

## 'Fix Her Mistake': Abortion and Parenting Narratives in *Jane the Virgin*, *Riverdale*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *The Fosters*

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Published: March 1, 2022

### ABSTRACT

Recognising the impact that fictional stories can have in shaping viewers' beliefs about abortion in the United States, I analyse unplanned pregnancy storylines in four popular television shows (*Jane the Virgin*, *The Fosters*, *Riverdale*, and *Pretty Little Liars*) with large young adult and adolescent audiences to critique how this issue is contextualised for this specific viewing demographic. The unintended pregnancy of each character is part of a larger, complex, and highly dramatic storyline that includes sex outside of a monogamous relationship, murder, rape, and forced or accidental insemination. Additionally, dialogue in two of the four shows does not include the word 'abortion'. Pregnancy is shown as a punishment for bad behaviour in all four shows. Lastly, three of the five (60%) characters decide not to have an abortion, challenging the findings of current research where abortion is the most frequent pregnancy outcome. These findings imply that shows with large adolescent and young adult viewing audiences are more likely to show adolescent and young adult women choosing parenting over abortion, while simultaneously supporting and challenging existing research on abortion portrayals in television shows.

**Keywords:** abortion, abortion stigma, teen television shows

### INTRODUCTION

In 1962, *The Defenders* was the first American television program to include an abortion plot (Sisson, 2017). Subsequently, abortion portrayals have appeared in various films and television shows; however, these portrayals often do not accurately reflect the experiences of American women. It is only recently that abortion narratives have appeared outside of the drama genre (Sisson and Kimport, 2014), prompting researchers to ask:

what is the narrative purpose of any abortion depiction, and how do different genres contribute to a range of purposes? (Sisson, 2017: 1)

To help answer this question, I examine abortion narratives in four television shows (*Jane the Virgin*, *Riverdale*, *Pretty Little Liars* and *The Fosters*) on *The CW* and *Freeform* (both American broadcasting networks with large adolescent and young adult audiences) in order to understand how this highly controversial and divisive issue is presented for this specific viewing demographic. This is a feminist narrative that focuses on the individual abortion experiences as expressed by the women and adolescent girls in the shows included in this study, all of which are based in the United States. Narrative stories, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), 'occur within specific places or situations,' making temporality 'important for the researcher's telling of the story within a place' (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 69). Such contextual details, they add, 'may include descriptions of the physical, emotional, and social situations' (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 69), as illustrated in this study of abortion narratives. According to Mann, second wave feminists' support of abortion became one of the 'most contentious political issues in the second half of the twentieth century,' noting that 'these heated political battles over reproductive rights continue to be waged today' (Mann, 2012: 73).

In the United States, abortion is a highly contested procedure in healthcare, despite its legality. According to Andaya and Mishtal, women's rights to legal abortion are 'now facing their greatest social and legislative challenges since its 1973 legislation' (Andaya and Mishtal, 2016: 40) of the landmark *Roe vs. Wade* decision. In the United States, abortion is commonly treated differently than other medical procedures, and providers must routinely comply with legal obligations that go beyond standards of professional ethics and practice (Sedgh et al., 2012),

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making safe, affordable, and accessible abortion difficult to obtain. Individual states can pass laws that restrict access to abortion and include mandatory waiting times, biased counselling, and public funding restrictions. While first trimester-induced abortion is not unusual for women in the United States with nearly one in four women seeking this form of healthcare by the age of 45 (Jones and Jerman, 2017), access to this legal form of healthcare is heavily restricted in many states. Restrictive abortion laws may contribute to and reinforce abortion stigma, furthering negative public perception about abortion providers (Britton et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2009)<sup>1</sup>, and stigmatising the patients that seek abortion procedures (Cockrill and Nack, 2013; Cockrill et al., 2013).

Abortion stories are not uncommon in American media and, in 2019, there were at least two dozen characters in streaming shows, movies, and television that ‘have had or talked about having abortions, many unapologetically’ and this, according to Buckley (2019), ‘would have been unthinkable a decade ago (n. p.)’. Abortion scenarios frequently exaggerate negative outcomes for the characters seeking abortion healthcare and do not accurately represent who is accessing it regarding race and age (Kost et al., 2017; Sisson and Kimport, 2016). Previous research indicates that television shows overrepresent young, white, nulliparous women seeking abortion care (Kost et al., 2017; Sisson and Kimport, 2014, 2016; Sisson and Rowland, 2017). In a study of 415 onscreen abortion plotlines between the years 2005 and 2014, Sisson and Kimport (2016) found that 78 plotlines occurred in the past 10 years, 25 of the characters who considered abortion were under the age of 20, and 13 characters that did obtain an abortion were under the age of 20, making this age group the most likely to have an abortion procedure. In their study, more than half of the characters considering an abortion procedure obtained one, making it the most frequent outcome (Sisson and Kimport, 2016: 447), indicating that abortion on television is more common than in film. While many of the shows analysed in the current research feature young adult and teenage characters, these characters do not exclusively appear on television shows with large adolescent and young adult viewing audiences. Genre, according to Sisson, should be considered when analysing abortion narratives on television shows, as these portrayals will vary based on several factors including ‘presumed audience, the willingness of broadcasters to present controversial content, and the intent and knowledge of the creator’ (Sisson 2017: 1-2). Thus, young adult and adolescent viewers may be subjected to different portrayals of abortion narratives than shows written for adult audiences. Additionally, adolescent and young adult viewers may rely on television shows in order to inform their ideas about abortion, which often provide ‘(mis)information’ about the procedure and can influence the experience of patients seeking abortion care (Kimport et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2009; Sisson and Kimport, 2014; Sisson and Rowland, 2017). Condit argued that in America, ‘prime time network television has been the most widely accessed cultural medium’, positing that its examination

is therefore essential to understanding the ways in which public, explicitly political discourse made the crucial transition into the cultural vocabularies of everyday life (Condit, 1990: 123).

Shows such as MTV’s *16 & Pregnant* (2010), *Big Mouth* (2018) and *13 Reasons Why* (2019) depict young women negotiating unplanned pregnancy and abortion, suggesting that various programs are addressing abortion in the wider television landscape.

Prior research has described how the media can affect beliefs about abortion, which is often more stigmatised than other reproductive experiences (Cano and Foster, 2016; Cowan, 2017; Sisson and Kimport, 2014, 2016; Sisson and Rowland, 2017). As of 2021, 39 states mandate sex education and/or HIV education, while only 18 states require program content to be medically accurate (Guttmacher, 2021), therefore, adolescent and young adults may learn more about abortion through television show portrayals than in their classrooms. With few requirements addressing medical accuracy in sex education in the United States, adolescents and young adults may be subject to the stigmatising silence, misinformation and reproduction of social myths that often surround abortion experiences (Ludlow, 2008; Sisson and Kimport, 2014). Due to the controversy surrounding abortion, silence surrounding this procedure is common (Cano and Foster, 2016; Cowan, 2017; Sisson and Kimport, 2014, 2016; Sisson and Rowland, 2017), making abortion themes on television shows necessary to critique despite the falling rates of abortion in the U. S. (Guttmacher, 2018). Evidence shows that the teenage birth rate in the United States has declined by 41% between 2006 and 2014 however, unintended pregnancy and abortion are still popular storylines in television shows and may lead to the belief that teen pregnancy rates are increasing, not decreasing (Romero et al., 2016). While previous research on the topic of abortion in television shows has acknowledged many problematic trends including an overrepresentation of death and other negative health outcomes for women seeking abortion care, my primary goal is to narrow this focus to shows with large adolescent and young adult viewing audiences to provide a deeper exploration of abortion themes in U.S. television shows on *The CW* and *Freeform* networks.

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<sup>1</sup> See Shara Crookston (2020) for a more detailed description of abortion restrictions in the United States.

## POST-FEMINISM AND CHOICE RHETORIC

Each abortion narrative in this study makes use of post-feminist rhetoric, specifically the rhetoric of choice. Post-feminism, states Ochsner and Murray (2019: 714), 'is not a specific stance, but rather, an object of analysis in culture'. Post-feminism, according to Angela McRobbie (2009), is criticised as being where the aims of feminism are perceived as being achieved and are therefore no longer relevant. Women, states post-feminist narratives, are equal entities with men, and if they experience oppression, this oppression is self-imposed. McRobbie (2009) includes a critique of how feminism's influences on daily life are taken for granted, while being simultaneously integrated within political and institutional life. Feminist language such as 'empowerment' and 'choice' are, states McRobbie (2009: 1), 'converted into a much more individualist discourse' so that this language becomes a kind of 'substitute for feminism'. Gill (2016: 619) asserts that ideologically, gender equality is supported as a 'cheer word, a positive value' that is empty of any reference to politics and 'does not necessarily pose any kind of challenge to existing social relations.' Post-feminism, then, is a 'sensibility' that consists of themes that include a pronounced individualism, an emphasis on choice, freedom, agency, and the emergence of the beauty-industrial complex (Gill, 2016). Post-feminist narratives of choice appear in the shows analysed in this study by rarely addressing the structural issues that prevent patients from accessing abortion and the challenges young and single mothers experience. Hoerl and Kelly (2010: 361) posit that

within a post-feminist paradigm, the meaning of choice is inverted such that even a woman's decision to reclaim her traditional gender roles is coded as a feminist expression of agency.

These discourses, they argue, 'tend to ignore the material barriers to economic advancement that many women, including single mothers, face', making 'the application of choice in post-feminist discourse bifurcates work and family as an either/or option in which women may choose one or the other, but are destined to fail if they attempt both' (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010: 361-362). In post-feminist media that encourages women to consider both children and work, unplanned pregnancy is reframed as women's liberation (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010: 362), as shown in *Pretty Little Liars*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *Riverdale*.

## ABORTION PLOTS IN *PRETTY LITTLE LIARS*, *JANE THE VIRGIN*, *RIVERDALE* AND *THE FOSTERS*

The sample plotlines under analysis were restricted to four television series with abortion storylines that aired in the United States on *The CW* and *Freeform* networks in 2016 and 2017. Geraghty (1981: 10) differentiates between the continuous serial and the series, stating that the series deals with 'a particular story within a discrete episode', has a set number of episodes and "disappears" for several months each year. All the shows selected for discussion in this study are categorized as series, based on Geraghty's definition. *Jane the Virgin* (*The CW*), *Riverdale* (*The CW*), *The Fosters* (*Freeform*), and *Pretty Little Liars* (*Freeform*) are relevant to this project as all shows are popular with females in the 12-18, 18-24, and/or 18-49 age ranges. All four shows feature teenage characters still in high school (*Pretty Little Liars* seasons 1-6.5, *Riverdale*, and *The Fosters*) or young adult women in their early to mid-20s (*Jane the Virgin* all seasons, and *Pretty Little Liars* seasons 6.5 and 7). All shows are part of the 'teen drama' genre that became popular in the 1990s and have become favoured on network and cable television programming in recent years (Kelly, 2010). *The WB* (currently *The CW*) according to Wee (2010: 146), was characterized as a 'teen' network (12-34 year olds) and regularly featured teen characters negotiating coming-of-age rites of passage with 'intelligence, sensitivity, and knowing sarcasm'. *Freeform* (formerly *ABC Family*) is a subsidiary of Walt Disney Television that focuses on programming that appeals to adults between the ages of 14 and 34 (Steinberg, 2014) and includes shows such as *Greek* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. In this study, teen drama was defined as hour-long, prime time television programs where most of the storylines feature teenage or young adult characters and whose viewing audience is overwhelming adolescent and young adults (Kelly, 2010). To be eligible for this study, shows had to meet the following criteria: (a) The shows were hour-long dramas aired during primetime, (b) most of the characters are teens (ages 13-19) or young adults (early to mid-20s) and (c) at least one unplanned pregnancy storyline takes place over many episodes. Storyline was defined as a series of related events that unfold over many episodes. Storylines addressing abortion portrayed a main or recurring character considering abortion, having an abortion, or being pressured into having an abortion by a family member or partner.

Season one of *Riverdale* (2017), which was loosely based on the popular *Archie* comics which started in the early 1940s, averaged 1 million viewers while season two more than doubled this number with 2.33 million total viewers. In addition to leaping 140% with women under age 35 and increasing by 476% with teens, *Riverdale* was the network's highest rated telecast in the teen demographic in five years (Adalian, 2017; Andreeva, 2017; Mitovich, 2017). This mystery series follows a group of four friends led by musician/athlete Archie Andrews as they navigate

their high school landscape while investigating the recent disappearance of a classmate, Jason Blossom. Part of season one's mystery involves Betty's older sister Polly (also a high school student), a recurring character, and her secret relationship and subsequent pregnancy with her recently murdered boyfriend, Jason Blossom. Polly is sent away to a convent to hide her pregnancy and her parents pressure her to give her twin babies up for adoption. In *Riverdale*, the controversy surrounding Polly's unplanned pregnancy takes place in episodes 6 through 8 in season 1.

*Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017) maintained a steady viewership of over 2.5 million viewers over seven seasons and stands as the second most watched show on *Freeform* (formerly *ABC Family*), garnering 1.2 million female viewers aged 12-34 (Baron, 2015). In addition to the impressive viewership *Pretty Little Liars* has maintained, the show's actresses are extremely popular on Instagram: Ashley Benson, who portrays Hanna Marin, has over 19 million followers, while Lucy Hale, who plays the role of Aria Montgomery, has over 22 million fans. The television series, based on Sara Shepard's young adult mystery book series of the same name, follows the lives of four high school friends who are stalked by an anonymous character named 'A', who appears shortly after queen bee leader and resident mean girl Alison DiLaurentis disappears. In the seventh and final season, Alison, now in her early 20s, discovers she has been raped and forcibly inseminated while in a mental hospital. Several episodes are dedicated to her decision-making process, where she ultimately decides to parent instead of abort. Episodes 10-15 in season 7 of *Pretty Little Liars* were analysed for this essay.

*The Fosters* (2013-2018) is a drama series known for its progressive storylines that include a bi-racial, lesbian couple raising a houseful of foster and biological children of varying sexualities and racial identities. The show premiered on *ABC Family* (now *Freeform*) in 2013 and regularly addresses issues such as racism, homophobia, and sexual health. The show averaged 1.68 million viewers in the first season, winning a *Teen Choice* award for breakout TV show in 2013 and two *GLAAD* media awards in 2014 (IMDb.com). The 2017 winter premier ranked as the network's number one telecast for females ages 12-34 (Multichannel News 2017). Emma, a 16-year-old high school student and recurring character on the show, has an abortion in season four. Her abortion plotline in *The Fosters* and the aftermath of her choice spans several episodes and two seasons: season 4, episodes 14-20 and season 5, episodes 1 and 4, by far the most screen time in this sample spent discussing abortion.

Lastly, *Jane the Virgin*, a comedy-drama based loosely on the Venezuelan telenovela *Juana la Virgen*, is one of the few shows on television featuring a predominately female, working class, Latina cast, with one character who rarely speaks English and is an undocumented immigrant. The show is set in Miami, Florida and often uses tropes and devices found in Latin telenovelas such as the love triangle, the lost sibling, and the evil mother/stepmother as part of its plotlines. In the series' pilot, the eponymous mid-20-year-old Jane, who identifies as a virgin (e.g., has not experienced penis/vagina penetration) is accidentally artificially inseminated during a routine pap smear when she falls asleep on the exam table while waiting for her gynaecologist. The series revolves around Jane negotiating a very unplanned pregnancy while trying to meet her career goals and maintain a romantic relationship. Additionally, Jane's mother Xiomara has an abortion in season three, making *Jane the Virgin* the only show in this study to feature both abortion and parenting plots. *Jane the Virgin* (2014-2019) has a similar viewership as *The Fosters* (1.6 million viewers in the key 18-49-year-old demographic) and has been nominated for an abundance of awards: including a Golden Globe win for actress Gina Rodriguez as the title character Jane (Hamedy 2014; IMDb.com). In *Jane the Virgin*, season 1, episode 1; season 2, episode 22; and season 3, episode 2 were viewed and analysed.

Four themes emerged from this narrative study: the word abortion is rarely used; pregnancy is portrayed as punishment; friends, lovers, and family support parenting and shame abortion; and the 'good' mothers choose parenting.

### **The Word 'Abortion' is Rarely Used**

The word 'abortion' is rarely used when the characters in the shows analysed for this study face unplanned pregnancies. Phrases such as 'fix her mistake', 'appointment with a doctor', 'options', and 'make a decision' are substituted instead. *Pretty Little Liars* describes the medical abortion procedure in season 7 by Alison, a young woman in her early 20s. Alison tells her best friend (and later fiancée) Emily that she has made an appointment to terminate her pregnancy to 'gain control of her life' after several traumatic incidents with her now ex-husband. When Emily inquires about her appointment, Alison states that she will take the 'first pill at the clinic this weekend and the next one at home a few days later', describing a medical abortion without using the term 'abortion'. In an act of support and solidarity, Emily offers to drive Alison to the clinic, reassuring her friend that she doesn't have to explain why she is terminating her pregnancy. When using the term 'terminate the pregnancy', Alison encourages a more forthright discussion of abortion—however, 'abortion' is not used, thereby contributing to the stigmatizing silence around this word (Shaw, 2016).

When Jane in *Jane the Virgin*, a woman in her early 20s, discovers she has been accidentally inseminated during a routine pap smear, she discusses her options with her family and boyfriend, and the phrases used include 'you don't have to have a baby', 'end the pregnancy', and 'having a choice'. Jane's grandmother Alba, a devout Catholic, uses the term 'abortion' when telling her granddaughter that she encouraged Jane's mother to have an abortion

when she became pregnant at age 16 and expresses the regret that she has carried from the encounter many years later. Jane is surprised to learn that her grandmother pushed her mother to have an abortion given her religious convictions. Furthermore, Jane believes that her mother Xiomara had her as a teenager because Alba ‘made her’ and Xiomara has never corrected this inaccuracy, likely to protect the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter. In reality, Xiomara never wanted to have an abortion and is ‘glad’ she had Jane. Alba’s admission that she encouraged her daughter to have an abortion allows Jane to more clearly understand her grandmother’s insistence that she parent and speaks to the ambiguous and complex relationship some people of faith have with abortion. This confession adds to a more nuanced, progressive discussion of how abortion is navigated for the characters in the series and provides a diverse set of abortion ideology. Alba tells Jane that she has been the ‘best part of [her] life’ and is grateful that her daughter did not follow her request to abort. Alba assures Jane that this baby will become the best part of her life, furthering Jane’s indecision. It is important to note that Jane does not use the word abortion when referring to her pregnancy. Jane’s decision to parent communicates deeper ideas about her character, including her piety, purity, and maturity (Sisson, 2017), that closely align with her Catholic convictions. *Jane the Virgin* is the only series in this study that openly discusses the complicated relationship between religion and abortion, adding an additional layer of complexity to how abortion narratives are shown on television.

In *Riverdale*, high school cheerleader Polly reveals that her father “made an appointment with a doctor” so that she would not have to ‘live with her mistake’, when facing an unplanned pregnancy. Thus, in *Riverdale*, *Jane the Virgin* and *Pretty Little Liars*, young women don’t have an ‘abortion’ when facing an unplanned pregnancy: rather they contemplate ‘terminating a pregnancy’ or ‘make an appointment with a doctor’, so that they don’t have to ‘live with their mistake’, before ultimately choosing to parent, regardless of circumstance. Silence as furthering stigma is an attitude held by some who work in the reproductive rights industry who believe that using the word ‘abortion’ is critical in de-stigmatizing this procedure<sup>2</sup>.

*The Fosters* and *Jane the Virgin* feature characters with ‘pro-abortion stories’ who choose abortion over parenting (Condit, 1990), challenging the trend of anti-abortion narratives seen in *Riverdale*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *Pretty Little Liars*. While both shows are challenging existing norms of what is commonly seen on television regarding abortion themes, ethnicity, and family systems, the way abortion is presented in each show indicates only a subtle improvement over *Riverdale*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *Jane the Virgin*.

When high school student Emma, a recurring character on *The Fosters*, becomes pregnant, she chooses abortion. She is the only white character in this cadre of shows that chooses to abort, indicating that white parenting is favoured in shows with this viewing demographic. Emma’s narrative of choice is

the generic subject of liberal feminism: the white, middle-class and...conventionally feminine citizen whose ‘key value in this discourse is the right of the individual to choose (Baird and Millar, 2019: 1119).

Interestingly, the word ‘abortion’ is not used until several episodes after the procedure. Phrases such as ‘doing this’ and ‘I support your right to make your own decision’ are substituted. This treatment is again stigmatising the word ‘abortion’ by substituting a less controversial euphemism. In *The Fosters*, Emma is not a main character—appearing in approximately 52 episodes as opposed to other characters that appear twice as frequently, and is the sometimes girlfriend of a main character, Jesus. Similarly, in *Jane the Virgin*, Xiomara is a prominent character on the show, but is not the title character. She is a mother in her 40s who has already fulfilled her reproductive role as Jane’s mother, and is not interested in raising another child. In *Jane the Virgin* the term ‘abortion’ is not used until several episodes (and a new season) later when Xiomara discloses her own abortion to her daughter Jane and son-in-law. Both examples reinforce the trend that main characters in television shows with this specific demographic are less likely to have an abortion, while supporting or recurring characters do. This trend complicates Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport’s (2016: 447) findings that most onscreen abortions (60%) were not obtained by ‘peripheral or single-episode characters’, but rather main characters, making abortion the ‘most frequent pregnancy outcome’. Out of the five characters that consider abortion on the four shows analysed, only two have an abortion (40%) and neither are main or title characters, indicating a significant shift in pregnancy outcomes for shows in this genre. This finding also suggests that television shows that have large adolescent and young adult audiences are more likely to show parenting as a favourable alternative to abortion, whereas abortion is an option only taken by supporting characters whose stories may not be as central to the series as those of title characters.

Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport (2016: 450) call for an exploration of ‘the creative processes behind abortion plotlines’ as well as an interrogation of structural forces that may impact the way abortion is portrayed in television. Another possibility for main characters choosing parenting over abortion for this viewer demographic could be writers’ fears of alienating their core audience should a main character choose to have an abortion (Sisson and Kimport, 2016). It is worth considering how adolescent and young adult viewers may react to a popular main

<sup>2</sup> See Maureen Shaw, *Language Matters: Why I don’t Fear Being Called ‘Pro-Abortion’* (2016), for a discussion of the importance of language in abortion discourse.

character having an abortion, which may be considered immoral and controversial to some, and the impact this may have on viewership figures and advertising income for the channel. Potential parental or religious outrage may also contribute to writers shying away from including abortion in their plots. Lastly, both shows use the term 'abortion' only a handful of times and not until well after the procedure has taken place, following the same trend as *Riverdale* and *Pretty Little Liars*, and leaving one blogger to ask, 'why won't anyone say abortion?' (Puchko, 2017).

### **Pregnancy as Punishment**

The trend of pregnancy as punishment plays out in various ways in all four shows. In *Pretty Little Liars* and *Riverdale*, pregnancy takes place as a result of complex, dramatic events that include forcible insemination and rape, stalking, and a forbidden relationship. In *Pretty Little Liars*, Alison's forced insemination and rape are one of the last results of an almost 10-year ordeal of being stalked, kidnapped, and tortured by anonymous 'A', starting when she went missing for several years while in high school. As the 'mean girl' of her small town, Alison was hated by many of her classmates for her relentless bullying and now she is subject to their revenge. In a bizarre example of pregnancy as punishment, Alison is forcibly impregnated with her best friend's fertilised eggs while being held against her will in a mental institution by her doctor/husband. It is only after Alison realises she is pregnant and completes a paternity test that she starts to have flashbacks of being drugged and surgically inseminated during her incarceration. Her initial decision to have an abortion is framed as a way for her to regain control over her life and body after this has been taken away. Alison's problematic pregnancy is an extreme example of reproductive coercion, rape, and a lack of bodily autonomy. Her assault goes largely unacknowledged in the storyline, further contributing to unclear ideas of consent, rape, and reproductive coercion—issues that many American women have experienced (Coker, 2007; Jackson et al., 2016; Joffe and Parker, 2012; Price, 2011; Roberts, 1998).

Polly in *Riverdale* is punished in several ways for her disregard of her parents' rules: she experiences an unplanned pregnancy that starts a chain of unfortunate events, including the murder of her boyfriend and her forced incarceration in a 'home for troubled youth'. Polly's parents pressure their daughter to give her much-wanted babies up for adoption after she refuses to have an abortion, implying that a teenage girl has little power over the trajectory of her life if she becomes pregnant and has disapproving parents. Polly is now a member of the 'bad girl tribe' [Club] of 'fallen women', for having sex outside of marriage and becoming pregnant (Cockrill and Nack, 2013: 975). This has led to her current predicament where she is seen as 'deserving stigma because of [her] own personal failings' (Cockrill and Nack, 2013: 975), and she must negotiate this shame on her own.

Jane's story complicates the trend of pregnancy as punishment for bad behaviour but does not disrupt it completely. As Jane is the daughter of a teenage mother, Jane's grandmother instilled the notion of virginity until marriage in her granddaughter, exemplifying Carpenter's (2005) metaphor of 'virginity as a gift' by using the example of a magnolia blossom being crushed in her hand. Jane has decided not to have sex with her long-term boyfriend until they are married, establishing her virginal status for viewers within the first few minutes of the pilot episode. When Jane becomes pregnant, she states that she has done 'everything right', yet she still ends up pregnant and unmarried, like her mother, who was 'irresponsible' when she got pregnant with Jane as a teenager. Furthermore, Jane's fiancé Michael asks her to have an abortion so that they don't have to start their life together raising 'some other guy's kid', insinuating that he may end their relationship if Jane chooses to remain pregnant. Jane must consider how remaining pregnant will impact her graduate studies, her job as a waitress and her goal of becoming a romance writer. Should she choose abortion, Jane will have to contend with her grandmother's disappointment and compromising her own religious beliefs. Jane is being punished as both options available to her are fraught with additional consequences, including the potential loss of a romantic relationship, the love, approval, and respect of her grandmother, and a dramatic altering of her carefully planned life and career goals. Jane is the only character in this study who comes from a working-class background and has to consider how being pregnant and eventually a mother will alter her precarious socio-economic status, challenging post-feminist ideas of equality (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010). For Jane (like many working-class women themselves), the stakes of this very unplanned pregnancy are especially high.

In a departure from *Pretty Little Liars*, *Riverdale* and Jane's story in *Jane the Virgin*, when Emma and Xiomara become pregnant, they choose abortion instead of parenting, thereby turning their backs on redemptive parenting, and confirming their membership in the 'tribe [Club] of fallen women' that Cockrill and Nack (2013) discuss. In *The Fosters*, Emma's pregnancy is a result of her on-again, off-again sexual relationship with Jesus, which resulted in her unplanned pregnancy after a birth control pill failure. Thus, *The Fosters* depicts a white teenage girl having an abortion instead of choosing adoption or parenting, challenging the dominant narrative in other television shows with large adolescent and young adult audiences that favour white teen and young adult parenting as seen in *Pretty Little Liars* and *Riverdale*. Emma states that she was not ready to be pregnant, have a baby and either parent or give the baby up for adoption and have her life goals derailed. Emma hides her abortion from Jesus, shouldering all the emotional and financial responsibility for her choice and does not consider his opinion in her decision-making process, which later contributes to their break-up. Emma has few people she can confide in, and her secrecy is an

example of felt or anticipated stigma (Cockrill and Nack, 2013), as she is concerned with the reactions of others and therefore, keeps her abortion confidential. When her abortion is revealed without her consent, Emma must contend with the high school rumour mill and Jesus' anger at not being included in her decision to have an abortion. The implication is that if a high school girl chooses abortion over parenting, she will be subjected to her friends' and lovers' feelings of betrayal and anger and they may abandon her, as illustrated in Emma's story.

Similarly, Xiomara in *Jane the Virgin* reveals at the end of season two that she became pregnant as a result of a one-time sexual encounter. In several instances, the unmarried Xiomara proclaims that she enjoys and desires sex which is in sharp contrast to her own mother who routinely states that sex is only acceptable within the confines of marriage. Throughout the series, Xiomara is adamant that she does not want more children and never wavers in this decision. Viewers find out later that Xiomara had a medical abortion, but she is not shown going through the procedure, which keeps abortion at a safe, antiseptic distance from viewers. Several bloggers applauded the show's writers for 'crafting the perfect abortion story line' where 'Xo has a chill abortion' and is not 'tortured' by her decision (Bradley, 2016; Dries, 2016), which is a new trend toward normalising depictions of abortion (Baird and Millar, 2019). While Xiomara's confidence in her decision to abort more closely reflects women's abortion experiences outside of television (Foster et. al., 2012), this scenario is not without fault. In season four of *Jane the Virgin*, Xiomara is diagnosed with breast cancer. While there is no direct connection made to Xiomara's breast cancer and her abortion in the previous season, anti-abortion organisations across the United States have attempted to mislead women into believing that the two are connected, despite many respected and established medical organisations disproving this assertion (American Cancer Society, 2014). Xiomara's breast cancer can be seen as another example of exaggerated abortion-related health risks that are commonplace in television shows featuring abortion plots that often include the death of the woman seeking an abortion in about 5% of shows, which is about 7,000 times the actual mortality rate (Sisson and Rowland, 2017).

For Emma and Xiomara, abortion can be one of several 'multiple transgressions' for women, including sex without the desire for procreation and an 'unwillingness' to parent (Cockrill and Nack, 2013: 975). Both are punished for their sexual activity, implying that it is promiscuous women that seek abortion care. Conversely, Jane, Polly and Alison 'take responsibility' by falling into the ultimate womanly act of mothering and can become members of the 'good girls/wives/mothers' tribe' [Club] that affords a higher status (Cockrill and Nack, 2013: 975) and 'both promote and reflect conservative family values that insist on women becoming mothers in order to live valuable or happy lives' (Oliver, 2012: 11). In sum, Emma and Xiomara's narrative arcs serve as cautionary tales to viewers about the dangers of having sex outside of a monogamous relationship.

### **Friends, Lovers, and Family Support Parenting and Shame Abortion**

Sceptical friends and family members eventually come to a place of support for the young mothers facing unplanned pregnancies, however, this support is more difficult to find when she chooses abortion. In *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily and Alison weigh the pros and cons of raising a child together for two episodes. Friends express their unwavering support in whatever the two decide to do, even though the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy are highly problematic. Similarly, in *Riverdale* family members eventually come together to support Polly in her decision to parent. Unsurprisingly, it is Polly's parents who exhibit the most shame about their young daughter becoming pregnant and they are the last ones to accept her. Jane's unique predicament leaves her open to many different opinions from those around her. In an example of felt or anticipated stigma that 'encompasses her assessment of others' abortion attitudes, as well as her expectations about how attitudes might result in actions' (Cockrill and Nack, 2013: 974), Jane does not tell her grandmother she is pregnant, knowing that she will be disappointed and encourage Jane to parent. Predictability, when Alba eventually discovers Jane's pregnancy, she encourages Jane to raise the baby noting that their 'faith is being tested' with this complicated state of affairs. Jane's boyfriend pushes for abortion, the sperm donor and his wife want to raise the child, and lastly, Jane's mother wants her daughter to know what options she has available to her. By the end of the first episode, Jane decides to remain pregnant and give the baby to the sperm donor and his wife. Despite these outlandish circumstances, Jane's decision has brought as much consensus as is possible to this situation and those around her vow to help in any way that they can. Jane, Polly, and Alison's decision to continue their pregnancies is an example of post-feminism's 'celebration of women's reproductive agency' (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010: 366) where these characters can maintain or recapture their moral virtue.

While Emma and Xiomara exhibit conviction in their decision to abort, both characters must contend with varying levels of self-interrogation, isolation, and negotiating how others feel or may feel about their decision. Abrams (2015) argues that abortion stigma is concealable and only becomes visible upon disclosure, leading to secretive behaviour as a common response to real or perceived stigma. In an example of self-interrogation and internalized abortion stigma, Emma wonders if her lack of guilt about choosing abortion makes her 'a cold-hearted bitch', demonstrating that she feels this absence of emotion surrounding her decision is troubling. For Emma, judgment comes from her best friend and sometimes boyfriend Jesus. She does not disclose her abortion to him

until several episodes later and this continues to cause tension in their relationship well into season five. Jesus expresses his anger and disappointment that Emma had an abortion without consulting him and did not consider adoption as a viable option. He then spends several episodes being simultaneously verbally aggressive and distant towards her. Additionally, Emma states that she cannot tell her parents about her pregnancy, and she chooses not to tell her best friend, Mariana, indicating an expectation of abortion stigma. When Mariana finds out about Emma's abortion, she is angered and hurt that her best friend did not confide in her. Mariana then tweets about Emma's abortion and while Marianna does not name Emma specifically, it was easy for other characters to figure out who had the abortion, showing that confidentiality surrounding this procedure is not ironclad. Emma must now contend with the gossip going around her high school as her classmates try to figure out who Mariana is referring to. At the end of the series, Emma and Jesus break up—likely for good—with Emma stating that they need time apart from each other, as they have been dating since they were 16 years old. While Emma does not cite her abortion as a contributing factor in their break-up, had she decided to parent instead of abort, there would be more incentive for them to work things out. Lastly, due to Emma's decision to abort without consulting Jesus, the implication is that when a partner is excluded in the decision-making process, she may be abandoned.

In *Jane the Virgin*, Xiomara's abortion story revolves around the reaction of her family. While Jane is supportive and non-judgmental of her mother's choice to have an abortion, Alba, Xiomara's deeply religious mother, reacts to the news by directing anger, shame, and disappointment at her daughter. To avoid her mother's disappointment, Xiomara attempts to keep her abortion private, designating a strong awareness of abortion stigma. Alba's Catholic belief that abortion is murder drives Xiomara's secrecy, findings consistent with Cockrill et al. (2013) where Catholic and Protestant women experienced higher levels of stigma than nonreligious women, had higher levels of self-judgement and a greater perception of community condemnation than less religious women. Predictably, Alba worries that her daughter will be punished for the sin of her abortion and makes several comments about Xiomara 'booking a ticket' [to hell] for her abortion. It is only after several days of shouting, isolation, and exclusion that Xiomara and Alba can make a fragile peace. Alba never states that she accepts her daughter's decision to have an abortion, deciding instead to 'move past' her feelings of disappointment in her daughter, acknowledging that they are different people with different values.

Xiomara and Emma must negotiate the balancing act of enacted and felt abortion stigma, all while contending with their own internalised abortion stigma, which at times, is problematised by a lack of guilt. The complexities of these storylines may mirror the experience of women seeking abortion care; however, they convey that there are negative consequences for women who choose abortion over parenting, thereby endorsing 'conservative' sexual behaviour (Rogers, 1992: 83) and anti-abortion narratives that 'people have abortions in isolation from those they love' (ANSIRH, 2018). In sum, the shows in this analysis suggest that it is better to support a loved one through an abortion experience than to have an abortion oneself.

### **The 'Good' Mothers Choose Parenting**

Polly, Jane, and Alison chose not to terminate their pregnancies and with this decision, they 'naturalize a particular relationship to pregnancy in which carrying a fetus to term is the assumed choice' (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010: 376). In these scenarios:

motherhood is not a choice that a pregnant woman makes; rather women may become mothers at the moment a child is conceived' (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010: 374).

Their decision to parent is not due to a lack of medical care or a lack of funds to pay for an abortion: they simply decide that parenting is the best option for them. Additionally, Jane's religious beliefs strongly influence her decision to parent and by the end of the pilot episode, Jane has made her decision to continue the pregnancy. In *Pretty Little Liars*, Emily and Alison work through this situation in several emotional conversations about their options, with Emily saying she would be filled with regret to miss a chance to parent her children. They decide that together as a family they will raise the twin girls Alison is carrying. Alison proposes to Emily and at the end of the series, and the two are a married same-sex, biracial couple raising twin girls, albeit through highly unusual means. Both endings illustrate that unplanned pregnancy, rape, forced or accidental insemination and abortion rejection will lead to a lasting, loving partnership for some women.

In *Riverdale*, Polly, like her mother, decides not to have an abortion. Alice reveals that while in high school, she became pregnant and gave her baby up for adoption, a decision that she still deeply regrets two decades later. With this admission, we see that Alice will help to ensure Polly's babies have a safe, happy home. Similarly, Jane's mother, grandmother, mother, fiancé and the baby's father decide that they will all work together to raise the baby that Jane is carrying, stating that she will have all of the emotional and financial support she could want. Polly and Alison exemplify the 'class biases of postfeminism' by illustrating the 'dominance of whiteness in postfeminist discourse' when deciding to parent with little discussion of the emotional and financial difficulties they will likely



face (Projansky, 2001: 78-79). Jane, as the only non-white, working class character in this cadre of shows, does not have this luxury.

All three storylines romanticise unplanned pregnancy as a blessing in disguise—an event that can unite families, bring together loved ones and in some cases, help a character find love. Reproductive coercion, sexual assault, and unintended pregnancy are transformed into romance and a happy ending for entertainment purposes, glossing over issues of bodily autonomy and agency, and failing to address the issues that single mothers may encounter. Additionally, these abortion-rejecting storylines reinforce a

repronormative arc in which characters' fertility and pregnancy decision-making are used to communicate deeper ideas about who those characters are' (Sisson, 2017: 16).

For Polly, Jane and Alison, the decision to parent could be viewed as redemptive, where we see a woman reclaiming her 'rightful' understanding of femininity by participating in the ultimate womanly act of mothering, enacting her 'innate desire to be a mother' (Cockrill and Nack, 2013: 975; Kumar et al., 2009), embracing motherhood as 'the single most important thing in a woman's life' (Rogers, 1992: 82), and 'ultimately restore[ing] the myth of motherhood' (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010: 375) despite the circumstances each woman is facing. While the parenting storylines of Alison, Polly and Jane are 'refiguring discourses of post-feminism to incorporate changing family structures' (Hoerl and Kelly 2010: 362) in a departure from the white, middle-class, heterosexual family model, these storylines still deeply rely on what Hoerl and Kelly (2010: 362) call a 'neo-traditional model of motherhood' that reinforce social scripts about womanness and maternity. The good mother, as seen in Jane, Alison and Polly, 'embraces her maternal role, accepting the social link between conception, gestation, and maternal bonds' (Abrams, 2015: 180). She is, Abrams argues, 'self-sacrificing, putting the demands of her maternal role before other personal choices' (2015: 180).

The 'happy ending' trope that is often portrayed in storylines such as these could also be seen as a reward for choosing to parent after considering abortion. Alison can move past her 'mean girl' image and is now a wife to Emily and mother to their twin babies. She has matured and found meaning in her life, leaving the torment she both experienced and inflicted behind her. Polly makes an adult decision by defying her parents to keep her babies and raise them, knowing she will be a single parent. She is challenging the authoritarian parenting rule in her house by not allowing her father to pressure her into having an abortion and epitomises the protective mother-to-be archetype that anti-choice organisations favour; the woman that protects life and rejects murder (Condit, 1990), regardless of circumstance. Jane allows her religious beliefs to guide her decision-making process, ultimately deciding that abortion is not a feasible option, making one anti-choice blogger applaud Jane's selfless decision to shift 'her life goals and timelines to make room for the new little one...in the face of this life shattering event' (Olmstead, 2016). While Jane's pregnancy was completely unwanted and unplanned, she decides that she can make the most of her situation, vowing not to let this pregnancy ruin her life, thereby adhering to the anti-choice doctrine that abortion is an unfavourable option (Condit, 1990) and morally wrong (Hoerl and Kelly, 2010).

Narrative symbolism of the 'good' versus 'bad' mother is evident in the abortion and pregnancy narratives of Jane, Polly, Alison, Emma and Xiomara. Abrams (2015: 180) posits that 'social perceptions of maternity are shaped in part by pronatalist values, which are foundational to social organization and religion' and the 'social value placed on fertility is pervasive across gender, age, race, religion, and class distinctions' are 'exceedingly resistant to change'. Popular culture frames the woman who seeks abortion as the 'bad mother,' demonising her for delaying or rejecting 'childbearing for personal or professional reasons' and 'rejecting the inevitability of maternal bonds' (Abrams, 2015: 180). She rejects this maternal role, abandons her child and 'puts personal concerns before motherhood' (Abrams, 2015: 180). The 'bad mother' stigma is constructed through a multifaceted framework of messages and experiences that include the beliefs of the individual and her interactions with friends, family, the community and society (Abrams 2015: 181). It labels women who seek abortion as 'promiscuous, sinful, selfish, dirty, irresponsible, heartless or murderous' (181). Abortion, Abrams (2015: 184) argues,

is more acceptable to many when the woman is perceived as a victim of circumstances beyond her control, whether the acts of another or medical happenstance.

Neither Xiomara nor Emma falls into this category, therefore, their choice to abort is positioned as especially selfish. For some, the decision to terminate a pregnancy may be perceived as the "ultimate abandonment of the life in being, a rejection of maternity and of the 'essential nature' of woman" (Abrams 2015: 183).

Xiomara and Emma face additional hardships from their choice that put abortion in a negative light. Emma remains single at the conclusion of *The Fosters* series and Xiomara is 'rewarded' in the narrative logic with breast cancer and suffers through several rounds of chemotherapy shortly after her abortion, indicating that there are life altering consequences for women who have abortions. Xiomara and Emma's abortion narratives are continuing to stigmatize women who have abortions as rejecting essentialist ideas of womanhood, 'marking them, internally

or externally, as inferior to ideas of womanhood' (Cockrill and Nack, 2013; Kumar et al., 2009;), and reinforcing the fear of isolation women who speak about their abortion experiences may face.

## CONCLUSION

Abrams (2015: 181) posits that 'when reproductive decisions are stigmatized, both the women who make these decisions and the procedures become marginalized', as evidenced by the unplanned pregnancy and abortion stories in *The Fosters*, *Jane the Virgin*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *Riverdale*. This study both simultaneously supports and complicates current research focused on abortion narratives in television shows. Xiomara's abortion in *Jane the Virgin* challenges current abortion television trends in several ways. She is Latina, in her 40s, working class, and has an adult daughter—which more accurately depicts real life abortion statistics where in 2014, 59% of women who sought abortion already had a child, 75% were low income, and 25% were Hispanic (Guttmacher, 2017). Xiomara's story complicates some of Sisson and Kimport's (2016: 446) findings regarding character demographics where most women who obtained abortions were disproportionately white, young, wealthy, and not already parenting. Furthermore, the word 'abortion' is used several times in the series when addressing Xiomara's abortion, helping to dispel the stigmatising silence surrounding the use of the term and assisting to 'normalize ordinary abortion experiences' (Ludlow, 2008: 32). Additionally, *Jane the Virgin* is in the comedy-drama genre, and it is only in recent years that abortion plots have appeared in this genre of show, particularly where an abortion eventually takes place (Sisson, 2017). Show creator Jennie Snyder-Urman stated that Xo's abortion was necessary for 'representation and balance...and also for realism!' on a show that has not shied away from current political issues (Bennett, 2016). Xo's abortion, according to Snyder-Urman, provides a

different type of abortion story on TV...one that didn't show the woman tortured and guilt-ridden. While that certainly does happen, it is not the only response, nor is it the only story that should be told (Bennett, 2016: n. p.).

Emma challenges the trend of adolescent and young white women choosing to parent as seen in *Pretty Little Liars* and *Riverdale* when she makes her decision to have an abortion based on her own needs and uses the term 'abortion' in later episodes. Emma's plot follows a common trend found in abortion television narratives that cite a disruption of education or vocational goals as the primary reason for abortion (Sisson and Kimport 2016). This trend is in opposition to findings that 'only about 20% of real women cite this reason as part of their decision' (Sisson and Kimport, 2016: 448), which may further stigmatise women who have abortions as 'selfish'. Both Xiomara and Emma continue to defy and attempt to reject ideas of internalized abortion stigma when they refuse to regret their decision to abort, standing resolute when they are criticised by family and lovers.

The importance of how accurately abortion is depicted in both *The Fosters* and *Jane the Virgin* should not go unacknowledged for writers' attempt to normalise and destigmatise common abortion experiences. Emma and Xiomara's abortion plots are an attempt at what Baird and Millar (2019: 1120) call an

'unapologetic abortion narrative' that provides a release from an involuntary and unwelcome condition, thus producing an overwhelmingly positive experience.

However, these narratives are not without fault and should not be considered ideal models for how abortion should be constructed in television shows, despite the many positive aspects of their stories. Emma and Xiomara become pregnant when they have sex outside of the confines of a defined relationship: their pregnancies and subsequent abortions may be seen as a form of punishment for being unattached women who desire sex and act on these desires. Xiomara is later diagnosed with breast cancer and spends much of season five recovering from her treatments which could be inferred as a result of her abortion, reinforcing the notion that characters who have abortions face additional health concerns. Such exaggerations can lead viewers to believe that abortion is more dangerous than it actually is, thereby contributing to populist misinformation about this form of healthcare. At the conclusion of *The Fosters*, Emma is left without a partner indicating that abortion makes women unable to find a lasting romantic relationship.

As abortion is more stigmatised than forms of healthcare, Sisson and Rowland (2017: 26) posit that 'individuals might be even more reliant on media portrayals in shaping their belief about abortion', therefore, depictions of shame and abortion-related health concerns on television should be avoided. Additionally, 'fictional portrayals of abortion impact viewers' beliefs and political opinions', whereby teen, young adult and single parenting may be seen as desirable, feasible and even romantic for viewers, while abortion continues to be stigmatised (Sisson and Kimport, 2016: 446). When Jane, Polly, and Alison decide to parent instead of seeking abortion, they are quietly admonishing this form of healthcare that 1 in 3 to 1 in 4 women in the U.S. experience (Kost et al., 2017).

Issues of financial stability, education and career goals are rarely addressed for the three characters that choose to parent. This follows the trends critiqued by Hoerl and Kelly (2010: 370) where in order to choose parenting over abortion

the main female characters' decisions to continue their pregnancies either ignore or background material conditions and other structural constraints outside of the individual woman's control.

Hoerl and Kelly summarise Sarah Projansky (2001) who argues that post-feminist discourses about choice ignore socioeconomic realities that favour white middle class parenting. Low-class women, Projansky (2001) states, cannot make the choice between work and family as easily as a middle-class white woman who may have the support of a working husband or partner, as shown in the case of Jane in *Jane the Virgin* (cited in Hoerl and Kelly 2010: 362). Jane is the only character that spends quite a bit of time worrying about how she will be able to afford a child. For Alison and Polly, the economic realities of parenting are not addressed thereby retaining the 'emphasis on white, middle-class women as empathetic—if not virtuous—models of contemporary parenting' (Projansky, 2001: 362). While a wholly supportive and accepting abortion storyline featuring teenage and young adult women may not be possible, writing an abortion story that is absent of shame, silence, isolation, and judgement would be a good place to start. Baird and Mallard posit that normalising and even celebrating abortion stories 'reorients the epistemology of abortion away from a preoccupation with themes such as stigma and 'awfulisation'', further stating that 'academic focus on positive representations of abortion may, help amplify their normative effects' and assist to 'establish particular norms for thinking about abortion and the women who have abortions' (Baird and Mallard, 2019: 1118). TV show writers may be unaware that they are reinforcing the abortion stigmas that women experience in real life experience (see Cockrill and Nack (2013), Cowan (2017), and Herek (2009)). Each fictional character's experience is riddled with variations of internalised, felt or anticipated, and enacted abortion stigma that play out in a myriad of ways, most commonly portraying characters who choose to abort facing enacted stigma in the form of abandonment, silence, isolation, fear, and shame by loved ones. For viewers who may have already sought abortion care or who will in the future, the concept of an abortion experience that is not fraught with guilt, isolation, fear, shame, and secrecy may not be within their realm of possibility. Abortion affirming narratives may serve to combat both stigma and misinformation (Baird and Millar, 2019) and writing abortion experiences that are brimming with support from family and friends may be a way to challenge these existing stigmas. Additionally, no longer connecting pregnancy and abortion as punishment for sex outside of marriage or for 'bad' behaviour may help to dispel deeply imbedded abortion stigma and stereotypes that only promiscuous women and girls seek abortion care. Furthermore, decreasing the exaggerated health risks associated for characters that have abortions is necessary to showcase more accurate abortion experiences. Lastly, using the word 'abortion' in these shows may help to de-stigmatise and normalise this common form of healthcare for adolescent and young adult viewers.

If television shows with large adolescent and young adult female audiences continue to address abortion, further research in this area should be conducted using a larger media sample. Additionally, as television shows with large adolescent and young adult viewers featuring women and girls of colour are becoming more common, it will be important to examine how abortion, race, and reproductive coercion are addressed for girls of colour whose history and access to reproductive justice is historically complex.

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**Citation:** Crookston, S. (2022). 'Fix Her Mistake': Abortion and Parenting Narratives in *Jane the Virgin, Riverdale, Pretty Little Liars, and The Fosters*. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 6(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/11758>

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