

The Representation of Urban Upper Middle Class American Women's Community in *Sex and the City*

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Abstract: The portrayal of urban upper middle class American women's community in *Sex and the City-SATC* is built upon constructed symbols related to the position of urban upper middle class American Women's community and how cosmopolitan the women are. The symbol's construction is characterized by singleness, upper middle class social status, well-established career, alienation, consumptiveness, independence, gender consciousness, and open mindedness in their sexual knowledge. Television has helped to fracture traditional conventions about how women should place themselves in the midst of their society and constructed urban upper middle class American women's image and identity.

Key words: urban upper middle class American women, community, sexuality, lifestyle, representation, construction.

HBO began airing *SATC* on June 6th, 1998. Central to the show's appeal has been its frank discussion of female sexuality and its refreshing representation of the lives of contemporary women although none of the writers, creators or directors associated with the program has directly referred to 'feminist' for that matter. In many ways, *SATC* has functioned as a forum about women's sexuality as it has been shaped by the feminist movement of the last 30 years.

By definition, all media texts are representation of reality. This means that they are intentionally composed, written, framed, cropped, captioned, branded, targeted and censored by their producers, and that they are entirely artificial versions of the reality we perceive around us. Every media form is a representation of someone's concept existence, codified into a series of signs and symbols, which can be read by an audience. However, we have limited perception of reality without the media. As an audience, we need the media to mediate our view of the

world; in other words, we need media to make sense of reality. Therefore, representation is a fluid, two-way process : producers position a text somewhere in relation to reality and audiences assess a text on its relationship to reality. The study of representation refers to the construction in any medium of aspects of 'reality' such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts.

This textual analysis study conducted to investigate structured symbols in *SATC* episodes that represent urban upper middle class American women's community by using semiotics approach. In semiotics (the science of signs) there are two central concerns: "The relationship between a sign and its meaning; and the way signs are combined into codes" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 37). A code is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture. These codes are links between producers, texts and audiences, and can be seen as agents of intertextuality through which texts interrelate in a network of meanings that constitutes our cultural world (Fiske, 1987, p. 4). The codes, according to John Fiske (1987), work in a complex structure, which is by no means concretely fixed. They begin with an event to be televised which is already encoded by reality or social codes such as those of appearance, dress, make up, speech, etc. which transmit the conventional representational codes, which shape the representations of narrative, character, dialogue, setting, casting, etc. These are then organized into coherence and social acceptability (common sense) by ideological codes, like individualism, patriarchy, race, class, capitalism, etc. Reality then is already encoded; we make sense of reality by the codes of our culture. If this encoded reality is televised, the technical codes and representational conventions make it technologically transmittable and an appropriate cultural text for its audiences. The choices chosen will have different connotative meanings.

Conventional, ideological codes and the relationship between them are sometimes difficult to locate. The way codes fit together gives then a sense of naturalness and is evidence of how these ideological codes work to organize the other codes into producing meanings that constitute the common sense of a society. This process of making sense means moving up and down each level (above), for sense can only be produced when reality, representations and ideology merge into an apparently natural unity. By all means, at the end, this study would reveal not only the position of urban upper middle class American women in the metropolis society's context, but also the ways the media *SATC* represents urban upper middle class American women's lifestyle and sexuality.

URBAN UPPER MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN WOMEN AND PUBLIC SPHERE

Strinati (1995) argues that industrialization and urbanization have created what is called atomization (p. 6). In other words, people are connected to one another as atom; they do not really have meaningful relationship. Cafés, clubs, restaurants, beauty centers are places, which portray how women alienated in the midst of busy metropolis New York. They cannot even recognize themselves and they need a community. They need access to know themselves through their friends. This community tends to be very exclusive and closed, yet it gives closeness, familiarity and intimacy. Thus, this urban upper middle class American women's community has turned to be 'a family to friends'.



'Attack 5' 10" Woman' (Season 3: Eps. 3), DVD *SATC*

Picture 1. Charlotte, Miranda, Carrie and Samantha are having brunch at a café

Families have always been at the center of a sitcom: from biological family (as in *The Cosby Show*), to families of friends (as in *Friends*). The concept of 'a family to friends' is a brand new one for television, *SATC* is unique for its focus on women's relationship. One of the most important themes of *SATC* is the value of female friendships and the role of these friendships in helping each of the women characters to understand herself and her life. In every episode, the four women characters meet together to talk, usually over brunch, or meeting at café, luncheon, or restaurants. The

women's relationships with each other—both as group and individual- are continually depicted as the character's primary New York community and family, their sources of love, care and economic support. These women are laughing, talking, and supporting each other.



'What's Sex Got to Do with It' (Season 4: Eps. 4), DVD SATC

Picture 2. Girls are hanging out at a club

According to Mandell (n.d.), coffee house is one of public sphere and urban institution that introduces 'bourgeois public sphere' –typical modern community-. Coffee house is a paradigmatic example as people come as individual in an intimate private space to share warmth. Coffee house is a public sphere where people participate in rational and critical discussion. Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte and Miranda use public sphere for meetings and having chitchat about their sexual life. Women's talk -the conversation between the four women- has been the central of the show and is at the core of each storyline. Their regular conversations at brunch, over a cocktail, or while at each other's apartments, function as sessions where each often challenges each other's viewpoints. 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game' is one of the episodes when Miranda chastises the other three for their inability to talk about anything other than men.

All we talk about anymore is Big, or balls, or small dicks. How does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about but boyfriends? It's like seventh grade with bank accounts. What about us? What we think, we feel, we know. Christ. Does it all have to be about them? (Season 2: Eps. 1, DVD SATC)

Instead of giving them sphere to resolve the quartet's conflict or crisis facing, these public spheres reassert social class attached to them. Café, restaurants, luncheon, whatever public places visited symbolize their social status and community. Public spheres represent urban women as an exclusive community. Places where they go are places associated with high exclusive brands and exclusive quality. In other words, public spheres show their financial independency.

URBAN UPPER MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN WOMEN'S CONSERVATISM

Being conservative is perceived as holding traditional values, especially religion, nationalism and social traditional values firmly. Conservatives stress on the traditional institution, such as family and church. For instance, conservatives define 'family' as the formal form of marriage and family. Charlotte has such kind of conservatism towards marriage, men and commitments. She has been living in a very urban city, yet she still believes in finding happiness through finding the right man, getting married and having children. Although her friends do not believe in marriage and commitments, Charlotte still has a big hope on meeting the right person, who is rich, handsome, well-established, well-educated and sexually attractive. However, she does not turn herself for only one man. She strives for getting the right man who might have the qualities she seeks.

The conservative urban woman bases herself on traditional values. Charlotte tends to be very polite, she bases herself on whatever considered normal and common. Charlotte refused to tell her friends what is inside her 'goodie drawer' (the nightstand drawer in which a person keeps all the sex essentials, in 'Attack 5' 10" Woman' (Season 3: Eps. 3, DVD *SATC*). Despite the fact that all of her friends feel all right and very comfortable to be nude inside the steam room, Charlotte does not feel the same.

Charlotte limits herself to be polite and civilized. She feels that she is not grown up by such freedom value. Being polite is when someone is using clothes. Conservative woman refuses to be innovative; they intend to maintain traditional values. Though there are many ways to get sexual satisfaction, conservative woman refuses to get sexual satisfaction through unusual ways. Being liberated in their normal life does not mean accepting 'the liberation of sexuality', they limit themselves to normal forms of sexuality.



'Attack 5' 10" Woman' (Season 3: Eps. 3), DVD *SATC*.

Picture 3. Charlotte shows her uncomfortable expression in the steam room

Conservatism constructs someone's way of viewing sexuality. Charlotte requires having sex with men who have normal sex organ - circumcised penis-. Charlotte is very surprised when she finds out the uncircumcised penis of Mike.

The uncircumcised penis is revolting for her because the penis skin is a heap of folded skin. Charlotte says, 'There was so much skin, it was like a *Shar-Pei!*' ('Old Dogs New Dicks', (Season 2: Eps. 9, DVD *SATC*). Charlotte still considers the 'conservative' way of having sex satisfaction should start from a normal penis, whereas Samantha thinks on the other way round. Samantha has liberated way of looking at sex; she can get her sex satisfaction by any kinds of penis, including the uncircumcised ones.



<http://www.sharpei.com>

Picture 4. *Shar Pei*

Lesbianism is another occurrence how Charlotte defends her conservative way of thinking towards institution of marriage and love. According to Charlotte, lesbian relationship is unusual and not normal. Charlotte does not trust Samantha's statement that she is a lesbian; she thinks that Samantha's relationship is revolting.



'What's Sex Got To Do With It' (Season 4: Eps. 4), DVD SATC

Picture 5. Charlotte's expression on lesbianism

Thus, conservative urban women have made limitation towards what is considered normal and common. She can accept normal polite and non vulgar or normal forms of sexuality. Patriarchy ideology shackles conservative urban women in the way that they are still dominated by a doctrine to satisfy and serve their men. However, in some ways, accelerated by higher education, they have a higher level of gender consciousness. Conservative urban women do not blame themselves when they find weak point or limitation in their sexual life. They are proactive and take initiative to patch up the problems. They do not give up and cry over their sexual problems. They are demanded to restore their sexual life because they are, again, demanded to satisfy men. Men's satisfaction is in the higher rank of her own self satisfaction. Still the most progressive aspect of *SATC* may be the view that women's advancement

in the workplace, the home and the bedroom –on the bed- does not make modern relationships more complicated, yet should not make them impossible. Instead, men must be willing to adapt, and traditional notions of the family may need to be redefined to accommodate these changes.

URBAN UPPER MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN WOMEN AND RELATIONSHIP

Urban upper middle class American women in *SATC* are always portrayed as women who do not wait for men's initiative. They take their own initiative when they think they need to take one. They do not depend on their men to do or decide something. Furthermore, they can start or end a relationship when they feel they fit or do not fit each other. Relationship in this sitcom is a relationship without commitment, as commitments bind them to certain responsibility and rights. They can get what they want without being committed to any certain responsibility. Samantha, for instance, is portrayed as an urban upper middle class American woman who does not commit herself to any kinds of relationships. She has dated and slept with so many men. Samantha feels herself as a man, and then she claims herself as *manizer* -women who sleep with many men-. She does not have any orientation in relationship. Relationship is a means of getting sexual satisfaction. The other girls, Miranda and Carrie do not want to have commitment in their relationship as well. Carrie is even scared to commitment and always afraid of being broken hearted. Carrie does not want to admit that she is afraid of being committed. She wants to be perceived as someone who is liberated by her urban life.

Based on commitment, initiative and orientation of their relationships, then it is concluded that urban upper urban middle class American women place themselves as equal as men in relationship. They do not show that they are weak or could be treated as the object of love or sex. Though only Charlotte who has the orientation of finding husband and making a happy family in her relationship, yet, she does not tie herself so easily to commitment and marriage. Before, she dated many men to get the man that she wants.

SATC challenges dominant media images of what is primary to male pleasure. Media have always portrayed that female orgasm is secondary to male pleasure. However, the single lifestyle and their finance independence manage them stand on the same platform as how men treat their women. That means women do not need men to reach and get their

sexual satisfaction. When men have objectified women then women can do the same thing, they can have sex without feeling as well. Extremely, they are able to make use of men, nor do not use men at all to get sexual satisfaction. They can fantasize and have sex with their sex toys, such as dildo, vibrator, cyber sex, or from their lesbian partner. Moreover, urban upper middle class American women can demonstrate their sexual desire openly. In the very episode, *SATC* opens with a discussion of sex as something 'women do' by asking whether a woman can 'have sex like a man', that is an active agent in pursuit of pleasure. After Carrie goes to bed with an old flame, having him perform oral sex and then taking off after she had had orgasm, she says, 'I left feeling powerful, potent, and incredibly alive' ('Sex and the City', Season 1: Eps. 1, DVD, *SATC*). While all of the characters on *SATC* take an assertive approach to sexual satisfaction, a woman's right to pleasure is most persistently expressed through the character of Samantha, who is the most sexually active and sexually satisfied of the quartet. In 'My Motherhood, My Self' (Season 4: Eps. 8, DVD, *SATC*), Samantha panics when, for apparently the first time, she is unable to have an orgasm.

Urban upper middle class American women actively protect and place themselves as the subject of sex. They protect themselves from the danger of sex by providing condoms inside their *goodie drawer*. They realize the risk of having pre marital sex, such as pregnancy and contagious sexual disease. Normally, based on patriarchal ideology, men are always perceived as the ones who have to be responsible when their girlfriends are pregnant. On the other hand, these women have a high sexual knowledge and they know exactly their sexual responsibilities and rights. In this case, these women have the positive side of self-centered as they actively protect themselves from the consequences of having pre marital sex.

Sitcom *SATC* demonstrates a revolution on what is considered normal and proper by the patriarchal convention. The patriarchal convention belief - women do not have rights to be satisfied by their men and women are always objectified-, is constantly swindled. This sitcoms reveals that women have rights to be satisfied by their men and women can perceive men as their sex object. They have their 'revolutionized' way of thinking, so that they fell 'fine' when they have to end their relationship. Relationships build by urban upper middle class American women represent how the patriarchal convention fractured.

LANGUAGE: GENDER AND SEXUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The choice of taboo words portrays how women have put themselves on the same level as men. The more taboo words employed, the more powerful they are. Samantha always uses many taboo words, such as: 'fuck', and 'shit'. She expresses herself very well by using taboo words. She prefers to use 'bitches' rather than 'girls' to refer to women. Instead of saying 'have sex', she prefers to say 'fuck'. Samantha uses those words –'fuck, shit, damm'- to show that she has power and she is not a weak woman. Referring to Dobrovsky (1996), the use of informal language demonstrates covert prestige. Men regard themselves macho when they use taboo words or rude words (p. 552).

The language used represents individual's gender consciousness. Samantha who expresses herself in taboo words has shown that she is on the same level as men and, sometimes, higher and more superior than men. Though Miranda and Carrie are not as aggressive as Samantha, they always find choice of words that show their openness. Carrie, the journalist, tends to make a complicated and artistic choice of words, such as, 'the very best lean-in and kiss-me goodnight kiss' to express 'the best goodnight kiss'. Miranda tends to choose witty and sharp words; she is practical and economical in using words. Therefore, both of them have put themselves in the same level as men; in other words, they are gender conscious. Charlotte is different from the rest. She is selective in choosing what she wants to say. She tries to soften her choice of words. Charlotte uses 'making love' instead of 'fucking'. Charlotte's gender conscious level is not as high as her friends', yet she will put herself on the same level when her rights are threatened.

The urban upper middle class American women have created their own idiomatic expression. Regarding the focus of quartet discussion, each expression has special meaning related to men, relationship, sexual activities and their identity.

CODEPENDENT COMING (n.): When a woman fakes orgasms because he is a nice guy and means well.

DEJA-FUCK (abstract n.): The strange sensation that you are fucking someone you have already fucked.

"EVERYTHING BUT" GIRL (proper n.): A girl who does everything but having intercourse with a guy.

FUCK BUDDY (n.): 1) a guy you have had a couple of dates with that did not really go anywhere, but the sex was so great you keep him on

call; 2) not a slave but has a life, a life you do not really have to know about; 3) guaranteed delivery within Manhattan in six hours or less.

GAY-STRAIGHT MAN (n, plentiful in New York City): A new strain of heterosexual males spawned in Manhattan as a result of overexposure to fashion, exotic cuisine, musical theater, and antique furniture

LA DOULEUR EXQUISE (n., French but familiar to many Americans): The exquisite pain of loving someone unattainable

MODELIZER (n., common, esp. In New York City): A man who is obsessed not with women but with models.

PERINEUM (n.): latin for “not without an engagement ring”

GOODY DRAWER (n.) : The nightstand drawer in which a person keeps all the sex essentials

URBAN RELATIONSHIP MYTH (n.): an unbelievable fairy tale concocted by women to make their love lives seem less hopeless, except it makes you feel even more hopeless because this fabulous, magical relationship is never happening to you; usually involves rain

SEX LIKE A MAN (n, common in Manhattan): Sex without feeling

SHARPEI (n.): An uncircumcised penis

Instead of having idiomatic expression, they also have special names to men they dated and had sex with. Miranda has dated with ‘*angry guy*’ (the man who is always in anger), ‘*guy who watches porn*’ (the man who watches porn before and while having sex), ‘*the modelizer*’ (the man who is obsessed with models). Samantha has had sex with ‘*viagra guy*’ (the man who consumes viagra before having sex), ‘*short guy*’ (the man who is short physically but good in sex), ‘*baby talker*’ (the man who talks like a baby). Charlotte has given special names to her dates, for example: ‘fall asleep guy’ (the man who sleeps while having sex), ‘uncircumcised guy’ (the man who has uncircumcised penis). Carrie has given special names to men who had sex with her, such as: ‘the alcoholic’ (the man who replaces alcohol with sex), ‘the guy who left money’ (the man who gives money after having sex).

Idiomatic expression and special names on men whom dated are ways to build exclusiveness. They are single attractive upper middle class women and live in New York. They are minorities in between New York women who believe in marriage and commitments. They have other perspective about how women should look at their lives. The idiomatic

expression grows as their friendship grows, it appears from sexual experience and problems they have discussed. They are the only ones who understand with whom they are dating and getting involved. In other words, this exclusivity protects everyone's privacy as the member of the community. Based on the choice of words, they express the sense of sophisticatedness to underline their status, single smart educated women.

URBAN UPPER MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN WOMEN AND BODY IMAGE

Urban upper middle class American women's performance is characterized by having the perfect mixture of legs, hip, breast and face size. They always take care of their bodies and skin's beauty. Consumerism has driven and pushed women for not being passive and accepting their body as nature given. Body can be molded into anything they want by giving enough money and attention. Therefore, body becomes the object of experiments and spa is the place for urban upper middle class American women to shape their bodies.



'Attack 5' 10" Woman' (Season 3: Eps. 3), DVD *SATC*

Picture 6. Girls are in the steam room, Samantha is in the massage room.

Body treatment portrays that young image should be renewed. What is considered as young is having a sexy body and not wrinkled skin. They try to cover the imperfect parts of body. As single women, they want to be perceived as urban women who have attractive shiny face and look young though most of them are in between thirties to forties. Charlotte (Season 3: Eps. 3, DVD *SATC*) feels that she is not perfect because she has big thighs, thus she is not confident to be nude in the steam room.

- Carrie : Charlotte honey, what's wrong ?
 Charlotte : Nothing , I'm just hot
 Carrie : Okay, .. and
 Charlotte : I'm just not comfortable being naked in public
 Carrie : Well, it's not public, it's ladies locker room
 Charlotte : I didn't grow up in the naked house
 Carrie : I didn't either
 Charlotte : But she grew up in a naked house
 Carrie : She might still live in a naked house
 O...Charlotte sweetie who cares about you looking at
 other woman?
 Charlotte : You don't care because you have a perfect body
 Carrie : Oh my god, you're deluded !
 Charlotte sweetie you have a beautiful figure
 Charlotte : Really?
 Carrie : Yes.
 Charlotte : Why is the woman in the steaming room looking at
 me?
 Like my thighs are too big?

Body and face treatment becomes important for them because they realize that physical attraction plays an important part in their socialization. Body and face are physical parts which are easily perceived by people around them. Living in New York makes them realize that performance is a 'talking' visualization. This also explains why urban upper middle class American women like to meet in public places, such as coffee shop, boutiques, and clubs. These are places where performance will decide how impressive they are. People do not really know each other; thus, performance automatically becomes something important for the first encounter. Their performances represent their socio economic status and sexuality.

URBAN UPPER MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN WOMEN AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Urban upper middle class American women in *SATC* have gay friends that appear quite often from time to time. If Carrie asked to list her good friends then she will put 'Stanford Blatch' in between. Stanford has been a great friend for Carrie, especially when Carrie needs a shoulder to

cry on. Charlotte has Anthony Marentino as her best gay friend. Anthony meets Charlotte for the first time when he is looking for a perfect wedding gown for her wedding. Though the marriage does not last long, she finds friendship. Anthony supports Charlotte to be braver in facing her failure. Therefore, gay is the urban upper middle class American women's best friend.

Why? First, the relationship between urban American women and gay is characterized by having no discrimination in their relationship. They never consider their gay friends as different people. They treat their gay friends as they treat other girls. Second, in friendship, gay becomes a place where women can talk heart to heart and get suggestions. This condition happens on the other way round as well; they can come to their best girlfriends. Besides gay is also beneficial for women when they do not have someone to accompany with to parties. Thus, it is called 'gay plus one'. These urban upper middle class American women tend to take them to parties when their dates cannot accompany them.

There are quite distinctive principles between female-female friendship and gay-female friendship. First, gay-female relationship accommodates women to be more straightforward in relationship compared to female-female relationship. Physically, gay is a man, thus, women can be very straightforward to show their thinking and feeling. Yet they tend to cover other women's feelings when they have contradictive thinking and feeling. Second, in gay-female relationship, women can take a braver and more independent position. Women can be a place for talking heart to heart and the source of suggestion. Women can be tougher and give a shelter when a man has problems. This is contrary to patriarchy values that men will not pout to women. Men should be tougher and should be in a more independent position. However, in this sitcom women are not portrayed as second class or in a weak position. Third, having gay-female relationship is another benefit for women. Urban American women have the possibility to access not only women's perspective but also men's perspective in the relationship. Their gay friends have a big empathy towards their men's and women's sides. Gay can put themselves in the position and functions needed. Thus, gay in gay-female relationship has given reflection to men that they should not always feel strong, brave, and arrogant. If men are always normally portrayed as strong and tough, yet men –gays- in *SATC* are not portrayed that strong. Gays represent the fractured patriarchy concepts. In *SATC*, men can cry and pout to women. Sometimes men put themselves lower than women do. Therefore, the existence of gay in this sitcom should be a

reflection for men that they should not have to be always strong, brave and arrogant. They can sometimes show their weakness side if they have to show it. Gay has given positive reflection to men in terms of how men should not tie themselves to men's normal given obligations. Gay in this sitcom has been a positive example for women. Women should not limit themselves to what women normally do, yet women should be flexible to do many things. Thus, women can cry expressing her sadness but women can be brave to face the challenges of life.

CONCLUSION

The theme of singledom has been on-and-on portrayed throughout the episodes to give insight and to function as a 'reflective mirror' for men. Being single teaches men that their self actualization cannot be measured as a part of family and a wife, yet as individuals, they can decide their own self actualization. The choice of living single is perceived as their freedom to decide and determine kinds of household responsibilities and means; they are not domesticated when they are in private sphere. Though they do not ask much from men for not being domesticated in public sphere, yet, this is a positive step in the way that women can reach a higher level of empowerment. This shows that deciding to live single in the midst of New York is not tied by traditional convention anymore, such as getting married, having children, husband, and a complete family, not changing partners. These urban upper middle class American women still have the same level of self-pride and status even though they choose to live single. However, living single does not mean unlimited liberated urban life. Though they even live in a modern and urban metropolis and they want to be acknowledged as liberated by their urban life, they still limit themselves to normal sex variation. They reject unusual type of sex, such as fetish, having sex in public place and lesbianism.

Thus, television, through this sitcom, has deconstructed and fracture traditional conventions about how urban women should perform and place themselves in the metropolis society. In its bold representation of urban upper middle class American women, *SATC* offers a refreshing alternative to media of female sexuality. *SATC*, through television, has constructed urban upper middle class American women's image and identity that have reached a higher level of maturity and their steadiness of choosing to be single. *SATC* portrays an important limited female empowerment that creates a space where urban upper middle class American women can be both feminist and sexual.

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