

LATINAS IN THE CITY: A DISCUSSION OF HOW YOUNG MEXICAN WOMEN
IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE WITH *SEX AND THE CITY*

A Thesis

by

ELIZABETH ANGELICA CANTU

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2007

Major Subject: Communication

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ABSTRACT

Latinas in the City: A Discussion of How Young Mexican Women

Identify and Engage with *Sex and the City*. (August 2007)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Antonio La Pastina

Globalization trends and treaties, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have increased the access and flow of United States media and popular culture products in Mexico. Limited research has been done examining the exposure of Mexican audiences to U.S. media products and the possibility of mass media's impact on Mexican cultural identity. This qualitative study examines how twenty college-educated Mexican women identify and engage with the transnational popular culture text of *Sex and the City* (*SATC*). A multi-disciplinary theoretical approach, mainly from cultural studies and media studies, provides the backbone for my study of a foreign audience's identification and engagement with a U.S. popular culture text.

Thematic categorization of my interview data showed that genre, gender, class and location all played a role in the media engagement process. *SATC* enabled these twenty women to examine their lived experiences in Mexican society and be exposed to alternative viewpoints. The women interviewed were active audience members that discussed their experiences as college-educated, career driven women associated with modernity but living in the traditional, patriarchal society of Mexico.

The women interviewed preferred watching television from other countries, such as the U.S., because it resonated with their lived experiences more than the telenovelas, which are the most common form of television programming in Latin America. In terms of discussing the representation of women on *SATC*, women talked about the gender roles, myths and structural forces of Mexican society to engage in resistive pleasure and to talk about gender politics. For these Mexican women, discussing *SATC* allowed them to express concerns over the representation of women in telenovelas, the importance of having alternative viewpoints available to women, and the experiences that have allowed them to foster spaces for change based on *SATC*'s content and characters. While factors, such as education, socioeconomics and geographic location framed the respondent comments, *SATC* was a source of strategic knowledge and cultural capital for women to open up new discussions with friends and family, new ways of looking and living out their sexuality, and ideas of the female body.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mother and father, who always stressed the importance of an education through their unconditional love and support.

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This thesis and the completion of my master's degree would not have been possible without the support of my professors, friends and family. I would like to start off my thanking Dr. Antonio La Pastina, who has been my advisor, mentor and friend. I would not have been able to complete this project without his constructive feedback, patience and encouragement. I would also like to thank my thesis committee for their patience and support during the long writing process. These professors along with others at Texas A&M have challenged me to think critically and stimulated my interest in academics. I thank you all for your wisdom and time.

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Above all, I am grateful to my wonderful father, Dr. Francisco Cantú, for always stressing the importance of an education and for providing me the resources to grow and follow my dreams. My father's examples of love, sacrifice and wisdom give meaning

and inspiration to my life, while also encouraging me to challenge myself and think critically about world issues. My father is the person that I am the most indebted to and who made this thesis possible through his unconditional love, financial support and encouragement throughout my life. Even though my father was not able to see the completion of this thesis, I know he was with me every step of the way. I thank you Daddy for being such a wonderful father and role model in my life. I love you and miss you dearly!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I get my style and fashion sense from *Sex and the City*
—young Mexican woman in Mexico City¹

This statement was made to a friend of mine at an Internet café when my friend complimented a young woman in her twenties on her clothing. The young woman told my friend that she was a big fan of *Sex and the City (SATC)* and got her fashion tips from the women on the show. My friend described the situation to me as I was trying to find women who watched *SATC* in Mexico City to participate in this study.

Unfortunately due to time schedule conflicts, I was not able to interview this young woman. Nevertheless, the statement illustrates the significance of U.S. media and the marketability of U.S. popular culture in other countries. In this case, a young Mexican woman looks to a popular television show from the U.S. to guide her “style and fashion sense.”

This thesis examines how twenty Mexican women interviewed during July and August 2006 in Mexico City and Monterrey identified and engaged with the popular culture text *SATC*. This chapter begins addressing the global scope of U.S. popular culture and some background information of *SATC* to better understand the purpose and results of the study.

This thesis follows the style of *The Journal of Communication*.

¹ All the interviews in this study were conducted in Spanish and the quotes utilized have been translated by the author.

United States and Popular Culture

Popular culture and globalization seem to be buzz terms in today's society. Most of us will hear these terms mentioned, talked about or participate in watching, reading and listening to popular culture items that might be available due to the global environment of our times. Popular culture is a term that was developed during the Enlightenment by intellectuals to distinguish between "high culture," which was what the educated and elite ascribed to, and "popular culture," which was the common and popular for the masses (Crothers, 2007; Martín-Barbero, 1993). The industrial-era added to the definition of popular culture by having "large, often multinational corporations providing goods and services for profit" that allow for everything to be available for marketing and consumption (Crothers, 2007, p.8-9). Today popular culture entertainment is an important part of the global economy that has influenced contemporary globalization (Crothers, 2007).

The ability to have access to popular culture items from different parts of the world has been a result of globalization and a catalyst in the world's political, economic and cultural frameworks. The idea of globalization is not a new phenomenon. Scholars have historically traced globalization to the expansion of state formation, European colonialism and the advent of capital modernity (Robertson, 1992). While there are several definitions and caveats seeking to explain globalization, it is certain that globalization encapsulates the economic, political and cultural systems of different nation-states in the world. Economically, globalization supports the concept of free trade by embracing minimal restraints on the flow of goods, services and people

throughout the world (Crothers, 2007). In conjunction, globalization has challenged political systems in nation-states by undermining the power and role they have in passing laws or regulations that interfere with free trade and transnational corporations.

Several debates arose questioning whether cultural products are a commodity that follows the logic of free trade or a meaning-bearing entity that can be subjected to actions and limitations from nation-states that choose to do so (Crothers, 2007; McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). Opposition from countries, such as France and Canada, allowing popular culture as a commodity stems from a fear that high exposure to popular culture items from a particular country, such as the U.S., might influence or cause a loss of national identity in the host country. While these institutional frameworks are interrelated and in constant debate, the United States has maintained that popular culture is a commodity that should not be restricted by rules and exemptions in trade worldwide. Currently, the United States is the leading provider of popular culture products to the world (Crothers, 2007).

In 2005, eighteen of the top twenty-five top grossing films of all time where U.S. films that were either made in the United States or filmed in U.S.-based studios, had U.S. actors/actresses, had themes that were recognizably a part of U.S. public culture, or were set in a U.S. locale (Crothers, 2007). As of December 2001, eighteen of the top twenty-five music-selling artists of all time were from the U.S., and the U.S. musical style of rock and roll is the most successfully marketed music format in the world (Crothers, 2007).

Television also presents great economic gain for U.S. companies in that “for every dollar spent internationally on purchasing television programming, 75 cents goes to U.S. companies” for motion picture and television production studios (Crothers, 2007, p. 60). In 2000, approximately 69 percent of all fiction broadcast in Europe was produced in the U.S. (Trepte, 2003; EAO, 2003). In the early 1990’s, U.S. programming increased by twenty percent (from 36 percent to 56 percent) of the total programming in Europe, while the European television series declined from 37 percent to 16 percent in the U.S. (Crothers, 2007). Satellite dishes have also served as an important force in the spread and exposure of U.S. television around the world, including in politically repressed countries and countries that lack the cable infrastructure to link viewers to these popular culture products.

Other television studies have shown that while the U.S. dominates in daily fiction programming, ratings of international programs rarely surpass those of domestic products (Trepte, 2003; IP, 2002; Servaes & Lie, 2001). These studies suggest that citizens seem to prefer the information programs and entertainment shows of national origin (Trepte, 2003; IP, 2002; Servaes & Lie, 2001). Countries, such as France and Germany, have also focused more on the production of fiction in order to counteract the heavy reliance of imported fiction in daily European television since the 1970’s (Trepte, 2003). While these trends indicate changes in U.S. dominance in terms of television programming, the examples above still suggests that the production of mass popular culture is centered in the U.S. and that most of the world’s films, music and television carry a U.S. label from the major popular culture corporations.

NAFTA and Mexico

In the early 1990's, the U.S., Canada and Mexico came into a regional agreement called the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that promoted neoliberal policies on trade. While these three countries are known for their production of popular culture, different competitive stances were taken in the trading of cultural products (Crothers, 2007; Mosco & Schiller, 2001; McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). With the majority of Canadians sharing the same dominant language of English as in the U.S. and the vast majority of the population living within a hundred miles of the U.S. border, the Canadian popular culture industry seemed to be more vulnerable to U.S. influence than Mexico's. Also research indicated that Mexicans enjoyed domestically-produced programming in television and music, and that dubbed English programs would not be as culturally accepted by Mexican viewers (Crothers, 2007). This point will be addressed later in my data analysis chapters. Therefore regulations that protected Canadian cultural artifacts were more extensive than the Mexico-U.S. trade when it came to cultural products (Crothers, 2007; Mosco & Schiller, 2001; McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996).

Focusing particularly on the Mexico-U.S. negotiations of NAFTA, Mexican negotiators accepted the logic of free trade in the cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Mexico (Crothers, 2007; McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). By 2004 the U.S. was to have dropped tariffs on an additional seven percent of Mexican exports from the 84% dropped in 1994, and Mexico was to have dropped an additional thirty percent of its tariffs from the forty percent it had done in 1994 on its imports from the U.S. (García

Canclini, 1996). In terms of electronic media, Mexican radio and television broadcasting companies would solely be owned by Mexicans, but cable television would be open. When NAFTA became law on January 1, 1994, forty-nine percent of foreign investment was allowed in the cable business of Mexico (García Canclini, 1996). There was a thirty percent quota established for Mexican movies in Mexican cinemas, but this quota was not enforced and Mexican movies shown in Mexican cinemas declined to ten percent by 1997 (Crothers, 2007; McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). This dramatic drop was not just a result of the popularity of U.S. films, but also a change in the place of access from the public arena of the cinema to the viewing of television and videos in the private arena of the home (McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). This shift has benefited U.S. companies because of their control of distribution outlets of television, video and cinema in most of the world (García Canclini, 1996).

These economic policies along with the diffusion of new communication technologies into Mexico, such as cable systems, videocassette rentals, satellite dishes and so on, have increased the contact and consumption of U.S. popular culture products in Mexico (Lozano, 1996). Latin American scholars have articulated their concern over the influence that transnational communication can play on the national identity and culture in their country. In Mexico, fear of U.S. cultural influence on Mexican identity can be traced back to the nineteenth century. The recent dominant presence of U.S. popular culture products in Mexico has revitalized this fear and scholars have begun to examine the problem again (McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). Beginning in the 1960's, Cremoux found that "80% of the television programs preferred by junior high school

students in Mexico City originated in the United States” (Lozano, 1996, p. 158). A cable television study done by García-Calderón (1987, p. 56) argued that the significance of U.S. programs on cable television has resulted in the displacement of Mexican national culture for those of foreign values (McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). Similarly, Esteinou (1990) described Mexican television as adopting the promotion of consumerist culture and appreciation for the U.S. way of life, while forgetting the Catholic cultural background of Mexico by:

adopting the transnational culture of Superman, Wonder Woman, Star Wars, Batman and Robin, Walt Disney, and so on. Thus, in less than a generation the roots of the transnational, the North American, have been planted in our conscience. Today, we can say that in Mexican territory the first generation of “norteamericanos” [Americans] has been born. (p. 116)

While these are just some examples of work that has been done attempting to understand the cultural consumption and presence of U.S. media in Mexico, limited research still exists in examining the exposure of Mexican audiences to U.S. media products and the possibility of mass media’s impact on Mexican cultural identity. With popular culture providing an avenue for researchers to examine the values, needs and standards of a particular community or group of people, the present study might contribute to the understanding of the intersection between Mexican identity and the viewership of a U.S. popular culture text.

SATC’s Global Audience

Sex and the City (SATC) was a popular HBO television series that aired from 1998 to 2004. The idea behind *SATC* came from a column written by Candice Bushnell in the *New York Observer*, which started in the fall of 1994 and later became a book in

1996 (Bushnell, 2001). The column examined relationships and mating habits of women in New York City, which would eventually be the plot of the television series. Darren Star, the creator of the *SATC* television series, was a fan of the column and became motivated to write a comedy that would discuss sex from a female's point of view and "in an up-front, honest way", which was a new idea for television (Sohn, 2004, p. 14). After discussions with ABC that left Star hesitant with the way the network would handle the topic of adult sexuality, Star turned to HBO (Sohn, 2004). HBO quickly embraced the idea and from that moment the idea of *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) would become a successful television series and cultural icon in the U.S.

During its six-year run, *SATC* won numerous awards and attracted as many as 10.6 million viewers in the U.S. (Bauder, 2004, ¶ 8). After the series aired its final episode in February 2004, a "near-total media frenzy of good-byes, tributes, commentary, and post mortems on the show ensued, testifying the importance of the show to many viewers" (Gerhard, 2005, p. 37). In May 2004, a *Time* magazine article reported that the *Sex and the City* tour in New York tripled in popularity attracting 1,000 visitors a week to visit the restaurants, bars and hangout spots that the characters on the show frequented (Caplan, 2004, ¶ 1). Many attribute the popularity and success of fashion designer names such as Manolo Blahnik, and the popularity of sex products for women such as the Rampant Rabbit vibrator to the character's usage on the show (Attwood, 2005; Gerhard, 2005). When TBS added its "Very Funny" tagline in 2004, which included syndicated shows of *SATC* on its network, their ratings improved and along with other popular shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, it became among "the top two

or three cablers in the 18-34 demographic group” (Adalian, et al, 2006, ¶ 34). The show has also received attention from academic circles and scholars analyzing the messages and content of the television series.

While these examples show the popularity of *SATC* and perhaps the importance of the show to many viewers in the U.S., the show also received worldwide acclaim and attention. According to the imdb website², *SATC* was shown in Germany, Argentina, Israel, Brazil, Singapore, Spain, France, Ireland, Poland, Serbia, Mexico and other countries. The language and programming times of *SATC* depended on the country and people’s access to media outlets, such as cable, satellite or Internet³. In countries like Singapore, the government lifted a TV ban on *SATC* and announced the possibility of decriminalizing oral sex in attempt to “play down the country’s reputation as a nanny state” (Campbell, 2004, ¶ 7). In a *Time* magazine article focusing on free love in China, they chronicled the lives of different women and their sexual experiences. According to the article 70% of Beijing residents admitted to having sex before marriage, a significant increase from 1989 where only 15.5% indicated they did (Beech, 2005, ¶ 2). In the same article, Fu Zhen who goes by the nickname of Carrie, as in Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* said “My parents’ only entertainment came from revolutionary movies, so they were more conservative about sex. My generation, we see everything, everywhere, and we are hungry for new experiences” (Beech, 2006, ¶ 2). In other countries, such as Israel, citizens became upset after Sarah Jessica Parker, the face of *SATC*, appeared on a

² imdb.com is an Internet movie database

³ Different versions of *Sex and the City* are shown depending on the country and the media outlet. If the television series was shown on local television, it was likely dubbed and cut for content. If the television series was shown on satellite or cable, the series was likely shown in its original version or in English with subtitles in the host country’s language.

billboard advertisement in a slinky dress that exposed arms, back, part of her thigh and her Manolo Blahnik shoes (Kiviat, 2004, ¶ 1).

In Brazil, networks, such as Record and Fox, have made attempts to compete with Globo, the dominant TV network, by creating a new show adopted from *Sex and the City* entitled *Avasalladoras* (Agence French Presse, 2006, ¶ 11). When the show ended in 2004, many women in Colombia mentioned that they felt that like they were losing a friend and that the lives portrayed on the show gave inspiration to educated women (Debicki, 2004, ¶ 5). In Mexico, cable channel 40 attracted 10 million viewers in 2004 (Marín, 2004) and in 2005 the local channel TV Azteca7 announced it would show *SATC* on Tuesday evenings (Hernández, 2005, ¶ 3). These examples show the popularity of *SATC* around the world. Some scholars, like Arthurs (2003), would argue that *SATC* is a post-feminist text due to female characters living alone, representing autonomy and being economically independent. Many viewers in different countries have had the opportunity to watch *SATC* and the show has had success in places that are culturally and ideologically different from what is depicted on the television series.

This worldwide viewing of *SATC* make the show a product of globalization where the audiovisual images flow from the local realms of signification for a particular cultural group and create de-contextualized cultural and political histories, which can have different meanings and interpretations in different areas (García Canclini, 2001, p. 160). As someone who is interested in the flow of images and the cultural significance of this text in other countries, I selected *SATC* for my study to focus on how this popular culture text that represents women as “having it all” and being sexually free to express

their needs and desires would be interpreted and understood in a different country. I picked Mexico because of the geographic proximity to the U.S., the changes the country has undergone in preparing and adopting NAFTA, the strict gender roles that exist in many parts of Mexico and the popularity of the show there.

Information on *SATC*'s Plot and Characters

This section will provide a brief summary of *Sex and the City (SATC)* for readers who might be unfamiliar with the show. More importantly, it discusses characters and elements of the plot that are necessary for understanding the viewer's interpretations of the show later in the data analysis chapters. While there were 94 episodes in the 6 seasons of the series shown on HBO, I will only provide a general overview of the plot and its characters. The following section will take a more critical look at the value-systems that are represented on *SATC*.

The characters on *SATC* present a hyper-real⁴ depiction, due to the excessive consumerism and carefree lifestyle, of what it is to be a woman in contemporary New York City. Each major character in *Sex and the City* can represent a common stereotype of contemporary women. Samantha Jones, who has her own Public Relations business, is the promiscuous woman who prides herself on having "sex like a man;" meaning unattached and the more the better (Star, 1998, Episode 1, Season 1). Samantha expresses throughout the show that sex gives power to women. She does not allow herself to get too attached to the men she sleeps with, sometimes even forgetting the names and faces of her past partners. Samantha is proud of her sexuality and does not

⁴ Term coined by Jean Baudrillard to suggest that in postmodern cultures the conscience is unable to differentiate between fantasy and reality

think that the rules apply to her, which is why she sleeps with married men and claims she “will wear whatever and blow⁵ whomever [she] wants as long as [she] can breathe and kneel” (Star, 2002, Episode 70, Season 5).

Miranda Hobbes, who is a lawyer at a major law firm in New York, is driven by her career and puts in long hours at the office in order to become a partner. Miranda’s success intimidates men and becomes problematic in some of her relationships. She has a very cynical view of love and is even told that she acts like the male in the relationship. Miranda’s greatest fear is letting men in her life take care of her. “Why do you hate men so much?” is a question she is asked by the male character in the show that she eventually marries (Star, 1999, Episode 20, Season 2).

Charlotte York, who worked at an art gallery in New York, resembles the traditional stereotype of women who want to get married and start a family. She is infatuated with the concept of love and has an ideal image of what marriage and relationships should be. She believes that in order to get the man of your dreams, “you have to play by the rules (Star, 1998, Episode 1, Season 1). Charlotte is not always comfortable talking about certain sexual topics, once leaving the restaurant the group frequently eats at because of the sexual topic they were discussing. Even after her first marriage ends in divorce, Charlotte remains an optimist of love.

The last major character of the show is Carrie Bradshaw, who writes the newspaper column that the whole show is based on. Carrie’s character is a hybrid of all the other women: she is hoping for that special relationship, she cares about her career

⁵ Referring to oral sex

and she has her share of one-night stands. Towards the end of the show, Carrie tells her boyfriend, “I’m looking for love. Real love. Ridiculous, inconvenient, consuming, can’t-live-without-each-other love.” (Star, 2004, Episode 94, Season Six). Carrie has a great need to always be up-to-date on her fashion, more so than the other characters, and is frequently buying shoes and clothing that she cannot afford. Due to her column and her close relationship with a gay man who runs a talent agency, she has some celebrity status allowing her to partake in fashion shows and being recognized by others when she goes out. Throughout the six seasons, Carrie partakes in many relationships with men but always has her heart set on Mr. Big, a successful bachelor who is afraid of commitment.

What ties these women together is their friendship, their disappointing past relationships and their need for consumption. The fact that these characters have jobs and live alone represents their autonomy and economic independence (Arthurs, 2003). However, almost every episode has them turning to each other for help on dealing with their issues. Throughout the seasons the characters dealt with life changing issues, such as divorce, breast cancer, an unexpected pregnancy and making life-changing decisions like moving from New York to be with a significant other. It is at these times when relying on their friendship became an important element of the series.

On a more superficial level, the depiction of work and financial responsibility seem to be nonexistent to these characters, and hedonistic, narcissistic behavior is depicted. With Samantha running her own public relations firm, Carrie writing her newspaper column from her own apartment and Charlotte managing the art gallery as if it was a hobby, there is a collapse of work into the private sphere and the theme of

“having it all” becomes possible for these characters (Arthurs, 2003). These women do not rely on marriage to satisfy and fulfill their financial and sexual needs (Arthurs, 2003). Even when Miranda, the partner at a major law firm in New York, becomes pregnant she is able to get help from her friends and the baby’s father to help her maintain her work and her motherly duties without being married (Arthurs, 2003). This theme of “having it all” allows the women to “move freely around the cafes and boutiques, with a confident sense of possession, enjoying the multitude pleasures of consumption in the company of other women and gay men” (Arthurs, 2003, p. 93).

At the end of the television series, each female character, regardless of their past views of relationships, will end up with a partner and the mythic journey of finding Mr. Right and finding happiness becomes the culmination of the show. Discussion regarding these issues will be addressed in the next section as I analyze how *SATC* is an example of the other-directed, consumer society of the U.S. This is significant because it communicates some of the value-systems of U.S. culture that a foreign audience will view and interpret. Furthermore, the gender politics of *SATC* will be addressed in the following chapter.

SATC and U.S. Culture

Sex and the City’s (SATC) success and representation of women make it a significant text for analyzing in terms of the elements that have made the show successful and the value-systems that are communicated throughout the text. As mentioned above, the characters of *SATC* are a close-knit group of friends that share their disappointment of past relationships and the need for consumption. Part of the

value-system represented in *SATC* is what Reisman (1961) calls an other-directed society. This social character is prevalent in United States culture (Riesman, 1961). Riesman explores this concept by looking at how children's stories have changed from *Red Riding Hood*, who goes to grandmother's house alone with no one to guide her, to *Tootle the Engine*, who relies on the support of his town and teacher to stay on the tracks and is later rewarded by his peers for making the right decision (1961). Being a part of this other-directed society leads people to rely on "their contemporaries [as] the source of direction for the individual—either those known to [them] or those with whom [s/he] is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media" (Reisman, 1961, p. 21).

Popular U.S. television programs, such as *SATC*, *Friends* and *Desperate Housewives*, are composed of a cast of characters that heavily rely on their peers to get through each obstacle and event that occurs in the character's life. U.S. popular culture is saturated with this concept of other-directedness where individuals keep in touch with others to create a "close behavioral conformity" that is "[exceptionally sensitive] to the actions and wishes of others" (Riesman, 1961, p. 21-22). As mentioned above, *SATC*'s characters are in constant communication with each other: sharing meals, drinks, shopping, work-outs, walks or talking on their cell phones (Gerhard, 2005). The need to conform and seek acceptance from those around you is necessary in the U.S., similar to how the women on the show seek acceptance from their group of friends and sometimes even from the men they date.

Aside from other-directedness, *SATC* also has prominent elements of a consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998). *SATC*'s theme of "having it all," including the multitude pleasures of consumption, becomes the "code" of the show and an accurate assessment of contemporary U.S. society. Baudrillard discusses the concept of "code" in *The Consumer Society*, where the "fact remains that, at the distribution level, goods and objects—like words and (in the past) women—form a global, arbitrary, coherent system of signs, a *cultural* system which, for the contingent world of needs and enjoyment, for the natural and biological order, substitutes a social order of values and classification" (1998, p. 79).

New York City as the setting for *SATC* is an important element of the show for it is a part of the culture of signifiers that define the United States and representative of U.S. consumerism. New York City is one of the most recognized and significant cities of the U.S. around the world. It has become a symbol/sign of U.S. opportunity (the stories behind Ellis Island), status (the skyscrapers, Donald Trump), liberty (The Statue of Liberty), culture (the fashion, the restaurants) and attitude (loneliness). In Baudrillard's *America*, he discusses the "solitude" of New York. He concludes that there is a "magical sensation of contiguity and attraction for an artificial centrality," a "self-attracting universe, which there is no reason to leave" (Baudrillard, 1986, p. 15).

This idea of not being able to leave New York is represented throughout the different seasons of the *SATC*. Many times the women characters wonder why people would ever leave New York and are shocked when other characters in the show decide to move to other cities. In the last season, Carrie Bradshaw, the leading character moves

back to New York after having lived in Paris, France. Her Mr. Big, the leading male character in the show, also moves back to New York after having lived in Napa Valley, California. Throughout *SATC*, the characters and setting of the show frame the loneliness, fascination with consumerism, and narcissistic attributes of U.S. culture. All of these characteristics are what Lasch (1979) associates with the culture of narcissism:

The rationalization of inner life, the cult of consumption...dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings...the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, deteriorating relations between men and women. (p. 32-33)

These characteristics are evident in the characters: Samantha and Miranda want men for sex but grow worried when they think they might be falling in love with them; Carrie's fascination with shoes and always being fashionable; Charlotte's not wanting to celebrate her 36th birthday because she is not where she thought she would be at that age. The fear these women have of becoming too dependent on others and at the same time feeling lonely; the need for celebrity status; and the fear of old age and death, are themes these women struggle with throughout different episodes. These women "have it all" and have nothing. This inability of being satisfied and never truly knowing what they want and need in order to achieve their happiness are prime examples of the narcissistic personalities that the characters in the show possess.

Regarding the conspicuous consumption of the characters on the show, other-directed societies see "consumption as a means to an end" (Riesman, 1961, p. 263). Baudrillard elaborates on this idea by making note of the "fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and

material goods” in a consumer society (1998, p. 25). The characters of *SATC* buy and consume clothes, shoes, good food at expensive restaurants, expensive drinks, nice apartments and even sex. Baudrillard develops the idea from Riesman of ‘standard package’ which is interrelated to the idea of conformity that is common in other-directed societies:

Apart from the fact that the notion of conformity has never been anything but a cover for an immense tautology (in this case: the average American defined by the ‘standard package,’) which is itself defined by the statistical average of goods consumed. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 70)

The women in *SATC* all have a need to stay up to date with their fashion and show off their status through their fashion and accessories, making conspicuous consumption a common characteristic for these female characters. Many times the characters, particularly Carrie, will go buy a new outfit when she is about to go on a date or to a special event. “A consumer lifestyle is presented not as a series of commodities to be bought but as an integrated lifestyle to be emulated” where the “clothes and shoes become expressions of the different moods and personalities of embodied, empathetic characters in an authentic setting” (Arthurs, 2003, p. 90). In this case, the setting is New York and each woman’s style fits the stereotype they emulate.

Miranda is usually shown in suits because of her job as a lawyer in a major law firm, and perhaps to resemble her financial independence and tendency to act like the male in the relationship. However, as the show progresses and Miranda becomes a mother, her style will also reflect those changes. Samantha tends to wear more provocative clothing that is tight-fitting and low cut whether she is at work or out with her friends. Charlotte, who is probably the classiest and most conservative dresser in the

group, is often seen with her pearls. Carrie, on the other hand, has more of a need than the others to rely on her clothing to define who she is. She often and casually talks about how she “maxed-out” her credit card to buy outfits and shoes, such as Manolo Blahniks.

When Carrie needs to buy her apartment, she does not qualify for a loan by the bank. She tells her friends that she does not know where her money went. Miranda tells Carrie that she has a closet with one-hundred pairs of shoes, each costing \$400:

Miranda: One hundred times \$400; there is your down payment.

Carrie: Well that is only \$4,000.

Miranda: No, it is \$40,000.

Carrie: (gasp) I have spent \$40,000 on shoes and I have no place to live. I will literally be the old woman who lived in her shoes. (Star, 2002, Episode 64, Season 4)

According to Riesman, it is this “craving” for objects that becomes “objectless” (1961).

In this example, Carrie realizes that her fascination with shoes has led her to not be able to afford a place to live. In turn, her shoe fetish becomes a controlling force for the inability to have a stable relationship. Baudrillard further develops this idea to say:

Consumer behavior which is apparently focused on, and oriented towards, objects and enjoyment [joissance], in fact conduces to quite other goals: that of the metaphorical or displaced expression of desire, that of production through differential signs, of a social code of values. (1998, p. 78)

Based on these concepts, I would like to propose that the abundance of shoes and the need for shoes in Carrie’s life has become a denial of enjoyment. For Carrie shoes have become not only a symbol of status and a social function, but also a substitution for the stable male relationship in her life. These shoes in a way have become for her sexualized views as fetish. The need and desire of a man becomes the need and desire for shoes.

All these characteristics are congruent with Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, where the heroes of production are replaced by the heroes of consumption (1899). According to Veblen, the leisure class becomes a predatory institution where the following traits are necessary in order to survive under the "regime" of status and class: "ferocity, self-seeking, clannishness, and disingenuousness—a free resort to force and fraud" (Veblen, 1899, p. 225). The leisure class takes part in activities of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste (Veblen, 1899), using these elements as standards that emulate distinctions among the different classes of people. This is evident in *SATC* with the multitude pleasure of consumption that the characters partake in together and the expensive designer clothes and lifestyles that the characters emulate. The depiction of a consumer society with narcissistic, other-directed characters is an important element of *SATC* and a "code" that is communicated throughout the narrative. Further explanation of the gender politics of *SATC* will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Overview

The objective of this introductory chapter has been to present contextual background information of U.S. popular culture in the world, information on NAFTA and Mexico's consumption of U.S. media and the significance of *Sex and the City* (*SATC*). This information serves as a framework for understanding how structural forces, such as treaties and nation-states, and how the text, *SATC*, can be interconnected and play a role in audience reading, interpretation and appropriation of a text throughout the reception process (La Pastina, 2005)

Chapter II will outline a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach, mainly from cultural studies and media studies, which provide the backbone for my study of an audience's identification and engagement with a U.S. popular culture text⁶. This theoretical approach also presents the framework for analysis and categorization of the data collected.

Chapter III presents the methodological approach used in the thesis and provides contextual information for the cities selected for data collection and demographic information of the women who took part in this study.

Chapter IV begins the discussion of the data by focusing on the reading and interpretation stages of the media engagement model⁷ (La Pastina, 2005). This chapter presents negotiations that these women faced when watching *SATC* from a female, Mexican perspective as well as the interpretation that these women had when watching and discussing the television series. This chapter is necessary to understand the patterns of identification and engagement that these women had with *SATC*.

Chapter V continues the discussion of the data, but focusing more on the appropriation and change stages of the media engagement model (La Pastina, 2005). This chapter discusses how women used *SATC* to discuss their experiences in Mexican society, the ascribed gender roles, and the new perspectives offered by the television series. Views of sexuality and the accounts women gave of *SATC* being a form of empowerment will be addressed.

⁶ Referring to *Sex and the City*

⁷ The media engagement model consists of four interrelated stages: reading, interpretation, appropriation and change (La Pastina, 2005). These stages will be outlined and referred to throughout the thesis.

Chapter VI concludes the thesis by providing a summary of the results and suggesting how the results contribute to the field of study. The conclusion also presents the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the previous chapter I briefly discussed how globalization and trade agreements, such as NAFTA, have led to the exporting and importing of cultural products and ideas throughout the world. One medium that has played a significant role for the exchange of these events and ideas has been television. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities have done a considerable amount of research regarding media and audiences. However, there is not one single discipline that encapsulates the complex and multidimensional process of evaluating how a group of women identify and engage (La Pastina, 2005) with a transnational popular culture text. Recognizing that factors such as gender, media content, culture, identity and geographic location can influence how women view and interpret *Sex and the City (SATC)*, I adopted an interdisciplinary approach to develop my theoretical framework. The literature and theories utilized are interrelated and essential in understanding the multilayered process that occurs when a viewer watches television.

Power, Culture and Globalization

The concept of power is often discussed when addressing the production, the content, the exporting and viewing of media products. Working with Foucault's and Gramsci's understanding of power, "communication is the outcome of human practices that are struggled over" (Louw, 2001, p. 11). Meaning that when individuals interact with media products they are making meaning under the pre-existing economic, political and linguistic structures, which are essentially power relations (Louw, 2001, p. 11). In

media studies, those who control the means of production are believed to run cultural life (Staiger, 2005). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the distinction between high culture and popular culture hierarchically posits the masses as common and privileges the elites and intellectuals. Martín-Barbero (1993) discusses how culture became a mediating factor that covered over differences and reconciling tastes as the process of “enculturating the popular classes into the capitalistic organization of society [by undergoing] major change in strategies which ensured its continuity” (p. 120). With mass culture becoming a new form of popular culture and the presence of the masses more visible with the concentration of workers in city centers, these social changes enabled culture to take on new meanings and functions (Martín-Barbero, 1993). The shift that led to the collapse of the public sphere would be occupied by a new organization in society, which produced the phenomenon of the mass and mass culture as a “culture which, instead of being a place where these differences are marked, becomes the place where these differences are covered over and their existence is denied” (Martín-Barbero, 1993, p. 121). These hegemonic structures therefore play an important role in the control and exposure of media to people.

Without a true theorized power model in audience studies, various fields of study have approached the areas of culture, popular culture and media by examining the hegemonic structures that interconnect these concepts and the influence these structures play within the globalized environment. Depending on the foci of study within these fields, the approach for examining and conceptualizing globalization differs.

Scholars who focus on the complexities of globalization using a critical transcultural framework reclaim the notion of hybridity (Kraidy, 2005). While the term hybridity has been controversial, hybridity theory looks at culture from a historical and comparative approach that recognizes how population migrations and the flow of products have led to an intermixing of cultural values and practices (Kraidy, 2005; Crothers, 2007). Therefore, hybridity suggests that “traces of other cultures exist in every culture, thus offering foreign media and marketers transcultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities” while invoking “an active exchange that leads to the mutual transformation of both sides” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 148). While hybridity theory does not suggest a posthegemonic look at cultural mixture or exchange, Kraidy (2005) suggests it is the “cultural logic of globalization” (p. 148).

The means to understand the interconnection of power and hybridity exists in critical transculturalism for its “synthetic look at culture,” considering social practice both translocally and intercontextuality as the site of agency, the “dialectical and dialogical relation between structure and agency” and focusing on media “production, text, and reception in the moment of cultural reproduction” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 149-150). Using this framework, the concept of culture is unstable, holistic and heterogeneous. Culture is synthetic due to the hybrid components that are constructed by the structural and discursive forces (Kraidy, 2005). When considering the translocal, examination of local spaces is important, and making sure not to limit these spaces by keeping the U.S. at the center of cultural exchange and pushing other cultures to the periphery is key (Kraidy,

2005). Hybridity also consists of “intercontextuality” (Appadurai, 1996), which looks at the text and context as discourse structured in dominance while also acknowledging that “hybrid forms and identities are not always and necessarily reflective of total dominance” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 156). The attention between structure and agency in critical transculturalism focuses on a lopsided articulation that examines how structures and discourses function in various contexts to model different hybridities and how hybrid cultural forms also reflect hegemony and its limitations (Kraidy, 2005). Therefore the scope of translocal and intercontextual considers social practices as the site of agency, while the national states mediates between the global and local as well as the local to other locals (Kraidy, 2005).

An example of hybridity and the hegemonic structures that exist in hybrid cultural forms is Mexico. When Spaniards arrived in Mexico in 1519, they began a policy of cultural *mestizaje*, an intermixture of Spanish culture, people and religion with the indigenous populations that “amounted to the Westernization and Christianization” of Mexico (Kraidy, 2005, p. 52). In the seventeenth century, artists made use of what Gruzinski (1995) calls “hybrid imagery” to connect the Catholic themes with native America by making the Catholic Virgin Mary, which was to become the patron saint of Mexico, dark-skinned and barefoot and giving her Náhuatl⁸ symbols (Kraidy, 2005). This strategy was used to create a stable Mexican identity that used heterogeneous elements, which are still visible in contemporary Mexican culture. Kraidy (2005) points to Mexico City’s center Plaza de las Tres Culturas “where a precolonial pyramid, a

⁸ A prominent indigenous tribe of Mexico

colonial church, and a modern building stand contiguously, a record of the historical trajectory of Mexico as a hybrid nation, a mixture of three cultures” that enshrines the “integrative dimension of mestizaje” (p. 52). Today, Mexico has 62 indigenous living languages even though the federal, official language is Castellano Spanish from Spain. According to the INEGI (National Institute of Geographical Statistics and Information), 60% of the population is mestizo (Native Indian-Spanish), 30% is Native Indian, 9 % is European and 1% is other, indicating the heterogeneous elements and hybridity of Mexico. Mexico’s hybrid cultures and identity will be an important element throughout the thesis.

As an application of critical transculturalism and hybridity theory, Kraidy (2005) focused on the cultural reception of Maronite youth in the postwar Lebanese media environment to look at the role of mediated communication and cultural hybridity. Kraidy’s objective was to understand the meaning of having a hybrid cultural identity in everyday interactions. Throughout his interviews, Kraidy (2005) found that Maronite youth often identified with the traditional aspects of the Arab world as well as the modernity associated with the West (giving them a hybrid cultural identity), integrating both aspects as they discussed their use of media and popular culture.

For example, Maronite youth saw Latin American telenovelas and Egyptian serials as being part of the non-Western, Arab category for their highly melodramatic content and lower production values that did not give them a normative Western look. However, the Rahbanis, Lebanon’s most celebrated family of musicians also considered as non-Western, was a cultural text that gave unconditional identification with all of

Kraidy's respondents. U.S. productions such as *The Cosby Show* and *Beverly Hills 90210* were associated with the modernity of the West for the ideology of individual freedom (Kraidy, 2005). In Kraidy's case study, he found that his interviewees at times used content from these media texts to extract more social freedom from their parents, but also recognizing that their own social and sexual life did not allow them to have all the freedoms depicted on U.S. television programs. The high sexual content of programs like *Beavis and Butthead* led these youth to criticize Western values. Therefore, the Maronite youth "drew on a variety of texts, many outside their ascribed cultural space, to articulate their hybrid identities, even as it subverts the broader sociopolitical context, is subject to forces of exclusion and inclusion that sometimes reflect confessional politics." (Kraidy, 2005, p. 146)

While the critical transcultural frameworks looks at notions of hybridity, power, media and globalization, there are other overarching elements that are necessary to look at when discussing reception studies of women watching the representation of women on television. This next section uses gender theory and feminist television theory to address these issues and to look critically at the gender politics depicted on *Sex and the City* (SATC).

Women on Television, Women and Television

Aside from the complexities of theorizing about media and power systems in the global environment, another complex dimension of my study involves both the representation of women in *Sex and the City* and women as viewers. One dominant system that is very prominent in every society, culture and country is the gender system.

While biological divisions can have different meanings cross-culturally, gender acts as a universal marker of human identity. Gender works as a way of “socially defining roles expected of males and females” (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 12). These gender constructs are created and justified by a variety of institutions, which in turn transform into a gender system (Omi & Winant, 1986). These gender systems socially construct our ideas of gender by sorting people into certain positions and establishing a system of hierarchy, where men and masculinity is at the top and women/femininity is at the bottom (Omi & Winant, 1986). This system then regulates how we talk about and perceive the different genders. For example, women are traditionally seen and talked about as nurturing, handling matters of the home and as being submissive. Men, on the other hand, are seen as powerful, leaders, strong and intelligent. These systems use language and create expectations of gender roles in a society.

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) takes a critical look at gender practices and suggests that these practices must be rendered thinkable so that we can conceptualize them and give them a possible voice apart from normative sex/gender/sexuality schema. Butler is concerned that this heterosexist framework of understanding sex and gender has created “exclusionary gender norms” that operate as “preemptive and violent circumscription of reality” (xiii). Therefore, gender roles establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be “real” by establishing the “ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression” (xiii). It is through the notion of gender performance that the body becomes a speech act; meaning that the body becomes understood through its

performance of socially constructed identities (Butler, 1990). “Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of the body...understood as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv) that produces “the effects of a corporeal signification...on the surface of the body” (173). Performativity is therefore the means mirroring or imitating. For example, children are dressed by their parents. These parents have an idea of gender roles expected in a society through a variety of interactions and mediums. Therefore, the mother and/or father might put pink on a girl and blue on a boy because those colors perform the gender roles that have been socially constructed.

Butler also states that it is impossible to separate gender from the political and cultural intersections that are produced and maintained in a society (1990). “From this it is evident that gender cannot be separated from the power structure of society for it is the “juridical structures of language and politics that constitute the contemporary field of power, hence, there is no position outside the field but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices” (Butler, 1990, p. 8).

Several scholars who study media suggest that media plays an important role in defining and reifying how people view men, women, different ethnic groups and the world (Hendricks, 2002; Wood, 1997). Social movements and new schools of thought such as second wave feminism and postfeminism are believed to challenge these contextual power frameworks. According to Thornham (2001) “a vital aspect of feminism’s project has been to transform women’s position from that of object of knowledge into that of subject capable of producing and transforming knowledge” (p.

94). As a result, the representations of women in U.S. popular culture have shifted their energy from the traditional role of family and private sphere to a more individualistic and public sphere. New television programming about women allows the creation of a subject position in the text by depicting a “group of people as having authority” (Brummet & Bower, 1999, p. 124) and a text that provides for the “subject a fully realized narration” (Brummet & Bower, 1999 p. 130). This empowers the group to think that they were responsible for their success because they initiated the action and made certain decisions (Brummet & Bower, 1999), which is what is represented by the characters of *SATC*.

The representations of women in media have notably changed throughout the years. In the late 1950s, Mrs. Cleaver from the popular comedy sitcom *Leave it to Beaver* was depicted as the traditional stay-at-home mother who took care of her All-American family. Almost fifty years later, the image of Carrie Bradshaw, an independent thirty-something journalist who is not married, loves shoes, and relies on her friendships and numerous relationships for material to write her newspaper column, *SATC*, has emerged as the new face for women. While decades of research in cultural and feminist media studies demonstrate media’s tendency and ability to racialize and genderize certain groups through their representations (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004); sociological pressures from social movements and feminism as well as the desire to maximize and target different audiences have encouraged new representations.

The media have used a hybridization of genres in efforts to maximize audience viewing and make shows appealing to both men and women (Arthurs, 2003). This trend

has developed shows such as *SATC*, *Ally McBeal* and *Desperate Housewives*, among others, to focus on women as protagonists who drive the narrative of the show, the representation of women's sexuality on television drama and new perspectives on women's roles in contemporary U.S. society. The high ratings and growing success of the hybridization of genres does not suggest that the media no longer genderize or racialize these groups, it suggests that the representations of women have been altered to include more than just the traditional narratives and narrow range of roles that were available to women characters in the media (Arthurs, 2003).

Sex and the City (SATC) uses postfeminism thought to explore women's sexuality. The characters of the show playfully struggle with wanting to be sexy and flirtatious while also being autonomous women (Gerhard, 2005). Through these new representations, "women, if they chose, can work, talk, and have sex 'like men,' while still maintaining all the privileges associated with being an attractive woman" (Gerhard, 2005, p. 37). However, many feminist and critical theory scholars view the ritualized use of female archetypes and images, despite these new representations, as having a narcotic effect on women who become oblivious to their own oppression and experience with hegemonic institutions.

According to Dow (1999) "when women function as spectacle, when they are valued more for entertainment than for ideas, when their essence is reduced to appearance, they are not subjects" (p. 156). Instead the women function as a sign, image and spectacle within the patriarchal structure (Walters, 1995). When exploring *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which is similar to *SATC* in its innovative attempt to offer a

new perspective of women in contemporary society, Dow (1994) concludes that the stereotypical sex-role structure placed around the protagonist, Mary Tyler Moore, fails to provide insight in the advancement and portrayal of women. The following section expands more on these ideas by taking a closer look at the representation of women in *SATC* and the gender politics of the show.

SATC and Gender Politics

While *Sex and the City (SATC)* was seen by many as a contemporary television series that offered a new representation of women and their status in society, I argue that it still hegemonically constrains women to the idea that women are not happy, complete or emotionally stable without a man in their lives. Therefore, a dialectical tension exists in the television series to challenge the constructs of female and male roles, while recreating the fairy tale journey of a woman's search for love and self discovery in contemporary society that constrains women to a traditional romantic narrative. While the characters struggle with progressive ideas of sexuality, sexual discourse and women's role in society, they also struggle with society's pressure to get married, be sexy for men and rely on men to rescue them. While *SATC* deals with these ideas and constructs of women and relationships in a comedic way, shared throughout the characters' conversations of their quest for love, it continues to rhetorically normalize the hegemonic patriarchal structure in contemporary society.

Each episode of *SATC* represents a mythic fairy tale of the search for love and "Mr. Right" in Manhattan. The very first episode starts off with "once upon a time a beautiful, successful, woman from London moves to New York" (Star, 1998, Episode 1,

Season 1). While the show has been promoted as being about the sexuality of women and a Valentine for being single (mentioned on HBO Farewell Tribute 1), there exists “an active engagement by its female protagonists in the renegotiation of the classic romance fantasy” (Di Mattia, 2004, p. 18). Each episode has the women, particularly Carrie and Charlotte, hoping for the phrases of “I love you” and “Will you marry me?” from men, and each episode acts as a quest in search for that fantasy.

A Carrie voice-over of Season 6, asks “when will waiting for the one be done?” (Episode 82, Season 6). Throughout *SATC*, the fairy tale story and the idea of Mr. Right pose a dilemma between the fantasies of finding their other half⁹ and realities of their actual dating experiences. In Season 2 the characters talk over lunch about the urban relationship myths that “are concocted by women to make their lives seem less hopeless” (Episode 20). Charlotte believes in soul-mates and believes that there is that one perfect person out there for her, while Samantha and Miranda are more cynical. Carrie goes back to her apartment and presents the audience with the question of how myth plays a part in the idea of men and women in the modern day society:

That afternoon I got to thinking about myths and relationships. Heroes, boyfriends, Cyclopes, divorced guys. Are they really that different? The primitive Greeks clung to myths to explain the random hopelessness of their miserable lives. Do modern day singles need modern day myths just to help us get through our random, sometimes miserable relationships?...Are we willing to believe anything to date? (Star, 1999, Season 2, Episode 20)

Throughout the rest of the episode the women are struggling with these questions and each explores the fantasy and reality of these urban relationship myths. For example,

⁹ Referring to Greek mythology in that people’s search for love stems from the need to find the other half that is missing to complete you.

Samantha decides to date a man who is 72-years-old after she realizes that they have a good time together. After disclosing to Carrie that she has decided to date a man who is substantially older than her, Carrie's voice-over states that perhaps Samantha was "living her own urban myth about a woman who stopped for cocktails one afternoon and lived happily ever after" (Star, 1999, Season 2, Episode 20). However, at the end of the episode Samantha decides to dump him when realizing it could not work in the bedroom.

Miranda then sleeps with a bartender who would like to pursue a relationship with her, but Miranda pushes him away. The bartender asks her "Can you for one second believe that maybe I am not just some full-of-shit guy? That maybe I do like you. That maybe the other night was special. Do you think you can do that?" (Star, 1999, Season 2, Episode 20). Miranda gives him a cold response that she has slept with too many bartenders and is jaded when it comes to love.

However, after seeing Mr. Big¹⁰ show up to dinner with Carrie, Carrie's voiceover states:

Seeing Big show up for me like that shook Miranda's lack of belief system to the very core. And just like that Miranda left denial...From that night on promiscuous women everywhere would tell the tale of the one night stand that turned into a relationship. (Season 2, Episode 20)

According to Harrington & Bieble (1987) "our [U.S.] society is still fascinated by the notions of 'true love' a belief that love is a life-long commitment, trust and sacrifice between two people is still very much alive in our culture" (p. 131). For the protagonists on *Sex and the City (SATC)*, each episode shows the women obsessing and making the topic of men the central focus of each cocktail hour, dinner, coffee break and social

¹⁰ The main, male character of the television series, who is Carrie's love interest

event. At one point Miranda, the strong and independent lawyer, scolds the women for only making men their central focus:

Why does it always have to be about men? How can four smart, independent women only talk about men? What about what we want, we feel? It is like seventh grade with bank accounts. Give me a call when you are ready to talk about something else for a change. (Star, 1999, Season 2, Episode 14)

Miranda angrily storms out of the restaurant, only to regret later what she said.

According to Harrington & Bieble (1987), a big component of the emergent notion of love must first focus on individual growth. Throughout the characters quest for love, they all experience personal growth in some way. It is not until the end when each character has matured, grown and found themselves as women that they are ready to accept men in their lives. In the U.S. there is a mythic idea that “love conquers all” and “one only attains ‘completeness—a full identity—through choosing a love partner and remaining true to that choice against all odds” (Harrington & Bieble, 1987). This idea is representative in the characters depicted on *SATC*.

Throughout the seasons, these women rely on their friendships to discuss, manage and deal with their frustrations and the emotional turmoil of searching for that perfect man that will make their fantasies into realities. However, as the seasons progress, each character is faced with obstacles that help the characters grow. Each character in the beginning thought they knew everything about themselves, men and love. Samantha thought she was powerful, strong and proud of her sexual prowess only to lose her sex drive due to chemotherapy treatments she must undergo to treat breast cancer.

Miranda thought that all men were jerks, freaks and that the most important thing in her life was her career. Not having a motherly instinct in her, Miranda becomes pregnant and is forced to reevaluate her priorities. Charlotte, who only wants to get married and have children, played by the rules and married a distinguished doctor with money. She quits her job to be a stay-at-home mother and wife only to realize that her marriage is a lie and she cannot have children. Carrie, who prides herself in her newspaper column and friends, ends up leaving all that behind to follow her Russian boyfriend to Paris, France in hopes of the fairy tale ending.

The final two episodes of the series show the women in very different positions from the beginning six years before. Not only do the women look older but there is a “softer” look to the bold characters and a “stronger” look to the frail characters. Samantha, who wears wigs throughout these episodes to cover-up the effects of chemotherapy, is seen as a woman who puts her relationship with the young man she is dating before the sexual prowess she once exuded. She also learns to accept her disease and is seen as an inspiration to others with cancer when she removes her wig at a cancer benefit.

Miranda is seen as a mother and wife that agrees to let her husband’s mother move in with them after the mother-in-law suffers a stroke that has caused memory loss. The cynic of love, who feared losing her sense of control to a man, shows a compassionate side and opens her life up to a family. One of Miranda’s last scenes in the series shows her giving her mother-in-law a sponge bath.

Charlotte, the eternal optimist of love who often broke out in childish reactions when she did not get her way, now acts as a strong figure. When the parents of the baby they were planning to adopt change their mind, she holds her frustration and tears back to comfort her husband.

However, in order to have the series end with closure for these women and for the love quests to end, Carrie, the main protagonist, has to first find herself and her reality of love. After Carrie moves to Paris, France for her boyfriend, she spends a lot of time thinking about her friends, who she misses, the column she left behind, and the man, Mr. Big, who came to see her the day before she left. When things go bad for Petrovsky¹¹ and Carrie, Mr. Big walks into the lobby of the hotel to take her back. With one look at each other she starts to cry and as they walk the streets of Paris he discloses to her “Carrie you’re the one.” Carrie looks up at him and tells him “kiss me you big baby” followed by “take me home, I miss New York” (Season 6, Episode 94).

These last episodes represent mythic journeys for these characters as they end their quest for love and discover who they are. In traditional romance, “two characters [are] destined to be together” (Harrington & Bieibly, 1987, p. 133). In this case Carrie and Mr. Big were destined to be together but they had to go through journeys of discovery before they opened themselves up to each other. Mr. Big’s transforms from a man who cannot commit to the hero that goes to Paris, France to rescue Carrie from living a life where she does not even know who she is anymore. With Mr. Big’s presence, Carrie realizes what she wants and asks to be taken home to New York. This

¹¹ The male character of a Russian artist in the television series, who dates Carrie throughout most of season six

is the final journey for Carrie and the rest of the women to have their fantasies of happiness and Mr. Right become realities.

According to Menon (2005), the finale of *Sex and the City* was satisfying to several viewers because it brought closure to the series and gave it a “sense that everything—all the suffering, all the humiliation, all the raunchiness, all the sexual adventures—had a point, and that point was monogamous, consummated love” (p. 491). The finale episode tied up the loose ends of the show by allowing the audience to see that these women will be all right, for all their fantasies became realities. Moments such as the revelation of Mr. Big’s name, Carrie moving back to New York and the last coffee shop scene where all the friends are together, all create closure for the show. Carrie’s final voice-over ends the series by showing each female character happy with their Mr. Right:

Later that day I got to thinking about relationships. There are those that open you up to something new and exotic. Those that are old and familiar. Those that bring up lots of questions. Those that bring you somewhere unexpected. Those that bring you far from where you started, and those that bring you back. But the most exciting, challenging and significant relationship of all is the one you have with yourself. And if you find someone to love the you, you love, well, that's just fabulous. (Star, 2004, Episode 94, Season 6)

This voice-over affirms the independent, progressive view of women where the most important relationship is the one that an individual has with themselves, such as knowing themselves and being themselves. However, this statement is problematic because the television series suggests that Carrie could not have this strong view of herself had it not been for Mr. Big, the heroic masculine character that brings her home and allows for her fantasy of love to become a reality. While *Sex and the City*(*SATC*) became a television

series that many viewers were proud of due to the controversial representations of women in new roles, talking about taboo issues and being able to “have it all,” the feminine and masculine archetypal images and the mythic framework of the quest for love worked against those progressive ideas. Instead it retold the classical fairy tale where the knight, in this case Mr. Big, rescues the damsel in distress, Carrie, and together they live happily ever after. Therefore, the characters of *SATC* reaffirm stereotypical views of women by having them conform to social conventions of female beauty, such as being thin, attractive and fashionable, but also positing men at the center of their lives. The characters allow men to be the main focus of their conversations, and they define their attitudes and choices of men and sexuality based on their ideas of finding their Mr. Right.

During the 1980s, Harrington & Bielby (1987) discussed how in the realm of “power relations or decision-making, men continue to wield authority over women” in popular culture texts (p. 143). In February 2004, the same power relations that have constrained women are still having a narcotic effect on women who are oblivious to their own oppression and experience with hegemonic systems. By watching *SATC* many felt they were engaging in progressive ways of thinking about gender only for it to end in the traditional love story that makes men the hero and women the ones that need to be rescued. Consequently, the themes of *SATC* are centered around issues of gender politics and further normalizes the patriarchal structure.

Women's Talk and Resistive Pleasure

While the theoretical framework and analysis mentioned above suggests that audiences must fit in the constructed defined spaces of a text, audience theory and feminist theory also recognizes that meaning construction by television audiences is a social process where audiences are capable of various interactions with the text (Brown, 1994; Jordan & Brunt, 1988). Brown's (1994) work analyzing women watching soap operas and the discursive network that surrounds the viewing of a program designed for women, suggests that pleasure acts as a political act for women. Pleasure, in this context, is a concept that extends beyond the mere entertainment, fun and enjoyment that occurs when a person watches television. Pleasure, instead, becomes the meaningful and connecting experiences of engagement that a viewer has with a text, such as the text's ability to accomplish a sense of realism among viewers (Cohen & Ribak, 2003). This concept will be further explored in the chapter.

Brown uses Fiske's (1987) concept of tertiary text, meaning the conversations that people have about the television shows they watch, to discuss the spoken text, which is where "much of the meaning construction generated by television takes place" (Brown, 1994, p. 13). Brown (1994) sees the spoken text as the space "where people talk about their lived experience in relation to what they have seen and heard on television" (p. 13). As Brown analyzed the conversations that woman had about the soap operas they watched, women's talk created the spoken text. Meaning that as these women shared their lives and interests in reference to the soap opera text, there was also an awareness of their mutual oppression making talk a "mutually validating and

therefore often pleasurable and potentially empowering” act (Brown, 1994, p. 33).

Women’s talk essentially becomes a form of resistive pleasure for women by creating an oral network that allows people to speak in illegitimate ways, where women’s pleasure is not ignored and provides a “fantasy space where the behavioral possibilities within patriarchy are explored” (Brown, 1994, p. 175). Brown (1994) suggests that soap operas can function as a form of cultural capital (will be explored in the next section) and as a means for acquiring strategic knowledge. This knowledge counters the dominant system by allowing the restructuring of ideological norms in themselves. This strategic knowledge puts women in touch with conflicts and contradictions in society that spark resistance, providing skills needed in conventional politics, resistive reading practices where women become cultural critics and activists of social change, and a raised consciousness that allows an application of what bell hooks (1992) calls the oppositional gaze (Brown, 1994). While hooks uses this term in relation to race, Brown extends it to women due to their subordinated group status:

Subordinates in relation of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (hooks, 1992, p. 16)

While Brown suggests that this oppositional consciousness allows for a critical, oppositional look that shifts the spectator into a position of agency, she also recognizes that female subjectivity is in a constant state of struggle due to the inability of a woman to say she is completely emancipated from the hegemonic, dominant culture (1994). However, soap operas do provide a space for women to be self-reflexive and can

encourage women to “perform acts of resistance that help us to think in oppositional ways” (Brown, 1994, p. 182).

While Brown’s (1994) work focuses on women watching soap operas and *Sex and the City* belongs more to the situation comedy genre,¹² some differences exist between the narrative structures and content of these two genres. However, based on the representation of women and the gender politics of *SATC*, I feel that I can apply Brown’s work to my study. The following sections will delve more into reception studies and the relationship that social activities and the social positioning of viewer plays in the interpretation of a popular culture text.

Cultural Capital

Mary Ellen Brown (1994) claims that soap operas can act as a form of cultural capital for women. Cultural capital was used to describe how a “person’s class and social status are reflected in bodies of acquired knowledge” by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) when he focused on the socially constructed character of preferences, interpretation and value judgments (Brown, 1994, p. 114; Moore, 1993). Bourdieu saw taste and preferences as belonging to a system of distinction that sustained and reproduced relations of dominance and subordination between social groups and classes supporting the already established notion that culture acts as a form of politics (1984). With the hierarchal positioning and distinction between high culture and popular culture, some preferences are invested with greater social value than others, privileging certain food

¹² Soap operas in the U.S., Britain and Australia are daily serials that have open narrative forms that do not have closure or an ultimate moment of resolution. Situation comedies, however, are a closed serial designed to end and mostly shown in the evenings.

ways, events, consumption practices, manners and choices (Moore, 1993; Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, cultural capital becomes the “accumulation of symbolic wealth in the sphere of culture” and “culture is all about processes of identification and differentiation—with identities being produced through practices of distinction (Moore, 1993, p. 120). As a result, distinction becomes the deep sense of social difference and the distance a person feels and utilizes when confronted by cultural actions and consumer preferences that offend their aesthetic sensibilities (Bourdieu, 1984).

The attainment of cultural capital stems from the family and/or social group of a person that already has it, teaches it and values it, but outside forces such as school and travel can also influence this valued knowledge (La Pastina, 2001; Brown, 1994; Moore, 1993). The appreciation of history, philosophy, and classical music are examples of valued knowledge while soap operas, gossip columns and popular music indicate low social status (Brown, 1994). For Mary Ellen Brown (1994) women’s understanding of “soap opera conventions” and the continuation of women to “value the knowledge of soap opera and its conventions,” marks women as having low social status (p. 114). However, Brown suggests that women can construct meaning from soap operas that varies from the accepted and dominant notion of meaning concerning soap operas and other products or expressions in order to use their cultural capital defiantly (1994). By valuing soap operas, women can use oppositional decoding to recognize their own oppression and counter the dominant ideological norms they are constrained by (Brown, 1994). Thus, cultural capital plays a central element in the process of media interpretation.

In La Pastina's (2001) analysis of how factors such as gender, geographic location and cultural capital influence a viewer's interpretation of product placements in the Brazilian telenovela¹³, *The Cattle King*, he found that these factors were central to the process of engagement that viewers in the Northeast Brazilian community of Macambira had with the commercial narrative of the telenovela. Based on the telenovela's rural setting and content, La Pastina categorized two usages of product placement throughout the narrative: the promotion of modern farming practices, such as cattle vaccines; and product placement of consumer durables and perishables, such as fashion items (2001).

In his conversations and participant observations with viewers of the telenovela, La Pastina (2001) found that except for younger, better-educated viewers, most viewers of Macambira saw the product images as part of the narrative or did not even notice the product placement due to the limited cultural capital of people in the area. The viewers that did notice products, such as vaccines or fertilizer, consumed the idea of modernity over the brand names (La Pastina, 2001). Therefore, the limited amount of cultural capital of the people in Macambira did not stem from "being oblivious to these product placements due to inherent inability to understand the nature of advertisement, but rather to the social, economic and cultural constraints related to their isolation from urban consumer culture" (La Pastina, 2001, p. 553). More familiarity of commercial narratives and products could have led these viewers to relate more to the textual insertions of the goods advertised during commercial breaks and throughout the telenovela.

¹³ Telenovelas, or novelas, are melodramatic serials similar to U.S. soap operas in narrative affinity, but different in that they last about three to six months.

Gender also played a role in the interpretation of product placements. While men were more attuned to the rural elements of the narrative, women were more interested in elements of fashion trends associated with the wealthy, urban characters in the romance, causing differences in viewer's telenovela taste based on their gendered positions in society (La Pastina, 2001). These distinctions of taste link men to the more realistic elements of the narrative, the rural theme of *The Cattle King*, whereas women saw the beauty and leisure activities as more central, demarcating the traditional gender stereotypes of men and women roles in society (La Pastina, 2001). Gender, local isolation, lower financial means and limited access to consumer goods, were factors that “hindered complete participation in a global consumer culture” demonstrating that “cultural capital available to viewers remains a central element in the process of media interpretation” (La Pastina, 2001, p. 555).

Throughout this section I have examined how cultural capital plays a role in the process of media interpretation and engagement of a local programming text, in this case a rural Brazilian community with a Brazilian telenovela. On the other hand, other structural elements play a role in how audiences interpret and engage with a transnational text that is foreign, but still highly successful with audiences and regional markets. The following section will look at culturally proximity as a factor in the global distribution and local consumption of media texts.

Cultural Proximity

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, U.S. exports of media can prominently be seen in various countries. In 2000, approximately 69% of the overall fiction

broadcast in Europe was produced in the United States (EAO, 2003). In the early nineties, 30% of the total number of Mexican television programs was imported, while imports from the U.S. made up 75% of that number (McAnany & Wilkinson, 1996). While U.S. products appear to dominate fiction programming, data suggests that audiences prefer the information programs and entertainment shows of their regional and local programming (de Sola Pool, 1977). When looking at the production and flow data of 24 countries, Straubhaar et al. (2003) concluded that of the countries surveyed most produce their own programs, especially during primetime.

Still, the success of foreign media texts over national products in different countries has received scholarly attention to help understand the preferences of audiences and their reception. While the theory of cultural proximity was used to help understand an audience's need for cultural and historical references along with local tastes in what viewers prefer to watch (Straubhaar, 1998; Straubhaar, 1991), reception studies done in Brazil have challenged the theory while examining how a Mexican telenovela named *Marimar* was more successful than a national telenovela that had better production values and themes that resonated more with Brazilian issues, such as corruption and land reform (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). These trends have suggested that other cultural factors and structural forces also play a role in audience orientation.

While research shows that audiences prefer programs that have cultural and/or proximate relevance and that this proximity is grounded in historical spaces of cultural and linguistic commonality:

these tendencies are dynamic and relational; they change over time as cultures change, and they work out in relation to other trends, some broad across nations and supranational regions, some very localized by subnational cultural differences, or very particular to the specific interests of the groups that help mediate what people choose to watch on television and what sense they make of programs as they watch them. (La Pastina & Staubhaar, 2005, p. 273)

Therefore, factors such as the multilayered, hybrid cultural identities of people, local cultures as opposed to national cultures, the genre of the text, and the high, preceding cultural consumption of cultural products from a particular country can all play a role in determining what viewers prefer to watch regardless of where the program was produced.

For older, Brazilian female viewers in Macambira, the Mexican telenovela of *Marimar* was preferred over the Brazilian network, Globo, telenovelas due to its “puritanical content” and “the traditional melodramatic structure of the Mexican telenovelas” that provided a “romantic antidote to the harsh urbanity of many Globo telenovelas” (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 281). With the usage of subjects that depicted urban lifestyles leading to a modernization of genres in Brazilian telenovelas, female viewers felt these telenovelas were not romantic enough while males became more attracted to them for their realistic elements. However, some men were also able to identify with the Mexican telenovela due to the theme of class mobility and the protagonist’s struggle to rise from an orphaned childhood to a respectable woman who inherited a fortune. A male in Macambira, who did not normally watch telenovelas, identified with the telenovela due to his personal experiences of hardship and struggles of upward socioeconomic mobility that coincided with the protagonist in the melodramatic narrative (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Therefore, the notion of

cultural proximity becomes more complex than just geographic location and language. Factors, such as gender and the program's genre also play a part in what audiences prefer. La Pastina & Straubhaar (2005) suggest that the concept of cultural proximity needs to be operationalized:

both at the national and the subnational levels, where different cultural groups, either because of regional culture, urban rural divides or differences of class, might feel more proximate to products originating in other cultures that might share some of the same values. (p. 283)

Therefore, looking at cultural proximity from a multilayered, multicultural perspective, transnational narratives do have the potential of creating strong identification with viewers from a different culture. Therefore, cultural proximity along with cultural capital, as mentioned in the previous section, are important when evaluating the process of reception. The following section will look at elements within the text that can play a role in audience interpretation and the ability for the text to transcend cultures and regional spaces.

Narrative Transparency

Despite the external cultural, geographical and power elements discussed above that influence an audience's reception and engagement with a text, elements within a media text also play a role in the ability to transcend cultures and be interpreted by a foreign audience. Olson (1999) theorized this ability as narrative transparency, which allows people to relate a foreign media text to their own cultural context, using their own beliefs and values in that interpretation. Olson seeks to understand how Gbagyi people in Nigeria interpreted and related to the television show *Dallas* by associating J.R. Ewing as the trickster worm in Nigerian mythology (1999). While *Titanic*, the highest

gross-producing film of all time earned \$1.5 billion in 1997 with its worldwide audience, research shows the movie was interpreted differently in different interpretive communities. According to Strom (1998), Japanese audiences liked the movie because they saw their cultural virtue of *gamen*, or the ability to remain stoic during hardship, in *Titanic*. Russian audiences, however, had a contest to write a new, happy ending for the movie due to its melancholy nature (Olson, 1999; Bohlen, 1998).

Olson suggests that having personal cultural myths within a narrative makes a text transparent regardless of where the media text was produced (1999). Since the usage of storytelling and myths go beyond every civilization and culture in an attempt to make sense of reality and satisfy human needs and emotions, universal mythotypes remain constant and allow for identification and interpretation to occur (Olson, 1999). In order to satisfy this mythotypic reading, Olson (1999) has outlined eight elements used in media texts to encourage this type of reading in audiences: virtuality, ellipticality, inclusion, verisimilitude, openendedness, negentropy, circularity and archetypal dramatis personae. As I explain the different elements, I will also show how Chitnis et al (2006) applied the theory to examine how U.S. audiences and Indian audiences had different interpretations to the popular television show *Friends*.

Virtuality is a “psychologically convincing and electronically stimulating environment whereby audience members of long-running serials with continuing casts develop ‘hyper-real¹⁴ relationships’ with the characters” (Chitnis et al, 2006, p. 134; Olson, 1999). In the Chitnis et al (2006) study, they found that audiences experienced

¹⁴ Stemming from the concept of virtual reality, meaning that audiences have a hard time distinguishing between the virtual and unmediated realities

anxiety after the show was over since ten years of broadcasting in the U.S. and almost the same time in India led to a fictitious relationship with the characters of the sitcom.

Ellipticality is a narrative technique that makes use of audience participation by leaving out details (Olson, 1999). This allows the viewer to complete a picture in their own minds by creating an understanding that fits their values and behaviors. In the Chitnis et al (2006) study where an episode of *Friends* with a safe sex message was examined, the audience “wondered what might have happened in the bedroom when Monica returned, without a condom, to tell her boyfriend Richard that they would not be having sex that night” (p. 134). Based on the viewer’s values they might have thought that the couple did not end up having sex after the episode was over or might have thought that the couple could not restrain themselves and did.

In conjunction with the previous element, inclusion also creates a sense of audience participation by using situations that are commonly faced by people (Chitnis et al, 2006; Olson, 1999). In the television show, *Friends*, situations such as the struggles of dating, quarrels among roommates, a close-knit group of friends, are all qualities that allow a viewer to participate in the unfolding of a plot by relating it to their lives (Chitnis et al, 2006; Olson, 1999).

Versimilitude consists of the ability for a media text to convey a sense of truth and realness to the viewer (Olson, 1999). If a situation appears unreal or uncommon, they might question the truth-value of the plot and discredit the text. The *Friends* episode studied with Indian and U.S. audience had viewers reluctant to accept a woman

calling off sex and a man agreeing to it without trying to persuade her otherwise (Chintis et al, 2006).

Openendedness motivates a viewer to return to the program hoping for closure to the narrative (Olson, 1999). Narrative texts appear to have no end by ending each episode openended, meaning that viewers need to return the next week to see how the story will unravel. Even when series end, such as *Friends* in May 2004, viewers might feel as if the show does not have an end based on its reruns or an audiences' desire to wonder what happened to the characters once the show was over (Chintis et al, 2006).

Negentropy instills a sense of order among viewers by showing characters in familiar settings (Olson, 1999). This repetition allows a feeling of reality by bringing order to the disorder, meaning that regardless of the plot in *Friends*, the characters were shown in the coffee shop and in the apartment to show a family developing a strong bond with each other (Chitnis et al, 2006).

Circularity restores balance by having the narrative arrive where it began (Olson, 1999). Many times this happens as the characters' lives and situations go through a time of unraveling a tumultuous plot of self discovery and being restored to how things began. Olson (1999) looks at the conclusion of *Sienfeld* where the "characters found themselves repeating the very words of dialogue that began the first episode of the series, completing a perfect circle with only the slightest awareness of déjà vu" (p. 102). In the Chitnis et al (2006) study the audience knew how the characters lives ended up when the final episode aired in May 2004, giving them a sense of closure and fulfillment.

Archetypal *dramatis personae* are the characters that transcend cultures and have an affective component of universal appeal (Olson, 1999). Archetypes are “derived from the repeated observation that, for instance, the myths and fairytales of the world literature contain definite motifs which crop up everywhere” (Huake & Alister, 2001, p. 30). An example can be Caputi’s (2004) distinction of two common female archetypes:

Patriarchal ‘good girls’ are associated with niceness and all-around impotence, toothlessness. The ‘bad girl’ or *femme fatale* is the always dangerous abyss, the black hole, and the *vagina dentata*¹⁵—the one that still has some bite. (p. 328)

Therefore people can distinguish woman characters as being an example of one or the other based on the usage of these archetypes in stories, movies and so on. In the *Friends* study, the audience interpreted certain characters as being the fool or the knight (Chintis et al, 2006).

Looking at each element, Chintis et al (2006) found that both Indian and U.S. audiences found *Friends* to be transparent, but focused on different attributes that made the value-systems represented as culturally specific to them. For example, Indian viewers could only display elements of virtuality with certain characters, such as Phoebe and Joey. However, U.S. audiences were able to develop virtual relationships with more characters, having them identify more with Rachel and Chandler.

The reception and engagement process when viewing a media text is dependent on interrelated factors that involve external factors, such as cultural capital, and internal attributes found in the narrative such as the ones explained above. Throughout the data analysis chapters, references will be made to only some of the elements that Olson

¹⁵ Means a toothed vagina in Latin. Referring to a myth in many North American tribes.

(1999) outlined to describe how women interpreted and identified with *Sex and the City* (*SATC*). While Olson's theory points out important narrative elements that allow for foreign audiences to identify with a foreign text, I find that the theory falls short of examining the structural factors that might also influence an audience's reading of that text. I will expand on these points later. The next sections address some similarities and differences between telenovelas and *SATC* followed by literature in reception studies that look at the patterns of identification.

Telenovelas and *SATC*

Since my study takes place in Mexico, where the predominant form of programming is telenovelas, and I am focusing on a transnational text originally from the United States in that context, it is important to briefly discuss some of the similarities and differences between the telenovela genre and the situation comedy (sitcom) genre of *SATC*. These characteristics are important in the data analysis chapters where women discuss and compare Mexican telenovelas to the U.S. television series they watch.

Telenovelas are the "most current and vital cultural product that Latin American countries export to the world and share among themselves" (González, 1992). While telenovelas dominate primetime television in Latin America, differences exist based on their country of origin. For example, "Mexican telenovelas are notorious for their weepiness, extraordinarily Manichean vision of the world and lack of specific historical referents," while Brazilian telenovelas are "luxurious, exploit cinematic production values, and are considered more 'realistic' for their depiction of ambiguous and divided characters in contemporary (or specific historical) Brazilian context" (Lopez, 1995, p.

261). Telenovelas from Venezuela and Columbia lie along the continuum to these extremes sharing similarities and differences while having characteristics that make them distinct (Lopez, 1995). However, these are some of the common elements of telenovelas regardless of country of origin:

a continuing story line, which begins, develops and ends six to ten months later; a continuing cast of characters, whose stories interweave in the overall plot; a tendency to focus on themes of urban life, family, social mobility, and romance; and historically, a tendency to use limited sets and modest production values. (Straubhaar & Viscasillas, 1991)

Telenovelas are usually shown in the evenings during the work week. Unlike U.S. and European programming, telenovelas in Latin America are melodramatic serials that are clearly class-based rather than gendered (Lopez, 1995). The telenovela therefore is not associated with only female consumption as are soap operas in the U.S. and in Europe.

Situation comedies, or sitcoms, in U.S. television derived from the classical era¹⁶ of Hollywood films were the representation of sex before marriage was not permitted and characters focused on consummating their relationships and getting married (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). This genre was adapted to television to be a weekly series format that has characters constantly seeking for that consummation between the male and female characters of the plot (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002). Humor is an important element that is used in the playful interactions between males and females. The length of sitcoms varies, many times having seasons that last for a number of years depending on audience response. However, most sitcoms share these similar elements:

stable recurring casts of characters who rarely remember events from previous episodes, and who rarely achieve personal growth, instead occupying a particular

¹⁶ Referring to the U.S. film industry from about 1915-1960

slot in the sitcom narrative: father, mother, best friend, precocious child, buffon, etc. Thus, the situation comedy relies on a set of domestic and familial-like relationships to structure the narrative slots available to characters in the program. Even when programs don't take place within family or home, the setting still functions as a surrogate home and the characters relate to each other as part of a family. (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 96)

While *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) had different characters come and go throughout the seasons, the core group of female protagonists stayed the same, acting almost like a family unit. However, while *SATC* falls into the sitcom genre, it was shot with a “single-camera (like film), similar to *Melrose Place*¹⁷, with no audience and no laugh track” (Sohn, 2004, p. 14). According to Darren Star, he wanted to “bridge the gap between a television series and a movie” by creating a true adult comedy that handled “sex in an up-front and honest way” (Sohn, 2004, p. 14). *SATC* along with other sitcoms such as *Will and Grace*, address themes, like the search for love and the importance of friendship, while dealing with controversial and progressive topics, such as homosexuality and women's sexuality.

Telenovela and U.S. sitcoms might differ in production values and themes addressed in the narrative, but they share similar elements such as recurring casts whose stories are interwoven throughout the plot. While sitcoms tend to last longer than telenovelas, sitcoms also take a more closed serial format that is designed to end and bring closure to the narrative. The next chapter will provide more background on Mexican telenovelas that will be helpful in understanding the readings and interpretations of *SATC* for Mexican women.

¹⁷ A popular U.S. television sitcom aired between 1992 and 1999. It was created by Darren Star, same creator of *SATC*, for the Fox network.

Identification and Reception Studies

Under reception studies scholars have looked at different topics, such as: the decoding of texts, the different readings of texts based on cultural backgrounds and cultural proximities, and what makes a text a transnational hit. In these different areas of research, the concept of identification is commonly used in considering how audiences might be influenced in moral and cultural positions of a text or the level of engagement that audiences will have with a text (Barker, 2005). Identification, therefore, works as a mechanism that allows audiences to experience reception and interpret a text based on their identity, situation, experience and so on, playing an important role in the media experience (Morley, 1992; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Press, 1989; Radway, 1983).

Stuart Hall's (1980) work on the encoding and decoding model of media messages theorized that viewers respond to media messages in three general ways: the "dominant-hegemonic," or the encoding way, where viewers read and experience media the way it was intended by the producers; the "negotiated way" where viewers work through problems they have with a text to find their own meaning or pleasure; or the "globally contrary," or decoding/oppositional way, where viewers reject the intentions of producers and put the message into "some alternative framework of reference" (p. 136-138; p. 20-21). While the first way suggests a passive, encoding approach for looking at audiences, negotiation suggests that the viewer does not passively accept a media text (Moore, 1993; Hall, 1980). Instead the viewer can actively negotiate meaning with the text based on their cultural background and/or experience in their society. Further research examining the encoding and decoding model of media messages suggests that

various factors play a role in the negotiations that viewers make in a text (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Morley, 1986). This suggests that the multi-layered cultural dimensions of a person should be considered and not assumed to be the same for people sharing similar backgrounds, like socioeconomics or locations.

Katz and Liebes (1990) study with Moroccan viewers of *Dallas* found that “referential statements” were made when discussing the text regarding their kinship roles and norms. This “referential mode” enables viewers to relate to “characters as real people and in turn relate these real people to their own real world” (p. 100). Hobson (1991) applied “referential mode” to suggest that women used soap operas to discuss their lives. In conjunction, work with women viewers of talk shows suggest that women watched shows that offered “legitimate” discourses that resonate with their everyday experiences where “women encounter these shows as enacting discourse about relevant issues by people with whom they identify [with]” (Manga, 2003, p. 198).

These viewing practices, along with structural forces and genre elements, are all an important and interconnected way of examining the reception and engagement process. The ability for a viewer to identify with the plot, characters or genre presented allows for identification to be a “mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (Barker, 2005, p. 355). This multilayered approach recognizes the discursive and power institutions controlled and reproduced by media, while also acknowledging that audiences are not passive entities that simply consume the intended purpose of producers. Therefore identification can work as a process where women use

television to discuss their lives, while also choosing to watch programs that offer some resonance with their lived experiences. The last section aims to tie these various sections together to discuss the media engagement model and how these various elements are a part of the engagement process.

Intersection of Theories and Media Engagement Model

The media engagement process is an active, “complex, multidimensional, and multi-layered” interaction that allows for analysis beyond simple interpretation of a text (La Pastina, 2005, p. 8). Case studies of audience reception allow the researcher to discuss the transition where “text becomes reality and sometimes reality seems to be the text” by studying the complete media experience of “reading about the show, to watching it, to talking about it, to remembering it and so on” (La Pastina, 2005, p. 8). In focusing on how college-educated¹⁸ females in Mexico interpret the themes, characters and plot of the text as well as how they accept or reject the values and attitudes used in the narratives (La Pastina, 2005), I will utilize the theoretical frameworks explained above to study the reception and media engagement process of these women with the transnational text, *Sex and the City (SATC)*. While these frameworks are interrelated and the factors involved constitute the viewing of *SATC*, I will show on how these frameworks are involved in the media engagement and reception process.

La Pastina’s (2005) model of media engagement looks at the “four stages of the engagement process: reading, interpretation, appropriation and change” (p. 6). The first stage of the model focuses on the actual reading of the show, or “the factual explanation

¹⁸ All of the Mexican women in the study were either currently attending a university or had already completed their university degrees.

of the narrative structure and content” (La Pastina, 2005, p. 6). This step looks at the viewing habits of the interviewees, their overall impression of the television series and women’s character and thematic preferences of the text.

The second stage focuses on the interpretation of the text, which happens on an individual and social interaction level of norms, values, beliefs and so on (La Pastina, 2005). Using Olson’s theory of narrative transparency, this step will look at elements that allowed the viewers and interviewees to interpret the messages of *SATC* in relation to their own cultural context. Aspects of cultural capital and cultural proximity will be important factors in determining the interpretations of the text by viewers.

The third stage of appropriation will focus on “the issues brought up by the text and interpreted through mediating forces [that] are used to explain one’s own life or the social relations and cultural dynamics one is inserted in” (La Pastina, 2005, p. 7). This section will look at the “spoken text” and pleasure that women described when watching *SATC* using Mary Ellen Brown’s work.

Finally, the discussion will focus on behavior change, if any, based on the viewer’s engagement with the text (La Pastina, 2005). While this stage is the hardest to document, Mary Ellen Brown’s (1994) work suggests that when women discuss their positions through a media text, they can take pleasure into their own hands and use it as a political act. By discussing soap operas, women can “question their status rather than confirm their status” and in doing so, can restructure ideological norms for themselves” (Brown, 1994, p. 131). This can include standing up to the establish norms and claiming

one's space by using the soap opera as strategic knowledge with conflicts that spark resistance (Brown, 1994).

The social and cultural constructions of romance and family, in the case of women, are central for the control of meaning for women in society. When patriarchal meanings are left unquestioned, women's position in society remains unchanged. It is only through the questioning of such meanings that hegemonic control can change. (Brown, 1994, p. 131)

Therefore, change implies that women can use their television viewing experience to counteract the dominant discursive structures they are embedded in to create a space of alternative viewpoints and behaviors in their lives. This section will describe the forms of resistive pleasure, empowerment and oppositional decodings that the interviewees described when discussing the show and their identification with the show's narrative.

Research Questions

These theoretical frameworks and usage of the media engagement model (La Pastina, 2005) will explore the following research questions explored in this thesis:

- What elements made this transnational text attractive to female viewers in Mexico?

The focus of this question is to analyze the characters and plot of *Sex and the City* and the elements that made the text appealing to viewers and applicable to their own cultural context. Mythic frameworks and understandings will play a role in this analysis.

- How do college-educated Mexican women identify with the transnational, foreign text of *Sex and the City*?

Television has altered how society and individuals see and know information, transforming the social, political and economic organizations of society (Joyrich, 1996). Through the discourses of television, "contemporary formations of knowledge, identity

and reality have shifted in ways that radically alter the epistemological, aesthetic, and ideological space” of culture (Joyrich, 1996, p. 22).

My focus for this question is to ask women to share how *SATC* reflects, or does not reflect, them and their personal experiences in everyday life as college-educated women in Mexico. Part of this focus is to see if these women struggled or did not struggle identifying with the text, which depicts U.S. women in New York, based on the content and context of the television series. It was important to focus on the dialectical tension between what aspects of *SATC* do these college-educated women identify with the most/least as well as how it relates to/does not relate to their cultural contexts.

- How do Mexican women engage with the themes and characters of *Sex and the City*?

The media engagement process will help explore the transition, if any, of where “text becomes reality and sometimes reality seems to be the text” for these Mexican women (La Pastina, 2005, p. 8). As mentioned in the previous question, television can present alternatives for viewers, and I am interested to see if *SATC* influenced viewer behavior or attitude in watching and interpreting the transnational text.

CHAPTER III

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

When designing this study, many variables played a part in helping me decide on the location, sample and methods. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the impact that trade agreements like NAFTA have in access and cultural consumption of foreign media texts in countries like Mexico and the limited studies exploring mass media's impact, particularly U.S., on Mexican cultural identity, led me to focus on Mexico as the site for my research study. In addition, a personal visit that I made to Mexico months before I began to design my study brought the popularity of *Sex and the City (SATC)* in Mexico to my attention. In discussions with close friends and family members in Mexico, I was amazed at how enthusiastically they discussed the show's themes and content in view of the conservative values attributed to Mexican culture. Upon returning, I began to research *SATC* in Mexico.

Conducting a LexisNexis search of *SATC* coverage in Spanish-language News Sources with search terms of "sex and the city" and "Mexico," resulted in about 450 articles dating from 2001 to December 2005. Taking into consideration that some of these articles were repeated in different news sources throughout Mexico and some provided information such as awards the television series received in the Golden Globes and so on; other articles discussed the success of the show in Mexico and other Latin American countries as well as debates concerning the appropriateness of the show on television considering its content. An article in a Mexican northern newspaper, *El Norte*, indicated that *SATC* reached 10 million viewers in 2004 on channel 40, which

aired the television series on Tuesdays at 11 p.m. (Marín, 2004). On May 3, 2005 *Sex and the City* was released in Mexico on the local channel TVAzteca7 on Tuesday evenings at 11 p.m. (Hernández, 2005, ¶ 3) Other articles and research indicated that HBO Latinoamerica, Sky Entertainment and Cinecanal, all cable or satellite channels, showed *SATC* in Mexico. While I was not able to find the actual ratings and viewership of *SATC* on each channel and in the different regions of Mexico, the 10 million viewers on Channel 40 does indicate that *SATC* had a significant audience in Mexico. Aside from television, *SATC* is also available for rent at Blockbuster in Mexico and/or the selling of the DVD collection at popular Mexican retail stores, like Sanborns, or the ability to get pirated versions in street markets, all provide access points of *SATC* to Mexican citizens. Before I go into more specifics of the sample and the methods of my study, I would like to provide a brief contextual background of television in Mexico, Mexican gender roles and the Mexican cities that I selected in order to better understand the backdrop of where I did my study.

A Brief Look at Television in Mexico

Up until the 1990s, Mexican television was controlled by the television media conglomerate Televisa. Televisa, owned by the Azcárraga family, reigned during a time that Mexico was “almost a one-party business in a one-party state” (Davis, 1999, p. 49) where protectionist laws were nationalistic and designed to prevent foreign control of media and telecommunication sectors (Lozano, 2002). However, the 1980s encouraged the adoption of neoliberal strategies by government administrations to deal with the country’s economic crisis and Mexico joined the General Agreement on Tarrifs and

Trade (GATT), opening Mexico up to competition, liberalization and independence (Lozano, 2002). In 1990 the Salinas de Gortari administration privatized the state-owned IMEVISION television network created in 1983 to reorganize state-owned television and networks in the country, allowing for the creation of TV Azteca, Televisa's first competitor (Lozano, 2002). In 1993, Ricardo Salinas Pliego along with a group of investors bought the IMEVISION network and other media, gaining control of national television channels 7 and 13 for TV Azteca (Lozano, 2002). Almost six years later, TV Azteca would own 251 stations in Mexico, while Televisa owned 326 stations (Lozano, 2002; Sánchez Ruiz, 2000).

Today, both networks emphasize programming and production on telenovelas, the soap opera format that dominates Mexican and Latin American programming (Clifford, 2005). As mentioned in the previous chapter, telenovelas are the "most current and vital cultural product that Latin American countries export to the world and share among themselves" (González, 1992). Today, Televisa is the largest producer of telenovelas in the world, producing "70 % of the Hispanic language segment of the U.S. and 50 % of the series shot in Latin America" (Beard, 2003, p. 74). Telenovelas are often classified as the Cinderella style melodrama or the realist melodrama (Clifford, 2005). Traditionally, Televisa is known for the classic Cinderella style melodrama that follows a set of ethical principles in which "the story must conclude on a note of hope and love, allowing viewers to be able to go to bed free from stress" (Beard, 2003, p. 75). Family and true love are among the most important elements in these telenovelas and the ethical standards of good acts are rewarded and bad acts are punished (Beard, 2003).

TV Azteca, on the other hand, is known for producing telenovelas as realist melodrama. Since the creation of the network, TV Azteca has weakened Televisa's ratings with its harder, more controversial telenovelas as well as tabloid television (Davis, 1999). While family is also one of the most important TV Azteca values to be depicted in its telenovelas, strength, constant learning, trustworthiness, liberty, tolerance and love for Mexico are among other values that the network upholds in its programming (Beard, 2003). Based on a public statement on the TV Azteca website in 2000 by President Ricardo B. Salinas Plieg, Beard (2003) differentiates between the networks concluding that "TV Azteca also puts thinking before feeling and dreaming in its list of the inspirational effects of its stories, while Televisa is, quite simply, a factory of dreams" (p. 78).

Aside from the different approaches to telenovelas in the two dominant networks in Mexican television, cable and satellite-delivered programming has added to the competition (Davis, 1999). Since the 1988 launch of PanAmSat and with the growth and sophistication of satellite transmission, dubbed versions of U.S. networks like ESPN and HBO are available and an active, competitive, multi-format television industry has expanded consumer choice in Mexico and Latin America (Davis, 1999). A 1997 study showed that Mexico had the third highest level of pay television activity on the list of Latin American countries, led by Argentina and Brazil (Davis, 1999), suggesting Mexico's desire for more choices and new forms of programming. With the "satellite-induced change" in Latin American television, expansion of "consumer viewing choices, [the creation of] new business opportunities for media corporations, [the reversed] flow

of international programming and [the changed] nature of international advertising” has had cultural implications at all stages in Latin America (Davis, 1999, p. 58). While my study does not seek to explore the cultural implications of satellites and neoliberal policies in Mexico, it is important to note that programming, like *Sex and the City* (SATC), was available to some of the women in my study based on the expansion of programming choices available to them due to satellite and cable channels.

A Brief Look at Gender Roles in Mexican Culture

Gender roles in Mexico have been delineated by a cross section of institutions, such as state and religion, which have historically positioned males and females in society with certain attributes based on gender. Whether it is the “political sphere (women’s citizenship), the cultural sphere (women as representatives of national honour or symbolic of the nation itself), or socio-economic sphere (as reproducers and, latterly as workers and consumer),” gender has been an important element in the construction of nations (Craske, 2005). These constructions, however, are developed by men and a masculinist vision of femininity and women’s place has constrained and encouraged women’s citizenship over time (Craske, 2005; Nagel, 1998).

Historically, the identity of citizens in Mexico stems from the double ancestry of the indigenous and Spanish culture, which has been struggled over in Mexico’s intent to construct a modern nation since the 1910 revolution that sparked the development of the contemporary Mexican state (Craske 2005; Marcos, 1999). Prior to the revolution, Porfirio Diaz had taken a liberal approach to modernize Mexico by following U.S. and European models. In matters of gender, men were the heads of the household and part

of the public sphere, while women were placed in the private, domestic roles that had them view themselves as important based on their influence over children and family, with no political voice.

The 1910 revolution broke away from the liberal past and sought to create a modern state that reclaimed nationalism in Mexico by taking a protectionist approach, limiting the power of the Catholic Church, and constructing the notion of *mexicanidad*, or *Mexicanness*, that integrated the ethnic diversity of the nation as *mesitzo* (Craske, 2005; Brading, 1985; Schmidt, 1978). When it came to Mexican women, male revolutionaries saw women as the reproducers of “true” Mexicans, however fearing that women’s strong affinity to the church would spillover into the political views of their children and be a threat to the national revolutionary project (Craske, 2005). Therefore, women continued to be constrained to the “self-denying womanhood” idea (Craske, 2005) and the oppressive Catholic double moral situated their lives and relationships to their men in terms of “sexuality, family, work, social and political contexts” (Marcos, 1999). These double standards of gender roles have been characterized as *machismo* and *marianismo* in Mexican and many Latin America cultures. *Machismo* is associated with “patriarchy by assuming masculinity, virility, and physicality as the ideal essence of ‘real’ men” (Harris, et. al, 2006; Villereal & Cavazos, 2005; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002; Wood and Price, 1997 Mosher & Tomkins, 1988). *Marianismo* is the idealized view of femininity that derives from the “values ascribed to the Virgin Mary”¹⁹ as a model of womanhood, [with] values such as virginity, chastity, purity, self-sacrifice,

¹⁹ The Virgin Mary represents the “Mother of Jesus” in Catholicism. The *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the Mexican Virgin Mary, is the Patron Saint of Mexico and an important cultural icon in Mexican culture.

submissiveness, obedience, motherhood, and the dutiful daughter and wife” (Gonzalez, 2002, p. 87; Gil and Vazquez, 1996).

As the Mexican state continued to develop, pressure from women’s groups and the recognition of women’s importance in the state development project created pressure to give women more rights. By 1917, women were considered equal in the home, given property rights, legalized divorce was recognized along with alimony settlements to the ‘innocent party’ (Craske, 2005). By 1931, women were protected from working overtime, not allowed to work the night shifts or in areas where intoxicating drinks were sold and new rights were given to mothers and pregnant women (Craske, 2005). While these laws gave women new rights and opportunities, the state still continued to utilize a protective attitude towards women that politicized women’s traditional roles instead of challenging them. In place of granting women equality, the legislation looked to protect women and not recognize them as autonomous political subjects, due to the “centrality of motherhood [in] the construction of femininity” (Craske, 2005, p. 125). By 1953, women were granted the right to vote and given a platform in the PRI party, but only a small number of women took these political roles (Craske, 2005).

The 1970s western feminist movements influenced Mexican feminism by seeking more rights for women and demystifying the “patriarchal double moral in relation to sexuality, asking for access to abortion rights, and debunking feminine stereotypes by which woman’s identity was made exclusively dependent on having a husband and being a mother” (Marcos, 1999, p. 431). The Mexican feminist movement began in Mexico City and spread out to other states of the Mexican republic with issues

such as “voluntary maternity,” or the right to sexual education and use of contraception, centers for victims of rape and sexual violence and the creation of feminist publications (Marcos, 1999). This view of women as actors in social movements got the attention of the state and when Carlos Salinas de Gortari became president in 1988, he turned his attention to women in the economic restructuring of Mexico (Craske, 2005). As previously stated, Salinas de Gortari used neoliberal strategies to deal with the country’s economic crisis, looking at citizens as workers and consumers. Women would therefore need to be inserted into the paid economy. Salinas de Gortari’s project used the traditional roles of women to exemplify self-sacrifice and self-denial along with progressive images of women political activists and workers to reduce state expenditures and increase the economic burdens on the family, particularly with women (Craske, 2005). Women became a “symbol of modern Mexico, emphasizing their increased political participation and various policy initiatives [such as sex crime legislation] to demonstrate Mexico’s commitment to democratization” (Craske, 2005 p. 127). The election of Vicente Fox from the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party) in 2000, has returned to a more conservative view of women and motherhood (Craske, 2005).

The characterization of gender roles in Mexican society and the close relationship that gender plays in the socio-historical and contemporary struggles of state development provide background and contextual information for my study. The next section looks more specifically at geographic location.

A Brief Look at Mexico City and Monterrey, N.L.

Mexico's official name is the United States of Mexico and it is divided into 31 states and has one Federal District (Distrito Federal). According to the government website Cuéntame, Mexico has approximately 103 million inhabitants, making it one of the eleven most populated countries in the world. Of those inhabitants, 53 million are women and 50 million are men. The country has 56 indigenous ethnic groups and 62 living languages, aside from the dominant Castellano Spanish²⁰. According to the INEGI, or the National Institute of Geographical Statistics and Information, 60% of the population is mestizo (Native Indian-Spanish), 30% is Native Indian, 9 % is European and 1% is other. Mexico's population is relatively young and more than a third of the population is single (13 million men and 12 million women) (Cuéntame, 2006).

Mexico City, also known as the Federal District, is one of the largest cities in the world. It is located in the central region of Mexico and was the former center of the Aztec empire in the 1300's. It is the most important economic, industrial and cultural center of Mexico and an example of a global city in Latin America (García Cancilini, 2000). Mexico City has experienced rapid growth due to industrialization, but the most significant development has been the transnational investments and transnationalization of Mexican businesses since the country's economic opening to outside forces, which has led to domestic migrants to the city (García Cancilini, 2000). According to the National Institute of Geographical Statistics and Information, Mexico City had about 8,720,000 inhabitants in 2006. Since Mexico City is at the center of the Mexican state, I

²⁰ Castellano Spanish is the language that Spaniards brought to the New World and is the dominant form of Spanish in Latin America today

found it an interesting and desirable location for my research of *Sex and the City (SATC)* and Mexican viewers. Compared to other cities in Mexico, Mexico City seemed to be an area where woman would have access to the show, as opposed to more rural areas, and where I could find a significant number of women who watched the television program.

The other city I picked for my study was also based on my assumption of access and the ability to find viewers of the show, but what interested me more was its proximity to the U.S. I was interested to see if the geographic location of the women I would interview influenced the viewer's reception and interpretation of the program and its content. Other factors that also played a role in my selection of these cities was that I had planned on studying in Mexico City the first half of the summer in 2006, and during the second half of the summer I could stay with family that lived in the Monterrey area as I conducted my research.

The northern industrial city of Monterrey is the third largest city in Mexico making up 3 percent of Mexico's 103 million, and responsible for about 6 percent of its exports and 9 percent of its manufactured goods (Weiner, 2002). Monterrey is in the northern state of Nuevo León, located about three hours from the Texas/Mexico border. Since the inception of NAFTA many Canadian and U.S. business have opened operations in the area, giving Monterrey the "least Mexican metropolis" of the country with its air conditioned malls and the prominence of U.S. fast food chains (Weiner, 2002, ¶ 10).

Decision Time on Method

Deciding on the specifics of my study in another country presented challenges due to not knowing how many resources and how many women I could get to actually participate in my study. In order to better understand and hear the narratives of how Mexican women identified and engaged (La Pastina, 2005) with *Sex and the City* (*SATC*), I decided to do respondent interviews. Respondent interviews are a good method of “clarifying the meanings of common concepts/opinions; distinguish the decisive elements of an expressed opinion; determining what influenced a person to form an opinion or act in a certain way; classify complex attitude patterns; [and] understand the interpretations that people attribute to their motivations to act” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). While I had some familiarity with Mexican culture, I did not grow up in Mexico and I felt that in order to better understand women’s experiences and their reception of *SATC*, an interview would provide more opportunity to further delve into issues and situations that came up throughout the interview process. This study did not aim to generalize findings to a common population, but rather to better understand how college-educated women living in the capital city and close to the U.S./Mexico border identify, negotiate, and engage (La Pastina, 2005) with a U.S. popular culture text.

Before beginning my field work, my target was to find between 15-30 college-educated Mexican women, preferably between the ages of 18-30 years old, who had watched at least six episodes of *SATC*. I wanted to interview women who were familiar with the characters, themes and content so that they could express their views and preferences of the series, and more importantly how they identified and engaged (La

Pastina, 2005) with *SATC*. With six seasons in *SATC*, ranging from 8 to 20 episodes a season, I felt that six episodes would give a viewer enough exposure to form an opinion about the series. I was not necessarily looking for fans or women who really like the show, which led me to think that I did not have to require a potential interviewee to have seen the series in its entirety. The issue of access also led me to make this decision since the series had started airing approximately a year before on the local channel TV Azteca7, while some cable and satellite channels had already stopped airing *SATC*.

The way I decided to recruit women in Mexico City and Monterrey, N.L. was through snowball sampling, meaning that I would ask the women I initially interviewed for referrals of friends or others who they knew watched *SATC*.

Entering the Scene

When I arrived in Mexico City in May 2006, I relied on the access I had to a private university where I was to do a Global Media study abroad summer program as a way to case the scene and find woman that viewed *Sex and the City (SATC)*. Before I began looking for interviewees, I visited a director of research at the private university to discuss my project and to see if she could direct me to women who she knew were viewers of the series. More importantly since I did not pilot my questions, I had her look over my interview questions to make sure the questions were culturally and linguistically translated correctly as well as ethical and culturally sensitive to Mexican culture. Due to the summer and limited classes being offered at the university, the director suggested that I make flyers to post around the university bulletins and public locations to see if any interested respondents replied. However, this approach proved to

be ineffective since only one person responded, and due to different schedules I was not able to interview her. I was able to find women who were viewers of *SATC* through an internship that I was doing in Mexico City.

Almost two months later, I arrived in Monterrey, Nuevo León to begin looking for female viewers of *SATC*. My recruiting experience in Monterrey was different since I had communicated with a professor at a private university prior to arriving. She was conducting her own research study on *SATC* and agreed to help me recruit women when I arrived in Monterrey. Upon arrival, I also had the professor review my questions to check for ethical and cultural sensitivity issues. The professor sent out mass e-mails to her summer school students about the study and directed me to students who had already agreed to talk to me prior to my arrival.

The Interview Process

I began the interview by telling each woman that our time together was going to be a conversation regarding the television series *SATC*. I felt this was necessary in building rapport and in trying to lessen the researcher/interviewee power distance. The respondent interviews lasted approximately one hour and I used my interview questions to have women focus on their viewership of the show, how they identified with characters and themes, what they liked/disliked, and how similar the representation of women in *SATC* was to contemporary Mexican women (for a copy of the interview questions, refer to Appendix A). I gave the interviewees the choice of selecting where they wanted to do the interviews, and I only met with each interviewee once. Each

interview was recorded on a cassette player and later transcribed for data analysis and categorization.

During my time in Mexico, I conducted 20 interviews in Mexican Spanish²¹ with Mexican women who were or had once been viewers of *SATC*. I accomplished 6 interviews in Mexico City and 14 interviews in Monterrey (for a more detailed summary of each interviewee, refer to Appendix B). Of these women, the youngest was 19 years old, interviewed in Monterrey, and the oldest was 47 years old, interviewed in Mexico City. The Mexico City interviews were mostly women in their late 20's to early 30's, while Monterrey interviews had mostly women in their 20's. These women were all either currently in college at the time of the interview or had completed college. All the Mexico City women had completed college and had careers, such as a fashion designer and holding an administrative position at a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization. Of the women in Monterrey, two had completed their master's degree, 6 had completed college and 6 were currently in college. The careers of the women in Monterrey included being a kindergarten teacher, working at the technology office of a university and being a journalist. The majority of the women were not married, except for three, and two were divorced. The women in this study have been given a pseudo-name, which will be used throughout the remaining chapters. After transcribing and translating the interviews, I began categorizing my data based on the recurring themes and issues that surfaced during the interviews. These categories will be further explored in the

²¹ While Mexican Spanish has the same grammatical and linguistic foundation of Castellano Spanish, there are different idioms, colloquialisms and accents that make it specific to Mexico

following two chapters as I discuss how these women identified and engaged with *SATC*.

CHAPTER IV

SEX IN ANOTHER CITY: NEGOTIATION AND INTERPRETATION OF *SEX AND**THE CITY* IN MEXICO

To begin the data analysis chapters, I will address the reading and interpretation stages of the media engagement model (La Pastina, 2005). While all the stages of the model are interconnected, I will focus on the viewing habits of the interviewees, their overall impression of the television series and their thematic preferences of the text. The second stage focuses on the interpretation of the text, which happens on an individual and social interaction level of norms, values, beliefs and so on (La Pastina, 2005). Using Olson's theory of narrative transparency, this step will look at elements that allowed the viewers and interviewees to interpret the messages of *SATC* in relation to their own cultural context. Aspects of cultural capital and cultural proximity will be important factors in determining the interpretations of the text by these viewers.

As addressed in the theoretical chapter, cultural capital consists of the “accumulation of symbolic wealth in the sphere of culture” and “culture is all about processes of identification and differentiation—with identities being produced through practices of distinction (Moore, 1993, p. 120). As a result, distinction becomes the deep sense of social difference and the distance a person feels and utilizes when confronted by cultural actions and consumer preferences that offend their aesthetic sensibilities (Bourdieu, 1984). While cultural capital happens more on an individual level, cultural proximity happens on a more structural level of factors that influence the reading. Factors such as the multilayered, hybrid cultural identities of people, local cultures as

opposed to national cultures, the genre of the text, and the high, preceding cultural consumption of cultural products from a particular country can all play a role in determining what viewers prefer to watch regardless of where the program was produced.

The aim of the chapter is to begin looking at how the text was received by the women I interviewed and what internal and external factors help influence the reception and engagement process. Different elements will be addressed, such as how the text was legitimate to these women, critiques of the show, critiques of Mexican television, and so on.

Viewership of *SATC* by Respondents

Of the six interviewees in Mexico City, all women had started watching *Sex and the City (SATC)* at least three to four years before the interview dates in July 2006. Four women mentioned having seen *SATC* on CNICanal 40, cable channel 40, and two mentioned other cable channels, such as Sony Cable or Channel AXN. These versions were in English with Spanish subtitles. One interviewee, Gaby, mentioned that Channel 40 had the option of SAP, where the viewer could change the language from English to Spanish, but since her television did not have that option she watched it dubbed in Spanish (Mexico City, July 13, 2006). The same respondent mentioned that Channel 40 hit some financial troubles and problems with Televisa, which caused the airing of the series to not always be at the designated time. This experience made the show difficult for her to watch, so she turned to renting the series.

Only two women watched the series on the local Mexican channel TV Azteca7 when the channel began showing *SATC* on Tuesday evenings at 11:30 p.m. in May 2005. These versions were dubbed in Spanish and were censored for sexual content. The rest said they chose not to watch it on TV Azteca7 because it was shown too late or because they did not like to watch the censored/dubbed versions of the show. None of these women owned the episodes on DVD; only one woman besides Gaby mentioned above, rented the series. Two women did, however, borrow the DVD collection from a family member and friends. All women mentioned wanting to buy the series at some point but not wanting or not being able to spend approximately \$1,445.00 pesos, approximately \$142 dollars, on the DVD collection. Four women did make reference to “la cajita rosa,” or the “pink little box,” during the interview. In Mexico, the DVD collection of seasons 1-5 was being sold in a pink and purple box resembling a shoe box. These women liked the way the collection was marketed, and one woman, Sara, laughed as she said, “it is one of those things that is necessary for a woman to have in her life” (Mexico City, July 10, 2006). All the women saw *SATC* alone at their homes, except for Rosa who saw it with her husband and Sara who rarely saw it with her mother.

In Monterrey, Nuevo León, there was more variation in the length of time and viewing habits of the fourteen interviewees. The women discussed watching *SATC* anywhere from 7 years to 2 months before the interviews in August 2006. Six women saw *SATC* on HBO, with five also seeing the show in some combination of TV Azteca7, renting or buying/borrowing the DVDs. Of those that watched *SATC* on local television, many complained of the late showing and not liking the dubbed versions of the show.

None mentioned watching *SATC* on Channel 40. Similar to Mexico City, only two women rented the episodes but seven mentioned owning the episodes, box set collection or pirated versions of the series. Only three women mentioned their only access to *SATC* on TV Azteca7, which shows the dubbed/censored version. The rest saw *SATC* in English with Spanish subtitles, English with English subtitles, dubbed if seen on local television, and one woman mentioned she only watched it in English. These women appeared to be more inclined to watch *SATC* with someone else, such as a group of friends, husband, boyfriend, roommate or sister but always in their homes or the home of a friend.

As I begin my analysis of the interview data, I would like to point out some of the markers of cultural capital and cultural proximity that these women possess, which will influence their reading and interpretation of *SATC*. As established in Chapter II, cultural capital works as a system where distinction becomes the deep sense of social difference and distance a person feels and utilizes when confronted by cultural actions and consumer preferences that offend their aesthetic sensibilities (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural proximity was used to help understand an audience's need for cultural and historical references along with local tastes in what viewers prefer to watch (Straubhaar, 1998; Straubhaar, 1991). In this case, most of these women express their dislike for watching *Sex and the City (SATC)* dubbed or in the censored version that is displayed on local television. According to Alejandra in Mexico City, she chose to watch it on cable over local Mexican television because she "does not like dubbed versions" and prefers to watch programs in their "original language" (Mexico City, July 12, 2006). In

Monterrey, Carmen mentions that she does not like that *SATC* is dubbed on TVAzteca and that it is “ideal” for her to see it in English since “that is part of the personality of the characters” (Monterrey, August 18, 2006). These distinctions show that most of these women had a certain level of cultural capital that not only allowed them to understand the English version of the show, but also led them to prefer watching *SATC* in its original language, despite it being a foreign language to them. This is important because it suggests that watching *SATC* in English was a way of having women perform a modern, cosmopolitan role that represents their aspirations as well as identity. While the theory of cultural proximity suggested that audiences preferred material produced “within their own language and local or national culture,” (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 273) the theory has extended to include other factors, such as an audience’s multiple layers of identity, to the multiple proximities that lead people’s choices and interests in the television programs they watch (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). These two theories will be referred to often in the following sections as we discuss the reading and interpretation of *SATC* by these Mexican women. Other theories, such as Olson’s theory of transparency and work in reception studies, will also be used to understand the reception process of these women.

‘Legitimate’ Text

The series discusses the struggles and issues facing an important sector of women in Mexico today. I think that Mexico has many professional women with a certain established standard of living that could see themselves reflected [in the series]...It also dared to talk about situations that still are not discussed in Mexican programming...The themes, what they represented and the fact that many of us are a part of that same group of women who are professionals or who work make the series interesting. (Selena, Mexico City, July, 20, 2006)

This statement was made in an interview in Mexico City when discussing with Selena why she thought that *SATC* was popular in Mexico. All the women at some point in the interview discussed that they watched *SATC* because they liked the themes, characters and new representation of women. For these women, the latter was different in Mexican programming, especially in the way that women were represented in telenovelas. The women seemed to suggest that telenovelas did not offer a representation that they could relate to with their experiences in society: college-educated women who had/ or wanted a career. They seemed to suggest that they preferred watching television from other countries because it seemed to resonate with their experiences more.

Research in reception studies indicate that the gendered experience of watching television shows that women have a tendency to prefer “soft genres” that have emotion and melodrama while men prefer “hard” genres of factual, realistic elements of a narrative (Gray, 1992; Morley, 1986). Other research indicates that “audiences see the stories as relevant to their own lives in a variety of ways,” such as “the understanding of class or gender roles” (Leal, 1986; Sarques, 1982). Engel Manga’s (2003) study of women viewers of talk shows suggests that women watched shows that offered “legitimate” discourses that resonate with their everyday experiences where “women encounter these shows as enacting discourse about relevant issues by people with whom they identify [with]” (p. 198). While the matrices of genre, gender, class and location all play a role in the media engagement (La Pastina, 2005) process, the audience is constantly shifting between these mediated forces and their identities to create

understanding and interpretation of the text. Similar to Kraidy's (2005) work with Maronite youth, who identified with traditional aspects of the Arab world and the modernity associated with the West showing the hybrid culture identity of these youth, these women also negotiated their reception through the mediated forces that shape the viewing of U.S. programming in the cultural bound norms and values in Mexico.

SATC v. Telenovelas

In my attempt to understand why women chose to watch *Sex and the City* (*SATC*), I asked the women about their television viewing habits. Four women in Mexico City mostly watched programming on cable and they named current and past U.S. television shows they either currently saw or had seen in the past, such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Dynasty*²², while the other two mentioned not being heavy television watchers, expect for local news or an occasional movie. The interviewees that mostly watched local news said they had become involved with *SATC* for the interesting representation and themes treated on the show, but that it was rare. According to Selena, "I normally just watch the news, but this series really caught my attention and I purposefully looked for the program when I could watch it" (Mexico City, July 20, 2006).

In order to compare how the reading, interpretation, and in most cases appropriation of *SATC* occurred and contributed to the engagement process, I asked the women to compare the representation of women on local Mexican programming and the representation of women on *SATC*. The women in Mexico City had a lot to say about

²² All popular U.S. television shows and soap operas that they had access to watching in Mexico

the differences. They claimed that Mexican television is too “conservative,” “traditional,” and discussing themes like sex, particularly with women was “taboo.”

While these women understood that telenovelas were dominant in Mexican programming, recognized the popularity of these telenovelas in other countries, and that telenovelas are an important economic export for Mexican television networks, none could relate to the “submissive,” “dumb” representation of women and “ideal” themes. One interviewee in particular discussed the frustration of only having the Televisa and TV Azteca network in control of Mexican programming:

Unfortunately, here in Mexico we only have Televisa and/or TV Azteca. Between the two of them, they are in control of the whole country! Those institutions sell, what is going to sound very bad, television for stupid people. For people without an education who cannot aspire to more than to have a kid, not pay taxes, and be out on the streets. That is how things are. So, in order to keep these people dumb, they exploit them with what they put on television...For example, I do not know if you saw a telenovela like *Maria Mercedes* or *Maria del Mar*, or of Thalia²³ that came out on television and was sold on DVD. People actually bought it! It is such a shame! To have the little clown that falls in love and even if she is the scum of the earth, she is beautiful and her beauty is coming out of her ears. She then falls in love with the rich man and the rich man is like WOW! So, it ends up being the story of Cinderella where the whole world is happy. So, Mexican television is very inspirational. I think that it is way more inspirational than U.S. television because I think that the U.S., even though I have never lived there, does not really deviate from the lives of certain people and what is depicted on television²⁴. (Rosa, Mexico City, July, 19, 2006)

Therefore Rosa rejects Mexican programming for the Cinderella-style melodrama because it presents an ideal picture for the Mexican public. However, when comparing Mexican to U.S. programming, she perceives programming from the U.S. as closer to

²³ *Maria Mercedes* and *Marimar* were popular telenovelas in Mexico played by a well-known Mexican actress named Thalia.

²⁴ The interviewee uses U.S. programming to depict a way of life in the U.S. that is different from Mexico.

the lives of people and as not being “dumb.” Other women, like Raquel mentioned that she thought *SATC* got people’s attention and had an impact in Mexico because:

Society or part of society wants programs that deal with real situations. Not ideal but real situations of what hurts you, what makes you think, and what makes you look at your own life. So, you look at the characters [in *Sex and the City*] and the discourse that they present and the images that they present, and you identify with them. (Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

The women in Mexico City therefore recognize that while television programming from other places, like the U.S., have more realistic storylines and the representations of women are more modern than the Cinderella melodramatic telenovelas of Mexico, they also distinguish that only a “part of society” prefers it. Other women also felt that Mexican society is not ready for this type of representation:

I have not seen a Mexican program that has that freedom to express: this is my life and I do what I want. Here in Mexico the theme of sex is completely taboo. They can present the story of this is the good girl who goes to the best places, but when she goes home and closes the door, you do not know what happens. This is what is so great about [*Sex and the City*] because it focuses on sex and it does so openly. Not just if [the characters] have sexual relations or not, but also their desires and their discussions about it. That is the advantage that it has over the programs from here. Here we still have a society that is not prepared to hear at 8 p.m. about the hook up she had the night before. Here that presence is still taboo and with the strong role of family and the shock of how can women say that and think that it is bad because she is a libertine! All that is very different here. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

Since these women feel that Mexican television is for less educated people and they distinguish themselves as a part of society who wants a more “legitimate discourse” (Magna, 2003) in the representation of women while Mexican culture challenges this modern look at individual freedom, were reasons these women presented for choosing to watch *Sex and the City* over Mexican programming. In one case, Alejandra mentions

that *SATC* has also opened up the possibilities to other U.S. programs that might not have been previously accepted:

I think that *Sex and the City* is the precursor to *Desperate Housewives*. Thanks to *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives* has been well accepted. However, if it had not been for *Sex and the City* in Mexico, *Desperate Housewives* would not have the success that it has. I watch *Desperate Housewives* since *Sex and the City* has finished, but this one continues to be about women who are of similar ages and who are not the typical housewives. Since we do not like telenovelas, we have other types of entertainment like these television series. (Mexico City, July 12, 2006).

In Monterrey, the women appeared to have very similar views about local Mexican programming. These women saw Mexican society as too “traditional” to talk about “provocative themes” like the ones handled in *SATC*.

Mexican television is very stereotyped. It is very poor. Because it is poor there are no good programs like *Sex and the City* which demonstrate and represent contemporary life and experiences. If you sit down to watch Mexican television you will see the typical Cinderella story of the rich woman who falls in love with the poor man or the poor woman who falls in love with the rich man or they have some problems in their relationship where socioeconomics is a big obstacle...For example, if you sit to watch TVAzteca you realize that life is like a song. The stories revolve around the words of a song and you tell yourself ‘What foolishness! What am I watching?’ There is no reasoning, they have poor dialogues and the stories are poor. (Alicia, Monterrey, August 10, 2006)

These women mentioned their frustrations with the same Cinderella-story melodrama of telenovelas because it was always “the same thing, the same thing, the same thing of the poor woman who falls in love with the rich man and she becomes a woman of status in society” (Itzel, Monterrey, August 14, 2006). Some said that unlike telenovelas, *SATC* had a more open-ended plot where the viewer did not exactly know what was going to happen, unlike telenovelas where “the first episode starts unraveling the plot and you already know what is going to happen” (Itzel, Monterrey, August, 14, 2006).

Similar to the interviews in Mexico City, women in Monterrey also felt that Mexican programming was targeting a sector of society different from them and their experience:

The function of telenovelas is very big because it is mostly designated for the middle to lower-middle to low classes. Therefore the expectations and cultural way of life is very different. In the middle to lower-middle to low class of society, the greatest expectation of women in society is to get married so that they can be supported. If we are talking about the medium high to high classes that are more open-minded, especially in these generations, it is different because the women are waiting more to get married and want to start a career where they do not rely on a man to support them...So, I think that Mexican television is always targeted to the lower classes and those classes will not be able to have another perspective. I think that you have to look at programs and American television series in order to reach the other social sectors that can have other perspectives. (Carmen, Monterrey, August 18, 2006).

Therefore, what these women choose to watch on television provides markers of education level and class.

In Monterrey, six women actually mentioned that they do not like watching local Mexican programming, while some said they just watched the news. According to Paulina, "I do not watch telenovelas, and locally I just see the news. The rest of the time I watch cable television or series, such as *CSI*, *ER* and *Lost*" (Monterrey, August 23, 2006). Another woman mentioned how frustrating it was when she did not have cable:

I did not have cable the year before last and I spent my time watching novelas. It was horrible, but then I started watching *Desperate Housewives* [which was being shown on TVAzteca7] I really liked that series. Now, I have cable and Sky satellite and I just watch television series from the U.S. (Sophia, Monterrey, August 23, 2006).

Other U.S. shows that women mentioned that they liked to watch included: *Will and Grace*, *The L Word*, *Friends*, *Project Runway*, *Scrubs*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Queer as Folk* and *Gilmore Girls*. However, while these women did seem to prefer U.S. shows to

telenovelas or Mexican programming, two of the married women in their thirties and one of the single women in their late twenties mentioned that *Sex and the City* had a way of presenting the controversial topics in a way that did not seem “too harsh” or make the viewer feel uncomfortable:

We have had open shows, such as *Queer as Folk* but I thought it was too strong and in bad taste, unlike [*Sex and the City*]. The show dealt with issues that you thought could be used in an Almodóvar²⁵ movie. They were that strong. However, I saw it with no problem. So, maybe if I saw those issues on another show like *Queer as Folk*, I would even feel uncomfortable watching those scenes. However, in this television series I did not. I think they could not have handled the sex scenes and topics any better. (Paulina, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Another interviewee, Carmen, mentioned that *SATC* was a very “clever” and “funny” show for her and compared to others, like *The L Word*, the show had a way of managing the sexual topics in a very “gentle” way through humor and Carrie’s dialogues (August 18, 2006).

Perhaps if I look at it in a calmer way next time [referring to *The L Word* television show] I will not mind it so much. However right now, I think the show was too grisly and I did not like it. (Carmen, Monterrey, August 18, 2006)

These examples of U.S. cultural consumption of popular culture texts with the interviewees serve as elements in cultural capital and cultural proximity that these women have with *Sex and the City*. The strong presence of U.S. cultural products in these women’s lives “create[s] a sense of familiarity or proximity with [the texts],” including the television program genre (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). The women not only see U.S. programs as a form of “proximity to modernity” as mentioned above in

²⁵ Pedro Almodóvar is a Spanish director who has made award-winning movies that deal with controversial topics

the preferences of more realistic texts that represent women with more freedom and independence, but also as a way of distinguishing them as educated, career-oriented women that differentiates them from the “lower” sectors of society that watch the Mexican television programs. The level of exposure these subjects had to provocative themes also adds to the proximity of the text in the women’s lives, which is why Alejandra felt that *Sex and the City* led to the success of *Desperate Housewives* in Mexico City and why Carmen thinks that if looking at other shows, like *The L Word*, she could possibly change her attitude to the content. While these women have high exposure to and consumption of U.S. media, they still struggle to sometimes deal with the more controversial and “harsher” topics that can be dealt with in these programs even when they offer new perspectives and representations and the different value systems within the cultures. The following section will look at the main issues of negotiation in elements of the plot that these women struggled with in their reading and interpretation of *Sex and the City (SATC)*.

Show Me the Money

When addressing the concept of negotiation, I will rely on Hall’s (1980) “negotiated way” of audience interpreting media texts where viewers work through problems they have with a text to find their own meaning or pleasure. Negotiation suggests that the viewer can actively negotiate meaning with the text based on their cultural background and/or experience in their society. To begin the discussion, some of the negotiations of an audience include the recognition of the “fictional nature of the genre and the functioning of its rule” (McAnany & La Pastina, 1994). Therefore

research shows that audiences do not have a hard time distinguishing between the fictional elements and their own lives in issues of class and culture, while also being able to find many applications of the text into their daily lives (McAnany & La Pastina, 1994; Leal, 1986; Sarques, 1982). While research with women watching television indicates that discussing the text can function as a tool for discussing their own life and experiences, middle-class viewers seemed to adopt a more “critically distanced viewing strategy than working-class females” (Wood, 2005, p. 116; Press, 1991).

The main element of *SATC* that women in Mexico City and Monterrey struggled with the most was the consumerism and excessive shopping of the characters on the show, especially with Carrie, the main character. While some saw the fashion and usage of Manolo Blahnik, the famous shoe designer, as a “fun element” that enhanced the visual aspect of the show, many saw the representation as exaggerated and unrealistic. Socioeconomics is an important aspect of Mexican and Latin American cultures. While race and ethnicity are more subtly interconnected in Mexico than in the United States, the socioeconomic hierarchy in Mexico is prominent in the privileging and opportunities available to people, as briefly mentioned in the last section, where some of the women delineate the differences between access to education and different roles/expectations of a person based on their social class. Therefore these women, who have or are in the process of attaining careers and at least a college-level education, wondered how these women could afford the exuberant lifestyles of characters living in a big city in the United States and had a hard time identifying with this representation:

I really cannot relate to the social status of the characters. I see them as rich women who work for fun and pleasure. They get surgeries and wear boots, and I

do not know what else. They have money to buy in boutiques and to live in places like San Pedro²⁶...Therefore they look like women of a very high socioeconomic group. They do not look like Mexican women because we do not have the same economic power and we are not so open in other matters, like sex. (Betty, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

The difficulty of some women to identify with their favorite character of the series stemmed from the consumerist representation of Carrie.

Carrie, like all the other women, is independent. She is super cool, gets along well with everyone, but she can be a little cold sometimes and can be vain. Well, maybe not vain, but materialistic. For example, did you see the episode where she breaks-up with Aidan and has no money to buy her apartment and Miranda tells her, 'do you know how many pairs of shoes you have?' So, I perceive her as the one that I cannot identify with because she is too materialistic. (Catalina, Monterrey, August 8, 2006)²⁷

Sara in Mexico City, whose favorite character was Carrie, questioned the possibility of having a lifestyle like the one that was represented on the show. Since she is a fashion designer she was very involved with the "super fashion" and "visual" aspects of the series, but also was critical at the possibility of being able to have that lifestyle in Mexico.

That they [referring to the characters] can manage that whole matter of super-fashion, being a realist in a society like ours, it is unreachable. When you are depressed you are not going to buy yourself 500 dollar shoes! I mean, how great to be able to do that, but reality is not like that. But, like I mentioned, the first thing that hooked me [into the series and] made me realize that I liked it was how cool they managed the [fashion]. Like Carrie. She is a girl who is a winner and the girl who visually you can see that everything is perfect even though that is not the reality. Expensive shoes will not necessarily guarantee that you will have the perfect man by your side. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

²⁶ San Pedro is the richest area of Monterrey, N.L. to live in

²⁷ Catalina of Monterrey mentioned that her favorite character of the series was Carrie, but had a hard time identifying with her based on her consumerism and materialism.

Some women used this topic as a way to discuss the differences between lifestyles in the United States and Mexico; however each had different readings and interpretation of the representation. Rosa in Mexico City saw this representation possible in the United States based on the economic power and consumerism of the country, but had a hard time relating it to the Mexican experience.

Here we do not have the economic opportunities to live in a city like New York. To begin with, you cannot compare Mexico City to New York. It is silly because you look at the apartments in the show and those lots are extremely expensive here. You would not be able to afford them, unless you were of that social class that can. However, in general, you just cannot. In general, people live off their *Infonavit*²⁸. Of what they give you, as an option for housing, there is a little house or an apartment of 50 meters. It is small and there lives the father, the mother and their three children. That is the cultural way here...I do not know how the salaries are in the U.S. but here a secretary with an education in a commercial career struggles and works hard to make...about 200 dollars a month and what can you do with that money a month? Here minimum wage is 150 dollars a month, so these situations are totally different and you cannot compare. (Rosa, Mexico City, July 19, 2006)

Helena in Monterrey felt that even though the economics of the U.S. and Mexico are different, there is an emergence of new women in Mexico to have these opportunities:

Since they make more money in the U.S. [the characters] can have this lifestyle. In Mexico, I have begun to see women in their 30s following that role of single women who prefer to work and spend their money on themselves and find their place instead of investing it into a marriage. Even though you work, you do not have to contribute your salary there. Therefore, I think that it is similar. (Helena, Monterrey, August 15, 2006)

In this case, Helena recognizes that the U.S. lifestyle and economic opportunities are different from Mexico, but also recognizes that changes in women's experience in Mexico could potentially lead to a similar experience of women buying what they want for themselves.

²⁸ *Infonavit* is credit given to families by the government to pay for housing.

These specific elements of the text that became problematic for viewers were interpreted in different ways by each viewer. Olson (1999) theorized about a text's ability to have narrative transparency, which allows viewers to relate a foreign media text to their own cultural context through the usage of specific elements in the text. Of these elements, verisimilitude and ellipticality can be applied to these different readings and interpretation. Verisimilitude is concerned with the ability for a media text to convey a sense of truth or realness to the viewer (Olson, 1999). If a situation appears unreal or uncommon, they might question the truth-value of the plot and discredit the text. Therefore, Betty, Catalina, Sara and Rosa discredit the ability for the text to seem possible in Mexico and find it hard to identify with these aspects and/or characters of the text.

Ellipticality is a narrative technique that makes use of audience participation by leaving out details (Olson, 1999). This allows the viewer to complete a picture in their own minds by creating an understanding that fits their values and behaviors. Based on the quotes presented above, Helena in Monterrey, unlike the rest of the interviewees, still recognizes that there is a difference in the representation on television with that of her experience, but uses an alternative explanation for having the situation fit her worldview. In this case, recognizing that for some women in Mexico the aspect of consumerism might be possible.

Finally, other women used their cultural capital in order to recognize the fictional nature of the genre by realizing that the purpose of entertainment leads to certain melodramatic and exaggerated characteristics.

There are many elements that are exaggerated. Even the creators [of the show] say that they are exaggerating everything. If you stop to think, no matter how successful Carrie is, I do not think that she can have the income to buy 500 pairs of shoes that are Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik for 500 dollars each. And, no matter how successful Samantha is, her lifestyle that drives her to look for an apartment of 4 million dollars and on top of that use brand names like Dior and those kinds of things. So then I say, okay, there are things that are exaggerated! Of course there are people who do have that kind of lifestyle, but I am going to use Carrie as an example, what type of income could she possibly have? I mean she works at a weekly newspaper that is not even compared to *The New York Times*. I think they pay her like 4 dollars a word or something like that. So you ask yourself, where does she get that money? In the last episode they did a special where the costume designer, Sarah Field, is asked 'Realistically, where does Carrie get all the money to buy the clothes and shoes?' She responds by saying not to ask her that question and to just enjoy the series. So, they do exaggerate and I think it is part of the charm of the series. (Alicia, Monterrey, August 10, 2006)

Gaby in Mexico City suggests that she puts these aspects aside to focus on the themes that she feels are significant in the text.

The issue of consumerism and calling too much attention to a behavior that is stereotyped in women as being a modern woman [who shops] in life and so on. That part I do not like very much because these women are other types of women. That focus on the stereotype of women who are very worried about fashion I do not like. But, I insist, that this is not what catches my attention. I don't criticize because it is part of the story that each woman has a closet full of shoes and that they buy in the best boutiques. I see those frivolous things, but I put them to the side. Probably because I identify [with the show], which is why I put them aside. What is important [for me] are the relationships and the liberalization of sexuality. I do not look at those things, like looking at their clothes and that type of thing. What gets my attention and what attracts me to the show is the new representation [of women] and not how they dress or the consumerism. I do not identify with those aspects. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006)

Therefore, in the reading and interpretation of *SATC*, some of these women negotiated their cultural capital in a way that made sense to them. As previously stated, some managed the consumerist aspects as a way of distancing themselves from the text by questioning the truth-value of the content. Some saw the consumerism represented on

the show as a way of demarcating the differences between U.S. and Mexican economic experiences. Others used it as a way of explaining that they understood the melodramatic content of the drama without rejecting the value and/or application of certain aspects in their lives, and a few complete a picture in their own minds by creating an understanding that fits their values and behaviors

The following section looks at other elements of the show that led the interviewees to negotiate their cultural norms, values and beliefs with *SATC* and how they interpreted those elements.

Filling in the Familial Gaps

Aside from acknowledging the different representations of women in Mexican and U.S. programming and issues of socioeconomics, it seemed that the only other common negotiation that women had with elements of the text was the absence of family. As previously stated in the contextual section discussing telenovelas, family and true love are among the most important elements in telenovelas and the ethical standards of good acts are rewarded and bad acts are punished (Beard, 2003). Family is a central aspect of Mexican culture and the lack of family presence led women to wonder why this was not included in the series.

In the end, the characters confront their situations alone because there is an absence of family. Here, for example, the themes of relationships are universal because the failures in relationships or the successes or the difficulty or the ease or being able to maintain a relationship with someone [does exist]...[In Mexico], the difference is significant [compared to the show] because you always have your family supporting you. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

Gaby in Mexico City also mentions that Mexican culture has more traditional values that cause a person to rely on their family first and foremost instead of the group of friends that is depicted on *SATC*.

One also has their group of friends where you support each other and follow each other, but here due to our upbringing we first turn to our families for support. We have that tradition where we look for support from our families first before we turn to our friends. However, in the series they are women who are alone and who do not have family to support them and that is emphasized. You do not know who Carrie's family is or you know that Miranda is in bad terms with her mother but you do not know why. They do not talk about family... That absence of family makes their friendship even stronger and there is sisterhood amongst them. But in the case of Mexico, we traditionally turn first to our family because that is our culture. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006)

In this case, Gaby engages with ellipticality (Olson, 1999) in recognizing that the characters in the show form their own bond of sisterhood to make up for the absence of family in *SATC*. Another interviewee in Mexico City voiced her concern for this absence of family as being a bad influence on Mexican youth.

It is not a good influence for the youth to see that form of family because on one part it is good that they are independent and that they do not depend on family or of one person [such as a] boyfriend, lover or whatever. It is good that they are independent. However, that strong independence also causes them to be alone because they want money to have their apartments and to buy what they want, but they do not care about having a family or a husband. I mean, it is not good and it is not bad but I think it can also be a bad influence. (Alejandra, Mexico City, July 12, 2006)

The struggle that Alejandra feels seems to be related to what another woman in Monterrey was concerned about: the diminishing of cultural values that seem to be tied to U.S. culture.

In general, I like the relationship that the women have amongst themselves but I think, for example, that many or the majority has a null and void relationship with their family. That concerns me. Here I am going to sound very Mexican.

That is the only time where you say, well comparing gringo²⁹ culture to the Mexican, for us family has an important place. And for gringos [family things], are put to the left, they do not put it or it does not enter their lives. (Diana, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Angelica, another interviewee in Monterrey, also wondered if the absence of family was representative of U.S. culture. However, later on in the interview Angelica, along with another interviewee, brought in their college experience to make sense of this lack of family.

It is very strange that I never see the family [of the characters]. That, for example is something that is very important here and in the series there are no family members and they really do not touch the subject. It is not really a problem but it does spark my curiosity to think is it always like that in the United States? After a certain age you separate from your family and only in important events you see them?...However, I can relate to the friendship because we are very open to having gay³⁰ friends. I have four friends and one gay friend and we go everywhere together. And, since I do not live with my family right now that I am in school, they become my family. (Angelica, Monterrey, August 22, 2006)

That really caught my attention and what is prevalent in the series is that the friendship and bond never breaks. That bond is very important because since they do not have family and they live alone, but they have their friends. Right now I am living a stage of my life where the majority of my friends are foreign to this area. They do not have brothers or sisters close by, so they call you are midnight telling you, 'I crashed! Please come get me!' So, there you represent not the mother nor the father, but the friend that will go and be there for you in whatever you need. So, that is important, the support of friends. (Daniela, Monterrey, August 11, 2006)

Therefore Angelica and Daniela, in comparison to the others, have the college experience of either not living close to their family or having friends that do not live close to their families, which allow them to not only fill the familial gap that is present in

²⁹ Gringo is a colloquial term for describing U.S. culture.

³⁰ Referring to homosexuality

Sex and the City (SATC), but also allow for the text to be relevant and identifiable to their experiences.

Location as a Factor

Another aspect of negotiation that these women dealt with was the reference point that they used to compare their lived experience to issues that they had with the text. In Mexico City, when women compared issues, such as socioeconomics, they seemed more attuned to turning to the U.S. or abroad to compare these differences. However, when women in Monterrey looked to compare their lived experiences with what was represented in the text, they seemed to look to the capital, Mexico City, in order to compare these differences.

When Raquel in Mexico City was asked if she could see the themes of *SATC* applicable to Mexico, she discussed India, Latin American countries and the U.S. as the reference points for her answer:

The themes of *Sex and the City* are universal but I do not think that you can apply them so much to Mexican culture as you can to Latin America or the U.S. And if we go further, you cannot compare them to Asian cultures. So, for example, in places like India where women cannot even uncover their faces, not even with drugs could you apply themes like friendship, romantic relationships, sex and feminism. It is like fighting against a big religion. I think that friendships can exist in India and Mexico and that people do have sex in India and Mexico, and while I think that the themes are universal, you cannot apply them to every culture. (Mexico City, July 19, 2006)

Therefore, Raquel looks at U.S. and other Latin American cultures as modern and progressive as illustrated by themes like “friendship, romantic relationships, sex and feminism,” while struggling to see the possibilities of those same themes in more traditional cultures like India and Mexico. Raquel’s perceptions of these countries and

cultures are based on the representation of characters and themes in television shows from the U.S. and other telenovelas from Latin America. Raquel also previously used the U.S. as the reference point for comparing the differences of economic opportunities between the U.S. and Mexico based on the representation of characters in *SATC*.

When discussing if the representation of women on *SATC* represented contemporary Mexican women, Selena in Mexico City had a hard time relating the characters of the show with women in other areas of Mexico, besides the capital of the country.

It would have to be a sector of the population that is in the middle to upper middle class, urban setting and in a big city like here [Mexico City] where women have some issues resolved and are not necessarily thinking about survival. They need to be established in the personal and professional sense similar to the women in the show. I cannot imagine this type of character anywhere else in the Republic of Mexico even if it is a state capital. I do not know if it is the same in the U.S. (Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

In Monterrey, however, some women seemed to look first at Mexico City or other areas of Mexico before looking to the U.S. as a way of comparing the different issues and experiences. When asking Carmen if women on *SATC* represented contemporary Mexican women, she responded:

Yes, Mexican women can have similar characteristics to the characters of the show, but it would have to be in a big city like Mexico City where the people are more open in how they think and in terms of age, women who are over thirty since those are the characteristics of the characters. I think so because in general, Monterrey is more traditional to Mexico City. In Mexico City, well what I have discussed with people from there because I have never been there, they live more freely. Here, it is different because the society is more restricted. (Carmen, Monterrey, August 18, 2006)

When asking Paulina if the themes of *SATC* were applicable to Mexican culture she also looked at other areas of Mexico and Mexico City to compare.

Maybe [they are applicable] in the North of Mexico, because in the South, no. If you go to Veracruz, Oaxaca, Merida, the culture is not the same. I do not think that they would accept the show the same way. In the North of Mexico, well part of the North, we are more, not liberal but more open. For example, in Monterrey we are conservative but due to certain groups, especially the women who work and women who work in universities and such. Since we coexist with people of different places, there are cultures who are more open, so you become more open. In Mexico City, for reasons of distance, you have to be more open. For example, a friend of mine who lives there told me that his girlfriend stays with him overnight at his parent's house with them there. I was shocked and asked him how could that be? He mentioned that it was safer that she stay with them at night then having her go all over the city at 3 a.m. So, maybe in big cities like Guadalajara that are more open. But in Sonora they are more conservative and in Chihuahua even more, but that is because they are very Catholic areas and the series does not emphasize those religious issues. So, it depends where you are in Mexico in how they will accept [the show] and how the themes can be treated. I think you can see them accepted in Mexico City. (Paulina, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Again, it seems like women try to negotiate between traditional and modern viewpoints when it comes to the themes of *SATC* and experiences of women in Mexico. However, instead of looking abroad, the women who lived and were originally from Monterrey looked to Mexico City, the capital of the country, as the signifier of modernity and an illustration of a more open society. This supports the notion that geographic location is also a part of the multiple proximities that will influence the reception process. Location is also a factor in examining the structural and discursive forces that make culture synthetic due to its hybrid components (Kraidy, 2005). Therefore, in considering the translocal, it is important with acknowledge that the U.S. is not always at the center of cultural exchange and does not always keep other cultures or cultural spaces in the periphery (Kraidy, 2005).

Identification with Themes

I think it is very well written. Like a television product it is very well made. The music, the presentation, the casting, the plot, everything comes together very well and it is well written. I really liked that! And the content, the situations that they present. I think it is a good perspective of treating actual themes through the eyes of a woman. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006)

Well, I loved the fashion. I generally liked the locations that they selected of New York, it looked beautiful. The music, I thought, was extremely good. The cinematography, the costume, the script—I liked it all. What I also liked was, and it is something I hope to have one day, the closeness of the friends. To be able to get together to discuss things, and you know it seemed like they never made value judgments amongst themselves. (Raquel, Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

I really liked the scenes and their style of dressing. I really liked the men that come out in the show! I really like seeing Carrie. I feel that her life is like that of an artist³¹, I do not know, like a character that is totally free. I liked her freedom and security. That I like very much. The setting and the views that you see in the background of New York. (Betty, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Well, I liked it very much because the main character is Manhattan and I really like that place. I have been there and I really liked it. And I like that you have independent women who are successful and that they are very good friends. (Angelica, Monterrey, August 22, 2006)

All these statements were made by interviewees when asked to discuss the elements that they liked most in *Sex and the City (SATC)*. The first two statements were made in Mexico City and the last in Monterrey by women of different ages and experiences. Similar to La Pastina's work with telenovelas in rural Brazil, gender and location have played a role in the interpretation of the plot, themes and characters of *SATC* in Mexico (La Pastina, 2001). Based on their positions in society, many women focus on the beauty and leisure aspects of *SATC*, reifying the established traditional stereotypes of gender roles in society (La Pastina, 2001) as central to the plot and as important in

³¹ By artist, the interviewee means a famous person

discussing the factors that make the series memorable. Their positions in Mexican society as college-educated, career driven women, who live in two of the three largest cities in Mexico give them the cultural capital of being familiar with the brand names like Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik. The high production values and scenes from New York also make *SATC* visually pleasing and tied to aspects of modernity and Western thought. Along with these aspects are the themes of love, romantic relationships and friendship that represent the basic human needs in society, but handled in a way that differs from Mexican programming. Therefore, *SATC* follows the genre rules, but offer a more realistic melodrama that they prefer. These aspects influence the ability for these women to identify and engage with *Sex and the City*.

Identification is the “mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if events were happening to them” (Barker, 2005, p. 355). Therefore, when women talk about television it can be seen as a tool for discussing their own lives (Wood, 2005; Hobson, 1991). Katz and Liebes (1990) saw this as “referential mode” where viewers relate to “characters as real people and in turn relate these real people to their own real world” (p. 100). In conjunction, work with women viewers of talk shows suggest that women watched shows that offered “legitimate” discourses that resonate with their everyday experiences whereby “the women encounter these shows as enacting discourse about relevant issues by people with whom they identify” (Manga, 2003, p. 198).

Therefore identification is a process where women use television to discuss their lives, while also choosing to watch programs that offer some resonance with their lived

experiences. The following section will look at the themes that women identified with. There seemed to be more identification in Mexico City with the themes of sexuality and the independent working woman. In Monterrey there seemed to be more identification with a new representation of age and friendships. This does not suggest that women in Mexico City did not see friendships and relationships as important and women in Monterrey did not see sexuality and independence as important. On the contrary, all these women felt that these themes were central in their acceptance and liking of the show but when discussing the themes, women in Mexico City focused more on sexuality and women who work, and women in Monterrey on the new perspective of age and the importance of friendships.

Mexico City: Independent Women in Modern Times

I think we are living in a new stage in Mexico. Taking into consideration that more than 50% of the population are women and we are in a state of transition. For example, in our culture as women we have received, especially through the means of communication like television, a culture with very clear topics—virginity, marriage as a fundamental part of family. But, we have evolved and the roles have changed. We are women who participate, are independent, we have to work. So, *Sex and the City* captures your attention because you identify with these new roles. Not at the same level of success that they represent on the show, but you identify with the woman who is a worker, who is independent and who can have the same sentimental problems that the women on the show have. So I think there is a lot of identification in that sense because the roles have changed for a Mexican woman. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006)

Gaby uses aspects of the themes and plot to explain the “new stage in Mexico” that particularly addresses her experience in Mexican society. With Mexico City being the capital of the country, one of the largest cities in the world and having aspects of modernity associated with it, along with the experience of females with careers, all

provide structural factors that allow SATC to be culturally proximate and have the cultural capital to identify with the representation of women on *Sex and the City* (SATC).

I think right now due to the empowerment of women to be more independent and the idea that they do not need to get married to live fine or to go shopping, I think that is good. Finally there is more focus on what you want to do with your life. To say, I am independent and if I do something, I will do it for myself. If in certain aspects of my life, I feel that I want a male companion then he necessarily does not have to be with me 24 hours a day or my whole life. On the contrary, he can be a passer by, or your accessory or your accomplice and that is it. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

Sara, who is in her late twenties, works as a fashion designer and is single, emphasized how she was glad that shows like SATC were in Mexico because it presented themes that she and her friends could identify with.

It discusses the intimate life of four women who are professionals, independent, live alone and they make their own decisions. That is what I liked. (Raquel, Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

The women in Mexico City all felt that SATC dealt with important themes that deviated from the traditional melodramatic programming and traditional view of women in Mexico. The youngest women in Mexico City was 27 and the oldest was 47 years old. One of the 27-year-olds was married, the older two were divorced and the other three were single. All of them have finished school, have careers, and could relate what they saw of SATC to their experiences as modern, independent women in contemporary society. Therefore, age, location, marital status and education led them to see SATC as offering “legitimate” discourse and became a show that they watched.

Mexico City: Sexually Explicit

Well, Mexico is a conservative society. To open the private lives, the sexual, the free expression of sexuality in four women really made an impact on me. An impact because those are themes that are not touched, that are rarely spoken

about, that you do not say or you only say in private places like with friends...So, the opening of that part of a woman, women who want to live out another form of expression in our sexuality. (Raquel, Mexico City, July 20, 2006).

The theme of sexuality was one that women in Mexico City seemed to identify with more for the empowerment and modern representation that the characters on *SATC* offered rather than the actual lived experiences of the interviewees.

In general, they all perceive the issue of being happy. To be satisfied with their happiness, stable with their partners and to live out their desires. But what really gets my attention and what identifies all of them with one another is to first and foremost live out your sexuality. That is cool! And that is something we do not have in Mexico. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006).

In the case of Gaby, talking about the “coolness” of characters living out their sexuality on the show also functions as a way of recognizing the limiting aspect of Mexican society that constrain and reject this kind of expression. Further discussion on this point will be made in the following chapter.

The themes of sexuality are important because I found a lot of things served as tips and bits of information that are important...For example, when Charlotte is sterile... [Samantha’s breast] cancer, and those things that can happen to anyone! Not that I have my medical degree from watching the show, but whereas before I might see something and I probably would not have done anything about it, now I probably would go to the doctor because it could be something very serious. So, the show does cover themes that are important for women. (Alejandra, Mexico City, July 12, 2006)

Alejandra manages another form of understanding and expression of the theme of sexuality to make it applicable to her life. In this case she seems to suggest that because she is a contemporary modern woman, she should also be concerned with contemporary women’s issues like sterility and breast cancer, which she might not have thought about before.

My close group of friends and I really relate to the characters in the series. We have very similar experiences in terms of sex, relationships, jobs and friendships. I had a male friend tell me once that we were the characters on *Sex and the City* in Mexico...It is the best because I can go with my friends and talk about sex for ten hours with them and maybe one will leave and another will come but we all have the same struggles in common. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

Similar to before, *Sex and the City* presents themes and representations for Sara that she and her social group can relate to based on their life experiences and choices. The above quotations all show the ways that women identified with the themes on *SATC* based on their experiences and social groups. The following section will focus on the themes that women in Monterrey identified with more.

Monterrey: A New 'Age' Look

In Mexican culture it is like if you are a woman and if you are 28 years old and you are not married you are an old maid! The series changes that way of thinking because Carrie is thirty-something and the majority of them are in their thirty-plus, and Samantha is the oldest. Here in Mexico you do not see women in their thirties as successful, single and it being accepted. It is like Miranda says in the show, 'I am single, I am thirty years old, I have a great apartment but I am no desirable. But if I was a man, single and thirty then I would be a catch.' So, for people to see that on television and focus it on their culture really grabs your attention. (Maria, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

Similar to the sexuality theme in Mexico City, Maria seems to identify with the theme of older women who are single and have careers. Maria is 21-years-old and currently studying at a private university in Monterrey. While her age and experience does not necessarily fit the characters of the show, she sees the theme as a new way of looking at women's age and questioning the cultural Mexican norms in that sense.

In Mexican culture, if you are a certain age and you are not married, then you are an old maid. I think this show presents the topic in a positive way because the majority of programs here give you the idea that if you do not have a boyfriend then you do not go out or you should already be engaged or something like that.

So, the show leaves you thinking that I am not the only one and there are other people in my place. (Daniela, Monterrey, August 11, 2006)

Similar to Maria, Daniela is 25-years-old who studies and works at the university. For Daniela discussing the characters' age can be seen as a form of empowerment to look at her position in society differently, perhaps alleviating the pressure that she could be feeling for not already being married or engaged.

I am about to be 30-years-old and I am single. I have told my sister I think people in Mexico are changing the way they look at 30-year-olds who are not married. You also stop looking at it as a stigma and you tell yourself if I do not want to do it, then I will not. I have my whole life to enjoy, discover and have my things and I am fine. If you like it, then that is fine. Even if it is slowly happening in Mexican society, *Sex and the City* gives me more affirmation that it is okay to live like that. (Gloria, Monterrey, August 15, 2006)

Gloria perhaps finds herself closer to the women's representation of the show due to her age, having a career and having completed her education. However, she uses *SATC* as a way of affirming to herself that it is fine if she is not married and perhaps presents the possibility that she has options, such as enjoying her life and discovering new things. More importantly, she takes from the show affirmation of her life choices because the new acceptance of 30-year-olds who are not married is happening slowly in her society.

Monterrey: The Circle of Friends

Women in Monterrey also seemed to want to talk more about the relationships and friendships that are depicted in *Sex and the City*.

I identify with their friendship because my friends resemble them a lot. In my group we have the Samantha, the Charlotte, the Miranda and the Carrie. We are all different and we have our own perspectives, but we can come together and be friends. (Catalina, Monterrey, August 8, 2006)

I identify with the group of friends. Like I said, you will always have 3 or 4 friends in your group who you can tell everything to and they will not look at you

badly. For example, with my friends, I could relate to the conversations that they had... We talk about sex, fashion, men and all of that. But, I think it is more women in my generation. (Itzel, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

Based on previous discussions, the aspect of friendship over family seems to be valued more in current generations than before (refer to the section “Filling in the Familial Gaps”). Itzel, who is 29-years-old and has her career, identifies with the group of friends on *SATC* based on the discussion topics and interactions that she has with her social group, but also recognizes that other, perhaps older age groups might have a harder time relating to the same camaraderie.

In my group of friends, we all like [the show]. We even comment that we are a mixture between the women of *Sex and the City* and the women on *Desperate Housewives*. I think it is due to the fact that they discuss subjects that were never discussed before and [we] are tied to a new way of thinking in Mexican women. (Paulina, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Paulina, who is married and in her mid-thirties, refers to her group of friends as a mixture of characters in *Desperate Housewives* and *SATC*, two U.S. popular culture texts, that present a “modern” look at women. In this case, Paulina uses *SATC* to describe her friends and their desire to engage with “new ways of thinking in Mexican women” (Paulina, Monterrey, August 23, 2006).

These women seemed to focus more on the friendships of *SATC* perhaps because six out of the fourteen interviewees were still studying at the university and many lived away from their families, which made their friendships more important. These women were also younger compared to the women in Mexico City. This could also lead to more identification with the friendships due to their lived experiences and ability to spend more time with friends. After all, age is a factor for these women preferring the

representation of older women not being married as compared to how women are represented in Mexican television.

Significance of Chapter

This chapter was necessary to establish the women in this study and the types of negotiations that these women made in the reading and interpretation of a foreign media text, in this case *SATC*, in Mexico. In reading and interpreting *SATC*, these women provided information of the elements that made the text legitimate and critique the value-systems represented on the show that did not fit theirs. However, by negotiating these elements, the women were able to identify with *SATC* and enjoy watching *SATC*. I felt it necessary to discuss some of the negotiations made to understand the patterns of identification that will be prominent in the next chapter.

These women are distinct in their level of cultural proximity with the text due to their gender, urbanized setting, education and cultural capital which will all spillover to the following chapter that focuses more on appropriation and possibilities of change in the engagement process (La Pastina, 2005). The position that these women have in Mexican society allows them to use *SATC* as a way of discussing Mexican culture and gender roles.

CHAPTER V

LET'S GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT: RETHINKING GENDER

ROLES, MYTHS AND SPACES FOR CHANGE THROUGH *SEX AND THE CITY*

I hope that many Mexican women that watch the show can change aspects of their lives. I hope it has some influence because many women are left by men and the men have a lot of power over women in Mexico. So, I think it would be good that some of that liberalism affected some and changed things for women. (Alejandra, Mexico City, July 12, 2006)

Because you are a woman, they limit a lot of things for you. Even if they say that we have evolved a lot and that we are in the 21st century, they still limit a lot of things for you because you are a woman. In the television program, the women get through things for themselves. In Mexican culture, the woman is always about their home, their family even if you work. (Itzel, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

The statements above are from Alejandra in Mexico City and Itzel in Monterrey when asked if they thought *Sex and the City*(*SATC*) was changing the way that Mexican society viewed gender roles and/or women's sexuality. This, along with a series of questions concerning myths of women in Mexico, representation of women in Mexican television and asking if the characters of *SATC* represented Mexican women, all provided the opportunity for women to talk about their experiences as women and roles in Mexican society. In the last chapter I introduced some of the main negotiations that women in Mexico City and Monterrey engaged with when watching *SATC*. This chapter continues to focus on the reading and interpretation of *SATC*, but emphasizing more on the appropriation stage of the media engagement model. The appropriation stage deals with "issues brought up by the text and interpreted through mediating forces that are used to explain one's own life or the social relations and cultural dynamics one is inserted in" (La Pastina, 2005). Throughout the interviews, I asked women to relate

their lives and experiences to the text in order for me to better understand the reception and engagement process that women had with *SATC*. This allowed women to discuss their perspectives and provided an outlet for them to discuss the constructed gender roles of women in Mexico.

Mary Ellen Brown's (1994) work with women talking about soap operas found that due to the devaluation of women's talk in society, providing a space for women to talk about "their lives and interests with an awareness of their mutual oppression" can allow women's talk to be "mutually validating and therefore often pleasurable and potentially empowering" (p. 33). Providing women the opportunity to talk about the soap operas or television shows they watched gives women a "situation in which their talk is validated [and] can produce confidence and the potential ability to speak again" (Brown, 1994, p. 34). Throughout the following sections, I will present: the gender roles in Mexican society, the usage of myth in the show as a means of identification and resistive pleasure, and the spaces for change that some women claimed to as result of watching *SATC*. Similar to Brown's (1994) work, change implies that women can use their television viewing experience to counteract the dominant discursive structures they are embedded in to create a space of alternative viewpoints and behaviors in their lives.

Examining Gender Roles in Mexican Culture through *SATC*

When asking the interviewees about gender roles in Mexico, all women described women in Mexico using some of the following terms: mother, virgin, self-sacrificing, submissive, the importance of marriage, caregiver to her children and standing by her husband.

In Mexican culture, the woman still has to be conservative. For example, my mother tells me not to laugh so loud because I will seem crazy. I think about it and it is like, but that is how I laugh, so I do not care what others say. But here the prototype is the woman who is quiet, centered, and very pretty, has good manners, is passive. She is basically like a statue or something like that. She has to be formal and very perfect. (Betty, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Mexican culture is all about family and we all save the appearance of the family. It does not matter if your husband hits you. That is not important. You still say nothing of that treatment to protect your family image. [Women] have to be like that—submissive, obedient and you give yourself to your husband and he tells you what is good to do. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

Here in Mexico, when you are married you become like an object to be owned where you become ‘Catalina of {pause}’³². I mean, you do not have father or mother. So, if you are 35 or 40 and you see your friends married with children and you, yourself are not married or have children, they look at you as ‘My aunt Catalina who is the old maid’...I mean it is not important that you have a doctorate in economics or that you are a medical doctor. I would be a single woman...and everyone would be feeling sorry for the old maid. (Catalina, Monterrey, August 8, 2006)

You have to be dressed in white at your wedding, be a virgin. You cannot have sexual relations before you get married or you can only be with one person, and that you should be faithful. Being unfaithful is the worse thing you can do or have done to you. (Maria, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

Other women used these questions to discuss the institutions in Mexican society that have contributed to this construction and reification of women’s gender roles. Gaby, along with other respondents, felt that media plays a big part in that reification.

They are not myths. They are sad realities for the Mexican women that come from the ancestral culture that we have, but also from the media. What the media has sold, and specifically the telenovela, are the expectations of what it is to be a Mexican woman. A virgin, a submissive woman, self-sacrificing, who puts her well-being and her happiness aside for the happiness of her husband, her children and her family. She needs to support her family, so she does not matter but everyone else does. Those values of having to be, not so much subjected to the

³² In Mexican culture the woman does not drop her last name but writes her husband’s name indicating that she is of the man she marries. For example if Catalina Sanchez marries someone with the last name of Cruz, she is Catalina Sanchez de Cruz, signifying she is of her husband.

man, but to be co-dependent. She must depend on her husband. Those are the stereotypes that we keep dragging on and we continue to drag them on. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006)

Other women also discussed the impact of religion in Mexican society and its ties to the representation of women in telenovelas. As discussed in Chapter II, when Spaniards arrived in Mexico and began the cultural mestizaje and Christianization of the indigenous populations, strategies were used to create a stable Mexican identity that used heterogeneous elements that are still visible in Mexican society. For example, Catholic themes were incorporated with native America by making the Catholic Virgin Mary, which was to become the patron saint of Mexico, dark-skinned and barefoot and giving her Náhuatl symbols (Kraidy, 2005). The Virgen of Guadalupe, the Catholic Virgin Mary described, “was merged with the story of Tonantzin, the Pre-Colombian fertility goddess” as a way of converting “indigenous peoples [by] conflating pagan beliefs and Catholic deities and beliefs” (Colle, 2005, p. 13). Part of Christianization resulted in a binary of good/bad, virgin/whore by the Catholic Church. Brewer (2004) states “for Catholicism to be successful it was necessary to introduce a new image of women in which the virgin/whore dichotomy was paramount and woman was obedient to man” (p. 45). This enforced strict sexual customs in the indigenous people and accomplished a following of the Catholic doctrine in their lives.

The use of *marianismo*, or the idealized view of femininity in Hispanic cultures, derives from the “values ascribed to the Virgin Mary as a model of womanhood, values such as virginity, chastity, purity, self-sacrifice, submissiveness, obedience, motherhood, and the dutiful daughter and wife” (Gonzalez, 2002, p. 87; Gil and Vazquez, 1996). The

use of marianismo characterizes the prototype of the female heroine in the telenovelas (Gonzalez, 2002). The ritualized use of these images in the media have been the main critique of telenovelas as having a narcotic effect on the people, particularly women, who become oblivious to their own oppression and experience with hegemonic institutions. However, some of the interviewees, used their cultural capital to discuss women's gender roles in terms of the mediated forces that construct and reify these values attributed to women.

When talking about the Catholic Church in Mexico, I cannot generalize, but still last year it was a big issue to prohibit the usage of condoms. That tells you a lot about the influence that religion has in our society. It is still very strong. Even the presidential candidate who is winning the election right now, Calderón³³, made a commentary criticizing the expression of sexuality. Right now I have been hearing on the news that here in Nuevo León some parents are rejecting the usage of a textbook because it has sex education in it. Therefore, it has a huge influence and you ask yourself, how is it possible that in the 21st century where we hear that AIDS is affecting and killing millions of people, these families, in one of the most prosperous states of the nation, can have these ideas? That speaks a lot about our machista society. It is very behind. (Alicia, Monterrey, August 10, 2006)

Other women also discussed how the presence of Catholicism in Mexican culture generates a double morality in terms of gender roles, sex and women's sexuality.

They are not myths. They are realities...If you go to indigenous towns, away from the urban, you hear stories where you say WHAT? That if it is the wedding night and the wedding sheets are not stained they beat the woman. I mean, you ask yourself: What is wrong with these people? I mean they do not have a reason to do that. I mean, if the [woman has sex before] and she likes it then WHAT IS THE BIG DEAL? But, you do find people like that. Crazy people. In Mexico, the church has a lot of influence on the people. For example, I have had the opportunity to observe and find out that priests are driving around in cars that you say 'Get out!' I see them in limousines, for example. Then you see the drunks praying to the Virgen of Guadalupe and I do not know who else. Saying they will not sin again. And, after two months when they forget about their

³³ My study was conducted in the summer of 2006 around election time in Mexico.

promise they get the drunkest they have ever been in their life because they feel they have fulfilled their promise. They return to their homes they beat their wife or rape their daughter or their son because they were so drunk or drugged and they go back to church and with three 'Our Fathers'³⁴ they fix the sins they have committed and they forget about it. Then they are good fathers. In Mexico that exists. Those myths of women in Mexican society of submissive, left behind, and if you are 18-years-old and not married, you are left. Your train has passed. Those are not myths! Those are realities!! If I start to talk about small towns, NO WAY! I cannot even begin to tell you. If at 30-years-old you are not married, they have labeled you as an old maid and people want to do tests on you to see if you are still fertile. (Rosa, Mexico City, July 19, 2006)

Rosa later goes on to say that she thinks the double morality does not just exist in the rural, primarily indigenous populations, but also people who lived in the city had more access to education and alternative forms of thinking. Gaby in Mexico City discusses how this double morality is closely tied to women's expression of their sexuality as being one tied to guilt since Catholicism uses guilt to control the society.

Here it is traditional and conservative. Always about finding love and getting married so you can procreate. You do not see it as going from one relationship to the next, of living your sexuality without guilt. That is what we have a lot from the Catholic Church. The guilt. Being a woman who lives her sexuality is not about giving you satisfaction, it is about feeling guilt. That is what you see in Mexico. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006)

In Monterrey, two women in their thirties seemed to discuss the prominence of double morality in the area.

There is a double morality that exists because even if a couple is supposed to love each other and be true to each other, men are still in power and women must obey the man. That comes a lot from older ways of thinking and the influence of the Church. I just got done reading an article in *El Universal*³⁵ of a study done in Mexico City regarding San Pedro³⁶. San Pedro is the area with the most money and the richest here. There you have people with the most money and access to education. They have opportunities to study, to prepare themselves, to support

³⁴ A prayer in Catholicism.

³⁵ A national newspaper in Mexico

³⁶ An affluent area of Monterrey

themselves. Supposedly if you have access to those resources, you should be more open-minded and have more cultural diversity. However, it is not true that one comes with the other because they found that the majority of divorces in Mexico happen in San Pedro. The majority of those cases and the problems that lead to divorce is domestic violence. That violence shows that men still have the power and that men feel they can beat their wives. (Sophia, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Paulina, also from Monterrey, discussed how she thought *SATC* presented an alternative viewpoint for women even though culturally many women of the area would not vocally express their desire to ascribe to the new representation for fear of what society would say of them:

I think after a woman sees the show it can open a new way of thinking for her. I do not think she will go out on the street and announce ‘I am free from society’s mores’ but it does allow new ideas. Well, it depends on the woman because I can imagine many women here saying that, ‘Oh no, how could we be like that. Those characters are a bunch of whores.’ However, I think some women will stay quiet but deep down the little idea gets into them and they might wonder, ‘could I be like that?’ (Paulina, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Finally, women also discussed how family plays a role in reifying these gender constructions and many times the family puts pressure on these women if they deviate too much from the cultural norms and expectations.

That issue of getting married dressed in white was important for me because I knew it was important for my mother...One still has those types of ideas that are traditions and values that you have from growing up in your house. (Rosa, Mexico City, July 19, 2006)

A woman like me in Mexican society is the minority. I mean, if we stop to look around, everyone is married. In the end, the ideal woman or the achievement for women is to get married. You do not see a happy woman in society without being married. I tell you this because I hear it from my parents all the time. They tell me that I am not happy. I tell them I am happy and that it is important for me to enjoy my own life. And I ask them ‘Oh well, what do you want me to do?’ They tell me I should look for a husband, get married, have children and have a family. I tell them that I would like to but I just have not found anyone worth my time. There is still too much submissiveness and a man looks for a woman who

has not had a lot of boyfriends and who is young and a woman of the house. That kind of thing. To be my age, to see women of my age single, well I break away from the idea of the ideal. (Sophia, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

I have been very criticized by my family. They tell me how it is not possible that I am 29-years-old and not married...that I am an old maid. Since I was 22-years-old I have been an old maid because all of my cousins got married at 19 or 20-years-old. And I look at them and then I say 'What?' I have had the opportunity to meet people, I have enjoyed myself and I have the possibility of meeting more people and I am opening myself up to more possibilities and not just saying this is the love of my life and with him I am going to get married and with him my life will definitely be happy, no. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

As seen above, women discussed the gender roles and institutions that play a role in reaffirming ideas of femininity in Mexican culture. However, women also used the interview time to express their frustrations, the limitations and oppositions they feel with the socially constructed norms, particularly based on their experiences. The ability for women to express themselves is what Brown (1994) argues is the power of the spoken text where "people talk about their lived experience in relation to what they have seen and heard on television" (p. 13). This will be referred to throughout the following section when discussing the characters on *SATC*.

The Pink of a New Perfection

As previously discussed the ideas of women and women's roles in Mexican society have been ascribed by institutions, like religion and politics, and continue to be reified in culture, society and family. Part of this reification stems from the usage of mythic stories and archetypes in a text. Archetypal *dramatis personae* is one of the narrative elements that Olson (1999) discusses is important in a transnational text's ability to have narrative transparency in a foreign culture. Narrative transparency allows people to relate a foreign media text to their own cultural context, using their own beliefs

and values in that interpretation (Olson, 1999). Archetypal *dramatis personae* are the characters that transcend cultures and have an affective component of universal appeal (Olson, 1999). Archetypes are “derived from the repeated observation that, for instance, the myths and fairytales of the world literature contain definite motifs which crop up everywhere” (Huake & Alister, 2001, p. 30). An example can be found in various texts, like the Bible, and what Caputi’s (2004) describes as two common female archetypes:

Patriarchal ‘good girls’ are associated with niceness and all-around impotence, toothlessness. The ‘bad girl’ or *femme fatale* is the always dangerous abyss, the black hole, and the *vagina dentata*—the one that still has some bite (p. 328).

Therefore most people can distinguish woman characters as being an example of one or the other. Throughout the interviews, many women identified with the archetypes and especially the mythic search for love in *SATC*. However, while Olson cites cases like the Gbagyi people in Nigeria interpreting and relating to the television show *Dallas* by associating J.R. Ewing as the trickster worm in Nigerian mythology (1999), these women mostly made reference to Brothers Grimm tales, such as *The Frog Prince*, or colloquialisms to discuss the archetypes that are found in Mexican culture, such as “*mi media naranja*³⁷.” However, while these women could relate to these old stories of searching for love and ideas of women, what attracted them to *Sex and the City* was that they believed it challenged those archetypes and/or stereotypes to create new ones.

When asking women to discuss the main characters, their preferences among the main characters, and the characters they identified with, there were discrepancies between the responses in Mexico City and Monterrey. Many felt that each character

³⁷ Literally translated, “my half orange;” meaning that search for your other half

represented a stereotype of contemporary women among the interviews: seven women mentioned that they could identify with characteristics and situations presented with every main female protagonist in the group, four identified with a combination of two main female protagonists and nine identified with only one character.

However, while most of these women could identify with the archetypes and stereotypes used in *SATC*, they also felt that the text challenged these representations by providing new representations. In Mexico City, three women had Carrie as their favorite character and the other three had Carrie with a combination of another female protagonist. Carrie was liked for her fashion, her independence, she is the one that drives the story, for being laid back and for being a good friend. Three women in Mexico City did not like Charlotte for her need to always follow norms, her obsession with marriage and motherhood. Despite not liking Charlotte, Sara likes that her character breaks away from the myth of living happily ever after when you get married to your prince charming:

When Charlotte gets married to the first man who is the best doctor, in the best wedding, with the best family...It visually and apparently seems like the perfect marriage. In the end, however, it is not. The mother-in-law was a pain, and Charlotte was not truly happy, I remember thinking, 'Wow! They are really dealing with the reality of things. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2007)

Others felt that the characters followed the myth of searching for love but at the same time presenting other stereotypes of women:

Here you have independent women, successful, the woman who has fulfilled certain satisfactions in their professional and financial life, but are now in search for the third part of love and feelings. It is that struggle for having those things and perhaps in that order, while in Mexican culture, it is reversed, if any...That search for my half orange [or my other half] does follow the same myths of love and women, but it has changed. (Selena, Mexico City, July 20, 2006).

Most women in Monterrey identified Charlotte's character as the one that was the most representative of women in Mexico. Five women mentioned Charlotte's representation as the good girl of the group.

Charlotte continues to follow that idea of the blue prince³⁸ and to get married dressed in white without sleeping with the man—that will make her happy. In a certain form, that character exists in many cultures. (Sophia, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Charlotte is your typical Regia³⁹ girl. Right? She is all sweet, all nice, all innocent but she also has her devil inside. That is how Charlotte is and that is how a lot of the girls around here act. (Paulina, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Charlotte is the typical woman. She is just looking to see when she is going to get married. For her, sex has to be about love. She is obsessed with motherhood. She is the most 'old fashion' in her ways. She likes the marriage, the family, lalalalala. (Catalina, Monterrey, August 8, 2006)

Charlotte is the, the sorority girl that has her job and an independent life but she is always thinking about marriage and having children. She maintains certain conservative values and she is not as open to talk about certain things as her other friends. She does not like to take risks and thinks in a traditional way. (Gloria, Monterrey, August 15, 2006)

While some of these women admitted to identifying with Charlotte, two women admitted that they had a hard time accepting that they identified with Charlotte's character.

I think, even if I really do not like the character, that I identify with Charlotte most. She is very conservative in a certain way. I would like to be more carefree and not care what others think of me, but I cannot. I am not...I do not like to take risks that could affect my personal life and I do not like to think of things outside of the system. Even though I am not very happy with that realization, I am most like Charlotte. (Diana, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

³⁸ A colloquial term meaning "prince charming"

³⁹ Meaning from the Regiomontana Region of Monterrey

While I really like Carrie because she is liberal, I identify with most with Charlotte because I am timid and I am still more closed-minded than I would like to admit. I am still more conservative and I have not tried to be more like Carrie yet. So, while I admire Carrie's personality, I identify more with Charlotte because it is closer to my reality. (Betty, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

It seems like this identification with Charlotte's character presents a problem for these women by recognizing that while throughout their discussion of women and gender roles in Mexican society, they also seem to be self-reflexive in recognizing aspects within themselves that might not be considered modern and progressive. According to Brown (1994), when women speak about television, they recognize "a kind of subjectivity, or space into which we are supposed to fit, constructed by our culture for us even though we do not occupy it" (p. 174). Therefore the dominant social construction of gender and women still remains a part of consciousness and women "recognize it, understand it, and must deal with it" (Brown, 1994, p. 174). The genre of soap opera therefore provides a space for "women's resistive pleasure" even while trying to constrain women to the "hegemonic femininity" designed to keep women in their "place" (Brown, 1994, p. 174). *SATC* is similar in its portrayal of gender politics. Women therefore have agency and can use their television viewing as cultural capital for gaining strategic knowledge from the text through its representations and plot. Women from a more conservative area of Mexico when compared to Mexico City also like how *Sex and the City (SATC)* represents alternative ways of looking at myths, archetypes and constructions of society. When discussing her favorite episode "Women, the Myth and the Viagra," Maria reflects how *SATC* deals with idealized structures of society that:

They deal with the whole structure of society. Women have an ideal for men and many times that does not exist. Or always having that expectation that the blue

prince [prince charming] will come and rescue you in that moment. It is the episode that is most representative that there has always been urban legends. They meet and he falls in love, he asks her to be his wife and they get married. I laughed in that episode when Carrie says how there is always rain because they do always bring rain at that moment to make the scene romantic and that all the things in love can happen. That is representative of society. As much American as it is Mexican. The woman stays a lot with that idea that they are feeding her since childhood that men can be marvelous. You can find your prince charming, do not worry. A woman can change a man and things like that. (Maria, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

Later on in the interview, Maria discussed how even though she does not identify or prefer Charlotte's character, she feels that what happens in her first marriage makes her the most controversial character by challenging the idea of the perfect marriage.

Charlotte I think is the most controversial because she starts off my being an independent worker who works at an art gallery and she graduates from some of the best schools. She is looking for the perfect marriage. She gets the perfect marriage but that perfect marriage becomes ruined because everything is not what it appears. She then finds another man who is not the perfect, most handsome man but he loves her and respects her and all her thoughts that she grew up about the perfect man and marriage change. That really got me to think about these myths and the idealized future you think you deserve to have. It is not always what it seems. (Maria, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

Samantha, who would be more like the bad girl/femme fatale of the group for her open sexuality and promiscuous nature also seemed as a character that women looked to, even though she was not necessarily the favorite character or the character they identified with. Angelica in Monterrey liked Samantha because she felt she was a character that was not really seen in Mexican culture or television.

Here in Mexico we are starting to see more characters like these. Barely, but we are...I think we can also be as successful as them and take a new stance as women in Mexican society. For example, Samantha is like the male that does not mix her feelings in a relationship. She goes after what she wants and it is like she is changing that taboo that women can really do that if they desire. I like her independence and that the characters can be alone, do what they want, and be happy. (Angelica, Monterrey, August 22, 2006)

Therefore, while Olson identifies the usage of archetypal *dramatis personae* in a narrative to relate the foreign text to one's cultural context, in this case, women liked *SATC* for its challenging of archetypes, stereotypes and myths that were presented in the text to make the text more applicable to their lived experiences of college-educated women who have/want careers and represent more nontraditional ways of being as women in Mexican society.

Text and the Self

Some women did, however, acknowledge the changes with their generation and/or group of friends that have allowed women to have some other roles, such as having a career and being a professional. As previously mentioned, these women's educations, ages and careers allowed them to have cultural capital and cultural proximity with the text, oftentimes allowing women to identify with *SATC* as well as using the text to examine their positions and the possibilities that they have when deciding to live their lives away from the cultural expectations and norms. By watching *SATC*, the women also seemed to use their talking about the text as cultural capital that empowered them from the machista, religious Mexican society.

We are all born with that 'chip.' The one that says I am going to get married and my wedding is going to be a dream. I will have my perfect family with two dogs and four children and it is going to be a marriage without problems. But, reality is not like that. Because of that, the issue of divorce is used. Now I have friends who have gotten married that say, in that 'chip' of marriage also exists that 'chip' of divorce. If it does not work, they get divorced. And before, especially in my family, it was that if you get married, you stay married forever. And if there was a point where you cannot stand your husband, well you got married and you are screwed. But it is also good that there has been more freedom there, even though it is not considered 100% the best choice, but to be able to say I am going to go with my partner and get married to see if it will work. Or that there are people

like me who say no. Right now marriage is not what I am looking for. I am not looking for it and I do not need it. I see my friends who are married with their children and I say, no. Not me. What I want is not that. If one day it happens, well good. But you do not have that mentality as a child to say this is my boyfriend and I am going to marry him. Not anymore. It has been a liberation for me and it has worked for me. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

I started watching it when I was 17-years-old when I was more innocent and did not know anything. I remember when I saw all the third and fourth season, I saw it back-to-back on DVD, it was like also questioning yourself in what I really wanted and how things were going on in my relationship. It provides a way for looking at yourself and your actions. (Helena, Monterrey, August 17, 2006)

Other women used the text as a way of self-reflecting on the ways that women also play a part in the reification of having men in control and women as subordinated to that control. Selena in Mexico City used one of her favorite episodes to discuss this:

There is one episode that really grabs my attention when Carrie and Samantha go to a celebration at a church, I do not remember if it was a wedding or what, but Mr. Big's mother was going to be there but he does not invite Carrie to go. [Carrie] goes disguised to go to the mass in order to see Big with his mother. So, I started thinking about everything that a woman is capable of doing when she feels she is excluded from a man's life to better understand what he does when he is not around her. The wanting to find a way of understanding and knowing the life of the other when he is not around her. That really got my attention because in the end women will do a lot of things, disobey certain guidelines or unwritten rules in a relationship with the effort to know more about the other person. And I started to think, why do we women always make it about them, the men? Why do we give men that much power in a relationship? (Selena, Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

Sara, also in Mexico City, used *SATC* as a way of examining “fantasy spaces where the behavioral possibilities within patriarchy are explored” (Brown, 1994, p. 179) by the testing of social boundaries through resistive pleasure.

I think finally in a program open to deal with the women's movement in the aspect that women are not submissive as much as they were before and now women are looking at the constant battle for power. To say, men are strong, they have the best jobs, they were the ones that were socially recognized. So this has encouraged women to say, well, why can't we be better than them? And to say

why can't we also be successful? A winner? Independent? I do not need a man by my side to have what I want. So, I think that is very good that a show allows you to reflect upon yourself and your abilities. (Sara, Mexico City, July 10, 2006)

These examples of raised consciousness allow for an application of the oppositional gaze that bell hooks (1992) sees as a site of agency where subordinated groups can also raise an oppositional consciousness, in this case women see their actions and experiences to be aware of both how they are constrained by the gender politics of women in society but also how they can resist these gender constructions in society.

Opening up Discussions

While my interviews with women were only a conversation between me and the interviewee, several women discussed how *Sex and the City (SATC)* provided topics for conversations to have with friends and/or family as well as open up topics of conversation that they did not have before with their friends and/or family. Also as mentioned in the previous chapter, the issue of friendship is central to the narrative of the show. Many women seemed to find pleasure in Carrie's voice-overs and the discussions amongst the female protagonists as they got together and discussed issues in coffee shops, bar scenes and their apartments. I would like to suggest that the usage of voice-overs and the discussions amongst the characters in the narrative also become an important tool in raising consciousness and providing a space for women to listen to the spoken text of women, regardless if the women on the screen were using a script. This in turn provided conversation topics that women could later have with friends and/or family.

The usage of voice-overs was rarely used in television, but in *SATC* was a way of presenting the worldviews discussed in the narrative's plot and a reminder to the viewer that it is being told from the perspective of a woman. It also allows women the opportunity to engage with women's talk, resistive pleasure and the raising of consciousness by providing a "liminal experience" where voice-overs in teenage programming provide "that intense, suspended moment between yesterday and tomorrow, between childhood and adulthood, between being a nobody and a somebody, when everything is in question and anything is possible" (Julian, 1999, p. 2). Characters, like those in *Sex and the City (SATC)*, pose questions and situations that have them in a transition period of trying to discover themselves with different opportunities that a liminal experience offers, especially in questions of gender roles, women's sexuality and it their relationships.

Carrie begins every episode with a question. It is like nothing has been said or nothing has been written. It does not say, this is how you have to live. No. It begins with a question and it is like saying, I do not know how everyone else lives but I live like this and I ask myself. Many of the questions that were posed were very interesting. The relationships between man and women, the way relationships are when they are established and how women change when they are married. That is very real! How others look at you when they are engaged or married and you show up to a reunion and you are alone and you continue being alone and everyone feels sorry for you. They ask you, Why are you alone? I love that they examine these issues! It begins with a question and I see it as a good opportunity to ask yourself about your own life and what is happening to you. To ask, What did I do for this to happen? Or What can I do so that this does not continue to occur? You do it to learn...Every episode can teach you, or demonstrate another way of learning. I love that they are women who do not suffer. In my culture, the women, I do not know if it is like that in other cultures, but here, the woman has to have a lot of suffering and you have to pay a high price to suffer. What the show demonstrates is that it does not have to be a high price of suffering. You can keep going. (Raquel, Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

The show is very liberal and it has a way of liberating women. In the beginning it was like—No, women do not live like that, they do not behave like that. Then you said, of course they do! That is how we talk, and we do childish things, it is just that it was in the closet. It is now more uncovered. I have noticed in my friends that before no one brought up things like that and now it is like we are more open. We talk, we comment, we see. It has opened up different themes amongst friends. Before, it was a gender issue because the men were the ones that talked. They were the ones who were open, went out, they did out-of-control things like that. Now women have the luxury of doing those kinds of things also. (Helena, Monterrey, August 17, 2006)

Many times because of the themes, we used them to start discussions with my group of friends when we got together (Selena, Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

Alejandra, in Mexico City, proposes that female viewers can also use their time of watching *SATC* as a form of empowerment by watching new representations that allow spaces to test the boundaries they are ascribed to and engage (La Pastina, 2005) in resistive pleasure.

For a woman to see programs like this, to sit down for half an hour...it is good because she can listen to what is happening [in the episode] and not feel guilt afterwards for wanting to leave her husband or that she cheated on her husband because here in Mexico that is looked upon very negatively. Not many families accept that. In reality many people do not accept that a woman thought about cheating on her husband and things like that. I think that is why many people liked the show. (Alejandra, Mexico City, July 12, 2006)

Some of these women engaged with the text as a way of raising consciousness and later going back to their social circles to discuss controversial female topics that allowed some women to take part in resistive pleasure when discussing these topics with friends and family.

I identify with relationships that they have with their partners and friendships. The relationships, things to do with sex, the communication and the friendships that they have with giving each other, the advice and everything they go through together. On Thursdays I get together with my friends and we talk about the show. We start to take a theme and we start to look at how those themes relate or

not with what is happening in our lives, so we give advice to each other based on the program. There is some playing, some laughing and some seriousness. I have four friends who watch *Sex and the City* and we take the themes of the program of that week and related it to what happens to us. (Itzel, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

My sister and I watch it together and we talk about things...I say if these women can do it, if these women can, then why do we have to limit ourselves? There are women who do not divorce their husbands because culturally they think, well I got married and that is how it is. So, it can allow women who are in situations to say, when I can do it also. If they can, then I can also. I am free, I am a woman and nothing is going to happen. (Gloria, Monterrey, August 15, 2006)

Through these discussions with other women, these women appear to not only raise their consciousness but be empowered to talk with others as a form of resisting the hegemonic patriarchal structures around them.

Spaces for Change: Dating Manuals, Advice and the Female Body

While all the interviewees used *Sex and the City (SATC)* to discuss their experiences and ideas of gender roles and the challenging of these gender roles through the text, some discussed how *SATC* has created spaces for change in their lives. These changes seem to stem more from just an alternative viewpoint for women to have about themselves and society. Some women seemed to provide examples of how they used aspects of the text to live out their sexuality and/or reaffirm their life choices. In La Pastina's (2005) media engagement model, the last stage focuses on "behavior change, if any, based on the viewer's engagement with the text" (p. 8). Besides the accounts of empowerment and resistive pleasure that have been described above, some women actually discussed how *SATC* has encouraged them to change their behavior and views about themselves in Mexico. By change, I am referring to these women's ability to

restructure within themselves some of the norms and values in society and have more agency in their perceptions of self.

I have changed my perspective and my way of looking at things. It is like you open certain outlooks and you take away the cobwebs. So, I insist the importance of not living with guilt. The 'go for it!' of living your sexuality without guilt. And if you want to do it for pleasure and only for pleasure, then do it! It does not have to be a relationship that ends in a stable relationship or in a long-lasting relationship. Instead, if you are attracted to a guy and he makes little eyes at you and you know it is only not going to last more than two or three days, well that is fine. To live that without a bad complex or guilt is what has been important for me. For me, personally, *Sex and the City* has helped me live without that guilt. And I speak for myself because I do not know what it could represent to the rest. But, I think that it can help you change a little your way of thinking and to leave those cultural backgrounds of tradition and of guilt that we have. (Gaby, Mexico City, July 13, 2006)

In this case, Gaby has been empowered to live her life without guilt and to live her sexuality in a different way that would cause her to change based on the engagement of the text. Raquel in Mexico City also described the new way of looking at her body as a space for change that was influenced by the text.

The expression of female sexuality. The appropriation of the body. That I think is super important that, that I observe in Mexican feminine culture is not the same. I mean that in Mexican culture in a big part, especially in more traditional sectors, of controlling women's sexuality. I think *Sex and the City* provides the autonomy and the freedom to say, I want to live my life and I am not going to respond to the expectations or what the feminine expectations say, or the expectations of womanhood. Instead, simply it is like looking at another way of life that is being presented to women and how they struggle with the appropriations of their body or their emotions. So, I do not think it is necessary to center it in feminine discourse. Instead in contemporary life where they found their own form of living and how they want to live their lives. What I like is that they what to live it with the most pleasure and I am not referring to only sexual pleasure. Instead the pleasure to discover how they are and to live in the world, their world around them and how the series is very concrete. It centers around human relationships of men and women and the expression of sexuality. Those are things that I am trying to do in my life more. (Raquel, Mexico City, July 20, 2006)

Raquel also describes the influence that *SATC* has had on her and describes how watching the show has given her strategic knowledge and cultural capital to resist the dominant system of religion, politics and patriarchy to live a more self-gratifying life.

When I started watching the series, and until now I am making this conclusion, I think that I needed a response to know how relationships work and how relationships should be or what were the rules of a relationship. I have only had two boyfriends until now. The one I currently have and another that lasted a week. My relationships have either been casual or they do not amount to anything. When I started watching the series it was like I was looking for answers and it gave them to me. It is because I watched the series and then I would look at relationships of people and I could see a comparison. It is a new way of looking at women. Especially because there are many places in my culture where they tell you that you have to be dressed in white at your wedding, be a virgin. Or that you cannot have sexual relations before you get married or that you can only be with one person and that you should be faithful. Being unfaithful is the worse thing you can do or have done to you. The show gives you more awareness of the consequences that those actions can have on a relationship. I mean, they do not give anyone a manual saying that this will happen to you if you are in a relationship. No, for me, *Sex and the City* is the dating manual that no one ever gave me. Somehow it has a way of having you reflect on what happens in a relationship when watching the series. (Maria, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

For Maria in Monterrey, the text becomes a dating manual for looking at relationships when discussing her need of getting responses to answers about relationships. Other women talked about learning about relationship and getting advice from the dialogues and situations that happen to the characters of the show.

I learn from the dialogues and the advice they give you through the situations” (Itzel, Monterrey, August 14, 2006)

It does leave you a message and, I don’t know, if one day you have a romantic problem, then you watch the series and say, I can do this or I can look at it this way” (Angelica, Monterrey, August 22, 2006)

As described previously by other women, in a culture where women are supposed to be self-sacrificing and suffering, perhaps spaces for this kind of discussion is limited in her

life so she resorts to the women's talk and resistive pleasure on the show to get the answers that she needs.

Research in reception studies of transnational texts have also supported the idea that viewers will use the themes and plot of a text to open up "opportunities for families to talk about sensitive issues" (McAnany & La Pastina, 1994, p. 837). Only one woman in Monterrey mentioned the discussion about sensitive, controversial topics with her mother due to the show's content. While other women did see it with their mother, no accounts were made of this space for dialogue except when it came to friends. This is similar to the talk among friends presented in *SATC*.

One night my mother asked me 'why do you like that the series?' She really does not know much English but she could translate the name of the series into Spanish. She told me she did not understand, based on the name, why I watched the show. She was sure it was all about sex but I told her it was not like that. [I told her] that it was about four women who are very different and how they dealt with themes and situations. Situations that are serious. Situations that are sad. Situations that are funny. And that is how we live in life. Things that can happen "logically." That it was "logical" that these things happen. (Daniela, Monterrey, August 11, 2006)

Daniela mentioned that she watched the show with her mother, but that the mother really did not become a fan. Instead, *SATC* has provided the opportunity to learn more about sex and to include her mother in the process.

It really did not catch her attention. The series has also interested me not so much in sex but the themes that are related to sex. I have sat down occasionally to look at webpages that look at diseases and things related to sex. Sometimes my mother sits down with me because she also does not know a lot. It has changed my perspective, not so much that I want to have sex, but that I want to know about the consequences and the dangers that exist when you decide to have sex. (Daniela, Monterrey, August 11, 2006)

Therefore the usage of topics like sex encouraged a young woman, who mentioned in the interview that she was the first woman in her family to get a college education, to learn more about a topic that is considered taboo in Mexican culture.

Finally, a woman in her thirties discusses how *SATC*'s representation of older, single successful women has allowed her to reaffirm her life choices in a society where marriage is ideal for a woman, where she gets pressure from her parents, and where she is considered an old maid.

Maybe it went 'click' to other women the way it went 'click' to me because the way I see my life, it is not about that search for the man I will marry. To be able to find characters or situations that I have lived or that I am going to live or that I would like to live by, give you the ability to identify with it. When all around you, you realize that people are just thinking about a ring and with who they are going to marry, you tend to change your way of thinking with a show like this one...I saw the show as a form of living my thirties without fears of being single. Without the fear to say, I am single and even if I do not have a partner, I am not bitter. I mean, it is not like the train is leaving me. I saw it more from the perspective that it is neat to be able to live your single years. I mean they live their lives with all the problems associated with living their single years. The not having a man by your side. The falling in love and not being able to fall in love with what you do not want. But, in the end, none of the women are bitter about being single and none of them are going to be dress saints their whole lives at a church [referring to being old maids dedicated to the church]. That new stereotype of seeing women live their lives gave me that hope that I have possibilities to stay single if I want to. That is what I liked about it...It was a way of living out and enduring my thirties as a happy and not bitter woman, and caring less about what other thought. (Sophia, Monterrey, August 23, 2006)

Sophia therefore has used the text as cultural capital and strategic knowledge for reaffirming in herself her life experiences and choices against a society that has more traditional roles and expectations for women.

Significance of Chapter

Throughout this chapter I have focused primarily on how the reading and interpretations discussed in the previous chapter have led to appropriations and in some instances spaces for change in the interviewees. This chapter has been a space for me to comment on how these twenty Mexican women have engaged (La Pastina, 2005) with *Sex and the City (SATC)* in Mexico and how their ability to comment on the constructed gender roles and myths in relation to their lives and experiences has allowed women's talk to be a form of resistive pleasure.

Through the spoken text, resistive pleasure has led to resistive reading practices that can make the reader or viewer a "cultural critic and instigator of social change" (Brown, 1994, p. 177). While I am not suggesting that these women will start a social movement based on *SATC*, I am suggesting that it has led to a raised consciousness of these women in Mexican society that can allow for the oppositional gaze, where agency exists for women to have an "oppositional consciousness" (Brown, 1994, p. 181). Some women have used this "oppositional consciousness" and made it work for them. Meaning that they have changed their ideas of sexuality, ideas of the body, sought out advice from the text and reaffirmed their life choices. Brown (1994) suggests that this oppositional consciousness can only be politically powerful when it is shared with others and that it becomes a collaborative act where it can "develop a concept of agency that works toward new levels of empowerment" (p. 181). This section has looked at women's narratives of *SATC* by focusing on how women have shared alternative

viewpoints and forms of resistive pleasure that can influence change in their lives while being constrained to Mexican culture and society.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: FINAL DISCUSSIONS AND ROOM FOR GROWTH

This thesis sought to understand the media engagement and reception process of twenty women from Mexico with the transnational, U.S. produced *Sex and the City* (*SATC*). From my analysis I categorized themes based on these women's narratives that reflected the negotiations and patterns of identification as well as the appropriation and possible aspects of change that these women claimed to experience when watching *SATC*. I hope these findings can contribute to the understanding of global media, foreign audiences, and cultural identity; particularly U.S. media and its impact in Mexico. Throughout this final chapter, I will summarize the important findings of my study, suggest how my study contributes to the field of cultural and media studies, and discuss the limitations of my study.

Summary of Findings

As previously mentioned, the matrices of genre, gender, class and location all play a role in the media engagement (La Pastina, 2005) process and the audience is constantly shifting between these mediated forces and their identities to create understanding and interpretation of the text. As these women discussed their preferences and interpretations of *SATC*, they described their reception experiences integrating the cultural bound norms and values in Mexico with their lived experiences. From the last two chapters, it is evident that these women were active audience members that discussed their experiences as college-educated, career driven women associated with modernity but living in the traditional, patriarchal society of Mexico. These elements

made up the hybrid identities of these women, which they made reference to when discussing *SATC*.

The fact that most women preferred to watch the show in English and did not like the dubbed/censored versions shown on local television distinguishes the women in my sample as having a level of cultural capital that is not representative of Mexican culture. The women not only preferred the English version of the show, but also had access to the show on cable and/or DVD sets. This is important because it suggests that watching *SATC* in English and its original version allowed women to perform a modern, cosmopolitan role that represents their aspirations as well as identity. The issue of education and socioeconomics, therefore, played a factor in the reception of *SATC* and the access that these women had to the television show.

All the women at some point in the interview discussed that they watched *SATC* because they liked the themes, characters and new representation of women. For these women, U.S. programming differed from Mexican programming especially in the way that women were represented. The women seemed to suggest that the most popular form of Mexican programming, telenovelas, did not offer a representation that they could relate to with their experiences in society as educated women who had/ or wanted a career. They seemed to suggest that they preferred watching television from other countries, particularly from the U.S., because it resonated with their experiences more and did not present women as “submissive” or “dumb.” The women claimed that Mexican television was too “conservative” and “traditional” to discuss themes like sex; particularly with women. However, the women also distinguished that only a “part of

society” would prefer these new representations and provocative themes, and that Mexican television was for less educated people.

In terms of discussing the representation of women on *SATC*, women talked about the gender roles, myths and structural forces of Mexican society to engage in resistive pleasure and talk about gender politics. Mary Ellen Brown’s (1994) work with women talking about soap operas found that due to the devaluation of women’s talk in society, providing a space for women to talk about “their lives and interests with an awareness of their mutual oppression” can allow women’s talk to be “mutually validating and therefore often pleasurable and potentially empowering” (p. 33). Providing women the opportunity to talk about the soap operas or television shows they watched gives women a “situation in which their talk is validated [and] can produce confidence and the potential ability to speak again” (Brown, 1994, p. 34).

For these Mexican women, discussing *SATC* allowed them to express concerns over the representation of women in telenovelas, the importance of other alternative views being available to women and experiences that have allowed them to foster spaces for change based on *SATC*’s content and characters. While many contextual factors, such as education, socioeconomics and geographic location framed the respondent comments, *SATC* seemed to act as a source of strategic knowledge and cultural capital for women to open up new discussions with friends and family, and as new ways of looking and living out their sexuality and ideas of the female body which are constrained by cultural, patriarchal forces.

Elements in *SATC* that were problematic for women in Mexico City and Monterrey were the consumerism and excessive shopping of the characters on the show and the absence of family in the narrative. However, women engaged with elements delineated by Olson (1999), such as verisimilitude and ellipticality, to their readings and interpretation of the show in a way that made sense to them. For example, some women saw the consumerism represented on the show as a way of demarcating the differences between U.S. and Mexican economic experiences. Others used it as a way of explaining that they understood the melodramatic content of the drama without rejecting the value and/or application of certain aspects in their lives, and a few completed a picture in their own minds by creating an understanding that fit their values and behaviors.

When describing differences between *SATC* and the Mexican experience, location was a factor in how women described the differences. In Mexico City, women compared issues, such as socioeconomics to the U.S. or abroad, while women in Monterrey were more attuned to look at the capital, Mexico City, in order to compare these differences. Therefore, in considering the translocal, it is important to acknowledge that the U.S. is not always at the center of cultural exchange, while keeping other cultures or cultural spaces in the periphery (Kraidy, 2005).

When looking at patterns of identification, location also played a factor. There seemed to be more identification in Mexico City with themes of sexuality and the independent, working woman. In Monterrey there seemed to be more identification with a new representation of age and the aspect of friendship. While all the women interviewed felt that these themes were central in their acceptance and liking of the

show, women in Mexico City focused more on sexuality and women who work, and women in Monterrey on the new perspective of age and the importance of friendships.

In summary, these women's educations, ages, socioeconomics and careers allowed them to have cultural capital and cultural proximity with the text, oftentimes allowing women to identify with *SATC* as well as using the text to examine their positions and the possibilities that they have when deciding to live their lives away from the cultural expectations and norms.

Significance of Findings

While my intention was not to generalize findings of *SATC* to the Mexican population, I still think that it can contribute to media and cultural studies based on my findings. As already established, the cultural capital of the women interviewed allowed them to understand the genre rules of *SATC*, interpret the text based on familiarity with other U.S. television shows, and make the text more culturally proximate for these women. This, in turn, supports the importance of looking at hybrid identities, the structural and contextual factors that will influence an audience's reading, and ways that women appropriate watching television as a form of resistive pleasure, it also provides possible avenues for expanding some of the theories used in my theoretical framework.

Olson's (1999) theory of narrative transparency suggests that the usage of specific elements in U.S. television and movies allow viewers to relate a foreign media text to their own cultural context. Olson cites the Gbagyi people in Nigeria interpreting and relating to the television show *Dallas* by associating J.R. Ewing as the trickster worm in Nigerian mythology (1999). However, the women in my study were mostly

drawn to *Sex and the City (SATC)* because they felt that it challenged the old children's stories, stereotypes and archetypes that exist in Mexican culture and not vice versa.

While these women did relate some of Olson's elements to their reception process, such as verisimilitude and ellipticality, Olson's theory is limited in only looking at internal elements utilized by the text and not structural forces that the foreign audience is embedded in.

In conjunction, reception studies has done a lot of work with identification and looking at elements that audiences prefer due to the similarities that exist between a foreign media text and a foreign audience. However, what these women liked the most about *SATC* were the different representations of women and alternative viewpoints that the show presented. As already mentioned, these women preferred and identified with the provocative themes used in U.S. programming as opposed to Mexican programming, the different views of sexuality, and the representation of women characters on the show talking about sex in an open manner. All of these characteristics differ from Mexican culture and programming. Therefore expanding the research focus in reception studies might be beneficial to also understanding the pleasures of difference that also exist when foreign audiences watch and interpret a foreign text. Having women compare *SATC* to Mexican culture allowed them to engage in resistive pleasure because they expressed their concerns over the representation of women in telenovelas, the importance of alternative viewpoints being available to women, and experiences that have allowed these women to foster spaces for change based on *SATC*'s content and characters.

These discussions also served as a way for these women to position themselves as different from the Mexican population. The women not only see U.S. programs as a form of “proximity to modernity” in preferring the representation of women with freedom and independence, but also as a way of distinguishing them as educated, career-oriented women that differentiates them from the “lower” sectors of society that watch the Mexican television programs. Most of these women commented that they only watch U.S. programming. The characteristics of these women as urban-living, college-educated, career-driven women who watch U.S. television can be associated with modernity. Their positions in Mexican society and as women who live in two of the three largest cities in Mexico give them the cultural capital of being familiar with the brand names like Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik.

As mentioned in Chapter I, the characters of *SATC* partake in the multitude pleasure of consumption with expensive designer clothes and the lifestyles that the characters emulate. A consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998) with narcissistic (Lasch, 1979), other-directed characters (Reisman, 1961) that are part of the leisure class (Veblen, 1899) is an important element of *SATC* and a “code” that is communicated throughout the narrative. Perhaps further research must be more critical about the value-systems that are being viewed by foreign audiences to see the influence that these values have on cultural identity and these systems of distinction. While the women in my sample were skeptical about the consumerism of the show, they also were very vocal about how Mexican programming was for “less educated” people and distinguished themselves as cosmopolitan, modern women. As U.S. media remains a leading force in

the global flow of media products, it is important to also critically see how value-systems depicted in U.S. media are interpreted and reified, if any, in other countries. In my study, the presence of U.S. cultural products in Mexico provided an alternative choice in programming that provided content, resistive pleasure, and voice to subordinated groups, such as women in Mexico. Nevertheless, the prominence and influence of foreign media, as opposed to local, was also evident. For example, most Mexican women making references to only other U.S. television shows or making reference to Brothers Grimm tales, such as *The Frog Prince* to discuss child stories.

Limitations of Study

Some limitations to my study are that as a qualitative researcher, I have interpreted these women's narratives regarding *Sex and the City (SATC)*. I have also translated all the interviews during the transcription. Recognizing that language is distinct to each culture, translating some idioms and colloquialism might have changed the effect of what these women were trying to state in Spanish. I have tried to stick to the most pure form of translation, but I also recognize that in order for it to make sense in English there has to be some slight modifications made to the meaning.

My study also consists of women who were recruited by convenience sampling. These women were self-identified and/or self-recruited fans of the program, which might be viewed as more engaged and more talkative viewers of *SATC*. Expanding the research to different areas and having a sample that is more representative of the diverse population of Mexico might contribute to different findings. Reaching different sectors of society in Mexico, perhaps those with less education, economic and cultural capital

might provide more information on how those factors change the reception and engagement process.

I also would have liked to have had a more even distribution of interviews between Mexico City and Monterrey to allow more room for comparison. Unfortunately, I did not have an informant in Mexico City and the summer time schedules made it difficult to get more women to participate in the study. Perhaps with more time I would have tried to incorporate a multi-method, ethnographic approach to better understand the context, reading and interpretation of *SATC* in these two locations. Perhaps doing some focus groups would provide a good source of women's resistive pleasure through the spoken text and allow more commentary on these interactions. Also, focusing on more specific issues, such as women's health topics or women's sexuality might have provided more insight in the accounts of empowerment, agency and change.

Final Thoughts

Further examination of transnational texts and the ways audiences engage with these texts is important in examining the implications that cultural consumption of a specific foreign cultural product can have on the local culture. It was interesting to me how many of these women mentioned contemporary U.S. television shows as their preferences on television. These high levels of cultural consumption affect, in this case, Mexican culture and identity. While these women seemed to focus on their viewing of *SATC* as having a positive impact in Mexico, it might also be important to examine the negative impacts it might have on culture and identity. With Mexico's proximity to the

U.S., the growing presence of Latino populations in the U.S. and the migration flows of people, it is important to focus on this transnational flow of popular culture products to unpack the different mediating forces and matrices that affect this flow among nation-states, from the political to the individual level.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. ¿Cuándo fue la primera vez que viste *Sexo en la Ciudad*? ¿Te acuerdas cuál fue el episodio o la temporada?
2. ¿Qué pensaste de la serie de televisión después de ver los primeros episodios?
3. ¿Con qué frecuencia ves o viste el programa de *Sexo en la Ciudad*?
4. ¿Ves *Sexo en la Ciudad* sola? Si no, con quién ves la serie de televisión?
5. ¿Dónde ves *Sexo en la Ciudad*? ¿En tu casa? ¿En la casa de una amiga/o o en casa de un pariente?
6. ¿Ves la serie de *Sexo en la Ciudad* por televisión abierta o por contrato? ¿En qué canal es?
7. ¿Cuando ves a *Sexo en la Ciudad*, lo ves en inglés, en español, con subtítulos, doblado?
8. ¿Tienes episodios de la serie grabada para cuando no puedes ver el programa? ¿O le pides a alguien que te lo grabe?
9. ¿Haz comprado la serie de televisión para tenerlo cuando quieras ver el programa?
10. ¿Tienes un episodio que es tu favorito de la serie *Sexo en la Ciudad*? ¿Cuál es?
11. ¿La serie está en su última temporada, hay alguna temporada de la serie que te guste más? ¿Por qué?
12. ¿La serie en México tiene un nivel de audiencia alta, a qué crees que se deba? ¿Por qué gustan a la serie en México?

Preguntas sobre los Personajes

13. ¿Me puedes describir a los personajes principales de *Sexo en la Ciudad*?
14. ¿Cómo ves a los personajes de *Sexo en la Ciudad*? (Por ejemplo: las admiras, quieres ser como ellas, no te gustan, etc.)
15. ¿Qué personaje te gusta más? ¿Por qué?

- 16 ¿Qué personaje te gusta menos o no te gusta? ¿Porque?
- 17 ¿Con qué personaje puedes identificarte más? ¿Porque?
- 18 ¿Consideras que los personajes en *Sexo en la Ciudad* representan o se parecen a mujeres contemporáneas mexicanas?
 ¿Si la respuesta es sí, en que?
 ¿Si la respuesta es no, por que?
- 19 ¿Piensas que los personajes masculinos de la serie representan o se parecen a los hombres contemporáneos mexicanos?
 ¿Si la respuesta es sí, en que?
 ¿Si la respuesta es no, por que?
20. ¿Que opinas de las vidas que representan los personajes principales? (por ejemplo: mujeres de treinta años que no están casadas, mujeres que se van de compras en lugar de tener un esposo y una familia)
21. ¿Tu crees que la representación de los personajes principales son diferentes de cómo se ven las mujeres y los hombres en los programas de México? Por favor explica.
22. ¿En tu opinión, tu crees que la forma de relación entre las mujeres en *Sexo en la Ciudad* son similares a las amistades en realidad? ¿Porque o porque no?
23. ¿En tu opinión, tu crees que las relaciones entre mujer y hombre en *Sexo en la Ciudad* son similares a las relaciones en realidad? ¿Porque o porque no?
24. ¿Hay una amistad o relación entre los personajes con que puedes identificarte?
 ¿Cual es o porque?
25. ¿Tu crees que la representación de los personajes de *Sexo en la Ciudad* esta cambiando la forma en como la sociedad ve diferentes aspectos de genero? Por favor explica.
26. ¿Tu crees que la representación de los personajes de *Sexo en la Ciudad* esta cambiando la formas en como la sociedad mexicana ve la sexualidad de la mujer? Por favor explica.

Temas, Cuentos, Mitos

27. ¿En tu opinión cuales son los temas más importantes que se tratan en *Sexo en la Ciudad*? ¿Porque?

28. ¿Con cuales temas te sientes mas identificada con o son mas de tu interés en *Sexo en la Ciudad*? ¿Porque?
29. ¿Tu crees que los temas de *Sexo en la Ciudad* son universales, es decir que se aplican a la cultura mexicana? ¿Porque o porque no?
30. ¿Qué piensas de los temas de *Sexo en la Ciudad* y las mujeres en México, es decir, crees que es un nuevo modo de ver a las mujeres o crees que no ofrece nada para las mujeres?
31. ¿Qué es lo que te gusta mas de *Sexo en la Ciudad*?
32. ¿Qué no te gusta de *Sexo en la Ciudad*?
33. ¿Tu crees que hay mitos (prototipos, patrones culturales) o un idealismo de como es la mujer en la cultura mexicana? ¿Cuáles son?
34. ¿Tu crees que *Sexo en la Ciudad* sigue esos mitos de la mujer?
35. ¿Tu crees que hay mitos o un idealismo de cómo son las relaciones entre hombre y mujer en la cultura mexicana? ¿Cuáles son?
36. ¿Tu crees que *Sexo en la Ciudad* sigue esos mitos de las relaciones entre hombre y mujer?
37. ¿Qué se te hizo real de las historias o temas tratados en *Sexo en la Ciudad*?
38. ¿Qué se te hizo exagerado?
39. ¿Te gusto como acabo la serie de *Sexo en la Ciudad*, es decir los episodios finales? ¿Porque o porque no?
40. ¿Si tú pudieras escribir el final de cada una de las protagonistas principales, cual seria?
41. Si tuvieras la oportunidad, que cambiarías de el programa *Sexo en la Ciudad* para hacer el programa más interesante para ti o más real para ti?
42. ¿Quisieras comentar algo más de lo que no hayamos hablado que quisieras extremar?

English Version of Questions

1. When did you begin watching *Sex and the City (SATC)*? Do you remember the episode or season?

2. What were your first thoughts of the television series after watching the first episodes that you saw?
3. How often do you or did you watch *SATC*?
4. Did you watch *SATC* by yourself? If not, with whom?
5. Where did you watch *SATC*?
6. On what channel did you watch *SATC*? Was it on cable or local television?
7. In what language did you watch the television series?
8. If you could not watch *SATC*, did you have episodes recorded or ask someone to record it for you?
9. Have you bought *SATC* to watch when you want?
10. Do you have a favorite episode on *Sex and the City (SATC)*?
11. Do you have a favorite season?
12. At one point *SATC* has high viewership. Why do you think that people liked the show in Mexico?
13. Can you describe for me the main characters of *SATC*.
14. What are your first thoughts of the main characters? (Ex: do you admire them? Do you want to be like them? Do you not like them?)
15. Which character is your favorite character on *SATC*.
16. Which character do you like least on *SATC*?
17. Which character do you identify with the most on *SATC*?
18. Do you think that the female characters on *SATC* represent contemporary Mexican women?
19. Do you think that the male characters on *Sex and the City (SATC)* represent contemporary Mexican men?

20. In general, what do you think of the lifestyles that the characters on *SATC* portray? (Ex: They are women who are over 30 years old and not married. Instead of having families, they do shopping, go out, date, etc.)
21. Do you think the representation of the main characters of *SATC* is different from the representation of women and men in Mexican programming? Please explain.
22. Do you think that the friendships depicted on *SATC* represent friendships in real life? Why? Why not?
23. Do you think the romantic relationships depicted on *SATC* represent romantic relationships in real life? Why? Why not?
24. Is there a friendship or relationship on *SATC* that you identify with? Why? Why not?
25. Do you think that the representation of the main characters of *SATC* is changing the way that Mexican society sees gender? How? Why? Why not?
26. Do you think that the representation of the main characters of *SATC* is changing the way that Mexican society sees a woman's sexuality? How? Why? Why not?
27. For you, what are the most important themes of *SATC*? Why?
28. Are there themes of *SATC* that you identify with? Please explain.
29. Do you think the themes on *SATC* are universal? Meaning, that you can also apply them to Mexican culture?
30. What are your thoughts of the themes on *SATC* and women in Mexico? Does it offer a new perspective? Please explain.
31. What did you like most about *SATC*?
32. What did you not like about *SATC*?
33. Do you think that there are myths about women in Mexican culture? Please explain them.
34. Does *Sex and the City (SATC)* follow these myths? Please explain.
35. Do you think there are myths about relationships in Mexican culture? Please explain them.

36. Does *SATC* follow these myths? Please explain.
37. What seemed real to you about *SATC*? Why?
38. What was exaggerated or fake about *SATC*? Why?
39. Did you like the way that *SATC* ended, particularly the final episodes? Please explain.
40. If you could write the ending of each main character on *SATC*, what would you write?
41. If you had the opportunity to change something about *SATC* to make it more interesting or real for you, what would you change?
42. These are all the questions I have for you, is there anything else that you would like to comment on or any final thoughts about *SATC*?

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHICS

Name	Birthplace	Age	Education level	Job/Career	Marital Status	Interview Location
Sara	Mexico City	29	completed college	fashion designer	single	Mexico City
Alejandra	Mexico City	27	completed college	marketing/public relations	single	Mexico City
Gaby	Acapulco	32	completed college	works for NGO	single	Mexico City
Rosa	Mexico City	27	completed college	marketing/public relations	married	Mexico City
Selena	Sonora	47	completed college	director of NGO	divorced	Mexico City
Raquel	Mexico City	39	completed college	works for NGO	divorced	Mexico City
Catalina	Monterrey,N.L	24	completed college	teacher/magazine editor	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Alicia	Tampico	21	currently in college	student at university	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Daniela	Monterrey,N.L	25	currently in college	works at technology office	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Itzel	Monterrey,N.L	29	completed college	secretary	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Maria	Tampico	21	currently in college	student at university	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Gloria	Monterrey,N.L	29	completed college	kindergarten teacher	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Helena	Monterrey,N.L	24	completed college	works at technology office	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Carmen	Monterrey,N.L	33	completed college	works at technology office	married	Monterrey,N.L.
Angelica	Cuidad Juarez, Chihuahua	21	currently in college	student at university	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Paulina	Monterrey,N.L	35	completed master's	works at technology office	married	Monterrey,N.L.
Diana	Saltillo	26	completed college	journalist	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Magdalena	Tamaulipas	20	currently in college	student at university	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Sophia	Monterrey,N.L	35	completed Master's	works at technology office	single	Monterrey,N.L.
Betty	Guanajuato	19	currently in college	student at university	single	Monterrey,N.L.

APPENDIX C

WOMEN'S VIEWERSHIP OF *SEX AND THE CITY*

Interviewee	Interview Location	When started watching?	With Who?	Cable/ Local DVD/ Rent	Language	Owns DVDs?
Sara	Mexico City	4 years ago	Alone or w/ mom	Channel 40, Rent, Borrowed DVDs	English w/ Spanish subtitles	No
Alejandra	Mexico City	4 years ago	Alone	Channel 40	English w/ Spanish subtitles	No
Gaby	Mexico City	3 years ago	Alone	Channel 40, Rent, TV Azteca7	Dubbed in Spanish, Channel 40 had option of SAP but her TV did not have option	No
Rosa	Mexico City	3 years ago	w/ husband	Channel AXN	English w/ Spanish subtitles	No
Selena	Mexico City	3 years ago	Alone	Channel 40	English w/ Spanish subtitles	No
Raquel	Mexico City	3 years ago	Alone	Sony Cable, TV Azteca7, Borrowed DVDs	Dubbed on TV Azteca7 and English w/ Spanish subtitles	No
Catalina	Monterrey	Can't remember	Alone or w/ friends	DVDs	English w/ Spanish subtitles	Yes
Alicia	Monterrey	4 years ago	Alone or w/ mom	Satellite HBO, TV Azteca13	English w/ Spanish subtitles & dubbed	No
Daniela	Monterrey	1 ½ years ago	Alone or w/ friend	TV Azteca7	Dubbed	No
Itzel	Monterrey	1 year ago	Alone	TV Azteca7	Dubbed	No
Maria	Monterrey	6 years ago	Alone or w/ sister	HBO & DVD	English w/ Spanish, English w/ English subtitles & dubbed	Yes
Gloria	Monterrey	2 months ago	w/ sister	TV Azteca7 & DVD	English w/ Spanish subtitles & dubbed	Yes
Helena	Monterrey	7 years ago	w/ friends, boyfriend or mother	HBO, DVD and once on TVAzteca7	English w/ Spanish subtitles & dubbed	Yes

APPENDIX C

WOMEN'S VIEWERSHIP OF *SEX AND THE CITY*

Interviewee	Interview Location	When started watching?	With Who?	Cable/ Local/ DVD/ Rent	Language	Owns DVDs?
Carmen	Monterrey	3 years ago	Alone or w/ husband	On HBO, TV Azteca7, & DVD	English w/ Spanish subtitles & dubbed	Yes
Angelica	Monterrey	1 year ago	w/ sister	Rent, TV Azteca7	English & dubbed	No
Paulina	Monterrey	4-5 years ago	w/ husband	HBO	English w/ Spanish subtitles	No
Diana	Monterrey	1 ½ years ago	Alone or w/ roommate	Borrowed DVDs from roommate	English	No
Magdalena	Monterrey	½ year ago	Alone or w/ sister	DVDs	English w/ English subtitles	Yes
Sophia	Monterrey	4 years ago	Alone or w/ friends	HBO, Rent, DVDs	English w/ Spanish & English w/ English subtitles	Yes
Betty	Monterrey	2 months ago	Alone	TV Azteca7	Dubbed	No

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