

POPULAR PLOT LINES AND PASSIONATE CONVERSATIONS: INTERPRETING THE
SEX AND THE CITY BREAST CANCER STORYLINE

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to all the women out there that break barriers through open dialogue. And to those whose voices are stifled, may they find their voice one day.

PREVIEW

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By

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ABSTRACT

Using the framework of entertainment-education as a media strategy, the present study sought to determine how viewers of *Sex and the City (SATC)* interpreted its highly gripping breast cancer storyline through conversations and group sense-making. Some 17 heavy viewers of SATC, all women, participated in this study, watching three episodes of the *SATC* breast cancer storyline in small group contexts. The viewings sparked conversations and discussion on a variety of topics, and five major themes emerged from an analysis of the transcripts: (1) personal identification with *SATC*'s characters, especially with Samantha, (2) the importance of social support during a cancer diagnosis, (3) the importance of trusting doctor-patient relationships, (4) a heightened awareness of breast cancer and other health issues, and (5) the cognitive and emotive effects of the breast cancer storyline on the respondents as involved viewers.

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CHAPTER 1
TELEVISION SHOWS AND POPULAR IMAGINATIONS



Consider the following snatch of conversation between Samantha and Carrie, protagonists of *Sex and the City* (SATC), a highly popular television show of this past decade.

Samantha: I am just so angry. The chemo I can handle, but this hair thing, it's...it's too much.

Carrie: Sweetie, we'll find you a better wig.

Samantha: I have left hair all over Manhattan. Every time the wind blows I have to check to make sure I'm not bald.

Carrie: It's only temporary, it'll grow back.

Samantha: Until then, I have to look like a sick person, and I don't do "sick person".

Carrie: Because you're not! You're someone who had a little blip of bad luck and now it's over.

Samantha: And what if it's not over?

Carrie: It's over, so over.

Samantha: What if it comes back? I could die Carrie...with really bad hair.

Carrie: Hey, you are not going anywhere.

Samantha: Carrie please, let me talk about what I'm afraid of, please.

What happens when two much-loved characters of a popular television program have a conversation such as the above? How do audience members respond, react, and interpret the breast cancer plotline of *SATC* about coping with chemotherapy, the accompanying hair loss, and nervous anxiety about the future?

Welcome to the world of *SATC*, its protagonists, its gripping plotlines, and its audience responses.

Sex and the City (SATC) was, and continues to be, an extraordinary popular cultural phenomenon, as evidenced by the recently -released *Sex and the City 2* movie in late-May, 2010.

To understand its popularity, consider an *SATC* episode dealing with women's obsession with highly desirable and painfully uncomfortable shoes. The episode "A Women's Right to Shoes" not only exhibited what a pair of shoes could do for a woman's confidence, but also raised many provocative questions. Carrie Bradshaw, one of the *SATC* protagonists, goes to a party at her friend's apartment. She, and other guests, are asked to leave their shoes outside -- so as to not bring in germs. When Carrie is about to leave the party she discovers that her brand new pair of Manolo Blahniks that cost her \$485 are missing. When Carrie informs her friend, she is not just unfazed by Carrie's predicament but "shoe shames" her, criticizing her lavish lifestyle. The single and childless career woman Carrie Bradshaw is hurt and upset by her friend's harsh judgment especially as she believes she works hard, pays her bills, and hence can sometimes splurge on trendy fashion items.

After this episode was broadcast, I remember shoe shopping with a girl friend of mine. Neither of us had much money, and we talked about this episode, about how we are both financially responsible, and whether or not it would be wrong for us to splurge on a pair of shoes. We especially talked about the dilemmas that this episode raised. At the end of the show, Carrie's friend decides to buy her the shoes to replace the stolen ones. My friend and I both agreed that it was the right thing to do. We also agreed that judging someone for their choices in life was hurtful and harmful and that it could potentially lead to other social ramifications, such as intolerance and prejudice.

I receive phone calls, text messages, emails, and even letters from friends who tell me they just finished watching *Sex and the City* and it jogged their memory of me, and our times together. The conversations that inevitably follow relate to the topics discussed in *SATC*. My friends use the show as a means to discuss with me issues that they are facing in their own lives. To my friends I am known as a living encyclopedia of *SATC* so they know they can come to me, make any reference to *SATC*, and know that I will understand them. I have often wondered what if more women watched the show? Would that give them more opportunity to discuss with others the current challenges they are facing? This thought inspired the present research.

The purpose of this study was to talk to women viewers of *SATC*, to gauge how they process the sensitive topics that the program addresses, and to gain an understanding of how the program is interpreted through the conversations that follow. That is, how do women interpret *SATC* and make sense of the issues they have seen the characters experience? In this study I focused on the breast cancer storyline in *SATC*, using three key episodes that dealt with the topic. I arranged for several women's groups to watch these three *SATC* episodes and followed the conversations that ensued. In-depth interviews were conducted with some of these respondents.

In essence, this study sought to understand how watching a popular show on television can benefit a community of viewers in terms of spurring conversations about a health issue, creating a space for dialogue that may otherwise, given the taboo nature of the topic, not be available.

The Power of Popular Television

When we sit around as families and friends and watch a favorite television program, the viewing experience is qualitatively different than it is if we watched alone. Television has become a shared “space” or experience for many. We watch a show during the week and then ask our friends on the weekend if they caught the episode. We talk about the issues characters face and how they are resolved in a 30 to 60 minute period. Television has the ability to make us talk about things we may not talk about otherwise. Television lets us see conflict from various perspectives. It makes us question how we would handle issues if we faced them. It sparks our imaginations and at times makes us question our own opinions and sometimes our own values, “What would I do in that situation?”

Where can conversations go, where can they take us, how can they change us, or influence us, if at all? Because watching television has become an activity that people can do as a group -- with friends or family -- it is interesting to reflect on the various levels at which communication occurs in such a situation. There is mediated communication, that is, people watching what is happening on the television (the medium) screen. This mediated experience may spark a conversation between two of the viewers, that is, at the interpersonal level; or a conversation before, during, or after a program among the bigger viewing group, that is, group communication. And, also intrapersonal communication, the continuous internal dialogue that works in conjunction with any of the other types of communication that is occurring. To

understand how this study will work, one must understand what *SATC* is about. The storylines are diverse, the characters colorful, and the conversations passionate.

About Sex and the City

For six straight seasons (1998 to 2004), the television series, *SATC* captured the imagination of young women in the United States, becoming a cultural phenomenon as none had expected. Since 2004, the show has rerun on TBS and FOX, and been made available on VHS/DVD, and on HBO on demand. The show targeted women between the ages of 18 to 49. *SATC* brought in an estimated 64 million viewers to view the series finale in 2004. The show has influenced women in their ways of fashion and designer cocktails (Carrie's favorite drink). *SATC* was such a cultural phenomenon that it was turned into a major motion picture in May 2008 and again in May 2010. However, despite the significant following we do not know much about how the show influenced conversations between and among avid women viewers.

SATC featured four main characters, each with their own personality and foibles, allowing viewers to find a diverse array of emotions, situations, and plotlines to relate with. The four characters were Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), and Charlotte York (Kristin Davis). Carrie is a writer for a weekly newspaper, she is referred to as the eternal single girl who is always looking for love but trying to maintain her independence. Samantha owns her own public relations firm and loves to meet men but fears commitment for she emphasizes her need for independence. Miranda is a tough lawyer who prosecutes everyone including the men in her life. Finally, there is Charlotte who runs an art gallery and is always in search of the perfect man. Every episodes deals with a specific issue that most women face such as being single and independent or being in a relationship and still making time for friends. Through the character's different personalities and