An Exploratory Study: Agenda-setting and Cultivation Effects of *Sex and the City*, a Postfeminist Perspective

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INTRODUCTION:

In June of 1998, the American cable network Home Box Office (HBO) introduced *Sex and the City*, a comedy series whose frank nature and sometimes controversial women proved to be a huge success during its six-season run which came to an end in February of 2004 when the series finale aired, with 10.6 million viewers tuning in (Bauder, 2004 as cited by Stern, 2005).

Based on a column (for the New York Observer, 1994) and later a book written by Candace Bushnell (1997), the show takes the audience on a journey through the intricacies of the lives of four young, beautiful, professional women living in New York City and their friendships, romantic relationships, sexual escapades, extravagant bistro lunches and cocktail-laced dinners, and their gradual growth as ever-flawed human beings and women.

Carrie Bradshaw, a columnist for the fictional New York Star, Miranda Hobbes, a corporate lawyer, Samantha Jones, a public relations practitioner who owns her own firm and Charlotte York, a museum curator, make up the fabulous foursome that lured so many viewers to the show each week and continues to do so even now after its cancellation, with syndication to TBS, Bravo, E4 and many local stations.

Since its inception, *Sex and the City* has created incredible buzz and has been deemed by many to be a cultural icon of the times we live in. According to Negra (2004) *Sex and the City* "operates as a key cultural paradigm through which discussions of femininity, singlehood, and urban life are carried out." Its popularity stems from the more complex and honest representation of women (albeit, mostly white, upper class women) it offers in comparison to any television shows that came before it. *Sex and the City* can

sometimes border on crude in its language and frequent nudity, but the life lessons, frank talk and deep, lasting friendships that it puts on display has brought the show an unprecedented and deeply connected loyal audience. Speaking of the series' female audience and issues, HBO's president of original programming said "We've never had a response like this from anything we've ever done. It's behind the struggle to find the meaning of life in the year 2000" (Keating, 1999 as cited by Stern, 2005).

D'Acci (1994) examines the construction of a "women's audience" especially that of a "working women's market" which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She argues that the construction of such an audience began after network television and advertisers discovered this prominent female market (especially the increasing demographic of working women, albeit mostly white, upper class women). Although shows like *Cagney and Lacey* struggled to stay on the air in that era due to its feminist implications, a series like *Sex and the City* demonstrates how far such efforts have come. With a mixture of feminist and postfeminist images, consumerist lifestyles, and crucial discourse on the female identity, the series has been able to captivate this "women's audience," and keep them loyal while proving immensely profitable for television networks and advertisers alike.

Popular press, and academic analysis and research alike have demonstrated that *Sex and the City*, although its high-class lifestyle characters are sometimes hard to relate to, has a profound effect on its female audience and their feelings on heterosexual relationships, female friendship and the female identity. In the present analysis and research I wish to demonstrate how the series presents postfeminist ideals more completely and complexly than "women programs" that came before it, and demonstrate

the possibility of its agenda setting and cultivation effects (those beyond the traditional public affairs and violent television arenas usually undertaken by each theoretical framework, respectively) namely in its most vulnerable audience, college women ages 18 to 24 [the series' target audience is women between the ages of 18 and 34 (Bauder, 2004 as cited by Stern, 2005)].

LITERATURE REVIEW:

NEGOTIATING POSTFEMINISM: FROM *DESIGNING WOMEN & MURPHY BROWN* TO *SEX AND THE CITY*

Susan Flaudi, author of the 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, argues that there has been a decline in television's interest in and support for feminism, pointing out that in the 1980's, unlike the 1970s, shows built around single career women almost vanished or like *Cagney and Lacey*, faced constant pressure to mute their feminist implications (Dow, 1996). The "backlash" she suggests implies the "wholesale rejection of feminist ideals, an attempt to demonize women's liberation and to return women to the subordinate roles of a bygone era." However, Dow (1996) suggests a lot of the discourse that has been deemed "backlash" is more appropriately labeled "postfeminist." This distinction, Dow (1996) says, "recognizes that some discourse which questions certain feminist issues and/or goals also assumes the validity of other feminist issues and/or goals."

Kim (2001) offers a helpful definition of this widely debated term. She argues that there are three general approaches to defining the term postfeminism. First, it refers to the era after second-wave feminism: that is, the 1980's and particularly the 1990s. Second, as some writers and feminists have observed, postfeminism signifies a backlash against feminism. Third, there are some writers who have defined the term in a more

positive manner, claiming it to be "a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism."

Further, Judith Stacey (1987) defined postfeminism as the "simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism." Modleski (1991) defines postfeminist texts as those that "in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism- in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world." Others (Arthurs, 2003 and Moseley & Read, 2002 as cited by Gerhard, 2005) define postfeminism as "the convergence of popular culture and select aspects of feminism organized through revisiting the distinction between feminism and femininity." Finally Amanda Lotz (2001) sees postfeminist texts as those which "explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit; critique a conception of oppression not grounded on the multiplicity of identities women occupy; challenge the assumption that race, class or disability activism are not "feminist" issues, and deconstruct binary categories of gender and sexuality." Gerhard (2005) asserts, however, that although this feminism may indeed reject gender binaries, that does not equate into abandoning the conception that gender is still a system of power. She then suggests that looking at postfeminism as a re-negotiation of antifeminist and feminist thought in and through popular representations of women might be a more simple and helpful way to understand the concept. Similarly, Dow (1996) asserts that "shifting attitudes toward feminism do not always represent a rejection of women's liberation as much as an adjustment to it."

Designing Women (1986-93) has often been linked to feminism by the popular

press and television critics (Dow, 1996). Dow's (1996) discussion of *Designing Women*

and its both feminist and postfeminist values begins in the workplace. This is set in

Sugarbakers, an interior design firm in Atlanta Georgia based out of the home of Julia

Sugarbaker, the firm's senior partner. Although the characters often discuss their work,

they are seldom seen doing it. In essence, although Sugarbakers is a business, its

ambience is more like that of a home, making it a more appropriate setting for the

women's talk that drives the narrative. These are not women trying to make it in a man's

world. It does not confront gender politics in the way in which television usually does.

Still, with *Designing Women's* unique environment comes the freedom to discuss ideas

and define issues solely in women's terms and based on women's experiences which

allows for consciousness-raising and "women's talk." The women interact as equal peers

with the purpose of pulling together all of their individual experiences rather than to

compete with one another and "produce a superior story" (Dow, 1996). In addition, each

participant acknowledges what each woman brings to the interaction.

As mentioned before, postfeminism is quite often a negotiation of many feminist

and postfeminist values rather than a total disregard of or "backlash" to traditional

feminist ideals. *Designing Women*, too, takes part in this negotiation. Although the focus

of the show positions itself around personal interaction between the characters and

"women's talk," the storyline still leaves room for the audience to identify with multiple

characters (Dow, 1996). Dow (1996) also points out that "the resistance encouraged by

some episodes' open endings contribute to construction of feminist discourse that

challenges postfeminist assumptions in popular culture and in other television

programming." *Designing Women* simultaneously operates in a feminist and postfeminist frame namely through its "commercial femininity" in which women are free to work, but must still confirm to conventional standards of beauty (Press, 1991 as cited by Dow, 1996).

Dow (1996) suggests that *Murphy Brown* is a more wholesome representation of postfeminist values, arguing that the series is indeed "postfeminism personified." Murphy does not achieve success by playing a domestic role in the workplace, as in *Designing Women*. Instead she has adapted successfully to the masculine culture of television journalism and made her way to the top of her profession through her rugged individualism. Murphy embodied the idea that women's liberation requires that women "clone the male competitive model" (Hewlett, 1986 as cited by Dow, 1996). Murphy's character is decidedly not feminine in any traditional sense. Murphy is aggressive, competitive and lacks interpersonal sensitivity. These traits are key to her success in a patriarchal world. However, consistent with postfeminism, this success has its costs. Murphy does not have much of a personal life at all. She does not have a close-knit group of friends (the idea of a "postfeminist postfamily") as in *Designing Women* and she is incapable of developing meaningful or lasting relationships with men. Her rugged individualism is what makes her so postfeminist. She is nobody's victim; instead she sabotages herself by choosing her career over a personal life of any kind. Murphy is funny because she consistently acts as a woman is not supposed to act. She exploits the perceived conflict between femininity and professional success (Dow, 1996).

In a later season of the show, Murphy becomes pregnant by her ex-husband who does not stick around to be a part of it. Feeling that this may be the only chance she has

to bear a child, as she is getting older and has not been able to find a lasting relationship with a man, Murphy decides to go through with the pregnancy and raise the child herself. Dow (1996) calls this the "ultimate postfeminist moment" stating that Murphy was surrendering to the supposed biological imperative of women to bear children. Dow brands Murphy's parenting style as decidedly more stereotypically male than feminine in that her life as a mother and her professional life are most often compartmentalized in the show rather than overlapping. In conclusion, the personal costs of professional success, the conflicts between work and motherhood, and the emphasis on the "choices" women make in addition to an emphasis on individualistic solutions make *Murphy Brown* unequivocally more postfeminist than many of the television women that came before her.

Designing Women then negotiates postfeminism while *Murphy Brown* exemplifies it. *Sex and the City* goes a step further and simultaneously performs both functions in the context of today's modern world. The women of *Sex and the City* are independent, professionally successful, part of a very close-knit "postfeminst postfamily," and treat men more as commercial products which can satisfy certain needs but cannot fulfill the women as deeply as their own sense of identity and self-esteem can. The four women are all looking for "someone special" throughout the series, but only settle into serious, committed relationships when they feel they have found the right partner who will treat them right, and fulfill all of their needs and desires. Still, three out of the four women (Carrie, Charlotte and Miranda) at some point in the series or another, give in to their "biological" yearnings for motherhood, as discussed earlier.

Tropp (2006) takes a closer look at the topic of pregnancy as related to *Sex and the City*. In this piece, Tropp (2006) gives a detailed analysis in which she creates a comparison between Carrie's (Sara Jessica Parker) and Miranda's (Cynthia Nixon) real life pregnancy with that of their characters on *Sex and the City* (only Miranda actually becomes pregnant in the series). Through her comparison, Tropp (2006) strives to show how the series challenges dominant discourses on pregnancy and motherhood. She also compares the idea of a "Super Mom" with that of a celebrity and suggests that magazines commercialize motherhood while turning it into just another product to be sold.

In addition, Tropp (2006) analyses each of the main characters and their individual struggles with pregnancy and motherhood, whether they are or wish to be pregnant or not during the series. In doing this, she introduces the "Whore/Madonna" dichotomy that represents Samantha and Charlotte's characters respectively. She then concludes that *Sex and the City* successfully confronts sex/gender stereotypes regarding women and pregnancy while revealing (through Miranda's character) the contradictory discourses women face today in regards to motherhood and pregnancy.

Exhibiting traits of the "bourgeois bohemians" as Arthurs (2003) termed it, the women of *Sex and the City* are able to "reconcile the contradictions between bourgeois and bohemian values and lifestyles" resulting in the liberation of white, middle-class women like themselves "from sexual constraints required by bourgeois respectability." Thus, the frank sex talk that permeates throughout a large portion of every episode insists on the pleasures of heterosexual sex for women (Gerhard, 2005).

Although programs that came before it, such as *Designing Women*, exhibited traits of the "postfeminist postfamily" that is a crucial element of the narrative in *Sex and*

the City, it is my belief that no series before it dealt with this element as deeply and as complexly as it did. Gerhard (2005) asserts that a key difference between *Sex and the City* and other "women programs" is that the show "regularly suggested that this family of four could be enough to make up a life still worth living without the husband or the baby, a life led outside the historic feminine and feminist script." The series rejects female victimization and "demonstrates its knowledge of the images of abject single femininity that proliferate in popular culture while differentiating itself from those images" (Negra, 2004).

The women of *Sex and the City*, according to Kim (2001) do not merely fantasize in a surreal world as other characters such as Alley McBeal do. They don't just talk or think about doing things, but instead actually do them and act upon their thoughts. They also make mistakes and learn from these mistakes. They move on and continue to make choices. "All of the women in *Sex and the City*, Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha, are on display: their professional choices, their choices in lovers, their clothes and their bodies" (Kim, 2001).

Sex and the City provides a crucial representation of women in a society and media culture that often and regularly places harsh judgment on women who are either unmarried, childless and/or professional (Negra, 2004). "The series generates complex portrayals of (mostly) single, sexually active working women, sketching in rich detail characters who would have merely been femmes fatales in another era" (Negra, 2004).

In her focus group study of viewers of *Sex and the City*, Stern (2005) asked a sample of mostly student volunteers at a large Midwestern university questions that allowed her to examine how *Sex and the City* contributes to the empowerment of women

and the sexualization of women, how relevant the issues discussed in *Sex and the City* are to their own lives, and what the series says about the nature of society in America today.

This study in addition to the extensive analysis undertaken on *Sex and the City* by other researchers, have brought to the forefront the fact that the series is one that concerns a myriad of important issues as related to women, femininity, sexual politics and feminism.

In another *Sex and the City* academic analysis, Richards (2003) examines Carrie Bradshaw, the main character of the show, as a possible flaneuse (or male flaneur) of the postmodern era. This concept, according to Richards (2003), is similar to the streetwalker who traditionally roamed the streets and arcades of nineteenth century Paris, observing city street life. She asserts that the women of *Sex and the City* are "the post-feminist, postmodern version of femininity, where economic, intellectual and sexual liberation has been achieved, thus allowing them to engage in a glamorous consumption of men and clothes."

In addition, Ross (2005) discusses the ways in which *Sex and the City* offers a direct examination of female sexual desire and its connection to other desires. Ross argues that the series does this by showing women discussing sexuality and personal sexual desires, gender roles in modern society, and their consumption of material goods with other women. In addition, she suggests that the women of *Sex and the City* incorporate sexual desire into a consumerist framework which allows them to manage their sexuality through discussion of sexual choices, gender role options and actual material goods.

Although Stern (2005) concerned herself and her study with many of the issues I wish to examine through the present study, she did not postulate the possibility of the agenda-setting and cultivation effects that a series like *Sex and the City* could have on its viewers. I argue, that because of its complex representations of women and women's issues, *Sex and the City* could be a strong tool not for telling women what to think, but certainly what to think about in relation to their female identities and their role in society, while also cultivating ideas about female sexuality, romantic relationships, friendship, professional lives, New York City and affluent lifestyles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS:

BEYOND PUBLIC AFFAIRS-
AGENDA-SETTING & ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA:

Agenda setting theory, from its origins in McCombs and Shaw's 1972 study which looked at a small group of undecided voters at Chapel Hill and the agenda issues in the news media they used to follow the 1968 presidential campaign, has almost exclusively concerned itself with public affairs and the news media despite the fact that entertainment media usually enjoys a larger viewership than the news media does (McCombs, 2005). More recently, a few scholars (Holbert et al., 2003 as cited by Holbrook & Hill, 2005) have begun to look at the possible agenda-setting effects of entertainment television. In a 2005 study, Holbrook and Hill combined laboratory experiments with cross-sectional survey data to examine the role crime dramas might play in influencing public opinion. Their results suggested that the viewing of crime dramas drives perceptions of a more crime-ridden world in need of political action.

McCombs (2005) explains that agenda-setting research has grown far beyond its original domain set in the transfer of salience from the media to the public agenda and

now encompasses five distinct stages of theoretical attention. These include basic agenda-setting effects, attribute agenda setting, the psychology of agenda-setting effects, sources of the media agenda, and consequences of agenda-setting.

Basic agenda setting effects are based on the idea that the transfer of salience from the news media to the public is a key early step in the formation of public opinion. Attribute agenda setting effects then propose that the media agenda becomes prominent over time on the public agenda. That is, the media cannot only be successful in telling us what to think but also in telling us how to think about it (McCombs, 2005). Next, the concept of the psychology of agenda-setting effects finds its value in the idea that voters (or any individuals) with a higher "need for orientation" will exhibit higher agenda-setting effects than those with a smaller need. The sources of the media agenda stage of agenda-setting asks the question, "If the press sets the public agenda, who sets the media agenda?" The answer is that the pattern of news coverage that defines the media agenda results from the norms and traditions of journalism, the constraints of time and the daily interactions between the news and news organizations themselves. Finally, the consequences of the agenda-setting effects stage identifies three main consequences of agenda-setting for attitudes and opinions: forming an opinion, priming opinions about public figures through an emphasis on particular issues and shaping an opinion through emphasis on particular attributes (McCombs, 2005).

Shaw and Martin (1992) conducted a study in which they used poll and content analysis data to compare media use and agenda agreement for different types of reference groups and concluded that one major function of the mass media is to enhance group consensus within the larger social system by providing issue agenda options more

attractive than those historically learned and expressed as an aspect of one's gender, race, age, level of education, or level of wealth.

Shaw and Martin (1992) state that many people and institutions, not only the news media, have an interest in setting or influencing personal or public agendas.

More recently, McCombs (2005) has pointed to the new trend that exists in expanding the core idea of agenda-setting theory, the transfer of salience, to a wide variety of new settings beyond public opinion. I argue that a television show like *Sex and the City* which has reached and touched so many with its complex and inviting narrative, can transfer the salience of certain "feminine" issues and discourses onto its viewers, especially young college women, ages 18-24.

BEYOND VIOLENCE-
CULTIVATION THEORY & DRAMATIC/COMEDY PROGRAMMING:

While agenda-setting theory has traditionally focused on public affairs, cultivation theory has traditionally focused on television programs involving violent content. The theory was first developed by George Gerbner with the assistance of his colleagues and students at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania beginning in the early 1960s (Ostroff, 2007).

Cultivation theory assumes several things. First, it assumes that many of the things we know or claim to know come largely from the stories we are told (mostly by television, as far as this theory is concerned) and to a much lesser extent from actual personal experience. Deemed a theory of social control, cultivation also assumes that television stories reinforce the dominant power structure of society; a white, male dominated society. Moreover, television stories are thought to be "centralized, standardized, market-driven, advertiser-sponsored" and therefore cultivation theory

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focuses on the mass production of messages. One of the crucial assumptions of cultivation is that all television content is fundamentally the same and therefore it does not matter what you watch because there is just one set of recurring universal themes that permeate through all programming (Ostroff, 2007).

In addition, cultivation theory assumes that television is the "source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history," "the mainstream of the common symbolic environment," and that it's "drama, commercials, news and other programs bring a relatively coherent system of images and messages into every home" (Ostroff, 2007).

Finally, the theory assumes that television is unique in comparison to other media vehicles and that many kinds of programming, including news, share similar crucial features of story-telling. As would seem obvious, those viewers who watch television more heavily are said to see the world more in accordance with the TV version than lighter viewers (Ostroff, 2007). Interestingly though, according to Ostroff (2007), heavy viewers in one demographic group will have more similar opinions on television-affected issues with heavy viewers in another demographic group than will light viewers in their own demographic group.

As a research initiative, cultivation theory is concerned with the long-term effects of television on large populations and places an emphasis on total immersion rather than selective exposure, assuming that the effects of cultivation are highest among heavy television viewers. Cultivation however is not just an effect; instead it arises from a complex mix of influences, not just television exposure. Moreover, there is a two-way relationship and interaction between television and its audiences, rather than a one-way

process occurring only from the television to the audience. The research agenda in this area, then, is concerned with three methods: the institutional process analysis (the formulation of policies directing the massive flow of media messages), message system analysis or content analysis, and cultivation analysis through the use of interviews and surveys (Ostroff, 2007).

Lastly, the concept of resonance, according to Ostroff (2007), suggests that lessons gained from watching television are most pronounced in viewers when they are confirmed by experience. Thus, I suggest the possible cultivation effects that might result from heavy viewing of *Sex and the City* will be more distinct in those viewers who have similar experiences to those presented on the show in their daily lives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What postfeminist values are presented in *Sex and the City*?

2. What social agendas are being sold to young women through *Sex and the City*?

3. What ideas are being packaged and sold to young women in *Sex and the City*?

4. What image of the world does *Sex and the City* cultivate in young women in regards to New York City, friendship, male-female relationships, physical appearance and careers?

5. Do young women see any relevance to *Sex and the City* in their own lives?

METHODOLOGY:

In a focus group lasting approximately one hour, five University of Florida female students (both undergraduate and graduate students, ages 18-24) were asked questions concerning their perceptions, attitudes and experiences with *Sex and the City*. Discussion topics included but were not limited to participant's general thoughts on the series, their likes and dislikes regarding the show, and their feelings on how women, work, family

and consumerism are portrayed through the show. Participants were also asked questions concerning each of the four individual, main female characters, shows preceding *Sex and the City* that might have exhibited similar content or themes, the main messages offered by the series, its relevance to their own lives, and their perceptions of singlehood and marriage, and how these are portrayed in the show.

Flyers for the recruitment of participants were distributed in the J. Wayne Reitz Union colonnade at the University of Florida during the course of several days. Flyers were also posted on bulletin boards in the Institute of Hispanic/Latino Cultures and the Institute of Black Culture at UF. Interested individuals were asked to e-mail the principal investigator for further information regarding the time and place in which the focus group would take place. Once enough interested persons contacted the researcher, a time and place that was convenient to all parties was chosen. Seven individuals expressed an interest in participating. However, only five people actually showed up to the focus group. Although focus groups are usually most desirable with six to eight participants, five was an acceptable number in this instance due to the exploratory nature of the present study. For this reason also, there was no need for probability sampling for this particular study. Participants were offered free food and refreshments in appreciation for their participation.

FINDINGS:

Participants included 2 graduate students (public health major and educational leadership major), and 3 undergraduate students (public relations/criminology double major, political science major and sociology major). Two participants were 21 years old, two were 22 years old, and one 24 years old. Three participants were of Hispanic-Latino

descent, one of Caucasian/Hispanic-Latino descent and one of Caucasian descent. All participants were regular viewers of *Sex and the City*, although some were more avid viewers than others.

A majority of the participants described *Sex and the City* and its many facets in a largely positive manner. Only one participant began with some reservations on several of the show's messages, but later agreed with the rest of the group that the positive messages and aspects of the show outweighed the negative ones. This participant felt the show was at times "far-fetched" and "ridiculous." She added:

> "I just think, you know, it's kind of sad if women are really sleeping with that many men and going through so many relationships, so many little issues."

All of the participants expressed some sense of the show being "far-fetched" at least at times especially in regards to the up-scale lifestyle the four women lead and the consumerism they exhibit. Still, all participants attributed a larger sense of reality to the show in regards to the relationships that are portrayed in the show, both the romantic and platonic ones, and to the experiences and personalities of the four women.

In discussing the four different main characters of the show, participants felt these women all exhibited strength and power in their own unique ways. As a group the women were described as "quirky," "smart," "sexy," and "powerful." Individually, Carrie was described as the "spasy" and more emotional character. She was described as the more vulnerable and often times immature one, but also as the one who seemed to experiment the most and make the most mistakes, while also learning the most throughout the course of the show. Miranda was described as focused and driven, sarcastic and dry. Participants also noted substantial growth in her character throughout the show, and a sense of her having "warmed up" as the show progressed. Charlotte was

described as the idealistic one searching for the perfect husband and the white picket fence, the character representing the traditional woman. On the other hand, participants also felt that Charlotte's evolution throughout the show signified, more than any other character did, that "nothing is really traditional anymore and anything goes." Finally, Samantha was described as the sultry one, the sex symbol, the ultimate female powerhouse of confidence. Participants often expressed a desire to be more like Samantha while finding it difficult to actually do so. They expressed that Samantha says and does all of the things women secretly want to do or wish they could do, but often either lack the confidence to do or are afraid of how society might view their actions.

The characters were often considered by participants as representative fourths of a whole woman instead of individuals that could stand on their own. The individual characteristics of each allowed the audience, according to participants, to see the different facets of a complete woman.

Participants also expressed that these women are not typically beautiful and therefore give a more realistic representation of women as compared to other television content. One participant discussed Samantha in this regard:

> "Something I always liked about Samantha is that she's supposed to be the ultimate sex symbol on the show, the really sexy one. The guys all went for her and then she has like no breasts and I always thought that was interesting and that didn't even come up until towards the very end when they diagnose her with cancer after she wanted to get a boob job and then they found that out…..I was always impressed that she didn't have like you know, what men would see as a major necessity in a sex symbol."

Another participant discussed Miranda's pregnancy as an avenue to realistically portray what a woman's body sometimes endures in addition to an instance when Charlotte portrayed a woman's difficulty with her body.

> "Yeah I definitely liked it when Miranda was pregnant and like talking about getting back into her skinny jeans and like...that is like the only time they really had to deal with weight or like when Charlotte didn't wanna be naked in the sauna…"

One participant also mentioned Sarah Jessica Parker's (Carrie's) nontraditional looks as far as what television considers to be an attractive woman. Finally, another participant observed that although the woman are still attractive and for the most part physically fit, the show does a good job of showing how they achieve this instead of pretending it all happens magically.

> **"**Yeah, but they always show them like working out. I mean like they show them all like sharing an ice cream but they show them that like in that ladies inner wisdom episode that they're like doing yoga, or running or wrestling. Yeah so it's not like oh why are they so thin? Like they portray, u know, a healthy woman should work out."

As far as how women are represented in the show, participants felt that they were portrayed positively for the most part. Although the show could be misconstrued as purely about sex and a foursome of loose spinsters, participants noted that if you were an avid watcher of the show, you would realize that it is more about the individual characters, their growth, and their friendships with each other than it is about sexual escapades and extreme up-scale lifestyles.

In discussing how the women's professional lives are portrayed in the series, participants expressed that the characters were not seen working as much as they would have liked to see. However, they did note that Miranda is often shown at work, probably the most out of the four main characters. They also noted that Miranda's character adequately portrays what it is like for women in the workforce in the struggles that she faces and the amount of work that she has to do in order to make it in a male-dominated field (she is a corporate lawyer).

> **"....**like Miranda, they show her like working her 80-hour weeks so and that power struggle. She has to struggle with, oh, she has this meeting with this partner and is she going to make partner and she has to pretend she's a lesbian. Like what is that supposed to mean. Like you know if I'm a lesbian that's less risk of me having a child that is going to pull me away from the firm? Is it gonna make me more "manly" or something and that she's able to come out and be like I'm not a lesbian and she still gets partnership so…"

> **"**I think as far as what it's like to be a woman in the workforce. I mean, I think, she's working [Miranda]…that's like a male-dominated field. Having like a child and they give her crap for like missing work and being late and she's pretty

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much like a single mom and …you know, for a while. So I find her the most realistic as far as what it's like for a woman to be in the workforce."

"I think they show Miranda at work even more than they show Carrie at work, cuz since she is the narrator, you know, when she's doing the voice over, she I guess is typing but they show Miranda at work most often so I think that is more realistic. Like that is what it's like for women in the workforce. They have to fight for it. Sometimes they have to pretend they're lesbians (laugh). It's probably not to that extreme you know, but it's difficult, because I've seen movies you know. It was like some movie with Jennifer Aniston where she had to pretend that she was about to get married and then she would get a raise. You know, like getting married showed that she's a serious person, that she's stable, she was gonna buy a house, she was gonna stick around with the company, she wasn't like gonna leave them, so I think, you know, that is a realistic portrayal. But it is kind of strange that she has to pretend to be a lesbian. Like, oh, she's a lesbian, now I understand, so it's ok."

The character's individual jobs were seen by participants as glamorous and sometimes unrealistic, although they still asserted that seeing the women working in these glamorous, up-scale jobs, is a positive representation. Still, participants agreed that because the women in the show are in their mid 30s and 40s, it is more plausible that they would be in the professional positions they are in, because they have had time to work themselves up in their respective careers.

When asked whether there is any concept of family in the series, participants expressed that although traditional family members were only scarcely mentioned, there is a definite sense of family present in the show in the relationship that is portrayed between the four main characters.

"I mean when they have emergencies, they call one another or like when Miranda threw out her back, she called Carrie and you know, they always call each other….which I think is realistic. If you're living in a city that you're not originally from, then you're going to turn to the people who have become your family, you're going to call your friends in an emergency, because your mother that's living, you know, in Miami is not going to fly over there to get you if you fall."

As previously mentioned, participants often noted that the show, when analyzed more closely, is more so about the relationship and friendship between the four women than anything else.

Although participants often discussed the consumerism in the show, particularly Carrie's outlandish shoe shopping and the foursome's expensive lunch dates and lavish New York City apartments in addition to brand name merchandise often appearing on the show, they asserted not ever feeling like they were being sold anything in the sense of a

traditional product. They also never mentioned the consumerism of men and sex that has

previously been postulated by several scholars of the series. Participants did however feel

that they were being sold the lifestyle and the messages present in the show. One

participant noted:

> "I don't think that when I'm watching it I am [feel she is being sold a message]. I mean, when you think about it later, you
> don't think they're selling you a message, but you take in that message and you could choose whether to apply it to your
> life or not. Oh, they sold me to be confident."

Participants then felt the series pushed several messages onto its female audience.

These included "the fabulous kind of lifestyle," power and confidence. One participant

also alluded to an episode in which Samantha is convinced to take an HIV test, showing

that "yeah, she's off sleeping with these people, but she needs to take care of her health

too."

Moreover, participants more indirectly discussed other messages offered by the

series. Among these was the message that it is OK to be 35 and single, that it is OK to be

a powerful, independent woman, have it all and be proud of that; it is OK to make

mistakes and learn from them, that one should not apologize for the way they choose to

live their lives, that it is better to be alone and happy rather than unhappy in a relationship

or marriage, and the importance of friendship. More on the negative side, participants

felt that the show often portrayed marriage as negative; that the women, despite their

independence are always at the core, searching for someone, and finally that although

Samantha is allowed to be sexually free, gutsy and powerful, she is "called out on her

slutiness" at several times throughout the series. Still, one participant asserted that

although the women are always looking for someone, they do not settle into a

relationship until they find the right person and the relationship that best suits all of their

needs.

Participants found the women of *Sex and the City* and many of their experiences and personality traits highly relevant to their own lives and characters. They often found themselves relating to a mix of the characters, their personalities and their experiences, rather than just one. They were able to relate to the women's relationships with men and with each other, their fears and their triumphs in addition to their desires and needs throughout the show. Participants could relate to Charlotte's wanting a child, Carrie's on and off relationship with Mr. Big, the friendship between the four women, infidelity, etc. Even those aspects with which the participants had a harder time relating to, mainly the lavish lifestyles, extravagant shopping sprees, number of sexual or romantic partners, and age, were still enjoyable to participants in that they could live "vicariously" through the four women or see some of the things they would have to deal with in their futures. One participant expressed:

> "So yeah there's just things in there that you wish you could do, you feel that you identify with them. I think its good, because even though they are in another cohort, they're like in their mid-30's and we are like in our young 20's, mid-20's, I think we're getting older, they're getting older so everyone is still learning all the time and I think hopefully by the time I'm 35, I'll know more than I know now, but it just shows, you know, you're always figuring shit out basically."

Samantha was the one character that participants expressed a desire to emulate the most. They expressed an enjoyment of living vicariously through her, particularly, because she had the ultimate confidence and never apologized for anything she did or the way in which she conducted her life. They described her as free and powerful, that part of "us [women]" that tends to be suppressed due to society's expectations of the gender, but that they all wish they could let loose. One participant alluded to an episode in which she received satisfaction from watching Samantha in action:

> "**….**when she [Samantha] was throwing the flyers with Richard's face as like revenge. That gives you like a sense of satisfaction, because you know, you've been cheated on and you're thinking what can I do to get back at him and you'd probably never make hundreds of flyers and throw them out in the city but its kind of satisfying that she's doing that and its making her feel good. Maybe it's not mature, but at the moment when you're hurt, it's empowering."

Finally, participants felt that *The Golden Girls* is the only show that came before *Sex and the City* that had a large resemblance to it because it had four women as the main characters and each of these could be found in the main characters of *Sex and the City*. Participants expressed that they could not think of many shows with four women as the main characters off the top of their heads, and also could not pin-point a show that catered to the same or similar demographic and exposed some of the same issues.

The following section will answer each of the previously postulated research questions more directly and in summary format:

1. **What postfeminist values are represented in *Sex and the City*?**

A postfeminist postfamily is clearly present in *Sex and the City*. The four main characters find comfort and strength in each other and often suggest that their relationship is enough to sustain a happy and fulfilling lifestyle, without the traditional family components of a husband and child, mother, siblings, etc. Participants seemed highly aware of this component throughout their discussions.

Also a postfeminist value, participants alluded to the fact that Samantha, although she is free, confident and powerful, is often called out on her overly sexual lifestyle. In addition, participants expressed that the women, despite all of their independence, are always looking for someone, suggesting that their independence and power come at a cost, much as it does in *Murphy Brown*. Also, the same consciousness-raising and "women's talk" that is present in *Designing Women* is present here as well as the "commercial femininity" which allows women the freedom to work but not the freedom to abandon traditional conceptions of beauty. Although participants expressed that the four women are not all traditionally beautiful, they are still in large part attractive and feminine.

Samantha then exhibits the same "rugged individualism" exhibited by *Murphy Brown* in which she "clones the male competitive model," through her highly successful career in public relations and no-apologies active sex life, and her avoidance of a serious romantic relationship, marriage and children. She is also nobody's victim much like Murphy.

Moreover, Miranda, like Murphy, "surrenders to her supposed biological clock" and decided to have a baby on her own (although she marries the father much later in the series). Charlotte is constantly trying to become pregnant during her two marriages on the series, and Carrie gives thought to having a child on her own at one point in the show. Despite the fact that the women in the show are all professionals, they are seldom seen working although they are in some instances. In this way, their lives are compartmentalized.

In conclusion, *Sex and the City* exhibits postfeminism in much the same way as *Murphy Brown* does by emphasizing the personal costs of professional success (although to a much lesser extent), conflicts between work and motherhood, choices, and individualistic solutions, while also centering itself around a very meaningful and central "postfeminist postfamily" like the one present in *Designing Women*.

2. **What social agendas are being sold to young women through *Sex and the City*?**

Through *Sex and the City*, young women are sold a "fabulous type of lifestyle." They are exposed to an array of extravagant shopping sprees, expensive lunches in the city (NYC) with friends, luxurious apartments, extremely active dating and sex lives and glamorous jobs.

3. What ideas are being packaged and sold to young women in *Sex and the City*?

Through *Sex and the City*, young women are being sold ideas of confidence, power and independence. They are being sold the idea that it is acceptable to be older and unmarried, to try different relationships until they find the one that serves all of their desires and needs, to love themselves before loving someone else, that it is acceptable to make mistakes and learn from them, that female friendships and bonds are important to a women's life and survival, and that we are all flawed as human beings and will always experience growth, regardless of age. They are being sold the idea that women must take care of their bodies in a healthy way and can be sexually free, but must also take care of their health while doing so. In addition, young women are being sold the message that at the core, they will always want to find someone in order to find happiness and that straying too far away from society's norms and expectations will often have repercussions.

4. What image of the world does *Sex and the City* cultivate in young women in regards to New York City, friendship, male-female relationships, physical appearance and careers?

Sex and the City has the potential to cultivate a very unrealistic image of New York City in young women, although the participants in the present study did not exhibit these effects due to having been to New York and perhaps due to their higher levels of education. Still, participants expressed that watching the show, without having actually been to the city, could lead audiences to believe that the city is considerably less expensive than it really is; that large, attractive apartments are easy to obtain and affordable, that glamorous careers in the city are just up for grabs, and that it is easy and affordable to keep up with a high-paced lifestyle full of expensive meals, shoes and social outings in the city.

In regards to friendship, *Sex and the City* cultivates the image that female friendship is essential to a woman's well-being and that it can replace the need for a traditional family. In regards to male-female relationships, the series cultivates the image that these are complicated, ever-flawed, and numerous. The series then cultivates the idea that physical appearance is not as important as confidence and that it is something that is achieved through a healthy, active lifestyle rather than that it just comes naturally and effortlessly. It also cultivates the image that different aspects can create beauty, not just a predetermined set of attributes as shown by the discussion of Samantha as a sex symbol despite her small breast size and her struggle with cancer. Finally, the series cultivates the idea that glamorous careers are easy to come by and sensational, although not always to such a great extent. Less often characters on the series are shown struggling with career issues and working hard. The age of the characters also helps to cultivate the idea that the characters have achieved the success and status they have in their careers due to the time they have spent in their respective careers, thus having had time to move up professionally.

Consistent with the concept of resonance in cultivation theory, the lessons learned from the series by participants were more pronounced when they were confirmed by experience; when they could relate to them and could find instances of them in their lives. Thus, the participants seemed to share the "TV version" of the romantic male-female relationships, female friendship and the female identity stories told through *Sex and the City* more so than they did the stories told about extravagant lifestyles and glamorous jobs.

5. Do young women see any relevance of *Sex and the City* in their own lives?

The participants in this study clearly demonstrated seeing a relevance to their own lives in the show. They related most to the relationships portrayed in the show, both between the women themselves and in

their relationships with men. Participants were also able to relate to the individual characteristics of the different women, and the different experiences they encounter and deal with throughout the series in addition to their insecurities, growth, wants, needs and desires. Again, they saw less relevance in the extravagant lifestyles led by the characters, but still found enjoyment and satisfaction in living vicariously through them.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION:

Sex and the City has proven itself time and time again to be culturally relevant and academically viable as a subject matter. The present findings, although by no means generalizable, suggest that the series exhibits a great potential to have agenda-setting and cultivation effects on its largely female audience.

The participants in this study demonstrated, through their discussions, that the show has a significantly clear set of messages that they often internalize and believe. These messages, highly related to the participants as women, create an agenda which tells these women what to think about in terms of relationships, work, appearance, life, being a woman, etc. I would argue the agenda-setting effects of this series are largely positive. Messages of independence, power, confidence and having it all as a woman in today's society are highly valuable in a show that has penetrated such a large female audience and a media-system that is still largely representative of traditional patriarchic values. This series shows women that they can live their lives how they choose, be powerful, stand up for themselves in relationships with men and in life, to work hard and play hard, and to appreciate all of the many facets of being a woman in modern society.

Although this study was just an exploratory one, it shows the possible agenda-setting power of entertainment media instead of the more traditionally examined news-media. I argue that entertainment media can have even larger agenda-setting effects on it audiences due to the fact that individuals consume these media products in a more relaxed fashion (perhaps to escape or unwind) and therefore may be more likely to

internalize messages or agendas that do not seem as though they are being shoved down their throats as political ones might often seem. Messages embedded in entertainment media might thus have the ability to create larger agenda-setting effects. Again, the present study is just an exploratory one, but future research should use more grounded, quantitative measures to gauge the agenda-setting effects of this and other entertainment media programming.

The present study also suggests that *Sex and the City* has the potential to cultivate images of New York City, friendship, male-female relationships, physical appearance and careers among other aspects in its largely female audience. Although the participants of the present study did not seem to exhibit belief in the less realistic aspects of the series, namely the "fabulous" lifestyle full of bistro lunches and expensive shoes, large NYC apartments, countless sexual escapades, and always glamorous jobs due to low resonance, a less educated or more impressionable audience might be more likely to believe in these images. In addition, the series cultivates more realistic and positive images such that female friendship is essential to a woman's well-being, that male-female relationships are difficult and flawed, and that being attractive is a combination of physical appearance (achieved through a healthy, active lifestyle) and confidence. The more negative images the show might have the potential to cultivate are that female friendship eradicates the need for a traditional family, that male-female relationships and sexual partners are and should be numerous, and that being independent and sexually free will inevitably have its negative consequences.

This study was designed to serve as a launch pad for the exploration of the possible agenda-setting and cultivation effects of entertainment media, namely the series *Sex and*

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the City, in order to open the floor for further and more grounded investigation of these effects with regards to this series and other dramatic/comedy programs. The findings offered here could help to design future research on these effects to gauge whether the potential agenda-setting and cultivation effects found here are statistically significant and whether this kind of study would be valuable in relation to other popular television programming. Future studies should also examine more diverse populations and larger samples, other programming in addition to *Sex and the City*, and possibly look at the effects that could be produced in audiences for which *Sex and the City* and other programming was not initially intended (in this case men).

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