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Abstract
Since the new millennium, there has been a remarkable increase in audio-visual adaptations of superhero comic books (Garcia-Escriva, 2018). Whereas these adaptations used to include predominantly male superheroes, they have started to feature more female superheroes (Curtis & Cardo, 2018). An increase, however, does not imply diverse and rounded representations, since women in superhero movies tend to be depicted in stereotypical and sexualized ways (Kaplan, Miller & Rauch, 2016). Even though previous research has addressed the genre's politics of gender representation, there is a need for research that looks at televised female superheroes from a queer postfeminist lens. Therefore, this study conducted a textual analysis, informed by queer postfeminism and intersectionality theory, to explore how leading female superheroes in the series Supergirl are represented. We concluded that the superhero series Supergirl subverts hegemonic gendered identities through its depiction of both traditional and queer femininities.

Introduction

Popular culture might today seem omnipresent, but this universality certainly does not extend to the representation of marginalized socio-cultural groups. As Erigha (2015) notes, especially white men have the privilege of creating narratives in Hollywood. Their research into Hollywood's cultural production industries demonstrates that this problematic trend reduces opportunities for women and minorities. This, in turn, leads to stereotypes and a lack of diversity in movies and television series (Erigha, 2015). Despite increasing initiatives such as the founding of SheDecides, awareness campaigns for the Gender Pay Gap, #MeToo (Krijnen, 2020), and periodic demands for more opportunities and fair representation, women and socio-cultural minorities remain underrepresented and/or stereotyped (Lindner et al., 2015; Sink & Mastro, 2017; Lauzen, 2018, 2019).

Predictably then, female superheroes in mass entertainment such as comics, movies, and television series have similarly faced underrepresentation and stereotyping – which is now evidenced by various studies (Robbins, 1996; Baker & Raney, 2007; McGrath, 2007; Stabile, 2009; Demarest, 2010; Signorielli, 2011; Kaplan et al., 2016). But even though previous research has addressed the genre's politics of gender representation, there remains a need for analyses of televised female superheroes from a queer postfeminist lens – as the relevance of female superheroines cannot be reduced to exclusively gender-based perspectives (e.g. Demarest, 2010; Kaplan, Miller & Rauch, 2016). Interested in the interplay between (ostensibly) progressive representation and wider structures of inequity, feminist theories about queer postfeminism address the relation between neoliberalism and feminism – pointing to the contradictory entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist themes. Particularly, they stress narrative possibilities offered by queerness (Dhaenens, 2014) and underline that queer postfeminist popular culture can reiterate and subvert traditional heteronormative femininities at the same time by including both feminine (cf. postfeminism) and non-feminine (cf. queer theory) gender performances (Moseley & Read, 2002; Gerhard, 2005; Gauntlett, 2008; Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). Accordingly, these approaches are united in their refusal to subscribe to a binary, evaluative stance on popular culture, prioritizing instead a recognition of its inherent complexity. Of crucial import herein are the links between intersectionality theory and postfeminism, inviting a more fine-grained understanding of how representation pertains not only to gender, but (re)configures other identity axes too – such as (dis)ability, race or sexual orientation.

Applying the insights of queer postfeminist thought to female superheroes, this article reports on a qualitative study that explored to what extent the series *Supergirl* (2015) reiterates and/or resists hegemonic constructions of gender and sexuality. Importantly, the series is part of the Arrowverse, a media franchise of American television network The CW comprising of audio-visual adaptations of the DC comics superhero stories. In popular discourse, the Arrowverse is often applauded for its portrayal of gender and sexual diversity in prominent characters (Holloway, 2017; Kelly, 2018), rendering it a fruitful site to further theorize queer postfeminist ideas on representation. To do so, the case at hand must first be situated vis-à-vis previous research into superheroines. Here, particular emphasis goes to the relevance of adopting queer postfeminism and its intersectional outlook as a productive theoretical framework to inquire how female characters are represented in contemporary television series. Applied to *Supergirl*, this reveals how the superhero series tries to provide a space for reimagining (and thus for reconfiguring) society towards a more inclusive and equal environment (Stabile, 2009). Simultaneously, it points to a reductive engagement with intersectionality, highlighting how particular identity categories are still normalized at the expense of (invisible) others. This, the paper concludes, troubles established analytics in gender-based studies of female superhero content, which have long prioritized evaluative dichotomies.

Studying superheroines

Studies into the superhero genre demonstrate how the genre has a long history of misrepresenting and underrepresenting female characters (Kaplan et al., 2016; Ameter, 2019). The portrayal of female characters in comics, which form the basis for audio-visual adaptations, has always been shaped by the preconceptions of masculine creators (Robbins, 1996). Consequently, the few historical representations of superheroines tend to be highly stereotypical. Sadri (2014) concluded that superhero comics reiterate a monomythical structure through which patriarchal ideologies are continuously disseminated and reinforced. As such, the behaviour, physical appearance, and superpowers of female superheroes have long been gendered in binary categories based on traditional conceptions of exclusive femininity and masculinity.[1] Starting with the behaviour and roles of female superheroes, Robbins (1996) demonstrated that heroines in comic books from the 1940s until the 1990s often served as sidekicks for the male superhero and/or as 'the girlfriend' – to be conveniently in need of rescue in the male hero's classic protection narrative. Other studies affirm this one-sided and stereotypical representational pattern with female superheroes in comics and their audio-visual adaptations. Signorielli (2011) summarised the findings of large-scale research on the representation of gender in fall prime time broadcasting between 2000 and 2008, whereas Baker and Raney (2007) studied female and male superheroes in children's cartoons that were aired in 2003. McGrath (2007), on the other hand, analysed how gender and race were represented in two comic book series, while Rauch (2012) conducted a content analysis of 120 superhero movies between 1966 and 2009. Each and every one of these authors illustrate that female superheroes were, in most cases, expected to be emotional, attractive, and concerned about their personal appearance. These studies indicate that it is rare to see female heroes in a leadership position, and they are more likely to be portrayed as afraid and helpless compared to male characters. Similarly, scholars found that female superheroes were often sexualized when their physical appearance was prioritized in analyses. Demarest (2010) argues that the physical appearance of superheroines often underscores their sexuality by pronouncing their extreme hourglass figures; clothes worn by superheroines, often revealing bodysuits, immediately draw attention to their bust, hips, and waist. Kaplan, Miller and Rauch (2016), who conducted a content analysis to identify gender differences in superheroes' roles, appearance, and violence in 146 movies between 1978 and 2009 confirmed Demarest's qualitative research. Their macro analysis demonstrates that female superheroes wear more revealing clothing than men and are more conventionally attractive, sexy, thin, afraid, and helpless in contrast to male superheroes – who are represented as muscular and powerful.

It is furthermore crucial to emphasize that gendered distinctions prevail regarding the superpower ascribed to male and female superheroes, and the symbolic importance hereof should not be underestimated. When looking at how superpowers are gained and wielded, it is notable that male superheroes tend to have inherent powers acquired without external assistance. Women, conversely, tend to be gifted powers by men or lack special powers altogether (Demarest, 2010). But the symbolism here has room for ambiguity. Indeed, Robbins (1996) considers this gendered distinction paradoxically empowering, because it demonstrates that superpowers are not necessary for a woman to become a superheroine. Perceived as such, women's superpowers originate from extensive training, meaning that any woman could assume a superheroine role. The use of powers and the assumption of a superhero role again differs significantly, however. Kaplan, Miller and Rauch (2016) demonstrate how male superheroes use special abilities and weapons considerably more often

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[1] Whereas we do recognize the difference in aesthetics and audiences between comics and their audio-visual adaptations, we elaborate on research concerning both media interchangeably. This is because media corporations have created unity between comics and their audio-visual adaptations based on the concept of superhero characters (Gordon et al., 2007).

than female superheroes – meaning that superhero fiction mostly conceives women as nurturing, and fertile, passive non-agentic background characters.

Because studies like these span several decades (from 1940 to 2009) and a diversity of media (comic books, film, television), patriarchal and sexist discourses might seem pervasive aspects of the superhero genre. Men are protectors, heroes, and active agents, whereas women are nudged into the role of the supportive bystander, vulnerable victim, or passive object; undermining women's agency to act and protect themselves (Stabile, 2009). But at the same time, the genre has the potential to subvert traditional gendered stereotypes by 'imagining and valuing forms of heroism that transcend the old, tired stereotype of the damsel in distress' (Stabile, 2009, p. 90) – which is arguably even exasperated by the genre's patriarchal, heterosexist history. Indeed, the interpretation of contemporary images of superheroines may be up for debate, and recent examples might not correspond to what has been observed in the past. The assessment that the embodiment of femininities considered 'traditional' necessarily reiterates patriarchal ideology, for instance, is troubled when approached from a queer postfeminist and intersectional perspective. To explain why, however, demands a discussion of the value of looking at popular culture from those perspectives.

On queer postfeminism and intersectionality
As opposed to the studies discussed above, a queer postfeminist and intersectional perspective invites a different engagement with and assessment of popular culture. The notion of 'postfeminism' itself merits further discussion, however, because it is variously interpreted, circumscribed and defined. Feminist media studies display three dominant interpretations of postfeminism: postfeminism as a political position, as a historical shift within feminism, or as a backlash against feminism (Gill, 2007). Different authors[2] have attempted to go beyond these singular interpretations, emphasizing instead the complex and ambiguous relation between neoliberalism and postfeminist discourses. Gill (2007) describes postfeminism as a sensibility that can be employed to analyse contemporary cultural products and their engagement with gender norms, in recognition of the fact that certain feminist priorities have seemingly shifted from counterhegemonic to mainstream status. Acknowledging that popular culture now at least partially embraces the language of feminism, she stresses how postfeminist discourses and representations are inherently contradictory through the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist themes and points to their defining features. Postfeminist culture is therefore in the first place dependent on discourses of capitalism and neoliberalism; feminist causes are repackaged as an individual struggle rather than a political one (Gill, 2007; Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). Accordingly, understanding the postfeminist sensibility requires recognizing the fact that neoliberal notions of feminism treat it as an empty signifier, affirming gender inequalities rather than subverting them. It demands an acute awareness of how neoliberally co-opted, consumer versions of feminism and portrayals that advocate it have the potential to repudiate feminist goals. At the same time, Gill (2007) stresses, postfeminist discourses *do* articulate ideas critical of the traditional status quo, and as such also provide the opportunity to subvert patriarchal notions. As such, postfeminist discourse does mediate between traditional oppositions in feminism: 'Postfeminism is a discourse that gives women the opportunity to be feminine, attractive, and a feminist at the same time. It is a new form of empowerment, adjusted to the actual societal context' (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014, p. 179).

Indeed, Moseley and Read (2002) posit that postfeminist culture deconstructs the boundaries between the private and the public and between being feminist and being feminine – the latter having a noted history as a tool to discredit oppositional views in intra-feminist debates. Adriaens and Van Bauwel (2014) unite different interpretations of postfeminism and organise them into a list of characteristic fundaments, including consumer culture, fashion,

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[2] Including Gill (2007), Banet-Weiser (2018), and Negra and Tasker (2014).

(sexual) pleasure, individual choice, focus on the female body, hybridism, and the use of technology. Hybridism in particular is relevant to the present paper, because it articulates the relevance of focusing on queer dimensions of postfeminism, which ostensibly subverts established gender norms, and highlights the multiplicity of identity. Particularly, postfeminist discourses trouble and transgress boundaries between feminine and masculine traits and reject earlier feminist convictions about gendered difference and the political import thereof (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). Indeed, both postfeminist discourse and its scholarly discussion has in the past decade been reconfigured by intersectional perspectives, challenging both the hegemony of young, White middle-class and able bodied women in cultural expressions of postfeminism and their centrality to critical imaginations thereof. As such, feminist engagements with postfeminism are at once extended and reconfigured by intersectional theory[3] (Gill, 2017). It emphasizes that women have intersecting identities and, as a consequence, how women face oppression is dependent on the context and the different axes of their identity such as race and sexual orientation (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008; Walby et al., 2012). This conceptually extends the sites wherein the subversion of traditional identities can be enacted, beyond gender alone – but simultaneously cautions against simplistic critiques of postfeminist culture too (Gill, 2017).

Sexuality in particular presents itself at once as a mode of subjectivity habitually mobilized in postfeminist culture and neoliberal discourse (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014), and as a site wherein their critical analyses tend to oversimplify complicated intersections of gender with other identity axes (Gill, 2017). In what she calls 'queer postfeminism', Gerhard (2005) calls for feminist accounts of postfeminism to embrace and complement the narrative possibilities offered by queerness – in the first place subversions of traditional alignments between gender and sexuality (Gerhard, 2005; Gauntlett, 2008). This offers a framework to acknowledge that queer postfeminist popular culture can simultaneously reiterate and subvert traditional heteronormative femininities by including both feminine and non-feminine gender performances. Applied to cultural analysis, then, this facilitates critical deconstructions of the normalizing function of gender categories in postfeminist discourse to productively interact with a recognition of the subversive role these ostensibly antifeminist reflexes might play vis-à-vis commonplace convictions about sexuality (Gill, 2017). This is particularly relevant in relation to the superhero genre, which is rife in imagery that conflates gender and sexuality. As Tate (2008) notes, female superheroes tend to be depicted in an exaggeratingly sexualised way to emphasize their femininity and power. As such, the expression of their femininity disarticulates the idea that heroes have to be men and/or masculine. Although it has the potential to subvert hegemonic ideas about heroism, the practice does tend to overemphasize female superheroes as 'feminine' whenever they engage in 'male' heroic acts (Tate, 2008). But it also follows that depictions of female superheroes might challenge hegemonic constructions of gender by reiterating traditional femininities while simultaneously embracing narratives that emphasize queer modes of sexuality – notwithstanding their possible reaffirmation of hegemonically gendered identities. Queer postfeminism thus offers a useful framework to critically approach representations of female superheroes in popular culture by, because it cautions against simplistic evaluative registers based on gender or sexuality alone (Gill, 2017). Superhero narratives potentially provide a space to reimagine and reconfigure society towards a more inclusive and equal environment (Stabile, 2009). To further develop these reflections, the present research therefore analyses how the series *Supergirl* engages with gender and sexuality – both as singular categories and necessarily intersecting modes of subjectivity.

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[3] Postfeminist popular culture supposedly reiterates white heteronormative femininities, which Gill (2007, p.163) called 'the racialized and heterosexualized modernization of femininity'.

Methodology

To do so, this article reports on the results of a textual analysis (McKee, 2003) of the main female superheroes in *Supergirl*, a live-action series of the so-called 'Arrowverse' (series of The CW based on DC Comics). Two questions structured a systematic analysis of the material: First, how does the series engage with feminist interpretations of gender and their relation to neoliberal logics? Second, to what extent do the female superheroes found in the series reflect the entry of intersectional and queer problematizations to feminist though? As such, we have particular interest in exploring how series construct characters' gender and sexual identities on a formal and ideological level, and how such constructions relate to postfeminist culture. The choice to analyse *Supergirl* (season one to four) reflects this ambition, seeing that exploratory analysis showed the series is often popularly articulated to queer postfeminist discourses (Holloway, 2017; Kelly, 2018). Out of every season, several relevant sequences were distinguished for in-depth textual analysis. Each season was taken into account to allow recognising and mapping representational evolutions, but analysis was limited to a sample of episodes/sequences – an exhaustive study being unfeasible due to the number of cases and episodes. The insights and contributions of authors mentioned above served as an inductive, theoretically informed basis for analysis. We constructed an Excel file to list the findings of the formal and ideological textual analysis. This file facilitated recognizing the central themes and making clear conclusions. In the following paragraphs, the results are discussed, organized according to the central themes that were uncovered during the textual analysis. These include the resisting and reversing of the protection narrative by female superheroes, the presence of genderbending characters, and the intersection between gender and sexuality.

Reading the superheroines in *Supergirl*
Resisting and reversing the protection narrative

Superheroines from the postfeminist era are more active than their counterparts in the 1970s and 1980s; they are thought to value their autonomy and freedom to make their own choices (Gill, 2007; Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). In *Supergirl,* female superheroes resist and, in some cases, even reverse the protection narrative. In these moments of role reversal, female superheroes assume a leading role, including that of protector. Ostensibly, this distinguishes *Supergirl* from earlier examples of superhero fiction, which studies deconstructed as rife with patriarchal and sexist discourses (Sadri, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2016; Ameter, 2019). Where the dominant narrative used to portray men as protectors, heroes, and active agents at the expense of women – mostly nudged into the role of the supportive bystander, vulnerable victim, or passive object, thereby undermining women's agency to act and protect themselves (Robbins, 1996; Rauch, 2012), *Supergirl* presents itself as an altogether different case.

Crucially, *Supergirl* does not centralize a classical heteroromantic dyad, but revolves around the dynamic between two female protagonists: Kara Danvers (Supergirl) and Alex Danvers (Kara's adoptive sister). From the beginning of the series, *Supergirl* addresses the (patriarchal) obstacles that Kara has to conquer to become a hero, focusing on her development of a superhero identity. The sisters are depicted in contrast to each other: Alex is a respected secret agent, whereas Kara is discontent about her job as an assistant at a media company. Alex is burdened with the task to protect her younger alien sister and attempts to do so by keeping Kara's powers a secret from the world. The protection narrative, in this case, materializes in the relation between the two female protagonists, but is reversed from the outset. The superhero requires protect, rather than the other way around. The pilot episode in which Kara decides to use her powers to help people after years of suppressing them illustrates this dynamic:

> Alex: "What were you thinking? You exposed yourself to the world, you are out there now, Kara! Everyone will know about you and you can't take that back! […]

What if people figure out who you are? What you are! It's just, it's not safe for you to do anything like that ever again!" (S1E1)

Importantly, only a small portion of the people she saved applauded her protection; the majority compared her to Superman and deemed her unfit to be a superhero due to her gender. Consequently, the first season revolved around Kara's attempts to win the respect and trust of the public. Indeed, countering the protection narrative is a prominent aspect to this seasonal arc. In the first episode, Kara is constantly confronted by people who do not take her seriously. Her co-worker expresses his discontent by comparing her to Superman and calling her 'a rooky superhero'. Her skills and strengths are questioned by news reporters who analyse her every move. She also offers her assistance to the secret organisation her sister works for but is dismissed with a sneer that she should '*get back to getting someone's coffee*'. Kara's sister is the first person who changes her mind and supports her. She expresses this after Kara needed to be saved by Superman and loses faith in herself. Alex then states that Supergirl's story is just starting and that one day she'll be saving Superman. Eventually, Supergirl succeeds in gaining the respect of National City's inhabitants; proving the protection narrative wrong. In the subsequent season, she becomes a protector in her own right when her male co-worker James decides to become a hero. When reprimanding him for putting his life in danger, she notes:

James: "Look, I was never meant to be in Superman's shadow. Or yours. I am more me as Guardian than I have ever felt as James Olsen. Kara, we are the same."

Kara: "No, we are not the same. You are a human. You're going to get yourself killed. One mistake, one human error and you're gone. That's it. You don't get a strike, James! ...You are never going to be strong enough for this." (S2E10)

Here, Kara confidently asserts the strengths and abilities necessary to act as a superhero, while delegitimating James' gender-based claims to protector status. Kara's superpowers resemble those of Superman and are derived from her alien origin. Alex, on the other hand, has skills as a result of extensive training – demonstrating that superpowers are not necessary for a woman to become a superheroine (Robbins, 1996). That Alex acts as Kara's protector, moreover stresses an equal distribution of strength among the sisters regardless of the origin of their powers, again subverting established notions about protection and care. Both Kara and Alex are represented as strong, independent individuals with their own priorities, and each of them is surely able to protect themselves. However, in Kara's case, this is not necessarily acknowledged by other characters, meaning that Kara sometimes appears vulnerable and in need of saving. The attention given to Kara's need to prove herself in relation to Superman resonates with Gill's (2007) notion of postfeminism as emphasizing self-surveillance and individualism: women, not men, are required to work on the self and are responsible for their own actions.

Cat Grant, Kara's boss and mentor, plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Cat's actions explicitly articulate the inherent relation between postfeminism and neoliberalism by exploiting Supergirl's journey to her company's commercial gain. Indeed, Cat's professed feminist activism is deprived of political significance, and ultimately reiterates ideas about traditional heteronormative femininity rather than subverts them. Nevertheless, she can be considered a prime example of postfeminist heroism to whom Kara looks for guidance. Her mode of dress reflects traditional interpretations of femininity, but at the same time also depict a ruthless boss only concerned with making profit. She commodifies Supergirl into a marketable feminist product, stating that she is going to 'blow Supergirl up' to save the newspaper. When Kara confronts her boss about naming the new hero 'Supergirl', claiming that calling her a girl is belittling and an anti-feminist move for the newspaper, Cat reprimands her for her critique. She states that she branded the hero and if Kara perceives

Supergirl as anything less than excellent, that *she* is the real problem. But simultaneously, Cat challenges these notions by letting her guard down sporadically, pointing to structural inequalities that still restrain women in their everyday life. She talks to Kara about getting angry at work stating that for women, not for men, this is professional and cultural suicide. At times, Cat also counters the media's comparison between Supergirl and Superman:

> Cat: "He, he, he. Him, him, him. I am so sick of hearing about the man of steel. Every woman worth her salt knows that we have to work twice as hard as a man to be thought of half as good." (S1E2)

Nevertheless, her discourse cannot be dislodged from neoliberal co-optations of feminist convictions. Through her dialogue and actions, *Supergirl* becomes an inherently postfeminist popular artifact that sporadically reiterates traditional heteronormative feminist notions (Gill, 2007; Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). However, this does not mean that the series does not challenge and subvert those notions at the same time. Whereas Cat and Kara seem to mainly reiterate (and to a lesser extent resist) these ideas, Alex expressively subverts notions about heteronormative femininity.

Genderbending

Supergirl represents both traditional and queer femininities which both in their own way have the potential to challenge gender inequalities. Female protagonists like Cat Grant and Kara Danvers reflect traditional notions of femininity. Their freedom of choice and professed autonomy notwithstanding, their modes of dress and behaviour adhere to socially constructed, mass-mediated ideals that women have made their own and, as such, reiterate traditional practices (Gill, 2007). When Kara is not wearing her superhero costume, she wears dresses, heels, and make-up. This postfeminist hint also extends to the aesthetics of the series. The majority of the plot is set either in Kara's apartment or at the media company, Catco. Both sets are characterized by soft (slightly pink) colours and are bathed in light. But in contrast to this ostensible emphasis on traditional femininity, *Supergirl* does not systematically sexualize women, nor does it present femininity as a bodily property from which women should derive their strength. Accordingly, the series does attempt to break with the sexualizing of female superheroes, even though it does highlight other markers of hegemonic femininity. Similarly, self-surveillance and individualism are given importance, but are at the same time often dislodged from traditional notions of femininity. The presence of genderbending characters, further troubles the traditional gender binaries partly upheld by the series, underscoring a 'queer' sensibility to its postfeminist outlook (Butler, 1990; Gerhard, 2005; Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014). These instances of genderbending blur the boundaries between feminine and masculine traits (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014), further complicating *Supergirl*'s position vis-à-vis postfeminist discourse.

Explicitly contrasting Kat and Cara, its secondary female protagonist, Alex Danvers, constantly disrupts clear demarcations between what is traditionally considered masculine and feminine. Through her, *Supergirl* illustrates how freedom of choice for women to act and behave as they please can perfectly deviate from traditional heteronormative femininity too. Not only does Alex combine both traditional feminine and masculine characteristics in her modes of dress and behaviour, but the overall aesthetics of her storyline underline this divergence as much as the pinkish hue highlights Cat and Kara's traditional gender performance. Juxtaposing sequences dominated by the characters reveals how Alex is associated with dark and gloomy sets – like her apartment and her workplace, the latter of which is situated in an underground secret bunker. She prefers dark clothes and rides a motorcycle. Logically, this contrast extends to the Danvers Sisters' superhero costumes. Kara dons a costume that consists of leather boots, a red skirt, a red cape, and a blue, long-sleeved

top[4]. Alex, on the other hand, wears a black, tight combat outfit designed to move efficiently and unnoticed during field missions. In comparison, Kara seems almost a textbook example of traditional femininity. Nevertheless, Kara also occasionally challenges both traditional feminine and masculine characteristics, but mostly through interactions – particularly those with her alien boyfriend Mon-El, who still has to get accustomed to the planet Earth. Her traditionally feminine gender expression notwithstanding, she explicitly teaches him to not objectify women, and tasks him with household responsibilities when she leaves for work – reversing traditional patterns of feminine-masculine interaction and division of labour. At the same time, Alex can occasionally also be spotted in dresses and heels, again combining feminine and masculine traits. As such, both protagonists are complex characters that cannot be reduced to their bodily properties. Again, this can be illustrated through the dynamic between the Danvers sisters. Through her embodiment of traditional feminine traits, Kara's heroism seems deeply embedded in postfeminist culture, but she never expresses the need for marriage or giving up work. This contrasts with Alex who challenges traditional feminine notions but does express those needs. In season three, Alex breaks up with her partner as they did not share the wish for children; even though she was willing to give up her job to become a mother. Much to her surprise, she was later promoted to director and assured she would be able to combine the job with motherhood stating that 'she does not have to deny any part of her to be complete'. Inasmuch as Kara's disinterestedness in marriage and homeliness destabilizes her propagation of traditional gender norms, Alex' desire to form a nuclear family recalibrates her gender-bending devotion to the rejection of classical femininity. As such, both Kara and Alex reiterate, and even more, resist anti-feminist notions; individually, but even more so in their contrasting dynamic.

Importantly, the series does not shy away from showing female protagonists in vulnerable positions either, and does not ascribe a periodic refusal of heroism to only one of both sisters. Challenging the idea that women have to be constantly self-monitoring, undermining a traditional postfeminist trope, *Supergirl* emphasises that a loss of strength is not inherently related to notions of femininity. In season three, for instance, Kara deals with panic attacks. In a rejection of postfeminist discourse in popular culture, this vulnerability was not represented as a failure of the superhero. Rather, it complicated Kara's character development by countering neoliberal notions about the self-monitoring subject and addressing mental health issues:

> Kara: "I don't know how to fight this one. And I should be able to stop her. But then she makes her way into my mind and forces me to relive the scariest moment of my life. It's…torture. How am I supposed to deal with that?"
>
> Alex: "Well, by remembering that your fears don't define you. You know who you are as Supergirl, as Kara. That's what defines you and she's got nothing on that."
>
> Kara: "No, who I am as Kara feels broken. I lost Mon-El…Alex, I'm trying to be myself again, but everything that used to make me feel good, like, a relief, it's disappeared." (S3E2).

Intersections between gender and sexuality

Postfeminist popular culture supposedly reiterates white heteronormative femininities, which Gill (2007, p.163) called 'the racialized and heterosexualized modernization of femininity'. But characters like Alex already challenge the predominant postfeminist nature of the series, queering postfeminist normality with regard to both gender performance as sexual identity. Alex is first shown to experience same-sex desire in season two, and eventually comes out

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[4] However, Kara's superhero costume changes in season five (not included in the analysis) in which she starts wearing a full-length bodysuit.

as a lesbian woman. She initially struggles with accepting her feelings for Maggie, a female police officer she has been working with, and it takes her several episodes to fully accept who she is:

> Alex: "Deep down I think I still wasn't comfortable that that was my new normal. But it is my new normal and I'm happy that it is. 'Cause, I don't know, I finally get me. But now I realize it wasn't about you, it was about me living my life." (S2E8)

Repudiating the supposed 'singularity' of coming out as a fixed moment in time (Chambers, 2003), moreover, Alex's disclosure of her same-sex desire to Kara and her mother is contingent on interpersonal circumstances. Her conversation with Kara was arduous, and her sister had trouble to fully understand what she was getting at – leading the latter to apologize for not creating a safe environment for Alex. This sharply contrasts with her fairly casual coming out to her mom and friends – highlighting how coming out is a context-specific act, and being 'in' and 'out' of the closet is far from a binary opposition (Chambers, 2003). Especially the reaction of Kara's boyfriend Mon-El neutralizes the emotionally charged topic as he did not realize same-sex relationships are a problem on Earth to which he is still trying to accustom:

> Mon-El: "Oh, that was the thing? Okay. Is that like a problem here on Earth?"

> Alex: "Well, on Earth not everybody supports ladies loving ladies."

> Mon-El: "Oh, on Daxam it's the more the merrier." (S2E12)

Whether the inclusion of a coming-out narrative is problematic because it reiterates the closet mechanism (Dow, 2001) or, conversely, subverts reductive, neoliberal 'disclosure' motifs (Chambers, 2003) is debatable. At any rate, popular depictions of LGBTQ+ characters often portray sexuality as something that needs to be emphasized, struggled with, or dealt with (McInroy and Craig, 2017; Murray, 2015), which is not quite the case in *Supergirl*. For the remainder of the series, Alex is represented as a well-rounded, multifaceted character who eventually accepts her LGBTQ+ identity – which is no longer centralized after the coming out. This contrasts with research stating that non-straight characters are mostly included as comic relief, villains, victims of violence, or mentally/physically ill (McInroy and Craig, 2017).In this regard, it also merits to point out that *Supergirl* also includes a transgender woman, Nia, in the fourth season. Much like Alex, her LGBTQ+ identity is not a central aspect to her narrative. In fact, only one episode that engages with Nia being a transgender woman, focused on a trip Kara and Nia undertake to Nia's birth town to visit her family. Nia opens up to Kara about her identity and explains her family history concerning the passing down of powers:

> Nia: "I can't imagine having grown up anywhere else."

> Kara: "Because your parents are from two different planets?"

> Nia: "Yeah, and also because I'm trans. I always knew that I was a girl. My parents were amazing. They affirmed my authentic self and helped me transition young. I've always been able to be open about who I was in Parthas. I'm not saying it was easy, there were definitely people who didn't understand. But the towns' ethos of inclusion is strong. And I think if I grew up anywhere else, it would've been a lot tougher." (S4E11).

But, she is afraid to admit to her sister, Maeve, that she is the one who inherited the powers as they are passed down to only one woman of every generation. Due to their conflation of sex and gender, her family seems oblivious to the possibility of Nia inheriting the powers – waiting patiently for Maeve's powers to kick in. When her mother realizes Nia has inherited the powers, she apologizes for being so blind and states that it was Nia's destiny to be her daughter and to inherit the powers. Maeve's reaction differs from her mother's as she expresses her disgust in Nia inheriting the powers as she is 'not a real woman'. Despite the fact that the series stresses how Nia's family did not think of her as a real woman, this narrative is subverted as Nia ultimately inherits the powers. As such, one could state that whereas *Supergirl* focuses on the issues that LGBTQ+ women experience in everyday life, it does so to criticize these issues rather than affirm or reiterate them. Especially as, despite Alex's coming-out narrative and Nia's confrontation with her sister, their LGBTQ+ identity is not depicted differently than their straight and/or cisgender counterparts.

Conclusion

As the analyses conducted for this study show, *Supergirl* inherently reflects queer postfeminist culture, and both reiterates and challenges feminist and queer notions at the same time. Through its emphasis on independence, individual choice, hybridism, and fashion (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014), the series is expressively immersed in the themes and fundaments of postfeminist culture – articulating the complexities of contemporary feminist politics. With Kara's idolization of her boss and mentor Cat Grant, *Supergirl* seemingly professes to a postfeminist model of female heroism – couched in traditional scripts of femininity. Although at times professedly feminist, both Kara and Cat often reduce feminism to an empty signifier, and reiterate convictions about traditional heteronormative femininity rather than subvert them. Indeed, Cat Grant's commodification of Supergirl into a feminist hero explicitly points to the neoliberal co-optation of feminism – which is normalized rather than critiqued by Kara's failure to meaningfully escape this framing. Nevertheless, the series' female protagonists are undeniably strong and able to defend themselves. They are no sidekicks, resisting and in some cases reversing the protection narrative. Moreover, representing a superhero according to traditional feminine notions subverts hegemonic ideas about heroism – regardless of the general gendered discourse underlying the portrayals. As such, by reiterating traditional femininities as conduits for heroism, the female superheroes in *Supergirl* do challenge hegemonic conceptions of gender, even though other self-evidences about gender are reiterated. Alex Danvers' genderbending and same-sex desire insert a degree of queerness to the narrative, moreover, again both reiterating and challenging common-sensical beliefs about intersections between gender and sexuality. Echoing Gibson's (2015) statement, gendered identities are affirmed and challenged in contemporary superhero adaptations and imbued with tensions and contradictions. However, we conclude that *Supergirl* challenges gendered identities rather than affirms them through its depiction of both traditional and queer femininities. That both LGBTQ+ superheroines are represented in leading roles in which their sexual identities are only explicitly addressed in specific episodes again highlights *Supergirl's* counterhegemonic engagement with gender and sexuality. Even though the reiteration of postfeminist notions can consolidate traditional heteronormative femininity, *Supergirl* illustrates how postfeminist norms, values, and practices can be represented in inherently ambiguous ways, affirming and subverting traditional femininities at the same time.

As these contradictions are an essential characteristic of contemporary superhero adaptations, we stress the need to approach the genre from a queer postfeminist perspective. This analysis has allowed us to point out how queer theory can serve as a correction to analyses of postfeminist culture - particularly when addressing female superheroes. However, we do express our doubts concerning the absence of diverse representations concerning the leading roles on other identity axes than sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the

superhero series *Supergirl* tries to provide a space for reimagining and thus attempting to change society towards a more inclusive and equal environment.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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