Sex and the third wave

A discussion of the representation of some third wave feminist issues in the American TV series Sex and the City
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1. Abstract

In 1998, a new and groundbreaking TV series premiered on American cable television: *Sex and the City (SATC)*. The show is comedy about four fashionable, thirty-something women living in New York City, and throughout the series we follow their ups and downs and their struggles with various aspects of their lives. These women were born with the advantages gained by the women’s movement in the 1960’s and 1970’s and consequently, they have much more choices and different roles and expectations to deal with. I find it interesting to relate *SATC* to feminist theory, seeing that they are both dedicated to examining images of women and how society expects them to act. In connection with this, the purpose of this thesis is to discuss the representations of some third wave feminist issues in *SATC*.

Due to space limitations, I chose to focus on the five themes on the show that I found most dominant and interesting: gender, sexuality, beauty ideals, relationships and marriage and sisterhood. I examined the viewpoints of selected third wave feminists, each within their field of interest.

Judith Butler’s viewpoints about the performative sex revealed that third wave feminists wish to abolish the normative gender oppositions (man vs. woman) and instead see gender as something that is performed via repeated actions and separated from sex. This means that one can be a woman and still be what is normally perceived as being masculine. In connection with sexuality, Butler argues that heterosexuality is as much a performance as homo- or bisexuality, but because of the heterosexual matrix, any other sexuality than heterosexuality is recognized as being queer. Paula Kamen argued that women have developed more powerful sexual identities and uses the term “superrats” to describe sexually aggressive women that put their own pleasure in focus. In connection with the issue of beauty ideals, Naomi Wolf argues that women are repressed by a beauty myth created by patriarchy that makes women obsessed with their appearance and increasingly makes them embrace cosmetic surgery and the like. When it comes to relationships and marriages, Susan Faludi claimed that women feel more indifferent about marriage and that many women choose to remain single, contrary to what the media said during the backlash against feminism in the 1980’s. Finally, Naomi Wolf praises the ideology of power feminism and appreciates the idea of prioritizing individual needs, wishes and achievements before the collective. bell hooks, on the other hand, argue that there is still a need for women to unite in a sisterhood in order to bring about more positive change for women across the globe.
In the analysis of SATC, I discovered that the show partially embodies Judith Butler’s idea about the performative sex, seeing that Samantha and Miranda to some extent can be perceived as having reversed the traditional gender roles. However, the show never fully lets go of the normative assumptions about gender and sex. When it comes to sexual orientation, homo- and bisexuality are rejected and consequently SATC supports Judith Butler’s theory of the heterosexual matrix. The show depicts women as being sexually aggressive and they bring their own sexual pleasure into focus. That way, they (and especially Samantha) represent aspects of Paula Kamen’s idea about women developing more powerful sexualities. Additionally, one could argue that the women in SATC are under the spell of the beauty myth, since they are so preoccupied with appearances, fashion and style. However, seen from another third wave feminist point of view, this obsession can also be seen as a way of making empowered and individual choices and a way to create their own personal self-image and identity. When it comes to one of SATC’s most central themes, relationships and marriage, to some extent the show supports Susan Faludi’s claims about women not considering marriage as the main purpose of their lives and that many women choose to remain single. SATC depicts being single as something women should not be embarrassed about but rather cherish. However, in the end three out of the four women end up getting married so it never fully embraces the idea that a woman can live happily ever after without a man by her side. Finally, the notion of sisterhood is celebrated in the show but not in a collective sense, because the sisterhood merely consists of the four friends and not women outside their group.

Overall, SATC does express some of the viewpoints put forth by the third wave feminists I have examined. However, it never fully lets go of normative ways of thinking about the five themes at hand.
2. Introduction

“You see us, Manhattan? We have it all!” (*SATC*, S03:E10, “All Or Nothing”)

This is one of the countless quotes uttered in one of the most popular contemporary TV series. In 1998, it saw the light of day: *Sex and the City* (*SATC*). A comedy about four fashionable, thirty-something women’s lives in New York City. The four protagonists (Miranda, Charlotte, Samantha and Carrie) represent completely different archetypes of women: the cynical career woman, the optimistic romantic, the sexually liberated femme fatale and the woman in between it all. However, what they all have in common is that each of them was born with the gains of the women’s movements and therefore has a wide array of choices they have to cope with. Throughout the series we get to follow these four women in their struggles with how to deal with various aspects of their lives: singlehood, relationships, careers, marriage, motherhood and sex. A lot of sex. Seeing that the roles and expectations for women today have changed significantly since the last generation, *SATC* attempts to portray what these new roles are and how women deal with them in everyday life.

There is no doubt that *SATC* has become popular with millions of viewers all over the world and that the show has acclaimed critical praise. In connection with this, I find it interesting to relate *SATC* to contemporary feminist theory (third wave feminism). Both *SATC* and feminists are dedicated to examining images of women and how society expects them to act – and each of them have their own points of views about these issues. This motivated me to find out whether *SATC* and third wave feminists share viewpoints on issues that preoccupy them both: gender, sexuality, beauty ideals, relationships and marriage and sisterhood.

2.1 Problem statement

Based on the above mentioned, I have chosen to write this thesis on the basis of the following problem statement:

*In this thesis, I would like to discuss the representation of some third wave feminist issues in the American TV series Sex and the City.*

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1 The show has been nominated for more than 50 Emmy Awards and 24 Golden Globe Awards (Appendix A)
2.2 Method
In terms of methodology for answering the problem statement, I will carry out a thematic analysis. The thesis will account for relevant and central aspects of the most recent wave of feminism: third wave feminism. I have chosen to focus exclusively on third wave feminism and its contributors because many of the goals former feminist movements have fought for have been achieved and it would therefore be more suitable and interesting to examine which issues and values contemporary/younger feminists work with.

I have chosen to structure both my theoretical part and my analysis on the basis of five selected themes: gender, sexuality, beauty ideals, relationships/marriage and sisterhood. I have chosen these themes because I find that these are the issues that are the most important and interesting in SATC. Based on these five central themes, I have examined the viewpoints of third wave feminists on each of these issues. I have attempted to implicate various and multiple perspectives from both noted feminists and less well known ones – depending on which feminists have worked more with particular themes.

The thesis will start by briefly introducing feminism, its purpose and a brief account of its history. Next, an account of third wave feminism will be carried out, leading to a section that introduces various third wave feminists’ perspectives on the five themes. The view on gender will be examined on the basis of Judith Butler’s theory about the performative sex which will lead to a section about sexuality, in which Butler’s ideas about heterosexuality being the norm will be explored. These ideas will be supplemented with Paula Kamen’s theory of women’s development of more powerful sexual identities. Naomi Wolf’s theory about the existence of a “beauty myth” that represses women will be used in connection with the theme about beauty ideals. In the next part about relationships and marriage, I will examine Susan Faludi’s ideas about the backlash against feminism and which attitudes contemporary women have to relationships and marriage. Finally, Naomi Wolf’s distinction between victim feminism and power feminism will be studied in order to examine third wave feminists’ view on sisterhood. The theoretical part of the thesis will be concluded with bell hooks’ alternative notions about sisterhood.

In the analysis, each of the five topics will be dealt with in terms of which views SATC presents and if there is any convergence between them and the views of the third wave feminists I have examined in the theoretical part.
2.3 Delimitations

Because of space limitations, I have had to confine myself to only examine the five themes mentioned in the method section above (gender, sexuality, beauty ideals, relationships/marriage and sisterhood). It should also be noted that using other theories for the analysis might bring forth other results.

Furthermore, I have chosen to primarily focus on the series because I see this as a chapter for itself, and the movie\(^2\) being a continuation with different themes and a different tone.

Also, one should also be aware that there are several different kinds of feminisms within each wave (and especially within the third wave), and consequently the viewpoints that will be listed will not be representative for all kinds of feminism.

Because the TV series is so well known, it is assumed that the reader of this thesis is familiar with the show and its character and basic plot.

When I refer to episodes of the show, I will use the abbreviation “S” for season and “E” for episode, followed by the title of the episode in question.

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\(^2\) The series ended in 2004 but was followed up by a movie in 2008, entitled *Sex and the City: The Movie.*
3. Feminism

Feminism is defined as being the “advocacy of the rights of women based on the theory of equality of the sexes” (Oxford English Dictionary). One of the earliest manifestations of feminism can be found in British author Mary Wollstonecraft’s book “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” from 1792. This text is considered to be seminal for the formation of feminism as a movement. In the book, she challenges the notion of women being naturally inferior to men and argues women deserve the same rights as men; including an education. (Den Store Danske - Gyldendals åbne encyklopædi). Other influential texts for the formation of feminism is Virginia Woolf’s non-fiction essay “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), where she introduces the notion of female bisexuality, and French writer Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex”, in which she argues against the tendency to perceive women as being the inferior sex in patriarchal societies (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006, p. 6).

Within feminist history, three stages or generations can be identified; referred to as “waves”. In the following paragraphs, I will examine each of these waves and describe their characteristics and key issues. However, one should keep in mind that these waves overlap and that earlier feminist ideas and activities may continue in the next wave, keeping the complexity of each wave intact despite of different societal and cultural contexts (Bailey, 1997, pp. 17-18).

In the following paragraphs, the three waves of feminism will be examined.

3.1 First wave

The first wave refers to the women’s suffrage movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In this period, the main concern was the exclusion of women from political, social, economic and public life and the key issue was for women to get political citizenship and gain the right to vote (Gillis 2007, p. xxi). This wave primarily consisted of white, well-educated women from the middle class, although at the beginning it also involved women from the working class and women of color. The primary goal of the movement was achieved in 1920 with the passing of President Woodrow Wilson’s Nineteenth Amendment which said that no state or federal agency was allowed to deny or reduce the right to vote on the account of sex (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006, pp. 3-4).

3.2 Second wave

The second wave primarily refers to the women’s liberation movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. This movement grew out of other movements fighting for the rights of oppressed groups: for example the lesbian and gay movements, civil rights movements and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Many second wave feminists did not believe that the improvements made by first wave
feminists had solved the problem of inequality between the sexes (Gillis, 2007, p. xxi). They felt that society still lacked equal rights between the sexes, such as equal pay for equal work and equal rights on the labor market and wanted the gender division in the educational system to be abolished (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006, pp. 10-11). Second wave feminists saw women as “victims of a patriarchal, commercialized, oppressive beauty culture” (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006, p. 8) and the Redstockings and other radical feminists protested against the Miss America Pageants and the notion that “the way women look is more important than what they do” (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006, p. 8). The second wave is also often associated with feminist Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique”, a book in which Friedan criticizes the social norms of the time and women’s role of being financially dependent housewives (Chansky, 2008, p. 341). They saw a link between political and cultural inequalities and therefore focused on broader social relations and issues which women dealt with in their everyday lives. That is: motherhood, sexuality, reproductive rights, sexual discrimination, the workplace, family and domestic labor (Gillis, 2007, p. xxi). Consequently, one of the slogans of this wave was to “make the personal political”, just like “Sisterhood is powerful” became a household phrase (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006, p. 9-10).

3.3 Third wave
In a 1992 edition of Ms. Magazine, author and activist Rebecca Walker (daughter of author Alice Walker) published the article “Becoming the Third Wave” in which she expresses her rage with the way women are devalued and ignored. She encourages all women to let their discontent translate into action: “[…] the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman’s experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don’t prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives.” (Heywood, 2006, vol. 2, p. 5). The article marks the start of third wave feminism, a wave that had its formational period in 1991-1995 and has continued and evolved until the present day. The third wave started as a reaction to the backlash that feminism had experienced in the 1980’s where the media declared feminism dead and that the women’s movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s had reached its goals and that there was no longer any need for feminism (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, p. xv).

However, giving a clear and concise definition of third wave feminism can be difficult. Whereas both first and second wave feminism had each their key issues (women’s right to vote in the first wave and “making the personal political” in the second wave), third wave feminism
does not have a single and emphasized issue agenda that distinguishes it from other movements (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, p. xx). Because of this, some see third wave feminism as an extension of second wave and some feminists debate whether there even exists a third wave (Bailey, 1997, pp. 17-27).

The feminists that represent third wave feminism were all born with the privileges that first and second wave feminists fought for and consequently they have more opportunities and liberties than their predecessors (Krolokke & Sørensen, 2006, p. 15-17). However, they believe that the fight for equality between men and women is still not complete and, like second wave feminists, they fight for economic, political, social and personal empowerment for women. Nevertheless, many third wave feminists are critical towards certain elements of second wave feminism. For example, they have criticized second wave feminism for being obsolete to young women today and that it was obsessed with what is politically correct. They furthermore think it was too monolithic and criticize its tendency to see all women as belonging to a universal womanhood; a sort of common female identity (Bailey, 1997, pp. 21-26).

Instead, third wave feminists embrace ambiguity and wish to abolish normative and categorical thinking when it comes to gender, sexuality, race and class. It promotes individuality and even though it embraces political activism it does not wish to force others to collective action. The focus is on the individual woman’s right to choose what is best for her. Instead, third wave feminism is about listening to and sharing each other’s stories and use elements from popular culture they find empowering (Sowards, 2004, p. 548). It embraces difference and complex identities with untraditional combinations of characteristics, and they believe that you can wear lipstick, shave your legs and wear designer clothes and still be a feminist dedicated to changing social practices (Bailey, 1997, p. 22). In this connection, they wish to redefine feminism and create an alternative to the stereotypical image of what a feminist is and looks like, denoting that all female identities are welcome. To them, being a feminist does not mean that you are a man-hating, humorless and unattractive person; characteristics many associate with second wave feminists. A woman can be fun, popular and attractive and still be a feminist (Findlen, 1995, pp. xiv-xv). Consequently, some of the key characteristics of third wave feminism are multiplicity, complexity and contradiction. Third wave is not merely one kind of feminism; it consists of lively debate instead of consensus and a wide variety of different viewpoints is presented, creating multiple feminisms (Bailey, 1997, p. 26).
Another point of criticism is that third wave feminists think second wave feminists were too prudish when it comes to sex. They argue that second wave feminists have been unsuccessful in producing and embracing new and alternative forms of sexuality and that “It seems that second wave feminism has put up more restrictions than green lights when it comes to sexuality”. (Alfonso & Triglio, 1997, p. 12). Just as third wave feminists embrace difference when it comes to identity, so do they when it comes to sexuality.

Because of its distancing from second wave feminism, some have seen third wave feminism as being synonymous with postfeminism. There have been debates about whether feminists such as Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe and Rene Delfeld are postfeminist or third wave feminists. However, there is a general consensus that the difference between the two terms is that postfeminism is very critical towards earlier feminisms and questions whether feminism is necessary or helpful. Third wave feminism, on the other hand, denotes a continuation of earlier feminisms, but with differences and new viewpoints (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, p. xv).

There are also feminists who are critical towards third wave feminism and its characteristics. First of all, it has been criticized for being unfocused because of its lack of an issue agenda. Furthermore, some disapprove of its individualistic nature and its focus on personal empowerment instead of political activism. For this reason, they do not believe that third wave feminism will be able to be of significant help in the struggle to achieve social change (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, p. xvi). In connection with this, some argue that third wave feminism is only an academic construction and not an activist movement. And even if it is merely a phenomenon within the academy, there are too few theories ordinary women can relate to. They seek theories women can use and share in their everyday lives that are written in a less specialized language. Finally, some have argued that despite of its emphasis on multiplicity third wave feminism is not for everyone but merely for middle class women that have the freedom to look out for their own individual interests and make the choices that feel right for them. Women in for example third world countries do not have this freedom (Alfonso & Triglio, 1997, pp. 8-11).
4. Third wave feminists

In the following paragraphs, some of the major third wave feminists will be introduced. They will be introduced in an order according to the themes that were introduced in the introduction: gender, sexuality, beauty ideals, relationships and marriage and sisterhood.

4.1 Gender

Third wave feminists are devoted to challenging the normative ways of thinking of gender. They wish to create an alternative to the gender binary that divides individuals into two categories: men and women. Instead, they propose to view gender as a continuum, where femininity and masculinity merge and intersect (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 156-157). Judith Butler is one of the most well-known feminists within the field.

4.1.1 Judith Butler: the performative sex

American philosopher Judith Butler has been one of the most influential contributors to feminist theory and gay and lesbian studies. She is also known for being the founder of queer theory; a theory whose name is misleading, seeing that queer theory is about identity, gender and sexuality in all people – not just homosexuals. It deals with individuals not being able to fit into normative categories concerning identity and therefore the word “queer” should be understood in the sense of someone being “odd” or “different” instead of “gay” (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, p. 262-265).

With the publication of her book “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” in 1990, Butler challenged the conventional assumptions about gender and sex. According to her, the tendency for second wave feminists to assume that there exists a common female identity is problematic. The term “woman” is not exhaustive enough, seeing that gender intersect with cultural and political factors, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and region. By assuming that all women have the same identity, one fails to acknowledge that within this group there are different individuals and that being a woman does not mean that is all you are. Butler therefore thinks the term “women” is worrying and that it can cause anxiety and a fear of not fitting into the category and of losing one’s place. A universal and cross-cultural female identity is therefore questionable (Butler, 1999, p. 6).

Furthermore, Butler criticizes the distinction between the categories of “sex” and “gender”, sex being defined by the biological differences between men and women and gender being the social and cultural factors that distinguish a man from a woman (femininity and masculinity). Traditionally, gender has been perceived as being a consequence of sex. That is, if
you are born a girl you will be expected to act in certain ways and want certain things that differ from boys. Butler argues against this idea and says that by dividing men and women into categories on the basis of their sex, a binary opposition is created and individuals are forced to stay inside a single category. This binary opposition also has to do with power; that it consists of a subject (men) and an object (“the Other”: women) and therefore generates an unequal separation of power between men and women (Butler, 1999, p. xxviii + pp. 9-11).

Instead, Butler claims that that identity is not fixed or distinct and that gender and sex are not natural facts but culturally constructed. She is inspired by a quote by Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Butler, 1999, p. 12). In this connection she introduces the term “the performative sex”. According to her, gender is independent from sex and is solely defined by the individual’s actions. In this way, gender becomes a “doing”; something the individual performs and which becomes a part of the identity through repeated actions: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results." (Butler, 1999, p. 33). In this way, gender becomes a question of how the individual acts and identity is consequently not fixed, but changes depending on the circumstances of the situation. As a result, the boundaries between genders is torn down, and gender becomes free-floating, complex and independent of sex: “ [...] with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.” (Butler, 1999, p. 10).

In the following paragraphs, the issue of sexuality will be examined and Butler’s ideas about the performative sex will be further developed.

4.2 Sexuality
Sexuality has always been an issue that has preoccupied feminists, although the stance on the subject has changed. Third wave feminists strive for a more individualist feminism and consequently they turn away from rigid sexualities and embrace different and unconventional ones. Also, like Butler, they welcome fluid boundaries between sexualities and within sexualities. That way, sexual orientations become separated from other identity categories. In addition, they want women to be as entitled to sexual pleasure and freedom as men are. A woman’s body belongs to her – and her only (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 303-307).
Nevertheless, women are still caught in the Madonna vs. whore dichotomy. That is, that women are categorized either as women with motherly qualities (morality, purity, service to men and children) who cannot be perceived as sexual objects or that they are “bad” and slutty women. The term “slut” is used prevalently about women with pronounced sexual behavior or appearance. However, some third wave feminists have attempted to change the negative meaning of the word and introduce another version: “the ethical slut”, which instead denotes open-mindedness and courage (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 303-307).

Several third wave feminists have contributed with their thoughts on both sexual orientation and sexuality itself. In the following paragraphs, the ideas of feminists Judith Butler and Paula Kamen will be examined.

4.2.1 Judith Butler: the heterosexual matrix
In connection with assuming that sex and gender are socially constructed via repeated “performances”, Butler also argues that these performances have to be carried out in particular ways in order for the person to avoid being labeled as diverging or queer. Sex, gender, sexual practice and desire have to be related to each other in a coherent way. Consequently, sexuality becomes a performance as well. Sexuality is something one does and not something one is. In that way, heterosexuality is just as much a performance as homosexuality or bisexuality. However, Butler argues that there is a so-called heterosexual matrix; that heterosexuality is seen as being the norm and that other forms of sexuality are abnormal. Therefore, if one is a female (in the normative sense of the word) one must sexually desire males (Butler, 1999, pp. 40-44).

4.2.2 Paula Kamen: "superrats" and babe feminism
In her 2001 book, “Her Way: Young Women Remake the Sexual Revolution”, Paula Kamen examines how young women have developed more powerful sexual identities in the past decade. Kamen argues that because of the increase in power and status, gained on account of the women’s movement, women feel less ashamed about their sexuality. She refers to this “new” kind of sexually liberated women as “superrats” who “are united by one common trait: the expectation of and insistence on conduct their sex lives and relationships on their own terms with a new degree of openness” (Kamen, 2001, p. 21). These women are sexually independent and insist on making their own choices. They act in a sexually aggressive way one would normally associate with men. They put their own sexual pleasure and desire before any man’s and they do not hesitate to be the ones
initiating sex (Kamen, 2001, pp. 21-39). This idea of more sexually aggressive women has also been referred to as “babe feminism”.

However, the notion of “babe feminism” or “superrats” has not pleased all third wave feminists. Some argue that these sexually aggressive women are often still subject to male-defined beauty ideals. Also, one of journalist Anna Quindlen’s main points of criticism is the lack of sisterhood in this kind of feminism. In her 1994 article “And Now, Babe Feminism”, she argues that it does not promote political activism and that it is merely about the individual’s sexual lifestyle choices. She says: “it has a shorter shelf life than the feminism of sisterhood. I’ve been a babe, and I’ve been a sister. Sister lasts longer.” (Appendix B). Consequently, not everyone sees an aggressive sexual drive as the way to female empowerment.

4.3 Beauty Ideals
Another issue that has been subject to great interest among third wave feminists is the notion of beauty ideals and how women live (and should live) after these. There are a lot of different opinions on the subject. Some feminists see beauty ideals as ways of creating gendered and sexist expectations whose purpose is to keep women suppressed. Others see them as less restrictive and stresses that all women have the right to make their own choices about what to do with their body and physical appearance. If one chooses to conform to beauty norms it is an active, individual choice free from cultural influence that should be respected and seen as empowering. For example, many third wave feminists perceive fashion as being a fun way of expressing one’s individuality and this contrasts the “anti-fashion” tendencies of second wave feminists and the stereotypical ugly, unfashionable and man hating feminist. Some are willing to embrace fashion and beauty standards as long as women do not feel coerced to do it and as long as it is not only available for select groups (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 32-35 + 129-131).

Naomi Wolf is one of the feminists that have examined the issue of beauty ideals.

4.3.1 Naomi Wolf: “the beauty myth”
American writer and activist Naomi Wolf published her first book “The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women” in 1991. In the book, Wolf argues that despite of the gains made on account of the struggles of second wave feminists, women are still not as free as they want to be. She claims that as a result of the power women have gained politically, economically and legally the past decades, patriarchy needed another implement to eliminate women’s advancement: “the beauty myth”. According to Wolf, the ideology of beauty is part of a backlash against
feminism and that it is the last of the feminine ideologies that can control women and keep male dominance intact. She claims that it is primarily dominated by politics and that the beauty ideals are constructed by patriarchy and not by universal, objective trends. Wolf provides this explanation of how the myth works: “In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves” (Wolf, 1991, p. 12). Women are constantly confronted with beauty ideals in the media: young, white, slim and well-proportioned women with perfect skin, lustrous hair and dressed in high fashion. Also, the beauty myth is linked with female sexuality, what Wolf terms “beauty pornography”, that is, linking beauty with sexuality and perceiving women as sex objects “to undermine women’s new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth.” (Wolf, 1991, p. 11). As a result, many women have become obsessed with their physical appearance and a fear of growing old has become prevalent. Consequently, women have increasingly embraced the fashion industry, cosmetic surgery, cosmetics and diet products (Wolf, 1991, pp. 11-17).

In the following paragraphs third wave attitudes towards relationships and marriage will be examined.

4.4 Relationships and marriage
Given the cultural context in which third wave feminists live, their attitudes towards marriage have changed. Firstly, statistics show that women’s average age at marriage has risen from around 20 in 1970 to 25 in 1997. Most women want to get an education and establish a career before they get married and consequently they are not in as much of a hurry to walk down the aisle as their predecessors. Also, the attitude towards singleness has changed the past decades and is more widely accepted (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, p. 204). These issues are examined more thoroughly by third wave feminist and journalist, Susan Faludi.

4.4.1 Susan Faludi: backlash and myths about women
It is hard to work with third wave feminism and not mention Susan Faludi. To third wave feminists (and women in general) she has become a cultural icon. In the 1980’s, it was becoming a prevalent notion that feminism was dead; that the work of the women’s movement in the 1960’s and 70’s had paid off, with several significant gains in economic, political and cultural areas of society (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 125-126). The media claimed that these gains had caused that “women are more unhappy precisely because they are free” and that “Women are enslaved by their own
liberation” (Faludi, 1992, p. 2). Faludi did not believe this to be true and in her first book, published in 1991, “Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women”, she claims that such notions were part of a backlash against feminism, generated by the media in the 1980’s. She argues that the backlash had emerged because women, in the wake of second wave feminism, had taken another step towards equality between the sexes and the backlash was an implement to reverse this development: “The backlash against women’s rights works in much the same way: its rhetoric charges feminists with all the crimes it perpetrates.” (Faludi, 1992, p. 17). In this connection, Faludi describes some of the myths the media had created about women: that single women over thirty suffered from a “man shortage” and had small chances of getting married, that professional women got stressed and lonely, that women who did not have children got depressed and that unmarried women became hysterical (Faludi, 1992, pp.1-2). All these myths are refuted by Faludi, on the account of doubtful empirical data and unqualified academic researchers. Instead, she introduces new information from valid surveys about women’s attitudes towards marriage, relationships and singlehood.

She claims that the portrayal of single women as being desperate to get married was entirely incorrect. Marriage is no longer the main purpose of women’s lives and women in their thirties are not only postponing marriage – some discard the thought completely. Especially well-educated women with high incomes are indifferent to marriage. Instead, these women choose to live on their own and focus on their career (Faludi, 1992, pp. 33-36). Faludi also refutes the claim that single women are depressed and argues that they actually have better mental health and higher self-esteem than married women. Most single women enjoy being single and many of them believe that they can have a happy and complete life, even if they never marry (Faludi, 1992, pp. 55-57).

In the following paragraphs, the last theme, sisterhood, will be examined.

4.5 Sisterhood
During the second wave of feminism, one of the main slogans was “sisterhood is powerful”. However, third wave feminists have a different take on what sisterhood is and how beneficial it is. Some see sisterhood as “outdated” and do not think it holds the same importance as it once did while others think sisterhood is still necessary in the struggle for equality (Henry, 2004, pp. 9-17). In the following paragraphs, Naomi Wolf’s and bell hooks3 views on sisterhood will be examined.

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3 bell hooks has chosen not to spell her name with capital letters
4.5.1 Naomi Wolf: victim feminism vs. power feminism

In her book “Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century”, published in 1993, Wolf argues for a new kind of feminist ideology with a heavier emphasis on individualism; “power feminism”. This feminism is an alternative to “victim feminism”, which Wolf claims sees women as victims of patriarchy and that female power is sought by using powerlessness as an argument. This kind of feminism puts community first and self later and it encourages women to agree and share the same opinions. She argues that this creates hostility towards individual achievements. Power feminism, on the other hand, is based on the notion that women can achieve as much as men and that women can be aggressive and require autonomy. This ideology emphasizes women’s strengths and abilities instead of their weaknesses and it sees women as being survivors instead of victims. Most importantly, it focuses on women’s individual achievements: “[power feminism] encourages a woman to claim her individual voice rather than merging her voice in a collective identity, for only strong individuals can create a just community” (Wolf, 1993, p. 149). It accepts that women are individuals and that “What every woman does with her body and in her bed is her own business” (Wolf, 1993, p. 150). However, bell hooks has a different take on the issue of sisterhood.

4.5.2 bell hooks: sisterhood is still powerful

Some third wave feminists argue that this concept of power feminism encourages women to reject the notion of sisterhood and that this ideology will make women more competitive which in the end will benefit patriarchy (Owens, 2007, p. 117). Feminist bell hooks has also noticed the tendency of women becoming less interested in female solidarity and sisterhood. She claims that because feminist gains are taken for granted, women do not feel it is necessary to work on creating solidarity among their peers. In this connection, differences in class and race also matter and there is a divide between privileged and less-privileged women. She argues that it is necessary to work on minimizing this divide and for women to realize that sisterhood is powerful and necessary in order to bring about positive change for all women (hooks, 2000, pp. 13-18).

In the next part of the thesis, I will carry out an analysis of SATC in order to find out what the show says about the five main issues and whether the view points on SATC are similar to the ones I have examined in the first part of the thesis. The themes will be introduced in the same order as in the first part, starting with gender.
5. Analysis of Sex and the City

5.1 Gender

To some extent, SATC reverses the normative gender roles and embraces the idea of the performative sex that Judith Butler referred to. In these cases, masculinity and femininity are performances that are not reserved for men and women, respectively, but intersect across genders. This is especially when it comes to the characters of Samantha and Miranda.

Samantha has both masculine and feminine traits, each of which she performs under different circumstances. When she interacts with men she uses her femininity to seduce them and to get what she wants. She wears sexy and colorful clothes; often short, cleavage-revealing dresses and uses mimics and non-verbal language to look sexy and seductive. In that way, her femininity is a source of power; a sort of performance she can carry out whenever she needs it. She likes having the power over a man and she puts her own pleasure before any man’s. Her immense pleasure in sex and her predator-like aggressive approach to seducing men are also traits one would normally associate with masculinity. Furthermore, during the countless conversations with the other women, she is extremely outspoken about sex and often has bawdy stories about her conquests. In one episode, Carrie refers to Samantha as “a powerful hybrid: the ego of a man trapped in the body of a woman.” (SATC, S02:E11, “Evolution”). Consequently, Samantha performs her gender and she can intersect between feminine and masculine roles.

When it comes to Miranda, the reversal of traditional gender roles is also obvious. Miranda has a quite cynical and cold façade, often accompanied by sarcastic remarks. She always says what is on her mind and she seems very confident, no matter if the others refute her viewpoints. She is stubborn and is not keen on compromising in any aspect of her life. This also comes to show in her relationship to men where she has difficulties with commitment and compromising her own independence and freedom in order to make room for a man in her life. She likes to be in control and to have the freedom to do whatever she wants. Her greatest passion is her career as a partner at a law firm and she has high ambitions and aspirations to rise through the ranks. All these character traits can be interpreted as being masculine (Southard, 2008, 157-161). Also when it comes to her fashion sense, her masculinity is pronounced. This is especially the case in the first seasons of the show, where she is often dressed in sportswear or suits in neutral colors. On the other hand, as the show progresses, both Miranda’s style and personality traits change and become more feminine. She starts wearing more colorful and feminine clothes and the feminine
sides of her personality become more visible as well. She gives birth to a baby boy and starts prioritizing her new life as a mother higher than her career. Also, she ends up marrying Steve, and although she maintains her sarcastic and cynical façade, she becomes more caring, open and tolerant as the final seasons progress.

Whereas the idea of the performative sex is present in the case of Samantha and Miranda, Charlotte and Carrie portray a more normative image of women. Although they are both empowered women with successful careers and sexual drives, they are the ones with the most feminine character traits. First of all, they dress in feminine clothes; often dresses or garments with floral prints. More importantly, they are the most active when it comes to searching for love and finding a man to spend their life with. This is especially the case when it comes to Charlotte, who is an eternal optimist who believes in true love and whose main goal in life is to find her soul mate and have the perfect wedding in the perfect Vera Wang gown. Also, she is the only one of the four women who likes (and knows how) to cook and she sets aside her career in order to stay at home to work on her marriage with Trey and try to become pregnant. All these character traits make up a very traditionally feminine archetype that almost resembles women of the 1950’s.

Seen from Judith Butler’s point of view, the reversal and intersection of gender roles and masculinity and femininity is positive, but in the end, the majority of the character traits of the four protagonists are feminine. Also, a character like Samantha is so extreme that although some female viewers might find her inspirational, others might not take her seriously. Consequently, the show never fully lets go of the normative assumptions about gender and sex.

5.2 Sexuality
The title of the show instantly gives us a clue: sexuality is one of the major themes on SATC; primarily in the sense of sexual freedom but also in terms of sexual orientation. It is no coincidence that the show’s title is closely related to Helen Gurley Brown’s book “Sex and the Single Girl” from 1962. In this book, Gurley (who was editor-in-chief for the women’s magazine Cosmopolitan from 1965-1997) encourages and advises women to appreciate their single status and to become financially independent and sexually liberated – much like SATC does (Garner, 2009).

When it comes to sexual orientation, different sexualities are presented throughout the series. Firstly, quite a few homosexual characters are introduced, out of which Carrie’s friend Stanford Blatch and Charlotte’s friend and wedding planner Anthony Marentino are the most
dominant. They are both portrayed as stereotypical gay men. They care about fashion, gossip and attractive men and the way they talk and their mimics are quite clichéd. However, they primarily comprise an entertaining role on the show and one might argue that because they are so stereotypical, they are hard to take seriously.

Furthermore, the main characters somehow becomes acquainted with questions about their own sexuality or about others’. Firstly, Samantha has a relationship with a lesbian artist, Maria, for a short period (SATC. S04: E03, “Defining Moments”). She does not have any insecurity with experimenting with her sexuality, and in general, she does not put much consideration into whether people are homosexual or not: “Wake up. It’s 2000. The new millennium won’t be about sexual labels. It’ll be about sexual expression. It won’t matter if you’re sleeping with men or women. It’ll be about sleeping with individuals […] soon everyone will be pansexual. It won’t matter if you’re gay or straight.” (SATC, S02:E16, “Was it Good For You?”). However, the three other friends do not take Samantha’s newfound lesbianism seriously and mostly makes jokes about it, just like they are uncomfortable hearing about her sex life. The relationship does not last long, mainly because it becomes too intimate and too focused on emotional attention for Samantha’s taste. It is basically too boring for her and her urge for passionate desire cannot be fulfilled in a lesbian relationship, at least not this one (Merck, 2004, pp. 55-57).

Miranda also briefly experiments with her sexuality – although in a far less extensive way than Samantha. In the first season of the show Miranda’s boss mistakenly thinks she is a lesbian (probably based on the stereotype that women that wear masculine clothes and are preoccupied with their careers are homosexual), and in order to please her boss, she agrees to be fixed up with a lesbian woman, Sid. Miranda kisses Sid and subsequently declares: “Yup. Definitely straight” (SATC, S01:E03, “Bay of Married Pigs”). Once more, homosexuality is rejected (Merck, 2004, p. 53).

The same is the case when Carrie dates Sean, who turns out to be bisexual. She attempts to be open minded about it, but it confuses her and she does not understand it. Neither does Miranda or Charlotte, who thinks it is a question of either or: “I’m very into labels. Gay. Straight. Pick a side and stay there” (SATC, S03:E04, “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl”). In the end, Carrie ends up dumping Sean because she “was too old to play this game” (SATC, S03:E04, “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl”), indicating that bisexuality is a game; something that cannot be taken seriously (Merck, 2005, p. 54).
Consequently, the storyline in SATC supports Judith Butler’s idea of the heterosexual matrix; that if you do not follow the norms and embrace heterosexuality, you will be considered abnormal or queer. Although the women are tolerant and respect other people’s sexualities they still reject homo- and bisexuality when it comes to their own sexuality.

However, when it comes to sexual relations the show is more open-minded. As previously mentioned, sex is one of the main themes and one can barely watch an episode without seeing graphic sex scenes or the women bluntly discussing sex over lunch. Because the characters enjoy and discuss sex, they become the subjects of sex and not the objects like they have been in the past. Also, the male gaze has been replaced by the female gaze and it is consequently the men who are objectified. They are attractive “hunks”, often with well-paid jobs and for the women to look at and choose as sexual partners if they live up to their demands (Southard, pp. 152-153).

All four women have sexual desires and expectations and it is of great importance to them. If the sex with a guy is not good they do not hesitate to dump him and if they do not have a guy to have sex with they find other ways to satisfy their sexual needs; for example by using vibrators. They put their own pleasure before any man’s which corresponds to what third wave feminists say in the matter. The concept of the sexually aggressive woman, or the “superrat”, fits especially well with the character of Samantha. She is the most sexually active and experimental of the four. She even describes herself as “a trisexual. I’ll try anything once” (SATC, S03:E04, “Boy Girl Boy Girl”). She sleeps with countless men throughout the series and often casually with men she has just met and never will meet again.

Consequently, one can argue that SATC embraces third wave feminists’ encouragement to focus on the woman’s right to pleasure. Also, it tells us that sexual freedom can lead to female empowerment because they do not rely on men for anything but sex and they are fully in charge of their own bodies and how they use them.

5.3 Beauty ideals
The relationship the four women have to fashion, weight, cosmetics, cosmetic surgery and physical appearances in general can be interpreted differently, depending on from which point of view the issue is looked.

One might argue that the women are victims of what Naomi Wolf referred to as the beauty myth. They are all preoccupied with their looks, to a greater or lesser extent. They all make
an effort to stay attractive by wearing makeup; they change hairstyles and dye their hair; they take care of their skin and work out. Miranda points out herself that they “live in a culture that promotes impossible standards of beauty” (SATC, S01: E02, Models and Mortals).

Throughout the series, we see the women being insecure about their bodies. Charlotte dreads being naked at a spa because she thinks her thighs are too fat (SATC, S01:E02, “Models and Mortals”), Carrie feels intimidated by not looking like a model when she participates in a fashion show (SATC, S04, E02: “The Real Me”) and Miranda feels self-conscious in connection with gaining weight after the birth of her son (SATC, S05: E03, “Luck Be An Old Lady”). Even Samantha, who has an enormous self-confidence and a very relaxed relationship to the body she often proclaims she loves, feels timid at one point. In one episode, she gets her naked pictures taken and proclaims that she does it for herself and nobody else. When the guy who has to frame the picture does not give her a single compliment about it, Samantha is disappointed and we discover that her former statement might not be entirely true (SATC, S04:E02, “The Real Me”). However, in each of these episodes the women’s insecurities are refuted by messages about perfection not being realistic or desirable and that flaws are a part of life and one should learn to embrace them.

Also when it comes to aging, SATC explores the norm about it not being desirable to age, and that physical signs of aging should be avoided at all costs. The fact that these four women are in their mid-thirties (and Samantha being even older, in her forties) denotes that they are no longer in their “prime time” of life. To make matters worse, they are all, at different points in the series, still single. The issue of age arises in several episodes. For example, in one episode Charlotte panics about turning 36 (and thereby becoming “an old maid”) and insists on pretending she is still 35, dressed up in a slutty, low-cut dress (SATC, S05:E03, “Luck Be An Old Maid”). Samantha, being the oldest of the four, also feels anxious about her age from time to time: at one point she fears she has reached her menopause and is devastated that she might be “drying up” (SATC, S03:E08, “The Big Time”). However, these insecurities are refuted and age is even celebrated, for example in the episode when Carrie turns thirty-five: “I'm thirty-five, thirty-five is not twenty-five”, Carrie says despairingly, to which Miranda replies “thank God!” and Samantha finishes the conversation by jokingly saying “Oh, Shut the fuck up, I'm a hundred and forty” (SATC, S03:E01, “The Agony and the Ex-tacy”). Thereby, they accept that they are no longer in what is thought to be the “prime time” of life, but that doesn’t mean that they act their age. These women still go out clubbing and dancing, having drinks and sleeping till noon the next day. They flirt, have casual sex,
smoke pot and gossip like teenagers. In that way, they don’t let their age inhibit them from doing what they want. However, in this regard they are also affected by the beauty myth, in that Samantha embraces cosmetic surgery. She frequently gets botox injections, strongly considers getting breast implants (SATC, S06:E14, “The Ick Factor”) and tries a chemical peel to get rid of the few wrinkles that are starting to appear (SATC, S05:E05, “Plus One Is the Loneliest Number”).

Furthermore, all four are interested in fashion and a lot of their time is spent on shopping or talking about fashion. The biggest fashion fanatic of them all is Carrie, whom in one episode is said to “live for fashion” (SATC, S04:E02, “The Real Me”). The women are all preoccupied with fashion and designer labels and Carrie has a closet filled with shoes that are worth $40,000 in total. In the vast majority of the time they all look glamorous, as if they have just stepped off the cover of Vogue. This highly emphasized preoccupation with looks, fashion and style can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, the women can be perceived as being under the spell of the beauty myth and that they live in a restrictive beauty culture where they are forced to attempt looking like the ideal presented by society. Also, because the emphasis on designer labels is so enormous one can argue that this makes fashion exclusive and restricted a limited group of people that are financially well off (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 131-132).

On the other hand, some third wave feminists see women’s preoccupation with physical appearance as an individual choice and a way of empowering themselves and creating their own self-image and identity (Tait, 2007, pp. 121-122). So by dressing up in different outfits, with different labels and different styles, the four women produce each their unique and personal styles. The clothes become a part of the character. Also, we rarely see the characters wearing the same garment twice. Their obsession with fashion can even be seen as being feminist, because these women actively choose to create their own style (Heywood, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 34-35).

5.4 Relationships and marriage
Another of the main themes in SATC is relationships. Throughout the series, the four women have numerous relationships - some more serious than others. Each character has different views on men and relationships and especially marriage; views that to a large extent are consistent with Susan Faludi’s presentation of backlash myths and the refutation of these.

With the exception of Charlotte, none of the protagonists are particularly eager to get married. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Miranda has commitment issues and it takes some time before she warms up to the thought of being Steve’s girlfriend – let alone deciding to marry him.
When she finally does get married to Steve, it is not a fancy, romantic wedding but a modest ceremony in a park where she doesn’t even wear a wedding dress (SATC, S06:E14, “The Ick Factor”).

Carrie has difficulties with the thought of getting married as well. When she discovers her boyfriend Aidan’s engagement ring, she throws up and when she and Miranda go to try on wedding gowns, she gets a panic attack and has difficulties breathing while wearing the dress (SATC, S04:E12, “Just Say Yes” and S04:E15 “Change of a dress”). This is an obvious metaphor for her perceiving marriage as something that will suffocate her and take away her freedom to do whatever she wants. She says herself: “I’m missing the bride gene. I should be put in a test tube and studied” (SATC, S04:E15, “Change of a Dress”). This comment also indicates that it is something she feels society expects her to want. That all women have a “bride gene” and that you are abnormal if you do not (Henry, 2004, pp. 73-74).

Samantha is very much against marriage and do not believe in the institution. She describes her relationship to marriage in the following way: “I feel the same way as you feel about Botox. Painful and unnecessary.” (Sex and the City: The Movie). She is the character who has the most sexual relationships, but when it comes to more serious relations with men the number is much smaller. She likes it best when there are no strings attached and she prefers to keep an emotional distance to the man she is seeing. She cannot combine her urge for sexual relations with commitment and monogamous relationships, at least not for a longer period of time, and she prioritizes her individual wishes before anything else. Like she says to her boyfriend Richard when she breaks up with him: “I love you, but I love me more” (SATC, S05:E03, “Luck be an Old Lady). This idea of valuing one’s own independence and individuality over a relationship with a man is something all three have in common. They are all skeptical about getting married because they might have to compromise their independence and they see marriage as a threat to their individuality. They are afraid that if they fully commit to a man by getting married, they will not be able to make the choices they want. To them, marriage is a sort of negotiation; a series of compromises (Tukachinsky, 2008, p.190-191). For example, when Miranda is reluctant about moving to Brooklyn with Steve and their baby, Steve reminds her that it is not all about her anymore, to which Miranda replies: “Oh God, I’m married” (SATC, S06:E16, “Out of the Frying Pan”). That way, marriage makes them feel inferior and it threatens their self confidence. We can see this in episodes where the women refuse to be rescued by men. For example Miranda being
skeptical about letting Steve take care of her after her eye-surgery (SATC, S03:E01, “Where There’s Smoke”) and Carrie not wanting Big to help her with the down payment for her apartment (SATC, S04:E16, “Ring a Ding Ding”). That way, they help each other instead of relying on men (Nelson, 2004, pp. 89-93).

Because these women are financially independent, they no longer need to get married. Marriage is an option; something they can choose or deselect. They don’t have to depend on a man and consequently they can be more picky about who they choose to be with. They look for their soul mate; the man that gives them butterflies in their stomach. There has to be a spark or else it is better to be single. And in SATC, being single is not something to be ashamed of. The show does touch upon the stigma there still is about being single and that living alone is not always easy. When Miranda buys her apartment the real estate agent wonderingly asks: “it’s just you?” (SATC, S02:E05, ) and both her and Carrie get the “don’t worry, you’ll find someone-looks” at engagement party (SATC, S04:E01, “The Agony and the Ex-tacy”) (Nelson, 2004, pp. 88-89). However, SATC emphasizes the positive sides of being single and it encourages women to celebrate their single status instead of letting the normative assumption that being alone is something that should avoided at all costs. For example, in the episode “A Woman’s Right to Shoes”, Carrie ponders whether she has made the wrong decision my choosing the lifestyle she has (being single, partying and buying $400 shoes) but ends up cherishing it by announcing that she is married with herself (SATC, S06:E09, “A Woman’s Right to Shoes”). Singlehood is no longer just a phase you have to rush through; it should be enjoyed while it lasts.

Contrary to the other women, Charlotte has a completely different view on marriage. In fact, one of the sole purposes of her life is to find her soul mate, marry him and have kids. She is willing to make self-sacrifices to get the man she thinks is her true love. In the episode “Time and Punishment” (S04:E07), Charlotte decides to quit her job and devote her time to tend to her marriage with Trey and start trying to have a baby. The others disagree with her decision but they respect it. Later, when she is in relationship with Harry, she converts to Judaism in order to be able to marry him4 (SATC, S06:E03, “The Perfect Present”). That way, she represents a stereotype that many women might think is the norm; that everyone should look for their true love and want to get married. However, seeing that Charlotte has so many problems in her first marriage (Trey being impotent, their inability to have a baby and the general lack of spark between them) ruins the

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4 Harry promised his dying mother that he would only marry a Jew
marriage. That way, SATC tells us that sometimes marriage is not what one should be striving for; that sometimes it is better to be alone than to settle for fake happiness with a man they do not love (SATC, S02:E04, “They Shoot Single People Don’t They?”).

However, although they do not rely on men they are all (with the exception of Samantha) still looking for a happy ending with a man and finding their “god damn soul mate” (SATC, S04:E01, “The Agony and the Ex-tacy”). And in the end, all of them end up marrying the man they believe is their true love. Only Samantha chooses to continue living her single life, despite her turning fifty in the movie. Consequently, one might argue that although the show portrays Susan Faludi’s views on the tendency of single women choosing to remain single and postpone marriage, it never fully embraces the idea that a woman can live happily ever after without a man by her side.

5.5 Sisterhood
The friendships between the four women constitute the very foundation of the show’s plot. In each episode, much of the time the women sit together sharing a meal together, having frank conversations about sex or discussing relationship issues. They gossip, laugh, agree and disagree. Their conversations are the central element of the show. In every episode, much of the time is spent on the women talking to each other about things that are going on in their lives at just that time. They use these conversations to help each other make sense of their lives, to find out what matters to them. They seek and give each other advice and help figure out how to live their lives and handle the situations they are faced with in each episode (Gerhard, 2005, pp. 43-44).

The relationships the women have with each other are more lasting and trustworthy than those with men. They offer them an emotional alternative to the boyfriends and potential husbands they meet throughout the series and the bonds they forge provide them with a support that no man can give them. They are each other’s alternative family and their real family is rarely mentioned (Gerhard, 2005, pp. 44-46). Furthermore, what characterizes their friendships is that they have very different personalities and each their individual perspectives on aspects of life. Therefore, they sometimes do not agree but we rarely see the women fight or hold grudges against each other. When they do, the conflict is resolved in the course of the episode. They are all members of their own collective force because of their tightly knit friendship. In a way they have their own sort of sisterhood (Southard, 2008, p. 153). Charlotte even refers to them as each other’s soul mates: “Maybe we could be each other’s soul mates. And then we could let men be just these great nice
guys to have fun with” (*SATC*, S04:E01, The Agony and the Ex-tacy”). The following statement, made by Carrie, also connotes to the four women as being each other’s “true loves”: “It’s hard to find people who will love you no matter what. I was lucky enough to find three of them” (*SATC*, S03:E12, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”).

However, their sisterhood does not go beyond their own friendship. They are there for each other but they do not seem to take other women’s situation into consideration. One might even argue that Carrie betrays a sister by having an affair with Mr. Big. Therefore, *SATC* tends to support Naomi Wolf’s idea of power feminism; that each woman should fight for what she wants and keep her own achievements and goals in mind and not necessarily engage in activism that benefits women as a collective.
6. Conclusion
The purpose of this thesis was to discuss the representation of some third wave feminist issues in the American TV series *Sex and the City*. In order to answer this problem statement, five central themes were chosen for further examination: gender, sexuality, beauty ideals, relationships and marriage and sisterhood. The thesis was divided into a theoretical part, where I introduced different third wave feminists’ perspectives on these themes. Next, I carried out an analysis of *SATC* with the purpose of finding out what the show says about these issues and whether it corresponds with third wave feminist viewpoints.

I started the thesis by introducing a short presentation of first and second wave feminism and subsequently examined third wave feminism more thoroughly. I discovered that some of the main characteristics of third wave feminism are complexity, multiplicity and contradiction. Although it does not have a single and emphasized issue agenda, one of its areas of focus is the abolition of normative and categorical thinking; for example when it comes to gender and sexuality. Also, it is critical towards certain areas of second wave feminism, such as the idea of a common female identity.

Judith Butler’s viewpoints about the performative sex revealed that third wave feminists attempt to deconstruct the binary gender oppositions (man vs. woman) and instead see gender as something that is performed and separated from sex, meaning that one can be a woman and still be what is normally perceived as being masculine. In connection with sexuality, Butler argues that heterosexuality is as much a performance as homo- or bisexuality, but because of the heterosexual matrix, any other sexuality than heterosexuality is recognized as being abnormal. Paula Kamen argued that women have developed more powerful sexual identities and introduces the term “superrats”, which are sexually aggressive women that put their own pleasure before any man’s. In connection with the issue of beauty ideals, Naomi Wolf argues that women are repressed by a beauty myth created by patriarchy that makes women obsessed with their appearance. When it comes to relationships and marriages, Susan Faludi claimed that marriage is no longer a must for women and that many women choose not to marry and live happy lives being single, contrary to what the media said during the backlash against feminism in the 1980’s. Finally, Naomi Wolf praises the ideology of power feminism and appreciates the idea of prioritizing individual needs, wishes and achievements before the collective. bell hooks, on the other hand, argue that there is still
a need for women to unite in a sisterhood in order to bring about more positive change for women across the globe.

In the analysis of SATC, I discovered that the show partially embodies Judith Butler’s idea about the performative sex, seeing that Samantha and Miranda can be perceived as having both feminine and masculine sides and especially Samantha intersects between the two, performing different genders depending on the situation. However, the show never fully lets go of the normative assumptions about gender and sex. When it comes to sexual orientation, homo- and bisexuality are rejected and consequently SATC supports Judith Butler’s theory of the heterosexual matrix. The show depicts women as being sexually active and they follow their desires and bring their own sexual pleasure into focus. That way, they (and especially Samantha) represent Paula Kamen’s idea about women being sexually aggressive “superrats”. Furthermore, one might argue that the women in SATC are under the spell of the beauty myth, since they are so preoccupied with appearances, fashion and style. However, seen from another third wave feminist point of view, this obsession can also be seen as a way of empowering themselves and a way to create their own personal self-image and identity. When it comes to one of SATC’s most central themes, relationships and marriage, the show to some extent supports Susan Faludi’s claims about women not considering marriage as the main purpose of their lives and that many women choose to remain single. SATC does portray singlehood as something women should celebrate instead of being embarrassed about, but in the end, three out of the four women end up getting married so it never fully embraces the idea that a woman can live happily ever after without a man by her side. Finally, the notion of sisterhood is celebrated in the show but not in a collective sense, because it merely consists of the four friends and not women outside their group.

Overall, SATC does express some of the viewpoints put forth by the third wave feminists I have examined. However, it never fully lets go of normative ways of thinking about the five themes at hand. As a result, one might question how revolutionary and beneficial the show is for feminism and whether or not a third wave feminist can in fact be a fan of the show.
7. Bibliography

**Primary resources:**


Appendix B.

*Sex and the City*. (television series) (1998-2004). USA.


**Secondary resources:**


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8. Appendices