

Sex and the City: Perpetual Adolescence Gendered Feminine?

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Gendered Media Messages

This essay examines the marketing discourse of “perpetual adolescence,” which trains both young and old to be consumers of “youth” in a marketplace that privileges adolescence over adulthood. The main purveyor of this discourse is the media, and even more specifically, television, which de-stabilizes identity formation by over-saturating the individual with images and identities for possible ownership and consumption. One of the problems with examining televisual representations of perpetual adolescence is that the televisual discourse is typically gendered masculine (and white, hetero, middle-class masculine), which means that the lifestyles that are continually privileged become so widely distributed that we view them as “natural” and “normal” and the standard against which we judge all other lifestyles. In television sitcoms, the lifestyles that are most often replicated and privileged have historically centered on a “Leave it To Beaver” model, which includes a nuclear family unit with a working father, a stay at home mother, two or more children, and a house in the suburbs. Tied into these representations are gendered expectations of what are considered socially accepted male and female roles (that men should work and women should stay home), and a variety of stereotypical characteristics that we associate with being either masculine or feminine traits (such as: men are supposed to be strong, silent, detached, decisive, etc., and women are supposed to be sensitive, emotional, collaborative, etc.). Even more recent sitcoms, which do not center around the nuclear family unit, such as “Friends,” still participate in re-enforcing gendered stereotypes through the traits associated with each of the main characters. For example, on *Friends*, women are represented by Monica, an

obsessive cleaner and gourmet chef, Rachel, a waitress fixated on shopping and fashion, and Pheobe, a spacey and compassionate folk singer, and men are represented by Joey, a macho and promiscuous actor, Chandler, a funny and insightful businessman, and Ross, an intellectual and dorky anthropologist. As Marx and Engels critiqued in “The Ruling Class & Ruling Ideas,” at any moment in society, the ruling ideas of that society are the offspring of the ruling class.¹ Or to put it even more simply: the dominant ideology of a society reflects the interests of those with the most power and those who have the most power are those who have access to the prevailing system of production. Therefore, what they produce focuses on their desires, dreams, hopes, and aspirations for society and reinforces their powerbase by replicating their lifestyle as what is “normal.” Those who do not have access to the system of production are left to accept the images, ideas, and objects of the dominant class as normal even when it does not reflect their real lives, but instead works to keep them subjected to poverty, domination, and subordination. In short, those who control what Marx called the means of material production (for example, the making of things), also control the system of intellectual production (or the making of ideas) because objects carry ideas and ideologies with them.

This essay is particularly interested in examples of the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence that are gendered feminine. How does analyzing media discourse that is gendered feminine alter the notion of “perpetual adolescence”: Does it make it stronger, weaker, or alter it into non-existence? This essay examines the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) as a case study for the existence of a “perpetual adolescence” gendered feminine. *Sex and the City* followed the lives of four single New York women, in their thirties, through their pursuit of love, companionship, and a good time. HBO described the

series and its characters in language that aimed to allow the show's audience to connect to one or more of its characters:

Carrie Bradshaw writes a column about sex and relationships in New York City. With three of her closest friends Samantha Jones, a big time publicist who is more interested on being "on the spot" than in a long term relationship; Miranda Hobbes, a cynic lawyer, who refuses to accept the possibility of being single and fights society against the social pre-concepts to keep a relationship alive and Charlotte McDougal, an art gallery curator who is a bit prudish when it comes to sex, but hasn't yet lost her faith in finding true love.²

Ultimately, what we discover is that *Sex and the City* offers a dualism that both stands as a critique of social norms at the same time as reinforcement for those same norms it is critiquing. This dualism is often associated with postfeminism and the television sitcom. In *Sex and The City* this dualism occurs around issues of competing sexual identities, which is, according to adolescent psychology, a hallmark of adolescence, as well as around the consumption of commodities in order to establish a particular identity and lifestyle—areas of youth culture targeted by big business since the inception of “teenagers” as a niche category.³ Over the last half-century, a major focus of the advertising agency has been young people, either as a gateway to adult consumer spending or as young consumers in their own right. As baby boomers became teenagers in the 1950s and 1960s, advertising appeared in tune with baby boomers and many ad campaigns moved their focus towards the billion dollar “youth market” and its disposable income.⁴ When the baby boomers became thirty-somethings, and then forty-somethings, and even grandparents, advertisements always seemed to move step-by-step with the boomers in the aging process, with one key feature: the faces and focus of the ads got older (from O-Pee-Chee Baseball Cards to Roloids), but the idea of “youth” and being “youthful” never left. This appeal to “youthfulness” in advertising is part of what I call

the marketing discourse of “perpetual adolescence” in that advertisers appeal to the youthful sensibilities of the adult consumer by selling “youth” itself as a lifestyle and tie-in commodity to whatever else the ad is pitching. The discourse of perpetual adolescence is not a recent phenomenon; instead, it is a discourse that emerged in the late 1940s, when theories from social psychology and the critique of mass society zeroed in on lifecycle, identity development, peer influence, and group behavior and both regimes of thought began to appear inside the advertising agency, where they were used specifically to help increase sales within the growing youth market.

Perpetual Adolescence, Postfeminism, and *Sex and the City*

In *Purchasing the Teenage Canadian Identity: ICTs, American Media, and Brand Name Consumption* (2005), I speculated that North American society in the new millennium (due to a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, those in the article’s title) had placed itself in a situation where the traditional lines of distinction between adulthood and adolescence had been erased.⁵ More specifically, the paper discussed the ways in which the culture industries fragmented the marketplace throughout the twentieth century to create niche markets to which advertisers could market and sell specific brand-name commodities; the most notable niche has been the “teenage” market. Here, the term “culture industries” is used in a similar fashion to Adorno and Horkheimer, who employ the term to refer to all of the industries involved in the appropriation and de-politicizing of art, through its mass production and sale for profit.⁶ I suggested that the emergence of a fragmented marketplace was the result of a merger between American big business and the culture industries, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, and was in part due to technological advancements in information and communication

technologies (beginning with the railroad, until the present day). I concluded with the assertion that the culture industries and media conglomerates of the new millennium had begun the quest to re-unify the market place to a pre-railroad state where all consumers, although members of smaller targeted niche markets, are part of one dominant market ideology. This ideology would be that of the consumer with an adult wallet and youthful sensibilities, also known as the perpetual adolescent.

The history of perpetual adolescence as a marketing discourse is also the history of the creation of a youth consumer market and is therefore intertwined with the advertising industry and its growth in the United States. The term “youth consumer market” has a double meaning in that it refers to the creation of a destabilized youth identity based on an over-saturation of images and identities for consumption by the culture industries, but it also refers to the valorization and idealization of youth sensibilities by adults. Perpetual adolescence then is a marketing discourse targeted both to the old and to the young. Although media images would suggest otherwise, one is not either adult or perpetual adolescent. It is important to note that these are not hard lines (adulthood and childhood), nor are they binary distinctions. Rather, in our current post-millennial society, the barriers between adulthood and adolescence are fluid and permeable, causing people to move back and forth between a desire to “grow-up” and a desire to “stay young” continually throughout their entire life. As people move in and out of perpetual adolescence the culture industries are always trying to sell them newer and flashier images of youth for possible ownership and consumption to bring them back to perpetual adolescence.

Postfeminism is one of those dangerous terms that academics often try to avoid using since it can have a multiplicity of meanings. In this piece, the term postfeminism will be used similarly to the ways Angela McRobbie uses the term in her piece “Postfeminism and Popular Culture,” in which she uses it to speak about a double-entanglement. This double-entanglement “comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life...with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations.”⁷ McRobbie’s definition of double-entanglement is especially important in explaining how *Sex and The City* works like a traditional sitcom by both acting as a site of resistance for heteronormative sexual practices through the girls’ discourse of their sex in the city and at the same time reinforcing the social norms it critiques by placing such a heavy influence on finding the right guy to settle down with and marry. Jane Gerhard in her 2005 article “Sex and The City: Carrie Bradshaw’s Queer Postfeminism” says that “[t]o see Carrie Bradshaw’s queer postfeminism, then, is to see her sex life as a product of a longer representational history of women, feminist or not, who sought sexual freedom or freer expression of female sexuality.”⁸ Queer postfeminism refers to the connection between postfeminism and queer theory, which suggests that identities are not fixed and do not dictate who we are (the world is more complex than “straight” and “gay”) and proposes that we deliberately challenge all notions of fixed identity politics. According to queer theory, “sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and which then operate under the rubric of what is ‘natural, essential, biological or god-given’ and this needs to

be challenged.”⁹ Queer postfeminism seeks to problematize these neo-conservative ideals about sexuality by highlighting the choices and diversity available in the lives of women with regards to all types of relationships. The double-entanglement of postfeminism can be seen in *Sex and the City* through how at the same time that Carrie Bradshaw connects to the earlier feminist movements in episodes such as season one’s “Valley of the Twenty-Something Guys” where Carrie, a thirty-something lady, enjoys the traditionally masculine practice of dating a younger partner and discusses the taboo of a thirty-something lady doing so, she also distances herself from those same movements by continually searching for “the one” and having the traditional husband-wife relationship as the end goal or overarching theme of the entire sitcom. It is through this double-entanglement that the issues of sexuality and consumption, which comprise the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence gendered feminine, are dealt with on *Sex and The City*.

The Dialogical Sitcom

The type of television programming that this paper will examine, namely *Sex and The City*, is part of a hybrid television genre that I have termed the “dialogical sitcom”—i.e., a genre situated somewhere among sitcom, soap opera, and reality television (other titles in this genre include *Fat Actress* or *So NoTORIous*). Although all sitcoms involve dialogue, in the dialogical sitcom the movement in the show happens completely through its dialogue: the dialogue is the action. The setting of the sitcom is used simply to house dialogue: the brownstone, the store, the restaurant, the coffee shop, et al. are all used not primarily as settings for action, but instead as spaces in which dialogue is to take place. Therefore, when we see the girls at the Yankees baseball game in the season two episode

“Take Me Out to The Ballgame,” the episode is not concerned with the outcome of the baseball game (this piece of information is inconsequential to the episode or its main themes); rather, the Yankee game is simply the space where the girls engage in the dialogue about men and dating around which the episode is framed. In this way, the dialogical sitcom is similar to reality television (like *Trading Spaces* or *Survivor*) which relies heavily on dialogue for action. A typical episode of *Sex and the City* usually involves a monologue by Carrie in her apartment, which sets up dialogue between herself and her girlfriends at any of the following: coffee shop, restaurant, lounge, bar, store, or New York City street. All of the show’s movement and action takes place by one of these conversations introducing the next.

The show *Sex and The City* is a sitcom in the most literal definition of the genre title: it is a situational comedy. The show takes on a theme or issue and seeks to work through it over the course of the show’s length and always tries to end with a resolution of the issue, even when the resolution is not a happy ending (although more times than not it ends happily). As Bonnie Dow illustrates in her pieces on *Murphy Brown* and *Designing Women* in her book *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*, the sitcom is a site for both resistance and for reinforcement of social norms. As Dow says, “There is a doubleness to the perceived meaning of the sitcom; it is discussed at once, as an affirmation of women’s progress and as a reminder of the problems such progress has created.”¹⁰ *Sex and The City* takes part in each of these practices. For example, *Sex in the City* acts as an affirmation of women’s progress in episodes such as Season Four’s “What’s Sex got to do With It,” in which Miranda, who is unhappy with her string of bad dates, decides that she is going on

a sex strike, and takes control of her own sex life. However, at the same time, *Sex in the City* acts as a reminder of the problems such progress has created, as demonstrated by the Season Four episode “All that Glitters,” in which Miranda is forced to hide her pregnancy from her coworkers because she is fearful of not making partner and being pigeonholed at work if they view her as a mother instead of as a lawyer.

The show *Sex and The City* also resembles reality television through its use of “real dialogue.” *Sex and The City* provides the viewer with what are presented as real female conversations about issues of sex in a fashion that has typically been a place for female silence on television. Although shows such as *The Golden Girls* or *Designing Women*. used humour as a way of dialoguing about female sexuality, they did so without the explicitness of *Sex and the City*, which attempted to construct an authentic type of dialogue similar to that heard in reality television. This “real” dialogue allowed for conversations like the one between Carrie and Samantha that takes place in the bathroom of Miranda’s apartment during her son Brady’s first birthday party in the Season Six episode “One,” during which Samantha is complaining to Carrie about the appearance of grey pubic hairs with the comment, “No one wants to fuck grandma’s pussy.” Although *The Golden Girls* may have alluded to the subject, *Sex and the City* took a reality television approach to dialogue in explicitly stating the issue. As Jane Arthurs argues in “*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama,” “the novelty of *Sex and The City*...lies in the migration of a women-centred and explicit sexual discourse into television drama.”¹¹ Furthermore, issues that arise each episode are more times than not resolved through dialogue, rather than action. For example, Carrie dialogues with her girlfriends in order to solve her issues regarding Mr. Big’s lack of

commitment, and Carrie subsequently dialogues with the viewer through the voice-over synopsis at the end of each episode to bring closure to each show.

Sex and The City also borrows characteristics from the genre of the soap opera. For example, the show's plot tends to focus on the rapidly changing sexual partners and relationships of its characters. Often the viewer is introduced to the episode's plot through the introduction of a crisis. The ensuing crisis mentality brought on by the episodic circumstances often appears to be unrealistic, such as in the Season Four episode "Just Say Yes," when Carrie seeks to find a down payment to buy a flat but cannot find the money and wonders where all of her cash has disappeared to over the years. When she realizes that she has spent her money on articles of clothing and currently owns hundreds of pair of shoes, more specifically Blahniks, instead of having invested in a savings account, she asks the self-reflexive and rhetorical question of whether or not she might actually become "the old woman who lives in her shoes." Furthermore, *Sex and The City* has a unique fan-type relationship with its viewers who find themselves tuning in every week, heavily invested in the sexual enterprises of these four Manhattan women. In many ways, the four characters stand-in for the audience. Their discussions of sexual promiscuity act as a way for the audience to partake in those same experiences voyeuristically. Finally, the familiarity of the plot and its continual focus on "sex" and "the city" provides the ability for the viewer to watch episodes in non-chronological order and to join into the story line at any point of the six seasons as if they have never missed an episode even if weeks, or years, have passed between episode viewings. This of course is one of the core characteristics of the soap opera genre, that although the details of the plot changes daily to keep the viewer interested in the show, the themes are

repetitive and the characters fluctuate very little so as to maintain familiarity with the viewer, even if an episode is missed.

It is important to note that situational comedies, soap operas, and reality television are not the only media genres that *Sex and The City* embodies. The television show *Sex and The City* is primarily based on Candace Bushnell's 1997 book by the same title, which housed a collection of articles from the weekly sex advice and lifestyle column that Bushnell wrote in the [New York Observer](#). Bushnell based the column on the adventures of the New York "in-crowd" that included herself, her socialite friends and their "searches for true love...or at least someone to go home with at the end of the night."¹² One could even argue that both the book and television show are based on Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 book *Sex and The Single Girl*, or even the "Cosmo Girl" identity, which represented "a sexualized symbol of pink collar femininity" that Brown later helped establish at *Cosmopolitan* magazine.¹³ "The Cosmo Girl, [is] the fictionalized woman [Brown] invented to characterize the magazine's imagined 18-34 year old female reader."¹⁴ As the age bracket of adolescence has been extended through perpetual adolescence, one could argue that the Cosmo Girl identity is one that marketing discourses in the new millennium display as one that is sought after by women of all ages. There appears to be a link between *Sex and The City* and films such as *Bridget Jones Diary*, which also began in print as a newspaper column, and similarly appears to reinforce these same images of pink collar femininity. Finally, works by Feminist Media Scholars such as Jane Arthurs and Deborah Phillips suggest that *Sex and The City* can also be seen to be connected, through its focus on consumption and sexuality, to both the

glossy women's magazine and single woman novels of the twentieth century, which had their roots in the earlier works of authors like Jane Austen.¹⁵

Finally, the fact that the show first aired on the HBO network is also significant, since as a pay-for-use network the same lines of censorship did not apply as with similar shows on cable television. Therefore, the show *Sex and The City* was provided great leeway in its discussions of sex and sexuality. Being on a non-cable channel allows for the inclusion of content usually reserved for movies and a rating higher than PG due to extreme violence, nudity, sexual content, etc. This lack of censorship in part helps to explain some of the popularity of HBO sitcoms and dramas over the last decade, including *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* or *Deadwood*. Furthermore, since HBO is a commercial-free network, the commercialism, advertising of commodities, and marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence took place within the episodes of *Sex and The City* through the ways in which the characters themselves consumed men, food, shoes, and glitter. The show itself was the commercial. Even though there were no separate commercials, "the audience is [still a] commodity manufactured and sold by media corporations to advertisers."¹⁶ *Sex and The City* advertised the latest fashions, giving credibility and importance to a woman purchasing Chanel, Gucci, Manolo Blahnik, Dolce & Gabbana, and Ralph Lauren, at the same time as it advertised the hottest restaurants, coffee shops, night clubs, and "in" spots in New York City. In fact, in addition to the explicit advertising of commodities of fashion, the show also is a advertisement for New York City itself. The show *Sex and the City* has been used a large scale promotional vehicle for tourism in New York by promoting restaurants and bars, tourist attractions, and shopping. A visit to the HBO website for *Sex and the City* reveals that with one click

you can get a map of all the hot spots in New York visited by the *Sex and The City* girls to use for planning your own vacation.¹⁷ At the same time, it is also implicitly advertising life for the “in-crowd” in New York City. Embedded in these advertisements is the implicit ideology that there is cultural capital to be gained by being seen wearing the right products at the hottest “in” spots. The show is promoting a particular type of lifestyle of youth and playfulness for consumption by women of all ages.

Competing Sexual Identities & Commodity Consumption

One of the main themes throughout all six seasons of *Sex and The City* is the theme of competing sexual identities. Each episode of *Sex and The City* is focused almost exclusively on making sense of “sex” and “the city” by focusing on the creation, maintenance, and often the conclusion of multiple sexual relationships. “Sex in this context becomes like shopping – a marker of identity, a source of pleasure- knowing how to choose the right goods is crucial.”¹⁸ Is this a site of power for feminist discourse since the girls control their own sexuality? This question is in line with discussions of postfeminism, since it asks if a sense of agency has replaced a sense of activism, or as Ellen Riorden states: “While I do believe that individual empowerment in women can help foster collective agency, it more often has the effect of stunting women, encouraging them to work only for themselves in the immediate moment...[w]ithout a doubt, it is necessary for women to feel some sort of power, but as this article suggests, when it is commodified, empowerment can come at the expense of actual change”¹⁹ Of course this quote relates to the earlier discussion of double-entanglement and the television sitcom, where there are two competing (and supposedly contradictory) ideologies (one of female empowerment and one of neoconservative ideals about gender) existing simultaneously.

What Riordan is suggesting is very similar to Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas about how entertainment takes the agency out of people.²⁰ According to Adorno and Horkheimer, to be entertained means to be in agreement and agreement always means putting things out of your mind, and forgetting suffering (even when it is on display). At the root of agreement and entertainment is powerlessness because agreeable entertainment provides an escape – but not from the intrusive thoughts of reality but instead from the thoughts of resisting reality. The liberation that amusement promises is from thinking! A commodified feminism has similar consequences.

In this light, *Sex and The City* is also a discourse on perpetual adolescence in that one of the main goals of adolescence from a psychological perspective is making sense of competing sexual identities. According to the theory of perpetual adolescence, the processes that have been attributed by psychologists to the stage of development in the individual's life referred to as adolescence – i.e., a desire for increased intimacy, emotional trial and turbulence, separation from parents and authority, and the formation of a positive self-identity– are now life-long processes.²¹ Furthermore, what had previously been seen as the symbols of the completion of adolescence –the ability to maintain a healthy, mature relationship with a member of the opposite sex, the ability to control sexual and violent urges, the ability to distinguish rationally between fact and fiction, and the ability to balance out the competing “selves” of an individual's identity– are now life-long struggles.²² These many facets of adolescence appeared weekly as themes and titles of *Sex and the City* episodes between 1998 and 2004, during each of the six seasons that the show aired on HBO. Ultimately, the show's conclusion (which will be discussed at greater length later in this essay) ends with a resolution of these

competing sexual tensions and selves, much in the same way the adolescent psychology proposes that the completion of adolescence comes about with a similar resolution on the individual level.

Angela R. Record explains in her piece on the creation of the female teenage consumer, “Born to Shop: Teenage Women and the Marketplace in the Post-War United States,” that since the end of World War Two, the American Culture Industries have worked to create a niche market for teenagers that was different from adulthood.²³ Furthermore, within this teenage marketplace, there were two marketing discourses, one for females and commodities targeted to them, and likewise one for males and their respective commodities. The discourse behind the female teenage marketplace was in many ways a continuation of the female marketing discourse of the 1920s that set out to equate the role of the housewife with that of the purchaser of household goods.²⁴ Likewise, the marketing discourse of the 1950s and magazines such as *Seventeen* aimed to return women to domestic roles, and to offer them advice to help them beautify themselves so that in turn they might be able to find themselves a good husband. As we noted earlier, the *Cosmo Girl* was another example of such marketing discourses targeted at young women. Furthermore, as Daniel Cook Tomas illuminates in *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*, young girls began to be viewed as a separate category for marketing by department stores as early as the 1930s.²⁵ The point here is not to suggest a great similarity between these discourses but rather to that a gendered marketing discourse that seeks to tie female teenage identity to consumption has existed for almost a century. The theory of perpetual adolescence simply connects this marketing discourse to all women

with purchasing power, not just those who fit the traditional female teenager demographic. As long as there has been a teenage market, there has been a both a female and a male teenage market and separate marketing discourses to sell consumption practices to these two groups.

The story of *Sex and The City* is on one level about sexual identities, but as we see, even the sexual practices of the characters constitute a story about consumption. Deborah Phillips in her piece “Shopping for Men: The Single Women Narrative” claims that in the genre of “single women novels”, “their [single women’s] pleasure in consumption is not limited to fashion and beauty goods for their own adornment, but extends to the consumption of men themselves.”²⁶ Other examples of this type of novel include Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, and, supremely, Jane Austen novels like *Sense and Sensibility*. The heroines in *Sex and the City* partake in these same consumption practices. Here we see a connection and a disconnection from the female teenage marketing discourse of the past, with the show acting as both a site of social resistance at the same time as it reinforces the social norms it critiques. On one level, the message that *Sex and The City* offers its viewers is one of sexual freedom, especially in relationships, as illustrated by Charlotte’s sexual relationship with her overweight, bald, hairy, Jewish divorce lawyer, or by Samantha’s promiscuity and brief encounter with lesbianism. Other examples include: Carrie sleeping with her ex-boyfriend Mr.Big even after he is married, or dating a guy in a mental institution; interracial dating, such as when Miranda dates Robert, the black doctor, or Miranda’s relationship with her vibrator that she is insistent on maintaining even when her cleaning lady disapproves. All of these examples offer a space for discourse on relationships that

goes against the narrative of heteronormativity dominating mainstream media: these women might be heterosexual, but they certainly aren't "normal" or "normative"! On the other hand, the narrative of the show (and Carrie's newspaper column in the show) over the course of the six seasons seems to suggest that if a girl follows the rules, consumes the right products, and makes herself pretty and available, she can find the right man and catch herself a husband, much like the marketing discourse of *Seventeen* magazine half a century earlier. How else do we make sense of the drastic content shift in Season Six, which moves the themes of *Sex and the City* from a story of the single girl to a desire for all the characters to find closure, which represents finding one partner of the opposite sex to settle down with? For example, Carrie appears to pick Alexander, her latest boyfriend, over her long romance with Mr. Big and follows Alexander in his move to Paris in the Season Six episode "An American Girl in Paris" by leaving her girl friends in New York; yet even though Carrie then leaves Alexander for Mr. Big in the show's final episode, she still selects the lifestyle of settling down with one partner. Miranda in the Season Six episode "One" chooses to return to Steve, her ex-boyfriend and baby's father, ending the inter-racial romance she had been involved in with Robert, the black doctor; even though they appeared to have a strong relationship, she still selects the lifestyle of a heteronormative and "racionormative" family. In the Season Six episode "Great Sexpectations," Charlotte announces her decision to convert to Judaism so that she can marry Harry her Jewish divorce lawyer, choosing to select the lifestyle of a single-religion marriage, thus removing a cultural taboo from the relationship, while Samantha gives up her promiscuous ways and agrees not only to hold Smith's hand, as we see in the Season Six episode "The Domino Effect" but also settles down with one man, also

selecting a monogamous lifestyle. In *Sex and The City*, a “consumer lifestyle is presented not as a series of commodities to be bought, but as an integrated lifestyle to be emulated.

**What gendered perpetual adolescence looks like:
Examining episodes of Sex and The City**

In light of recent works of feminist critiques of the media, this paper sets forth to analyze the ways in which the marketing discourse of *perpetual adolescence*, that is, the selling of youth sensibilities to adults, can be viewed to be gendered feminine, as illustrated in the dialogical sitcom *Sex and The City*. I propose to explore these issues by looking at three episodes of *Sex and The City* from three different seasons: “They Shoot Single Women, Don’t They?” from Season Two, “The Agony And The ‘Ex’-tacy” from Season Four, and “A Woman’s Right To Shoes” from Season Six. In what ways are these episodes and their messages offering spaces for resistance? In what ways are they re-enforcing social norms? The two main areas of resistance and re-enforcement to examine are the issues of competing sexual identities and the consumption of commodities. Ultimately, these episodes act as examples of the ways in which *Sex and The City* illustrates that the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence exists as a commodified experience gendered feminine.

The Season Two episode “They Shoot Single Women, Don’t They?” examines the issue of authenticity in sexual relationships and is an excellent example of the multiple sexual partners and competing sexual identities that the girls deal with in each and every episode. One of the trademarks of the narrative of a *Sex and the City* episode is that it begins with a clever title that is also the theme for that episode. In this episode, the title is a pun on a 1969 Hollywood film “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?” ([Sydney](#)

[Pollack](#)), in which the theme is that people are the ultimate spectacle. The film looks at the popularity of dance marathons during the Depression as desperate people competed for prize money. The most popular scene from the movie is “The Derby,” a heel-and-toe race around the dance floor which appears to go on to no end. In this episode, Carrie and the girls also appear to be participating in a heel-and-toe race around Manhattan in search of happiness in a relationship. This spectacle of looking for a man also takes on the qualities of the “Great Depression” so much so that the title implies that Carrie herself questions her own existence and value in the same way that Jane Fonda, the lead actress in the film, does when she asks Michael Sarrazin to shoot her, since she feels to be of no value, asking, “They shoot horses, don’t they?”

A trademark of the narrative of a *Sex and The City* episode is that each episode’s theme is then explored through the lives of each of the four main characters individually, and then shared among the four collectively through dialogue that usually takes place over a meal. Woven in and out of our main story and four sub-stories is an overdub dialogue provided by Carrie, which is also the copy for the story she is working on that week for her column “Sex and the City.” in the imaginary newspaper the *New York Star*. In this episode, Carrie is asking the question “Is it better to fake it than be alone?” Faking it becomes the topic not only for dialogue in the restaurants and on the telephone, but becomes the subject of each of the four character’s sub-plots. As the show progresses, each of the four women partake in a relationship endeavor, Charlotte with a handyman to whom she fakes an intimate connection, Samantha with a club owner who fakes a long term interest in her so that she’ll sleep with him, Miranda with a former boyfriend for whom she is faking her orgasms, and Carrie who is asking herself if she has been faking

it to herself that she is happy being single. Carrie's overdub tells us this much, when she asks herself depressingly: "As I walked home I couldn't help but wonder, when did being alone become the modern day equivalent of being a leper? Will Manhattan restaurants soon be divided up into sections smoking/non smoking, single/non-single? Then I had a frightening thought, maybe I was the one who was faking it, all these years faking to myself that I was happy being single."

In the opening scene of the episode, all four of the heroines, Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha, are out at a salsa club, at a point when none of the women are in a committed relationship. The women collectively do a shot of tequila and toast to life without men. Charlotte warns the group that if she ends up old and alone she will hold them accountable, to which Samantha replies, "We are all alone, honey, even when we are with men...My advice to you is to go through life enjoying men but not expecting them to fill you up." Their dialogue reflects how *Sex and the City* is thematically centered around competing sexual identities and consumption (as well as practices—slugging tequila, getting filled up, etc.). In this scene, for example, men are viewed as something to be consumed for pleasure, much like the tequila shooters the girls are throwing back. Is this a new sensibility? Furthermore, the sexuality of dialogue and the ways in which the four single girls inhabit the bar atmosphere and shoot tequila while talking about sex suggests that being a cosmopolitan woman (a "cosmopolitan" martini being the drink of choice of the heroines) at the turn of the Millennium allows them to interact in a male-type fashion in spaces where those types of actions had previously only been available to men.. "For postfeminists like Carrie and her friends, gender differences, such as wanting to look sexy and flirt, are playful, stylistic, and unrelated to

the operations of social power and authority. Women if they choose, can work, talk, and have sex 'like men' [straight men] while still maintaining all the privileges associated with being an attractive women."²⁷ This dichotomy becomes even more evident when a club owner approaches the girls offering to buy them drinks, or through the openness of the women to dance together, a practice often only reserved for women or homosexual men. It is a rare sight indeed to see two straight men dancing together in a night club. An interesting comparison would be to compare how straight men interact in the space of a club in a film such as the *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977)

The heart of this episode's story line revolves around a photo shoot that Carrie takes part in for a popular New York magazine. The photo shoot is being shot by Stanford's (Carrie's closest male, and gay, confidant) new boyfriend and is supposed to be called "Single and Fabulous!" However, when the article is printed, the exclamation point is replaced with a question mark and instead reads "Single and Fabulous?" Over lunch the next day, the girls discuss the magazine article and its contents. Charlotte reads, "Single was fun at 20, but you want to ask these women how fun will it be being out all night club hopping at 40?" to which Charlotte replies, "Who's out all night?" Samantha's wry answer: "Who's forty?" What is interesting is Miranda's reply of "Fuck the exclamation point," which is met by an emphatic "Fuck them" from both Samantha and the usually timid Charlotte. The girls are very defensive about being pigeonholed into a category of single womanhood, which this magazine article portrays as the promise of unhappiness and solitude.

A third trademark of the narrative of a *Sex and The City* episode is that it always aims to close on a happy note. Much like the sitcom and its adolescence, the goal is

always to end with resolution to the issues of the episode. The closure to “They Shoot Single Women, Don’t They?” comes anecdotally, as Carrie’s voice-over tells the viewer that “Over the next week, things pretty much returned to normal.” We learn that Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha all vacate the relationships they experienced during the episode to return to the same state at which they were when the episode began: singleness. Carrie finds solitude by having a glass of wine alone on a restaurant patio. This glass of wine serves as her affirmation that it is okay to be a single woman and after a crazy twenty-five minutes of man-chasing in the hopes of finding Mr. right, the girls resign themselves to the fact that it is better to be alone than to fake it.

A closer look at the Season Four episode “The Agony and the ‘Ex’tacy” is beneficial to this paper since it helps to clarify the important role that friends and “sisterhood” play in *Sex and The City*. Of course for adolescence, the acceptance by a peer group is one of the key features in defining one’s own identity. Often adolescents struggle in their identity formation as they search to separate themselves from their attachment with their parents and gain inclusion within a social peer group. Certainly the girls are already separated from their parents, none of whom we ever see throughout the six years, but they do participate in this idea that the value of one’s identity is found through acceptance by a peer group. Interestingly enough, the only parents we interact with in *Sex and the City* are always portrayed in a negative light. For example, Steve’s mom is portrayed as a ridiculous alcoholic, who both pays for a clown to open the door and take people’s coats at her grandson’s first birthday, and brings her own beer to the event, as seen in the Season Six episode “One”; additionally, Tre’s attachment to his mother is seen as one of the main reasons why Charlotte’s marriage to him is

unsuccessful, as it ultimately crumbles in the Season Four episode “All That Glitters.” Tre’s mother is portrayed through out Seasons Four and Five as an overbearing, domineering, crazy woman. Ultimately, it is Tre’s mother with whom Charlotte must negotiate the divorce settlement, until Tre in the Season Five episode “Critical Condition” ends the negotiation by sending a fax to all the involved parties that states that he believes that Charlotte is entitled to anything that she would like in the divorce settlement.

In “The Agony and the ‘Ex’tacy,” Carrie is struggling with turning thirty-five. The episode opens with a montage of each of the girls leaving their house for a Saturday night on the town, allowing the viewer to catch a glimpse into each of their personalities: Carrie ensures she has her cigarettes, Samantha packs a condom, Charlotte packs her lipstick into a Chanel purse, while Miranda grabs her keys from the bowl at the front door where they sit next to her Palm Pilot. Carrie’s voice-over begins the episode, stating “If you are single, there is one thing you should always take with you when you go out on Saturday night, your friends.” True to the format of *Sex and The City* episodes, the majority of the discourse in this episode occurs over the consumption of food. There is something extremely sexual about the consumption of food and in many ways the focus of this show revolves around the consumption of food, dialogue, relationships, and commodities- all in a way that is highly sexualized. This sexualization of consumption can be linked to bell hooks’ notion of “eating the other “ (although without the racial overtones), whereby the consuming of the single, non-normative lifestyle is used as a stand- in acceptance for its existence—however not in a way that allows for an understanding and real acceptance of it, but rather in a way that appropriates it for the

straight, and dominant group.²⁸ This is why we see episodes where the girls partake in a non-hetero experience, such as Miranda in the Season Two episode “Bay of Married Pigs,” where her co-worker mistakes her for a lesbian and tries to set her up with another woman and she obliges, or Samantha in the Season Four episode “Defining Moments,” who enters into a lesbian relationship that lasts for a couple of episodes. Even the generally prude Charlotte in the Season One episode “Three’s a Crowd” agrees to take a women home to partake in a threesome. The single girl narrative and narratives that challenge heteronormative social roles are so prevalent in *Sex and the City*, - not because it is being consumed, and not to appreciate those lifestyles, but rather to appropriate and “digest” them.

The lunch-time discussion in this episode revolves around the Aristophanean concern of whether or not there is one soul mate for each person. At one end of the spectrum lies Charlotte, who feels that there is only one, whereas at the other end lies Carrie, who feels that you have many, and if you miss one another comes right along- just like taxi cabs. Miranda objects to the whole discussion based on the idea that either way, a woman has to look elsewhere to find happiness. The next day at a different coffee shop, after what Carrie describes as a less than perfect birthday (because she is man-less), Carrie proclaims to her girlfriends, “I am 35 and alone...It felt really sad not to have a man in my life who cares for me...no god damn soul mate,” to which Charlotte replies consolingly, “Maybe we could be each others’ soul mates and then we could let men be these great, nice guys to have fun with.” The happy ending to this episode comes when Big’s limo pulls up in front of Carrie’s apartment. Big invites Carrie into the limo where they share a glass of champagne. He leaves and Carrie’s voice-over closes the show with

the concluding narrative statement that is required for the sitcom to have its closure: “Having three soul mates [referring to her girlfriends] already makes it easier to spot those nice guys to have fun with.”

The third and final episode examined here is from the final season, “A Woman’s Right to Shoes.” The episode begins with Stanford and Carrie attending a baby shower for their friends Kyra and Chuck. They have been asked to remove their shoes at the front door, and Carrie is heartbroken, since she views the shoes as an essential part of the entire outfit and suggests that she would have worn a hat had she known she had to remove her shoes! As they take the elevator up to Kyra and Chuck’s apartment, a competition ensues between Stanford and Carrie as to who has purchased the better gift. Even before they arrive at the baby shower, Stanford and Carrie have a discussion about which gifts from the baby gift registry (even the babies in *Sex and the City* are centered around consumption by having baby shower registries at designer stores!) and the struggles which they went through to purchase these gifts.. Stanford has purchased the Peter Rabbit baby dish set with matching bib, to which Carrie jealously huffs, “Dang, you snagged that. Thanks to you I was left with the Little Me Chair.” Stanford is clearly the winner since his purchase is of a much “cooler” gift than Carrie’s, thus signifying that the child will certainly like Stanford better. Consumption here is linked to the acceptance of adults by children.

When it’s time to leave, Carrie notices that her shoes are missing. After a series of uncomfortable conversations, Kyra finally offers to pay for Carrie’s shoes, only to rescind her offer when Carrie informs her that the shoes were \$485, quipping, “That’s insane, I’ll give you \$200. I’m sorry; I just think it’s crazy to spend that kind of money

on shoes.” When Carrie responds that they are the same designer shoes that Kyra herself used to wear, Kyra responds by shoe shaming Carrie: “Sure, before I had a real life... I really don’t think I should have to pay for your extravagant lifestyle...they’re just shoes.” Of course, what Kyra’s shoe shaming highlights is the role that shoes and consumption play for the girls of *Sex and The City*. “A designer stiletto shoe, Carrie’s trademark obsession, is different [than a relationship with a man]. It’s always there, to be possessed, offering a fetish substitute for the satisfactions denied by men. The autoeroticism legitimated by the narcissistic structure of the look in consumer culture offers the possibility of doing without men at all.”²⁹ As Carrie says herself in a Season Four episode, Manolo Blahnik’s are her real soul mate

The episode “A Woman’s Right to Shoes” is one of the best written episodes in all of the six seasons, asking some perturbing questions about the consumption patterns of a heteronormative society. The theme of this episode asks the question of whether choosing to purchase commodified goods for one’s self provides the single person with equal cultural capital and happiness as a having heteronormative family. Carrie’s voice-over asks plaintively: “Is it bad that my life is filled with shoes instead of children?” Samantha asks this question differently over lunch, when she saucily fumes, “If you gave a party and told her to leave her baby outside in the hall and her baby was missing at the end of the night, believe me there would be pay back.” The title of the episode suggests that a women’s right to shoes provides equal value to a women’s life as having children. There is also an encoded violence here that is using shoes as a mirror for children in the discussion of not only a woman’s right to have children but also a woman’s right to have an abortion. The double-entanglement of postfeminism can also be found in the title of

this episode, where from one perspective, the title makes a bold statement about a women's right to choice, but then devalues that same choice by comparing it to the right to buy shoes.

After Carrie is shoe shamed, she complains first to Miranda via the telephone and then over ice cream with Charlotte. During her ice cream social with Charlotte, Carrie has a moment of clarity and what follows is one of the most engaging monologues of the show's six seasons:

"I did a little mental addition, and over the years I have bought Kyra an engagement gift, a wedding gift, then there was the trip to Maine for the wedding, three baby gifts. In total, I have spent over \$2300 celebrating her life choices." Charlotte responds that Kyra would do the same, to which Carrie says, "and if I don't ever get married or have a baby, what? I get bubkiss? Think about it, if you are single after graduation there isn't one occasion where people celebrate you...Hallmark does not make a 'Congratulations, you didn't marry the wrong guy' card and 'Where is the flatware for going on vacations by yourself?'" Of course, even a diatribe as strong as this is neutralized when Carrie finishes it by asking how Charlotte's pistachio ice cream tastes and then asking for a taste of it for herself. Consumption of food here gives the body the pleasures that it lost through purchasing gifts for someone else's consumption

This episode also ends with a happy ending. The show concludes with Carrie calling Kyra and leaving a message that she is engaged to be married to herself and registered at Manolo Blahnik. When Kyra goes to the store there is only one item on the registry, the exact pair of shoes that were taken at Kyra's house the week before. When Carrie reads the card it says, "We are so happy for you and you". Carrie responds "It was

my very first wedding present” with an optimism that suggests that it hopefully will not be her last.

Consuming Gendered Media Discourse

As a social text of popular culture encoded with dominant ideologies of sexuality and consumption, *Sex and the City* works on multiple levels – simultaneously as a site of resistance and as a site of reproduction. Throughout the six seasons it aired on the non-cable channel HBO (1998-2004), the dialogical sitcom *Sex and the City* acted as site of resistance to dominant heteronormative sexual ideologies through the presentation of the four main characters and all of their sexual escapades as a viable and acceptable lifestyle for the single woman. It validated the life choices of the single girl who chose to consume men, dialogue, food, and commodities instead of settling-down to marry and start a family. However, at the same time as it challenged social norms, *Sex and the City* also worked as a space of or site of reproduction where the dominant ideology of a heteronormative family lifestyle was portrayed as the overarching goal of each of the characters and the resolution point of the entire series as Season Six came to a close. It is this double-entanglement around the girl’s sexualities in the show that highlights the queer postfeminism of *Sex and the City* as a cultural text.

Of even greater significance is the idea that *Sex and The City* worked as a commercial for a particular representation of a gendered, adolescent lifestyle typified by the single girl narrative, whereby this lifestyle is presented as glamorous, extravagant, and socially acceptable. The glorification of this single girl narrative is highlighted by her right to choose to consume items such as men, food, dialogue, and commodities, and the pleasure she receives from those acts of consumption. In doing so, *Sex and the City* was

also reinforcing a larger marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence that seeks to maintain the destabilized identities of adolescence throughout adults' entire lives by privileging youth and youthful sensibilities in advertisements. *Sex and the City* provides an excellent example of what the marketing discourse of perpetual adolescence looks like when it is gendered feminine, but unfortunately it offers little insight into the dangers of glorifying such a discourse or the available spaces for resistance where one can appropriate perpetual adolescence for subversive and political means. Does such resistance matter? Boy, is the show entertaining and agreeable, which is exactly what the culture industry is all about.

Notes

¹ Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels . "The Ruling Class & Ruling Ideas" in *Media & Cultural Studies: Key Works*. Eds. Douglas Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham. London: Routledge, 2006.

² <http://www.hbo.com/city/#>.

³ For more information on adolescent psychology, see Norman A. Sprinthall and W. Andrew Collins, eds., *Adolescent Psychology: A Developmental View*, Third Edition. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995), or Daniel Offer, Eric Ostrov, Kenneth Howard, and Robert Atkinson, eds., *The Teenage World: Adolescent's Self-Image in Ten Countries* (New York: Plenum Medical Book Company, 1988). For more information on adolescents and the media, from a medical perspective, see Victor C Strasburger, *Adolescents and the Media: Medical and Psychological Impact* Volume 33 Developmental Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry (London: Sage Publications, 1995).

⁴ In 1959, the youth market held an estimated purchasing power of over \$9.5 billion, which is more than four times the amount from 1945. Edward K. Spann, *Democracy's Children: The Young Rebels of the 1960s and the Power of Ideals* (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 25.

⁵ Stephen Gennaro, "Purchasing the Teenage Canadian Identity: ICTs, American Media, and Brand Name Consumption" in *International Social Science Review* (Volume 80, 2005, Numbers 3 & 4).

5. Theodor Adorno and Max. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. London: Verso, 1991.

⁷ Angela McRobbie., "Postfeminism and Popular Culture" in *Feminist Media Studies* Vol.4 No. 3, 2004, p.256.

⁸ Jane Gerhard. "*Sex and the City*: Carrie Bradshaw's Queer Postfeminism" in *Feminist Media Studies* Vol.5 No. 1, 2005, p.38.

⁹ www.colorado.edu/english/engl2012klages

- ¹⁰ Bonnie Dow. *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970*. Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press: 1996. p. 139.
- ¹¹ Jane Arthurs. "Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama" in *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 3, No.1, p. 83.
- ¹² www.candicebusnell.com
- ¹³ Laurie Ouellette, "Inventing the Cosmo Girl: Class Identity and Girl-Style American Dreams" in *Media, Culture & Society* 21 (3), p. 363.
- ¹⁴ Ouellette, "Inventing the Cosmo Girl," p. 359.
- ¹⁵ For more information on the connection between glossy women's magazines and *Sex and the City* see Jane Arthur, "Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama." For more information on the connection between single women novels and *Sex and the City*, see Deborah Phillips' "Shopping for Men: The Single Women Narrative" in *Women: A Cultural Review* Vol. 11 No. 3.
- ¹⁶ Ellen Riordan, "Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism," in *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25:3 (July 2001), p. 280.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.hbo.com/city/#>
- ¹⁸ Arthurs, "Sex and the City," p. 94.
- ¹⁹ Riordan, "Commodified Agents," p. 295.
- ²⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry."
- ²¹ Gennaro, "Teenage Canadian Identity."
- ²² Norman A. Sprinthall and W. Andrew Collins, eds., *Adolescent Psychology: A Developmental View*, Third Edition. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995),
- ²³ Angela R. Record. "Born to Shop: Teenage Women and the Marketplace in the Post War United States," in *Sex & Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*. Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press: 2002. pp. 181-195.
- ²⁴ Roland Marchand. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity*. Los Angeles, University of California Press: 1985.
- ²⁵ Daniel Thomas Cook. *The Commodification of Childhood: the Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- ²⁶ Phillips "Shopping for Men," p. 240.
- ²⁷ Gerhard, "Carrie Bradshaw's Queer Postfeminism," p.38.
- ²⁸ bell hooks. "Eating the Other" in *Media & Cultural Studies: Key Works*. Eds. Douglas Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham. London: Routledge, 2006.
- ²⁹ Arthurs, "Sex and the City," p. 93.