

Stef R.

Prof name

Class name

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Man! I Feel Like a Woman!: The Negative Effects of Postfeminism in *Sex and the City*

The first time I watched *Sex and the City*, it only took the first episode to suck me in. This is rare for me, as I'd often think of myself as more of a movie person; modern television often requests more of your time than a film would, especially since hour long episodes have become increasingly popular. However, the complex, realistic characters and dialogue were both aspects of *Sex and the City* (*SatC*) that immediately drew me in. As someone who intends to pursue a career in entertainment marketing, media analysis is a hobby I partake in quite often, not only for my career but because I find it fascinating to dissect the philosophies within the media we consume everyday. Furthermore, as someone who is a transgender man, I often find myself analyzing the gender politics within media I watch, regardless of if it's the focus or not. This may have been part of why I initially found, and still find, *SatC* so fascinating.

Unlike other postfeminist media, *SatC* tackles postfeminism and other related issues so directly. *SatC*, along with other entertainment since the 90s, have been prime vehicles for postfeminism, and have spread that ideology into the mainstream as a result. Through observing how media portrays postfeminist issues, I can easily come to the conclusion that postfeminism in media such as *Sex and the City* has negatively affected how people navigate gender presentation and performance.

## **I Couldn't Help But Wonder... What is *Sex and the City*?**

*Sex and the City* (*SatC*) was an HBO dramedy series created by Darren Star that ran from 1998 to 2004. *SatC* was based on a real column of the same name written by Candace Bushnell, both filled with stories of love, drama, and commentary on the life of a metropolitan woman of the time. For the sake of continuity, I will only be writing about and analyzing the show, as I believe *SatC* is the most compelling out of any of the associated shows, movies, or literature within the franchise. *SatC* has a wide array of characters throughout its six seasons, but the show primarily centers on four main women: Carrie Bradshaw, a spunky sex columnist and the narrator of the series; Charlotte York, a girl-next-door art dealer; Miranda Hobbes, a pragmatic lawyer; and Samantha Jones, an unapologetically sensual PR executive. Throughout the series, these women navigate, banter, and philosophize on their dating and professional lives. They typically do so alongside a cup of coffee or a walk in the big city of Manhattan, giving the world they live in a sense of reality among the often bizarre romantic situations these women find themselves in. This sense of reality carries through into the postfeminist philosophy of the show, an ideology that sprung into popularity in the 90s, when *SatC* made its debut.

Postfeminism is an ideology that, as I previously mentioned, was popularized in the 90s, and at its core proclaims that society has achieved feminism's goals of equality; therefore, women can relish in the same vices as men. Postfeminism is often acted upon as a reaction to the staunch second-wave feminism of the 60s to the early 80s, which primarily focused on the legal and social rights of women. Second-wave feminism was largely led by more liberal women, and once some of their bigger goals had made

progress, many began to lay the foundations for postfeminism. Though feminism is often thought of as a liberal and fairly straightforward idea of all genders being treated equally, postfeminism “upholds mainstream feminist values, while at the same time criticizing feminism for being an old-fashioned movement” (Shepherd). More specifically, postfeminism focuses on individuality and denounces prior expectations of women, all the while having a deep-rooted shame to separate from fighting for these issues. Despite this, postfeminism is still a predominant perspective to take, even if incidentally. We see this due to postfeminist media such as *SatC* still being popular today, and having had lasting impacts on how feminism is viewed as a whole. By seeing these “ideal” postfeminist women in *SatC*, many people saw it as “a symptom of the perceived death of feminism” (Wyman). The “ideal” women in postfeminist media are complex and unique to one another, while still carrying postfeminism at the forefront of their beliefs.

### **Desiring Domination: “Ideal” Women in Postfeminist Media**

One of the primary traits of the “ideal” women in postfeminist media is the belief within them that they deserve to be, and already are, on the same playing field as men in society, work, and love, despite what society may throw their way. In the first episode of *SatC*, Samantha Jones proclaims, “this is the first time in the history of Manhattan that women have had as much money and power as men” (Star). In this statement, Samantha presents the core belief of postfeminism; this belief is unfortunately, not true in the grand scheme of how society treats women. Though this episode aired in 1998, there are still many feminist issues present then that pervade society to this day, such as wage inequality, abortion, proper treatment of abusers, and stereotypical gender roles. The “ideal” woman under postfeminism does not like to acknowledge these

issues, as that would mean there is still a fight to be fought, which is inherently paradoxical to postfeminism. As mentioned previously, there is often a subconscious shame in postfeminist figures that they mustn't fight for these causes or even associate with fellow women; as in their eyes, this would be a cry of defeat in the eyes of the patriarchy they claim they have already become equal to in society. Samantha Jones and Miranda Hobbes are often the two main *SatC* women guilty of this, as they are both in predominantly male fields and seek to not be associated with other "typical" women as a means of fitting in and for confidence purposes. Samantha often blatantly does this, differentiating herself from other women: "with the phrase 'you people' [she] overtly distances herself from (and belittles) women/the female gender, serving to establish or even confirm men as the norm" (Beers Fägersten and Sveen). Samantha often refers to women as "you people" and addresses people she's judging as "honey", even the rest of the main group. By doing this, Samantha distances and separates herself from other women, perhaps to assimilate to men and their behavior. Miranda also takes part in making herself be perceived more "male" in power dynamic terms, though I will discuss this behavior more in depth when speaking on gender roles in postfeminist media.

This goes hand in hand with a perceived independence among the "ideal" women in postfeminist media. One of the staples of postfeminism is the independence and individuality that contrasts from second-wave feminism, which was primarily about banding together to fight for more social rights. Though *SatC* focuses on a female friend group that likes to discuss topics of love and roles in society, they're not typically seen fighting for these subjects outside of their little group, except perhaps Carrie with her column. This perceived independence is only perceived by those who believe they have

it; the society around them do not often see this, even in more modern times removed from the time of *SatC*'s airing. Independence is a concept that is hard to wrestle with in terms of any marginalized group, as one must consider how important community is, which *SatC* takes in account by focusing on a friend group and not just one woman. Despite this, *SatC* often still makes it out to be a requirement to find a partner, ultimately going against the independence postfeminism props itself up on.

Out of all the factors that make an "ideal" woman under postfeminism, the elements that hold the most weight are to be bold, intelligent, and, most importantly, chic. An ideal postfeminist woman is one that moves as an equal in the patriarchy, able to have the same opportunities as men and not have to fight harder for them. This of course is not often the reality in the corporate setting these women often work in, but it is the fantasy that many postfeminists like to portray reality as. As I previously mentioned, in this same fantasy women can celebrate this supposed equality with the same vices as men, such as clothes and lovers. Postfeminism ideally likes to make all women out to be stylish, tasteful businesswomen. By being drab or tacky, a woman under postfeminism shows her vulnerability, interestingly contradicting with the supposed individuality that postfeminism likes to build itself on. This obligatory chicness follows along with the imposed importance of image, and attributably wealth, with the "ideal" postfeminist woman.

### **I Shop, Therefore I Am: Consumerism in Postfeminist Media**

Image, or rather perception, is a focus within postfeminist figures. Carrie Bradshaw, the narrator of *SatC*, is always in a uniquely "Carrie" outfit: a strange color combination, excessive tulle, or a fun print, coupled with a pair of expensive Monolos or

a designer handbag. Her state of mind is often shown through her dress, as I previously mentioned she may show an internal vulnerability through a “tackier” outfit than usual, or a simple dress when she wants to be taken more seriously. Regardless of the actual contents of her clothing, her and the other main women of *SatC* uphold the standards of postfeminism through their dress. In *SatC*, “high fashion indicates not only a measure of wealth but also a greater sense of personal security and perhaps female advancement” (Lorie). Oftentimes the image of wealth is more important to postfeminist figures than actual wealth itself, as even though Carrie is a freelance writer, she can still somehow afford an Upper East Side apartment and her lavish shopping habits. In the season four episode “Ring a Ding Ding”, Carrie is scrambling to either renew her lease or move in with her boyfriend, Aidan. While shopping with Miranda, she realizes that she’s “spent \$40,000 on shoes and [she has] no place to live” (Star). This is undoubtedly impossible for a freelance newspaper writer to afford; nonetheless, if she were to be clothed unstylishly, she would not accurately represent the postfeminist ideals expected of her in media. This is also partially attributed to the economic state of the U.S. during the rise of postfeminism; in the 80s and 90s, the economy was booming, especially in Manhattan, and postfeminist media led to depict that. As Keszeg puts it, “[*SatC*] contributed to the understanding of post-feminist female condition and highlighted the complex role played by consumption in the identities of people living in late-capitalist societies”. By consuming, postfeminist women show that they have the same amount of power and wealth as anyone else, regardless of the real-world implications of that power or wealth.

## **Just a Girl: Love and Relationships in Postfeminist Media**

At the core of *SatC* are the friendships of the main four women. These friendships are realistic, in that they will disagree with each other and playfully banter over romantic plights and drama in their lives, as friends do. Postfeminist media undeniably presents female friendships positively, especially in *SatC*, though there are underlying ideals they still hold each other towards. One of these postfeminist ideals is the imposed need to find someone to be with romantically. Though postfeminism likes to present itself as rooting for independence, *SatC* chooses to honestly depict how postfeminism still upholds society's expectations to find a lasting romantic connection. Of course, this is not a negative sentiment, but *SatC* makes it out to be a requirement to be taken seriously in society. In season three, Miranda pretends to be in a lesbian relationship to get into a dinner party of her coworkers, as "she is desirable to 'round out the dinner circle' of senior partners; as a single woman she is largely ignored" (Schulz). This additional tokenization is something I will touch in a moment, but I find it interesting how even with postfeminism's embedded independence, being in a couple is still desirable. *SatC* also shows how these women, more specifically Carrie, will change themselves in some way due to "[the] fear that men will no longer find [them] attractive if [they] [reveal] [their] true [selves]", this is uniquely "in contrast to the relationships among the four main female characters" where they share their most vulnerable feelings among each other without a second thought (Dykes). The main women go through many romantic endeavors throughout the series, each affair with their own quirks and problems, on a mission to find the "perfect" person.

On these missions, the women perpetuate cisheteronormativity in both their romantic and platonic relationships. Cisheteronormativity has a variety of definitions, but it is essentially the assumption by cisgender heterosexuals that everyone in society is cisgender and/or heterosexual, along with a separation from anyone outside of this group. One example of this separation is with the two gay male secondary characters of *SatC*, Stanford Blatch, a talent agent, and Anthony Marentino, an event planner; both men are Carrie's and Charlotte's token "gay best friends", respectfully. These men are stereotypically "gay", in that they speak with a certain inflection and are very tasteful in fashion, art, and parties. They are often excluded from many conversations and are progressively seen less as the show goes on, even though they are close with the main women. Another example of this separation is in season four when Samantha begins a fling with Maria, a lesbian painter. Varying from Samantha's prior escapades, this relationship goes great; this is until Maria gets fed up with men from Samantha's past. This annoyance participates in cisheteronormativity in that it makes lesbians out to be exclusionary to women who are primarily involved with men, something also touched on in season two with Charlotte attempting to befriend a group of affluent lesbian women. There are many other instances of these exclusionary beliefs in *SatC*, such as when Samantha dumps water over a group of transgender sex workers for interrupting her focus to orgasm, when the women call bisexuality "a layover on the way to gay town" and "a problem", or when Charlotte breaks up with a straight man for being too stereotypically "gay" and effeminate. Any character in *SatC* that dares to go outside the norm of being a cisgender heterosexual is put into an "other" category.



As a gay transgender man, I've had many experiences in this "other" category in my personal life, and watching how one of my favorite shows handles these issues of identity reminds me of them. Of course, I watch *SatC* and other media of its time with the prejudices of then in mind, but I still cringe seeing characters I love fall to these bigoted notions. When I first watched the episode where Samantha "[commits] more or less a hate crime" towards a group of low-income trans sex workers and is not reprimanded in any way, I looked at her a bit differently, as she had been my favorite character (Wyman). It's worth noting that these are the only trans characters seen in *SatC*, and how far they differ from the "ideal" women of postfeminism. These women that Samantha calls the cops on are not affluent in any way and are not dressed in what a typical postfeminist woman would see representative of their values. They are othered from the other LGBT+ characters of the show in that they do not abide by postfeminist ideals, which even the cisgender gay characters are presented as doing. Seeing how these supposedly sexually liberated and open-minded women could not treat trans people with the same dignity as even the gay people in their lives made me more aware of the trans-exclusionary traits within postfeminism.

### **Gender Roles in Postfeminist Media**

Societally imposed gender roles are often played with in postfeminist media, typically through fashion, language, and relationships. Postfeminism focuses so heavily on professional life for women, and this is in part with how ideal postfeminist women dress, typically in pantsuits or other career-driven attire. This is seen primarily in Miranda, who in *SatC* is often mistaken for a lesbian due to her having shorter hair and dressing in a more masculine fashion in her day-to-day, both visual traits stereotypically associated

with butch lesbians. Miranda is also terribly cynical and pragmatic, perhaps in an effort to assert her power in her predominantly male field of law, though this also filters into her personal life as well. Miranda often sees herself as “better than” whoever is trying to impress her; she imposes a need upon herself to impress others with her attitude and wit in order to be taken seriously. This is an issue of gender roles, as Miranda only really expresses her internal paranoia and anxieties to her female friend Carrie over the phone. To Miranda, expressing her true anxieties to others breaks her image of a put together and ideal postfeminist woman. Carrie falls for this too, though in a reverse fashion. She often does not act upon her composed internal monologue and instead either dances around an issue or acts out on whoever doesn’t follow her social script; one example of this being when she throws a bag of McDonald’s at Mr. Big’s television for him reasonably expressing that Carrie shouldn’t move to Paris just for him. Carrie likes to perform in life; she dramatically walks down sidewalks, twirls around in zany clothes, and use theatrical language. She lives in the movie (or column) in her head and feels a need to live out this fantastical postfeminist life to its most dramatic, so it makes sense to why she believes everything should go her way. As a woman in society, Carrie is expected to be overly emotional; so, in a way, she defies postfeminism by allowing herself to be so while still having a largely internal analytical perspective.

This defying and abiding of postfeminist gender roles also shows itself in the roles played within romantic relationships in the show. Samantha makes a point in her language and actions to be on the same playing field as men in relationships in terms of power. In the first episode of the series, she refers to “treating men like sex objects” as a “luxury” (Star). In this way, she goes beyond the postfeminist ideal of being perceived

on the same societal level as men and in turn becomes a misandrist caricature of a businessman saying the same thing about women. As with everything in *SatC*, there is a reverse of this; in this case, Charlotte presents a distinct contrast to Samantha's view on roles in relationships. Charlotte, previously a student body president and prom queen, is painted as traditional and naive in terms of how she views relationships. Charlotte likes to talk about her future through rose-tinted glasses, seeing a white picket fence and her "white knight"; when she has trouble in bed with her husband Trey, she shares with him her bodice ripper fantasy of being a fairy princess and him a pirate. In these expectations and fantasies, Charlotte represents the gender role of wanting to be swept away to a perfect life by the man of her dreams. Carrie once responds to this ideal with, "Did you ever think that maybe we're the white knights, and we're the ones that have to save ourselves?", to which Charlotte begrudgingly responds, "That is so depressing" (Star). It appears despite being surrounded by her postfeminist friends constantly criticizing men, Charlotte still believes for much of the series that she is waiting for "the one". The show ultimately decides to pair Charlotte with her divorce lawyer, Harry Goldenblatt, who is the opposite of the polished, Catholic, and conventionally attractive man of her dreams. I believe this to be a smart response to Charlotte's high expectations for herself, as she learns that her expectations and self-imposed gender roles in a relationship should not dictate her happiness, both as a woman under postfeminism and in the general sense.

As a gay trans man who also formerly identified as lesbian, I was acutely aware of the gender roles and relationship dynamic expectations presented in *SatC*. I've wrestled with a variety of different expectations both from myself and others under these

labels for gendered roles to play. Although not in the same contexts, seeing these gender roles in *SatC* develop and morph over the course of the series reminds me of my own experiences with expectations in society. As a trans man, I am expected to abide by traditional masculinity to conform to a standard. Though as a gay man, I am expected to be somewhat traditionally feminine in manner, interests, or behavior. When I originally thought I was a lesbian, I often saw the need for others in that community to label themselves as either “butch” or “femme”, ironically forcing gendered roles onto people who should otherwise not be affected by this dynamic within their romantic lives. Granted this is present in the gay male community as well, but I find it to be more at the forefront of lesbian culture than in gay male culture. When watching *SatC*, I am intrigued by how these similar gender roles are always at play in the women’s relationships and expectations for themselves. The inherent postfeminism within these expectations brings into discussion the treatment of men in the show, of which is exceedingly divisive.

### **SCUM Manifesto: Portrayal of Men in Postfeminist Media**

*SatC* has a complicated relationship with how it depicts men, but what all the straight men in the series have in common is that they are often depicted as bumbling fools at one point or another. This is a common trope in postfeminist media, as postfeminism focuses almost solely on affluent, powerful women and how they can do an equally sufficient or better job professionally than men. Misandry often runs wild in postfeminist media; as in *SatC*, the main women often banter about and criticize the unusual men they’re romantically involved with that episode. Some of this is warranted, as some of the men in *SatC* do have glaring issues: one wanting to be caught in bed by his parents, one two-timing women on the phone, and one filming women in bed with

him without their consent as some examples. However, some men in the show are harmless or as equally flawed and complex as the main women in the show, such as Mr. Big, Carrie's primary love interest. *SatC* is interesting in its depiction of men, in that despite its often cynical writing of men they are still seen as something to acquire. Mr. Big is a great example of this, as throughout the series he makes mistakes and is endlessly criticized despite initially being made out to be extremely charming. Carrie endlessly critiques men and their shortcomings yet falls for a postfeminist's dream man: a lavishly successful and independent businessman, or in other words, the same ideal postfeminist woman the women of *SatC* strive to be.

This strangely complex and gender essentialist portrayal of men in *SatC* is something I perceived while watching and perceived my whole life in other media, as it is often inescapable. As a result of this, for a long time I attempted to distance myself from different forms of masculinity due to this largely negative portrayal. The people who grew up in the rise of postfeminist media are now the people responsible for mainstream entertainment and create byproducts of postfeminism, though this time without the analytical nuanced commentary of something like *SatC*. Nowadays, if men are bumbling fools in a piece of media, they are played simply for laughs, not something to dissect or analyze along with these laughs. If those same characters were women, they would likely be pinned as ditzy and unintelligent. One may say this is simply a harmless role reversal of bygone portrayals of women in media, but as a trans man who has seen both portrayals, it must be done responsibly. By making out every person in a group to be one thing, even in a satirical or social commentary sense, you run the risk of committing the same influential damage as your prejudiced predecessors.

## Oh Honey, What About the Counterargument?

Some argue that due to its postfeminist values, *SatC* is not worthy of appreciation, even in an analytical sense. Notably, much of the discourse surrounding *SatC* is merely from a point of misunderstanding or overly simplifying issues and characters in the show. Alyssa Stephens writes, “This show honestly reveals how some women’s rivalry is one-sided, but also attempts to justify the bitterness of [Carrie] at times towards other women, so that of course, we still like them”. I believe this is a misguided perspective on Carrie, as she may have her moments of selfishness, but the show never makes her out to be likable in these moments. She may sometimes be bratty or make poor decisions, but we as an audience are not encouraged to empathize with her, only to observe. Another writer, Charlie Squire, writes, “Everything about the show is frustrating: the characters’ poor decisions, their perpetual selfishness, the immense and unspoken privilege of the show’s leads”. While I have had to take some breaks while watching *SatC* due to this similar frustration, I still always came back. As I’ve alluded to, I believe *SatC* can make the audience feel frustrated while also still being an incredibly compelling portrayal of relationships, gender roles, metropolitan life, and postfeminism’s effects. Portraying realistic characters that can sometimes be unlikable does not inherently mean the media is praising them. After all, feminism asks for the equal treatment of all genders, which *SatC* does do in writing female characters as equally flawed as men. At some point *SatC* critics must ask themselves, if Carrie Bradshaw were a male character, would there still be a public disdain surrounding her? In this way, Carrie Bradshaw is the “unacknowledged first female anti-hero on television” (Nussbaum). Anti-heroes are typically beloved by audiences, morally grey figures that

we can't help but root for. Though Carrie is also not my favorite *SatC* character, one would be remiss to criticize her and not at least respect her depth as a character under postfeminism.

Postfeminism in itself is complicated and “is not unilaterally good or bad, it must be considered in the contemporary context of the late liberal twenty-first century” (Adriaens and Van Bauwel). It can be positive, in that it portrays a view of women being strong, intelligent, unique, and complex. Despite this, postfeminism is still a close-minded perspective, as it fails to acknowledge how its media often relies on consumerism, perceived independence, gender roles, cisheteronormativity, and a frequently snobby air of sophistication to exist.

### **And Just Like That... There's Nuance in *SatC***

Postfeminism in *SatC* differs from other similar media in that there's always multiple opinions on a topic presented. Though frequently postfeminist in nature, these characters and their opinions still stand with nuance in which the audience is discouraged to simplify them, though many critics may still do so. Even with this nuance, I believe postfeminist media has negative effects on how people navigate gender presentation and performance. Despite my deep appreciation for *SatC*, its postfeminism and response to such are ultimately what made its later seasons fall short in its later messaging to the audience. Show creator Darren Star even said that he believed “the show ultimately betrayed what it was about” (qtd. in Cwik). Darren Star left *SatC* after its third season, leaving these complex characters to the likes of other writers and producers that may have not realized how important and unique the commentary in this show really was. Though postfeminism is embedded in the show from the

beginning, it is my belief that these other writers and producers did not fundamentally understand the messaging that Star wanted to convey throughout the series after his departure. In fact, Star had planned for Carrie to end up happily single at the end of the series as a defiance to postfeminist ideals. This ultimately was not how she ended up, instead becoming more paranoid and in her head, though with Mr. Big finally at her side. Though the show's original sentiment of contemplating, critiquing, and participating in postfeminism runs through until the end of the series, the changes behind the scenes during the show's run undeniably morphed the show into focusing more on the drama, conflict, and comedy that the average viewer was drawn to.

I still believe postfeminism in *SatC* and other similar media is indeed negative for how people navigate their gender presentation and performance, though I also believe critics do not fully see *SatC* as the compelling work of commentary that it is. Though I think *SatC* loses some of its original sentiment by the end of the show, it is still a remarkable commentary on postfeminism and its negative effects on the lives of average metropolitan women. *SatC* shows how postfeminism pervades itself into every facet of life, and in that way puts up equal expectations as traditional gender roles do. By having any expectations for a given group, you deprive the whole of that group of being diverse within themselves. *SatC*'s main four women are all negatively affected by postfeminism in one way or another, yet they all have unique stories to tell and relationships with postfeminism. In this way, *SatC* is both a product of postfeminism and a staunch critique of it.

I believe the issue of postfeminism in media is important because although postfeminist media was most popular in the 90s, it is still present in modern media.



Even when it's not the focus, postfeminism and its related issues are still permeating in our contemporary media and negatively affecting how people navigate gender presentation and performance today. Postfeminism in contemporary media now presents itself in more subtle ways, but you can still see how people remain affected by these ideas in media that we now see as typical. As my own message to audiences, I ask for people to be more aware of how postfeminism operates within media and how it affects audiences, even if subconsciously. Postfeminism and its role in society is not something to be ignored, as we see it in the people and media we see on a daily basis.

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