

A Cardboard Baby and a Long-Stem Rose: Consumeristic Postfeminism in the  
Relationships of  
Women as Represented in Sex and the City

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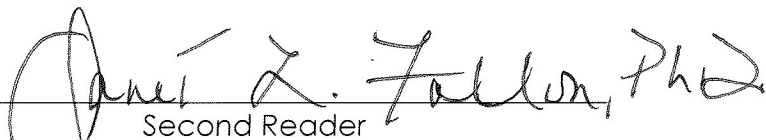


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A Cardboard Baby and a Long-Stem Rose: Consumeristic Postfeminism in the Relationships of

Women as Represented in *Sex and the City*

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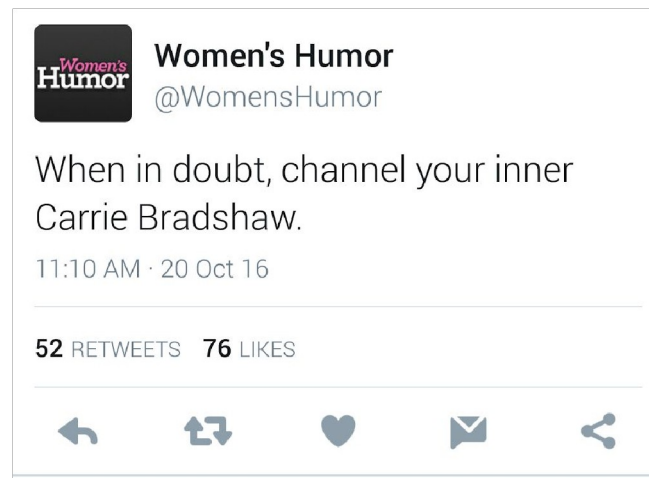
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## Introduction



Television has a unique place in our lives – our homes. Since its infancy the medium has had its place in bars, shop windows, and other businesses; however, since the 1950s, it quickly became a fixture in the American home and a regular part of American life. With the television set came programming; both literally and figuratively, the characters enter the lives of their audience in what is, according to researchers Rowan Howard-Williams and Elihu Katz, a more intimate way than any preceding medium (9-11). This intimacy - this relationship between the viewer and the characters - makes it all the more important to study its messages, and the audiences receiving them.

One program which functions as an effective example of this nuanced relationship is the HBO hit *Sex and the City* which aired from 1998 to 2004. This successful television program features four single, working women who have come to be some of the most prevalent characters in modern popular culture. On the outside, this appears to indicate a progression of - or, some might argue, progression from - feminism into postfeminism; it is an example of a rise in

popularity of a program dedicated to showcasing the lives of four very different women, each of whom supports herself financially and seems to make her own decisions about her life and relationships. However, a deeper analysis reveals the shallow nature of these observations, and a consumeristic, flawed postfeminism instead becomes the dominant ideology of the program - particularly in the women's search for happiness in their heterosexual relationships. The popularity of the program in pop culture, and especially the heralding of the lead character Carrie Bradshaw, is an indication of the attractiveness of consumeristic postfeminism to the program's target audience.

### **Methodology**

As a multi-season program that was broadcast on HBO almost two decades prior to this research, *Sex and the City* must be analyzed today in a unique way compared to analysis by audience members at the time of airing. Thankfully, with the invention of online streaming services, the full series is at the time of this research available on Amazon Video so that the series can be streamed online for the modern viewer.

For the purposes of this study, the entirety of the *Sex and the City* television series is used to inform analysis. However, in order to make specific claims and use meaningful examples, a few episodes in particular are referenced, and one in particular ("The Good Fight") is purposefully analyzed in depth and used for the majority of the analysis of the research. The episode in question was determined to be a standard episode after having considered the entirety of the series, and is used to be representative of the series. However, as with most large works, a single segment of that work cannot be used as a perfect representation of the whole work; the

complexities of the plots and the multi-year timeline of the program are just some of the factors which may lead “The Good Fight” to represent the ideology of *Sex and the City* in a different way than a given episode in the first season, which aired a few years prior and featured a slightly different format and writing style. However, critical analysis of the series as a whole has led to an understanding that the analysis included in this research fairly represents a holistic view of the series and is not applicable only to “The Good Fight” on its own.

### **The Culture Industry and Its Effect on Media**

Television is a major component in what Marxist theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno term the “culture industry” (1242). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, people are consumers of culture - these shared elements of society are shared because they satisfy some widespread need demonstrated by the public (1242). Speaking broadly, the culture industry is so fundamental to society that the average person hardly notices it, and it gets its power through control of mass media (1242) so the culture industry is made up in part of the producers of television programs as well as any entity that leaves an impression on those producers. Even the most fundamental assumptions that one makes are influenced by the culture industry, and much of what one learns about the world is shaped by it.

Further, there are a small number of producers in the industry because mass communication occurs through and is controlled by those select few agents with the means and influence to do so, which leads to messages that are “all alike in the end” (1242-1243). This leads to an ideology of mass communication, as the messages reflect the ideas of the producers and so these ideas are widely disseminated to the consumers. These many messages from the

same few sources provide a *seemingly* wide variety of options in the media for consumers to choose from, yet the identical nature of the messages means that there is only an illusion of choice for those consuming mass media.

Louis Althusser claims that ideology is an illusion that nonetheless shapes reality through its “material existence” (693, 695). This illusory nature of the messages bearing the ideology of their producers comes from the singular perspective with which they are encoded. Stuart Hall suggests that there is a difference between what the producer – here, those involved in the production of a given television program – intends and what the receiver – here, the television audience – interprets (166). What the producer does is referred to as “encoding” while the audience is involved in the “decoding” of these messages. The intentions of the producers behind the encoding and the interpretations of the audience resulting from decoding may not match up, because of the established ideological differences between the producers and the receivers (166). Ideological differences may exist because of other, more visible differences between the two parties – location, gender, sexual orientation, family style, workplace, etc. This leads the illusory codes in a particular program, meaning the different elements that physically or ideologically make up the content and messages of the program, to mean different things to different consumers. Despite this struggle between intention and interpretation, the encoding process does affect the decoding process in that it provides a framework for the decoding to take place; if this were not true, then “audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message” (170-171).

In television, specific codes are what relay these messages and function as the material means by which ideology is transferred from the producer to the consumer. Media theorist John

Fiske outlines three distinct levels of codes that function in television. Social codes, such as dress and speech, make up the first level based on “reality.” Technical codes, such as camera angles and lighting, and conventional representation codes, such as conflict and dialogue, make up the second level based on “representation.” Ideological codes, such as patriarchy and consumerism, make up the third level based on “ideology” (1276). Fiske notes that these small, seemingly-insignificant and superficial codes contribute as a whole to the acceptance of an ideology (1282). The different levels of analysis presented in this variety of studies – from culture as a whole, to communication, to the television medium and its specific codes – provide a theoretical lens for the analysis of consumerist and postfeminist ideologies present in the attitudes of characters in *Sex and the City*.

### **Consumerism**

Consumerism is the attainment or use of something, usually a material object, with the belief that it will bring about a positive change in one’s life. According to researcher Peter Stromberg, consumerism tells its believer that there exists a “second world,” a better existence, which one can attain by observing those who seem to have already done so - celebrities and other happy people depicted in mass media (11-12). The people in advertisements, celebrities on red carpets, even characters in movies and television shows propagate the tenet of consumerism that there exists the possibility of human life filled with happiness, sexiness, beauty, etc., and this is because their respective medium more often than not portrays their lives as such. Celebrities are, to the average consumer, relatable people who seem to have accessed this higher plane of existence (16). Mass media are the channels of consumerism, “sustaining the belief that the



other world exists and is accessible” (14). This is because mass media lends itself well to the coding of messages necessary to convince the individual that there is more happiness available to them than what reality has revealed. It is familiar enough to relate to the audience, yet distant enough to successfully send the consumeristic message that a better existence is possible despite its actual unfeasability. Television lends itself particularly well to the cause of consumerism.

Upon its invention and implementation in the home, television brought a new level of intimacy to mass media. First, it was primarily consumed inside the home. This alone lends itself to a deeper relationship with the audience because the characters function almost like guests invited over for a chat after dinner, or a best friend over to entertain while doing household chores in the afternoon. Also like having guests over for a visit, the viewer develops a relationship with the characters through regularity. Most television programs air at a regularly scheduled time every week. Just as two neighboring families might grow in friendship through a regular Wednesday night dinner, so too do viewers grow in relationship with television characters by sitting down with them in the living room during their regularly scheduled showtime. Modern programs are no longer restricted to the regularly scheduled time slot as the rise of the internet has led to the rise of on-demand and streaming video services. These services allow the viewer to put the characters at their beck and call, while still developing a relationship with them through the intimacy of the act of watching the program. While radio was also frequently enjoyed inside the home and at a regularly scheduled time, the only channel of communication for radio is audio, while television is both audio and visual. Listening to the program provides an element of intimacy, as though one is listening in on another’s conversation. Adding visual communication take this intimacy to the next level, allowing the viewer to be a fly on the wall in

the lives of the characters, but without the guilt of intruding upon a real-life personal matter. Yet this intimacy is not truly intimacy, because it is completely one-sided; the television characters don't grow in intimacy with the viewer in return. In sum, television provides a perceived intimacy.

The perceived intimacy is a reason television is an effective channel of consumerism. The viewer develops a relationship with the characters on screen and temporarily enters the world occupied by the characters. A sense of realism may develop as the viewer becomes familiar with this virtual world; elements of that world develop a relatability applicable to reality, keeping the viewer interested. As the viewer learns more about the characters, s/he may begin to relate to them as well. Realism is what lends television its power, especially in the ideology of consumerism. If a viewer relates to a character and the world that character lives in, s/he may - actively or subconsciously - buy into the ideology behind the scene in question, where it shapes a corresponding event in reality. This means that if a character seems to look to one particular object, service, or ideal as the answer to her/his problems, then the viewer may adopt that mindset as well out of an attraction to the seemingly-realistic perfection of that character. If ideology is, as Althusser notes, transmitted through its "material existence" (693, 695) then consumerism is transmitted through the actions of the characters and the actions of the viewer-turned-consumer who has decoded and internalized the messages of consumerism through the program. A lifetime of television viewing, combined with other channels of consumerism, then leads to the development of expectations of reality based upon that which one sees in this other relatable, yet unachievable, world. This unachievable nature of consumerism is an important element; satisfaction is always just out of reach for the consumer, which is why the consumer

spends a lifetime striving for it, falling into the lures of the consumeristic messages in the media and perpetually told that this next thing will bring them closer to happiness.

### **(Post)Feminism**

Just as consumerism claims that consumers are unhappy until “this great thing” is attained and eventually they may also be able to find themselves in a constant state of joy, postfeminism claims that women are unhappy because, even with feminist movements of the 20th century, women haven’t been able to truly choose a life that brings them happiness and only the freedom to make that choice will liberate women. While feminism in the early- and mid-twentieth century in the United States was about ending institutional and societal discrimination against women, postfeminism turns its eye to the individual woman and her ability to choose her lifestyle without judgement. Jenny Coleman explains that the “post” in postfeminism implies that the movement is a sort of sequel to feminism – as opposed to being either antifeminism or still a part of feminism (7). In practice, postfeminism recognizes the work of feminists in the past and how society and women as a group are impacted – sometimes for better or worse – and considers how women as individuals have been affected by this progress. Critics of postfeminism argue that it is a movement based on consumerism and tells women they can “have it all,” using women’s empowerment as a marketing tool without the women participating even realizing that it’s further objectifying them (Adriaens and van Bauwel 176-177). Postfeminist supporters argue that postfeminism moves forward from feminism by recovering the choices for women that feminism supposedly lost, like choosing to be a housewife or participate in a glamorous and feminine lifestyle (177-178). Researchers Fien Adriaens and Sofie van Bauwel take a similar

view, suggesting that postfeminism is marked by a “reevaluation of the tension that seems to exist between feminism and femininity” and strives to remedy traditionally feminine roles and symbols with female power (178). Christine Scodari also comments on the feminist vs. postfeminist debate and, although hesitant to agree with critics of postfeminism such as Ruth Shalit, she does admit that “if the women of *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* are liberated, they are liberated in ways that tend to support, rather than challenge, patriarchal definitions of female sexuality” (247). For Scodari, these shows aren’t exempt from patriarchal production techniques such as the “male gaze” (247).

The women depicted in postfeminist media seek to reconcile their feminist desire to have careers and utilize the freedoms gained by the feminists before them, and their feminine desire to have a lasting heterosexual relationship and the experience of motherhood and family; as Stephanie Genz puts it, the postfeminist woman’s challenge is “not to choose between feminism and femininity, job and relationship, but it is associated with her determination to ‘have it all’” (113-114).

Elizabeth Kaufer Busch notes that a single woman in the postfeminist era must reconcile her call to be satisfied with herself and the successes available in life sans-men with her still-present, seemingly-unfeminist fear of loneliness (94). This conflict is used as a major plot element within programs such as *Sex and the City* which target the very women believed to be caught in this struggle – single, financially-independent twenty- or thirty-somethings, living out their feminist mother’s challenges in their youth to be ambitious and independent, and yet pressured, by those same mothers many years later as well as the messages of happiness from the media and by their own desires, to find the “true love” that may or may not even exist.

### ***Sex and the City***

*Sex and the City* aired on HBO from 1998 to 2004. Set in New York City, the program has four lead characters, all single working women. The show contains narration by Carrie Bradshaw, played by Sarah Jessica Parker, and each episode is the subject of her weekly newspaper column. The other three lead characters are her friends – public relations businesswoman Samantha Jones, played by Kim Cattrall; art dealer Charlotte York, played by Kristin Davis; and lawyer Amanda Hobbes, played by Cynthia Nixon. The program generally focuses on these women's romantic and sexual relationships as well as their friendships with each other. Particularly noteworthy are their attitudes toward committed relationships. While all four of the main characters seek out relationships with men in some form, a variety of attitudes exist - running from Samantha's absolute disinterest in turning her sexual encounters into any sort of committed relationship, to Charlotte's seemingly sole purpose of finding a husband as soon as possible. Humor often comes from this contrast as the women give advice or take an action which directly opposes the preferences or conventions of another.

*Sex and the City* has a few major differences from the typical sitcom format. The program utilizes a single-cam format rather than the typical sitcom's multi-cam soundstage, lending it more of a cinematic, dramatic, and intimate tone. This is enhanced by the narrated format. Not only does the camera work lend itself to a more intimate relationship with the characters, but so too does the narration by Carrie, which acts as a direct link between the audience and Carrie's thoughts. Traditional sitcoms are not narrated and the multi-cam

soundstage set-up sacrifices that connection with the audience so that characters typically have to physically speak or act in order to get their message across to the audience. However, *Sex and the City* still features a half-hour format with a basic episode plotline that is typically resolved by the end, and the use of humor. In sum, much of *Sex and the City* is the same as the traditional sitcom and provides a basis of comparison, but some fundamental differences exist which provide a different though still relevant perspective in relation to the characters.

More than anything, *Sex and the City* emphasizes the romantic and sexual relationships of the four main characters and the people around them. Most of these relationships last a single episode in length, sometimes two or three episodes, and relationships that last more than a couple of episodes tend to be the subject of the larger, overarching storylines (such as Carrie and Mr. Big, Amanda and Steve, Charlotte and Trey, and Samantha and Richard). The challenges and joys of these relationships, as well as the other characters' token sexual escapades of the moment, make up the bulk of the content and generally follow some single theme each episode. Carrie's narration of a given episode provides a guided analysis of her own reaction to a given situation as well as the way her friends react - to her situation or to their own relevant ones. The way each character handles any given relationship development reveals more about that character to her friends and to the audience – whether an awkward encounter with someone new, realizing a personality flaw in a potential relationship, or struggling with some aspect of a long-term relationship.

### **A Feminist Program?**

*Sex and the City* might seem to be a feminist program. Each of the four main characters is over 30 years old, unmarried, and not in a long-term relationship until at least a few episodes into the show. They don't hold "pink collar" jobs, such as secretarial work or serving at restaurants, and are successful enough at work to support themselves financially. For the most part, they freely curse and talk about their sex lives in public - in fact, Carrie's livelihood depends on her talking about their sex lives in the public sphere - and behaving in ways traditionally ascribed only to men. While the conventions of previous generations pressured women to be maternal and family-oriented with eyes set on marriage, *Sex and the City* features women who are each other's family and who seem to range dramatically in their desires for marriage, motherhood, and the conventions of the domestic sphere. If feminism is about a woman's right to choose her lifestyle, *Sex and the City* appears to be the holy grail of feminist television shows - four women with their own careers have frequent, open discussions about their lives and then go out and decide for themselves how to handle any given situation.

The opinions and lifestyle choices of these women typically fall anywhere on a spectrum between Charlotte's traditional leanings, such as an active desire for marriage and motherhood, hesitancy regarding foul language, and recurring unwillingness to have sex "too soon" in a potentially long-term relationship; and Samantha's near-complete rejection of all traditional expectations, such as an active disinterest in long-term relationships, celebration of non-pregnancy, unashamedly free use of foul language, and preference for purely sexual

relationships. Yet the diversity of opinion brings these four women closer together as friends and the advice they receive generally aids in their decision making, whether or not the final decision is the one supported by the majority.

The women of *Sex and the City* therefore seem to be powerful models of feminism, yet relatable characters for the show's primary audience. There is a character for everyone to identify closely with, and the most prominently featured character is the neutral Carrie, approachable to the Samanthas, Mirandas, and Charlottes alike. They live in New York, have relatively normal - though certainly desirable - jobs, experience ordinary obstacles like finding a baby shower gift and looking for a new apartment, grow in friendship with one another, and have vibrant romantic and sexual relationships.

Some critics argue that *Sex and the City* is not as feminist as it may lead viewers to believe. While sexual liberation was one of a few major themes in the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, *Sex and the City* deals almost exclusively with these women's sexuality and relationships with men. They talk almost exclusively about their sex lives and romantic relationships - to the point where Miranda complains, "How does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about but boyfriends?" ("Take Me Out to the Ballgame"). Regardless of attitudes toward commitment throughout the series, all four of the women end up on committed relationships at the end of the series. Although they seem to have been liberated from the constraints of the patriarchy, they settle into the conventional roles that are often scorned by feminism. The characters employ a highly materialistic lifestyle that is often centered around shopping for the perfect dress, coveting a pair of \$400 shoes, choosing the perfect



Manhattan apartment. Despite being successful career women, they are rarely shown working to support their seemingly high expenses, instead spending camera time talking at brunch, walking along the sidewalks, or managing their sexual relationships.

This tension present in the show is reflective of the tension within postfeminism. Throughout the series, there is evidence of a postfeminist ideology that seems to empower both the characters and the audience members but actually undermines the supposed freedom of choice that postfeminism heralds. Further analysis of the program provides specific examples of this illusion of choice and highlight the shallow nature of the feminist ideology of *Sex and the City*.

### **Materialism in *Sex and the City***

One draw of the show is the lavish Manhattan lifestyle of the four main characters. All four are financially independent, working only one job. They do not rely on roommates for rent in their apartments in Manhattan, an area with a notoriously high cost of living. They dine out frequently, and go out for drinks even more so. Most of all, they shop a lot - and not at the local Old Navy. Designer brands are mentioned by name - Dolce & Gabbana, Prada, Manolo Blahnik, Fendi - and there was such a demand from the audience for these items that HBO listed the articles of clothing on the *Sex and the City* website (Scodari 249).

Carrie uses her friendships, relationships, and sexuality to make a living, and thus lives out the ideology of consumerism as a foundation for the show itself. It is assumed that everything Carrie narrates goes into her column, and Carrie narrates everything. Often, she will encounter a situation and do a personal reflection which leads to a single question based on the

issue at hand. Her friends' responses, either verbally or through example by the end of the episode, provide content for her column to either enhance or respond to her own experience working through the issue. Researcher Alison Winch notes that "Carrie skillfully and coherently commodifies her assets - sexuality, body, emotions, girlfriends... She successfully manages her emotions by objectifying them and turning them into capital" (69-70). She trades her private life for her career, and she loves it. Rather than making for inevitably awkward situations when her successful column reveals something highly personal about herself or the people around her, Carrie is rewarded with a handful of adoring fans around the world and a channel to process her life and the lives of her friends. Besides a couple of instances when another character like Mr. Big references the honesty of Carrie's narrative, she is able to make a living out of personal reflection on her day-to-day life without any judgement, criticism, or consequences.

Although all four of the main characters in *Sex and the City* have their moments of indulging in a shopping trip or finding happiness in some object or another, Carrie is most frequently depicted as a consumer. She is known for her collection of shoes, which she claims are valued at about \$40,000 ("Ring a Ding Ding"). In the same episode, she agonizes over shoe shopping with Miranda when she can't purchase anything - yet she tries on three pairs of \$400 shoes anyway. She's enticed into modeling at a charity fashion show with the promise of a free Dolce and Gabbana outfit ("The Real Me"). She shops for the perfect outfit to impress Mr. Big's new wife Natasha at a Women in the Arts luncheon ("Attack of the Five-Foot-Ten Woman"), and the high cost of the Manolo Blahnik shoes and dress from Bergdorf's are, from Carrie's perspective, worth sending the message from Carrie to Natasha that "I am beautiful and powerful and I don't care that you're only 25 and married my ex."

That outfit is one example of the crossing of postfeminism and consumerism in *Sex and the City*. Carrie looks to her shoes to bring her fulfillment - in this case, proving herself equally as fabulous as Mrs. Big. They hold a symbolic meaning of social and career power for Carrie. It is consumeristic because of her expectation that buying a pair of shoes is going to make her equal in the eyes of the woman she envies; it is postfeminist because she is using shopping and fashion to send a message of power and equality. Throughout the series, Carrie embraces her freedom to choose femininity as a way of feeling empowered. Even her career is postfeminist - Carrie has a journalistic profession, which is often considered a man's work, but she feminizes it by writing about relationships and sex. While many feminists might admonish Carrie for making even her career centered on relationships with men, Carrie's column is a source of pride for her.

Carrie's consumeristic relationship with her closet is most evident in "The Good Fight." When her fiancé Aiden moves into her apartment, he suggests that she clean out her closet in order to make room for his things. The camera immediately moves to a close-up of Carrie, panning closer for emphasis as her eyes go wide in shock and fear. She begins to explain why she needs this wardrobe. For Carrie, each item in her closet is valuable. The shoes that were stored up high and forgotten about and the Roberto Cavalli outfit she wore once a few years prior are a valued part of her past, while the clothes that Aiden didn't recognize are a valued part of her future: "I never wear most of this stuff yet, someday I will." These items hold value for Carrie, and her visible excitement about owning them points to an association between these items of clothing and her own well-being.

The items in Carrie's closet seem to hold more value to her than Aiden's expressed need to fill that space. The coding of the show seems to imply that this is not an acceptable balance

of desires; Carrie's behavior slips from acceptable to unacceptable when it is fully revealed to the audience that Carrie is behaving in such a way that seems to value her clothes over her relationship, choosing materialism over a stable, committed relationship. The same could be said of the entire apartment as well, as Carrie holds on to all of her possessions and Aiden seems to have brought all of his own; each of them, at least at first, chooses to keep their items despite recognizing that there isn't enough room to live comfortably around them. "My shit wouldn't be lying around if we weren't making room because your shit is lying around!" is a phrase exclaimed by Carrie, an expression of frustration that this aspect of her life is unsavory because of Aiden's swelling presence. This consumeristic need in each person clashes and the problem for Carrie becomes her possessions versus her fiancé.

Tension with Aiden over making space in the apartment reveals that something might be more important than the closet - her relationship with him. "I was holding on to a Roberto Cavalli outfit, and throwing away my relationship." Here, the show draws a line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of consumerism. Carrie concedes when she perceives that to do otherwise would harm her relationship. It becomes an intimate realization between Carrie and the viewer, and the honesty of that moment signals that the show approves of this sudden change of pace. It's revealed that consumerism is a completely valid, empowering ideology - until it gets in the way of a valued human relationship. This is a short-lived moment, however; immediately after Carrie concedes and is ready to give up her consumeristic ways, she turns around to find the dog chewing on a beloved pair of heels. She is reminded of how much she values her possessions and fighting with Aiden ensues once again, with neither Carrie nor Aiden ready to get rid of anything. The result of this argument is not a rejection of former

consumeristic ways, despite the change in tone regarding each character's demonstrated consumerism.

One unfortunate aspect of the Carrie and Aiden's fight is her perceived restriction to only two options. Carrie can either keep her things and lose her fiancé, or to keep her fiancé and lose her things. There is no option for them to find an alternative temporary storage location, or to look for another way to organize the apartment. Carrie is forced to choose between two things which postfeminism should permit her to possess at the same time - her sense of identity through her postfeminism-empowered consumerism, and her relationship with a man who seems to genuinely care for her.

One one level, the closet and apartment represent Carrie's single life. These things make up singleness for her - the individual-oriented size of the apartment, the privacy of living alone, the abundance of expensive clothes. This is emphasized in the episode by the sub-theme of the existence of "secret single behavior." As Carrie struggles to literally make room for Aiden in her apartment, she also struggles to figuratively make room for him and let go of those habits and preferences which she associates with being single - like coming home to a quiet apartment, standing in the kitchen eating saltines with jelly and reading fashion magazines, "things you would never want your boyfriend to see you do." These things are accepted in the program as being too feminine - they are acceptable for women to do behind closed doors, not in front of men. With the introduction of Aiden into this space, these things, according to the program, must go if Carrie wants Aiden. But Carrie demonstrates a desire and attachment to staying in her apartment, keeping the items in her closet, continuing her "secret single behavior." She

demonstrates a desire to hold on to her single, independent life, yet she also makes clear the value she places on her relationship with Aiden.

If Carrie has to make a choice between her closet and her fiancé, then she must value both options. Aiden represents happiness for her future; her clothes represent the happiness of her past. Here, it seems that postfeminism has failed her. Based on the framing of the show, Carrie cannot simultaneously choose the empowerment and independence she values from her single life *and* the desire she has for a committed romantic relationship.

Carrie's evident value of these things indicates to the audience that they, too, might value them. In the scene that features Carrie and Aiden's fight over the apartment clutter, most of the dialogue and camera time is given to Carrie which, in combination with the already well-established relationship which the audience has with her, directs the audience to sympathize with her. This emotional attachment and the addition of some narration to open Carrie's thoughts to the audience and not to Aiden invite the audience to more closely associate with her perspective. And if Carrie Bradshaw can admit to valuing her possessions over her fiancé, then this tells the audience that these things are worth valuing. Considering the value placed on these things, Carrie's decision to sacrifice them for the sake of her relationship also demonstrates to the audience the value of a romantic relationship.

There is a twist, however; while the episode emphasizes for a moment that it would be better for Carrie to choose her relationship over her closet, the result of their fight is not that Carrie gives up half of her closet space and they live happily ever after. Rather, the issue of space goes unaddressed when they finally make up, and Carrie is seen strutting down the street in the very outfit that sparked an argument in the first place. In addition, the relationship ends two

episodes later (“Change of a Dress”) when Carrie decides that she can’t marry Aiden yet; she isn’t ready to trade her single life for marriage. This further validates the value that the program places on single life and the things associated with it, but also the double standard of consumerism. Carrie is devastated by the breakup, and in the actual breakup scene she assures Aiden that eventually she will be ready to marry him, but at the same time she values her single life too much to sacrifice it. She is set up for failure, with unhappiness if she marries Aiden and unhappiness when she doesn’t; unhappiness if she gives up her single life, yet unhappiness if she doesn’t. Consumerism, then, insists that one consume - but not in ways that conflict with other things of value. Carrie can love her full closet, but only until it conflicts with Aiden. She can love Aiden, but only until that relationship conflicts with her single life. Carrie doesn’t find happiness in a relationship until the final episode (“An American Girl in Paris, Part Deux”), when she ends up back in the arms of Mr. Big who has suddenly changed into a postfeminist Prince Charming - he fights for her honor when he believes her previous boyfriend hit her and saves her from the loneliness of Paris without either a satisfying relationship or a career, and whisks her back to New York City where they can supposedly live happily ever after as two successful and independent people in a romantic, committed relationship. In the end, Carrie gets the have-it-all idealism of postfeminism.

### **Commodification of Men**

It isn’t just material goods that are consumed by the women of *Sex and the City*. They also seem to have made a commodity of men. “Men are presented as consumption goods for

women to buy, consider, fit and return” (Adriaens and van Bauwel 8) and that “fit” is more often than not based on sexual compatibility, making sex a commodity as well. Most episodes in at least the first three seasons of the show feature a conflict wherein one of the women finds a man who seems like a potential match and yet he has some defect - an odd fetish, a bad habit, an irregular sexual organ - and so they must “try it on” and, more often than not, return it dissatisfied and continue shopping without thinking twice of the man from last week.

Sex is more than just a fun way to pass the time for these women. It becomes a sort of need, as though they have a right to sexual satisfaction. In “The Good Fight,” a pregnant Miranda demonstrates her “need” for sex; she tells Samantha to “spare no detail” when asking about Sam’s latest sexual relationship, complains to Carrie that if she waits to have sex until next time the man she’s interested in comes back into town then she’ll be too pregnant for him to be interested in her, and rushes dinner at Charlotte’s because she’s worried about missing her date later that evening. At the end of the episode, Carrie refers to Miranda having sex as a “last meal” - which is often considered a sort of right for prisoners on death row.

In this episode, Miranda seems to be a postfeminist icon for her ability to choose both motherhood and sexual liberty. First, she demonstrates the freedom to choose unplanned motherhood. In the episode where she reveals her pregnancy (“Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda”), Miranda is given initial support in her decision to have an abortion but when she starts questioning the decision Carrie refuses to tell Miranda what to do, and Miranda decides to keep the baby. Second, she demonstrates the ability to do so while remaining economically and sexually independent. When she tells Steve about the pregnancy (“Just Say Yes”), she insists that he continue living his life as he had been - “I’m gonna take care of the baby and support it and



you can visit whenever you want but it's not gonna be your problem. It's... it's my decision, and it's just something I wanna do for me." At the end of the episode, Steve proposes to her and she doesn't even consider it an option before shooting it down and helping Steve see that she doesn't want to be his housewife or have a shotgun wedding. Miranda is calling the shots when it comes to this pregnancy, and she decides to take on motherhood as a new aspect to her current lifestyle. This brings us to "The Good Fight" - Miranda isn't letting pregnancy get in the way of her apparent need for sex. She isn't relying on the father of her baby for sexual satisfaction.

This consumerism and postfeminism is empowering for Miranda, but one might argue that it is demeaning for the man in question. Leading up to the date, Miranda ponders the situation with concerns directed almost totally at herself - is it socially acceptable for her to have sex with him? will it be her last chance for sex? is it even safe? Throughout the episode, Miranda never mentions how the decision might affect him, how he might feel knowing he was having sex with a pregnant woman, or whether he would want to know despite her steadfast belief that it will be a total turn-off. Carrie supports this consumerism and postfeminist selfishness as she advises Miranda that "it's your body, your life, you do what's best for you." Miranda and Carrie even talk about him in a consumeristic manner - he has the potential "to be a good fuck." Finally, there is no follow-up on the date until many episodes later, after Miranda has had the baby. In an episode concerned with Miranda's need for sex, the identity of the man is treated as irrelevant beyond his sex appeal; he is no more than a highly-sought sex toy.

Miranda asks a revealing question, however - "Is it tacky?" The viewer sees that she still questions the social acceptability of having sex with one man while pregnant with another man's baby, despite the certainty that she wants to have sex. No matter how clear her feelings, no

matter how empowered she is to express her sexual liberty, she is still subject to some level of social judgement that is so instilled in her that even though nobody but her girl friends and herself would know that she did it, she hesitates. It is worth noting, however, that this is only a brief scene, and even within the scene Carrie's advice is highly postfeminist - to do whatever Miranda feels best - so the program is not telling viewers that it is, in fact, "tacky." Miranda's decision to go through with the date and have sex with him is celebrated at the end of the episode, solidifying the pro-sexual liberty position of the show.

Despite the dominant message of this episode, however, Miranda doesn't truly have the freedom to satisfy her "need" for sex because she has to lie to men about her pregnancy in order to sleep with them. It still isn't Miranda's *choice* that this is her "last meal," her last time having sex for a relatively long period of time. If it was up to Miranda, her pregnancy would not affect her sex life at all. The postfeminist advocacy of women's choice is still an illusion, then, because she is only free to choose within certain parameters set by the patriarchy. She may choose to use men as sex objects, but only when they are also choosing to do so with her.

### **Postfeminist Romance**

Perhaps no character displays as high of a level of consumption of men and sex as Samantha Jones. Throughout the series, she's openly portrayed as the most sexually active and sexually adventurous of the four main characters, never questioning the social repercussions of a her lifestyle - and never seeming to be penalized for it, either. She establishes her objectification of men within minutes of her first appearance in the first episode: "This is the first time in the history of Manhattan that women have had as much money and power as men, plus the equal

luxury of treating men like sex objects” (“Sex and the City”). With rare exceptions, Samantha’s version of a long-term relationship is one in which she has sex with someone regularly rather than just a weekend or for one night.

She is in the middle of such a relationship in “The Good Fight,” having established a sexual relationship with a man named Richard, who hired her to do public relations for his hotel. Her commodification of men and sex is evident at the start of this episode when her phone rings and, despite the fact that she has always referred to him as “Richard,” the name on the caller ID is “Dick” - a double-entendre made even more clear by the conversation which followed: when prompted by the other three leading ladies to talk about this new guy, the only thing Sam says is that “he has a perfect dick.” Once she’s done describing it a short moment later, the conversation abruptly changes - the other women seem satisfied with this explanation of one very specific part of the man they were inquiring about.

Sam is getting the best of both worlds in this relationship from a postfeminist perspective. She is a successful businesswoman whose sexuality is not the reason for her success - yet she gets the sexual satisfaction at work anyway, by her own free choice, and not out of pressure to exchange sex for career opportunities. Richard didn’t hire her for her sex appeal, but for her talent as a public relations expert. When they start flirting in “Just Say Yes,” it’s unclear who is really initiating the move into a sexual relationship - he invites her to open up about her obvious bad mood, she tells him her disdain for monogamy, he expresses agreement with a scenario of his preference for a glamorous and jet-setting lifestyle, and after she smiles and fixes her hair, they’re next seen making out on a plane to live out that exact scenario Richard had described.

She has found someone who can elevate her career *and* give her the no-strings-attached, glamorous, sex-based relationship she seeks, without one being dependent upon the other.

This perfect scenario results in something uncharacteristic of Samantha: hesitancy. Never having been one to keep any aspect of her life private, Sam's initial refusal to talk about Richard to the ladies at brunch sticks out like a sore thumb, and this is emphasized for the viewer by the excited screams of the women at the table when they realize that Samantha has developed feelings for a guy. The rest of the episode expands upon this hesitancy and its basis in a new kind of consumerism - romance.

Samantha seems to be happy with her relationship with Richard being based on work and sex, until Richard begins adding elements of romance to their relationship. The first example is when he gives her a pink long-stemmed rose; more than just a romantic gesture on its face, the show adds intimacy to the moment by showing close-up shots of Richard and Samantha. Samantha seems to reject the romance of the moment when she puts the rose down and has oral sex with him immediately after - returning back to the pre-established sexual nature of the relationship. Noteworthy is the rose's symbolism of consumerism; it is a bought gift in this scenario and contains the consumeristic notion that the item will relay to Samantha the message of romance. As a symbol of romance, the rose also represents a replacement for the sex-focused relationship. Carrie's narration as Samantha receives the rose parallels the way Samantha had earlier described Richard's penis: "long, pink, amazing." Samantha obviously recognizes this representation later in the episode when she has an intimate moment of appreciation of the rose, expressed with a close-up camera shot of her smelling the rose with her eyes closed and a soft

smile - then a pained expression as she throws it in the trash, representing her continued refusal to change the dynamic of the relationship.

Her pained expression is an important indicator of her internal struggle; with her usual sexual partners, Samantha would never have thought twice about throwing out a token of appreciation. The audience is beginning to understand that this one is special, and pushes the viewer to sympathize with Samantha - the first step toward wishing her to give up her consumeristic relationship with Richard and give in to the romance. This is the dilemma of the episode: Samantha is caught between the sexual consumerism that she has established as her ideology of choice, and the romantic consumerism that she subconsciously moves toward.

Later in the episode, Richard surprises her with dinner. He seems to present it to her as he gestures toward it and the camera pans over to the table, simply organized and dimly lit beside a swimming pool - codes intended to tell the viewer that this is romantic, that this is more than a meetup for casual sex. As the camera cuts to Samantha's shocked expression, the viewer senses the tension of the moment as Samantha faces another challenge to the purely-sexual nature of the relationship. Once again, she seems to refuse - "I want no part of that," she tells him. "We are work and sex, nothing more." Richard concedes and they spend the evening skinny dipping in the pool. Yet one more attempt from Richard emerges afterward: wrapped in robes and dripping in pool water, he turns on music and they slow dance. Her response is coded such that the viewer senses her tension once again, with hesitation to just dance and not turn it into another sexual encounter.

Sam is stuck in a classic feminist predicament. She should be able to enjoy no-strings-attached sex "like a man," yet the show implies an innate attraction to the conventional

relationship. Samantha's feelings are also uncharacteristic of her; she had only established her sexual relationship with Richard at the end of the previous episode. The implication is that highly satisfying sex with someone who doesn't expect a long-term relationship from her is precisely what attracts Samantha to a committed relationship. She is not actually capable, then, of choosing a lifestyle of no-strings-attached sex; Richard is evidence that she will naturally develop feelings when the right guy comes around. When Samantha does "throw in the towel", Carrie's voiceover enforces this ideology: "All this time, she'd been trying to make him just a perfect dick, fighting her feelings that he might be the *perfect Richard*" (emphasis added).

Despite naturally developing feelings, Samantha did not exactly choose to trade in her preferred form of consumerism in the relationship. Until the slow dance, she had successfully rejected every opportunity for romance that Richard presented her. The rose itself symbolizes this choice - it is described in the show as a phallic symbol, and Sam must choose between the parallel objects. Her choice was to throw away the rose and thus reject the romantic ideology in the relationship, in favor of the purely sexual consumerism that she originally intended. She does not choose romance until Richard insists that she dance with him. Insistence was necessary, in fact, as she first refuses by reminding him of her statement earlier that evening. But he reminds her, "I'm your boss. It's an order." She's all but forced to indulge in a romantic moment with Richard. She doesn't choose to "give in" to the romance until he orders her to do so because he's her boss. Despite being coded as an independent businesswoman in all other aspects of the show, this relationship reduces her to a subordinate. It isn't coded as an offensive move by Richard, though - Samantha is happy when the episode ends. The exchange could be

read as being ironically romantic. Viewers know that Samantha isn't a subordinate kind of woman; based on previous encounters, she would never take orders from a man without good reason, and she isn't afraid to stand up for herself when she's being discriminated against. That was the reason why Richard hired her in the first place - she stood up to his sexism when he told her he wouldn't hire her because she slept with his architect, and he was impressed ("Belles of the Balls"). But much like that scene, which ends with Samantha in involuntary tears in the elevator after marching out of his office, the romantic encounters with Richard suggest that even an independent woman like Samantha is subject to traditionally feminine inability to control her feelings. By "throwing in the towel" after being ordered to follow his lead, Samantha is evidence of a postfeminist acceptability of pick-and-choose subordination; as long as Sam is an independent career woman, she is permitted to be told what to do in a romantic relationship, so long as she consents.

### **Confronting the Ideological**

If Samantha and Miranda are champions of the postfeminist decision to exercise sexual liberty and careerism, Charlotte is the champion of the classically traditional woman. She desires marriage and a family, certain that each will bring her closer to the picture-perfect life of her dreams. In the style of postfeminism, these desires are empowering for Charlotte and a source of her sense of independent self. *She* wants the baby more than her husband; when it's revealed that he doesn't want to be a father, he offers her the liberation from homemaking that is stereotypically desired by feminism, but the postfeminism of the show allows Charlotte to freely desire a family.

Marriage and motherhood are part of her consumeristic worldview. She emphasizes in the first couple seasons of the show that marriage will make her happy - even the challenges of marriage will be more joyful than the challenges of singleness. Once she's married, however, she still isn't satisfied - a common result of consumerism - and next becomes convinced that having a baby will bring her happiness and the challenges of motherhood will be more joyful than the challenge of being a family of two. The marriage and the baby are goods to be consumed, to bring Charlotte closer to the life she knew she wanted "since [she] was a little girl" ("The Good Fight"). Finding herself stuck in a difficult marriage and struggling with infertility makes Charlotte more desperate than ever for that idyllic life.

Charlotte and her husband Trey talk about having a baby and decide to try to get pregnant. When they realize that naturally conceiving a child is going to be difficult after test results show that she has fertility problems ("Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda"), Charlotte begins searching for treatments and alternatives. In her consumeristic ideology, she becomes convinced that buying fertility treatments, buying the nursery, even buying the baby - adopting - will grant her wish. Meanwhile, Trey becomes less invested in the efforts and Charlotte soon realizes that he doesn't actually want to be a father yet ("Just Say Yes"). She is devastated, because he is a necessary tool in the attainment of motherhood; without Trey, Charlotte cannot have her baby and thus cannot be happy. When the spouses argue at dinner in "The Good Fight," Charlotte's complaint to Trey is that "what's unforgivable is you *denying me my baby* because of your own selfish, spoiled needs!" (emphasis added). Charlotte does not view the baby as a shared source of joy, or even a tool to fix her broken marriage - the baby is *her* desire, and Trey is merely getting in the way of her happiness. Never mind that the acquisition of a child comes with the



responsibility of raising him/her, and that Charlotte and Trey's unstable relationship would likely affect the child's well-being; consumerism leads Charlotte to turn Trey and the baby into things for her use in getting closer to her dream life.

Trey becomes an example of blatant consumerism as he tries to use Broadway tickets to cheer her up - "we still have to find a way to have a giggle," he adds when he realizes that she is less enthused than he is, as if theater tickets and similar entertainment could act as a replacement for the baby Charlotte still wants. In their next scene, Trey brings home another gift for Charlotte - a giant cardboard cutout of a baby. Although Charlotte was reservedly excited to open the gift, Trey's obvious excitement over the gift is shot down as Charlotte leaves the room telling him "don't talk to me." Trey's explanation is based once again on the idea of "having a chuckle" - but also, this time, the fact that the clerk at the novelty store said that it would be funny. Trey, in his wealth and lifestyle based on enjoying the finest things, would of course trust the source of those things as an authority on fixing this relationship. Trey turns to material things to solve his problems with his wife, and chooses that one which he has been told by someone more expert than him - the clerk who promises comic relief through the items in a novelty shop - that this would make things better between them. Instead, it has the opposite effect; ironically, the show is critiquing his brand of consumerism.

The audience has been led to sympathize with Charlotte from the beginning of her relationship with Trey by featuring her much more prominently, in both the camera time during scenes with Trey and the opportunity to voice her opinions away from Trey while venting to her friends or alone - an opportunity that Trey rarely, if ever, gets in the show. This sympathy is put in action as Trey tries not just once but twice in one episode to make amends by buying his way

back in her good graces, and Charlotte responds negatively both times. This is only solidified later in the episode, when Charlotte has the ladies over for dinner and her disinterest in seeing him leads Trey to explain the cardboard baby situation and none of the three women react - they avert their eyes and don't so much as crack a smile. Soon, Trey is the only one talking, attempting repeatedly to explain why the gift is funny, which makes the silence of the others particularly noticeable - and, therefore, more awkward. With Trey established as the outcast of the episode, it seems that the lesson is that money can't buy a happy marriage.

Of course it doesn't matter that other people buy them or that the clerk said it was funny - the *reality* is that the cardboard baby can't act as a substitute for the real human baby that Charlotte wants. The cardboard baby parodizes Charlotte's real desire for a living baby, and that parody forces Charlotte to confront her own consumeristic attitude toward their situation. The cardboard baby is a symbol of two uncomfortable realities for Charlotte. The first, that she is unable to conceive. The baby is something she has wanted and tried desperately to get, and suddenly Trey presents her with a cheap replica. The second, that she has commodified the baby. Trey buys a baby - albeit a cardboard one - to make up for the fact that he won't help Charlotte buy a real one, through adoption or further fertility treatments. Trey's suggestion that they put the cardboard baby in the nursery and pretend it's a real baby strikes a nerve because it is an inauthentic replacement with the expectation of the same resulting happiness.

Charlotte's postfeminist ideology gives her permission to leave Trey and find a man who can satisfy her needs - in this case, her need for a family. When Trey can't give her what she wants, she is empowered to end her relationship with him and find a man who can. By the end of the series, she has remarried and in the final episode they successfully adopt a baby -

Charlotte's story ends with her getting exactly what she had been seeking and an expectation to live happily-ever-after, as consumerism promises.

Charlotte's choice to be a wife and mother is a postfeminist illusion. No matter how much she wants it, she can't choose the form of motherhood that she grew up thinking that she wanted. Yet she also refuses to find an alternative satisfaction in the married life she is in, because Trey holds the cards in the decision to adopt. Charlotte is still reliant upon her husband to satisfy what is coded to be her most important need, to have a baby. Her second husband, Harry, is the one who gives her that satisfaction. Postfeminism allows Charlotte to decide seemingly without social judgement to leave her husband if he isn't satisfying her needs, but she is only empowered in deciding who will hold that power over her; she can choose to be with or not be with a man based on this need, but she cannot achieve the happiness she seeks without a man.

### **Conclusion: Impact on the "Real World"**

It is not enough to merely encode a television show with ideologies like postfeminism; consumerism also relies upon viewers decoding in such a way that they can simultaneously relate to and envy the characters carrying the message. In the case of *Sex and the City*, the characters need to be relatable yet living more desirable lives - whether achievable or not - than the viewers themselves. *Sex and the City* is set up to develop that necessary relationship with the audience from the start. Viewers can see themselves as a part of the group, seated at the brunch table or on a brisk walk along the NYC sidewalk, as attentive listeners during conversations amongst close friends. More than just the setting, viewers can connect and identify with the characters on a sort

of social, personal level through scenes depicting the one character alone, and also through Carrie's narration of the episode.

The narration in particular brings viewers intimately into the world of Carrie Bradshaw; viewers know more than just what Carrie does and says, but also what she thinks and why she does what she does. It also gives a unique insight into her friendships, as Carrie narrates the scenes featuring other characters as well as her own and therefore gives viewers further material for analysis of and possibly identification with her. This intimacy and relatability make the program set up well for consumerism.

The lives of these four women are not perfect in the way one would expect when referring to them as models of modern women and the program as a channel of consumerism. If consumerism is based upon the depiction of idealized people demonstrating how a certain thing or idea got them to their perfect state, then it would seem that there is no room for the messiness of life as depicted in *Sex and the City* - things like Charlotte's inability to conceive, Carrie's recurring struggle to have a relationship with Mr. Big, Samantha's occasional yet persistent battle with intrusive desires for commitment, or Miranda's no-nonsense personality which frequently gets her into trouble in her relationships and friendships. These flaws, however, are precisely what make the world and characters of *Sex and the City* believable - they are what make up the realism so important to the draw of consumerism. In order to be models of consumerism, the characters need not be perfect - they need only to be moving toward perfection. As Stromberg points out, these small, perfectly-packaged flaws are what remind the consumer of that glimmer of hope that, if this person is able to live the glamorous life with these same flaws, then maybe s/he can too (17).

Peeling back the curtain, we are reminded that “Carrie is the output of a collaboration” between people like the writers, designers, and producers (Winch, “Strategic Sisterhoods” 71). There is a team striving toward her perfection - or just the right amount of imperfection - so that she can function as an appealing main character in every aspect of her characterization - her wardrobe, dialogue, apartment, and mannerisms, just to name a few. Author Christine Scodari argues that “women’s professional success is at once utterly conspicuous and taken for granted” in modern television programs – while different from traditional sitcoms which tend to focus on the family orientation of leading female characters, there is still little on the “day-to-day struggles...in the public arena” (250). Consider the lack of representation of the careers of the women in *Sex and the City*. Despite having jobs that are often associated with high stress and incredibly long hours, Samantha and Miranda are rarely seen actually working. It is assumed that they are successful, and implied that they work hard, but they aren’t actually *seen* working hard except in a few rare moments throughout the series. As mentioned earlier, Winch notes the personal relationship with Carrie Bradshaw that viewers of *Sex and the City* developed, and particularly the notion that Carrie is a “feminist icon” within a “progressive” show (“Strategic Sisterhoods” 62). Carrie is very different from actress Sarah Jessica Parker, publicly regarded as a perfect (post)feminist woman precisely because there is a team of people striving toward her perfection and a level of consistency that is fundamentally impossible for a real woman like Parker (71).

The efforts of the production team on *Sex and the City* were evidently successful as the program, uncharacteristic of television shows, grew in popularity over the course of its six seasons (Gomez 129). The finale had an audience of 10.6 million viewers, and the show was

awarded with numerous Academy award nominations and wins (129). According to analysis by researcher Beatriz Oria Gomez, *Sex and the City* fulfilled a “need” in audience members to consume stories that talk about sex more openly and with more acceptability than the romantic comedy movie genre of the time (133). In addition, its format as a continuous television show - as opposed to being a romantic comedy movie - afforded it the option to end episodes and seasons with cliffhangers or unanswered endings, simultaneously leaving viewers wanting to watch the next episode in hopes of achieving the closure of an established end to the story, and also depicting “the equally ‘episodic’ and fragmented nature of contemporary relationships” by choosing not to wrap up every episode in a perfectly-defined bow the way that romantic comedy movies tend to do (135).

By hooking audiences with dynamic storylines, providing an entertainingly shocking allure through the discussion of taboo topics like casual sex, and crafting a relatable menu of characters, *Sex and the City* set itself up to ensure that the encoding and decoding processes surrounding the program matched up in a highly effective way. The glamorous lifestyle of the characters translated into the consumeristic ideology relayed by the show and, when decoded, encouraged viewers to seek out this lifestyle themselves. The result was numerous phenomena of featured facets of these glamorous lives skyrocketing in popularity in real life. Still today, numerous articles list trends attributed to *Sex and the City* such as Manolo Blahnik shoes, cupcakes, Tasti D-Lite frozen yogurt, Brazilian waxes, and New York’s Meatpacking District (Stylecaster, Neumann).

Many of these trends reflect the postfeminist ideology present in the program. The rise in popularity of designer brands like Manolo Blahnik and Fendi reflect in viewers-turned-buyers a

desire for the same empowered femininity of Carrie Bradshaw. The rise in popularity of foodie hotspots like Magnolia Bakery reflect a desire to embrace the feminist acceptability of non-dieting and indulgence, while still remaining feminine - after all, they are cupcakes and chic bars, not the too-masculine hot wings and beer bars, which were depicted with an air of disgust in “Hot Child in the City.” And the rise in popularity of Brazilian waxes reflect a desire for the sexual liberty so often touted by Samantha Jones, likely the result of Carrie saying of her accidental Brazilian, “I’m so aware of ‘down there’ now, I feel like I’m nothing but walking sex” (“Sex and the Other City”).

The public response to *Sex and the City*’s messages demonstrates well the theories of the culture industry and its material existence. Without the encouragement of the women of *Sex and the City*, viewers likely would not have realized their “need” for sexual liberty via Brazilian waxes, feminine indulgence via cupcakes, or fashionable empowerment via designer shoes, shared needs as explored by Horkheimer and Adorno (1242). One might speculate that consumers don’t truly even *realize* the need behind their actions; a viewer may only say, “I think I want to try \_\_\_\_\_ like Carrie!” and the realization that s/he is drawn to the object of consumerism is but the surface of a deeper ideological need. Unless the individual questions his/her surface-level desire of the object, it will go unnoticed, the product of the consumption of coded media (1242). These objects of consumerism are precisely the ideological “material existence[s]” proposed by Althusser (693, 695). The characters of *Sex and the City* reveal the ideology encoded into their design through their dialogue, their physical reactions to telling scenarios, and their own consumeristic and postfeminist purchases. The viewers of *Sex and the City* reveal the ideology decoded and internalized from *Sex and the City* - and, presumably, a

variety of other sources with the same resulting ideological messages (Horkheimer and Adorno 1242-1243) - through their creation of and participation in trends based upon the desire to be like Carrie or Miranda or Sam or Charlotte.

As media change over time, so too does the culture industry and its channels of communication and implementation. Factors of perceived intimacy, relatable ideological concepts, ideological influencers, and the very channels of media may be notably different in even just a few months' time. One example of an influential change in media is the rise of on-demand video streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. Whereas television viewing had for decades been solely experienced through a television set and at regularly scheduled times, television viewing today has expanded to laptops and mobile devices, and is available at any location and any time of day. Relationships with television characters are no longer relegated to once-a-week visits in the living room. Entire series may be offered through a streaming service, so the viewer can choose to watch a program when it's convenient, never miss an episode, and even spend hours at a time with the same characters by watching multiple episodes in one sitting. The experience may lend itself to be more personal, more comfortable, and more intimate than the television viewing experience of the past. This potential increase in perceived intimacy with the on-screen characters logically leads to a higher susceptibility to ideological messages. However, the shorter time frame of viewing - such as watching within a few weeks a show that was originally aired over the course of six years - may decrease the perceived intimacy and relatability, as the characters have had less time embedded into the life of the viewer and the viewer has not experienced six years of his/her life involved with the characters.



Modern programs are not the only ones impacted by this change: a program such as *Sex and the City*, which aired over ten years prior to this study, may be decoded in a completely unique way by the modern viewer than it was by those who viewed it as it was broadcast on HBO. Although the encoding remains forever the same, the decoding is affected by the viewer's experiences prior to and during the viewing of the program. Further study on modern media and ideological messages, and their impact on corresponding audiences and the public in general,

may reveal notable trends in culture and deepen understanding of the effect of media and culture on the public.

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