

Abstract

The existing literature concerning post feminism shows a diversity of ideas among scholars; a polarization between opponents and supporters becomes salient. By rearticulating post feminism as a fundament of third-wave feminism and situating it within the context of the 21st century (Genz, 333-353), we endeavor a more revisited vision on the representation of post feminism in popular culture. Post feminism is a new form of empowerment, adjusted to the contemporary societal context. It focuses on agency, freedom, sexual pleasure, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humor, and a renewed focus on the female body. In popular media texts, the fiction series *Sex and the City* is often considered a signboard of post feminist discourse. In this article, we analyze the representation of post feminism in *Sex and the City*. Using an in-depth thematic film analysis, we analyzed whether and how post feminist themes are presented in the series.

Keywords

Popular culture, post feminism, empowerment, consumer culture, *Sex and the City*

Introduction

Sex and the City is a popular American television series launched in 1998 by *HBO* (Home Box Office 1998-2004), a pay television channel. The series is profiled as a humoristic taboo-breaking programme aimed at women. The emphasis lies on sexual freedom, female friendships, independence, and cosmopolitanism embodied by a group of young women who live and work in New York. *Sex and the City* is said to be produced from a female point of view and is stressed as a feminine series. The main characters are Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), and Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall). Carrie Bradshaw, a New York journalist, writes the column '*Sex and the City*' for the fictitious newspaper '*The New York Star*'. In this column, she tries to explain and give meaning to the modern socio-sexual life. Carrie's inspiration sources are her three best friends. The series won a considerable amount of awards (for an overview see <http://www.hbo.com>) and became an international successful cult hit. A real fan culture emerged, not just in relation to fashion and accessories, but also

restaurants and bars in Manhattan suddenly became very popular while fashion magazines used the clothes in the series as an inspiration source. Famous designers were dying to be on the show so that the viewers would link their clothes to the trendy *Sex and the City* brand, this effect is called “*the ripple effect*” (Sohn 158-159). In 2008 *Sex and the City: The Movie* premiered. *Sex and the City* was subject of countless articles and publications. “The series has contributed to current cultural discourses related to fashion trends, discussions on sex, sexuality and relationships as well as debates on modern femininity, feminism and the single woman” (Akass and McCabe 2).

Although the producers of the series never explicitly associated *Sex and the City* with feminism – both in popular, academic (see for example Gerhard 37-49; Arthurs 83-98) and media texts – it is often considered a product of post feminism. In this article, we analyze the representation of post feminism in this series and ask whether *Sex and the City* is a post feminist product of popular culture and look at how this so-called post feminism is articulated within the audiovisual text. We take a closer look at the related themes by using an in-depth thematic film analysis. However, first we need to be acquainted with the meaning of the post feminism key concept.

Post feminism has different interpretations among scholars. In literature a lack of consensus among scholars becomes clear. ‘Post feminism’ is often used in academic contexts of cultural studies and film and television studies, but is rarely used in sociology (Hollows and Moseley 7). Even when it comes to the birth of post feminism, scholars do not seem to get along (for an overview see Genz 333-353; Lotz 105-121; Tasker and Negra 107-110). We conclude that post feminism is mostly conceptualized in the academic context of television studies, in the media context of popular culture and within consumer culture. The prefix ‘post’ in the word ‘post feminism’ causes a lot of discussion. ‘Post’ is often considered as ‘after’ or even ‘anti’ feminism. But ‘post’ also has a positive connotation for a considerable amount of authors. They see it as ‘in relation with’, ‘related to’ feminism, not ‘split from’ and use the term to point out the changes in feminist discourse (Braithwaite 335-344). Ann Brooks (4) for example holds the vision that post feminism is about a political shift in feminism’s conceptual and theoretical agenda. It is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change.

In the following sections we will elaborate upon the post feminism's scholarly ideas that will be discussed in the light of the so-called feminist wave typology. Next, we will situate post feminism in its historical context. We conclude by taking an in-depth look at how the specific themes and attributes of post feminism are represented in *Sex and the City*.

Diverging visions on post feminism: a polarization

In literature, a polarization of fighters and supporters of conceptualizations of post feminism arises. First, we can differentiate a pessimistic perspective as this example makes clear, arguing that:

Feminism is dead! [...] In the 70's, feminism produced a popular culture that was intellectually provocative. Today it's a whole lot of stylish fluff. [...] Fashion spectacle, paparazzi jammed galas, mindless sex-talk, is this what the road map to greater female empowerment has become? (Bellafante 56-60).

Ginia Bellafante (56-60) points out that feminism shifted from a strong, effective political movement to an empty personal consumption style. The idea that post feminism is just a smart marketing trick to make women consume more, fits within this vision. For many scholars, post feminism is created by media and advertising business to increase sales by means of using empowered representations of women in their campaigns (Richardson 88). Within this point of view, 'post' in post feminism means 'after' or even 'anti' feminism. Here feminism has accomplished all of its goals and consequently, is over or even dead (Braithwaite 335-344). Within this perspective we can differentiate three visions. First, second-wave feminists are very critical when it comes to this new kind of feminism, because post feminism seems to be an academic or media-related construction and does not imply a feminist universal action. The second wave of feminist thought is 'hyphenated feminism' containing different theoretical frameworks (for example: liberal, radical, Marxist, psychoanalytical...) but united by a commitment to sameness, equality, universal action, sisterhood and scientific understanding (Arneil 153; Gamble 360). Tania Modleski (2-6) argues that post feminism brings us back to a prefeminist world where political goals are depoliticized and marginalized. Germaine Greer (12) stated that post feminism is just a market-dominated phenomenon. Not the government, but multinationals see women as their possession and spread false consciousness among

women by giving them the feeling they can have it all. “*The future is female, we are told. Feminism has served its purpose and should now eff off. Feminism was long hair, dungarees and dangling earrings; post feminism was business suits, big hair and lipstick; post-post feminism was ostentatious sluttishness and disorderly behavior*” (Greer 12). Secondly, feminists of the third wave do not identify themselves with post feminism because it serves patriarchy. Rebecca Munford (149-150) marks the dangerous, slippery slope between the third wave and post feminism. The *Spice Girls* for example are a post feminist product since it is created by masculine, patriarchal companies who only use feminism and girl power to increase sales. Despite the criticism, third-wave participants admit there is an overlap between post feminism and third-wave feminism since both consider second-wave feminism as old-fashioned and suffocating. They situate themselves within popular culture and mention themes as contradiction, diversity, personal and sexual pleasure, lifestyle, and individualism. But whereas post feminism is conservative and explicitly against second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism constructively built on second-wave’s accomplishments (Heywood and Drake 3). Following Braithwaite (335-344) none of both concepts – third wave or post feminism – are stable and fixed; instead both give the opportunity to debate on the paradoxes in modern feminism. Instead of discussing what feminism is (or not is), we should focus on the use of actual feminism and stress the possibilities of feminist praxis. That is why we rearticulate post feminism as an essential fundament of the third wave. Post feminism and third wave are complementary concepts that make clear that feminism is broader than ever (Braithwaite 342). A third and last negative vision on post feminism is the *backlash vision*. Authors as Susan Faludi (100-103) claim that “*a backlash*” – this is an antifeminist discourse in the media – is undermining feminism. According to her, the media launched the term post feminism to get rid of all merits of feminism. An example is the representation of career women as sick and anxious, not able to handle stress. The concept of the biological clock is also often used by media. With these antifeminist representations the media accuse feminism of destructing the female pleasure and the right of being feminine and sexy (100-103). Faludi herself is often criticized because she ignores the fact that popular culture and media can function as a *site of struggle* for feminism (Moseley and Hollows 9).

On the other side of the continuum are the optimists, often called postmodern feminists (Genz 336). Charlotte Brunsdon (309-320) counters the arguments of the opponents of post feminism and claims that post feminists are everything but marionettes of patriarchy. On the contrary, they acknowledge the

suppression and danger of it. Post feminists are against the totalitarian disposal of traditional female gender roles by feminism; personal choice is the central concept. If a woman chooses to stay at home for her family, that is her choice, and this choice is equal to the choice of choosing a career (Lancioni 135-136). That is why “*hyper domesticity*” and “*post feminist homemaking*” are central themes within post feminist theory (Negra 121). This coexistence of neoconservative values and liberal values is called “*double entanglement*”. Women thus can be traditional, radical, and pretty at the same time (Mc Robbie 255-256). Moseley and Hollows (97) agree with Brunsdon and add that post feminism is the reevaluation of the tension that seems to exist between feminism and femininity. The conventional manners of articulating femininity – such as lipstick, high heels or glamour – do not conflict with the female power. This femininity must be taken up in the feminist discourse. Series as *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal* and *Desperate Housewives* reflect this new femininity in relation to feminism. Lotz (105-121) states that post feminism can be a valuable critical theoretical model to analyze recent changes in the representation of femininity and feminism in media texts. Yet interpretations are relative because of the diverging meanings of post feminism.

Post feminism in the 21st century: a depolarization

By situating post feminism in a specific historical context, we endeavor to depolarize the distinctions between different versions of post feminism that have been upheld in various academic and media texts because post feminism is not against feminism, it’s about feminism today (Braithwaite 341). After second-wave feminism the idea grew that – because of the changes in meaning and interpretations of femininity – a new way of understanding the relationship between feminism and popular culture is needed. Post feminism is not unilaterally good or bad, it must be considered in the contemporary context of the late liberal 21st century, also called “*the Third Way*” (Genz 333). The Third Way philosophy underlies centre-left politics in Europe and the United States.

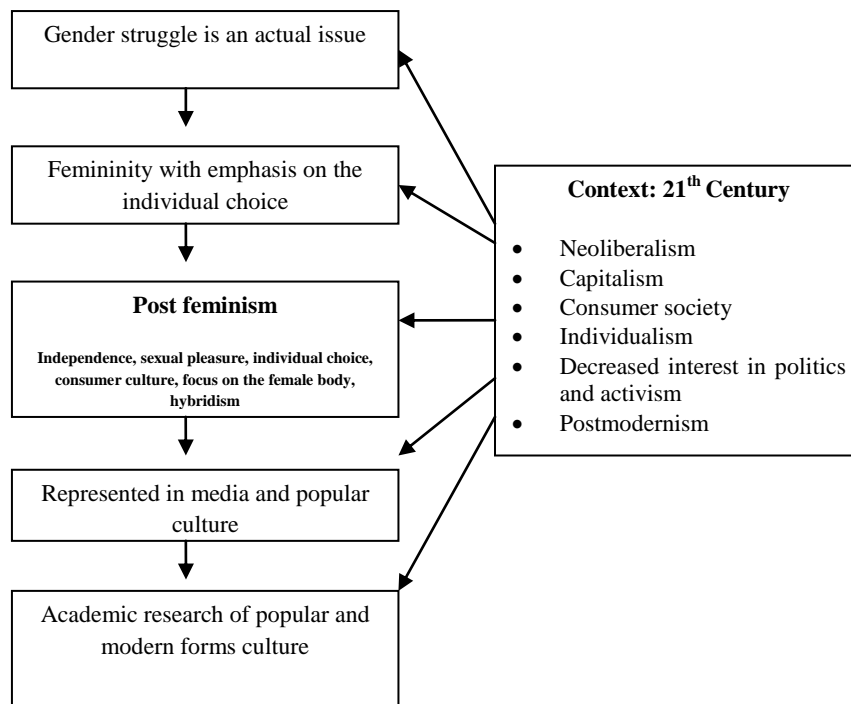
Post feminism can be considered part of the *Third Way* because it participates in the discourses of capitalism and neo-liberalism where women are asked to focus on their private and consumer lives as a way of self-expression. Post feminism is not about an activist of political struggle, it is about an individual one. This individual struggle takes place at the level of “*micro politics*” (Genz 337). Micro politics emerge out of personal and daily gender-based struggle and refer to the “*multiple agency positions of individuals today*”

(Mann 160). Post feminism responds to the changing female and feminist experiences; people do not identify with political movements (as feminism) anymore, even though gender struggle is still experienced in public and private life. Post feminists are sexual activists who use their body and attractiveness as an instrument to achieve societal and personal change (Genz 333).

Post feminism and the politics it endorses differ from emergent political movements such as third-wave feminism in that they are not founded on second-wave feminist theory and activism. Instead, post feminist politics adopts a Third-Way perspective to reconcile a number of conflicting concerns, from feminist calls for female equality and theoretical debates on anti-essentialism to the consumerist demands of capitalist society (Genz 333).

By means of conceptualization, we define post feminism as illustrated in Figure 1. Post feminism needs to be situated in the 21st-century context that is characterized by neo-liberalism, capitalism, consumer society, individualism, postmodernism, and a decreased interest in politics and activism. In this context, gender struggle is still an actual issue (the demand for equal pay or the glass ceiling for example). Post feminism is a discourse that gives women the opportunity to be feminine, attractive, and a feminist at the same time. It is a new form of empowerment, adjusted to the actual societal context. Independence, individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humor, and the renewed focus on the female body are the fundamentals of this new feminism. Post feminism is a pluralistic and contradictory feminism that has been influenced by the academic world, media, popular culture, and consumer culture. Media and popular culture play a crucial role in the representation, evolution and development of this new feminism. By consequence, academics can use post feminism as a tool to analyze contemporary products of popular culture such as *Sex and the City*.

(e.g. <insert figure 1, size: half page, Conceptualization of post feminism>)



Post feminism in *Sex and the City*

In academic literature, a considerable amount of scholars wrote on *Sex and the City* and its links with feminism. Gerhard (37) for example positions the series as an example of “*queer post feminism*” that links post feminist and queer theory. She states that the protagonists enjoy the fruits of post-70s equality with an added emphasis on emancipated sexual expression and a repudiation of feminist policisation. Astrid Henry (81-82) discusses *Sex and the City* in the light of third-wave feminism and concludes by saying that the series reflects an important but limited vision of female empowerment, a feminism that mirrors contemporary third-wave attempts to celebrate both women’s power and sexuality.

In this article, we will try to give an overview of the themes and attributes that are being called post feminist according to different scholars: consumer culture, fashion, independence, (sexual) pleasure, individual choice, humor, hybridism, technology and the renewed focus on the female body. Such an overview has never been made and served as a solid basis for our in-depth thematic filmic analysis of a sample of *Sex and the City* episodes. This overview is not exhaustive, post feminism is constantly evolving; new attributes and themes will always show up and some will be more important than other. Also, we should

note that the four main characters evolve through the six seasons. According to interpretations of female heterosexual Israeli viewers (Tukachinsky 183), the protagonists became more submissive over time (especially in the last two seasons). In the final episode, all characters end up in a committed conventional relationship.

Fashionable shoes & designer clothes: a culture

“I like my money right where I can see it – hanging in my closet” – Carrie (Season 6, 2004, To Market To Market)

Consumer culture is an essential element within post feminist tradition. Consumption within a neo-liberal context is a tool to achieve power and pleasure, an alternative route for self-esteem; women construct their identity and receive societal appreciation by means of consuming. Consumption may not be reduced to the simple act of purchase. The emphasis on consuming is often been criticized by second-wave and third-wave feminists as victim of commodification (Hollows and Moseley 14). *Sex and the City* is characterized by a high degree of consumerism. It is almost impossible to count the number of times that the protagonists are at the opening of a bar, club or restaurant, or out shopping. Fashion and designer brands as *Dolce & Gabbana*, *Prada*, *Gucci*, *Manolo Blahnik*, *Bed*, *Bath and Beyond*, *Helena Rubenstein*, etc. are often mentioned as are names of restaurants and bars (for example: *Pastis*, *Bed*, *G-spot*, which implies city marketing). In *Sex and the City*, shopping is presented as a funny and relaxing occupation. By consuming, the female protagonists develop their identity. Public citizenship is constructed through the notion of woman as shopping citizen. Not only goods and services are consumed, men can also be situated within this process of commodification. Men are presented as consumption goods for women to buy, consider, fit and return (when not considered useful) (Greven 39-40). By using men, female characters develop their identity. Men are reduced to a brand; as is clarified by the following quote of Carrie Bradshaw: *“He was like the flesh and blood equivalent of a ‘DKNY dress’; you know it’s not your style but it’s right there, so you try it on anyway”* (Season 1, 1998, *Bay of the Married Pigs*). In the series, the names of men are almost never revealed, men often get a label such as *‘Mr. Pussy’*, *‘Mr. Big’*, *‘Spring roll guy’*,... In addition, sex is being consumed by the female characters. The consumption of sex and men is striking in every episode, but the most salient example of ‘a man as consumption good’ is the *“fuckbuddy”*. *“A ‘fuckbuddy’ is someone you’ve dated once or twice and*

the sex is so great you keep him on call. He's like dial-a-dick! You're guaranteed delivery within six hours in Manhattan" (Season 2, 1999, *The Fuckbuddy*). Men are being used to fulfil the needs and desires of women and are reduced to the label *fuckbuddy* with unique selling position (USP) great sex. Another example is when the four women are talking about 'Mr. Pussy' (who is known for his great oral sex). Charlotte (who is dating Mr. Pussy) admits she is in love with him, and so Samantha replies: "*You don't fall in love with Mr. Pussy, you enjoy him and then set him free*" (Season 2, 1999, *The Freak Show*). Women are thus allowed to freely use men to fulfill their needs and desires. Although consumption seems to be an important topic, it is often mocked at and represented with a little irony. This ambivalence and contradiction is typical for post feminism (that is situated within the postmodern tradition). For example when Samantha talks about the '*pubic hair industry*':

It's a very neglected area but people really start to pay attention. You don't let it grow wild anymore, there's an entire business these days devoted to the upkeep and management of pubic hair. It says as much about you as your shoes (Season 2, 1999, *The Cheating Curve*).

Another central feature of post feminism – that is often linked with consumer culture – is fashion. Fashion is an important fundament of female subjectivity. Gender is not a physical issue but it is the cultural interpretation of the gender difference. Arneil (92) referred to Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986) to argue that fashion is everything but necessary to form a female identity because fashion steals away the attention from the woman herself. In opposition – writers as Judith Butler, a post-structural feminist who states that the body is only accessible through language for example – consider fashion as a necessary element in the formation of female subjectivity (Bruzzi and Church Gibson 116-117). In her book *Gendertrouble*, Butler shows that gender – as a social, cultural construction – is no physical thing, but it is recreated by means of appropriation and repetition of cultural norms and values regarding masculinity and femininity. This process of repetition is called a "*performative process*" (xv), for which fashion is a good example. In this context Butler (183-184) discusses the materialization of the body; this materialization however is never complete. Post feminism emphasizes style and fashion. Phenomena as *The Spice Girls* and *Madonna* prove that fashion can be a symbol of power and a source of pleasure: "*Dressing up equals fun, fun equals empowerment*" (König 140). The process of getting power by means of the body, the image or fashion, is often called

“*fashion feminism*” (Genz 333). *Sex and the City* offers a lot of attention to fashion and fashion articles. References are numerous: *Valducci, Gucci, Dior, Prada, Boss*, etc. Fashion and the act of shopping in general is represented as funny. Characters receive power for their fashion sensitivity, *the power ‘lesbian’* for example: “*The power lesbians, they have it all, great shoes, killer eyewear and invisible makeup*” (Season 2, 1999, *The Cheating Curve*). Identity is acquired through fashion (see Butler 1990). And as Marjory Garber (3) pointed out in her work *Vested Interest*; clothes and fashion are more than semiotic styles but also an articulatory practice of one’s gender identity. In an episode (Season 4, 2001, *The Real Me*), Carrie is asked to walk in a runway show for *Dolce & Gabbana*, when she doubts, her friends convince her by saying that ‘she lives for fashion, she is fashion’. In *Sex and the City*, certain forms of sex are associated with fashion. A conversation between Carrie and her gay friend Stanford makes this clear: *Stanford*: “*When did wild sex become back in style?*” *Carrie*: “*Oh, I think that was the weekend you spent at the Barney’s warehouse sale*” (Season 2, 1999, *La Douleur Exquise*). Other examples occur when the women talk about threesomes: *Samantha*: “*Threesomes are huge right now, they’re the blow job of the nineties.*” *Charlotte*: “*What was the blowjob of the eighties?*” *Samantha*: “*Anal sex*” (Season 1, 1998, *Three is a Crowd*) or when Charlotte’s dog appears to be pregnant: *Charlotte*: “*Elisabeth Taylor got gangbanged this weekend*”. *Samantha*: “*Oh my god, that is so eighties*” (Season 6, 2004, *The Cold War*).

Pleasure: Sex and fun

"I'm a trisexual. I'll try anything once" – Samantha (Season 3, 2000, *Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl...*)

Personal female pleasure is a central theme within post feminist literature. Post feminism is often mocked at by opponents as “*fun feminism*”. Sexual pleasure and joy are a specific form of pleasure. Women have a fundamental right on sexual freedom and pleasure and are not judged if they use this right. Sexual objectification is – by means of post feminism – transformed into sexual subjectification. In *Sex and the City*, this subjectification is apparent because women mostly take initiative when it comes to sex. A quantitative content analysis supports this vision as sexual encounters in the series are more likely to be recreational than relational. Women are able to initiate sexual encounters and decline them with no negative repercussions. The sexual double standard is being replaced by equal opportunities for sexual freedoms (Markle 46). Gerhard (37) notes that part of the pleasure Carrie, Charlotte, Samantha and Miranda derive

from sex comes from talking about it with one another and makes use of the “*confessional discourse*” concept of the poststructuralist Foucault. *Sex and the City* emphasizes the importance of the female orgasm (female pleasure comes first) and therefore challenges the dominant media representations (for example the emphasis on the male orgasm in pornography, see Linda Williams). To achieve this orgasm, masturbation and sex toys are no longer taboo, Charlotte for example buys a vibrator called ‘*the rabbit*’ (Season 1, 1998, *The Turtle and the Hare*), Miranda has one in her nightstand and Samantha uses one when she tries to ‘find back’ her orgasm (Season 4, 2001, *My Motherboard, My Self*). In the series, women are free to experiment with different kinds of sexuality and are not judged by their sexual behaviour. A quote of Samantha regarding SM illustrates this: “*Don’t be so judgmental, this is just a sexual expression, all these people have jobs and pay their bills, they just have fun with fetishes. We all have a fetish; I think it’s healthy and fabulous*” (Season 2, 1999, *La Douleur Exquise*). In *Sex and the City* (for example: Season 4 2001, *What’s Sex Gotta Do With It?*, Season 5 2002, *The Big Journey*), not only women, but also homosexuals and bisexuals have this right (for an overview on queer post feminism, see Gerhard 37-49). Post feminists define themselves in terms of sexuality. Sexuality is a powerful tool women can use to achieve their goals. Men are assumed to be driven by their strong urge for sex; women can transform this urge into power. “*The only place you control a man is in bed. If we perpetually gave men blowjobs, we could run the world and still have our hands free*” (Season 1, 1998, *The Power of Female Sex*). This sexual power can cause large competition among/between women, which is not the case in *Sex and the City*, where women are allies instead of enemies. This brings us back to other major themes in *Sex and the City*: female friendships, solidarity and community, which are considered as important feminist markers of the second wave.

The ‘Real’ me: about subjectivity

Since birth, modern women have been told we can do and be anything we want. Be an astronaut, the head of an internet company, a stay-at-home mom. There aren’t any rules anymore and the choices are endless, and apparently they can all be delivered at your door – Carrie (Season 3, 2000, All or Nothing).

Post feminism is not defined in collective terms, but in individual ones. Individual rights are valued higher than those of community. Most important is women’s self-esteem, women have the right to be happy with themselves (Shugart, Waggoner and Hallstein 195). This individualism is a logic consequence of our

postmodern society that stands for neo-liberalism and capitalism. The power to make individual decisions and choices is a logic consequence of society's emphasis on individualism. For a lot of authors, post feminism is synonym for a new era of "*choiceoisie*", a period where the own choice is highly valued. The ability to make choices is much more important than the choice itself (Probyn 130; Henry 71). Independence and autonomy are very important values; post feminist women are autonomous, financially independent, and have successful careers (Gorton 154). In *Sex and the City*, female protagonists very often make individual choices. These choices include bed partners, relationships, being single, plastic surgery, career paths, etc., all of the choices they make are respected by the others (this does not mean they always agree with each other). All protagonists are autonomous and financially independent. They have their own apartment in Manhattan and manage to achieve a successful career. Miranda is a lawyer and studied at Harvard University, Charlotte is director of an art gallery, Samantha is PR manager of her own company, and Carrie is freelance journalist for a popular newspaper. Not only the main characters are successful, the other women represented in the series are strong, independent women as well. "*Retreatism*" seems a bit contradictory within the theme of independence, but it appears in almost every post feminist (media)text. Authors talk about "*retreatism*" when a successful, highly-educated woman decides to stop working to be a housewife. This is her way to show her power (Tasker and Negra 108). Related to this aspect of post feminism is the central theme of "*post feminist homemaking*" or "*hyper domesticity*" (Negra 127); post feminism is consistently associated with a design for living that is deeply traditionalist and that centralizes a female homemaker figure. Consequently post feminism contains a hint of backlash, which implies an embedded paradox. In the fourth season Charlotte decides to give up her career to devote herself to motherhood (Season 4, 2001, *Time and Punishment*).

Besides individualism and individual choice, female bodies have a central position within post feminism. Post feminists strive for a better, slimmer, fitter female body. Age is a threat and has to be eliminated; plastic surgery makes this possible. In this context, Negra talks about "*post feminist body perfection*" (121) and the "*hyper aesthetization of everyday life*" (152) and refers to vagina rejuvenalisation as an extreme example of this tendency. In *Sex and the City*, all characters are concerned about their appearance; we often see them practicing fitness, training for the marathon, doing yoga. Sometimes, characters are at a spa or a beauty institute. Samantha is a great example of a woman who is extremely focused on her image and body, she is

very narcissistic. She is not afraid of Botox injections and chemical peelings to look more juvenile. For Samantha, age is a threat, this becomes very clear when a man estimates her age (40-41), the voice-over says “*Samantha has celebrated her 35th birthday for as long as we can remember*” (Season 2, 1999, *The Freak Show*). In the same episode, Samantha runs into an old friend who recently had a facial treatment whereby the fat from her ass was injected in her face. Samantha immediately schedules an appointment with the most expensive aesthetic surgeon in Manhattan. “*To Samantha, plastic surgery was like being at Barney’s, once you’re in the door, you might as well shop*” (Season 2, 1999, *The Freak Show*). In season 5 (2002, *Plus One is the Loneliest Number*) she decides to splurge on a chemical peeling and emerges looking like an overripe tomato. Plastic surgery is thus situated within consumer culture. In *Sex and the City*, plastic surgery is not exclusively for women, men can also undergo it. Examples are Miranda’s date who has hair implants (Season 2, 1999, *Evolution*), and Charlotte’s date Paul, who has ‘*a couple of low hangers*’ and considers undergoing a ‘*ball lift*’ (Season 2, 1999, *Take me out to the Ballgame*). Finally, *Sex and the City* promotes a “*girlie girl culture*” (Munford 146-148).

Humor & Irony: A Winking Eye

Besides individualism and individual choice, humor and irony are central themes within the post feminist discourse. According to Myra MacDonald (100), post feminism embraces the irony of postmodernism. Post feminist media texts imply a hint of irony, a winking eye to the audience. The central ambiguity structures the comedic narrative of *Sex and the City* (Akass and McCabe 179). The series uses humor and irony to make taboo subjects (oral sex, abortion, masturbation, cybersex, buying addiction, infertility, anal sex, etc.) more acceptable and discussable in puritans America. Humor can thus be seen as a catalyzing factor. This humor mainly occurs at the level of the sharp dialogues. Joke-making techniques used by the characters include the manipulation of flexibility of language with double-entendre as well as a play with different narrative forms, often associated with women (e.g. fairy tales, movie romance...), to create new associations (for an overview see Akass and McCabe 177-198). The previous statement has to be nuanced since humor is evolving throughout the seasons. It is also crucial to note that *Sex and the City* is a polysemic, complex, multilayered text where multiple meanings are embedded. This means that the text opens up for a relatively

wide range of possible readings depending on the viewer's worldview. Reception analysis is necessary to know whether an 'ironic reading' of the text is actually made.

In the series, patriarchal notions of femininity are being broken by means of humor. In a conversation between the four women concerning the reasons why men cheat on women and what the difference between the two sexes is, this potential criticism on patriarchy can be illustrated by the next dialogue:

Charlotte: We're not driven by testosterone. Carrie: Then what drives us? Charlotte: Emotions. Samantha: You mean hormones. Charlotte: No, you know, that little voice inside of me that says 'mate for life', mate for life. Samantha: Sweetheart, you can't go listening to every fucking little voice that runs through your head, it will drive you nuts! (Season 2, 1999, The Cheating Curve).

In this example the stereotypical, patriarchal image of the vulnerable woman waiting on the white knight is laughed at as being neurotic by means of humor. Women are not always driven by emotions; they also have feelings of lust and hormones that arise. Another example is situated in the fourth season (2001, *Sex and the Country*) where Carrie's attempt to bake an apple cake fails: "*The only thing I ever successfully made in the kitchen is a mess*". Here, the stereotypical image of the woman as 'kitchen princess' is being deconstructed.

Hybridism/Androgyny and Gender bending

Samantha: "You know, women dressing like men is very popular right now."
*Carrie: "And here I thought it was Pokémon." (Season 3, 2000, *Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl...*)*

Hybridism is a concept retrieved from postmodernism, a paradigm that can be situated in late modernity and is a cultural and social condition where hyper flexibility and hybridism are central concepts (Featherstone). Hybridism is the idea that everyone has a multiplex of identities. These identities operate as contradictions in someone's concept of self feeling/self-being. Post feminism pleads that every woman must recognize her own personal mix of identities. This contradicts the universal identity that is often promoted by (second-wave) feminism (Arneil 214-217). Androgyny is situated in the context of hybridism, but cannot be confused with hermaphroditism or bisexuality (Van Bauwel 17). "*Androgyny is the state of exhibiting a combination of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine traits*" (MacDonald 222). Hybridism stresses the flexibility of the identity and emphasizes the possibility of change whereas androgyny is a

celebration of the so-called completeness of a “third gender” meaning the fusion of masculinity and femininity; a mix of traditional gender roles takes place. The boundaries between masculinity and femininity become vague when a man and woman take up masculine and feminine traits at the same time. This androgyny reflects the aversion post feminists have against binary interpretations of gender (Shugart, Waggoner and Hallstein 201). Androgyny takes place at two levels; at the level of style or physical appearance, and at the level of the role a woman takes (MacDonald 222). Miranda Hobbes in *Sex and the City* can be situated in both categories of androgyny; her style of clothing (dress codes), and her professional function (she is a lawyer) can be considered more ‘masculine’ (she is cool, rational, and assertive). Samantha Jones can be typified as androgen, but only at the level of the role she takes. Her style and looks are ultra feminine, she often has a cleavage and wears a lot of make-up (femme fatale), but her role is more masculine (cool, calm, collected, dominant, egocentric).

Gender bending – as a form of gender ambiguity – is the physical mixing of masculine and feminine gender stereotypes. Van Bauwel (18) gives a more nuanced definition of the phenomenon and emphasizes the creative play. *“Gender bending can be conceptualized as a performative discursive articulation of resistance against traditional gender roles articulating a changing play of bodily hybridization of masculine and feminine stereotypes with the emphasis on gender ambiguity.”* Gender bending differs from androgyny since the latter involves a conjunction of masculinity and femininity whereas gender bending is a hybrid and changing articulation of masculinity and femininity. Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik (20) argue that gender benders base themselves on the androgynous ideal, but they differ from it since they can be situated in a postmodern popular image culture. Travesty is an extreme practice of gender bending. In *Sex and the City* transsexuals and travesties are often shown (Season 3, 2000, Cock a Doodle Do) and one episode is completely devoted to the theme of gender bending (Season 3, 2000, ‘Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl...’). In the episode ‘Take Me Out to the Ballgame’ (Season 2, 1999) Miranda Hobbes can obviously be categorized as gender bender. Miranda walks on the street in a dark, loose jeans dungarees, a hat, a wide dark blue jacket, and white sneakers. She wears no make-up and displays a nonchalant posture. She walks self-assured; her gaze is independent, assertive, and cool. The contrast (femininity versus masculinity) becomes even more obvious when she passes two crying women. This role mixture changes completely when Miranda runs into her ex-boyfriend; she runs away, looking shocked, fragile, sensitive (typical features of femininity). In

'*Evolution*' (Season 2, 1999), hybridism and androgyny are the main themes. Charlotte dates a pastry baker (Stephane) whose feminine side is very pronounced. A discussion concerning hybridism arises. Carrie argues that people cannot be divided into binary categories (female/male, homo/straight...) and typifies Stephane as a hybrid, a man with a mixture of identities. This dislike concerning binary categories is typical for post feminism and postmodernism (cf. supra). In *Sex and the City*, gender roles are often pierced. In '*The Cheating Curve*' (Season 2, 1999), the traditional pattern of gender roles where the woman is supposed to be cooking, is being broken; Carrie cannot cook and she finds it unnatural when she does it: "*That night at Mr. Big's kitchen, I performed an unnatural act of my own: I cooked.*"

Technology

"*I don't believe in email, I'm an old-fashioned gal. I prefer calling and hanging up.*" – Carrie (Season 4, 2001, *Baby, Talk is Cheap*).

New technologies are an important theme within post feminism and postmodernism. Women can become powerful and successful if they acquire knowledge about new communication technologies, media, and technique. Cyber feminists already pointed out the importance of technological know-how for the emancipation of women (Harraway 149-181). In the first three seasons of *Sex and the City*, we noted no to little references to technology, so cyber feminism seems to be out of the picture. When the storyline develops beyond the seasons, technology becomes more visible.

Conclusion

Feminism is not dead, on the contrary, it is present in popular culture, albeit in another form. In literature, scholars do not seem to get along and a polarization between opponents and supporters arose (e.g. Braithwaite, Faludi, Greer, Lotz, Moseley and Hollows, Munford). That is why we defined post feminism as a pluralistic and contradictory feminism that is being influenced by the academic world, media, popular culture, and consumer culture. Although it is mostly articulated in popular media text and is constructed within a neo-liberal consumer culture, post feminism can have its merits in articulating specific elements of a feminism in contemporary society. Post feminism can be conceptualized as a new form of empowerment or subjectivity, adjusted to the actual societal context. Agency, freedom, sexual pleasure, fashion, consumer

culture, hybridism, humor, and the renewed focus on the female body are the fundamentals of this new feminism. Post feminists are considered to be sexual activists who use their body and attractiveness as an instrument to achieve societal and personal change (Genz 333). This concept is mostly situated on the level of micro politics however it still stresses some feminist markers. These markers picked up by popular screen culture and series like *Sex and the City* can be considered as post feminist representations. However, interpretations are relative due to the diverging visions on post feminism.

Sex and the City is a post feminist cultural product that shows women in a world where they can be feminine, attractive, and feminist at the same time. Because of this representation, the series gives a forum to a renewed post feminist debate. By using an in-depth film analysis we looked at the themes of post feminism in *Sex and the City*. This form of feminism is mainly articulated by humor, empowerment, consumerism, and to a less extent gender bending. It is important to notify that other so-called post feminist popular television programmes give a different representation of this kind of feminism. *Desperate Housewives* for example tends to emphasize on the empowerment of the personal choice. Still, this text analysis has to be seen as a first step of further analysis where also a reception study is needed to get rid of the complex articulation of signifying practices of post feminism in popular media texts. It is not an exclusive signifying practice but *Sex and the City*, as do other popular cultural texts, is a potential breeding ground for emancipatory discourses and at the same time extends and stabilizes a hegemonic consumption culture.

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