Sabrina*, *Alex*, *Shelby*, and the *Powerpuff Girls* were part of the WB's, and now the CW's, target audience.

When *Buffy* premiered, critics and viewers hailed the former-cheerleader-turned-vampire-slayer as a “strong” female role model for the distressed girls that Pipher and many others worried about. *Buffy* established the fledgling network as a place where empowered young female protagonists were welcome. *Felicity* (The WB, 1998-2002) and *Charmed* both featured female lead characters and, while they did not produce “girl power” heroines as iconic as *Buffy*, they nevertheless reinforced the WB as a place for young women. After *Buffy* moved from the WB to UPN, *Gilmore Girls* inherited the network's “girl power” mantle, and Lorelai and Rory Gilmore became “girl power” icons in their own right. Unlike many of her “girl power” contemporaries, Rory (like *Felicity*) did not have supernatural powers. Instead, her “girl power” stemmed from her devotion to her education and career goals and her willingness to be a bookworm. Although all quite different programs, the WB's commitment to female-led shows demonstrates how the network responded to the “girl power” craze.

The WB was not the only network to pursue the young female demographic with shows featuring “positive” role models. UPN, in its early years, aired *Mo'isha*, a black-cast sitcom about a black teenage girl navigating adolescence with her charming middle

class family. UPN was also home to *Girlfriends*, a sitcom about four black, adult, female friends that celebrated female friendship. In 2004, the network debuted *Veronica Mars*, a noir teen-detective series about a young woman working to solve her best friend's murder and her own rape. Veronica, another cute, petite blonde like Buffy, was declared by many to be the heir to Buffy's "girl power" throne, but the show never achieved the popularity that *Buffy* did. Both the WB and UPN had a strong tradition of showcasing young female protagonists, a tradition that many hoped the CW would continue.

The WB and UPN both emerged in the "girl power" moment. By the time of the CW merger in 2006, there was less of an imperative for networks to present "empowered" female characters. More than ten years removed from the explosion of commercialized "girl power," the comparative lack of popular discourse about female adolescence allows the CW to embrace the consumerist, sexualized, and neoliberal aspects of postfeminism without placing a requisite emphasis on female empowerment.<sup>3</sup> Many "girl" shows embraced this philosophy in the 1990s and, while the sentiment is still relevant today, the "girl power" craze is not as pervasive as it once was. Not only was "girl power" a catchy motto, it was also easy to sell to the advertisers chasing the young female audience. The WB was better at selling "girl power" than any other network. Without a similar marketing pitch, the CW struggles over how to define and sell its young female audience to advertisers through its programming.

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<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to imply that "girl power" is dead, merely that the mainstream rallying cry for girl power is not nearly as loud as it was at its 1990s peak.

## The CW and Nostalgia for 1990s Programming

In the 1990s, television executives (and other media producers) believed that they *knew* what female viewers wanted. Eager to cultivate this new, “empowered” female consumer, networks featured more programming with female characters that exhibited a postfeminist sensibility. Most of these texts featured fashionable female characters that strive to “have it all,” namely, success and happiness in their professional and personal lives. Shows like *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2001) and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), as well as musical acts like the Spice Girls and films like *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (2001), became huge hits while articulating how postfeminism operates in young women’s lives. The CW has struggled to establish its “mission statement” vis-à-vis its female audience, and draws from the recent past in order to engage with its own version of “girl power.”

In the winter of 2013, the CW premiered *The Carrie Diaries*, an hour-long teen drama based on Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* prequel of the same name. The show is the CW’s fourth revival of a classic series in the network’s seven-year history. Many members of the CW audience came of age in the 1990s, when shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Sex and the City* were popular among young female audiences. The CW’s reboots of these beloved properties (along with *Melrose Place* and *La Femme Nikita*) attempt to tap into the nostalgia of the network’s older viewers. Of course, all networks hope to capitalize on viewer nostalgia with remakes (and reruns) of classic television properties while introducing classic characters to a younger generation. In *Inside Primetime*, Todd Gitlin explains the conservative thinking that pervades the network television business, which he terms the “triumph of the synthetic” (63). Network

executives, as Gitlin explains, seek “safety” and “short term results,” which he argues results in their predilection for spinoffs, remakes, and “recombinant” series (64). Even though the television landscape has changed dramatically since Gitlin’s writing, much of what he describes remains conventional network wisdom, and the CW is no exception. As Brian Steinberg reported in the spring of 2010, network executives believe that “revived properties have greater potential for success and less perceived risk” because of built-in audience familiarity (2). Recycled series require less elaborate promotion, which means that networks can spend less time and money advertising for these shows. Brian Stapf, the CBS Paramount Network Television President, explains to Michael Schneider that the recent increase in television remakes by the major networks is “partly market driven” and stems from worry about how best to attract viewers with hundreds of cable channels and endless distractions (14). In the 2000s, with ratings steadily decreasing for the major networks, revivals of old series became more and more common; the CW is not alone in its nostalgia. What is unique and noteworthy about the CW’s reboot strategy, however, is that the network draws exclusively from one era of television: the 1990s. The CW utilizes remakes of these shows to draw in viewers nostalgic for the female-centric television of their youth.

In the fall of 2006, there was no definitive blueprint for what kinds of television young, white, middle class women wanted to watch. The CW had modest success with *Gossip Girl*, and that success inspired CW executives to return to one of the most successful teen soaps of all time, *Beverly Hills, 90210*. While not widely cited as a “girl power” text, the show featured several female lead characters and was tailored to the

young female audience. The CW's reboot aimed to draw viewers nostalgic for the original *90210* to the network through the inclusion of the original's cast members. The show, which follows Annie and Dixon Wilson (this version's Brenda and Brandon Walsh) after they relocate from Kansas to Beverly Hills, initially divided its narrative between parent-aged characters and teenaged characters. This storytelling strategy invited older female viewers without alienating the teen and younger adult audience that the CW relied upon. The premiere's ratings were high for the small network, but steadily dropped throughout the show's first season (Toff 2). While the original *90210* tapped into the zeitgeist, the new *90210* failed to make much of an impression. The show was so unnoticed in popular culture that it inspired one loyal viewer to call it "the least cared-about show on television" (Hyden).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, many viewers (predictably) complain that the new version pales in comparison to the original, and that the storylines move too slowly. After its first, underwhelming season, the show's producers decided to focus on the teenaged characters, and the adult characters were phased out of the narrative. While *90210* failed to catapult the CW into legitimacy, CW executives were impressed enough by its initial success to order a new edition of *Melrose Place* (originally a *Beverly Hills, 90210* spin-off) for the following year. The poorly received revival centers on a new group of twenty-somethings living in the Melrose Place apartment complex. The remake of the original spin-off remains one of the network's most embarrassing flops.

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<sup>4</sup> Hyden's piece does not intend to ridicule the show for its lack of cultural relevance. In fact, he notes that he and his wife enjoy passively watching the show even though they do not know anyone else who watches it.

Undeterred by the failure of *Melrose Place*, the CW introduced another remake in the fall of 2010. *Nikita*, the network's highly anticipated reboot of cult drama *La Femme Nikita*, based on the 1990 French film of the same name, stars a gorgeous, government-trained rogue assassin. Like its predecessors, one of *Nikita*'s central motifs is the juxtaposition of Nikita's feminine beauty with her lethal power. The differences between *La Femme Nikita* and *Nikita* are noteworthy and largely reflective of the different moments in which they aired. Dawn Heinecken, writing about the original series, claims that *La Femme Nikita* frequently tries to "explain" or undermine away Nikita's presence as hero and soften her employment of violence by overtly sexualizing her body and framing her violence as productive and maternal (38). *Nikita*, played by Peta Wilson on this series, is blonde and petite, much like Buffy. Laura Ng argues that the series frequently highlights Nikita's blonde hair through low lighting and dark settings and clothes in order to accentuate her femininity as juxtaposed with her position as an assassin (113-114). Indeed, Heinecken writes that this blonde Nikita is "a hip, twenty-something techno-grunge goddess; her appearance and her taste in music and décor reflect current trends as seen on MTV" (42). Indeed, Wilson's Nikita dresses like the lower class character that she was before the government recruited her.

While *La Femme Nikita* hoped to attract young viewers with what Heinecken terms a "heroin chic" style, the CW's *Nikita* instead relies heavily on the combination of action, romance, and expensive fashion to attract young viewers. When not seducing targets in revealing, sparkly dresses, Nikita dresses in stylish but functional clothes. Nikita is certainly a woman of the postfeminist media culture of the 2010s. Actress

Maggie Q, a dark-haired, Vietnamese-American woman famous for her roles (and impressive, skillful stunt work) in previous action movies, brings a more glamorous and sophisticated look to the role.<sup>5</sup> Like Wilson, Q is sexualized both by the show and for the show, as discussed in chapter one. The show frequently features extraneous shots of Nikita in her underwear, and the camera often gratuitously pans Nikita's body. The central premise of *Nikita*, that she uses her "exotic" looks as a weapon, works perfectly as a postfeminist premise. Postfeminist thinking suggests that the show is allowed to objectify Nikita because she *chooses* to be feminine and sexy in order to accomplish her goals. Although quite low-rated, the show has survived, and provided the CW with its first (and, so far, only) female action hero. *Nikita* has been nowhere near as influential as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, however, and Nikita has yet to make a significant impact in popular culture.

In the fall of 2011, the CW got back into the *Buffy* business with its acquisition of *Ringer* (2011-2012), a rejected CBS pilot starring Sarah Michelle Gellar as identical twin sisters (one a former drug addict, one a glamorous, high society woman). Publications like *Variety* and *Entertainment Weekly* celebrated Gellar's return to television and noted that the return of "Buffy" to the CW could generate increased interest in the network. *Ringer* was tonally different from every other show on the network, and many joked that Gellar and her costars were the CW's "senior citizens," since they were all older than 30. While not a remake, the return of Sarah Michelle Gellar, a feminist and postfeminist icon,

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<sup>5</sup> Although I do not have space to discuss it at length here, it should be noted that Maggie Q's "exotic" look significantly complicates the new series' sexual politics. Q's performance often plays with the stereotype of the silent-but-deadly Asian woman, and employs it as a weapon while simultaneously employing that stereotype in its promotional material.

represented another move by CW executives informed by nostalgia for a recognizable star. Sarah Michelle Gellar was the face of the WB for five years, so CW executives gambled on her new show even though it was tonally off-brand for the network. In advance of *Ringer*'s premiere, newly installed network president Mark Pedowitz noted that Gellar's new show could appeal to the network's base of young women while getting "other age groups to sample us" (Young 18). While *Ringer* premiered to great fanfare (and high-for-the-CW ratings), the show failed to attract a large audience over its run and was canceled after one season.

*The Carrie Diaries*, the network's fourth attempt to revive an old franchise, hopes to tap into the hugely successful (and highly lucrative) *Sex and the City* phenomenon. The show, which premiered after flagship *Gossip Girl* ended its run, takes place in the 1980s and follows a teenaged Carrie Bradshaw as she tries to balance high school life in Connecticut and an internship in Manhattan. As Carrie herself explains in her voiceover introducing the show's third episode, "before there was sex, before there was the city, there was just me, Carrie." *The Carrie Diaries* is a coming-of-age teen drama, with the twist that the audience already knows how Carrie Bradshaw turns out.

*Sex and the City* was a groundbreaking show. When it premiered in 1998, it was one of the few shows to feature female characters so prominently, and the only one to address women's sex lives so explicitly. The show's privileging of female friendship over romantic relationships was refreshing, and the women's embrace of singlehood (most of the time) was quite revolutionary. *Sex* was a woman-centered sitcom that examined relationships from a female point of view. Jane Arthurs argues that the show engaged

self-consciously with feminist rhetoric and “selectively deployed feminist discourses as a response to cultural changes in the lives of their potential audience, an audience that is addressed as white, heterosexual, and relatively youthful and affluent” (3). Indeed, *Sex*’s address did not include all female viewers, and the show’s viewers were imagined as sophisticated, urban, affluent, white women. Indeed, *Sex and the City*’s target audience while on HBO is the same as the CW’s current audience. Since the release of two successful films and many tie-in products, the series has spawned its own media empire whose audience is imagined to be much larger.

*Sex and the City* was a pioneering, but problematic, text. While aspects of the show were feminist, the show was also part of postfeminist media culture. As L.S. Kim points out, the women of *Sex and the City* struggle to “have it all,” a classic postfeminist theme echoed in countless romantic comedies and television series (329). *Sex* was also invested in consumer culture, particularly fashion. Jane Arthurs argues that the show’s embrace of a consumerist, materialistic lifestyle counteracted some of the series’ political potential (51). In many ways, *Sex and the City* is the perfect postfeminist text: it naturalizes and takes for granted aspects of feminism while celebrating fashion and beauty culture. In one episode, Carrie realizes that she has essentially spent her life savings on shoes (usually from Manolo Blahnik) and cannot afford to pay the rent on her renovated apartment. *Sex and the City* is frequently cited as one of the most influential

texts within postfeminist media culture because it presents a near-perfect blend of feminist-minded heroines in beautiful, expensive clothes.<sup>6</sup>

Like *90210* before it, *The Carrie Diaries* hopes to pull from a wide segment of the CW's 18-to-34 female demographic. Not only does the show (theoretically) appeal to fans of *Sex and the City*, it also incorporates nostalgia for the 1980s, with many winks to '80s fashion, music, and lifestyle. Older women, even women older than 34 years old, can perhaps appreciate the show's setting. Unlike *Sex*, *The Carrie Diaries* is a teen drama, so its tone is markedly different. The pilot opens with the revelation that Carrie's mother recently passed away, and Carrie is working through her grief. When Carrie discovers that her sister has spilled nail polish on their mother's purse, Carrie decides to embellish the purse with more nail polish and artfully sign her name on it. On her first day in Manhattan, a photographer spots Carrie's purse and insists that she allow it to be featured in *Interview* magazine. *The Carrie Diaries'* first episode establishes Carrie as both a young fashionista and a teenage girl dealing with her own angst. Carrie and her friends deal with adolescent issues, including coming out and deciding when to have sex, and Carrie's family struggles to rebuild their lives without her mother. While Carrie and her friends (two girls and one gay male) do sit in a diner and talk about sex like on *Sex and the City*, the narrative focuses less on friendship and more on Carrie and her maturation process. The show's mixture of the CW formula (glossy teen drama) and nostalgia epitomizes the network's rebooting strategy. In many ways, *The Carrie Diaries*

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<sup>6</sup> See *Reading Sex and the City* (Eds. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe) and *Interrogating Postfeminism* (Eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra).

is *Sex and the City*, CW-style. While *Sex and the City* had a clear mission to represent women's friendships and relationships in a funny and relatable way, *The Carrie Diaries* tries to be everything to everyone and, as a result, its point of view is unclear. Even though the show looks like a runaway hit on paper, it has yet to draw large audiences.<sup>7</sup>

The CW's reliance on 1990s reboots, remakes, and spin-offs reveals its ambivalence and uncertainty about the young female audience today. While the WB both contributed to and was guided by the "girl power" craze, the CW has no similar guiding principle. The network, instead of experimenting with original programming featuring female characters, adheres to a conservative, risk-averse slate of teen soap programming. It seems the network is nostalgic for a time when they "understood" young female viewers and could give them what they thought they wanted. The CW has spent the last five years focusing all of its efforts on the young female audience. Shows like *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries* have generated buzz, but did not produce an iconic female heroine for our times. The CW is still trying to figure out what exactly its young female audience wants, and its struggle reveals the difficulty of appealing to young women in this postfeminist time. The CW's struggle to gain traction stems from its contradictory construction of its audience. The network makes frequent attempts to revive past properties construct their audience as one nostalgic for the "girl power" television of their youth, yet the network's programming and branding largely constructs its audience as young postfeminist subjects with an interest in fashion, luxury, and consumption. This

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<sup>7</sup> *Carrie's* premiere drew 1.6 million total viewers, with 0.6 million in the 18-49 demographic, numbers were on par with *Gossip Girl's* final season (O'Connell).

construction of the CW's audience suggests that these women are not invested in "girl power" and would rather go shopping instead. Of course, viewers with this type of lifestyle profile are highly attractive to advertisers seeking young women. The CW does not feel an imperative to produce "girl power" programming, which is reflective of the power and influence of modern postfeminist media culture.

## Chapter Three

### Gossip Girls: The CW, Genre, and Gender

In the winter of 2010, television critics celebrated the debut of a new CW drama, *Life Unexpected*. Reactions to the new show, a lighthearted, sentimental drama about a sixteen-year-old foster kid who reunites with her birth parents, were often effusive with praise and quick to contrast the new show with the CW's other programs. Critics expressed shock that the network that was most famous for *Gossip Girl* and *90210* would broadcast a "sweet" show like *Life Unexpected*. In his review of the show, *USA Today*'s Robert Bianco wrote, "the last thing you'd look to the CW for these days is a smart, sweet family drama with romantic comedy overtones. Surprise. Sweet is pretty much what you get from CW's new *Life Unexpected*" (4D). Bianco was not the only critic to praise the new show while simultaneously disparaging the network's previous programming. Jonathan Storm, of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, remarked that it "must have been an off day at the office when the CW picked up *Life Unexpected*. The show... is sweet, instead of packed with sex, drugs, alcohol, and sinister plots, like most of the network's recent fodder" (C4). Mike Hale, writing for *The New York Times*, suggested that the show could join the ranks of what he considered the network's only "purely enjoyable programming": *Gossip Girl*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Supernatural* (7). Other critics were quick to use the word "unexpected" in their headline in order to demonstrate how much this show differed from the network's other offerings.

*Life Unexpected* aired two short seasons on the CW, and was cancelled after twenty-six episodes. Although it is impossible to pinpoint why the show failed to secure a

sizable audience after receiving such delighted praise from critics, one likely factor in the show's demise was its tenuous relationship to the rest of the CW's slate. As many were quick to point out, *Life Unexpected* harkened back to the old family-friendly dramas of the WB and did not "fit in" with the CW's current programming. Even though the show's short run may seem historically insignificant, it was, in fact, quite illuminating. The show would, over the course of its run, try to become more CW-like through the introduction of a teacher-student affair, endlessly drawn-out love triangles, and slightly glossier aesthetic. Its attempts to conform to the CW's standards failed, and the show highlighted publicly how narrow the definition of a "CW show" had become.

The CW's struggle to establish itself as a respectable player within the television industry reveals much about the ways that a fixation on branding and niche audiences can influence programming. In 2007, after cancelling several of its old WB and UPN holdovers (like *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Veronica Mars*, and *Girlfriends*), the CW threw the programming equivalent of spaghetti against the wall in the hopes that something would stick. The network, still unsure of its identity, introduced *Reaper* (2007-2009), the story of a 21-year-old male slacker who discovers that his parents promised their firstborn child to the Devil and who must help the Devil to recapture souls who have escaped from Hell. The comedy-drama received mostly positive reviews, but failed to find an audience and was cancelled after two seasons. The CW also premiered *Life is Wild* (2007-2008), the story of a New York family that moves to South Africa. Executives hoped that the show could be the new *7th Heaven*, a family drama that the whole family could watch together. Robert Bianco, in his review of the show, likened the

series to a mere “*7th Heaven* replacement that adds African landscapes, wildlife and culture” (7E). The network scheduled *Wild* (which was based on the British series *Wild at Heart*) on Sunday nights, which was *7th Heaven*’s timeslot for many years on the WB. Dawn Ostroff, the CW’s entertainment president, told reporters, “the same things that brought families together five years ago still bring families to the set today. Quality programming with well-crafted, relatable stories that deal with real situations always make for the best family programming” (Waldman 29). Ostroff’s motto also applied to *Aliens in America* (2007-2008), a sitcom that chronicled the adventures of a Wisconsin family that welcomes a young Muslim, Pakistani boy into their home. The show served as a companion piece to *Everybody Hates Chris*, another family-friendly sitcom inherited from UPN. None of these family-friendly shows proved to be the breakout hit that the CW sought. Instead, the network’s new hit was the frequent target of the Parent Television Council’s ire: *Gossip Girl*.

The emergence of *Gossip Girl* as a pop culture phenomenon gave the CW a new lease on life, and the network seized upon the show’s success and strove to provide as many similar shows as possible. After *Gossip Girl* hit, the network quickly shifted its focus from family-friendly fare to sudsy and scandalous primetime soaps. While all networks are inherently conservative, the fledgling CW took this strategy to new lengths. Soon, the network’s ten hours of primetime consisted largely of one-hour, glossy dramas featuring large ensemble casts of attractive actors in stylized, expensive settings. Critics invoked the category of the “CW show,” knowing that most of their readers would know exactly what type of show they were talking about. In this post-network era, it is more

important than ever for small networks to cultivate a recognizable brand identity, and the CW's project of brand construction illustrates the increasing importance of establishing one's niche. The CW's brand is so specific that it functions like a genre, with certain expectations and limitations attached to it. What kind of programming does the CW provide for its target audience of young women? How can we understand the "CW show" as a genre-like category, and how can we understand that category as gendered? How does the CW genre limit the possibilities for the young women on the network? Who is the "CW woman" and how does she relate to the postfeminist sensibility? Why are so many critics' responses to the network's programming so dismissive?

### **Genre, Teen Television, and the Soap Opera**

In "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," Jason Mittell argues that scholars should conceive of television genres as "discursive clusters" influenced by texts (and the relationships between them) as well as production and reception (8). He draws attention to the various factors that make the study of television genre decidedly different from the study of film or literary genre. His approach opens up a space to talk about networks and branding as determining forces in creating and sustaining generic categories. Indeed, he calls for more attention to be paid to the "cultural activity" that links texts together, including promotional material and other extratextual information (6). Mittell acknowledges that the relationship between texts is also critical to any consideration of genre, but he argues that the text need not always be the starting point for genre analysis. Mittell's flexible definition of genre invites new consideration of the

concept and the ways in which it operates. In the case of the CW, the network's shows are linked by their similarities in narrative, form, and aesthetic, but they are also linked by their target audience, shared production companies, and dismissive critical responses.

Gary R. Edgerton and Kyle Nicholas, in their essay, "I Want My Niche TV: Genre as a Networking Strategy in the Digital Era," argue that "something altogether new and different is happening to television genres in the ever-expanding multichannel universe of the digital era" (247). Unlike Mittell, Edgerton and Nicholas concern themselves specifically with the relationship between genre and branding. They focus primarily on cable channels, like Home & Garden Television (HGTV) and the History Channel (now simply History), and note that genres are now the starting points (and selling points) for new cable channels. They note that branding in the post-network era is "central to cultivating audiences," and argue that genres are now stretched to conform to their respective network brands (252). Although they focus on the smaller cable ventures with overdetermined brand identities, their points about branding also apply to those networks and cable channels that do not spell out their agenda in their name. Branding is equally important to the CW, and the network experienced obstacles similar to the newly introduced cable channels in Edgerton and Ross's study, mainly, that audiences were not quite sure what programming to expect from the network when it launched. While the network inherited its schedule from the WB and UPN, it was unclear how the CW would craft its brand identity. After two years of experimentation, the CW established itself by programming a primetime schedule that blended "teen" television and soap opera.

While soap opera is a well-established generic category with roots in early 20<sup>th</sup> century radio, the category of “teen” television is decidedly more nebulous. I place the “teen” in teen TV in quotation marks because, while most of these shows prominently feature teenaged characters, they also attract a sizable audience outside of the teen demographic. In the case of the CW, the network does not express an explicit desire to draw teenaged viewers, even though many of its shows star teenaged characters.

In the introduction to their collection dedicated to “teen” television, Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein define “teen TV” as any show that addresses the struggle of adolescence, and, importantly, argue that it can be found in sitcoms and dramas, on broadcast and cable (6). The “genre” of teen television, then, is linked together through shared textual elements, namely, the presence of “teen” concerns and teenaged characters within the narrative. While Ross and Stein’s definition of “teen TV” is a useful way to link disparate texts, like *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005) and *Saved by the Bell* (NBC, 1989-1993), their definition of “teen TV” is quite broad and neglects consideration of the extratextual factors that contribute to the definition of genre. *Six Feet Under* and *Saved by the Bell* may both address adolescent concerns, but the discourses about these two shows (in terms of quality, aesthetics, imagined audience, etc.) could not be more different. As an HBO show, *Six Feet Under* was labeled as “quality” television by many critics, a distinction that is unattainable to a goofy, kid-targeted, Saturday morning sitcom like *Saved by the Bell* or any of the CW’s dramas.

As Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman point out in their book *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*, “teen” TV is also a gendered term,

typically associated with the young female audience. Levine and Newman note that “teen” series remain one of the few places where the “serialized and feminine” are privileged. Shows that are labeled as distinctly “teen” frequently feature a female protagonist like *My So-Called Life*, which is widely considered (with *Beverly Hills, 90210*) to be the forerunner of the many “teen” texts that premiered in the 1990s, especially those that aired on the WB. The show explored teenage angst and privileged emotionality and, as a result, connected with fans that felt that the show was realistic and related to their own adolescent experiences (Murphy 165). As Levine and Newman explain, “teen” shows often feature emotional drama (especially romance) at their centers, and this connects them with soap opera and all of its negative connotations (99). While *My So-Called Life*, unlike *Beverly Hills, 90210*, was not “soapy” in the traditional sense, its embrace of emotional drama nevertheless feminized the show. Most soapy or “teen” primetime shows cannot achieve highest “quality” status because they are too closely affiliated with the feminine genre of soap opera. As Michael Kackman notes in his arguments about *Lost*’s relationship to melodrama, most shows strive to combat the negative association with soap opera by counterbalancing those “emotional” storylines with more “serious” ones (Kackman). “Teen TV” is therefore delegitimized as a genre due to its closeness to the soap opera. The CW, with its focus on teen characters and soapy, highly serialized, and “emotional” shows, invites critical and scholarly dismissal with its commitment to “feminine” television.

“Teen” television may be a feminized form, but soap opera is the ultimate “feminine” narrative form. It is important to distinguish between “soap opera” and other

forms of serialized storytelling. In her study of soap operas, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre*, Laura Stempel Mumford arrives at her own definition of soap opera. Writing after the success of *Dallas* inspired an influx of serialized primetime programming, Mumford defines the soap opera as “a continuing fictional dramatic television program, presented in multiple serial installments each week, through a narrative composed of interlocking storylines that focus on the relationships within a specific community of characters” (18). Writing in the early 1990s, Mumford works to separate more prestigious serialized primetime shows (like *Hill Street Blues* and even *Dallas*) from the daytime soaps in order to focus on more traditional forms of soap opera. Mumford’s definition makes no mention of gender.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, any definition of American soap opera would have to include the genre’s gendered history, namely that these daytime serials are designed for female audiences.

While Mumford deals primarily with distinguishing between daytime and primetime soaps, Tania Modleski works toward a definition of the “soap formula” (31). In “The Search for Tomorrow in Today’s Soap Operas,” Modleski outlines two important, genre-defining qualities of traditional soap opera: women are “generally on a professional par with men” and that “most of *everyone*’s time is spent experiencing and discussing personal and domestic crises” (31). On these predecessors to soapy primetime fare, female characters are not the only ones concerned with “emotional” issues. This aspect is key to the feminization of soap opera (in its daytime and primetime iterations)

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<sup>8</sup> This erasure of gender is attributable to Mumford’s concern with soap operas in countries outside of the United States, some of which are not designed exclusively for female audiences.

as a form. On these shows, even the male characters (typically the more “serious” characters on “serious” shows) act “femininely” because they privilege their emotional lives over their professional lives. Additionally, most soap operas privilege the family unit above all other alliances (or, alternatively, create a “family” out of coworkers), which, as Modleski points out, places the form squarely in the domestic sphere (32). On soaps, there are few “serious” (masculine) plots to counter the emotional (“feminine”) plots. As a result, critics can dismiss soap opera as sentimental, unsophisticated, and unworthy of attention. This legacy of critical disdain extends to the CW’s programming, which is more “soapy” than the WB’s most prestigious shows were.

### ***Defining the WB Show***

In *Teen Media: Hollywood and the Youth Market in the Digital Age*, Valerie Wee identifies the characteristics of a “WB show” and argues that the network designed its teen brand to compete directly with MTV, another network popular with the teenage audience. Focusing primarily on the WB’s late 1990s teen-centered offerings (e.g. *Buffy*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *Felicity*), Wee notes that all of these shows had young and attractive casts, centered on the relationships between their central protagonists, and explored adolescent issues with “an appealing blend of intelligence, sensitivity, and knowing sarcasm” (146). Importantly, Wee points out that “WB teens” were “morally idealistic” and were almost exclusively white, affluent and suburban (147). Wee groups these dramas together and discusses their shared characteristics, but she does not argue that this group of texts forms its own genre or cultural category. I would argue that the “WB

drama,” for a time, constituted its own genre-like category. The cultural activity around the category, namely the network’s own branding strategies and critical discourse about the popularity and charm of these series, produced a genre-like category that worked to distinguish these shows from other teen-centered fare of the time. I would argue that the CW creates a similar genre-like category that is strengthened by the networks’ commitment to the primetime soap as its primary genre and by changing industrial conditions that encourage networks to target niche audiences. The genre of the “CW show” results from the network’s production practices, reception and its programming.

### **Defining the CW Show**

Writing shortly after the CW merger, Susanne Daniels and Cynthia Littleton note that the WB’s brand-defining shows (e.g. *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, *Buffy*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *Charmed*, and *Felicity*) were all produced by studios other than Warner Bros. (210). In its early years, The WB sought to build its brand through programming rather than production strategies. While its shows shared thematic characteristics, they came from several different studios and several different (often up-and-coming) creators. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was still quite common for networks to broadcast programs produced by other studios. Now, it is far less common.<sup>9</sup> This is especially obvious in the case of the CW, which produces all of its shows in-house through either Warner Bros. Television or CBS Paramount Network Television (or, in most cases, both studios). This strategy helps

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<sup>9</sup> Since the repeal of the “Financial Interest and Syndication Rule,” networks have increasingly produced their series “in house,” instead of pulling from rival or independent studios. This new business model lowers the risk for networks, which stand to gain enormous profits from their successful shows (which can later be sold internationally and into syndication) to offset the cost of failed programs.

the CW stay “on brand,” with expectations clearly laid out for the network’s projects while they are in development, but it also contributes to the conformity across shows that lead many to describe the network’s offerings as “predictable.”

The network’s desire to keep production of new series underneath the Time Warner corporate umbrella impacts every level of production. The CW programs only ten hours of primetime a week, which leaves a limited number of spots for new shows.<sup>10</sup> The CW’s synergistic practices have also led the network to rely on a few creators to provide the network with its hit shows. The network’s most prolific creators are Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage, the producing team that created *Gossip Girl*, *Hart of Dixie* (2011-present), *Cult* (2013), and *The Carrie Diaries*. Schwartz created *The O.C.*, the show that inadvertently created the model for the CW’s dramas. Like *Gossip Girl*, *The O.C.* is a teen soap about the scandalous lives of wealthy teenagers (and their parents) who live in Orange County, California. *The O.C.* was a huge water-cooler success in its first season, and the show became a pop culture phenomenon. Schwartz and Savage brought the *O.C.* sensibility to their CW shows, especially *Gossip Girl*. In the 2013 season, Schwartz and Savage’s series account for an astonishing forty percent of the CW’s schedule.

The CW’s other super-producer is Kevin Williamson, creator of *Dawson’s Creek*, one of the WB’s most successful series. Williamson created and produced one of the CW’s first original series, *Hidden Palms* (2007), the creepy story of a teenage boy (a recovering addict) who moves to Palm Springs with his mother, only to discover that his

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<sup>10</sup> By comparison, NBC, CBS, and ABC program between 19-23 hours a week, and Fox usually programs 15 hours a week.

neighbors are harboring some dark, murderous secrets. After that show's failure, Williamson provided the CW with its second breakout hit, *The Vampire Diaries*. Like *Gossip Girl*, *The Vampire Diaries* was adapted from a series of popular young adult books. After *Diaries* became the network's best-rated series, Williamson introduced a new series also inspired by the fiction of L.J. Smith: *The Secret Circle* (2011-2012). Unlike the WB, which invited many different voices (from different studios) to contribute, the CW has thus far relied on just a few creators to establish the CW brand through programming. The network's reliance on these "proven commodities" limits its chances to discover new talent, and Schwartz, Savage, and Williamson have come to define the CW's "teen" soap.

What, exactly, is the "CW show?" First, the category of the CW show combines the elements of "teen" dramas and traditional primetime soaps. Like the WB show before it, the CW show features young characters (teenagers or twentysomethings). Unlike the WB shows, which usually featured middle-class characters living in small towns, most of the CW shows feature wealthy characters living in cities or other glamorous locales. Even those shows that do not take place in urban areas, like *Hart of Dixie* (the main character, Zoe Hart, moves from Manhattan to Blue Bell, Alabama), embrace sophisticated, New York City-style fashion. This move to more fashionable urban locales is a distinctly postfeminist one. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra note, postfeminism is easily linked to what Virginia Postrel calls the "hyperaestheticization of everyday life," and this phenomenon is most easily seen in cities like New York (7). A glossy, colorful, sparkly aesthetic is a key characteristic of the CW show. While the CW's emphasis on youth and

fashion culture is hugely important to the definition of the CW show, the CW's shows also share narrative strategies.

In her summation of *Dallas*'s melodramatic characteristics, Ien Ang notes that "personal life is the core problematic of the narrative" for primetime soaps (238). Shows like *Gossip Girl*, with its fast-paced, twist-heavy storytelling and *The Vampire Diaries*, with its sexy supernatural creatures, clearly fit Ang's definition of primetime melodramatic soap. These shows also feature "excessive plot structure," with a tendency toward sensational catastrophes and crises. For many audience members, these shows are escapist entertainment. The CW's shows bring together "teen" television and soap opera, often including more elements of soap than its predecessors. While shows like *Dawson's Creek* or *Felicity* feel rooted in reality, the CW's shows embrace the excessive qualities of soap and include less realistic plotlines. The CW show, then, is essentially the soapier, more glamorous descendant of the WB's teen dramas.

While some of the WB's shows received effusive critical acclaim, the soapier aspects of the CW's programming prevent it from earning similar levels of respect.<sup>11</sup> Even the CW's best-reviewed show, *Gossip Girl*, can only hope to obtain "best guilty pleasure" status with reviewers. Indeed, *New York Magazine* featured the show's cast on its cover in 2008, with the phrase "Best. Show. Ever\*." printed over a photo of the show's cast scandalously sprawled across a bed. In the accompanying article, Jessica Pressler and Chris Rovzar qualify the statement and asterisk on the cover, assuring

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<sup>11</sup> *TV Guide* named *Gilmore Girls* "the best show you're not watching" after its debut season, and both *Gilmore* and *Buffy* were featured on several critics' annual "Top Ten" lists.

readers that the show is merely “the greatest teen drama of all time.” Written after only thirteen episodes of the show had aired, their take on the show is meant to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek and hyperbolic in a stereotypically teen-fan fashion, but their compulsion to align the show with previous teen dramas and establish that they do not *really* think it is the “best show ever” is nevertheless revealing. *Gossip Girl* is able to land the cover of a major magazine, but an article designed to celebrate the show still takes pains to separate it from more “serious” fare.

### **The CW’s Signature Shows**

In its short history, the CW has produced three signature shows, each of which helped to establish or reaffirm the limits and possibilities of the “CW show.” As previously mentioned, *Gossip Girl* set the standard for “CW shows.” In a nod to its soap roots, *Gossip Girl* features many interlocking storylines about family discord and romantic relationships. In the show’s first episode, Serena van der Woodsen returns to the Upper East Side after a mysterious absence when her brother attempts suicide. While fighting with her mother about her treatment of her brother, Serena also meets and dates Dan Humphrey, a sensitive boy from a slightly lower class (he lives in Brooklyn with his single father and younger sister instead of the Upper East Side). Serena also subtly challenges her best friend Blair Waldorf for her position as the school’s “Queen Bee,” and their six-season-long battle for top social status resumes. Blair, who is Serena’s foil, desires the natural charm and charisma that Serena possesses. She continually undermines her so-called best friend through sabotage and subtle, stereotypical “girl

fight” tactics in order to secure her position in the social hierarchy. Blair’s bad behavior (combined with her sometimes partner-in-crime Chuck’s debauchery) established the precedent of bad behavior on the CW. As Mike Hale once noted about the network, “young woman's inhumanity to young woman is an evergreen theme at CW” (Hale 2). It was Blair Waldorf, who became a fan favorite, who kick-started that trend. The show was ultimately a more risqué, more fashionable, and more glamorous version of *The O.C.* *Gossip Girl* set the mold for the CW brand, and teenagers behaving scandalously quickly became a staple of the CW’s programming.

Like *Sex and the City* before it, *Gossip Girl* became just as famous for its fashion as its plotlines. *Gossip*’s stars (especially Blake Lively, Leighton Meester, and Ed Westwick) became fashion icons. Throughout the series, the character’s personalities were represented in their clothes. Costume designer Eric Daman contrasted Serena’s bohemian, effortless style with Blair’s preppy, prim ensembles in order to emphasize the best friends’ night-and-day personalities. The show’s clothes made a serious impact on the fashion industry. As Ruth La Ferla chronicles in *The New York Times*, *Gossip Girl*, despite averaging less than three million viewers per episode, became a huge influence for young, female consumers. As Daman, who trained with famed costume designer Patricia Field on *Sex and the City*, explained, “we tried to launch trends from the get-go” (La Ferla A1). The show made prep school fashions like crested blazers, knee socks, and argyle sweaters trendy, and, like *Sex* before it, quickly became a “fashion marketing vehicle.” The characters’ wardrobes became even more glamorous and expensive as the show progressed, culminating in Blair’s series finale wedding dress, an Elie Saab couture

gown fresh from the runway. While *Gossip*'s storytelling certainly inspired the shows that would follow, its influence in the fashion industry is perhaps its strongest legacy. The show (and its accompanying website) encouraged fans to purchase the show's fashions, and many fans tuned in just to see what the characters were wearing each week.

The CW's second signature show was much less successful than *Gossip Girl*, despite its seemingly wider appeal. *90210* followed *Gossip Girl*'s example and explicitly featured racy content, including sex, drugs and other bad behavior. The show aimed to be the Pacific Coast version of *Gossip Girl*. The show's two-hour pilot episode introduces viewers to the new generation of *90210* characters while revisiting most of the original show's characters. In the show's first season, the show's older characters are very involved in the narrative. However, the show's ratings were quite anemic, and the show changed its creative direction after the first season, eschewing the parent-aged characters in favor of the new teen characters. These teen characters behave much like the characters on *Gossip Girl*; they are wealthy, entitled party kids who often scheme and backstab in order to get what they want. The decision to limit the involvement of the teens' parents signaled that the CW brand could not accommodate characters that were too far removed from their teenage years. *90210* also demonstrated that the CW was not afraid to essentially "copy" *Gossip Girl*'s successful formula.

*The Vampire Diaries*, like *Gossip Girl*, is based on a popular series of young adult novels, these by L.J. Smith. The show, which has steadily grown since its premiere in 2009 to become the network's most popular program, expanded the possibilities of a CW show. Although the network had previously featured other fantasy programs (including

*Smallville* and *Supernatural*, which it inherited from the WB), *The Vampire Diaries* was the first CW-developed show to introduce elements of the supernatural to the CW's formula. Like *90210* and *Gossip Girl*, the show features a large ensemble cast of very attractive actors. Introduced as a *Twilight*-esque, human-girl-falls-in-love-with-male-vampire story, the story quickly evolved into a highly serialized, complex narrative (with an increasingly complicated mythology) featuring many different romantic relationships. *The Vampire Diaries'* pacing is exceptionally fast, and each episode usually features a few unexpected twists. There may be less "partying" (i.e. drinking, drug use, etc.) on this show compared to *Gossip* and *90210*, but there is more than enough destruction and villainous behavior to compensate.

The show's first episode sets up the relationship between Elena, a high school girl, and Stephen, a centuries-year-old vampire. This romance was quickly de-centered by the evolution of a love triangle between Elena, Stephen, and his vampire brother, Damon. In keeping with the traditions of the soap opera, *The Vampire Diaries* now features many interlocking storylines and multiple romances in each episode. *The Vampire Diaries* demonstrates that it is possible to have a "CW show" with supernatural characters, but it is not possible to have a CW show that privileges one romance at the center of its narrative. Indeed, while CW shows often feature romances that fans become invested in (Dan/Serena and Chuck/Blair on *Gossip Girl*, for example), the CW adheres to the soap opera tradition of continually destabilizing relationships. Most of the CW's dramas feature a love triangle at the center, inspiring viewers to choose a side in debates about which romances should prevail. As a plot device, the love triangle encourages fans'

emotional investment and ensures that the show will never run out of storylines. Since the decline of *Gossip Girl*, in both ratings and pop culture presence, *The Vampire Diaries* has emerged as the CW's most successful (and most talked about) show. The success of *The Vampire Diaries* inspired the CW to invest heavily in fantasy programming, with *The Secret Circle*, *Arrow* (2012-present) and *Beauty and the Beast* (2012-present).

*Gossip Girl*, *90210*, and *The Vampire Diaries* may be the CW's signature shows, but they are not the only "CW shows." In fact, most of the network's offerings fit into the generic definition of "CW show." The dramas that premiered after the one-two punch of *Gossip Girl* and *90210* stuck closely to the CW brand and did not mount a serious challenge to its restraints. The network launched a remake of the *Beverly Hills, 90210* spinoff *Melrose Place* and, while the show was not successful, it was "on brand." *The Secret Circle* was also adapted from an L.J. Smith young adult series, and the show felt like *The Vampire Diaries*-with-witches. Even a "sweet" show like *Hart of Dixie* features a party or soiree almost every week and prioritizes fashion, aligning it with *Gossip Girl*. Ultimately, the category of "CW show" is determined by production (especially casting, art direction and costume design), critical reception, and the texts themselves. Thus far, the CW has not broadcast any shows that truly shake up the definition or common perception of the CW show. The narrowly defined category of the CW show makes for a cohesive brand identity, but it limits the possibilities for representations of women (and men) on the network.

### **The CW and the Postfeminist Subject**

What, then, are the possibilities for female characters on the CW? In its seven-year history, there has been remarkably little variation within the category of “CW woman.” CW women are universally thin, conventionally beautiful, feminine, and fashionably dressed. They all have a glossy look, achieved by make-up, stylized hair, and trendy and expensive clothing. (The CW men are also very handsome, frequently shirtless, and stylish.) Most of the characters on the CW are white, although there are a few exceptions. Of course, most narrative television shows feature actors more attractive than the population at large. What distinguishes the CW is how much it relies on its attractive actors’ sex appeal to sell its shows (as discussed in chapter one) and the superficial uniformity of its casts. There are no outliers, no non-normative bodies starring on the CW’s shows; even secondary characters largely conform to the network’s beauty standards. If one laid out the shows’ cast photos side-by-side, it would be difficult for someone unfamiliar with the network’s offerings to distinguish between the casts. The CW presents a narrow definition of femininity, one that reliant on consumerism and normative ideals of beauty.

Teenaged characters on shows like *Gossip Girl*, *90210*, *Privileged* (The CW, 2008-2009), and *The Carrie Diaries* spend a lot of money (and time) on their clothes, and their spending extends beyond their wardrobes. The women on “CW shows” are always impeccably made-up, the result of (unseen) hours spent in front of a mirror. On many shows, like *The Vampire Diaries* and *The Hart of Dixie*, there are lavish parties (and glamorous, sparkly party dresses) seemingly every week. The idealized CW woman’s consumption is quite conspicuous, and she symbolizes the postfeminist sensibility. She

must continue to spend money on clothes, makeup, and other retail goods in order to remain stylish and popular. In *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen explains that conspicuous consumption is the domain of the rich, and that demonstrations of wealth improve one's social status (69). Veblen also notes that consumption is required of the wealthy, and that failure to consume marks one as inferior (74). As Manhattan's elite, the characters on *Gossip Girl* regularly spend their money in this way. While this type of consumption used to be limited to a small minority, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue that, with its "frequent emphasis on luxury lifestyling and retail pleasures, postfeminism is thoroughly integrated with the economic discourses of aspirational, niche-market Western societies" and encouraged women to spend more money on their bodies (7). As members of the upper class, the women of *Gossip Girl* can afford to embody "luxury lifestyling," celebrate fashion culture, and invest heavily in commercial beauty culture.

On *Gossip Girl*, the fashion is a character on the show. This focus on aesthetics and luxury ultimately eclipses the show's narrative, and the show's characters seem more like fashion models than fully realized individuals. In the first episode of *Gossip Girl*, Blair's mother refers to her own daughter as her "first dress form," characterizing Blair as a blank slate for designer fashion to be placed upon rather than a person. Blair herself is fully invested in the fashion world, so much so that she develops bulimia in order to stay model-thin. As Rosalind Gill explains, postfeminist empowerment is tied to the body and one's ability to attract male attention and female envy (43). Blair's status as Queen Bee depends as much to her beauty and slender frame as it does her parents' wealth. Blair

must perform femininity perfectly at all times in order to maintain her power within the world of *Gossip Girl*. The show also constantly reminds the viewer that Serena, the charismatic blonde bombshell, gets everything she wants because of her looks, while Blair must work twice as hard (despite also being beautiful). Serena is the most powerful individual in *Gossip Girl*'s peer group, and that power is rooted in her body and the effortlessness with which she performs femininity. The CW woman must always appear beautiful, thin, feminine, and fashionable. While this is, of course, true of other programs as well, the CW heightens these requirements to an almost absurd degree. As a result, the CW women all look the same.

The CW brand produces quite homogeneous female characters, and the sameness that critics frequently complain of results from both the CW's specific brand identity and the network's embrace of postfeminist discourse. One critic, reviewing the network's offerings in the fall of 2011, asserted that the new show *The Secret Circle* "sticks closely to CW formulas, with the result that a lot of what we see and hear in the first episode feels like outtakes [with] pretty young characters in a picturesque location" (Hale 2). The disdain with which the CW is met can be traced to its "failure" to live up to the promise of the WB and UPN's best, "quality" shows, including programs like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Felicity*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Veronica Mars*. Each of these shows have been held up by feminist scholars as "positive" examples of female representation, and all but *Felicity* have inspired scholarly collections dedicated to unpacking, complicating, and

challenging the shows' feminisms.<sup>12</sup> The comparison between these different generations of "teen" shows is inevitable, since the CW, following the WB, was "supposed" to provide a space for feminist-friendly programming. Instead, the network focused less on fostering "strong" female characters and more on attracting viewers to its "sexy" fare. Figures like Buffy Summers, Rory Gilmore, and Veronica Mars also existed in a postfeminist climate, but their shows countered the consumerist aspects of postfeminism with characters whose actions often revealed political, feminist motivations. Buffy, Rory, and Veronica often challenged male authority, embraced sisterhood, and were generally "good" role models for girls. The primary difference between the WB and UPN's heroines and the CW's is the CW's almost-complete de-emphasis of the political aspects of feminism. There are few characters on the CW who challenge the status quo in significant ways.

Why has the CW yet to produce an iconic "girl power" character like Buffy? The closest that the CW has come to presenting a Buffy-like character is with *Nikita* (2010-present). *Nikita* is the story of an assassin who sets out to destroy Division, the mysterious government agency that trained her, and save the lives of those girls indoctrinated into the program. Nikita's training taught her how to use her sexuality as a weapon. In the show's first episode, she literally detonates a bomb with her lipstick while distracting unsuspecting men with her cleavage. Unlike Buffy, who often "dressed down"

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<sup>12</sup> *Buffy* has inspired its own scholarly journal, *Slayage*, as well as countless articles and several collections, including *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. Scholarly interest in *Gilmore Girls* produced *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls*. *Veronica Mars*, one of the few UPN shows to be celebrated by critics and academics, has its own collection: *Investigating Veronica Mars: Essays on the Teen Detective Series*.

while working as a slayer, being sexy is a crucial part of Nikita's job description. Nikita's success as an assassin is completely tied up in her sex appeal; her agency, in that sense, is owed to her beauty. Nikita exemplifies a continuation of the tradition of television's New Woman. As Elana Levine explains, this New Woman emerged in the 1970s as a way to negotiate meanings of second wave feminism and femininity (169). Levine argues that Buffy continued this tradition through her negotiation of third wave feminism and postfeminism. Nikita embodies the same contradictions: she is both feminist in her determination to destroy a patriarchal and exploitative organization, and feminine in her dress and appearance. Both Buffy and Nikita can be read as women trying to grapple with the impossible demands of postfeminism.

While it is possible to read Nikita's use of her sex appeal as a commentary on today's postfeminist, sexist, beauty-enthralled culture, the show frequently reduces Nikita to a sexual object without irony. In a dream sequence early in the show's first episode, Nikita slinks around a pool party in a red, barely-there bathing suit until she finds her target. The camera slowly pans up Nikita's body, *in her own dream sequence*, and lingers on her body as she flirts with her target. Nikita is one of the few CW women frequently shown in a professional setting, but she is still required to be sexy at all times. As an Asian-American woman, Nikita is always an "exotic" woman whose sexiness is an inherent part of her racial identity. This, of course, exemplifies what Rosalind Gill calls the "sexualization of culture," one of the main aspects of the postfeminist sensibility (150). Gill notes that in today's media culture, "possession of a 'sexy body' is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity" (149). While Nikita's body is not the

only source of her power (she proves herself to be quite intelligent and resourceful), it is critical to her success. While much has been written about Buffy's "girly" appearance, she never killed a vampire with her lipstick.

Significantly, Nikita is chosen to train as an assassin as a result of her lower-class background. Division "recruits" (drugs and kidnaps) young, poor men and women who have committed crimes and indoctrinates them. Nikita's status as a lower class character makes her quite different from the typical CW woman. Most of the women on the CW are in the upper class and, as a result of their wealth and "success," feel no need to challenge the status quo. This shift from "relatable" middle-class characters, like those on *Dawson's Creek*, *Everwood*, and *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, to wealthy, glamorous ones shuts down a lot of the CW's political potential. *Veronica Mars*, which aired its final season on the CW, demonstrates the political potential of lower-class characters. Veronica becomes a detective only after her family tumbles down the economic ladder and she loses all of her wealthy, popular friends. Much of the show dealt with the class relations within Veronica's high school between the haves (the children of millionaire businessmen) and the have-nots (the children of those who work for those millionaires), and the show mined these class conflicts for their political potential. On *Gossip Girl*, the "poor" Humphrey family lives in a spacious loft in Brooklyn, and their biggest problem seems to be that they don't "fit in" with the wealthy kids they want to befriend. The show does not explore class beyond the Humphreys, because to do so would complicate *Gossip's* focus on opulent wealth.

The CW's focus on upper-class characters, combined with its focus on characters' personal lives, results in shows that rarely show women at school or work. While the kids on *90210* and *The Vampire Diaries* go to high school, those shows devote little time to their studies. On *90210*, villainess Naomi's parents ask her teacher to give her an extension on an overdue paper so that she will not be distracted during her lavish birthday celebration. Naomi ends up copying Annie's paper, and the conflict sets up their contentious relationship for the rest of the series. While this plot takes place largely "in school," it is not really *about* school. It is about the emotional consequences of the stolen assignment.

Emotionality and relationships are privileged on all of the CW's signature shows. *Gossip Girl*, for example, begins with the promise of romance between Dan and Serena and an uneasy friendship between Serena and Blair and, while those relationships are repeatedly destabilized and rebuilt, the show never strays from its emotional center. Few plotlines have to do with the characters' education or careers, and those that do inevitably return to emotional concerns. For example, in the show's fifth season, Serena gets a job that she enjoys as a production assistant on a film in Hollywood. The show, however, privileges how the job affects her romantic life and her friendships rather than emphasizing Serena as a professional. *Gossip* even frames these students' pursuit of higher education as an emotional rather than professional storyline. In *Gossip*'s third episode, Blair sabotages Serena's chances of getting into an Ivy League school after she embarrasses Serena and announces to a room full of Ivy admissions officers that Serena

just completed drug rehabilitation. Admission to college on *Gossip Girl* is not based on grades or professional accomplishments; it is based on one's social standing.

The network's privileging of the emotional even extends to its medical dramas. *Emily Owens, M.D.* (2012-2013) borrowed *Grey's Anatomy's* (ABC, 2004-present) conceit that those who attend medical school graduate in a state of arrested development. Emily is desperate to shed her geeky high school image, and spends much of her time worrying about whether or not her medical school crush Will likes her, while treating patients on the side. While we often see Emily at work as a medical intern, her internal monologue (which we hear as her voiceover) is always more concerned with her personal life, including her crush on Will and her rivalry with her high school nemesis. The same is true of Dr. Zoe Hart (of *Hart of Dixie*). While she sees patients regularly, her love life quickly becomes the most important facet of the show's narrative and the primary focus of her voiceovers. While both of these women are accomplished doctors, their shows present their romantic lives as significantly more important than their professional success. Women on the CW are primarily emotional creatures whose professional lives are deemphasized in favor of personal and romantic storylines.

As Nikita exemplifies, the women of the CW are limited by the conventions of the "CW show" as genre, just like they are by sitcoms, reality shows, and workplace procedurals on other networks. The women of the CW spend little time on schoolwork or in professional environments. This becomes even more obvious after the characters' high school graduations, when college is completely deemphasized within the narrative on shows like *Gossip Girl* and *90210*. If they are in a professional setting, they are required

to be sexy at all times. While it is not necessarily “bad” that CW shows privilege the personal over the professional, the conventions of the primetime soap limit the possibilities for the network’s portrayals of young women.

### ***Conclusion***

Thinking about the CW show as a genre, rather than simply a collection of shows that air on the same network, allows us to understand the various forces that serve to influence the CW’s programming, from the first pitch meeting to the series finale. Even after the network picks up a slightly “off brand” show, that show must contend with the expectations attached to the CW. To return to the case of *Life Unexpected*, the show’s first season remained true to the pilot’s promise of a sweet, sentimental family-friendly drama. When *Life* returned for its second season, it introduced a bit more “scandal” to its plotlines. Lux, now seventeen, enters into a relationship with her young teacher, whom she meets at Baze’s bar. The plotline is reminiscent of Pacey’s affair with his teacher in the early episodes of *Dawson’s Creek*, and the affair requires Lux to keep secrets from her family and friends, upping the dramatic stakes of the show. The show’s attempts to fit the CW brand even extended to a crossover episode with *One Tree Hill*. *Life Unexpected* slowly became CW-ized throughout its run. Indeed, even the well-reviewed show could not seriously challenge the definition of the “CW show.”

Each genre introduces its own set of “rules,” but those rules can be broken and the definition of the genre can adjust accordingly. Genres, especially from Jason Mittell’s cultural perspective, naturally change and evolve over time, and it is possible that the CW

may eventually broaden its horizons and open up new possibilities for its female (and male, for that matter) characters. Right now, the genre of the “CW show” limits the possibilities for the network and its programming. The CW show’s combination of “teen” TV and soap opera feminizes the genre. The network’s recently installed president, Mark Pedowitz, has expressed a desire to expand the CW brand and invite more viewers to the network. The CW’s reputation ensures that it will fight an uphill battle for cultural legitimacy. While Pedowitz’s comments imply that the network seeks to reach a larger male audience (and the introduction of *Arrow*, a superhero drama, certainly suggests so), it is possible that his regime will introduce female-led shows that challenge the generic category of “CW show.” Perhaps, now that the CW’s brand is established, the network will begin to play with expectation and introduce some diversity to its line-up.

## Expanding the CW Brand: Conclusion

In May 2011, Dawn Ostroff stepped down as the CW's entertainment president. Her replacement, Mark Pedowitz, immediately announced his intention to broaden the network's scope and invite viewers outside of the network's target demographic to its shows. The fall of 2012 introduced the CW's most varied slate since its formative, experimental years. It featured one medical drama (*Emily Owens, M.D.*), one supernatural procedural (*Beauty and the Beast*, very loosely based on the 1987 CBS series of the same name), and a superhero drama, *Arrow*. While all of these shows were designed to expand the network's reach, only *Arrow* has attracted significant interest from male viewers (Crupi). More importantly, these shows still manage to stay true to the CW brand. They all feature frequently shirtless male performers, beautiful casts, and soapy/teen drama elements. It is possible that Pedowitz's attempts to change the network will succeed, however, the CW's brand may be too entrenched to significantly alter now.

The struggle of the CW's brand recalibration is perhaps best illustrated by *Cult*, a scary drama about fans copying crimes that they see on show-within-the-show *Cult*. The CW executives hoped that this horror show would draw more male viewers to the network, but, after a lackluster start, the show's final episode before cancellation drew a *zero* rating among males under the age of 35; the male audience for the show was statistically immeasurable (Goldberg). Of course, many shows fail, but *Cult*'s spectacular failure to draw male viewers suggests that the CW's strong brand identity will be difficult to change. Furthermore, as broadcast ratings continue to decrease and gap between cable

and broadcast shrinks, it may very well behoove the CW to continue to focus on a small segment of television viewers.

The CW's regime change introduces an interesting question: what are the possibilities for the CW? My interest in this project stems from a feeling of frustration about the network's failure to live up to the high expectations that accompanied its launch. I found it strange, but not altogether surprising, that so little scholarly attention has been paid to the fifth television network. Television studies' shift to industry studies has moved attention away from sites like the CW, which is regarded as a network full of guilty pleasure shows. Industry studies' focus on "quality" cable networks and emerging technologies leads to a neglect of traditional networks. Further, the impulse to study "quality" series has abandoned those shows that are not included under the quality banner, and has left much female-targeted television woefully understudied. While I do not wish to "reclaim" the CW as feminist, I do hope that this project draws attention to the state of female-targeted television today.

Of course, the CW is not the only network that courts young women; it may not even be the most successful. MTV has connected with young viewers for decades, and its recent recommitment to scripted programming with shows like *Awkward* (2011-present) and *Teen Wolf* (2011-present) promises a competitive line-up for years to come.

*Awkward*, a comedy about an teenaged girl who becomes popular after her classmates mistake an accident for a suicide attempt, and *Teen Wolf*, about a young man struggling with his status as a werewolf, both feature themes designed to resonate with young female viewers. In 2012, MTV hired Susanne Daniels, the former head of for the WB

who greenlit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Gilmore Girls*, as their president of programming. Hiring Daniels indicated that MTV wishes to diversify its slate (which is currently dominated by reality programming) and resurrect some of that old WB magic.

Another cable channel, ABC Family, has already staked its claim as the heir to the WB throne. The channel built its reputation as destination for young viewers through syndication. Second runs of 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Smallville* served as launching pads for the channel's original programming, including early shows like *Wildfire* (2005-2008) and *Kyle XY* (2006-2009). ABC Family slowly built a brand as a sweeter, more family friendly alternative to the CW, with family dramas like *Switched at Birth* (2011-present) and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-present). In 2012, the channel's Kate Juergens (a former WB employee) greenlit Amy Sherman-Palladino's *Bunheads* (2012-present), a charming hour-long comedy series about a small town whose rhythms are disrupted when a Las Vegas showgirl impulsively marries her longtime admirer and moves in. Michelle, who has her own as-yet-unrealized Broadway ambitions, becomes mentor to four young ballerinas and friend to her husband's mother. Like Sherman-Palladino's *Gilmore Girls*, *Bunheads'* narrative splits its attention between three different generations of women, and many cited the show as a throwback to the days of the WB. Sherman-Palladino's defection to ABC Family speaks to the stark difference between the "WB show" and the "CW show." While *Gilmore Girls* used to define the WB brand, *Bunheads* (a tonally and aesthetically similar show) would be entirely out of place on the CW.

Why do scholars and nostalgic viewers care so much about the WB's legacy? The WB, for many, is emblematic of a time when young women were valued and celebrated. While its politics were not perfect, "girl power" culture at its peak hinted at the possibility of a sustained increase in female-led media productions. The industries' return to equilibrium after the explosion of female-centric texts in the 1990s left many clamoring for the return of "strong" female figures to television. Further, the serious critical attention paid to shows like *Buffy*, *Felicity*, and *Gilmore Girls* legitimated television as a space where young women's stories could thrive. The CW's shift toward soapier programming effectively ended the association of young-female-targeted shows as quality series worthy of attention. The critical dismissal of the CW's programming reflects back on the audience, even if that audience's construction deviates from the actual audience; apparently those who watch these shows cannot be taken seriously. Ultimately, the association of the CW brand and programming with young women does little to "empower" them. The CW has yet to introduce a role model as influential as Buffy Summers or the Gilmore girls. Instead, the brand's limited vision of femininity and antiquated notions of a monolithic young female audience work to reify existing gender roles. The CW provides fertile ground for postfeminist ideas to circulate but, unlike the WB, allows less space for feminist messages to coexist with consumerist ones.

### **Contributions**

This study of the CW harkens back to the "old days" of feminist television criticism. I focus on the CW because it is a female-centric network woefully understudied

by television scholars. With recent shifts within the field to work on “quality” television and industry studies, the feminist roots of television studies have been deemphasized. This project attempts to bring together industry studies and feminist television criticism in hopes of furthering feminist conversations about the television industry. As a devalued object, the case of the CW is not dissimilar to that of the soap operas studied and reclaimed by feminist scholars like Charlotte Brunsdon and Christine Gledhill. I do not try to reclaim the CW’s programs as “feminist,” nor do I wish to project feminism onto these shows. Instead, I hope to draw attention to the complicated ways that postfeminist ideas are integrated into young women’s programming today and how conversations about female audiences have changed in the last twenty years. This project contributes to recent work on the emergence of postfeminist media culture and draws attention to an as-yet-unstudied site dominated by what Gill calls the “postfeminist sensibility.”

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While this project strives to paint as complete a picture of the CW as a network as possible, it is limited by several factors. First, my analysis of the network’s strategies is limited to an examination of executives’ public statements and programming decisions. Those who speak about the network’s goals do so with a mixture of optimism and guardedness, and it is impossible for me to determine what types of conversations these executives (as well as producers and creators) have behind closed doors. Second, this project does not integrate reception study into its study of the CW audience. A representative sample would be financially and logistically difficult to gather. I did not

want to simply interview college students about their relationship to the network and draw conclusions based upon a classed and non-inclusive sample. If this project were larger in scope, a reception study could reveal how the CW's construction of its audience impacts how viewers and non-viewers perceive that audience and the network itself. Third, a further exploration of the CW's online presence would be quite revealing. The CW extends far beyond the television screen, to Tumblrs, Twitter accounts, and apps designed for fans of its shows. As the network continues to integrate digital content into its business plans, its relationship to its audience will likely shift in interesting ways. Finally, the project is simply limited by space constrictions. The CW is a fascinating network worthy of many further studies.

This macro-level, top-down study of the CW provides a detailed consideration of the CW and its strategies, but neglects consideration of similarly themed channels, including MTV and ABC Family. A relational study of all of the networks that explicitly target young women would introduce new questions about the state of the young female audience today. Indeed, the "teen" or young adult programming is no longer dominated by one network, and this development presents new challenges to our understanding of female and teen audiences. Do these networks define their audiences in opposition to one another? How do these networks compare to each other aesthetically, textually, and tonally? Of course, this is all complicated by the prevalence of digital technology and the question of whether or not networks even matter anymore and, if so, in what capacity. I speculate that branding will become even more important and specific as television migrates toward the digital.

This project's focus on the CW as a whole also limits the amount of narrative and textual analysis that can be included. A larger project would allow for closer consideration of each show's nuances. I do not mean to imply, throughout this study, that CW shows are all "the same," merely that they share specific similarities. The network's shift to supernaturally themed programs is also unfortunately under-discussed in this project. This embrace of fantasy texts is closely tied to the rise of young adult fiction, like the *Twilight* series, that features supernatural worlds and characters. *The Vampire Diaries* premiered nine months after the first *Twilight* movie surprised prognosticators with its box office success and is itself based on a successful series of young adult novels. *Diaries* has eclipsed *Gossip Girl* as the network's most popular show, and the CW's quick response to the *Twilight* phenomenon suggests that the network may be more in touch with young people's tastes than critics believe. The convergence of young adult fiction and television and the process of adaptation are other aspects of the CW worthy of further examination.

As the CW adapts to the constantly shifting television landscape, the network's attempts to engage young women while opening up the network to broader audiences will inevitably lead to interesting negotiations and new questions. How can the network invite older and male viewers without alienating its young, female base? How will the networks' shows attempt to straddle the line between "mass appeal" and "teen" television? As the CW seeks a new beginning with uninitiated viewers, new questions emerge about the stability of the category of the "CW show" and the network's

commitment to young female audiences. The network may be exiting its first phase of development, but it remains a fascinating object for television scholars.

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