

**A Postfeminist Study of MTV's *Daria*: Youth Culture and Gender
Performativity in Millennium Media**

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Abstract:

This dissertation explores *MTV's Daria* (1997–2002) as a cultural text that reflects and resists postfeminist and neoliberal constructions of femininity within late-1990s Anglo-American media culture. Centred on Daria Morgendorffer, a perceptive and subversive teenager, the series uses irony to question the ideals of femininity shaped by consumerism, individualism, and self-surveillance. Through its representation of female characters, *Daria* exposes how gendered identities are performed and negotiated within the youth culture of 1990's. The study is based on Critical Discourse Analysis that draws on Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, and Judith Butler to interpret *Daria* as both a product and critique of its time. The research highlights how irony and self-reflexivity function as modes of resistance within youth media, positioning *Daria* as a significant cultural artifact that interrogates the postfeminist sensibility of the late 1990s.

Keywords: Postfeminism, Neoliberal Feminism, Performativity, Media Studies, 1990s–2000s, Youth Culture

Introduction

Among off-beat and niche youth media, MTV's *Daria* appears as a notable example. The striking feature in this show is the unconventional personality of the protagonist, Daria Morgendorffer; a teenage high school girl; with her quiet brilliance, critical thinking skills, paired with a deadpan humour that slices through hypocrisy of the socio-political and cultural aspects, making her one of television's most distinctive portraits of an observant young woman, unlike the mass media stereotypes at this specific point of time in Anglo-American TV culture. Daria along with her mother Helen and sister Quinn, represent different responses to the expectations placed on girls and women in late-1990s society. Helen embodies the drive for productivity, efficiency, and self-management that embodies the pressure to be endlessly productive and "put together", while Quinn represents how femininity becomes a public performance shaped by appearance, popularity, and consumer

culture. Through these contrasting figures, along with other female figures in the show, *Daria* reveals how femininity is shaped by market-oriented values and the need to perform certain versions of the self.

Daria is an American animated television series that aired on MTV from March 3, 1997, to January 21, 2002, spanning five seasons and 65 episodes. Created by Glenn Eichler and Susie Lewis Lynn, the series originated as a spin-off of MTV's controversial yet culturally influential show *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993–1997), where this unique character first appeared as a sardonic, intelligent foil to the two protagonists. Recognizing the potential of Daria Morgendorffer as a vessel for sharper cultural commentary, MTV commissioned a standalone series to explore her worldview in greater depth. Produced by MTV Animation in association with King Features Entertainment, *Daria* was developed during a period when MTV was diversifying its programming from music videos toward youth-oriented narrative content. The show's production was overseen by Producers Susie Lewis Lynn and Cindy Brolsma, with Karen Disher serving as a principal storyboard artist and later as a director. The character of Daria was voiced by Tracy Grandstaff, whose restrained, monotone delivery became central to the show's tone and identity. Supporting voice performances included Wendy Hoopes as Jane Lane, Quinn Morgendorffer, and Helen Morgendorffer.

Set in the fictional suburban town of Lawndale, the series follows Daria Morgendorffer, a cynical yet intellectually acute teenager, as she navigates the superficialities and contradictions of contemporary American high school life. Through her sharp internal monologue and dry wit, *Daria* constructs a biting critique of late-1990s American consumerism. The show's minimalist animation, static backgrounds, and dialogue-heavy structure further reinforce its focus on irony and detachment, distinguishing it from the frenetic style of other MTV animated series of the era.

It can be observed how in this very time period the ongoing debates on the new form of feminism, the postfeminist idea saw its emergence as these ideals of neoliberal feminism, gender performativity and representation of women in media curved. Angela McRobbie observed this new dynamic through popular series like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*, where media promoted a version of empowered femininity that was actually tied to consumerism and self-surveillance. It was observed how women are still encouraged to run after the image of a "perfect girl" to keep up the expectations of the deeply patriarchal and heteronormative society. McRobbie's account of postfeminism as a cultural formation that incorporates feminism only to undo it, provides a key frame for reading *Daria*, where female autonomy is rearticulated through neoliberal ideals of choice and self-management. Rosalind Gill's notion of a "postfeminist sensibility" further clarifies how characters like Quinn embody the self-surveillance, makeover logic, and consumption-driven femininity that circulate as normative in late-1990s media. In contrast, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps position Daria's ironic detachment, monotone refusal of glamour, and

rejection of popularity as a counter-performance to her sister Quinn who acts precisely on the stereotypical ideals.

The objective here is to observe how *Daria* reflects, resists, or reconfigures postfeminist, gender performativity and neoliberal constructions of femininity as identified by McRobbie and Butler within late-1990s Anglo-American media culture.

In order to undertake this task, a critical discourse analytic methodology has been opted. It begins with established theoretical frameworks of postfeminism and gender performativity, applying them as interpretive lenses to analyse *MTV's Daria* (1997–2002). The study seeks to test how far these theories account for the sitcoms' representations of femininity, irony, and neoliberal subjectivity within the cultural context of the late 1990s.

The dissertation will be organised into three chapters, beginning with outlining the theoretical framework, drawing on feminist philosophers' sensibilities, then situating *Daria* within the discursive landscape of the late 1990s youth culture and finally applying those theoretical lenses in a critical discourse reading of the series. The research explores how identities are framed through consumerism and self-presentation, and how *Daria Morgendorffer* along with her friend Jane Lane counter these hegemonic stances in the city of Lawndale, that emerges as a microcosm of the larger socio political and cultural reality of the millennium world.

This approach allows the study to validate or refine existing postfeminist theoretical claims by applying them to a text not typically foregrounded in mainstream feminist media analysis. The critical theory orientation emphasizes power structures, ideological contradictions, and socio-cultural conditioning within media representations of women, situating *Daria* as a cultural artifact that both mirrors and interrogates the norms of its era.

Chapter 1: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The closer we moved to the twentieth century, the greater the hesitation towards the very word “feminism” came to observation. Be it popular media, political leaders, or academicians, the political and cultural motivations of the feminist movement were deemed to be over, old, or rather redundant. At the dawn of the twentieth century, we arrived at the notion that feminism is in fact so at its ends, that women, as depicted in the popular media, especially the Anglo-American media, practically have it all – the economic independence, the sexual independence, and the perfect life a woman could possibly ask for. But all these points underscore the profoundly ironic stance adopted by this generation of young women, who were repugnant to being feminists, for its task was over, or because gender equality is now commonplace, or it could point to a bigger cultural shift in presenting and consuming the new female image with a set of all-new sensibilities. What these representations of women in popular media bring to light is a reductive yet hegemonic model of “being a “free woman” with the “power of choice”. This paradox of liberation without liberation marks the

terrain upon which postfeminism emerges: a discourse that announces the end of feminism while ensuring its vocabulary remains central to the cultural imagination.

In this ideological climate, series like *Daria* occupy a peculiar position. On the surface, *Daria* Morgendorffer seems to stand apart from the hyper-stylized heroines of late 1990s media; her wit, sarcasm, and critical distance appear to resist the norms of femininity that surround her. Yet, her world—filled with characters such as her mother Helen, the consummate career woman, and her sister Quinn, the quintessential self-styled consumer of beauty—embodies precisely the neoliberal and postfeminist tensions that scholars like Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill describe. Through its irony, *Daria* becomes not merely a commentary on gender roles but a reflection of how postfeminist subjectivity takes form within the very contradictions it mocks.

Postfeminism, as McRobbie explains, is a cultural sensibility that “takes feminism into account only to repudiate it”. McRobbie argues that postfeminism functions as an “undoing of feminism”—a process that paradoxically incorporates feminist discourse only to neutralize its political force (McRobbie 11). This new sensibility does not deny feminism outrightly but absorbs it into the logic of neoliberal individualism, recasting collective struggle as personal choice. According to McRobbie, the postfeminist subject is “a woman who is determined, self-managing, and career-oriented” (57). Drawing from Nancy Fraser, she argues that contemporary capitalism has absorbed feminism into the logic of neoliberalism, transforming what was once a political movement into a cultural style compatible with market ideology. According to Fraser, the shift from industrial to neoliberal capitalism redefined feminism as a discourse of social identity rather than material redistribution, turning structural critique into lifestyle management. In McRobbie’s analysis, capitalism’s alignment with feminism—what she calls the “new sexual contract”—effectively depoliticized the movement by tying women’s liberation to consumption and careerism rather than collective struggle. Between 1997 and 2007, this convergence produced what McRobbie calls the “social–sexual contract,” an arrangement where women’s civic participation was defined through earning and spending rather than activism. Feminist solidarity was replaced by individual makeovers, financial autonomy stood in for emancipation, and political engagement was reframed as self-expression. Postfeminism, in this sense, was not only a cultural discourse but an anti-feminist formation—a repudiation of the collective effort of activists and theorists that had once defined the women’s movement, now rendered redundant and even distasteful within the neoliberal imagination.

Rosalind Gill extends and complicates McRobbie’s argument in *Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility* (2007), where she identifies postfeminism not as a period “after” feminism but as a cultural atmosphere that infuses contemporary media. Gill outlines several features of this sensibility: the reassertion of sexual difference, the body as a site of identity work, the substitution of self-surveillance for external control, and the centrality of

choice as both promise and obligation (Gill 148). “To be empowered,” she writes, “is to choose the right kind of femininity” (149). This concept of empowerment, however, is deeply ambivalent—structured by consumerism and sustained by constant self-policing. Gill emphasizes that such representations, far from liberating women, repackage patriarchal norms in neoliberal terms. They produce subjects who internalize discipline and read it as freedom.

Sarah Banet-Weiser’s discussion of *popular feminism* in *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018) offer an important bridge between these theoretical claims and the contemporary media ethos that shaped *Daria*. Banet-Weiser argues that feminism has been rearticulated as a consumer identity built around optimism, confidence, and self-care. “Empowerment,” she writes, “is something to be owned and displayed, not collectively pursued” (Banet-Weiser 19). This commodified feminism functions as a cultural lubricant for neoliberalism, transforming critique into affective affirmation. The feminist subject of popular culture must always be confident, productive, and happy—a stark contrast to *Daria*’s weary detachment.

This convergence of McRobbie, Gill, and Banet-Weiser’s ideas establishes the foundation for interpreting *Daria* as a text that both participates in and destabilizes the postfeminist order. The show does not propose an alternative feminism; rather, it reveals the contradictions within postfeminism itself. By translating theoretical structures into lived dynamics, the show exposes how empowerment becomes indistinguishable from obligation. Judith Butler’s theorization of gender performativity deepens this framework by revealing how the ideologies of postfeminism and neoliberalism are enacted through the body. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988), Butler challenges the assumption that gender is an innate quality. Instead, she argues that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). Gender does not precede performance; it is produced by it. This repetition of gestures, speech, and affect gives the illusion of stability while concealing the cultural labour required to maintain it. Power, in Butler’s model, operates through this repetition: the subject becomes intelligible only by reiterating the norms that define femininity and masculinity.

It is known that resistance does not occur outside of power but within its terms. *Daria*’s irony and Jane’s aloofness are still legible as positions only because the norms they negate remain dominant. Their difference, therefore, both challenges and depends on the cultural field it critiques. In this way, the series enacts the paradox of performativity—where the subject can neither fully escape nor fully comply with the norms that make her recognizable.

In the framework of neoliberal capitalism, articulated by Nikolas Rose and Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is defined as a mode of governance that constructs individuals as

entrepreneurs of the self, responsible for their own success and failure (Rose 29). Under neoliberal rationality, the political becomes moral and psychological; social problems are reframed as matters of personal choice (Brown 42). Helen Morgandorffer's character exemplifies this logic. Her struggles—to manage work, family, and the image of composure—are never attributed to systemic constraints but to her own ability to “balance” effectively. The ideal of self-management becomes an invisible form of control.

Gill refers to this as the “double entanglement” of postfeminism: women are told they are autonomous while simultaneously burdened with new forms of obligation (Gill 153). The household dynamic of the sitcom—Quinn's pursuit of perfection, Daria's scepticism, and Helen's overwork—translates abstract theory into lived experience. Each woman represents a variation of neoliberal femininity: the consumer, the critic, and the achiever. Together they dramatize McRobbie's observation that postfeminism “reinstall[s] the household as the locus of feminine performance” (McRobbie 69).

The critical lineage of this analysis reaches back to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), whose critique of the culture industry exposes how ideology operates through entertainment. They argue that mass culture “perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises” (139), offering the illusion of individuality while producing conformity. The culture industry, in their view, transforms rebellion into spectacle, ensuring that critique itself becomes a consumable product. This theoretical insight is key to understanding *Daria's* self-reflexive irony.

The show's humour and cynicism function as an “immanent critique” in the Adornoian sense—resisting ideology from within its own forms. As an MTV property, *Daria* belongs to the very culture industry it mocks, yet its narrative style and tonal restraint undermine the affective intensity typical of youth media. The jokes are anti-climactic, the colours muted, the protagonist self-aware. Like Adorno's concept of negative dialectics, *Daria* refuses reconciliation: it does not offer solutions but sustains contradiction as critique.

McRobbie's postfeminism inherits this Adornoian suspicion toward ideology. She recognizes that in a world saturated with images of freedom, power works most effectively through consent. The culture industry no longer suppresses feminist discourse—it markets it. Feminist symbols, slogans, and aesthetics circulate as commodities that affirm neoliberal values of choice and self-improvement. *Daria's* self-conscious humour captures this shift. The series exposes how irony itself can become ideology, a safe mode of critique that allows complicity to masquerade as awareness. *Daria's* wry observations often end in resignation rather than action, mirroring Adorno's belief that in late modernity, critique risks collapsing into contemplation.

Through this synthesis of McRobbie, Gill, Banet-Weiser, Butler, and Adorno, *Daria* emerges as a complex cultural text that simultaneously mirrors and interrogates the ideological structures of its time. Postfeminism defines the ideological condition of its production; performativity reveals the mechanism through which its characters navigate gender; neoliberal subjectivity explains the moral economy that frames the characters' choices; and critical theory situates all these within the machinery of culture itself. The interplay of these frameworks allows *Daria* to be read not merely as an animated sitcom but as a theoretical experiment—a text that dramatizes the tensions between power and freedom, conformity and critique.

In order to understand *Daria*, it is important to understand the social and ideological worlds that shape it—the postfeminist sensibility that defines its aesthetics, the theory of performativity that structures its characters, and the neoliberal capitalistic environment of the time. The chapter thus establishes the interpretive lens through which the series will be examined in subsequent analysis. By reading *Daria* through these interconnected frameworks, the study situates the show within feminist media studies.

Chapter 2: The Cultural and Ideological Context of MTV's *Daria*

Media texts are always enmeshed in the social discourses that produce them. Hence, the following chapter situates *Daria* within the broader cultural and ideological landscape at the dawn of new millennium. *Daria*, as a late-1990s animated sitcom on MTV, does not exist outside the flows of postfeminist and neoliberal culture—it participates in, reflects, and subtly resists them. In this chapter, I examine how the socio-cultural context of 1990s Anglo-American media, defined by “girl power,” neoliberal optimism, and the rise of youth-centred television, created the conditions for *Daria*'s emergence. The aim is to establish how these cultural forces constructed a new “idea of woman”—apparently liberated yet profoundly constrained by patriarchal and neoliberal values.

2.1. MTV and the Landscape of 1990s–2000s Youth Culture

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a cultural turning point in how youth identity was imagined, performed, and commodified. During this era, MTV became more than a television channel—it became a generational pulse, a space where youth were both subjects and consumers of culture. Initially conceived as a 24-hour music video channel, MTV rapidly transformed into what Valerie Wee describes as a “youth lifestyle brand” that packaged rebellion and individuality into a consumable aesthetic (Wee 6). By the mid-1990s, the network had moved far beyond music, producing an array of reality shows, talk segments, and animated series that mirrored the anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions of its audience. In doing so, it became the primary curator of what it meant to be young, expressive, and free at the turn of the millennium.

The post-network era, characterized by media convergence and niche marketing, witnessed MTV mastering the art of targeting specific subcultures. This was not simply about entertainment but about identity construction through branding. The emergence of shows

like *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *Aeon Flux*, and later *Daria* reflected MTV's realization that irony and self-awareness had become the lingua franca of Generation X and early millennials. Laura Ivins-Hulley, in her essay "Narrowcasting Feminism: MTV's *Daria*," argues that MTV's programming in the 1990s "spoke to a young audience disillusioned with both mainstream media and traditional politics," offering instead a mediated sense of rebellion (1199). In that sense, MTV's irony-laden content did not merely capture youth cynicism; it commodified it.

Within this commercial yet culturally critical ecosystem, *Daria* emerged in 1997 as a remarkable experiment. The animated series followed Daria Morgendorffer, a high school girl whose intellectual detachment and sardonic wit sharply contrasted the peppy optimism typical of teen media. Positioned between satire and sincerity, *Daria* was marketed as a show for "smart girls who rolled their eyes at everything" (Ivins-Hulley 1200). This framing was strategic. MTV realized that by appealing to those who resisted conformity, it could still sell nonconformity as a brand. Thus, *Daria* was simultaneously a product of MTV's commercial logic and a subtle critique of it—a text that questioned the very system that produced it. In this way, MTV's cultural landscape provided both the platform and the paradox that made *Daria* possible.

2.2. Feminist Ideologies and the Postfeminist Moment

As MTV redefined youth culture, feminism itself was undergoing its own transformation. The late twentieth century saw feminism reframed within popular discourse, not as a collective political struggle but as an individual pursuit. This ideological shift, described by Angela McRobbie as "feminism taken into account," refers to a cultural logic in which feminism is acknowledged only to be dismissed as unnecessary (McRobbie 256). Popular media adopted feminist language—empowerment, independence, choice—but detached these ideas from their political roots. In her analysis McRobbie examines popular media with its "can-do" girls and figures like Bridget Jones or the women of *Sex and the City* who embodied freedom and confidence, but whose empowerment was closely tied to lifestyle, fashion, and emotional labour. In this context, the feminist subject was not a woman demanding structural change but an individual exercising "choice" within existing systems of power.

Rosalind Gill elaborates on this by emphasizing how empowerment became entwined with consumption. According to Gill, postfeminist culture celebrates women's agency while simultaneously demanding constant self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-presentation (Gill 149). The postfeminist woman, therefore, is both liberated and constrained—free to choose but compelled to choose correctly, according to neoliberal ideals of success and attractiveness.

Simultaneously, feminist subcultures like *Riot Grrrl* resisted this commodification of femininity by reclaiming anger, collectivism, and female agency. Bands like *Bikini Kill*

and *Zines* created by young women articulated a DIY feminism grounded in authenticity and resistance to mainstream appropriation. Yet, according to McRobbie's *the Aftermath of Feminism*, even this oppositional energy was soon absorbed by the market, rebranded as the sanitized "girl power" of the *Spice Girls* and MTV-era feminism. Thus, by the late 1990s, feminism existed in a paradoxical state—both omnipresent in popular rhetoric and absent in political substance.

This ideological contradiction is central to understanding *Daria*. Emerging amidst this cultural reconfiguration, the show inherits the language of postfeminist while questioning their underlying assumptions. *Daria*'s deadpan demeanour, her disinterest in consumer trends, and her scepticism toward popularity reflect a quiet refusal of postfeminist self-performance. Yet, her position within MTV's ecosystem reminds us that even refusal can be commodified. The show neither wholly rejects nor endorses postfeminist values; instead, it stages them as contradictions that define contemporary girlhood.

2.3. *Daria* in the Postfeminist Media Landscape

Placed within this landscape, *Daria* operates as both a reflection of its time and a subtle commentary on it. The series unfolds in the fictional town of Lawndale—a suburban world of conformity, self-improvement, and middle-class complacency. Lawndale functions as a microcosm of late-1990s America: its citizens are consumers before they are individuals, and its girls are encouraged to define themselves through visibility, desirability, and productivity.

Within this environment, *Daria* stands as an ironic outsider. Her dispassionate tone and refusal to participate in the rituals of femininity serve as acts of quiet resistance. Yet, her resistance is not revolutionary as *Daria* does not fight the system—she observes it, dissects it, and occasionally mocks it. This restrained defiance reflects the limited avenues for feminist critique within postfeminist media spaces. As McRobbie suggests, postfeminism neutralizes opposition by incorporating it—by allowing critique only insofar as it remains self-contained and ironic (McRobbie 259).

Moreover, the show's humour reveals the contradictions of postfeminist identity formation. While characters like Quinn epitomize the self-surveillance and performative femininity celebrated by postfeminist media, *Daria* embodies the intellectual detachment represented as authenticity. Yet, both positions—conformity and refusal—exist within the same consumer framework. *Daria*'s anti-fashion sensibility and sarcastic commentary become part of her branded identity, illustrating how even resistance can be aestheticized and sold. This dynamic echoes Ivins-Hulley's observation that *Daria* "negotiates a tension between discourses of female empowerment and the constraints of consumerist culture" (1198). In other words, *Daria*'s refusal becomes its own form of participation.

The show also reimagines the feminist voice through irony rather than activism. Where *Riot Grrrl* had shouted, *Daria* smirks. This tonal shift marks the adaptation of feminist critique to fit postfeminist sensibilities—smart, witty, but non-threatening. The humour distances viewers from political discomfort while still acknowledging systemic absurdities. Thus, *Daria* becomes a bridge between oppositional and mainstream feminisms: she makes resistance intelligible to a generation raised on MTV's sitcoms.

At the same time, the show resists the narrative of female perfection that dominated late-1990s media. *Daria* is not glamorous, socially successful, or emotionally expressive in the stereotypical ways. Her value lies in her intellect and authenticity; qualities rarely celebrated in the postfeminist landscape of makeovers and self-surveillance. In that sense, *Daria* reclaims a space for introspection and critical thinking within a media culture obsessed with visibility. However, the series does not envision an alternative social order; it simply gestures toward the cracks in the existing one.

Chapter 3: Critical Discourse Analysis of *Daria*

This section of the dissertation undertakes a qualitative discourse analysis of *Daria*, examining how the series constructs feminine subjectivities and negotiates gendered ideologies within the cultural conditions of the late 1990s. Situating the show within the climate of “girl power,” expanding youth markets, and postfeminist sensibilities, *Daria* emerges as an important text for understanding how young female audiences encounter, absorb, and contest cultural meanings.

The analytical framework for this chapter draws on Critical Discourse Analysis, which approaches discourse as a practice that can reproduce, naturalise, or challenge power structures. The emphasis on the interrelation between language, cognition, and society makes CDA especially compatible with feminist theoretical concerns. Taken together, these frameworks enable a reading of *Daria* that is attentive to its linguistic strategies, ideological work, and cultural positioning. Using Teun A. Van Dijk's triadic model, the analysis proceeds across three levels. At the textual level, it examines dialogue, irony, tone, and narrative framing to understand how the show articulates alternative forms of femininity and critiques dominant norms. At the cognitive level, it considers the interpretive positions offered to viewers—how *Daria*'s scepticism, intelligence, and refusal of convention shape audience mental models of gender and social expectation. At the societal level, these patterns are situated within broader ideological structures, including the neoliberal individualism and postfeminist sensibilities that shaped 1990s media culture.

Through this integrated approach, the chapter demonstrates how *Daria* uses irony and characterisation to contest normative femininity and reflects the ideological tensions of its cultural moment.

3.1 *Daria* and Jane

MTV's *Daria* features two highly atypical teen girls: *Daria Morgendorffer* and her friend *Jane Lane*. Both are marked by a heavy dose of sarcasm and an utter disregard for

conventional femininity. They eschew beauty rituals, spurn the popularity contests that dominate Lawndale High, and rarely display the emotional expressiveness expected of girls in media. In Judith Butler's terms, their behavior can be understood as a form of counter-performance. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but "an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts." In other words, femininity is performed by a series of gestures and behaviors. Daria and Jane refuse to perform the usual gestures—makeup, melodrama, performative cheerfulness. Their irony and emotional reserve become a refusal that reveals gender norms as constructed performances.

A close reading of female characters' in terms of dressing cues, facial expressions and vocal tone confirm how the characters resist femineity. Daria's green jacket, pleated skirt, and large round glasses denote a lack of interest in fashion, connoting a rejection of normative feminine beauty standards. Her slouched posture and limited facial expression symbolize disengagement and ironic detachment. These signs collectively construct an identity that critiques performative femininity. Her monotone voice operates semiotically as both index and symbol: it indexes boredom or refusal to emote, and it symbolizes a non-conformist stance. Somewhat similar is Jane's rebellious look with an asymmetrical bob haircut, black leggings, and red cropped jacket. Her clothing choices invoke alternative and punk visual codes, marking her as someone who resists both mainstream fashion and gender conformity. Her confident walk and ironic smirk index independence and sarcasm. Together, her visual signifiers construct the image of the autonomous artist. Semiotic readings of her style emphasize gender neutrality and cultural rebellion, rejecting the consumerist heteronormative femininity represented by characters like Quinn.

In *Arts 'N' Crass*, Daria and Jane produce an anti-beauty poster that is supposed to represent the student life at the dawn of the new millennium, but is censored by school authorities, pointing to both their rebellious stance as well as their awareness to destructive and unrealistic beauty standards for teenage girls. According to Daria, message of the poster is that all the emphasis on appearance is dangerous. The poem written by Daria with the poster of a beautiful teenager; painted by Jane; was unacceptable and "gross" to the principal. It goes like:

She knows she a winner
 She couldn't be thinner
 Now she goes in the bathroom
 And vomits up dinner

The poem creates a problem for the principal and forces the girls to change it to something delightful like the painting itself but Daria objects against it as "the poem becomes just another dishonest phony message".

In the episode *Lost Girls*, Daria shows a direct critique of a teen magazine and its writers for selling phony identity to young consumers and creating shallow content that doesn't bring any value to young girls at whom the magazine was targeted. The recurring term used by the superficial character of the magazine writer Val for her work is "edgy", that Daria defines in the following manner: "As far as I can make out, 'edgy' occurs when middlebrow, middle-aged profiteers are looking to suck the energy, not to mention the spending money, out of the 'youth culture.'" So, they come up with this fake concept of seeming to be dangerous when every move they make is the result of market research and a corporate master plan." Daria's critical awareness of capitalistic benefitters at this stage significantly places her outside the dominant narrative of a female identity in teen discourse. Further in the episode Daria criticises this woman for benefiting from girls' insecurities by saying – "... pushing yourself as some kind of role model when all you care about is how you look and what celebrities you know? Aren't teenage girls screwed up enough without you foisting your shallow values on them and making their lousy self-images even worse?" Ironically the episode ends on the song *Keep Young and Beautiful* by Annie Lennox showing the low self-image of the woman writer, Val, obsessed with her age and her looks; all that a woman presumably has to care about according to dominant media.

In *Daria*, dominant voices—Quinn, Ms. Li, and media figures—sustain traditional femininity, while Daria and Jane's voices challenge or mock them. Their ability to interrupt the dominant discourse, even temporarily, is a site of ideological contestation. At the cognitive level, these moments shape audience perception. Daria's sarcasm reframes normative behavior as absurd, prompting viewers to reflect critically on beauty rituals, popularity, and performance. Through irony, the show encourages audiences to question what femininity means and why it is performed in specific ways.

On a broader cultural level, the characters reflect the tensions of 1990s postfeminism. *Arts 'N' Crass* and *The Lost Girls*—reveal how *Daria* critiques the broader neoliberal and postfeminist norms that shape girlhood. Val's obsession with being "edgy," the principal's rejection of honest depictions of body insecurity, and the teen magazine's commodification of identity reveal the inherent problems of their social environment. The emphasis on appearance, branding, and desirability seen in these episodes reflects a cultural landscape where femininity is treated as a marketable project rather than a social experience shaped by inequality. Judith Butler's theory of performativity clarifies why these norms feel compulsory: femininity is upheld through constant repetition—beauty work, scripted confidence, polished "girl power"—and those who refuse these acts, like Daria and Jane, expose their constructed and disciplinary nature. Their critiques of superficial media, toxic beauty messaging, and profit-driven girlhood reveal how postfeminist media has perpetuated and how Daria challenges it boldly.

3.2 Helen and Quinn

Quinn's pastel pinks, matching accessories, and hyper-feminized voice construct a personality which signals to normative femininity. Her wide-eyed expressions and high-pitched tone depict social agreeability, while her obsession with appearance, shopping, dates and cosmetic products. These signs operate on the symbolic level to reinforce the myth of idealized teenage girlhood: beauty and popularity as power, consumption as identity. Quinn's character performs gender as a consumable script, perfectly aligned with postfeminist ideals of self-regulation and competitiveness.

This particular trait is visible through textual analysis of specific dialogue makes these links explicit. In *Too Cute* Quinn and her "Fashion Club" girls aka "popular girls" literally reinforce that their worth resides in their appearances. The girls claim that once a girl got procedures done and became "cute" only then she would be capable of joining the "Fashion Club". When Quinn visits the surgeon, the extreme advertising and dysmorphia creating content is visible in the scene. In another episode called *Quinn the Brain* an interaction between the sisters goes like:

Daria: Did you just spend two hours dressing up to go the door for one minute and dump your date?

Quinn: Daria, if you look your best when you blow a guy off, it makes them feel like you care.

Daria: Sometimes your shallowness is so thorough, it's almost like depth.

The significance to looks and clothing by Quinn forms the ground difference in the approaches of both the characters and Daria's critical thinking again.

Later in the episode another interesting interaction is observed between Jane and Daria;

Daria: Her writing's bad. Don't people know the difference between good and bad?

Jane: She's cute. There're different standards for cute people.

Daria: You mean, no standards. Isn't there ever a time when how you look doesn't affect how you're judged?

The fact that Quinn's looks make her popular for being a nerd, makes Daria question the double standards that surround knowledge too. At the cognitive level, Quinn internalises a belief system in which beauty, popularity, and consumption determine personal value, and her behaviour consistently reinforces this worldview. Such representations reinforce the ideals of self-surveillance in femininity. Episodes like *Too Cute* make this ideology explicit by insisting that a girl be "cute enough" for acceptance shows how deeply Quinn has absorbed the neoliberal idea that the self is a project to be continuously upgraded. Similarly, in *Quinn the Brain*, her insistence that "if you look your best when you blow a guy off, it makes them feel like you care" reveals a cognitive model in which emotional labour is replaced by aesthetic performance. Yet *Daria* deliberately frames these beliefs as shallow as illustrated through Daria's remark that Quinn's "shallowness is so thorough, it's almost like depth" and through the later exchange with Jane about the lowered standards for "cute people," which exposes how attractiveness distorts social judgement. At the macro level, Quinn exemplifies the neoliberal sensibility described by Gill, in which femininity becomes

a lifelong makeover project grounded in self-surveillance, competitiveness, and consumer practices. Her routines of grooming, shopping, and image-maintenance align with Gill's argument that women are positioned as entrepreneurial subjects responsible for crafting themselves into desirable products. By contrasting Quinn's internalised ideology with Daria's critical distance, the show exposes the superficiality and pressures of this cultural framework, revealing how postfeminist norms shape girlhood into a cycle of self-policing that the series subtly urges viewers to question.

On the other hand, Helen's visual and vocal presentation encodes the semiotics of neoliberal feminism, where empowerment is equated with professional success, self-management, and the disciplined balance between work and family. Her tailored power suits and structured blazers denote corporate authority, but they also connote the postfeminist ideal of the endlessly capable woman who must look efficient while absorbing the pressures of work and family. Her fast, clipped, managerial vocal tone symbolizes competence and control, yet simultaneously indexes suppressed exhaustion, signalling the emotional labour required to appear composed. Semiotic analysis shows that Helen's body language, wardrobe, and vocal style form a performance of femininity built on constant regulation: she must prove she can excel at work, manage her household, and remain polished. In this way, Helen embodies postfeminist femininity, where balance itself becomes a performance—an ongoing negotiation between expectation and self-surveillance.

Helen exemplifies Angela McRobbie's notion of postfeminist "double entanglement," wherein women appear empowered through promising careers and choice but remain bound by intensified expectations of productivity, emotional control, and familial responsibility. Helen's attempt to embody the flawless working mother is precisely this entanglement: she is both celebrated for her ambition and silently disciplined by the demand to juggle work, marriage, and motherhood without visible strain. Through a counter character of Amy (one of Helen's two sisters) this vision is contested as Amy emerges as the independent single, childless lady, who throws sarcastic remarks like Daria and shows great similarities to Daria's personality. *Daria* exposes the cultural shallowness of this model of empowerment, highlighting how neoliberal/postfeminist norms recast women's exhaustion as personal failure rather than a symptom of larger structural demands.

Thus, this chapter has shown how *Daria* uses discourse, irony, and characterisation to question the gender norms circulating in late-1990s media culture. Through discourse analysis framework, it becomes clear that the show challenges femininity at multiple levels: textually, through the ironic tone and visual cues of characters like Daria and Jane; cognitively, through the internalised beliefs of characters such as Quinn and Helen; and socially, through the broader neoliberal and postfeminist climate that shapes these beliefs. Quinn's and Helen's investment in beauty, productivity, and emotional discipline illustrate how postfeminist sensibilities become normalised, while Daria and Jane's refusal to

participate exposes these norms as constructed rather than natural. Drawing on Gill, McRobbie and Butler, the analysis demonstrates how femininity is produced through discourse.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how MTV's *Daria* (1997–2002) reflects, resists, and reconfigures postfeminist and neoliberal constructions of femininity through practices of gender performativity. Drawing on a Critical Discourse Analysis informed by Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, Judith Butler and by close readings of key episodes and character interactions, the dissertation demonstrates that *Daria* stages a complex, ambivalent critique of late-1990s postfeminist media culture.

First, the analysis shows that *Daria* reflects dominant postfeminist and neoliberal femininities of the period. Characters such as Quinn and Helen embody the two major strands identified by McRobbie: the makeover model and the self-managing, hyper-competent working woman. Their narrative arcs, dialogues, and visual coding reveal how femininity was restructured around individualism, consumer self-fashioning, and internalised self-surveillance—core features of 1990s neoliberal “empowerment” culture.

Second, the series resists these constructions through its central figures, Daria and Jane. Their ironic detachment, refusal to participate in normative feminine performance, and shared critical gaze illustrate what can be described as the destabilising potential of counter-performance. This resistance not only challenges postfeminist “choice” rhetoric but also denaturalises the cultural machinery that produces normative girlhood.

Third, *Daria* reconfigures femininity by modelling alternative ways of being a girl within the constraints of MTV's commercial environment. It presents intelligence, scepticism, refusal, and critical literacy as valid feminine subject positions—ones that operate outside traditional scripts of beauty, desirability, or neoliberal productivity. However, the dissertation also demonstrates that this reconfiguration is limited: as a product of MTV's youth-culture economy, the show simultaneously commodifies dissent, reproducing the ambivalences that characterise postfeminist media.

Methodologically, applying CDA alongside Butlerian performativity and McRobbie/Gill's postfeminist frameworks proved productive: it allowed the study to map how semiotic resources (visual codes, tone, narrative strategies) participate in producing gendered subjectivities at textual, cognitive, and social levels.

Limitations and directions for future research are important to note. This dissertation focuses on a select set of episodes and primarily on middle-class, Anglo-American representations; it therefore leaves room for further work on reception, intersectional analysis of race, class, sexuality, production studies, and comparative studies with contemporaneous

teen texts. Longitudinal research tracing *Daria*'s afterlives—fan practices, online discourse, and pedagogical use—would also enrich understanding of how the show's ironies travel across changing cultural climates.

In conclusion, *Daria* occupies a generative critical position: it is neither a straightforward denunciation of postfeminism nor an innocuous reinforcement of it. Instead, the series performs an ambivalent critique—one that makes visible the contradictions of late-1990s girlhood under neoliberalism while simultaneously participating in the cultural dynamics that shapes those contradictions. For feminist media scholarship, the value of *Daria* lies in its capacity to render the functioning of postfeminist subject-formation legible and teachable; for media audiences, it offers a model of sceptical engagement that complicates easy narratives of empowerment. Recognizing animated teen texts like *Daria* as serious sites of ideological work opens productive avenues for broadening feminist media critique in both historical and contemporary contexts.

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