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# Identification and Mediascape-
# *Ally McBeal, Sex and the City* and Female Audiences

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# ABSTRACT

This is a study of the female audience of *Ally McBeal* (1997- 2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998- 2003). It explores questions of audience identification and the location of that identification within a broader 'mediascape' which informs the way audiences engage with individual media texts.

My research takes feminist audience studies of women and popular culture and more recent work on audiences and media culture as its starting point. It employs a qualitative, multi-method approach using message board analysis, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups to explore the different ways women talk about the series. It focuses on different 'layers' within the audience, from dedicated fans to less engaged viewers.

The study found that although these series have been described as superficial and trivial, their female audiences takes them seriously and engage with them in complex ways. It suggests a continuum of relationships between viewers and the characters and experiences portrayed on screen. At one end there is close and personal identification, where respondents relate to the characters through personal experiences while at the other is a gendered recognition of things that women experience. There are multiple positions between the two points.

The study suggests that the concept of a mediascape is fundamental to an understanding of contemporary audiences and the ways in which they consume media products. There also appears to be different levels of audience engagement with and activity within the mediascape.

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# INTRODUCTION

This study looks at two North American television series *Ally McBeal* (Fox) and *Sex and the City* (HBO). Both foreground successful, cosmopolitan, attractive, independent, heterosexual, single thirtysomething female protagonists[1]. The series are typical of the stylish, "quality" shows currently showing on American cable/satellite channels and bought in by British television channels with reputations for minority, youth and new genre programming. *Ally McBeal* first aired in America in 1997 and *Sex and the City* in 1998. They were bought by Channel 4 and shown in Britain in June 1998 and February 1999 respectively. Each was showcased for young single women. In America HBO is a cable channel aimed at the 18- 34 age bracket and *Sex and the City* was aimed at women in this bracket.

*Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were screened late on a weekday night and as part of a line up featuring "a new docusoap following girls on the pull, a series of serious minded plays about relationships and a single-girl drama, *Ally McBeal*" (*The Guardian*: 21/07/99). Once their popularity increased, the series moved to a Friday night line up which included other popular and critically acclaimed American series like *Friends*, *Frasier* and *Will and Grace*, with repeats shown on Wednesdays.

Both the programmes had different fortunes. Initially very popular, after five years *Ally McBeal* was axed for poor ratings. In its five year run the programme won two Emmy's and three Golden Globes. However, the final episode of *Sex and the City* "drew an average of 4.1[2] million viewers, representing 26.8% of the viewing public, rising to a peak of 4.5

[1] For an outline of these series and a list of characters see Appendix 1.
[2] The final episode of *Sex and the City* drew an audience of 10.6 million in the US (www.bbc.co.uk/news)

million half way through the show" (2004: bbc.co.uk/news). In its six year run the programme won six Emmy awards and eight Golden Globes. Four years after the television programme ended, *Sex and the City* the movie has recently been released on 28th May 2008 (UK release). It follows on from where the television programme ended, but three years on. This time the story follows Carrie and her impending wedding to Mr. Big. The movie has also received both praise and criticism from cultural critics, and it would be interesting to do further research with viewers to find out how they feel the television series translates to the big screen.

Both series were received in contradictory ways by cultural critics. *Ally McBeal* was described as portraying "a ditsy whiney mini-skirted anorexic" (*The Guardian*: 26/04/1999) and as part of a "remarkable period in American television", helping to end the "snobbery about the quality of American television" (*The Guardian*: 20/04/2002). The criticism of women's genres seems to exemplify the complex positioning within previous academic theory of women's popular culture, whether it be soap opera or women's magazines, drawing on a view of the audience as a passive mass. These series represent a shift to a positive representation of women, validating women's experiences and aimed at the female audience. These series can also be considered in a wider context that deserves investigation, as Whelehan notes [Bridget from *Bridget Jones's Diary*] "speaks to some deep-seated angst at the heart of many young women's life, and whatever the true source of that angst its expression gradually starts to crop up, not just in Fielding's chick lit successors but in other areas of popular culture" (2005: 175). She cites 1998 as the time when the Spice Girls and "girl power" was popular, when *Bridget Jones's Diary* was published in the USA and *Ally McBeal* was aired in the UK. All of which explore the experience of being a woman in this contemporary moment.

My personal interest in the series grew from my own enjoyment. *Sex and the City* was shown whilst I was at university studying for my undergraduate degree and I watched it, my room full of my female flat mates all gossiping about the series. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* seemed to have struck a chord with young women. In Lancaster where I was a student, a local nightclub began to show "*Sex and the City* Live on the big screen". Every week my friends and I would go to the nightclub, watch the DVDs and the most recent episode, all the while sipping our Cosmopolitans and Vodka Redbulls pretending Morecambe was Manhattan.

Both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* have been of interest to academics in addressing debates surrounding representations of women on television, femininity and feminism (Moseley and Read: 2002, Arthurs: 2003, Akass and McCabe: 2004, Bignell: 2004) and the place of television in a much broader context of media (Arthurs: 2003, Bignell: 2004, Akass and McCabe, 2004). The series have been praised for their focus on female characters and their presentation of a female point of view on issues such as sex, romance, family and friendship. The series have also been criticised by some academics (Ouellette: 2002, Dubrofsky: 2002) in continuing to portray female characters that have to make decisions between their feminine and feminist values and the continual portrayal of single women's pursuit of heterosexual romance and need for a relationship.

This thesis considers *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as two examples from a range of popular culture texts that seek to explore the contemporary experience of being a woman. Whelehan explored the popularity of *Bridget Jones's Diary* arguing that the book became a best seller "because women recognised within its irony their own experience of popular culture and especially the tensions between the lure of feminist politics and the fear of

losing one's femininity" (Whelehan, 2005: 190). *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are examples of television texts that offer the same pleasures to a particular segment of the female audience.

*Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are both distinctive as programmes in their focus on female protagonists, their development of romantic and sexual narratives, their address to young female viewers and the hybrid nature of the genre leading them to be called "dramedies". The programmes can be seen as part of a tradition of situation comedy and drama aimed at the female audience, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown* and *Cagney and Lacey.* These previous programmes explore women's relationships with work and home or what is translated into feminist and feminine values. These programmes tended to suggest that the female characters could not be successful in their "professional lives and still retain the traditional qualities of femininity" (Dow, 1996: 146).These programmes showed the female characters struggling to combine the so called masculine world of work with the female sphere of the home.

*Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* can be seen in this historical context but have key differences with these older programmes. The main difference being the way the series have a self knowing and ironic attitude to the struggles of women's lives. The approach to key issues such as femininity, feminism, sex and marriage are all subject to "a comedic mode of address as it oscillates between complicity and a critique of a consumer culture" (Arthurs, 2004: 130). As noted above this approach is part of a wider set of media texts exploring the contemporary experiences of being a woman.

In terms of genre both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* can also be considered distinctive. There are a number of hybrid genres currently proliferating on television, especially American examples like *E.R* (1994- Present day). However, *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* take this hybridity further referring to and borrowing from other media. Glenn Creeber describes *Ally McBeal* as embracing "aspects of situation comedy, soap opera, courtroom drama and MTV" (Creeber, 2002: 45). The series plays with fantasy and reality, using music, singing and CGI animation to show emotions and experiences. *Sex and the City* uses a magazine style and borrows from other media to appeal to the female audience (Arthurs: 2003, Bignell: 2004, McCabe and Akass: 2004). Jermyn (2004) argues that *Sex and the City* has become "part of the cultural fabric of everyday life" and a brand that the audience engage with, "not just in relation to the television programme they watch, but in the magazines they buy, the clothes they wear, even the drinks they order in bars" (Jermyn, 2004: 202).

In this thesis the term 'mediascape' (Appadurai: 1996) functions to describe the way a television programme is not viewed in isolation to other media. Although the relationship between text and audience is significant, the media text is a textual base from which networks of media operate. For example, both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are discussed in magazines and newspapers; the series itself explicitly references films, magazines, newspapers and celebrity. Arthurs argues *Sex and the City* draws on other media, such as magazines glossy address "with their consumer oriented advice" (Arthurs, 2004: 129). By this she means the way magazines approach issues like sex and fashion is familiar to the way *Sex and the City* also approach these topics. The series can be considered against a backdrop of interlocking texts and media such as interviews with the actresses in magazines, spoilers about the storylines, other series that the audience have

watched, journalistic pieces on the characters as related to feminism and fashion. The term 'mediascape' (Appadurai: 1996), therefore helps us to understand *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as part of a much broader media context.

Therefore viewing *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as part of a mediascape provides insight into how the audience talk about the series. This talk may be related directly to the series such as storylines or interviews with the stars or relate to other television programmes they watch, magazines they read, Internet sites they read or books they have read. This means the audience has specific knowledge on the series as well as information that may stem from the series.

Having outlined how the series are distinctive in terms of genre, their place in a wider context of media and genres and their appeal to academics, I want to highlight the key contributions the study hopes to achieve. There are four main contributions that make this study distinctive in how it seeks to engage with debates understanding the female audience, feminism and femininity. First, this is an empirical study that offers data and results based on a specific case of women's experiences watching *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The second contribution deals with changing issues of representation of female activities and perceptions. Both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* portray economically independent, successful, career women. These programmes explore the beliefs, attitudes and opinions on a range of topics such as sex, motherhood, family and friendship. This is explored in a reflexive postmodern approach that needs documenting and examining as a contemporary case study.

Third, this study responds to existing feminist audience research studies and seeks to build on and be reflexive with them. Prior research on the female audience has focused on women in the home, with limited or no outside paid work who look after the house and their children. It is this group of women that were considered the "female audience" of women's genres. This study reflects on a social or demographic change where potential actual career women are watching and engaging with career women as portrayed on screen. This study therefore seeks to update female audience research.

The fourth distinctive contribution of this study is the empirical approach that seeks to engage with new approaches in audience research studies. The study allows an exploration into specific programmes and content within the wider context of mediascape. As noted above this term is used to explain the way the programme is just one media text that the audience use and encounter everyday and the programmes should be understood in that context. This suggests that the audience may have different levels of engagement with the texts depending on their technological knowledge and their interaction with other media.

The focus for this study was therefore to explore the distinctive aspects of the series with members of the female audience combined with a new wave of audience studies thinking that seeks to explore media culture and media consumption. Questions the study seeks to engage with are:

- How do the audience relate to and understand these representations of women, femininity and feminism in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*?
- What elements are important in relating to these representations? In particular the study will explore the relevance of terms such as identification and desire

- Are these series distinctive to the audience? Do the audience consider *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as new kinds of programmes exploring issues from a women's perspective?
- How do the female audience talk about the series? Is the mediascape significant in understanding this talk? Does the mediascape suggest different levels of engagement in the programmes?

This study begins by exploring online fan discussions of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The sheer number of web sites available and the kinds of messages that were posted confirmed the popularity of the series. However, in order to explore different layers of the audience the study could not rely on message boards alone. Therefore several different research methods, all aiming to uncover how different women talked about the series were used. The focus was on "talk" to understand the various ways the audience engage with the series. This validating of women's talk is a key part of the series distinctiveness and interest for feminist scholars.

Chapter One offers a review of key studies of the female audience and discussions of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Chapter Two discusses the methodology employed for the study. Chapters Three, Four and Five are empirical chapters concerning the different methods employed in the research: message board analysis, questionnaires and interviews and the focus groups. The Conclusion draws out key areas of discussion in relation to existing research on the female audience.

# CHAPTER ONE- LITERATURE REVIEW

There are now a wealth of feminist audience studies that consider the way women interpret and understand popular culture. Of particular relevance for my own study, are three key feminist studies and a fourth area of debate on comedy in understanding the pleasures female audiences get from different genres. The chapter starts with an overview of audience research study approaches by Ang and Hermes (1991). The chapter is then divided into sections: "Radway and Genre", focusing on Janice Radway's (1984) study of female readers of romance novels; "Stacey and Identification", examining Jackie Stacey's (1994) work on Hollywood movie stars of the 1940s and 1950s and her analysis of identification and consumption and "Press and Generation", considering Andrea Press' (1994) work on the importance of generation and class in the way women understand television programmes. Finally, "Gray, Comedy and Taboo Subjects", looks at the work of Frances Gray (1994) and others to explore comedy as an area that is understudied with female audiences. The chapter will then move on to discuss readings of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as media texts and consider recent developments in theorising the media audience and the implications this has for contemporary audience studies such as my own.

Ien Ang and Joke Hermes (1991) provide a useful overview of approaches to the female audience, identifying a shift in the way gender and media consumption has been researched. Early work on women's popular media emphasized their relation to women's subordination in society. For example, Tuchman (1978) saw the mass media as a key mechanism in the reproduction of patriarchal sexual relations. These kinds of accounts were based on two assumptions. First, that mass media imagery is transparent and contains clear, though unrealistic messages about women. Second, that girls and women passively

absorb media messages as lessons about "real life". These assumptions slowly changed with the development of studies based on textual analysis. Social theorists began to emphasise the ways in which "media representations and narratives *construct* a multiplicity of...cultural definitions of femininity...which serve as subject positions that spectators might take up in order to enter into a meaningful relationship with the text (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 327).

Such *textual mechanisms* are responsible for engendering spectator identifications or the way the viewer identifies with a programme. Modleksi (1982), for example, suggested the spectator position constructed for the female viewer of soap opera is the "ideal mother". Although, the question of spectator positioning is a useful way to consider how media texts interpellate or position viewers, it does not look at the way actual viewers respond to such interpellations. The term interpellate[3] is used here to refer to the way a text addresses or positions the imagined reader or viewer. This kind of approach separates the analysis of *spectatorship* as a set of subject positions constructed in and through texts, from *social audiences* as the empirical social subjects actually engaged with texts. Reception analysis has shown that, inscribed spectator positions are not uniformly adopted. For example, Seiter et al,'s (1989) study of women soap opera viewers argued that a spectator position of "ideal mother", suggested by Modleski, was not accessible to working-class women. This kind of study shows that women in the audience "actively negotiate with textual constructions and interpellations in such a way that the meanings given to texts - and consequently the positions eventually taken up by readers - are brought in accordance with the women's social and subjective experiences" (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 329).

[3] Interpellation is a concept first coined by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to describe the process by which ideology addresses the (abstract) pre-ideological individual thus effectively producing him as subject proper (www.wikipedia.org- 03.03.08)

Gendered subjectivity is constantly in the process of reproduction and transformation and "woman" is "an inescapably determinate, evershifting category" (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 333). Because of this, audience research should be guided by asking "how gender, along with other major social axes like class and race is articulated in concrete practices of consumption" (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 334). This chapter will now consider three key feminist studies that engage with the "actual audience" and a fourth area of debate on comedy in understanding the pleasures female audiences get from different genres.

**Radway and Genre**

Janice Radway's (1984) exploration of women readers of romance novels is considered to be a key work of feminist audience research. One part of her conclusions is that the practice of reading was as important for the female readers as what they were reading. Radway argues that reading allows the women readers to escape and resist their domestic roles and responsibilities in the family. This idea of resistance is interesting and is a theme that is continued in this literature review as an aspect of engagement with a text. Another focus for this thesis lies in Radway's discussion on the knowledge of genre the female readers had. This segment will start with a brief outline of Radway's study and will then expand on the particular aspect of the study that is of interest here.

The development of different approaches to the audience, identified by Ang and Hermes, is mirrored in the approaches to romance narratives by feminist academics. Romance has been the focus of a great deal of feminist analysis (Firestone, 1971; Snitow, 1983; Modleski, 1984; Radway, 1987). Studies of romance novels have moved away from consideration of how they oppress women and reproduce patriarchal culture towards an

examination of how women use them as a resource in everyday life. Radway's study is a particular example of placing women's pleasures in the context of their own lives.

Radway's (1984) study combines a psychoanalytical approach with ethnographic methods in order to explore why women read and enjoy romance novels. Her argument is twofold: one, that the novels are a form of compensatory literature which fulfil a need in women that is not met in society, and two, that the novels are, for the readers, informative, or what they describe as "educational", in terms of teaching them about other countries and cultures. Radway focuses on a group of North American women, connected by their use of a bookstore managed by Dorothy Evans. Using interviews, informal chats, observation at the bookstore and a series of questionnaires she explores how these women interpret the novels.

The romance readers' knowledge of the genre is obvious from their descriptions of what distinguishes successful and failed romances. For them, a good romance features a unique and independent heroine who is unaware of her own beauty and her own sexual desires; includes a hero who is transformed by his desire to nurture the heroine; shows the heroine choosing the hero once he has been transformed; excludes explicit sex and violence; provides the reader with an emotional experience; and has a happy ending which lifts the readers' spirits. It is through the reader's identification of good and bad romances that Radway claims we can see how the *practice* of reading romance novels is pleasurable and compensatory. The term, "escape" is used in two ways. First, it describes the act of "denying the present" (Radway, 1991: 90). The readers escape from the psychological and emotional demands of the family (Radway, 1984: 92). Reading gives them time and space to be alone and to be preoccupied with their own needs in a way which can be fitted in with

their daily schedules. Second, "escape" refers to "relief in identifying with a life not their own" (Radway, 1991: 90). The novels give their readers the chance to escape into someone else's story, one which has a happy ending.

Radway draws on Nancy Chodorow's (1978) work which argues women have an emotional need for nurturance, relating back to an "incomplete oedipal resolution" between mother and daughter (Radway, 1984: 136). There is a wish to regress and reconstruct the mother/ daughter bond, or at least a feeling of nurturance associated with it. But this need is not met in the current structures of society. In particular, the family structure neglects the "reproduction and emotional support of the wife and mother" (Radway, 1991: 94). Women must use therefore other activities such as reading practices to fulfil this need. Other studies of women's popular media have also suggested that they offer women an escape from daily domestic life (McRobbie, 1991; Hermes, 1995). Modleski (1984) suggests that romance novels enable female readers to escape the demands of everyday life and mirror the feelings of the heroine in a state of pleasurable dependency.

Radway also shows that romance readers value the novels they read because of the information they contain. While the readers describe the novels as "fairytales and fantasies", they also see them as "containing accurate information about the world" (Radway, 1991: 109), particularly in relation to geography and history. They can feel their education has not stopped (Radway, 1991: 113).

Radway sees romance reading as resistance *and* compensatory. The act of reading is oppositional "because it allows women to resist momentarily their self-abnegating social role", while the narrative structure of the novel "embodies a simple recapitulation and

recommendation of patriarchy and its constituent social practices and ideology" (Radway, 1991: 210). While romance reading can be seen as a site of resistance, the romance itself "maintains the ideological status quo as it reconciles women to patriarchal culture and reintegrates them" (Radway, 1984: 217).

Radway's study of romance novels is significant because she explores the place of a particular media text in the women's lives and suggests a range of ways they may function: compensation, resistance, escape, education. Her approach to understanding the place of romance novels in the women's lives takes various routes. She situates the texts within a particular narrative structure, generic framework and network of social relations. She examines how the novels fit into leisure practices and treats popular texts and media consumption as complex. It is her exploration of the intersection of these that is significant in helping to understand what place media texts have in the women's lives.
Radway takes women's pleasures of popular culture seriously. In her work, women are active, expert readers of novels. But this approach seems to be in conflict with her final summation that what the readers cannot see is that the stories maintain the patriarchal status quo. She has been criticised for seeing the audience and their pleasures as something separate to herself, something she can study from the outside, thereby creating a gap between feminist critics and the audience. A challenge in this study has been finding a place from which to write and I have situated myself as a member of the audience of these series and used this as a basis from which to start exploring people's relationships to the series.

This thesis will draw out of Radway's study how the female reader understands genre. The participant's knowledge of the romance genre informed their expectations of the novels and

what they understood as good and bad novels. This knowledge is significant as the reader's relationship with the novels can also be placed in a wider context which includes their knowledge of genre and their daily lives. This idea of context will be expanded on, later in the chapter when considering what has been termed the mediascape. For now the key interest here is in how this genre knowledge might apply to the young female audience of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. As noted in the introduction, one of the key distinctive features of these programmes is that they are genre hybrids. What kind of genre knowledge's will the female audience have or need to understand *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*?

Although Radway's conclusions are considered insightful, her theoretical discussions are more problematic. In attempting to combine a psychoanalytical approach with a ethnographical one, she returns to the idea of the mass female audience as oppressed. Rather what is significant in her study is the fact that the female reader is media literate, can read and understand genres and use novels in their everyday life for their own needs and pleasures. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, as will be discussed later in the chapter have a very reflexive and postmodern approach to themes of heterosexual romance. Assuming the female audience also read and understand genre in this what will this suggest about the contemporary audience?

Radway's work is similar in some ways to the next study that will be discussed - Jackie Stacey's *Stargazing* (1994). Both combine psychoanalytical discussion of the text and ethnographic study of the audience. Both focus on the relationship between popular culture and the female audience. Although Radway's study seems to find reconciling psychoanalytical and ethnographic approaches to the audience problematic, Stacey's

approach is more defined. She uses psychoanalytical theory as a starting point to understand what has been theorised about the female audience in a textual sense and uses ethnographic methods to consider whether these theories are still relevant after talking to the actual female audience. Both approaches are still valid in understanding the female audience as they open up the debate that the female audience is mass and involves different kinds of women and different kinds of relationships with media.

**Stacey and Identification**

Cinema is another key area where the female audience and female representations have been discussed and theorised. Feminist discussion in film theory has been primarily engaged with the idea of "woman as image". The most cited work in this area is Laura Mulvey's (1975) discussion of visual pleasure in narrative cinema. Mulvey argues that the cinematic experience positions the spectator as masculine, constructing visual pleasures that deal with women through voyeurism and fetishism. One key study that sought to explore the female cinema spectator as an actual social position was Jackie Stacey's.

Stacey's study is insightful for a number of reasons including considering the geographical, cultural, national, historical and social contexts of the audience and Hollywood stars. Her discussions on consumption and fantasy are also of interest but it is her explanations of identification, desire and the female audience that this thesis will focus on. This aspect of her work is particularly relevant for this study in exploring how the female audience relate to female stars. This segment will start with a description of her study and then look at the importance of her theories on identification.

Jackie Stacey's (1994) study considers the textual positioning of the audience alongside an investigation of their relationship to the stars on screen. She identifies a lack of feminist study about Hollywood stars and even less work on how women look at images of femininity. She uses psychoanalytical explanations of the female spectator as a starting point to explore the relationship between the female spectator and the female Hollywood star. Using a questionnaire, she examines British women's memories of Hollywood cinema stars of the 1940s and 1950s, thereby situating her study historically, culturally, geographically and nationally.

Film studies, Stacey argues, conceptualises the "female spectator" as a textual construction, removed from historical locations and often understood in terms of the unconscious. For example, Laura Mulvey's (1975) discussion of visual pleasure in narrative cinema offers an analysis "of [the] deep rootedness of structures of patriarchal unconscious in the pleasures of popular cinema" (Stacey, 1994: 20). Although this approach has been influential, it tends to exclude female spectators and female pleasures from discussion. In contrast, cultural studies research has focused on the consumption of popular culture by the "actual audience". In this tradition the emphasis is on the audience's readings of media texts and their viewing practices, rather than on the text and the unconscious. For example, Hall's (1980) model of encoding/ decoding has been used to study popular culture texts such as soap opera (Hobson: 1982) and romance novels (Radway: 1984). These consider "not textual positioning but the interaction between the text and reader" (Stacey, 1994: 360). Stacey outlines her intention to try and combine these two approaches, one textually based and one socially based, in order to examine the relationship between female spectator and female Hollywood star.

Stacey's initial aim was to analyse historical material about cinema from the 1940s and 1950s, but this did not provide her with enough information and so she used advertisements in women's magazines to elicit letters from British women about their memories and opinions of Hollywood stars of the time. The answers she received were used to compile a questionnaire. Although she notes that there are problems with trying to combine ethnographic methods with approaches which rely on notions of the unconscious, she argues that it is important to attempt this in order to develop a consideration of "cultural processes such as memory, identity formation, fantasy and daydream involving unconscious processes but analysed in terms of conscious everyday meanings" (Stacey, 1994: 778). In this respect, her concerns about the significance of cultural reading practices in daily life are similar to Radway's.

Stacey argues that "in a culture where the circulation of idealised and desirable images of femininity constantly surrounds us, the phenomenon of fascination between women is hardly surprising" (Stacey, 1988: 114). Media texts are used to circulate ideas about gender and become resources for the way women take on femininity. This is of particular importance for feminist media studies which is concerned with the way femininities are produced, circulated and negotiated.

Stacey's study explores a diverse set of "identification fantasies and identification practices" (Stacey, 1991: 171) with "cinematic and extra-cinematic identification and identification based on similarity and differences" (Stacey, 1991: 72). This allows us to conceptualise identification and desire as a diverse set of processes. Where previous film studies suggest that the female spectator will either desire to be like *or* identify with the star, Stacey argues the relationship involves both (Stacey, 1991: 22). Stacey's respondents

used the term "identification" to describe the match or the mismatch between the self and the ideal portrayed by stars. Drawing on Andrew Tudor's work (1991: 136), Stacey identifies "cinematic identificatory fantasies and non-cinematic identificatory practices" between the audience and the Hollywood star. These are "devotion"- an attachment to a particular star; "adoration", which refers to very intense feelings for a star and a fascination with aspects of her image beyond her films; "worship", which is the way spectators view the stars as goddesses who are different and unattainable. Stacey argues that these three types of cinematic identification are about the denial of the self, while other identificatory practices relate to the loss of the self in the fantasy world of the star ideal and merging the self with this ideal (Stacey, 1994: 159). "Transcendence" is the term Stacey uses to describe the way respondents "pleasure in imagining themselves taking on the roles and identities of the stars whilst in the cinema" (Stacey, 1991: 145); "aspiration and inspiration" which refers to the "desire for transformation of the spectator's identity" (Stacey, 1991: 151), both in terms of body image and character qualities.

Extra-cinematic identificatory practices involve the "spectators engaging in some kind of practice of transformation of the self to become more like the star they admire or to involve others in the recognition of their similarity with the star" (Stacey, 1991: 159). So for example, "pretending" refers to the way respondents discussed childhood games, for example, turning a coal site into Beverley Hills in their imagination. "Resembling" involves having a physical resemblance to the star or character and so creating a link to the star. "Imitating" refers to reproducing behaviour or mannerisms from the screen and "copying" refers to the replication of appearance. Stacey shows that through the audience's engagement with Hollywood stars, British women could resist their position in society. Identification is not just about copying an ideal in terms of style and fashion but a potential

site of resistance for British women in the war time period. This notion of resistance builds on a developing view of engaging with popular texts as a complex process of negotiation which may involve a struggle with femininity. Stacey considers desire and identification as two key relationships in the way the female audience relate to and understand female stars. It is the processes of similarity and difference that she argues is important to this relationship.

Stacey explores the role of cinema as a major form of leisure activity for people in the 1940s and 1950s, identifying the dual role escapism played in this context. The cinema took the British spectator to "another place" both by portraying another place - glamorous America, and taking spectators away from daily hardships and realities of war. Escapism was also a physical experience, given that cinemas themselves were plush and glamorous environments, providing a "transitional space between everyday life outside the cinema and the fantasy world of Hollywood film" (Stacey, 1994: 99). Stacey argues that this form of media consumption can be understood in terms of a desire for utopia, following Richard Dyer's notion that entertainment offers audiences "the image of something better to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (Dyer, 1977: 177).

Stacey extends Dyer's model to explain that the pleasures of media consumption are "historically and culturally located" (Stacey, 1994: 99). The role of fantasy for the female spectator was therefore twofold: escaping from the harsh reality of wartime but also offering the experience of playing with fictional worlds. "Hollywood stars offered female spectators [such] utopian ideals and the fantasy of becoming that ideal" (Stacey, 1994: 124). Fantasy allowed spectators to put herself in the place of the female star and imagine

her world. She also considers the female spectator as a consumer and examines how spectatorship and consumption are linked in the cinematic context. She argues that the cinema screen has often been used as a shop window to sell clothes, make-up and other goods to female audiences. She identifies three instances where spectatorship and consumption are linked: the purchase of the film itself; use of commodity tie-ins in which stars advertise products which suggested audiences they could become like the star of their choice (Stacey, 1994: 212); and the commodification of female image where the spectator becomes a consumer of idealised images of femininity and is "invited to recognise self in that image and recreate the self through these goods" (Stacey, 1994: 183). Through consumption, spectators are promised a way of becoming more like the ideal but this, in reality, involves an "impossible transformation and endless reproduction of the desirable image" (Stacey, 1991: 212). Audiences relate to commodities and to "lifestyle" through media texts.

Stacey concludes that the relationship between star and spectator is a "complex negotiation of the self and other, image and ideal, subject and object" (Stacey, 1991: 227). Hollywood stars are symbolic "others". But her study also demonstrates the importance of geographical, historical, cultural and national specificity and the relationship of media texts to other social and cultural practices concerned with consumption, leisure and lifestyle. The specific constructions of Hollywood stars as glamorous, feminine ideals positioned them as objects of desire and identification. Stacey argues that today the mode of perception of stars and celebrities has changed from "one of distance and difference to proximity and similarity" (Stacey, 1991: 238) where stars' lifestyles appear to be much more accessible through the consumption of particular commodities. In wartime Britain, America was

another world but today American programmes, films and brands are commonplace and it is no longer quite such a far away, different place.

The key aspects this study will draw out of Stacey's work are how she defines and uses the terms identification and desire. Stacey's flexible approach and reworking of these terms make them important in understanding the relationship between the star and the female audience. As discussed previously, Stacey explains that in psychoanalytic theory of the cinema the apparatus is considered to be masculine (Mulvey; 1975). This offers "three rather frustrating options of masculinisation, masochism or marginality" (Stacey, 1988: 120) to explain female attachment to female characters. More useful are the terms desire and identification, but not used in the traditional psychoanalytical definition concerning theorists like Freud or Lacan. Stacey's approach allows us to conceptualise identification and desire as a diverse set of processes and suggests psychoanalytical theory offering a singular process of identification is unsatisfactory.

Stacey describes identification and desire as relating to the boundary between the self and the ideal which is a source of fascination. Within the cinematic context, identification involves admiring or attempting to merge the self with the star. Outside the cinematic context identification involves transforming to become more like the star. Stacey argues that these kinds of identification suggest an intimacy between femininities where the audience have a desire to become like the star. Where previous film studies suggest that the female spectator will either desire to be like *or* identify with the star, Stacey argues the relationship involves both (Stacey, 1991: 22).

Stacey's study therefore suggests a method of explaining the relationship the audience have with femininities on screen. Stacey's study was primarily concerned with cinema stars, which offers a different kind of experience to viewers than television. This study will therefore explore if these theories can be applied to the relationship young female audience have with the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. While Stacey was concerned with cinema, the next study to be examined looks specifically at women watching television.

**Press and Generation**

Another key area of feminist debate has focused on women and television. Traditionally audience research studies in this area have considered women and soap operas (Modleski: 1979: Brunsdon: 1981 Hobson: 1982: Ang: 1985, Brown: 1986, Geraghty: 1991) on its character, mode of address, reception and context of consumption. This study, however, is concerned with drama, or hybrid genres and one audience research study in particular, by Andrea Press (1991) that specifically explores the female audience and television drama. In particular, she explores the changing representation of women on screen and demographic changes in the audience. Press' focus is on class and generation as important in the way women respond to television dramas. This study is particularly interested in Press's discussion of the way young women watch representations of women in screen. The following section starts with a description of Press' study and then moves on to explore her conclusions on young women and its relevance to this thesis.

Andrea Press examined the portrayal of women on television during what she calls a period of transition, the movement from second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s to a new period "marked by a new confusion and a lack of assurance about the relationship between

family and society and women's part in each" (Press, 1991: 4). Her aim is to explore how the mass media represent these changes to women and how women conceptualise and respond to them. Television texts and their reception is considered against a "background of radically fluctuating ideas about gender identity, shifting representations of gender and actual concrete changes in the social, economic and cultural roles of both men and women in society" (Press, 1991: 5).

Press argues that the "advent of the feminist movement coincided with an increase in the number of working women depicted on screen and later an increase in the number of women shown both in the family and at work" (Press, 1991: 6). She identifies particular representations of women that coincide with societal changes and in family life. In early television programmes, women are depicted as bound up in domesticity, but after the advent of second wave feminism, strong women in the public domain and in non-traditional positions become more visible. Later still, a wider variety of representations of women became available, and there is a focus on women's roles in alternative family structures. Press is particularly interested in differences within the female audience, especially as these relate to class and generation. She found that class was important in the way that television was assessed as 'realistic' and in the way women identified with female characters. Generational differences were also apparent. Older women tended to be inspired by newer representations of working women and enjoyed seeing women in non-traditional roles, though they found characters that combined professional competence with tough sexuality offensive. In contrast, younger women were more critical of representations of women at work because of their greater experience in the workplace. Because they had less experience of family structures, they tended to see these in a traditional and idealised way. Press found that changing norms and representations of femininity were a source of

pressure for younger women because of their combination of older ideals of women's service to their families *and* newer ideals of women's capacity to compete with men in the workplace (Press, 1991: 169).

Press's work demonstrates how historical context, generation and social experience frame the readings that women make of television programmes. Women focus on the similarities and differences of female characters to evaluate what they see on screen. Their social experiences make it possible for them to be critical of some representations. The female audience is not a mass, but is made up of individuals with shared experiences.

The interest of Press's study for this thesis is twofold. First, her discussion on the way societal changes of the roles of women are reflected on screen is something this thesis engages with. In particular that *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are examples of a number of texts exploring contemporary women's experiences. Second, is Press's examination of the way generation produces differences in the way women respond to these changing female representations. The fact that younger women actually disliked portrayals of young career women combining family and career was interesting. This interplay between career and personal life is also seen as a key aspect for the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Press's study suggests this may be a source of recognition for young female viewers, but actually may not be enjoyed. It opens the possibility of resistance to female representations and a site of negotiation.

Press's study is useful in drawing out some key ideas on the changing representations of women. We should also consider her study as being from a particular theoretical historical time period, presenting a case study for the female audience and drama. This is due to the

motivations she reveals for her study. Press focuses on an exploration of working-class subculture of resistance to dominant ideology. She takes two positions of the audience, first that mass media is important in disseminating ideology and second, individuals receive media actively, viewers bring their own perspectives to what they watch.

The thesis has so far explored audience research studies on the female audience in relation to romance novels, cinema and television. These have raised key ideas in exploring the relationship the female audience have with *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. One other area for discussion in understanding this relationship is comedy.

**Gray, Comedy and Taboo Subjects**

Comic representations of women have not received as much critical audience study as the other areas identified. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are noted as containing comedy and offer an opportunity to contribute to this underdeveloped area with empirical data. This thesis has chosen to look at the discussions of Frances Gray (1994) as she particularly considers situation comedy as a genre that has a strong female tradition. This study is also interested in her examination of comedy as challenging female social roles and taboo subjects.

Gray argues that, although comedy often positions women as "the object of the male gaze but of the male laugh, not just to-be-looked-at but to-be-laughed-at, doubly removed from creativity" (Gray, 1994: 9), situation comedy is an area where there is a clear female comic tradition which focuses on women's lives. American comedies such as *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the 1970s are set in the feminine spheres of home and family and engage with women's attempts to combine home and work life. Changes in women's social roles have been reflected in the representation of women in situation

comedy. For example, *Kate and Allie* (1984- 1989) and *The Golden Girls* (1985- 1992) portrayed alternatives to traditional family structures, focusing respectively on two divorced women in their late thirties who move in together and pool their resources and a group of four retired women living together. Some of the more recent US situation comedies such as *Seinfeld* (1990- 1998), *Friends* (1994- 2004) and *Will and Grace* (1998-) also show alternative families made up of groups of friends.

Comedy may be used to challenge the traditional roles of women and offer a "critique of dominant ideologies" (Creeber, 2001: 61). Porter argues that,

> comedy is essentially an anarchic form that consistently resists notions of political correctness and polite behaviour. It is a cipher for anti-social desires that cannot be expressed elsewhere and as such often exults in the breaking of taboos and canonical attitudes regarding the body, sexuality and social behaviour (1998: 66)

The challenging of women's traditional roles and the breaking of taboos around acceptable female behaviour can be seen in early popular situation comedies like *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957). Lucy Ricardo constantly attempted to escape domesticity. She "endured marriage and housewifery by transforming them into Vaudeville" (Mellencamp, 1992: 67). In each episode of the show she plotted to become a star, like her husband Ricky, but failed each time. Through comedy, however, she was able to challenge the notion that being a housewife was a satisfactory role for women in society.

Similar examples can be found in more recent situation comedies. In *Roseanne* (1988-1997), for example, the central character uses "feminine" unruliness to push the limits of acceptable feminine behaviour (Rowe, 1997: 82). For Rowe the unruly woman "violates the unspoken feminine sanction against making a spectacle of herself" (1997: 76). Roseanne is

defined as unruly by excess, fatness and looseness all of which are defined in our culture as "violations of the codes of feminine posture and behaviour" (Rowe, 1997: 79).

In *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-) norms about maternal responsibilities and behaviour are subverted by the role reversal of Edina as rebellious mother and Saffy as conformist daughter. Much of the comedy of *Absolutely Fabulous* "centres on the question of female conduct and appropriate behaviour" (Skeggs and Kirkham, 1998: 292). Edina, the mother, uses drugs and alcohol to excess and is obsessed with fashion, fame and consumption, while Saffy is the sensible, straight-laced daughter looking after her mother.

Much of the comedy in both *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Roseanne* stems from sending up traditional acceptable feminine behaviour and appearance and the "expression of desires which cannot legitimately be expressed in 'serious; cultural modes" (Porter, 1998: 75). Both series offer a comic exploration of the roles of women in relation to motherhood, sexuality, family, domestic life, social pressures, questioning these and the viewer's expectations of them. Gray argues that "situation comedy placed women centre stage and addressed an audience of women sharing an experience of the world" (Gray, 1994: 78). The female viewers' recognition of women's experiences is the most important element here.

There are three main aspects of Gray's work that are relevant to this thesis. First, is the recognition of the changing representations of women in comedy. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* can be seen in this historical context of situation comedies exploring single women and their lives. Second, is the importance of comedy in challenging and posing questions on taboo subjects like the role of women in society. *Sex and the City* particularly, uses humour to explore previously taboo subjects, such as sex from a woman's point of view.

Third, is Gray's conclusion that comedy appeals to women because of the sense of sharing their experience of the world. This may be significant in understanding the relationship the young female audience have with *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City.*

Although Gray is theoretically engaging, her discussions are based from a psychoanalytical standpoint. It would also be useful to explore these ideas empirically, with the female audience to evaluate them. It will be interesting to see if the actual social audience experience comedy as Gray argues they are textually positioned to do so. We shall explore this later in the empirical chapters.

**Existing Literature: A Review**

So far three key feminist studies and a fourth area of debate on comedy have been discussed to explore the pleasures and relationships female audiences have with different genres. These studies have identified four key points for focus within this thesis. First, an empirical approach to the audience is important. Theoretical discussions, although insightful need to be combined with audience data to consider the actual social subject. Media reception is one of the practices in which the construction of (gender) identity takes place (Zoonen, 1994: 123). The media circulate ideas about gender and they may become resources for the way women take on femininity. However, media texts do not exist in isolation and it is important to consider their relation to their historical and social context and to other cultural practices.

Second, is the importance of social and demographic change within the female audience. Press particularly showed that the female audience is not one mass group and consists of

smaller sub groups. There are differences within the female audience and this has an influence on their reception of texts.

Third, are the changes in the representations of women in their concerns and activities. There is a historical context of women on television and these representations have changed over time and in line with changes at a wider social level. The relationship between career and personal life for female characters are two key markers for these changes. How the female audience then relate to these representations is something to be explored. Stacey and Press have suggested that identification and desire, recognition of similarity and difference, acceptance and resistance will be important in understand this relationship.

Four, is the importance of the context of viewing in understanding and experiencing media texts. The studies examined above ask what kinds of experiences women's media offers to its audiences and what kinds of relationships women form with them. They ask how we can make sense of these experiences and relationships in particular contexts and how, in late modern societies, these involve broader patterns of consumption, and particular ideas about lifestyle, identity and gender.

***Ally McBeal***

These areas of feminist and audience studies debate will be applied to the two series which form the focus of this thesis- *Ally McBeal* (Fox) and *Sex and the City* (HBO). The thesis will use the ideas described above (and in the introduction): moving on from existing research, considering the demographic and social change of the female audience, changes in female representations and the mediascape. The chapter is now divided into discussion on *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City* and New Approaches to Audience Research.

There has begun to be some academic discussion on *Ally McBeal* such as Rachel Moseley and Jacinta Read (2002). They engage with key topics as outlined in the introduction of this thesis of changing representations of women on screen and the changing demographic of the young female audience. Also of interest is their use of the term postfeminism which they take from popular uses in the press. This section will begin with an outline of their discussion and then an examination of their ideas of generational changes.

Moseley and Read argue that *Ally McBeal* can be located in relation to a tradition of US postfeminist television drama. The term "postfeminism" is used by different authors in different ways. Ann Brooks uses it to refer to an "intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism" (Brooks, 1997: 4), while Susan Faludi (1992) uses the term to describe a backlash against feminism. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards refer to postfeminism as "girlie":

> Girlie says we're not broken, and our desires aren't simply booby traps set by patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation- Barbie dolls, make-up, fashion magazines, high heels- and says using them isn't short hand for we've been duped. Using make-up isn't a sign of our sway to the market place and the male gaze, it can be sexy, campy, ironic or simply decorating ourselves without loaded issues (2000: 136)

However, common to all uses of the term is the assumption that it describes the historical period following the emergence of second wave feminism. Moseley and Read also use the term to consider how television drama represents the relationship between feminism and femininity during this period.

Drawing on Bonnie Dow's work, Moseley and Read consider three types of postfeminist drama from the 1980s and 1990s. In all these, femininity is represented in the programmes by personal life while feminism is represented by career. The first type is the "hybrid

professional serial drama" such as *L.A. Law* (1986- 1994). In this type of drama female character must choose between career and personal life, feminism and feminity; she cannot have both. The second type is "postfeminist family television" which portrays an idealised vision of family life and working motherhood - for example, Claire Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* (1984- 1992) is portrayed both as a successful lawyer and a successful mother. In this type of drama the ideal is shown and there is no conflict between femininity and feminism and women successfully combine the two. The third type is "postfeminist nirvana" also portrays female characters who successfully combine personal happiness and career, and in addition suggest that women *actually* have the best of both worlds and femininity and femininity are no longer seen to be in conflict (Moseley and Read, 2002: 231).

Moseley and Read argue that these forms dramatise *either* conflict *or* harmony between career and personal life, and by extension between feminism femininity. *Ally McBeal*, in contrast represents a fourth type which dramatizes the struggle to hold them together. In particular,

> the distinction and conflict between public and private and feminist and feminine identities is irrevocably deconstructed and integrated, in a way which Dow suggests.... ..is potentially subversive of both stereotyped representations of feminism and the gendered divisions between public and private (2002: 232).

In this type of drama, the relationship between personal life and career, femininity and feminism, is more complex than a simple either/ or relationship. For example, in *It's My Party* (2:4)[4] a judge holds Ally in contempt of court when she disregards his instructions not to wear short skirts in court. Ally refuses to comply and is forced to spend a night in jail. This episode self- reflexively engages with the conflict many critics point to about *Ally*

[4] The referencing of television programmes within this thesis is as follows: the first number refers to the series or season and the second number refers to the episode number from that series.

*McBeal*, arguing she cannot be feminist and feminine (successful in her career but embracing femininity in her clothing).

Moseley and Read argue that while other critics have tried to make sense of texts like *Ally McBeal* in relation to academic definitions of postfeminism, a more useful focus might be on the "popularly available meanings of feminism, the way in which terms such as feminism and postfeminism, and the identities associated with them, are constructed by and circulated in popular discourses" (Moseley and Read, 2002: 234), and thus how these are "understood in the public and private sphere" (Moseley and Read, 2002: 235). For example, articles in the British press represent *Ally McBeal* either as a backlash against feminism or as a postfeminist text where feminism is seen to be a period that has passed and the goals achieved. In the first reading, Ally is seen as having pursued feminist goals (her career) at the expense of feminine ones (her personal relationships). As Ally herself says in the pilot episode, she is a "victim of her own choices" and the series appears to show that feminism (her career) has not brought her happiness. In the second type of reading, Ally is seen as too feminine to be truly feminist, her short skirts and interest in romance conflicting with the feminism signified by her successful career as a lawyer (Moseley and Read, 2002: 237). Academic interpretations of *Ally McBeal* also demonstrate different readings of how the series addresses femininity and feminism. Like Moseley and Read, Ouellette argues that the series has "entered public consciousness as a 'statement' about feminism, postfeminism and women" (Moseley and Read , 2002: 315). However, she argues that it deals with tensions between femininity and feminism by positioning feminism as antiquated, obstructing young women's career goals. Ally appears to demonstrate that women can be "feminine *and* successful without feminism" (Moseley and Read , 2002: 322).

These readings assume that feminism and femininity are mutually exclusive - Ally has chosen or must choose one at the expense of the other. However, Moseley and Read argue that the series is not organized around this opposition. This is because it is targeted at:

> A generation that has grown up with taking for granted the feminist victories won by their mothers and thus for whom feminism exists at the level of popular commonsense rather than at the level of theoretical abstraction. This is a generation who have found that despite the best efforts of feminists, you cannot just wish femininity away, relegate it to the dustbin of history as the bad "other" of feminism. This is a generation for whom "having it all" means not giving things up (the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance) but struggling to reconcile out, feminist desires with our feminine desires (Moseley and Read , 2002: 238)

*Ally McBeal* is concerned with the problems, struggles and contradictions facing contemporary young women (Moseley and Read , 2002: 239). It can be read as a "dramatisation of the coming together of traditional feminist values with a historically and materially different experience of being young and female.....examining the tensions and contradictions of being female, feminine and feminist" (Moseley and Read , 2002: 240). The pleasure of *Ally McBeal* lies, not in choosing between femininity and feminism, but in the *recognition* of the struggle, not the impossibility of "having it ally" (Moseley and Read, 2002: 247).

This article, by Moseley and Read, helps to make clearer two key ideas this thesis seeks to engage with the audience. First, the changing female audience are described by Moseley and Read by their relationship to second wave feminism. What is important here is the shift in thinking about young female audiences, as different in terms of experiences, social and cultural contexts than other aspects of the female audience.

Second, are the changing representations of women on screen. Moseley and Read argue that *Ally McBeal* represents a new stage in postfeminist drama where the female characters do not have to choose between femininity and feminism (personal life and career) but show the struggle contemporary women face in trying to "have it all". This article argues this programme is distinctive and does warrant further academic exploration.

While Moseley and Read's discussions engage theoretically they do not include any empirical data, which would be useful in evaluating the ideas with the social audience. The discussions are therefore largely theoretical about the audience and are something this study seeks to explore with the young female audience.

***Sex and the City***

*Sex and the City* is similar to *Ally McBeal* in its focus on the contemporary experience of femaleness, femininity and feminism. Again there is just beginning to be academic focus on the series. This thesis focuses on Jane Arthurs article because it engages with two key concerns of this study, the changing representations of women and the mediascape. What follows is an outline of Arthur's discussions and a look at the key aspects this thesis wishes to draw from Arthurs' ideas.

Jane Arthurs argues that *Sex and the City* explores femaleness in relation to consumption and sexual freedom. *Sex and the City* "remediates" the content and address of women's magazines with their focus on glamour, sex, relationships and consumption for television and establishes its identity across interlocking circuits of media, celebrity and fashion. The term "remediation" refers to the way "media are continually commenting on, reproducing and replacing each other" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000: 55). The particular address of the series

is to an audience of "bourgeois bohemians" (Brooks, 2003: 86) and takes the consumerist approach to sexuality found in women's magazines in which "sexual pleasure and agency is frankly encouraged as part of a consumer lifestyle and attitude" (Arthurs, 2003: 85).

The series presents an "integrated lifestyle to be emulated" (Arthurs, 2003: 90). This concern with style is also used to express women's sexuality which combines "wantonness and perfect cut" (Arthurs, 2003: 91). In this sense, although the unruly female characters transgression of bourgeois sexual decorum marks the foursome as "unruly", "their adherence to the sleek control of the commodified body makes them compatible with capitalism" (Arthurs, 2003:92). In the process, aesthetic boundaries replace moral ones. Men are rejected as lovers if, for example, they are too short. The series emphasizes the tendency of men to disappoint women: clothes and shoes prove more reliable sources of satisfaction. Designer stilettos never disappoint and offer a fetish substitute for the satisfaction men fail to provide. Sex therefore becomes like shopping, a mark of identity (Arthurs, 2003: 94). But, Arthurs argues, the series also captures "the messy contingency of the everyday" within which feminism is "produced or inhibited in practice" (Arthurs, 2003: 95). In this way, it creates "a space in popular culture for interrogation of our own complicity in the process of commodification- women's narcissistic relation to the self, the production of fetishistic and alienated sexual relations- that continue to undermine our self esteem and contentment" (Arthurs, 2003: 95). *Sex and the City* plays with and gives space to the examination of women's relationship with the beauty industry and the production of the self through commodities. Consumption and lifestyle are especially important in *Sex and the City.* Arthurs argues that the series "self-consciously explores the instability of feminine identity in a postfeminist, postmodern consumer culture" (Arthurs, 2005: 139).

Most significant is the self reflexive attitude to consumption that contemporary women display.

Other writers have examined how the narratives and humour of *Sex and the City* are addressed to young women's experience of being female, feminine and feminist. Joanna Di Mattia (2004), argues that the use of romance in *Sex and the City* functions as a way of exploring the contradictions of women's relationships. There is a tension between second wave feminism's message, that Prince Charming is a patriarchal fiction and a woman does not need to keep house to be happy, and the question of whether modern woman needs Mr. Right and, if so, where's the harm? (Di Mattia, 2004: 17/18). Through a discussion of competing constructions of archetypal masculinities in Mr. Big, the wealthy, passionate, rich seducer and Aiden, the stable, kind rescuer, Di Mattia shows how the series deconstructs the classic romantic quest and "repositions Mr. Right as a constantly appealing figure, yet a fantasy that requires individual negotiation and redefinition" (Di Mattia, 2004: 31). This exploration of contradictions is also explored through humour.

According to Akass and McCabe, the humour of *Sex and the City* operates in a similar way. They explain how:

> the uneasy relationship with the erstwhile myths that shape women's lives and attitudes to fairy-tale romance and the happy-ever-after, the cult of motherhood, the glamour and the pursuit of the perfect body are at the core of what makes us laugh in the show (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 179/ 180).

Akass and McCabe argue that the humour of the female characters' discussions about sex allows the series to "undercut female investment in patriarchal fantasies and reveal the constructedness of fairy tales and cultural myths and consumerist discourses that construct women as Other" (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 184). The "series oscillates between the

subtlety of humour to understand how patriarchal narrative works and the tragedy that will befall anyone who tries to bring it down" (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 189). They claim that its depiction of women who tell their own stories about sex and relationships gives women a voice and allows them to poke fun at patriarchal roles and expectations. These kinds of tensions explored in *Sex and the City* have also been addressed by third wave feminist writers.

Astrid Henry has discussed the way that *Sex and the City* explores many of the issues that third wave feminists have engaged with. This generation of feminists have never lived in a world without the women's movement. Rather than dismiss the movement or distance themselves from it, they have "redefined it from their own generational perspective" (Henry, 2004: 66). They use the "term third wave" to distinguish themselves both generationally and ideologically from second wave feminists (Henry, 2004: 66). *Sex and the City* mirrors two main themes in third wave writing: women's choice about marriage and the liberation of sexual freedom and agency. It critiques the idea that all women aspire to marry and the characters "make choices that defy traditional conventions of heterosexual femininity" (Henry, 2004: 74). Like much third wave writing, *Sex and the City* is also concerned with women's sexual pleasure, presenting orgasm as a "fundamental right and essential part of sex" (Henry, 2004: 76). Borrowing from queer culture, the sexual experimentation portrayed in the series has "broadened the cultural definitions of heterosexuality to include a range of experiences and attitudes" (Henry, 2004: 78). As Madelaine Bunting notes, *Sex and the City* explores every "kind of sex- masturbation, dildos, telephone sex and blowjobs- comparing experiences, offering advice and encouragement. Nothing is out of bounds, sex is an adventure playground which doesn't necessarily have much to do with love" (09/02/01: *The Guardian*).

Henry argues that third wave feminism has "steered clear of prescribing a particular feminist agenda" (2004: 71), but rather focuses on the effects of individual choices on individual lives: to marry or not to marry, for example. Sex is a matter of individual choice and lifestyle. Individual choice is emphasised through a focus on the four protagonists' differing experiences and responses. For example, in *Secret Sex* (1:6) which explores the theme of shameful secrets, Carrie discovers that Mr. Big keeps her a secret from his friends, Miranda discovers her new boyfriend's secret is that he likes pornography, Samantha tells her friends she isn't ashamed that they know everyone she has slept with, while Charlotte tells of a previous affair she had with a Rabbi and told no-one about. Individuality and difference is about character and attitude and emotion rather than class, age or ethnicity.

Individual choice, the expression of identity through sex and style, and a broader notion of "lifestyle" are particularly important in creating the glamorous world that the characters inhabit and in inviting viewers to identify with them as "bourgeois bohemians". This is evident in the way the series examines sexual desires and practices from a woman's point of view. This is part of a more general shift in the way television represents sex and the emergence of a "mixed schedule that also offers a range of more sexually explicit genres" (Arthurs: 2005: 45). Instead of "legitimizing the tastes of the powerful, the market caters for a diversified range of consumers. Crucially, this now includes women as potential consumers of sexually explicit texts, whereas in the past they had been restricted to men" (Arthurs, 2004: 41).

In Arthurs discussion on *Sex and the City* there are two aspects this thesis will draw out. First, is that the female representations in the programme explore the contemporary experience of being women through consumption and lifestyle choices. Second, is that the

female audience watching *Sex and the City* find it appealing due to the familiar approach it uses to issues such as sex and fashion, as used in other media like magazines. Arthurs discussion makes clear the links between television programmes and mediascape and presents *Sex and the City* as a case example.

Although Arthurs discussions are theoretically engaging they do not include any empirical data, which would be useful in evaluating the ideas with the audience. The discussions are therefore largely theoretical about the female audience and are something this study seeks to explore with the young female audience. The thesis will now explore in more detail the idea of mediascape and what implications this idea has for the audience.

**Media Audiences and the Mediascape**

Arthurs discussions suggested ways the mediascape may function in relation to *Sex and the City*. In this section the thesis seeks to discuss this idea more thoroughly and consider new ideas in audience research studies. This review began with Ang and Hermes' (1991) claim that much existing audience research has tended to decontextualise the reception process from the ongoing flow of everyday life. They go on to argue that in a media-saturated world the audience can no longer be seen as "neatly demarcated categories of people, collectively set in relation to a single set of isolated texts and messages, each carrying finite number of subject positions" (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 340). Audience researchers need to move beyond reception analysis and develop an approach which views media consumption as "a set of heterogeneous and dispersed, intersecting and contradicting cultural practices" where the audience is "constantly exposed to a variety of media and forms, and participates in range of events and activities" (Ang and Hermes, 1991: 340). The term coined for explaining the intertextuality of media is "mediascape".

The term 'mediascape' is taken from the work of Arjun Appadurai (1996). In late modern societies audiences "experience the media...as a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens and billboards" (Appadurai, 1996: 35). From this "endless media stream" audiences can construct "imaginative worlds that suit them" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 107). One feature of the way this media stream has developed is that the gap between fans and the "ordinary audience" is closing (Abercrobie and Longhurst, 1998: 122). As Brooker notes, the experience of following a television programme has changed:

> The structures are there to enable an immersive, participatory engagement with the programme that crosses multiple media platforms and invites active contribution: not only for fans, who after all have been engaged in participatory culture around their favoured texts for decades, but also as part of the regular, 'mainstream' viewing experience (2004: 579).

The development of this participatory culture and the networks of information available to audiences must be taken into account in studying contemporary media texts and their audiences. The increased possibility of different levels of engagement with media texts by different sections of the audience is also of interest here.

It is useful here to consider some discussion on fans to make clear the implications this idea of mediascape has for understanding the audience. As suggested above this idea of extended media and use is most often discussed in relation to fans (Jenkins, 1992, Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, Brooker, 2004). Literature on fans suggest that they have an active relationship with texts as they become both producers and consumers and this makes them much more engaged with the text.

Fan culture also gives us the terminology for understanding the skills of the audience;

1. Technical skills- appreciation of how the textual effect is created which includes evaluation of acting, script, camera work and so on.
2. Analytical skills- analysis of the text from within the parameters of the text itself such as generic, plot, narrative.
3. Interpretative skills- stem from without the text where the audience might compare the text to something else, reality and everyday life.

(Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 142).

The "fan through his or her reading and discussion with others fills in context which enables him or her to come to fuller and more reasoned technical judgements" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 143). These skills therefore differ depending on the level of engagement with other media and so different members of the audience have different experiences of the series. This idea of levels of engagement can also be applied to the "ordinary" audience. One person watching *Sex and the City* might watch the programme and may have read something in a magazine, perhaps unintentionally about the show. Another viewer may watch the show, actively look for information about the stories, stars, music and so on in magazines, visit websites, and contribute their ideas about the show on message boards. These two people are watching the same programme but are engaging with it differently. This is not to loose the distinction between "fan" and "ordinary viewer" but rather to say in contemporary society due to changes in technology and the television industry they now have similar skills and opportunities in their relationship to a programme. This could also explain some of the appeal of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in that discussing it with others, reading or learning more about the series/ characters/ actors all add to enjoyment.

This idea of mediascape, therefore, has implications for studying audiences. Existing audience research studies have considered the context of the audience in relation to factors such as age, ethnicity and domestic relations. The mediascape suggests a further dimension, in seeing the audience as active and navigating through sources of information both about and stemming from the text. Different women therefore may have different levels of engagement with texts suggesting different experiences and knowledge levels. These may be dependent on other media activities (like reading magazines) or technological knowledge (using the Internet).

This is not to say, however, that the audience are the sole site of meaning but it does suggest a more complex relationship between audience and media than perhaps previously considered. This is not comparative study on fans and ordinary viewers but rather seeks to suggest that the differences are no longer so clear and this must have implications for audience research.

To examine the experience of the audience within a cultural flow of interconnected media means that the objective in audience research becomes more complex. In this, the "third generation" of audience theory, the aim is "to get a clear grasp of our contemporary 'media culture' and the question is "the cultural place of the media in the contemporary world. (Alasuutari: 1999: 6-7). For this generation of theorists, an understanding for the ways that "audiences are changing together with wider social and cultural changes in society" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 3) is also necessary. In fact, the concept of "audience" becomes problematic because processes such as commodification treat individuals simultaneously as consumers and members of the audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 36). In addition, being a member of an audience is now a "mundane event"

(Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 37) because the experience of being an audience has begun to "leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 37).

The notion of the mediascape suggests that we cannot view television programmes in isolation from other media. Media texts reference other media and other texts; new media "responds to, re-deploys, competes with and reforms other media" (Arthurs, 2003: 83) and one of the most distinctive things about *Sex and the City* is its remediation of the sitcom and the glossy magazine. According to Jonathan Bignell, *Sex and the City* "shares three aspects with the discourses of women's magazines: the trope of confession, the centrality of sexuality as the key to the expression of identity and commodity fetishism" (Bignell, 2004: 164). "Confession" is also a key theme in talk shows such as *Oprah* which encourage women to speak frankly about their problems (Squires: 1998). It can be identified in *Sex and the City* in the way the four main female characters talk to each other about their sexual experiences, problems and encounters, the way they seek advice and support from each other, and "the assumption that the identities of characters are expressed through their sexuality is fundamental to the four women's sense of themselves" (Bignell, 2004: 165). The series focuses on the sexual happiness of the characters. The theme of "commodity fetishism" relates most clearly to the centrality of fashion in the series: it is described as the "fifth character" by Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (2004: 115).

Akass and McCabe also note the intertextuality of *Sex and the City,* arguing that the series "regularly plunders classic movie references...to give cinematic cause-effect coherence to an otherwise chaotic, open-ended TV narrative" (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 186). For example, in *Ex and the City* (2:18), Mr. Big's decision to marry Natasha rather than Carrie

is explained through a reference to Robert Redford's characters in *The Way We Were*. Carrie is wondering why Mr. Big married Natasha instead of her and Miranda turns to her and says "Hubbell"[5] to which Carrie replies "It is. It is *so* Hubbell". Here the "chick flick acts as short hand for the girls, in which narratives are humorously hijacked to enable them to tell their stories" (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 186).

Bolter and Grusin explain "that a medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media" (2000: 65). As they argue, media rework earlier media: cinema refashions elements from stage drama, photography and painting. In addition, posters, ticket pricing information and so on become part of the context of the film's meaning and context and "take part in the constitution of the medium of film as we understand it" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000: 67). The context of a film or television programme is further extended in other media formats such as newspaper and magazine articles. This suggests we should consider the audience's interpretation of programmes against a backdrop of interlocking media texts.

The audience can therefore be seen as "expert readers" who are required to extend their knowledge beyond the "textual base" of the programme to encompass a range of sources and experiences from other media. Viewers may come into contact with celebrity gossip about Sarah Jessica Parker or Calista Flockhart, with fashion spreads and interviews featuring the actresses in women's magazines, with Kim Cattrall's book on the female orgasm, with journalistic discussions of the series' depictions of women. These discussions feed back into the series, becoming part of its context and of the audience's reading and

[5] Miranda uses the term Hubbell because in the film *The Way We Were* Barbara Streisand's character meets Robert Redford's at the end of the film with a younger more glamorous version of herself. This is mirrored in *Sex and the City* as Carrie tries to understand why Mr. Big has chosen a younger, other woman.

experience. Television programmes therefore "enter a place in the public arena above and beyond their immediate textual base" (Woollacott, 1990: 252). In some cases, they may become part of the broader "debate" about sex, celebrity, femininity and feminism. This is particularly true of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. For example, *Ally McBeal* is nominated as a "cultural reference point" (Ouellette, 2002: 315) for a generation of women in their twenties and thirties, while *Sex and the City* is described as a "cultural marker of our times" (Jermyn, 2004: 203)

To understand the context of media texts like *Sex and the City* also requires us to understand them as "part of the cultural fabric of everyday life" and "not just in relation to the television programme they watch, but...the magazines they buy, the clothes they wear, even the drinks they order in bars" (Jermyn, 2004: 202). This involves consideration of a range of interrelated factors: audiencehood, identification, consumption, leisure practices and everyday routines. A consideration of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as part of the wider mediascape means that we need to focus not only on the series themselves, but the way they are linked to other texts and the way that audiences move between these. We also need to consider the interconnections between the series and other cultural practices associated with femininity – particularly those of shopping, fashion and beauty – and the growing importance of consumption, taste and distinction in constructing gender identity. How are the texts connected to women's sense of who they are and what kind of world they live in, and to broader representational regimes and discourses around femininity and feminism?

**Conclusion**

The discussions so far have explored key feminist audience studies and emerging debates on *Ally McBeal, Sex and the City* and a new phase in audience research. This section will consider the implications of these discussions on the four areas of interest as outlined in the introduction.

1. This thesis is an empirical study that will offer data and results based on a specific case of women's experiences watching *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. It will consider the young female audience aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old and consider them in context of a wider mediascape. We have seen that theoretical discussions of the audience can only go so far in explaining the audience relationships to a text. Empirical study can work to back up or explain differences in the audience's actual relationship with a text.

2. This study will examine the changes in the representation of women, their activities and perceptions, now described as postfeminist. The focus here is on the relationship the female characters have with their careers and personal lives (feminism and femininity) and how this relationship has been portrayed on screen. Press, Gray, Moseley and Read all suggest that the changes in the social roles of women in contemporary society are also reflected on screen. We have seen in the discussion above that there is both a comedic and dramatic history of changing representations of women on screen. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* seem to continue this trend and are part of a wider context of approaching the contemporary female experience in a postmodern and reflexive way.

3. This study will explore *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* with the young female audience, aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old. Earlier studies were concerned with women in domestic roles, where they are predominantly in the home with no paid employment. Relationships between text and female audience were therefore centred on pleasures within a domestic or daily routine. Press, Moseley, Read and Arthurs all point to significant changes in the demographic and social roles of women, specifically in their relationship to second wave feminism. Stacey argues that the relationship between the text and audience is based on identification and desire or similarity and difference. If the female audience of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are socially and demographically different what will this female audience with identify with?

4. In this study the young female audience, aged sixteen to thirty-five years old, are considered in the context of the mediascape. Arthurs, Appaduari, Abercrombine and Longhurst all indicate a new stage in audience research that considers the wider context of media the audience experience. Fan literature gives a way to explain this experience and the kinds of knowledge the audience can have and use in their relationships to media. This also points to different levels of engagement the audience can have with a programme.

# CHAPTER TWO- METHODOLOGY

The literature review ended by reflecting on the four key areas the study will make contributions to. This chapter is mainly concerned with the first contribution of the empirical approach to the female audience of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. This chapter sets out the methodological approach to the female audience and explains the selection of methods most helpful in exploring the three other contributions of relevance to this study. This study is a qualitative, multi-method, feminist study focusing on women's talk.

This study employs a qualitative approach which Denscombe argues is concerned with "meanings and the way people understand things" and "patterns of behaviour". This has its "own special approach to the collection and analysis of the data" (Denscombe, 2005: 267) that is different from a quantitative study. Denscombe argues that the role of the researcher is significant as their identity is important in how they interpret the data (2005: 268). This will be discussed further in relation to interpreting data but like Jermyn (2004) and Thomas (1995) this thesis agrees with the need for "research by women into one's own culture" (Jermyn: 2004: 204).

One single research method would be too narrow to encompass all these topics so a multi-method approach was used. Using this approach produces different kinds of data on the same topic and allows the researcher to see things from different perspectives. Using different methods permits triangulation "which involves locating a true position by referring to two or more other co-ordinates" (Denscombe, 2003: 133). This qualitative, multi-method, triangulated approach does not prove that data analysis is the only

interpretation but it gives some "confidence that the meaning of the data has some consistency across methods and that the findings are not too closely tied up with a particular method used to collect the data" (Denscombe, 2004: 133).

This approach to the data has consequences for three key concerns within the study: generalisability, validity and reliability. The findings in this study are not generalisable for the whole audience of *Ally McBeal* or *Sex and the City* due to the small scale of the study. They do however give an insight into how the particular sample of women used in the study understand and engage with the series.

The interpretative nature of dealing with qualitative data means that reliability can be problematic. If another researcher did the same research, would they interpret the data in the same way? It is therefore important to make it clear what the research aims are, how the study was undertaken and explain the decision behind the methods used to ensure the reader understands the context of the study and how results were reached (Denscombe, 2005: 274). Validity, as Creswell (2003) notes, is seen as a strength of qualitative data. In particular the approach in this study of multi-methods and triangulation increases the claim of validity as it allows the inclusion of several different sources to compare and confirm interpretations.

This study also continues a feminist audience research tradition of exploring the female audience of women's popular culture. This study can be seen as a feminist study sharing the similarities of a focus on texts consumed by women, on texts created for a female audience and attracting a mixture of celebration and contempt due to the engagement with women's preoccupations.

Particularly relevant to this study is Jermyn's discussion of the importance of validating women's engagement with series, not just how and why they watch but also the "social and anecdotal aspects of TV viewing- conversation about TV" (Jermyn, 2004: 206). She argues that the approach to the audience she takes mirrors the experience in the series of women's talk:

> The empowering experience of shared talk women are depicted as having in the world of the programme, and the equally rewarding and collective experience of talk about the programme women share in the "real" world (2004:208).

Jermyn's (2004) comments on talk are useful for my research on both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The main focus of this study is how the audience relate to and perceive both series. In order to explore this, the focus needed to be on women communicating or women talking, whether this is on their own, amongst themselves or where the researcher has created an environment for that discussion. It is in this talk that the links and understandings of the broad issues of changing social demographic and representing women's lifestyles may come to light. Where this study differs from Jermyn's is in its use of four different methods to elicit different kinds of what will be termed "talk" related to the way the audience perceive both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The following section discusses the four key methods used in this study. First, is the use of message boards as a space where the researcher can observe people communicating about particular subjects, in this case *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. This creates a specific kind of talk which is written. Second, is the questionnaire, used to explore a broad range of subjects with a large number of people. Third, are the interviews which provided talk with a small number of people but in-depth on specific issues. Fourth, are the focus groups which allowed the participants to be creative, whilst observing the talk of the group. In each case the aim was to access a different kind of "talk" about the series.

**Message Boards**

The aim of this study was to access women aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old communicating about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The appeal of analysing message boards was in the opportunity to observe interaction and responses to the series without the input of the researcher. Methods like focus groups tend to "only allow access to social relations that researchers have put together for research purposes rather than 'social relations'" (Baym, 2000: 20). In this instance the information was generated from the audience themselves. It was spontaneous and naturally occurring, not a response elicited by the researcher. These messages also have the advantage of being considered responses and opinions, rather than something "off the cuff" (Denscombe, 2003: 48).

First here it is useful to explain what a message board is, giving an example and explaining the format of messages and the peculiarities of this particular type of communication. This will give an indication of the kind of "talk" the message boards gave access to. Message boards are also known as bulletin boards, newsgroups, web forums or discussion areas and are usually attached to a website that will "host discussion about the material on the website" (O'Dochartaigh, 2002: 103). It is also the case that a website might simply offer access to numerous message boards about many different subjects for the user to choose from and post messages in. Within these message boards the "usenet provide[s] users with means of posting messages on electronic bulletin boards. Other users [can] read these "postings" and, if they wish, send a reply" (Denscombe, 2003: 47). Below is a typical example of a message board format. The visitor to the message board reads from the bottom of the page upwards to follow the "thread" of the messages, as new messages appear at the top of the pages:

Marleneemm

Posts: 5,448
Member Since: Dec 8, 2002

Re: Favorite Memories
Posted: 30 Dec 2003 02:52 PM (12 of 7813)

Reply
Advise

Vallerie: Nope Steve came to Miranda's rescue and took the "thingie" away from the cat~~ this is what Steve thinks of Miranda: "Miranda's an acheiver.Steve's going to say,You've slayed enough dragons for the day~come cuddle by the fire by me" In my Opinion Miranda is seeing Steve and wanting the space where she feels good.I beleive she's tired of looking.

CarrieTwin2

Posts: 14
Member Since: Dec 28, 2003

Re: Favorite Memories
Posted: 30 Dec 2003 02:51 PM (11 of 7813)

Reply
Advise

funny memorable episode:

when sam went back to the firehouse with the ditsy fireman....alarm went off and she was butt naked in the fireman suit...the guy told her to get out of it immediately...she was left there all alone and naked...

then the old couple walked by...haha...poor sam

vallerie

Posts: 616
Member Since: Feb 16, 2003

Re: Favorite Memories
Posted: 30 Dec 2003 02:46 PM (10 of 7813)

Reply
Advise

My favorite memory....

in the eppy, "the Drought" when Big placed a whoopy cushion on Carrie'seat and when she sat down....man I was laughing in stitches. Big's laugh didn't help much because i was cracking up even more!!

CarrieTwin2

Posts: 14
Member Since: Dec 28, 2003

Re: Favorite Memories
Posted: 30 Dec 2003 02:38 PM (7 of 7813)

Reply
Advise

cause i liked aiden so much, i hated that episode

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| laracroft<br><br>Posts: 1,969<br>Member Since: Oct 13, 2003 | Re: Favorite Memories<br>Posted: 30 Dec 2003 02:32 PM (6 of 7813) | Reply<br>Advise |

Those were pretty funny.
My favorite was where Big followed her around on the boat around Manhattan and later Aiden was redoing her apt and she went to a hotel. Well Big calls her and she comes down to the lobby,he then follows her in the elevator and she slaps him and then they have hot passionate you know what. I am sweating thinking about it.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| WWEGirl<br><br>Posts: 469<br>Member Since: Dec 4, 2003 | Re: Favorite Memories<br>Posted: 30 Dec 2003 02:28 PM (5 of 7813) | Reply<br>Advise |

Favorite memories....

I would have to say one of my favorite memories is when the girls were at the restaurant talking about how Samantha decided to take Richard back (Unoriginal Sin) and Charlotte made the V and tongue sign with her fingers and everyone was shocked!!

Or when Miranda's cat grabbed Brady's umbilical cord and tried to eat it and was batting it around the floor.

(hbo http://boards.hbo.com/thread.jspa?threadID=100000028&start=7800&tstart=0: Accessed: 25/04/04)

As can be seen from the example above, the people writing the messages give themselves nicknames to present an on-line or cyber identity. The message records the day and time, but as Denscombe highlights this "communication is asynchronous- not in "real time" (2003: 48). Responses to comments can come minutes, hours, days, weeks, years or never at all to particular messages. However, Denscombe argues that this gives the researcher the opportunity to trace archive material that records previous discussions on the topic (2003: 48). The written format of the messages is also subject to what is known as "netiquette" which is the code of conduct amongst users of what is expected. We can think of the

messages as a written form of conversation and so are subject to the same conventions in terms of politeness and good manners. Users are not expected to swear or use bad language.

Some features are, however, peculiar to users of message boards. Examples are the use of abbreviations and emoticons, "symbols that depict an emotion or feeling" which "in the context of plain text messages" may "go some way towards compensating for the lack of visual clues" (Denscombe, 2003: 50). Simple emoticons include: :-) :-( ;-) ☺ ☹. An example of such a message including these kinds of emoticons could be: "Jellybaby12- Well I wudn't know about that kind of thing 'cos I'm gud! Lol ;-) !!!". The poster has used the term "lol" which means laugh out loud. The inclusion of the emoticon of a face giving a wink indicates how the phrase is to be understood.

Message boards generate a particular kind of "talk" to be explored. The present interest will be in the content of such talk and how far it covers the main research topics.

For this study ten different message boards were analysed: five for each programme. This number was practical and provided a range of boards and so messages. Using two popular search engines, *Yahoo* and *Google*, a search was performed for "message boards AND...." for each programme. Over forty-three thousand websites were found for *Ally McBeal* and over three million websites were found for *Sex and the City*. In each case the first two pages of results were used, as they brought up the best matches to the search words. The following key websites were identified by this process:

| *Ally McBeal* | *Sex and the City* |
|---|---|
| www.coffeerooms.com | www.coffeerooms.com |
| www.gist.com | www.hbo.com |
| http://allymcbeal.tktv.net | www.tvtome.com |
| www.tvtome.com | www.gist.com |
| www.geocities.com | www.ew.com |

Although it is difficult to gauge personal information about the people using the message boards unless they volunteered it, the majority of messages were clearly from American, rather than British or European audience members. Those posters that were non-American tended to say as much in their messages, explaining that the series took time to be bought by other countries and screened. From their personal references and experiences, the majority of posters were judged to be women.

The boards were accessed on the same day and information was stored to aid analysis. The boards contained thousands of messages and so one hundred messages from each site were taken. The number of messages on the sites was divided by one hundred and every *n*th message was copied and stored. If the message was in response to or relating to a particular thread of conversation, this was also downloaded to put the thread in context. This resulted in over five hundred messages on each programme.

This method was designed to access broad information about how the female audience relate to the series, without researcher influence. The message board findings cannot, however, claim to be representative of the population of the audience of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. These were fans of one or other series committed enough to share their pleasure with others who also had the time and technology to do so. This sample was not limited to those who happened to be visiting a web site at one specific moment since the

researcher could look at archive material in analysis tracing comments from months and years ago.

**Questionnaire**

The aim of using a questionnaire was to ask specific questions to a target group of British women aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old. There were two questionnaires. The first was a filter questionnaire in order to gain respondents for the second main questionnaire. The aim of the main questionnaire was to get an indication of general responses to the series across a range of topics and to access a different segment of the young female audience, those who were not fans and may "talk" differently about the series.

The intent of the filter questionnaire[6], was to reach those who fitted the profile of viewers of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, as identified by Channel 4: young females between eighteen and thirty-five years old. The filter questionnaire was administered by approaching people in both Sheffield City Centre and Worksop Town Centre, and asking people a series of factual questions, relating to their age, occupation, ethnicity and relationships to the series. The main focus here was on the willingness of the respondents to receive the main questionnaire.

Denscombe suggests that it is appropriate to use a questionnaire when there are large numbers of respondents to be reached, when you require straightforward information, when you need standardised data, when the climate is open, when time allows for delays, when resources allow and when the respondents are expected to be able to read and understand

[6] See Appendix 2 for a copy of the filter questionnaire

the questions (Denscombe, 2003: 145). The focus here was on collecting a mixture of attributes, behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, which is what Simmons (2001: 90- 92) argues a questionnaire is most useful for. This method allowed for access to another kind of "talk", where the female respondents answered direct questions about the series.

The main questionnaire[7] was designed to explore a wide variety of topics including characters, narratives, identification, genre and context of viewing. The main design considerations were to engage the respondents' interest and attention. It was therefore broken down into sections and included both open and closed questions.

In addition to the sample from the filter questionnaire, another recruitment method was used for the main questionnaire. A request for volunteers was posted on the ten message boards used previously in the research. There were thirty-eight requests for questionnaires. Thirty-six were returned fully completed. Thirty-one questionnaires were from women, aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old. Of these women twenty described themselves as white British, nine described themselves as white other (American and European) and two were Indian and Pakistani respectively. Five questionnaires were completed and returned by male viewers of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Although their answers are not included in the data analysis, they were interesting and gave thought for future study.

Respondents were given two options for receiving the questionnaire. The first option involved a hard paper copy sent via the post. Although this method of distribution runs the risk of a poor response rate, the hope was that as the person had requested to take part they

[7] See Appendix 3 for a copy of the main questionnaire

would be motivated to send it back. The other option was to receive the questionnaire via e-mail over the internet. Hewson et. al (2003) argue that at its most simple this can:

> Consist in simply sending an e-mail containing text questions in the body and asking respondents to hit the "reply" button to their mailers, fill in their text answers to the questions, then hit "send" to return the completed .....questionnaire to the researcher's e-mail account (2003: 86)

This was the format adopted. Pilot sessions with respondents were trialled exploring the options for how the respondents should receive the information in order to allow all levels of technological ability to take part. These pilot sessions suggested that the questionnaire should be received as a file attachment, added on to the e-mail. Subsequently when distributing the questionnaires the respondents received the questions both in the body of the e-mail itself but also as a file attachment. This left the option for the respondents to either "reply" to the e-mail and type in answers or to open the file attached, answer the questions and re-attach the file, depending on their technological ability and preferred choice. In order to make the questionnaire simple to answer in this format, when the question asked for a pre-coded answer they were already typed in and the respondent simply had to delete in order to leave the desired answer. For example:

Q15. Do you/ did you watch it most often..?
*Ally McBeal*
On your own
With family
  Which members?
With friends
  What gender are they?
Can you comment on why this is?

*Sex and the City*
On your own
With family
  Which members?
With friends
  What gender are they?
Can you comment on why this is?

Other questions were more open. For example

Q29. What do like most about the show(s) as a whole?

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

Denscombe argues that these e-mail questionnaires have the virtue of being simple to construct and easy to answer (2003: 42). Hewson et. al (2003) also note that distribution is quick and cost efficient. Receiving the responses back in an electronic format facilitates data collection. Denscombe also suggests there may be a certain novelty value for the respondents in receiving an e-questionnaire (2003: 43).

This method of distribution, however, was not without its drawbacks. Although the questionnaire was simple to construct, it still had to be basic as e-mail body text is limited in terms of format and font. It also ran the risk of respondents not answering the questions properly. This is a problem for any questionnaire. At least here the possibility remained for further contact with the respondents to clarify any issues.

Respondents were also asked to forward the questionnaire to others who might want to complete it. This snowball technique is often criticised. As Radway (1987, 1991) and Stacey (1994) found, respondents tend to be quite similar to each other as people tend to move in similar social circles. This does not mean that the research is not useful but, as Stacey argues, it indicates that the arguments made relates to a particular group [of women] (Stacey, 1994: 16).

Both the message boards and the main questionnaire gave a broad sense of the way the audience relate to both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and allowed access to different "talk" between respondents. This questionnaire was not designed to generate statistically significant results but provide another way at getting at "talk". The interest here is who is talking and about what? The research still required more in depth data on the audience and their relationship to the series. So we now move to interviews and focus groups.

**Interviews**

Interviews were used to access "talk" on the *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, about specific aspects within the series. The message boards and questionnaires provided general information on a wide variety of topics including the keys areas of interest for the study: such popular characters, how often the programmes were watched, how the programmes were watched and the participant's involvement with other media. Interviews allowed an in-depth flow of talk on specific topics of feminism, femininity, love, sex and humour between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Denscombe suggests it is appropriate to use interviews when the data required is based on emotions, experiences and feelings, on sensitive issues or if you require data based on privileged information (Denscombe, 2003: 165). Here the research required detailed information (on potentially sensitive subjects) with groups of people with specialised knowledge of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*.

As Denscombe outlines, interviews "are a good method for producing data based on informants' priorities, opinions and ideas. Informants have the opportunity to expand their ideas, explain their views and identify what *they* regard as the crucial factors" (Denscombe,

2003: 189). The flexible nature of the interviews allowed for a discussion in a one-to-one situation of particular topics, with particular attention to the female audience's perception of the series. A semi-structured interview enabled specific questions relating to genre, narratives and character to be asked whilst allowing the respondents to expand on points and the researcher to follow up on areas of interest[8].

Recruitment for the interviews was carried out in two ways:

1. People were asked in the questionnaire (both postal and e-mail versions) whether they would help in subsequent stages of the research
2. Notices were placed on the message boards previously analysed asking for anyone interested to e-mail, write or telephone

Time and distance made face-to-face interviews unfeasible. Therefore the respondents were given a choice of options of how to be involved in the interview process:

1. Option one (preferred): Give a telephone number and specific time to call for the interview to be done over the telephone.
2. Option Two: Receive a copy of the questions over the e-mail and send it back to the research e-mail account. In agreeing to the e-mail option the respondents were warned that they might receive e-mails back from the researcher seeking clarification of answers. All the respondents agreed to this and in some instances there was follow up.
3. Option Three- Arrange a time to meet in a chat room on-line.

Denscombe argues that:

[8] See Appendix 4 for a copy of the Interview questions

> it is possible to conduct interviews over the Internet. As with telephone interviews, the internet makes it possible to cover huge distances without the need for travel. This saves a great deal of time and travel expenses, and allows the research to include people from a wide geographical area. The internet interview can take a variety of forms. At its simplest, it can consist of an exchange of e-mail correspondence. Alternatively it can be conducted through "bulletin boards", "chat rooms" or "messaging services" (2003: 42/43)

This approach proved most viable for the respondents. Eighteen interviews were completed. Roughly half of the respondents were recruited from the message boards and half from the previous questionnaire. All the respondents were female between the ages of sixteen and thirty-six years old. They were predominantly British and European. Four interviews were conducted over the telephone and fourteen requested an e-mail version of the interview. This gave them time to think about the questions and construct answers in their own time which "may encourage more detailed and carefully considered answers" (Hewson et. al, 2003: 45). None of the respondents wanted to meet in a chat room.

This method of administering the interviews meant that there was a loss of visual contact between the interviewer and the informant. The interviewer could not pick up on visual expressions or body language, though some respondents inserted emoticons. Such lack of visual contact between the interviewer and the informant may be an advantage. It provides some insulation against "interview effect" where the researcher's identity may influence the responses of the respondent. This method is what Denscombe calls a "communication equaliser" (2003: 43). The respondent cannot be influenced by the researcher's presence or identity as they cannot see them.

The physical absence of the researcher may also allow the respondents to be more open and less embarrassed about personal disclosure. As an example, some questions asked about the

portrayal of love and sex in both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The respondent may have felt more comfortable discussing this sensitive topic anonymously, without the researcher present. One drawback of this method was that despite nominating a deadline, the period between sending out questions and receiving back answers was unpredictable.

The interviews gave the opportunity to get to material, particularly "talk" in a different way and on particular points of interest. In this sense the interviews complemented the questionnaire and the message board analysis by looking in more depth at some of the topics addressed in these sections.

**Focus Groups**

The final research method used was focus groups. A creative activity was used in these groups and this allowed access to another kind of spontaneous "talk" about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and so another perspective. It introduced the visual and creative aspect of the respondents. This method was used primarily to engage with one of the aims of the research, to consider both the series and the audience as part of this mediascape.

Kruger notes that focus groups or discussion groups are particularly useful when detailed insights are needed, when there is a communication gap between groups of people, when the focus is on complex behaviour and motivation or when you need additional information (Kruger, 1994: 44). Important for this research was the consideration that group discussions and dynamics enable the researcher to explore issues in depth. Respondents were recruited for these focus groups using an advertisement[9] placed in local public areas: three

[9] See Appendix 5 for a copy of the advertisement

supermarkets, two libraries and a local fitness centre. These advertisements were displayed for three weeks with a deadline displayed on the advertisement.

Denscombe emphasises that focus groups or group discussions are usually organised around some kind of trigger or stimulus (2003: 169). In the two focus groups in this study the trigger for discussion was the creation of collages by the respondents. The two groups were asked to create two collective collages, one on Ally from *Ally McBeal* and one on Carrie from *Sex and the City*, and one personal collage each about the respondent themselves. This creative process was designed to reflect the visual nature of the series. In the literature review *Sex and the City* particularly suggested a consumerist address to the audience. The aim therefore, was to let the respondents have the opportunity to respond visually to a visual medium. The creation of collages also opened up the possibility of another different way to generate data. In the focus groups the researcher was not asking questions as much as listening to the group conversing whilst creating and explaining the collages. Once the task had been stated, the conversation flowed naturally. This again provided a different kind of "talk" between respondents about the series, in a group environment.

Two focus groups were carried out. One had four respondents and the other had five. All the respondents were female, British and aged between nineteen and thirty-five years old. Originally six to seven respondents were organised for each group but several did not arrive. Respondents in the focus groups were presented with three sheets with a diagram on, similar to a spider diagram. In the centre of two of the sheets was the name of a character; the third sheet said "you". Each sheet was split into three sections: Lifestyle, Media and

Miscellaneous[10]. The respondents were asked to fill in these three sections using either images or words from the selection of magazines provided or to write or draw anything they felt was relevant. The groups were asked to work together to create collages on Ally (referring to Ally from *Ally McBeal*) and Carrie (from *Sex and the City*) filling in the three sections. The first two sections were very focused, asking the respondents to think about particular aspects of the characters. The "Miscellaneous" section was to encourage the respondents to be as creative as they liked. Once the two collages had been completed as a group, the respondents were asked to create a collage with themselves personally as the object rather than the character (using the sheet marked "you"). In each instance the respondent was asked to explain what had been chosen to go on the collage and what it referred to.

This process was piloted, although the collage sheet used was different at this stage. In the pilot focus groups the collage sheets were split into eight different topics[11]. However these early sessions showed that these pre-coded groups were too rigid and respondents found them difficult to fill in and frustrating. These categories were then broadened into three general categories relating to the character and the series to allow a more open discussion and collage to be created. This pilot session did show, however, that what the respondents produced was revealing. Not only were the collages full of rich and detailed information, the actual image on many of the collages was simply an anchor for a much more detailed concept. For example, in focus group one, one of the respondents stuck a picture of a cappuccino on the Carrie collage. She explained that this was to symbolise the way the four main female characters always meet up for breakfast (and also drinks) to have a gossip,

[10] See Appendix 6, 7 and 8 for a blank version of the focus group collage sheets
[11] See Appendix 9 for an example of the collage sheet used in the pilot group

rather like her friends meeting up for a coffee and a gossip. Here the coffee is a signifier and female friendship the signified.

The "talk" from respondents whilst creating the collages covered many relevant topics: their decision making processes, *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* themselves, chat about the magazines, celebrities and their own personal lives.

This kind of creative method has been used in research projects previously, but is most recently discussed by David Gauntlett[12] who describes this process as typical of "new creative research methods" which recognise the creativity of audiences. Gauntlett was responding to the criticism that traditional research methods simply get data *off* people. These new research methods allow a *process* between the "explorer and the explored" (Gauntlett, 2004: 3) because the respondents are encouraged to make something or do something rather than simply give answers to questions. He highlights that in traditional audience research focus group researchers sit people in a room and ask them about specific media forms, making the approach language based. This requires instant responses. This "new" approach "operates on a visual plane. The same plane much of the media is operating in" (Gauntlett: 2004: 2). The reflective process of creativity is then explored through the explanations of the respondents, thus combining the visual and linguistic approach. Gauntlett argues this allows the researcher to explore the audience's agenda rather than establishing your own agenda. This curbs researcher bias.

Encouraging everyone to be involved in the creative process, especially creating their own personal collage, meant that everyone had the opportunity to give their opinions. In many

[12] In his inaugural lecture at Bournemouth University, 2nd June 2004 .

focus group situations the concern is that dominant personalities effectively "take over" the group and some group members do not express their opinion. Creating the collages gave the respondents the sense that their creativity and knowledge was valued and so hopefully they did not feel intimidated to express their feelings or feel the need to simply agree with the group consensus.

**Data Analysis**

Creswell (2003) argues that analysing qualitative data involves

> making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2003: 190).

In order to do this with the data from this study, the steps Creswell identifies were employed as helpful in analysing data. Most important was his method of coding. This meant organising the material into "chunks". It involved "taking text data or pictures, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labelling those categories with a term, often a term based in the actual language of the respondent" (Creswell, 2003: 192). Using this method, the three key categories identified in the literature review could be used as a guide to organising material. This method also allowed the flexibility of identifying more categories if the data showed such patterns emerging.

Creswell's subsequent three steps of analysing qualitative data were then followed. The first is to use coding to generate a small number of themes or categories. The themes of interest were already identified in the literature review but sub categories of interest were identified and used in writing up the material to structure the thesis. Second, Creswell suggests considering how the data will be represented in the report, the most popular being

a narrative passage. In discussing the findings quotes were used from the respondents, intertwined with personal interpretations of what they mean. This highlighted the source material to the reader and showed how the research had interpreted what had been said. Third, Creswell (2003: 193- 195) recommends making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The Conclusion chapter attempts to explore what the findings mean when compared to other studies of female audiences.

The research method employed meant three different kinds of data were collected from the various stages of the research. In using the steps identified by Creswell, triangulation was strengthened as the findings could be compared.

It is inevitable that the "the researcher's self plays a significant role in the production and interpretation of qualitative data" (Denscombe, 2003: 268). My identity as a young, white woman and my enjoyment of the series being studied shaped the way the material was interpreted. As Creswell notes, the background of the researcher may be helpful rather than detrimental to the project (2003: 200). I have knowledge of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and am a member of the target audience. This may encourage respondents to want to talk to me.

The importance of situating oneself in relation to the material being studied is particularly relevant when considering a key criticism of many audience studies involving women. The risk is creating a gap between the researcher and the respondents as "others", privileging the researcher position as being able to see what the audience cannot. In response to these criticisms I would refer, as Jermyn does, to the importance of the researcher "sharing a common culture with the audience" (Jermyn, 2004: 206). This study focuses on young

women and their enjoyment of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, all qualities I also possess.

**Conclusion**

This chapter began by saying that this study is a qualitative, multi-method, feminist study focusing on women's talk. The methods outlined here are appropriate in collating and analysing data that targets women talking about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*.

The next three chapters are data chapters. Chapter Three[13] looks at the message boards and breaks down into four main sections. The first section entitled 'The Representation of Women'[14] looks at messages relating to the female characters in both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City,* Genre, Narrative and Realism and humour. The second section explores messages relating to the 'Contemporary Experience of Being a Woman'[15] and in particular looks at the messages to explore questions of Identification and Consumption. The third section explores mediascape[16] and explores messages that indicate the writers engage with both series in different ways and with different media.

Chapter Four[17] looks at the questionnaire and interviews. The same four section structure, explained above, is used in order to organise the material.

Chapter Five looks at the focus groups and is also organised in sections. It becomes increasing clear that although these sections are useful to help the reader find their way

[13] Page 78
[14] Page79
[15] Page 89
[16] Page 93
[17] Page 100

around the material there are many links between the sections. In this section the titles 'Contemporary Experiences of Being a Woman' and 'Identification and Consumption' are merged into one section entitled ''Contemporary Experiences of Being a Woman and Identification'[18]. The links the respondents make and the way they talk about the programmes become clearer in this chapter but less easy to separate out into different issues.

[18] Page 128

# CHAPTER THREE - MESSAGE BOARDS

The first part of the research involved analysing message boards referring to *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. This allowed access to very engaged viewers, or fans, of the series. Using two search engines to find relevant sites, five different message boards were identified for each series. One hundred messages were selected from each site, including surrounding messages if these were part of a thread, to keep them in context. This offered a wide range of messages to examine.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the aim of examining message boards was to access spontaneous "talk" about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The messages cannot be considered as structured, organised pieces of writing, but are more like a stream of consciousness. In the following section these message have been organised into the key concerns of this study as identified in the introduction and literature review. The first concern was that this is an empirical study that will yield data based on young women relationships with *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The methodology chapter explained the choice of methods and the results in the next three chapters and subsequent conclusion chapter is taken to show that this first concern was achieved. Therefore the next section is divided into addressing the three remaining areas of contribution. These have been given headings in order to organise the material. The first has been called: "The Representation of Women in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*", looking at the female audiences responses to the female characters, genre and narrative of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The second has been called "The Contemporary Experience of Being a Woman", which considers the responses of the female audience in terms of the changing social and demographic make-up of the female audience and includes their contemporary experiences of being women. Both

these sections will also consider the idea of identification with the female characters, with particular reference to Stacey. The final section has been called "Mediascape" and will look at the female audience responses to their place within the wider media context. These headings and this organisation has been used to structure the material for the thesis in each chapter to ease reading, but the messages and talk are not organised in this distinct way and often combine reflections which relate to more than one theme.

**The Representation of Women in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City***

This section has been further broken down into four different sections focusing on aspects of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*: characters, genre, realism and fantasy and humour. This gives an overall picture of the various aspects of the two programmes the female audience were engaging with.

Female Characters

Radway (1984, 1991) found that for readers of romance novels it was important that the heroine was depicted as strong and independent. The message boards also showed that the portrayal of the female characters was important to the respondents. The following examples show how posters evaluate the characters. In this first example the poster discusses the characters as potential friends:

> 10/14/2000 | 11:39PM [19/29] Donna Dragon (*Sex and the City*)
> Who couldn't be friends with these girls? I love them and think that they are such great role models. They have such opposite and different personalities that come together to create a beautiful thing. They have wonderful friendships, except I'd like to see more of Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte hanging out more together without Carrie. (www.hbo.com)

In the next examples characters are discussed as media representations in the context of other media representations:

> Foxcalista 01/11/2001 | 2:19AM [ 24/24 ] (*Ally McBeal*)
> The women on Ally McBeal are the best on TV! Ally is the best of them all! Women are portrayed in a good light, since there are nothing but strong, independent, intelligent women on the series (www.gist.com)
>
> Marygrace 9/16/02 8:25AM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
> PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE DO NOT MAKE SAM UNHAPPY BECAUSE SHE DOES NOT HAVE CHILDREN. Women who choose not to have children are always portrayed as secretly unhappy. Can we PLEEEEASE have just ONE woman on television who truly does not regret her decision to have a full life without children? (www.hbo.com)[19]

Characters are evaluated in different ways, sometimes in terms of close relationships, sometimes in more distanced ways relating to gender representation. Audience members move between types of evaluation based on emotion and personal recognition and others based on an appreciation of textual production and consumption.

Posters often evaluate characters in terms of their own personal experiences, opinions and ethical stances. In this message the poster discusses Samantha from *Sex and the City* as if she were one of her own friends:

> Arbygirl 7/21/02 7:31PM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
>
> Ok, I've got to say this, after seeing this episode...Am I the only one who thinks Sam is turning into a MEGA-BITCH?! If one of my friends did that, I wouldn't be calling them a friend anymore. (www.hbo.com)[20]

Similarly in this message the poster contextualises the relationship between Miranda and Steve from *Sex and the City* in terms of social and educational conflict:

> 9/10/02 7:42PM PDT Verysexy (*Sex and the City*)
> STEVIE IS A NICE GUY, MIRANDA IS JUST TOO HARD ON THE POOR GUY. DO U GUYS THINK THAT BECAUSE STEVE'S JOB IS LESS UP IN SOCIETY AND BECAUSE HE IS NOT AS EDUCATED AS MIRANDA THAT

[19] See Appendix 10 (i) for the complete message
[20] See Appendix 10 (j) for complete message

IS THE REASON WHY SHE IS NOT FOLLOWING HER HEART? (www.hbo.com)[21]

In the following message, the poster moves from a discussion of the character to one of acceptable standards of female sexual behaviour and then to a commentary on the *Sex and the City's* role in the representation of sexual practices in terms of the wider issues of sexual health and ethics:

> 06/29/2001 | 8:31AM [ 18/21 ] No Nun (*Sex and the City*)
> This is definitely a show that only works in this era. Years ago, a woman was a skank if she slept with every guy she saw, while guys where considered studs. I don't think this will last, because of aids, Chlamydia, etc. etc...The tide is turning towards having a more stable relationship. But this show will only last if it shows more of the downside of bed-hopping. (www.gist.com)

Genre

Radway (1984) explored the importance of readers' definitions of romance in their expectations of the romance genre and of individual novels. The message boards showed that the audience saw both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as defined by particular elements such as humour that made them different or distinctive from other programmes. Some audience members discussed the series in relation to particular genres, framing their expectations and understanding of the series in this way. For example, in this first message the poster identifies *Ally McBeal* as a situation comedy, but hints at its more distinctive characteristics:

> Yabemom 2002-04-21 12:48:55
> PLEASE DON'T CANCEL ALLY My days, specially Mondays, are extremely stressful and on Monday nights I look forward to relaxing with Ally. It is a sin to cancel her show. It has been the only sitcom that has made me laugh out loud and cry uncontrollably since it's first airing. What? No violence, no explicit sex? The show has been done tastefully and with high regard to its viewers. If another network is willing to buy the show, I will definitely switch to that network. (tvtome.com)

[21] See Appendix 10 (k) for complete message

Similarly, in this example the poster identifies *Ally McBeal* as combining elements from a range of genres, but also as a distinctive series:

> todallycrazy2001 2002-05-16 21:27:02 (*Ally McBeal*)
> I really like Ally McBeal.....I've watched it since the beginning. In the mist of reality shows, and non-realistic comedies, I've looked forward to her world of craziness, and her never ending soap-opera. (www.tvtome.com)[22]

These messages show that genre is important in defining the audience's expectations, understanding and appreciation of the series.

The message boards also indicated a knowledgeable audience. When the posters discussed *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, it was not unusual for them to combine discussion of characters and storylines as 'real' with comments about production elements such as costume and set design. This also illustrates how message board discussions intertwine different types of commentary. Posters frequently switch between topics and discuss different aspects of the series at once. In particular, the design of the series was singled out for discussion. For example, in these two messages the posters discuss Patricia Fielding, the costumer designer for *Sex and the City*:

> Jenie
> 12/10/02 8:53PM PST (*Sex and the City*)
> How good is Patricia Fielding? I love all the clothes she gets Carrie to wear, even if they are a bit weird sometimes. But I think they really show the characters. I mean Charlotte is so classic with her dresses and pearls and Sam's outfits are just bold exactly like her. (www.hbo.com)

> Anothaholic 8/10/02 12:09PM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
> In this weekend's USA Today newspaper, section D Life, there is a good article about how Patricia Field and her staff dealt with building and choosing costumes for SJP and CNixon. Instead of hiding them behind things and drawing attention the ladies, she just used regular clothes. She used busy prints, straight camera angles etc., instead of going like all other shows and hiding the pregnant actresses. (www.hbo.com)

[22] See Appendix 10 (g) for the complete message

These examples show how *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are perceived as distinctive, unusual and special. They also suggest that posters engage with both series on different levels of realism, as in the following post:

> Posted by squeaky0000 on 22:10 6/10/2001: (*Sex and the City*)
> I know this is only a TV programme but I love it when Carrie and Big have scenes together it's so cool. You gotta love the sexual tension between them. I love how he seemed kind of jealous when she met the jazz musician. I was also wondering if Sarah Jessica smokes in real life. I wish she would cut down in the show. I don't know anyone who smokes that much anymore. It's ugly.

This message incorporates an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of the series, a discussion of the relationship between characters, a comment on one of the actresses and an opinion about smoking as a habit.

Narrative

Radway (1984, 1991) suggested that popular narratives in romance novels focused on the development of the relationship between the hero and heroine and the transformation of the hero. If novels deviated from this structure, they were unlikely to be successful. Messages in which posters criticise *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are useful in indicating their expectations and the way they evaluate narrative:

> Gemcap67 2002-07-22 11:39:57 (*Sex and the City*)
> I hope the season opener is not indicative of what's to come. S&TC fans are waiting to be part of the characters' lives. Maybe it's a desire to live vicariously through these girls. Last night's episode made me depressed. Miranda's life with a child, her boobs, her slow, but definite separation from the group. It all closely resembles real life which most fans like to forget for a 1/2 hour every Sunday. Even the dialogue was forced - Carrie didn't sound like the Carrie of episodes past, Charlotte promiscious? Please!!! Samantha in love? Come on! Bring on the real girls -the girls we all wish we had the courage to be sometimes!!! (tvtome.com)

In this message, the poster expresses her irritation at a change in *Sex and the City's* formula. This illustrates the appeal of the series for this audience member; watching the

female characters involves the pleasurable forgetting of real life. This message suggests a similar pleasure to the lifting of reader's spirits that Radway identified in the enjoyment of particular romance narratives (Radway, 1991: 66).

Posters often isolate particular moments or scenes from the series as particularly memorable and appealing. This rather long example shows a selection of scenes from *Sex and the City* which are organized as the poster's ten most favourite "moments" from one season:

> Angelina J
> 9/19/02 4:40PM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
> 1. BIG AND CARRIE'S REUNION IN SF (surprise, surprise- LOL - screw it...you need material for the sequel :) )
> 2. That guy in the casino getting his ass whooped by the four girls because of what he said about Miranda.
> (Yeah, what's your excuse? Are you having triplets? <eg>)
> 3. Jack almost wiping out on his bike!
> 4. The moment when Miranda was about to call Steve in the finale and we see her emotions. (Should we call daddy and tell him we miss him?)
> 5. Carrie being told off by Stanford!
> 6. Samantha babysitting! (need I say more? LOL)
> 7. Bunny walking in on Charlotte with her bunny keychain! (Bunny what are you doing here?????)
> 8. Stanford introducing Marcus to Anthony! (Oh, Mr. Shrimp man! LOL)
> 9. Charlotte and Harry!!!!!! (I think you're fucking hot....LOL --- and oh man the wall to wall shag carpet we were subjected too)
> 10. Samantha dumping Richard. (I love you Richard, but I love me more) Way to go Sam! (www.hbo.com)

The message focuses on a range of different moments, most of which elicit an emotional response, often of laughter. Emotional responses and the recognition of experiences are important in identifying the pleasure of the series' narratives. In the following example, the poster describes a favourite moment in terms of its relevance to their own emotional life:

> 08/4/2000 | 4:45AM [ 16/29 ] Tornado (*Ally McBeal*)
> after the thanksgiving show, when ally sat at the piano and sang "Dulcinea" (the song that meant a lot to her father and her), it really made me miss my Dad. Ally's relationship with her parents, especially her Dad, is very complicated and I've enjoyed watching it unfold. (www.gist.com)

Similarly, in the next message the poster explains their engagement with a moment based on the recognition of an experience and the emotions it made them remember:

> Posted by Laura20 on 23:19 8/31/2000: (*Sex and the City*)
> I cried for a good half hour even after it was over. It was all so real for me. Took me back about seven years when I was DUMB enough to do the same thing! [Carrie tells Aiden she has been cheating] (www.coffeerooms.com)[23]

Realism and Fantasy

Analysis of the message boards demonstrated that audience members evaluate the series', characters and narratives in terms of the real world, their own personal experiences and television conventions. Other aspects of the series such as settings, relationships and lifestyles are also evaluated by the respondents in this way.

> ladymarmalade
> 9/21/04 3:45PM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
> Yes SATC isn't the real world....it's the reel world.....however, the reel is modelled after the real and therefore in both instances changes occur...once again, it may or may not be welcome, but it is definitely a constant. People and characters cannot be stagnant.....they do have to change (www.hbo.com)[24]

This message is particularly interesting because of the sophistication with which the poster discusses the series in relation to the real world and the fictional world of television.

The message boards show that for these audience members, the most important aspect of realism is what Ang has called "emotional realism". Ang's (1985) study of Dutch viewers of *Dallas* shows that a text can be read at two levels, the literal, denotative level and the connotative level which relates to the "associative meanings which can be attributed to different elements of the text" (Ang, 1985: 44). It is at this second level that Ang identifies the emotional realism of *Dallas* where the audience recognise the experiences of the

[23] See Appendix 10 (h) for the complete message
[24] See Appendix 10 (l) for complete message

characters and therefore "experience it as real" (Ang, 1985: 47). As has been shown, some posters identify with characters because they have had similar experiences. Emotions and experience are linked. In the following message the poster explains her identification with Miranda based on her experience of being a new mother:

> Sf girl7/17/02 11:01AM PDT Re: Miranda (*Sex and the City*)
> I think Miranda's going to discover the ups & downs of being a single mother. I knew exactly how she felt in that episode. She'll also discover the difficulty of having to juggle dating and taking care of your obligations... which is not easy. From my experience as a single mom, you'd have to sacrifice a lot for your child. And I think Brady's going to bring reality to the girls too. Miranda would also have to be flexible and more patient. Kids have their own schedule.... we have to work around their schedule and that would be tough for controlling Miranda where everything has its place & time. This I have to see!
> =D

In this example the poster identifies with the characters in *Sex and the City* based on her experiences of female friendship and her memories of being the same age as the characters:

> Posted by Annie on 08:39 8/14/2000: (*Sex and the City*)
> The women I know tend to be extremely open and frank about their sex lives when talking to girlfriends. My friends and I did talk that way when we were that age. I love that about the show. They talk just how we did! (www.coffeerooms.com)[25]

In some messages, posters relate what they see in the series to their own lives, even when their experiences are not identical. In the following instance, the poster likens the way the characters in *Sex and the City* meet for breakfast to her own experiences of socialising with female friends:

> Kaire 2002-05-21 (*Sex and the City*)
> I love the way they all meet for breakfast everyday to dissect the problems they are having. I don't meet up with my friends for breakfast but we definitely have a gossip about what our latest boyfriend has done. (www.hbo.com)

[25] See Appendix 10 (m) for complete message

Humour

Gray (1994), Rowe (1997) and Skeggs and Kirkham (1998) have shown how humour can be used as a way of challenging traditional female roles. Humour was an important factor here in posters' description of favourite scenes or speeches. The following two messages are typical of posters' responses to the humour of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*:

> Posted by Lexi_03 on 21:35 10/8/2000: (*Sex and the City*)
> Oh my... this episode completely cracked me up. Carrie getting mugged was hysterical! I fell out of my chair and laughed hysterically on the floor for about five minutes solid! (www.coffeerooms.com)

> Koolaid143
> 9/19/02 12:02PM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
> My favourite scene was Miranda changing the baby and his belly button rolling around, taken by the cat! LOL LOL LOL (www.hbo.com)

In many instances, the kinds of scenes singled out as humorous are fairly conventional situation comedy scenarios. In other cases, humour was related to the recognition of experience:

> 07/27/2000 | 1:45PM [ 12/29 ] Dayz (*Ally McBeal*)
> I have so many favourite episodes- Ally is someone so many of us can relate to. I laugh at her so much because I can see myself doing the exact same things. One episode in particular was when Ally had been set up on a date, and she got "Stuck" (literally) in the restroom. Not because she clogged the toilet and it was overflowing, but because she really fell in... That is so typical that the hottest fireman had to come rescue her. (gist.com)

Posters particularly enjoyed the use of singing, dancing and CGI in *Ally McBeal*, finding these devices funny, distinctive and appealing:

> 08/21/2000 | 3:01PM [ 19/29 ] tornado *(Ally McBeal)*
> When they first introduced the oogga chugga baby. It is both a scary looking thing but also really funny when she sees it and it chucks spears at her. It was something no other has done and will now copy.

Some messages related humour to the breaking of taboos. This was particularly so in relation to *Sex and the City*'s representation of sexual practices:

> Posted by akita on 14:55 8/7/2000: (*Sex and the City*)
> On the Samantha issue...too funny! I loved her speech about Why do you think they call it a "Job"...it's hard work and awkward. And, if it tastes funky totally not worth it!!! LOL!! (coffeerooms.com)
>
> NYCu - 08/21/02 10:24PM PST (*Sex and the City*)
> One thing that *Sex and the City* brought out into public was the "taboo" subjects like "up the butt" or "sex therapy classes" or dates that end with Carrie in bed with $5,000 on the night stand. All the things that Sam says- she just makes me laugh. Like that time when all the girls go away and she dates Garth the vibrator man model- her comment- "no-one cares if your eggs have a side of cock". She had me laughing for ages. Even Carrie and Miranda were shocked!

The next example shows how this aspect of the series filters into the audience's everyday lives and generates more talk about the series and about sex:

> Kim- 05/03/04 13:52PMT (*Sex and the City*)
> I just want to say that I LOVE Sam. She is hysterical. I wish I had her balls to just say and do everything she does. Her knowledge in that sex shop just had me in stitches and the time she lost her orgasms and it was a major alert for her. I mean I talk to my girlfriends about sex but some of the things she comes out with and does have got us talking at a whole new level!

What this section has shown is the way this set of respondents talk about the series. Using the terms from Chapter One, referring to fan literature we can see the technical, analytical and interpretative skills[26] of the female audience are identifiable in this talk. The talk is complex, sophisticated and intertwined when discussing both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Posters recognise both series as highly distinctive and unusual and they demonstrate a sophisticated knowledge of the texts as texts. Particular scenes assumed great importance where they elicited an emotional response from the audience and emotional realism appears to be central to the audience's connection with the series. Although posters were clearly able to articulate the differences between their own lives and the lives of the characters,

[26] Technical skills refer to the appreciation of how the textual effects are created including evaluation of acting, script an so on. Analytical skills refer to analysis of the text from within the parameters of the text itself such as plot, narrative and so on. Interpretative skills stem from without the text where the audience might compare the text to something else such as reality (Abercrombie and Longhurst: 1998).

they related the characters' emotions, experiences, relationships and lifestyles to those of themselves and their female friends. Humour was important in the audience's enjoyment of the series.

**Contemporary Experiences of Being a Woman**

Gray (1994) and Press (1991) both considered the dramatisation of women's experiences and the changing role of women in situation comedies in terms of the way they reflected societal changes in the role of women. The message boards showed the tensions women feel about their experiences in this particular social, cultural and historical era. These involved trying to negotiate between certain qualities which were seen as opposites. The table below shows some of these tensions:

| | |
|---|---|
| Being independent | Still needing others |
| Being sexy | Not being overpoweringly sexy |
| Being career orientated | Having a happy personal life |
| Being a good friend | Being a bitch |
| Being sexually liberated | Not being inappropriately promiscuous |

A number of messages related to tensions around these issues.

> 10/1/2000 | 11:50AM [8/21 ] NJ Implant (*Sex and the City*)
> Loose or Liberated? That is the question. The answer is a little of both. There is no better time to be a woman than right now. We have examples of four fantastic ladies: A writer with her own column, a Public relations expert with her own company, a lawyer who is a partner and an art gallery dealer with a passion. Who cares if they sleep with an entire battleship! (www.gist.com)

Here the poster discusses how *Sex and the City* deals with issues of sexuality and employment. The poster identifies tensions around appropriate professional and sexual

behaviour. Another message deals more explicitly with the ways such issues relate to feminism.

> 09/30/2000 | 12:36PM [ 6/21 ] Powerfem (*Sex and the City*)
> I believe these characters are liberated in the best possible sense. They are not feminists in that bra-burning way, but delight in their femininity and sexuality. They also know that they don't have to look to a man to provide them with happiness and financial security. (www.gist.com)

The poster addresses the tensions between feminism as a political movement and the independence of characters in *Sex and the City*, distancing herself from "old fashioned" ideas about feminism but celebrating the strength and self-sufficiency of the characters. Another message focuses on the tensions between career and motherhood.

> Primogal 8/27/02 9:42AM PDT Re: Miranda
> THANK YOU for allowing Miranda to be a REAL new mommie facing REAL challenges. It's about time that we show women what it is REALLY like to be a new mom. And, especially if you have been a career-minded, independent woman. Having a baby changes EVERYTHING!! (hbo.com)[27]

These messages show a number of different tensions and negotiations the audience recognise within the programmes as relevant to their lives.

Identification and Consumption

Stacey (1994) identified a series of cinematic and extra-cinematic identificatory practices to explain how the audience related to Hollywood stars. Message board users also relate the fictional world to their own personal experiences when discussing characters and narrative. They also show different levels of audience identification.

> 04/17/2003 | 9:48PM [ 20/21 ] Ilana (*Ally McBeal*)
> I love Elaine. I do the same job as her and wear the same things as her. In fact I could be her. Although I can't sing! I am nosey but I love my friends and well... if I've had a few boyfriends then it's not my fault! (www.coffeerooms.com)[28]

[27] See Appendix 10 (a) for the complete message
[28] See Appendix 10 (b) for the complete message

The poster of this message shows a close level of identification, explaining how similar she is to the character of Elaine in *Ally McBeal* in terms of her job, clothes and personality. Another poster explains their identification with a character through a shared experience, in this case child birth:

> Mattison 05/07/21/02 8:20 PM PDT Re: Miranda (*Sex and the City*)
>
> I can totally relate to how Miranda is feeling - scared that she will drift away from the life that she has/had with the other girls....I had a baby 14 months ago and have slipped away from my old life (which was not unlike the life portrayed on the show - just a bit less stylish and not in NYC) (www.hbo.com)[29]

In this next example the poster explains they are a "little" bit like Ally McBeal:

> 02/18/2001 | 9:42PM [ 17/18 ] Dnice@Philly (*Ally McBeal*)
> I have gotten to know her a lot more over the years (that sounds weird as if I know her - lol). She's still quirky and funny and hopeless romantic and I love her. I'm a little like her so I sympathize with her a lot. (www.gist.com)[30]

Here there is another level of identification, one that is still close but not as close as in the first example. In the following example there is yet another level of identification. The poster identifies with more than one character from *Sex and the City*:

> 10/26/2000 | 7:29PM [ 12/12 ] Cowgirlcool (*Sex and the City*)
> I am most like Charlotte. Not in the fashion sense, but in the every day things that Charlotte does. Like her, I believe in a fairy-tale ending. Charlotte is an art dealer. I enjoy artistic things such as poetry and things of that nature. But, I am also like Carrie. Who hasn't had a Mr. Big in their life? (www.gist.com)[31]

The next example shows a slightly more distant form of identification which relates self, characters and 'women' generally:

> The_Sexy_Kitten- Sat, Aug 17, 2002 at 1:04 AM EDT (*Sex and the City*)

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[29] See Appendix 10 (f) for the complete message
[30] See Appendix 10 (c) for the complete message
[31] See Appendix 10 (d) for the complete message

> I think the show is a hit because it reaches women of all ages, races, and shoe sizes. Personally, my friends and I identify with some of the characters. It's almost like they're broadcasting your thoughts (www.hbo.com)[32]

Messages showed different levels of identification: close identification with a particular character or recognisable experiences; partial identification with a character: identification with several characters and identification based on the experience of being a woman.

Existing research has suggested that audience identification may be achieved through consumption. Jackie Stacey has argued that film spectatorship and consumption are linked. The audience is invited to identify with an ideal femininity on screen and recreate this image through their consumption of goods and commodities (Stacey, 1994: 183). On the message boards, there was evidence of the audience trying to buy items they had seen on screen.

> Posted by deadhead on 21:50 12/20/1999: (*Ally McBeal*)
> Does anyone know where I can purchase the scarf that Elaine was wearing in tonight's episode? (gist.com)
>
> 7/25/02 11:06AM PDT Mamahells (*Sex and the City*)
> L'Autre Chose Brand Shoes Does anybody know where to get these shoes? I've seen in the 'Sex and The City' style section a pair that was worn by Miranda, however, I am unable to find these shoes in NY. All suggestions are welcome. (hbo.com)
>
> karen- Fri, Aug 23, 2002 at 11:36 AM EDT (*Sex and the City*)
> Where can I buy the fake nipples I saw on the show? (ew.com)

These messages show that individual audience members are interested in linking their media consumption to other forms of consumption, most typically of clothes and accessories, though there is no evidence of the 'copying' documented by Stacey in her discussion of female film stars and their fans.

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[32] See Appendix 10 (e) for the complete message

The talk in these messages again show the complex ways and topics the respondents discuss when talking about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. They use the series as a way of engaging with experiences and tensions they recognise in their own lives as contemporary women. They identify with the series at different levels and by different routes, and with characters through close forms of identification based on the recognition of experiences and more distant relationships based on gender.

Stacey's flexible approach to identification is useful here as it allows for a concept of identification through different routes. This shows the importance in not considering the female audience as a mass, but made up of individuals with similar experiences. Stacey argued that the female cinema audience *both* identify with and desire female Hollywood stars (Stacey, 1991: 22). This relationship is based on similarity and difference between the audience and the star. Similarly, the message boards suggest that the respondents in this study identified and evaluated the female characters of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in relation to the similarities and differences in their own experiences and emotions. There was however, no evidence to suggest the respondents here necessarily wanted to be like the characters, but rather took pleasure in recognising the similarities and differences.

**Mediascape**

The literature review discussed Appadurai's (1996) and Bolter and Grusin's (2000) descriptions of the ways media are interlinked and how audiences navigate a mediascape in their relations to particular media texts. The message boards gave an indication of the ways posters understood *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* against a backdrop of interlocking

texts. In these examples the posters focus particularly on print media and share their information with other users:

> Lori 01/09/02 (*Ally McBeal*)
> Here's the article in TV Guide:
> CASE DISMISSED: This is just the ratings-boosting stunt Ally McBeal could have used right now. A spokesperson for Robert Downey Jr. is denying widespread rumors that his client will return to the Fox dramedy during May sweeps. "There are no plans for him to return at this point," Alan Nierob tells TV Guide Online. Adds an Ally rep: "While the show is fond of him and has never ruled out his returning, there are no plans to have him return in Mayor any other time this season." (tktv.com)

> Posted by Myra T on 20:57 6/11/2001: (*Sex and the City*)
> There's a pretty neat article in next week's TV Guide about Chris Noth, John Corbett, Kyle McLachlan, and David Eigenberg. Great photos, although Big is a little hairy. In it the four talk about what it's like to be in a show that is dominated by females, and how they have managed to stay around while others have come and gone. One little spoiler, though....
> Samantha will have a new love interest soon played by James Remar (who is currently on the USA series The Huntress).
> Has anyone heard if Steve is coming (coffeerooms.com)

These posters pass on knowledge they have acquired about the series, thereby taking an active role in the mediascape.

In the following examples, posters track the series' actresses across a range of media.

> 08/ 21/02 12:30PM PDT MarilynM (*Sex and the City*)
> Did anyone else see that film last note on tv? Kim Cattrell was in it, looking not like Sam at all, all homey and wifey. She was still fab though!

> Catrina 7/17/02 9:29PM PDT Re: Carrie (*Sex and the City*)
> Did anyone just see SJP on Dave letterman. She looks kinda different in her face but she is a skinny pregnant lady! (hbo.com)

> 1/20/03 7:20PM PST Jenie (*Sex and the City*) Re: Miranda I thought Cynthia looked adorable at the Golden Globes last night in her yellow dress. I also liked the hair. Here's hoping she keeps it that length. (hbo.com)

They also showed an interest in other media that could be related to the series:

> Icaustin 2002-04-29 22:43:10 (*Ally McBeal*)

> Re: Does anyone know the man that appeared on Ally Mcbeal?
> I can help you with that, his name is Josh Groban. Check out his site, and buy his CD - it's great. http://www.joshgroban.com (tvtome.com)
>
> sharon- Tue, Aug 13, 2002 at 10:53 AM EDT (*Sex and the City*)
> Can anyone please help me. On the episode when Carrie went to the night club with the sailors, there was a song playing at the closing of the show. Also, this song was played in the movie Pretty In Pink with Molly Ringwald. If anyone knows the title and singer of this song please email me at msqueenb70@hotmail.com. (Ew.com)

In these messages the focus moves from the series to the actors and to the world of celebrity.

Posters also compared the series to other television shows:

> Posted by snippy on 08:04 7/26/2000: (*Sex and the City*)
> Sex in the City and The Sopranos are the best shows. They are truly the only reason I keep HBO. It's just light and funny, and I love watching it. I even watch the repeats. Great cast and great writers.....too funny. (Coffeerooms.com)
>
> *hollie* 04/8/2000 | 4:51PM [ 16/24 ] (*Ally McBeal*)
> "Ally McBeal" is the best female character to come along since Shelley Long's brilliant Diane Chambers from "Cheers". Ally, and all of the women of the show are strong, and don't take crap from men. The women on the show are much more impressive and respectable than the men. This is a great female driven show that men seem to like more than women do. I'd say the women are shown in a good light! (gist.com)

These messages demonstrate that audiences do not watch television programmes in isolation but as part of a stream of media. This involves posters in discussions of quality and of issues of representation.

The message board analysis demonstrates the various ways respondents access a range of information that becomes part of how they understand and enjoy the series. Sharing information about the series, tracking actors, comparing shows and talking about the broader context of gender representation indicates the network within which individual texts exist. The sharing of information on the message boards also becomes part of the

mediascape itself. The act of posting is itself significant and pleasurable, offering users the opportunity to share information and opinions on a range of issues, reproducing the pleasure of talking to friends and allowing posters to exchange views with knowledgeable others. In this sense, message boards give individual audience members a voice and having their views validated. Their act of collaborative interpretation also allows posters to experience being part of a wider group all "talking" about the same thing.

In these messages we see again how the talk is intertwined to discuss the text and the "real world". We see again the technical, analytical and interpretative skills of the female audience. So although simple distinctions have been made between the themes dealt with in messages, it is important to remember that posters intertwine all kinds of topics in their messages. The talk is complex and sophisticated. The following example demonstrates this:

> Posted by Lucy0 on 18:41 7/9/2002: (*Ally McBeal*)
> My favourite character in the show is ling, and I love Lucy Liu. Though it might be unnerving to see someone so comfortable in her own skin, it is also refreshing and encouraging. I am glad that Lucy's movie career is taking off. Along with her CA part, she also has a new movie coming out called Ecks vs' Sever (http://www.ecksvssever.com). It is refreshing to see someone, especially an Asian person, not typecasted (she plays a super weapon in this movie). As much as men and women differ, I think we can all appreciate Lucy and her new movie. (coffeerooms.com) [33]

This message moves through different aspects of the mediascape, from the character of Ling in *Ally McBeal*, to the film career of Lucy Liu and the portrayal of Asian people in film.

[33] See Appendix 10 (p) for the complete message

**Conclusion**

The analysis of message boards gave an indication of the way highly engaged audience members make sense of *Ally Mcbeal* and *Sex and the City.* The talk analysed here is both complex and sophisticated when referring to both series. This talk has drawn out key ideas in understanding these female respondents relationship to *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City.* We will now consider what the responses mean for the three key aspects of this study outlined in both the introduction and literature review.

First, in terms of the representation of women in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* the female characters were described as strong and independent and most importantly "of this time", representing women in this contemporary moment. The characters offered an emotional connection based on personal experiences and emotions. Stacey argued that identification is based on the boundary between the self and other. The talk on *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* seemed more focused on the self and less about the other. There was a sense of bringing your experiences to the characters, perhaps trying to aspire to certain characteristics but not actively copying them to become more like them. Notably the respondents themselves saw the female characters as significantly different from other female characters they knew and had experienced, so indicating the importance in studying *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City.*

Second, in terms of the contemporary experience of being a woman the messages showed that the female respondents felt certain tensions within society. These concerns related to wanting to be sexy, independent, career orientated, building solid friendships and personal sexual satisfaction. These were all topics that the respondents felt conflicted about. This suggests a change in the demographic and social concerns of young women today.

Rather than disliking the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, as Press found in her study on representations of women in careers, the respondents enjoyed how the series explored these tensions. In particular both series were praised in their approach to issues such as the way the female characters "delight in femininity and sexuality" and showing how motherhood could in fact be difficult, as opposed to more mainstream representations of motherhood being fulfilling and natural. The appeal here seemed to be in taking women's experiences seriously. Penny Sparke argues that a "non-hierachical view of culture [that] allow[s] for the possibility of feminine taste finding a new level of acceptance" (Sparke, 1995: 229). Crucially here is that the respondents of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* have different concerns than those in past feminist audience research studies which tended to be based on the housewife. These respondents were concerned with their careers and satisfying sexual desires.

Third, is the mediascape. The message showed how *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as texts were part of a much wider context of media consumption and should be considered against a backdrop of interlocking texts. Respondents tracked actresses, shared information about plots, costumes, music and other media texts. Using the Internet in this way and exchanging messages are in themselves part of the mediascape as they create sources of information and a shred community to be entered anchored by the texts.

The analysis of the message boards illustrated that for the female audience both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are seen as important and significant. They explore and represent experiences that the audience recognise and value. The audience's engagement with the series is based on a series of identifications which relate fiction to reality. The talk demonstrated the complex and intertwined way the audience do communicate about both

programmes. The "talk" accessed here relates to a layer of the audience of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* who are deeply engaged with the series; we could call them fans. The next chapter will explore another kind of talk and focus on a different layer of the audience who are less engaged with the series.

# CHAPTER FOUR- QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEWS

The previous chapter on message boards focused predominantly on American female audience members who had a deep engagement with *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. This chapter focuses on questionnaires and interviews carried out with British viewers who were less engaged with the series. Whereas respondents using message boards set the agenda for discussion, in this stage of the project the researcher set the agenda for discussion by using particular questions based on the four topics identified in the literature review.

The respondents were women aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old. Thirty-one questionnaires were completed by e-mail or post. Eighteen interviews were conducted over the telephone and e-mail[34]. The questionnaire used closed questions designed to explore a variety of topics including characters, identification, genre and contexts of viewing. The interviews were more in-depth and focused on genre, humour and contemporary experiences of being a woman. The same structure of categories has been used in this chapter as the previous chapter to help with organising material. These categories also refer to the key contributions the study will make as outlined in the introduction and literature review.

**The Representation of Women in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City***

This section has again been broken down into four different sections focusing on aspects of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*: characters, genre, realism and fantasy and humour.

[34] See Appendix 3 and 4 for a copy of the questionnaire and interview questions

This has been done in order to organise the material and is slightly easier in this chapter due to the fact that the questionnaires and interviews asked direct questions on the topics.

Female Characters

Strong female characters were also a source of pleasure for the respondents, and the most popular characters were described as feisty, sexy, independent, blunt and confident. For example, Respondent Nineteen (Questionnaire) wrote that, "Sam is confident, successful and independent as a female and this is rarely seen on TV sitcoms". In the message board discussions respondents appeared to like characters because they could relate their own personal experiences to them. Here respondents also often described characters they aspired to be like or enjoyed because of their lack of conformity to expected social behaviour for women. Ling, from *Ally McBeal* and Samantha, from *Sex and the City* were both popular characters due to their assertive almost bitchy behaviour. They were seen by the respondents as characters who were not afraid of men, not afraid to go for what they want and forthright with their ideas and opinions. This might be partly attributable to the relation of a British audience to what they perceive as feisty American characters. Nevertheless, it is clear that the respondents enjoyed watching women who do not conform to ideas about how women are expected to act.

Genre

In order to put *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in context and examine their appeal for the audience, the questionnaires and interviews raised the topic of genre with the audience. In the questionnaire respondents were asked about the genres of programmes they liked best and in the interviews respondents were asked to describe *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in terms of genre, such as romance, drama or soap opera.

As in the message boards, respondents described *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as a combination of genres, generally as a combination of romantic drama and situation comedy. They explained that the series were difficult to define exactly, seeing them as distinctive, just as the message board respondents had. For example, Respondent Seventeen (Interview) explained:

> Ally is definitely a mixture of sit com and romantic drama but then not even them either. There are bits of those in there but not how you would think of say *Friends* which is what I would think of as a sitcom. I mean you've got singing and dancing but it's not a musical like say *Fame* or *Moulin Rouge* so I would say it's hard to say what exactly it is.

Respondents used other genres to explain the familiarity and distinctiveness of the series. For example, some argued that *Sex and the City* was similar "to *Ally McBeal* but I would say more of a drama than anything else. It is funny but it's not really a sitcom as such" (Respondent 6/ Interview). This mapping of the series against existing genres provided a framework for describing the series and the respondents' expectations of and pleasure in them. For example, as one interviewee noted in relation to *Ally McBeal*: "I wouldn't watch the programme if all the people were normal and boring and the law firm weren't a bit crazy. You can watch other programmes for like real law and court drama but Ally has more zany bits" (Respondent Seven/ Interview). It is *Ally McBeal*'s combination of generic conventions that informs how the respondent perceives and appreciates the series.
In the questionnaire respondents listed the kinds of genres they most enjoyed[35]. The most popular genres were drama, soap opera and situation comedies, along with music programmes. This suggests that the popularity of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* lies partly in their combination of popular genres which already appeal to their audience, a combination that the audience is clearly aware of.

[35] See Appendix 11- a table of results relating to genre

Narrative

The work on the message boards showed how the respondents fragmented the narratives of the *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and picked out particular scenes or moments that they liked, especially where these related to emotions or personal experiences. The same thing was found in the questionnaires and interviews. Respondents identified particular scenes and pieces of dialogue they liked and, in *Ally McBeal*, particular instances of dancing or singing they enjoyed. Respondent Seventeen (Interview) described how, "Ally just surprises you and it's those unexpected bits of singing or courtroom performance that makes you laugh". Scenes which elicited emotional responses were particularly popular as the following comments show; "I love the moment in the courtroom when Billy collapses and dies in her arms. I was sobbing like a baby.' (Respondent Seven/Questionnaire), and "I love the bit where Big phones Carrie and tells her he is having heart surgery and she just keeps crying at him. I can't keep a straight face just answering this. It just makes me laugh" (Respondent Twenty-Five/Questionnaire).

As on the message boards, respondents not only discussed narratives that related to their own personal experiences, but those that related to "women's experiences". For them, part of the appeal of the series was their focus on women and what they described as "women's interests". In the interviews, the majority of respondents disagreed with the statement, *"Sex and the City* is all about men, not women" (Bunting, 09/02/01: *The Guardian*) arguing that, "it's all about the women's experiences and feelings" (Respondent Fifteen/Interview). They saw this focus, indicated in the number of female characters, as distinctive, and identified the series as *for* women and engaging with women's experiences and interests, such as friendship, men, sex and fashion. They also felt that the use of comedy, singing and dancing in *Ally McBeal* had a particular appeal for women. For example, Respondent

Eighteen (Questionnaire) explained that she loved the dancing baby in *Ally McBeal* "especially where she [Ally] throws caution to the wind, confronts her hallucination and dances with the baby", while Respondent Twenty-Eight remarked that she enjoyed "the way they dance everywhere. I really liked one of the early episodes where all the characters are in the loo doing a little dance number".

Respondents also argued that the use of comedy and the focus on women's friendships, problems, pleasures and viewpoints in *Sex and the City* particularly spoke to women. Respondent Four (Questionnaire) felt that it was, "about girlies about town, fashion, exciting lifestyles, cute men: things that me and my friends do" and Respondent Seven (Questionnaire) explained, "I love the friendship, humour, discussions about sex, the fact that there's hardly any boundaries, they look at the problems of being single in a relationship vs married world and all from a woman's point of view".

Realism and Fantasy

"Emotional realism" (Ang, 1985: 47) was one of the most important factors for the respondents in terms of the way they evaluated *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The questionnaire and interviews suggested that it was also an important part of its appeal for the respondents. The series' recognition of women's experiences was particularly significant. Most respondents rejected claims by journalists that the series portrayed women in negative ways, such as helpless and desperate. Instead the depiction of women was seen as rooted in women's experience.

Respondents identified instances of realism both as related to their own personal lives, Respondent Thirteen (Questionnaire) wrote, "I can relate to the plots involving dating

wrong guys, falling out of love and sharing with friends" and to a realism of gender experience which involved the recognition of other women's experiences - "I think Ally is every woman's neuroses thrown in together. I don't have every one she has but I do manage to say the wrong thing or get stuck in bizarre situations. That's why you understand her. You know where she's coming from" (Respondent One/Questionnaire).

While both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are realistic in terms of their relation to women's emotions and experiences, they do this in quite different ways. *Sex and the City* stays within the boundaries of social realism, whereas *Ally McBeal* incorporates elements of fantasy and surrealism, using CGI, singing and dancing to express the characters' emotions. For example, in the *Pilot* episode of the series, Ally joins a new law firm only to find that her ex-childhood sweetheart, Billy, someone she still loves, is working there. Billy is shocked, but says he is happy to see her, "not as an ex-boyfriend, but as a lawyer who appreciates a talented addition to the firm". As the camera focuses on Ally, four arrows shoot straight into her heart. The use of CGI, singing and dancing allows the audience to perceive the programme as "like the real world but also a cartoon" (Respondent Thirteen/Questionnaire). It also helps to explain the distinctiveness and appeal of the programme. The comments here suggest that respondents' engagement with *Ally McBeal* at the level of emotion and experience is enhanced by the use of cartoon-like sequences and music.

The questionnaires and interviews suggested that *Sex and the City* is considered to stay more within the boundaries of recognisable realism, but demonstrated the importance of realism of emotion and experience in respondents' connection with the series. For example, Respondent Twenty-Seven (Questionnaire) wrote that she loved everything about *Sex and*

*the City* as "their lives are so fabulous and real. I've dated weirdoes and gone way past my credit limit". Characters, lifestyles and places are evaluated in terms of their realism. New York (the setting for *Sex and the City*) is known as a real place and the characters' lifestyles are evaluated as real within that context.

Humour

The questionnaires and interviews highlighted the importance of humour in the appeal of the series. Humorous scenes and dialogue were often referred to and respondents related the series' appeal to the fact that they were "so hilarious and so true" (Respondent Eight/Questionnaire). Respondent Seven (Interview) noted how, "Elaine and all her inventions made me laugh. Like her face bra. Only she could have made that up!" and Respondent Fifteen (Interview) explained that, "I thought it was hilarious when Carrie farted when she was in bed with Big and was really embarrassed. It was so true of when you do that the first time".

The majority of respondents felt that the humour was particularly for women because it revolved around recognisable female experiences. Respondent Nine said that, "I don't think men really see the humour in it, whereas women have been in that situation and know how the person is feeling" (Interview). Respondent Ten thought that, "men might find it funny but maybe not the same bits as women as the comedy comes from recognising experiences and as it's all about women then it may not be as familiar to a man" (Interview). Respondent Sixteen (Interview) reported that, "I think some men find them funny but really it's not things they can relate to and to hear that actually your penis can be too small is probably worrying rather than funny".

On the message boards it was clear that the audience appreciated different types of humour in each series. Humour in *Ally McBeal* depended on the use of singing, dancing and CGI technology. This was also found to be the case in the questionnaires and interviews. For example, Respondent Four (Questionnaire) explained she liked the way Ally, "has funny and strange visions" and Respondent Thirty-one (Questionnaire) said, "it's just so funny. The randomness of the singing and the bits of cartoons make you laugh as at the beginning it was just so unexpected".

The message board analysis also showed that humour in *Sex and the City* often depended on its ability to push at acceptable boundaries. The focus on sexual practices and taboos coupled with humour was also seen as appealing in the questionnaire and interviews. As Respondent Twenty-Nine (Questionnaire) explained, "it's funny but has a serious edge looking at issues on women and sex. While you're laughing you know it's all true" and Respondent Ten (Interview) felt that "it definitely appeals to women more. Could a man really laugh at all the inadequacies and experiences that Sam finds in a man?"

Similarly respondents enjoyed the breaking of female behavioural taboos in both series. Ling from *Ally McBeal* and Samantha from *Sex and the City* were singled out for their focus on their own pleasures and the fact both disliked the thought of having children. Respondent Nine (Questionnaire) described Samantha as, "a whore and fantastic", while Respondent Twenty-Two (Questionnaire) explained that Ling is "stubborn and goes against acceptable social behaviour. She just does what she wants, tells it like it is and just doesn't do what you expect". It is these aspects of the characters that many of the respondents appreciated and aspired to be more like; Respondent Twenty-Three (Questionnaire) wished

she was "more assertive just like Ling". These responses suggest the use of humour to disrupt norms of behaviour for women were an important source of the series' appeal.

In both series, the style of humour is structured around stylised one-liners, as in other American comedies such as *Friends* or *Frasier*. It would have been interesting to explore whether the respondents perceived the style of humour in these other series as aimed at women, or whether it was the subject matter and recognition of experience that was important in the appeal of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*.

What this section does is further support the conclusions from the message boards and suggest that there is not such a huge difference between the way more engaged viewers and slightly less engaged viewers understand the series. The key differences are more apparent when considering engagement in the mediascape. This will be discussed later in the chapter, in the section on the mediascape.

It also showed that the audience identify with the series in different ways, ranging from personal and close identification to a more distant identification based on gender, and that audience members may move between these positions depending on what is being shown. It demonstrated that whether realistic or fantastic, identification depended on emotion and experience rather than material factors. Audience members shift between different positions in order to engage with and assess the realism of what is shown on screen.

This stage of the research also showed how respondents drew on their experience of popular generic conventions in their understanding and appreciation of the series. The particular appeal of the series was shown to depend on their focus on women and 'women's

interests'. Characters that challenged accepted social behaviour for women were a source of pleasure and a point of aspiration.

Respondents revealed that audience members can take up different positions in relation to their personal and gender identification with media texts, and in relation to the evaluation of how realistic portrayals of women's experiences and emotions are.

Humour was found to be particularly significant in explaining the appeal of the series for the audience. Respondents argued that the humour spoke to women by focusing on women's experiences from a woman's point of view. In both series the ability to push the boundaries of expected female behaviour through humour was important for the audience

**Contemporary Experiences of being a Woman**

Analysis of the message boards showed that watching the series gave the respondents an opportunity to talk about their experiences of being a woman in contemporary society. The questionnaires and interviews aimed to examine this further by asking respondents about the way romance, love, sex, femininity and feminism were depicted in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. In their responses, the tensions they felt about these issues became clear. Respondents were asked if they felt the series were romantic. They argued that although the female characters' attempts to find an ideal partner in the series were romantic, "old fashioned" definitions of romance did not apply. For example, Respondent Eleven (Interview) explained:

> They aren't really hearts and flowers. I think Charlotte would be the most romantic having all these ideas about marriage when she only just meets someone. It's hard to say. I think of romance as being about soul mates and fate and in *Sex and the City* they meet so many people and date so much it doesn't seem to be the same thing.

Similar comments were made by Respondent Four (Interview):

> I think *Ally McBeal* is more explicitly romantic with the central character always looking for love. This is partly the case for Carrie in *Sex and The City* but her actions are balanced by the actions of, for example, Samantha who is more led by sexual pleasure and romance is an only an unexpected subplot on rare occasions. Both programmes focus on women looking for love but SATC is more tongue in cheek, and is more lighthearted about love/romance but without trivialising it.

Although respondents thought the series were romantic, they were careful to distinguish between different depictions of romance and between depictions of romance and their own views of romance. Respondent Eleven's comments demonstrate this level of negotiation between her own (quite traditional) view of romance (soul mates and fate), particularly 'romantic' characters (Charlotte) and the series more generally. Respondent Four's response also demonstrates the ways that respondents identify with the series on a personal level ('I think') and in a more distanced way ('programmes focus on women').

Respondents were also asked about the portrayal of love and sex in the series. They thought the series showed sex and love as related but different, drawing on different definitions of love and sex to express their views. For example, Respondent Ten (Interview) explained that:

> sex has more to do with lust in some characters' cases and for others there are varying stages of emotions whilst still having sex. They aren't necessarily in love with the man they are sleeping with but may have been on several dates with him and so have some kind of feeling for him. I guess what I'm trying to say is that you can't have sex with no feelings at all even if its only lust but it doesn't have to be love.

As with romance, respondents were careful and often found it difficult to clarify their own and the series' views of love and sex. This carefulness was also apparent in their responses to questions about the construction of femininity in the series. Although they agreed that the characters were feminine, they defined what this meant in different ways. Most

respondents defined femininity as being related to personal appearance, in terms of clothes, make-up and beauty. However, there were attempts to define femininity in other ways. One respondent noted,

> traditional uber-femininity is about being a cross between Barbie & Delia Smith. To have blonde hair; or act like a ditz; or to coo at babies; or wear skirts; or be as thin and as hairless as an 8 year old child. To ME personally 'femininity' is about feeling good about yourself, being strong, being good to others (Respondent Three/Interview)

While another argued that, "you think of stereotypical women wearing pink, taking ages having their hair done or nails or being able to shop for hours at a time. Needing looking after and protecting and so on and only some of these things are in these programmes" (Respondent Seventeen/Interview).

Interviewees were also asked if they felt the characters in the series could be considered feminist. The majority thought that they could be, as long as this term did not indicate "dungarees and aggression" (Respondent Two/Interview) or "man haters" (Respondent Eight/Interview). As Respondent Seven (Interview) explained,

> Having a shaved head, wearing dungarees and being angry that men are always in control is a bit old fashioned now. The idea of wanting to be equal with men is still true but so many women have jobs now, like Miranda who's a lawyer. I think being feminist is more about supporting other women and your friends.

Respondent Sixteen (Interview) thought that *Sex and the City* showed women who "have a lot of choices now and they can sleep with who they want without being considered a slut. All the girls have really good jobs and Miranda is also a mother which although she shows isn't easy it is possible and acceptable". Earlier feminist concerns – equal opportunities and sexual double standards – are seen as resolved in the world of the programme.

In their responses, women called approvingly on definitions which emphasize personal attributes such as independence and supportiveness and choice while rejecting those which they associate with man hating or views of women as unequal, passive, weak, victims. Broadly speaking, their responses seems to support Astrid Henry's (2004) claim that programmes like *Sex and the City* are in line with forms of third wave feminism which focus on the personal, pleasure and individual choice.

Identification and Consumption

Analysis of the message boards showed that the respondents identified with characters on different levels. Analysis of the questionnaires and interviews supported this. Respondents identified with characters or narratives because of their recognition of shared personal experiences or emotions, as Respondent Thirteen (Questionnaire) indicated: "As a single 30 something going on short relationship number one hundred, 3 words: I can relate". Another position of identification was more distant and related to gender identification rather than personal experience, to the experiences and emotions shared by women generally: such as friendship, employment and consumption. For example: "I like the friendship of the 4 main characters and how it shows their struggles with life" (Respondent Twenty/ Questionnaire). Another position taken by some respondents was one of aspiration. For example, Respondent Twenty-Three (Questionnaire) noted that, "Ling says what she thinks and is very confident. I'd like to be more assertive like her". Some respondents indicated that they took up more than one position at once. For example Respondent Seventeen (Questionnaire) wrote, "It's so refreshing that we finally see women talk like that on TV, about the same things I talk about with my friends". She identifies with what she sees as women's experience and with her own individual experiences with her friends.

In message board discussions, the glamorous outfits worn by the characters in *Sex and the City* were understood as 'realistic' because of their location as affluent urban professionals. In the questionnaires, respondents identified characters whose "style and fashion" they liked, but their clothes were not a point of personal identification. The majority of respondents said their personal style was not like that of any of the characters and that they adopted a more casual, comfortable style. Despite this difference, questionnaires and interviews showed women understanding the glamorous lifestyles of the characters as in keeping with their occupations and the urban surroundings, as the respondents on the message boards did. In the interviews the majority of women disagreed with the following statement about *Sex and the City*, "The programme shows that all women are interested in are getting a man and having designer clothes" (Aitkenhead, 05/ 02/99: *The Guardian*). As Respondent Thirteen argued, "their jobs afford their designer clothes just as I would buy them if I could afford them and getting a man is just one part of life." Respondent Sixteen echoed this, "I think this is more the way the show works than what all women are interested in. I like the fashion and I like shopping but that's not all I'm interested in". While fashion is an important aspect of the series, particularly in *Sex and the City*, there is no evidence that it was an important point of identification for the respondents who seemed to identify with the series at an emotional rather than material level. The characters' lifestyles are seen as being in keeping with the setting of the series, but identification with the characters depends on emotions and experience.

This section supports the responses from the message boards in terms of the respondents feeling certain tensions of being a woman in this contemporary movement and the levels of identification the respondents have with the female characters. The respondents here do suggest a further aspect as this stage of the research addressed key themes of love, sex,

romance, femininity, feminism more explicitly. It showed that respondents actively engage with a range of ideas about and representations of these in their responses to the series. Respondents showed that the terms are complex and in the case of femininity and feminism have a historical definition attached to them they often feel is difficult to reconcile with their own experiences. What the respondents also seem to identify is a focus on personal and individual qualities, which is something Astrid Henry, in the literature review argued was an important part of third wave feminism.

As discussed above the respondents identified with the female characters at different levels. This ranged from personal to gendered identification, as well as including aspects of aspiration and multiple positions of identification. A key aspect here not seen in the message boards, but brought out more clearly here was that female character style was not a point of identification. Emotional connection was far more relevant, then clothing and character fashion consumption. This section further supports the ideas raised in the previous chapter in relation to Stacey's and identification. The respondents here did not indicate, as Stacey does, a desire to transform themselves to be like the characters. There was some appreciation of female characters who did not conform to social expectations of female behaviour and a certain aspirational aspect to also be able to behave in that way, but no respondents discussed changing their hair or copying the characters style and fashion.

**Mediascape**

In the questionnaires respondents were asked about their interaction with the mediascape. For example, they were asked to name their favourite programmes since the age of sixteen. The most popular programmes were *The Simpsons*, *Friends*, *Frasier*, *Buffy the Vampire*

*Slayer*, *Angel*, *The Golden Girls*, *Will and Grace* and a variety of soap operas. This revealed something about the taste and age of the respondents, but also helped to define the context within which they view *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The programmes enjoyed by the respondents were American dramas, all combining elements of different genres, particularly soap opera and situation comedy.

Respondents were also asked about their use of other media. 65% said they regularly read a newspaper and 80% said they regularly read a magazine (these included *Cosmopolitan*, *Now*, *Closer*, *Hello*, *OK*, *Heat*, *Empire* and *More*). All the respondents used the Internet, most popularly for e-mail, though 71% of respondents used it for finding information on films, 65% used it for shopping, 58% used it for message boards and 35% used it for participating in chat rooms.

Respondents were asked if they ever bought a magazine for the gossip about the series. 23% said they had done this in relation to *Sex and the City* although only 1% said that they had for *Ally McBeal*.

This helps to locate the media consumption of the respondents. The stories and information in the magazines, newspapers, other television programmes and Internet, whether related to the series directly or not, make up the broader context of the audience's daily media consumption. A key point to note here is the difference in involvement in the mediascape for different layers of the audience. The fans of the series that used message boards were more active and a great deal more engaged with the flows of information about the series than the majority of respondents in the questionnaires and interviews. The respondents

from the questionnaires and interviews were still placed within the mediascape, interacting with other media and texts but were less actively involved in the flows of information.

So, just as there seems to be different levels of engagement in terms of identification relating to emotions and experiences, so there are levels of involvement in the mediascape. Interestingly these do not seem to influence each other. Respondents from the message boards had similar responses to the programmes regardless of being considered more involved in the mediascape.

The question specifically addressing the mediascape gave an indication of the relationship between the respondents and media consumption, such as reading newspapers or magazines. Responses discussed previously in this chapter, also gave an indication how this knowledge of mediascape is used. For example, when the respondents were discussing the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* they compared them to other characters in other programmes. Or when trying to explain the genre of the two series, respondents mapped them using their wider genre knowledge and other programmes they watched. Asking direct questions about the mediascape gave an indication of actual media consumption. Exploring the way the respondents talked about other aspects of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* gave an indication how this media consumption helps respondents to understand and make sense of the series. In the next chapter we shall see more clearly the complex links the female respondents make between the texts and the mediascape.

**Conclusion**

This section of the research allowed access to talk that was in response to particular questions. This allowed a more focused and in-depth understanding of key aspects of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. We have considered the particular insights the questionnaires and interviews have given and how this maybe different to the responses in the message boards, but what does it mean for the three key contributions of the study?

First is the representation of female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. This section of research as showed that like in the message board analysis, the respondents liked the female characters that broke norms of behaviour for women. They liked strong characters who were successful, independent, sassy and fiery. This aspect of female characters who are not afraid to talk about abortions, the fact that they don't want children, that they are successful in their careers, spend most of their wages on shoes, not houses suggests a marked difference than previous female characters, as described by Moseley and Read in the literature review. Female characters were explored by considering their relationship to personal life and career, where the respondents here enjoyed female characters that took a different postmodern attitude to the concepts.

*Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were also seen to appeal to women's interests in their narrative and approach to humour by the female respondents. This again gives an indication of the appeal of the programmes in women's interests being taken seriously, as Penny Spark noted in the previous chapter of, "feminine taste finding a new level of acceptance" (Spark, 1995: 229).

Second is the contemporary experience of being a woman. As in the responses from the message boards the respondents of the questionnaire and interviews identified the tensions they were experiencing in society. The responses here shed more light on the complex negotiations the respondents were making in understanding terms like romance, love, sex, femininity and feminism. Whereas the respondents enjoyed female characters who broke taboos of female social behaviour, in their own lives the key tensions appeared to be in reconciling historical and cultural definitions of terms like romance and feminism with their own experiences. These responses give support to idea that the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are part of a wider context of approaching the contemporary female experience in a postmodern and reflexive way. Highlighting the tensions women feel and exploring them.

Third is the mediascape. The responses from the questionnaires and interviews showed that *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* fitted into the interests and other media consumption of the respondents. The respondents were active in their media consumption of other texts and media. What the responses from the questionnaires and interviews made clear was that these slightly less engaged viewers of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were not as active in using the information as the fans in the message boards. This suggests different layers of the audience have different levels of engagement with the mediascape.

This stage of the research gave access to a kind of talk about the series which centred on being asked direct questions about certain topics from the researcher. The next chapter will discuss another kind of "talk" prompted by the focus group activities.

# CHAPTER FIVE- FOCUS GROUPS

The final stage of the research consisted of two focus groups with women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. Respondents were recruited through advertisements placed in local supermarkets, libraries and gyms and took place in a local community centre. They began by giving some information about the researcher and the study and used a quick exercise to introduce everyone to each other. A series of short questions were used to get the respondents thinking about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. What were their favourite characters and why? What storyline has been their favourite?

The schedule for the groups was piloted to ensure the task would yield data that could bed use in the research[36]. A creative task was used, asking respondents to create group collages based on the characters of Ally McBeal, Carrie Bradshaw and individual collages relating to themselves[37]. Groups were given sheets of paper, magazines, scissors, glue and pens and encouraged to write or draw anything they felt was relevant as well as using magazines for images and words. It was explained that there was no pressure to fill the sheets of paper completely but that explanations were requires for what they included. A variety of magazines were used such as *Now*, *New*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Heat*, *TV Quick*, *Radio Times* and *Marie Claire* because they offered a range of images, because of their address to women and because previous stages of the research had suggested that the series re-mediated topics commonly found in women's magazines. We could call this a semiotic exercise, which allowed respondents to produce signifiers relevant to their understandings of the series.

[36] See Appendix 12 (a)- (d) for pilot focus group collages
[37] See Appendix 13 (a)- (n) and Appendix 14 (a)- (l) for Focus Group One and Focus Group Two collages and explanations.

The aim of the focus groups was also to build on the previous stages of research by accessing another kind of talk, group talk, in order to gain another perspective on the way the audience understand the series. The use of a creative task was designed to prompt talk and encourage the exploration of the sign system used by respondents in interpreting the series.

After completing the collages, respondents were asked to explain their choices of images or words. Their responses were detailed and thought out. For example, in Focus Group One, one of the respondents stuck a picture of a pregnant woman on the *Sex and the City* collage and then covered this with a picture of a large bag. She explained this was to demonstrate the way that Patricia Field (the costume designer on *Sex and the City*) used floaty fabrics and large accessories to disguise Sarah Jessica Parker's pregnancy. As in this instance, the images chosen were not always obvious but demonstrated the audience's knowledge of the series.

The "talk" in the focus groups was not limited to what to include on the collages. Respondents talked about themselves, the programmes and interesting aspects of the magazines they were using. This kind of talk was similar to the spontaneous talk in the message boards where a number of topics were intertwined.

The three keys areas of interest identified in the literature review – the representation of the female characters, the contemporary experience of being a woman and the mediascape- were used as a structure for the focus group analysis. Although the questionnaires and interviews demonstrated that humour was a major factor in the appeal of the series, this was not raised in the focus groups. This will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter. In

addition, because of the nature of group discussion, the three remaining areas were not always dealt with as distinct and separate, though they are separated out below for the sake of clarity and organisation of material.

**The Representation of Female Characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City***

This section, as in the other chapters is split into the six sections relating to *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. This is for clarity in the organisation of material. Here it should be made clear that in the talk which referred directly to the choices of images these topics were easier to separate into these categories, but in the discussion the respondents had whilst creating the collages was complex and intertwined. This shall be seen in the extracts used.

Female Characters

Ally McBeal was described by respondents mainly in relation to her job as a lawyer and her desire for a relationship with a man. In contrast, Carrie was described in relation to her leisure activities. In both cases the characters were classified using points of reference and experiences familiar to the respondents: appearance, attitude to relationships, tastes and lifestyles. Respondents consistently identified these key elements in both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and their own lives. A good example is in Focus Group One. The respondents were trying to explain what Carrie from *Sex and the City* would drink. This resulted in several pictures being stuck over one another until the "right" drink was found:

| | |
|---|---|
| Respondent 2 | Oh. This [bottle of brandy] would be good. They always seem to go out drinking |
| All agree | |
| 5 | Look at these shoes [green strappy sandals]. These have to go on. They are very Carrie. |
| 4 | Well obviously. It's what they all wear all the time. I don't think any of |

| | |
|---|---|
| | them wear trainers ever do they? |
| 2 | Let's look. Yeah. High |
| 3 | Look at this glass. It's gin and tonic. Looks kind of cocktaily |
| 2 | That's better than the brandy. It looks more what they like...you know with a decorated glass and a mixture... |
| 3 | Shall I stick it next to the brandy? |
| 5 | Stick it over it |
| 4 | Yeah |
| 3 | OK. |
| 4 | Can I write on it? |
| Moderator | Yes. There's pens on the end. Write where you want. |
| 4 | I'm going to write Sleepless in Seattle for films |
| 2 | Would they watch that though? It's a bit sloppy. |
| 4 | It's a classic though and they end up in New York don't they? |
| 2 | Yeah.... |
| 4 | You can imagine them all sat around watching it and slagging it off. Miranda would hate it. |
| 1 | That's true. Yeah put it on. It shows what they are like. They'd watch it to make themselves feel better that that sort of thing doesn't happen 17 minutes later |
| 5 | Look at this [picture of cocktail glass] What do you think? |
| 3 | That looks exactly like what she'd drink. Does it say what it is? |
| 5 | No but it looks like a Cosmopolitan doesn't it? I'll stick it on |
| 3 | Put it over the gin and tonic as that's better |
| 5 | Sure? |
| 3 | Yeah |

Getting the specific drink was important to the respondents as it signified Carrie's character. The "right" drink was required to reflect Carrie's lifestyle

Genre

The focus groups did not talk about genre directly, but they did speak about the series in terms of characteristics that we might classify as belonging to a "glossy genre". A glossy magazine approach to subjects like fashion, appearance, celebrity gossip and relationships seems to be brought to the screen in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City.*

The focus groups demonstrated that watching the series was part of a larger set of cultural practices involving other media and an interest in celebrity gossip, fashion and show-biz

news. In their personal collages the majority of the respondents included references to magazines they liked to read, explaining their choices in terms of the opportunity they provided for accessing gossip about celebrities. The series clearly fit this context of gloss and glamour. Respondents used pictures of George Clooney, Barbara Streisand, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra and black and white films on their *Carrie* collages to signify the Hollywood glamour they felt *Sex and the City* embodied. This piece of dialogue shows the discussion on this theme developing:

| Respondent | |
|---|---|
| 1 | When I think of films I think of classic ones |
| 2 | Breakfast at Tiffany's |
| 1 | I'll write that one. Chuck me that pen |
| 3 | What about An Affair to Remember |
| 1 | Yeah. Black and white kind of women as women film |
| Moderator | How do you mean? |
| 1 | The women Hollywood stars were very feminine and seen as like goddesses |
| 4 | Yeah. Heels and skirts were what you wore as a woman. It's the same in *Sex and the City* |
| 2 | Yeah. |
| 3 | The great romantic epic is a bit like Big and Carrie with the on again off again…that sort of thing |
| 4 | But more sex |
| 3 | Well yeah |
| 2 | It's a mix of that style and femininity with women enjoying sex and not being afraid to find it and ask for what they want |

The "Hollywood" images, supplemented by images of yellow taxis, cocktails, parties and premiers, high fashion and Chanel No. 5 perfume worked to construct a specific context for the series, namely America. This context was clearly of importance for the respondents' evaluation and appreciation of the series.

Narrative

Differences between the narratives of the series became apparent in discussion. Respondents recognised Ally McBeal as a romantic narrative, discussing the way Ally

searches for romance, a family and Mr. Right, signifying this with pictures of a bride and groom, films and music about love and romance, romantic novels and melodrama. But these references to romance were given a contemporary twist, as the following discussion shows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Respondent | |
| 4 | I've stuck this on to show how it's about love but in a more updated way [Down with Love] |
| 3 | I've not seen that. |
| 4 | It's got Ewan McGregor and Renee Zelwegger in it |
| 3 | I can't stand her. She just annoys me. That's why I won't have seen it. She has a squashed face! |
| 4 | Well it about this playboy who goes after this woman and you think it's all straight forward as he tries to win her over |
| 2 | It's like Doris Day and Rock Hudson |
| 4 | Yeah. You think it's going to be like that but at the end you find out she is in love with him and it's all been a clever plan to make him fall in love with her |
| 1 | I think I remember that. Didn't Ewan have a really bizarre name? |
| 4 | Yeah something like Stud |
| Laugh | |
| 2 | Catch, Catcher? |
| 4 | It's kind of like those old romantic films like Doris Day where she realises she loves him but there's a twist. I just thought it fit with Ally McBeal as she wants that big epic romance but it's more updated. She can't just expect him to land in her lap. |

The respondents refer to traditional romances and the updating of romantic narratives through their use of Doris Day films and more contemporary treatments in films like *Down with Love* which treat romance and heterosexual relationships much more playfully.

In contrast, the respondents discussed *Sex and the City* in relation to narratives about sex. Focus Group Two included numerous pictures signifying sex and sexual fantasies. Focus Group One included a cartoon of a sexual position and Respondent One explained that "it represents the way Carrie and all the girls kind of experiment and have fun with sex. It's all about enjoying yourself from a woman's point of view that is not really looked at usually".

The absence of mainstream representations which celebrate women's sexual pleasure appeared to be a major factor in the way this series was understood as distinctive and enjoyable.

Realism and Fantasy

We have seen the importance of emotional realism and the recognition of experience in previous chapters. *Ally McBeal* was also described in the earlier research stages as including elements of fantasy and surrealism and this was referred to by respondents in the focus groups too. Respondent Three/ Focus Group One included an image that referred to the unisex toilets on the *Ally McBeal* collage, saying "everything happens in the loo there. They sing, dance, do gymnastics, have secret rooms, gossip, confide". Respondent Four in the same group included a picture of Britney Spears to "represent Vonda Sheppard the resident singer. She has a great voice and does good versions of songs that capture Ally's feelings". This segment of dialogue shows how Focus Group One approached this topic:

| Respondent | |
|---|---|
| 4 | This is for the way they sing all the time and the big mouth is for the way they use computers and cartoons to change the mouths or eyes and that |
| 2 | I love all that. When their tongues hang out |
| 3 | The singing is great. Vonda Sheppard has a great voice and the songs just explain exactly what is going on |
| 2 | Better than words |
| 3 | Yeah it actually gets your emotions |
| 1 | Oh I can't stand the baby though. |
| 4 | Really? I thought the baby was right funny |
| 1 | Oh no. I hate it. Ugh! It's bloody scary, throwing spears. It's a bit gross |
| 4 | When it like chases her and throws spears. I thought it was great… and |
| 2 | It was something new and different |
| 4 | Didn't like it at all. I like the singing though. Like you said about Vonda Sheppard |
| 5 | Sorry I was reading this. This girl got married at 12 to a 19 year old |
| 4 | In Britain? |
| 5 | Er…hang on. no in Russia or somewhere. But look at her wedding photo. She looks like.. |
| 1 | Playing |

4 Yeah dressing up
3 God I can't imagine being married at twelve. I was still playing with Barbie's
2 I know
1 Was it her choice?
5 Yeah she was fine about it. Apparently it's quite normal there. Shall I put her wedding picture on?
1 No it's too big
2 Find another

In contrast *Sex and the City* was seen as based on an exciting and glamorous "Hollywood" lifestyle of "yellow taxi cabs" (Respondent Two/Focus Group One), "meeting up for breakfast" (Respondent Two/Focus Group One), classic American films and music, designer labels, expensive technology (Carrie uses a laptop), cocktails and parties. Context is important in the way the respondents evaluate the series in terms of their realism. *Ally McBeal* is evaluated as a surrealist text while *Sex and the City* is evaluated in terms of "perceived contextual realism". Designer clothes, meeting for breakfast, parties, premieres and so on are evaluated as "realistic" insofar as they are understood as part of an American, glamorous, affluent lifestyle. This lifestyle may not be personably recognisable for a large part of the audience but the respondents explained how it was relevant to their lives. The following extract is from Focus Group One:

Respondent
5 This cappuccino is for when they always meet up for drinks. Although it isn't usually just coffee.
3 How good would it be to have the time to meet your friends for breakfast everyday?
4 I'd never get to work. We would just gossip about nothing all day.
5 We do that anyway. Give us a drink and then we've sat down and are off about the soaps, the neighbours, anything really.
4 Me too, anything
3 If I've just read my magazine as well I'm even worse. Telling everyone the gossip
2 I met up with my friends the other night and told them I was coming to this and then we had an hour long debate over the ending of *Sex and the City.*
5 Don't get me started. I loved it when Big found her
1 I'm glad it ended all tied up

2 I know. It's been so frustrating watching Big and Carrie not being together. If it had ended with her and the Russian…
4 I hated the Russian
3 Why would she go to Paris with him and not Big?
4 I know
2 Miranda too. Finally she's with Steve
1 I love Steve. She should have stayed with him. He so nice

Humour

There was no mention of humour in relation to *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* on the collages created. This could be in-part due to the fact the collages were focused on particular characters. Perhaps the particular characters of Ally and Carrie are not humorous taken out of the context of the programmes. The absence of reference to humour though is interesting. Especially as in the message boards, questionnaires and interviews it was highlighted as a key characteristic of both programmes. On reflection this was an area that needed more exploration.

We can see both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as sites of intersection of lifestyle and femininity. The respondents identified key concerns addressed within the programme that they recognised and related to: fashion, appearance, body image, friendships, relationships and motherhood. Identified here was the shared experience of being a contemporary woman. The images used suggested that these aspects were important in signifying femininity.

Focus group discussions also suggested that the series' could be described in terms of a "glossy genre", referring to the way they "re-mediate" a glossy magazine approach to fashion, relationships, sex and appearance. Respondents used similar points of reference in describing the characters and themselves: fashion, body shape, relationships and food. At a

general level the respondents considered *Ally McBeal* in terms of romantic narratives whereas they characterised *Sex and the City* in terms of sexual narratives.

The discussions showed that *Ally McBeal* was perceived to have more elements of fantasy such as singing, dancing and CGI technology and could be described a surreal, while *Sex and the City* was located within the context of New York and a Hollywood, American glamour. Respondents evaluate this series in what I called "perceived contextual realism" where the lifestyles of the characters were understood as "real" in the glamorous context of New York. They made this lifestyle relevant to themselves and their daily lives by matching their own experiences to those on screen.

**Contemporary Experiences of being a Woman and Identification**

The topics of "contemporary experiences" and "identification and consumption" have been linked here to emphasize a key aspect of the way female respondents identified with the series. This operated through the recognition of experiences and emotions of the series' representations of being a woman in contemporary society. The respondents' discussions suggested that this recognition occurred at the intersection of lifestyle and femininity. The respondents isolated a range of issues and concerns in the series as being particularly relevant to their own lives: fashion, appearance, body image, friendships, relationships and motherhood. Group talk around these issues indicated a shared sense of recognition and experience. These six topics will be examined in turn.

The groups' discussions about *Ally McBeal* and fashion focused on Ally's work outfits: suits, pinstripes and short skirts. The respondents' understanding of Ally as a character was closely related to her work environment, whereas Carrie was understood in terms of leisure.

Presumably this is a result of the focus on work in *Ally McBeal* and the blurring of the spheres of work and leisure in *Sex and the City*.

Fashion was related most clearly to the character of Carrie from *Sex and the City*. Both Carrie collages included specific kinds of clothes, dresses, shoes and designers that were associated with her. Focus Group One included various references to shopping, such as the Rodeo Drive sign. They also included three different dresses, all representing the kinds of clothes Carrie would wear. Significantly, the respondents were able to pinpoint Carrie's style very clearly through the choice of particular types of dresses and shoes, as well as iconic fashion accessories such as a necklace spelling out her name and a corsage. Respondent Three/ Focus Group One explained "She [Carrie] is known for starting trends, like corsages and this necklace was iconic". These choices suggest that for the respondents Carrie's identity is expressed through fashion.

In their personal collages respondents also discussed the kinds of clothes they liked and enjoyed wearing. Respondent Two/ Focus Group One included a cardigan and a Dorothy Perkins sign on her collage to represent the kind of clothes she liked, explaining "they're [Dorothy Perkins] not too expensive and they do sensible sizes". Clothing is significant in identity formation as a signifier of taste and lifestyle. Respondents chose distinctive items of clothing for Carrie and for themselves and distinguished between Carrie's glamorous designer clothes and their own more comfortable, sensible and affordable clothes. As the earlier stages of the research suggested, respondents do not necessarily identify with the characters' clothing styles, but with the experience of knowing about, choosing and buying clothes. In this way, they make what they see on screen relevant to their own lives. Clothing, shopping and what to wear are all important in this respect.

Both focus groups used pictures of lipstick, make-up and hair styles to signify the appearance of the characters. Focus Group Two described how "important appearance is in *Sex and the City*. They always seem to look for and strive for beauty" (Respondent Three). Personal collages also included images relating to personal appearance, such as nails or hair: "I take my hair very seriously and like to look after it" (Focus Group One/ Respondent One). In addition, both focus groups discussed body image. Both Ally collages sparked discussion of Ally/ Calista Flockhart's body shape. The respondents, aware of reports in the press about whether the actress is anorexic, included a tape measure on the collages to signify this concern. This extract of dialogue from Focus Group One indicates how the discussion developed.

| Respondent | |
|---|---|
| 5 | This is to represent the way everyone always talks about her size [tape measure] |
| 3 | She is really skinny though |
| 5 | But it doesn't make her anorexic. All anyone says is that she's so skinny |
| 3 | It'd be nice to see an actual real woman though |
| 2 | Yeah isn't the average size now a 14? |
| 5 | It's American though and they always have thin, gorgeous people on TV doing the most mundane things |
| 1 | She's not that pretty though. I mean if you look at Nell or Elaine. They're blonde and thin and have big boobs...compared |
| 2 | Calista is mousey and a bit weird looking and has no boobs at all |
| 1 | Yeah. She's a bit gangly |
| 3 | She's still skinny though... I know she might not be anorexic and I hate her if it's natural but it's not a great role model |
| 5 | Even if it's natural? She can't do anything about it |
| 3 | Well it's TV and that.. generally all full of stick insects. Elaine is a bit curvy |
| 5 | Renee is a bit more chunky |
| 2 | You only hear about Calista though even though I read that Portia Di Rossa actually had a eating disorder |
| 4 | That's bad |

What is interesting in this piece of dialogue is the reference to the series "being American though". This suggests that it is important to the respondents that the series are American

and set in America. This helps to shape the respondents' expectations about the series which are also evaluated in the context of this knowledge. I will discuss this further in relation to fantasy and realism.

This discussion shows the respondents' awareness of factors outside the series themselves, including information about individual actresses and a concern with the issue of women, weight and body image. This was clearly an important issue for the respondents; all the personal collages included references to weight, diet, a healthy lifestyle and body image. Respondent Three/ Focus Group One, for example, included two references to a slimming club she had joined which lead to a group discussion on the successes and failures of diets such as Atkins, Hamptons and Weightwatchers. Diet and exercise constituted a recognisable shared group experience and all the respondents had opinions and experiences to share about body image and management.

The Carrie collages did not reference body shape, but Focus Group Two referred to the way *Sex and the City* focused on older women, their bodies and sex. This was signified by a topless picture of Sharon Stone, as the following discussion explains:

| Respondent | |
|---|---|
| 3 | I'm going to stick these boobs on |
| 1 | I've just stuck some on. That pink bikini one |
| 3 | Yeah but these are Sharon Stones' |
| 1 | Yeah? |
| 3 | She looks right good for her age and this is to show that Carrie and them are not like teenagers or twenties or anything |
| 1 | That's clever |
| 2 | God I hope my boobs look like that when I get that age |
| 4 | She's probably had them done |
| 1 | Oh cynical... She looks good overall though I think |
| 4 | She had like a brain tumour or something didn't she? |
| 2 | Really? I didn't hear that |
| 4 | Yeah and she adopted some kids |
| 3 | She reminds me a lot of Sam. Probably from that film |

4 I know the one you mean. With.... Him in it.....married to Catherine Zeta Jones
1 Douglas
4 Yeah him
3 In that she was really confident and used sex
4 Wasn't she a murderer?
3 Yeah. Not that bit then. But you know
2 Yeah older but still got it
3 Yeah that's it. She older but she's not hiding she's still got a great body
4 Like Demi Moore. Have you seen the pictures of her recently? My god- the body of a twenty year old!
1 Probably is a twenty year old surgically attached!
2 Isn't that her boyfriend?
All laugh
2 I want a toy boy when I'm that age
3 Like Sam and Smith
2 Now he's gorgeous. And lovely about her cancer
4 Now he's not real
1 Only in America! I suppose he was meant to be an actor... Look at this a fireman. I'll put that on
3 Let's see
1 This is for all their fantasies
3 Did you see the one where Sam dates that fireman?
2 She was dressed in his outfit at the station and the alarm went and that man told her to get out the gear. Not even noticing she was naked
3 They just left her and that old couple saw Sam getting dressed!
4 I remember that one. There's something about firemen
2 It's their hats!

Making sense of particular characters relied on respondents' knowledge about a wide range of celebrities, especially female actors who had surgery to combat the ageing process. Again, a broad knowledge of a range of issues – here, the pressure on older women to retain a youthful appearance – informs the respondents' reception of the series.

Another aspect of the respondents' concern with body image and appearance was food, a major feature in all the personal collages. Each respondent discussed their favourite foods: fish, eggs, steak, salad and fruit. Some respondents discussed the kind of food they felt they should be eating such as fruit and vegetables. Fashion, appearance, body image and food all

provided an area of shared recognition familiar to the respondents in their own experiences of being a woman, whether pleasurable or problematic.

Friendships and relationships were also identified as important parts of the series. Sex, motherhood and family were all identified as essential to both series on the collages. The *Ally* collages included pictures of a bride and groom and a baby to represent fate and destiny, the dream of a "Mr. Right" and of marriage and children. The respondents thought that the idea of the perfect relationship was important for Ally in *Ally McBeal.* Respondent One/Focus Group One explained that marriage "is the ideal that Ally hopes for and the first thing she thinks of when she meets a new man".

The Carrie collages focused more on sexual relationships. Respondents thought that the central themes of *Ally McBeal* such as marriage and motherhood were treated more playfully in *Sex and the City*. For example, in Focus Group One, Respondent Five explained that a cake in the shape of breasts represented the "jokey way they [characters] talk about sex. They talk about it in a playful way but behind it can be quite serious". In the same group Respondent Two, referring to the image of "Quality Mum", explained that "being a mum is another idea they play with as most of them didn't want kids to begin with".

Focus Group Two included more sexually explicit images, including pictures of naked people and the word "sex" in big letters. All referred to the female characters "being comfortable with sex and nakedness……talking about penises and sharing stories" (Respondent Two/ Focus Group Two). The importance of relationships emerged in the personal collages where individuals referred to their own partners and children. Respondent

Four/ Focus Group One, referring to the baby magazines she reads, explained that "I don't have a baby but I like to read those magazines as one day I will have one". A major part of the series' significance for respondents is the recognition of women's shared experiences: relationships, motherhood, sex and children.

The *Carrie* collages also suggested that female friendship was another important relationship. For example, Respondent Four/ Focus Group One explained that "just like in *Sex and the City* friendships are really important. I like just talking to my friends and being with them all".

Discussions in the focus groups showed that the significance of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* for its female audience lies in the way the series deal with themes and issues that they recognise as important. There is a shared sense of experience in relation to appearance, fashion, body image, relationships and friendships for the women respondents who watch. This confirms the message board, questionnaire and interview analysis that showed the centrality of identification related with the experiences being common to women.

**Mediascape**

One of the main aims of the focus groups was to explore the relation between the audience and the mediascape. The collage task helped to uncover the sign system used by respondents to make sense of the series. The series were discussed as part of a larger system of media information flows.

The respondents' discussions suggested that the series fit into a gendered mediascape – a world of women's media which includes magazines, films and books. The term "glossy

genre" has been used here to highlight the similarities between the series and this broader media context. Most respondents indicated that they enjoyed finding information about celebrities, seeking it from different sources such as magazines and television programmes. Respondent One was typical in this respect, "celebrity gossip, fashion and life sums me up. Like I say I'm nosey and love to read all the gossip" (Respondent One/Focus Group One). These practices feed into audience knowledge about the series. In addition, *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* reproduce the themes of celebrity, gossip and fashion, thereby replicating the pleasures offered by the world of fashion and celebrity. This supports Arthurs' argument that the appeal of *Sex and the City* lies particularly is in its ability to "re-mediate" familiar media forms (Arthurs, 2003: 83).

The focus group responses show that we can consider the mediascape gendered and that *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* fit into a female mediascape of celebrity, fashion, show-biz news and other media texts. Interestingly we can also see more clearly the different levels of engagement with the mediascape. The respondents here are not as engaged as the fans from the message boards but are more engaged in flows of information than the respondents from the questionnaires and message boards.

In this chapter were see even more clearly how complex it is to describe the mediascape and the relationship the respondents have with it. The connections the respondents make and the way they talk about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* show how the programmes offer not only enjoyment discussion of particular characters and storylines, but are also a point of reference for talking about other genres, lifestyle, and femininity and shared experiences.

**Conclusion**

The focus groups were a different kind of exercise from the message board analysis, questionnaires and interviews and generated a different kind of data. The data nevertheless supported many of the conclusions from the previous research stages.

What was significant here was the access to shared talk about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The message board analysis, questionnaires and interviews gave an idea of how individual related to and evaluated the programmes, but the focus group talk gave a sense of the in-depth shared experience of the programmes. The extracts used from the groups helps to demonstrate more clearly that although this study has made categories to organise material, the talk in intertwined and complex.

The focus group exercise was an opportunity to explore the mediascape with the respondents, examining how their viewing is located within the wider flows of media information. Both series fit into women's broader experience of media consumption which encompassed television programmes, films, books and magazines, especially those focused on celebrity and gossip. The "re-mediation" of these various aspects of media meant that the series were exploring themes already familiar to the respondents. Key issues such as body shape, appearance, fashion and relationships were also recognisable to respondents because of their own experiences. Discussions demonstrated that respondents' knowledge about these themes drew on examples from other media.

The focus groups added another dimension to my study in allowing an exploration of the signifiers respondents use to make sense of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. It allowed access to group talk about the series in order to identify shared experiences and explore

how the respondents discuss the series with others. The focus groups also allowed the differences between *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* to be seen more clearly and explained the links between characters and the respondents in more detail. They pulled key areas of the research together and shed some light on how the contemporary experience of being a woman, identification and consumption, genre and context and mediascape all fit together in the ways the respondents understand the series. My analysis of the group discussions supports many of the conclusions drawn in earlier stages of the research, such as the importance of emotional realism and the recognition of experience, the distinctive nature of the series, audience relationships with characters and the significance of mediascape in understanding the context of viewing. What do these conclusions mean to the three key concerns of the study?

First is the representation of female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The previous stages of research suggested that popular characters were those that did not conform to norms of female social behaviour. Ally McBeal and Carrie Bradshaw were not described in this way. Rather they were described at a more practical level in terms of appearance, attitude to relationships, tastes, career and lifestyles. This gave an indication of the points of reference the respondents were using to describe the characters and suggested that the representation of characters is no longer just based on the relationship between personal life and career, but also on wider issues of lifestyle. It is also interesting to note here that the main characters from each series were not necessarily the most popular, suggesting that female characters that were unlike those seen previously in other programmes were enjoyed more.

Second is the contemporary experience of being a woman. The previous stages of research showed that the female respondents felt certain tensions living in the contemporary moment. The focus groups gave the opportunity to identify key shared issues the female respondents felt were central to their lives and recognisable across other media. Discussing the issues of fashion, appearance, body image, friendships, relationships and motherhood showed that the female audience of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* although may not be concerned over new issues, their concerns about them have a postmodern angle. For example, if we consider motherhood. The questions now revolve around whether to have children, when to have them, that motherhood can be difficult and not always enjoyable and that it is not necessarily natural for women to want a family. Motherhood is usually portrayed as natural for women, as something all women aspire to and want.

Third is the mediascape. The previous stages of research showed how more engaged viewers were more engaged with the mediascape. The focus groups discussions illustrated clearly how complexly the respondents understand and discuss *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Respondents could switch between knowledge of the series, of the "real world", of celebrity and show business, of other media, of their own experiences all in one sentence. One key factor that was not highlighted in the previous stages of the research was that the mediascape is gendered. These different knowledges the respondents showed were based on their experiences as women and their interested as identified throughout the research.

# CHAPTER SIX- CONCLUSION

The study focused on respondents talking about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, adopting Jermyn's view that "women's own stories and narratives" are "invaluable political and cultural evidence" (Jermyn, 2004: 207) in studies of media audiences. The importance of focusing on talk will be discussed further in the section on mediascape. The following chapter is organised to reflect the structure of the previous empirical chapters for clarity. These reflect the key areas of contribution for the study identified in the introduction and literature review. These were; first, that the study would offer data and results based on a specific case of women's experiences watching *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Second, is the exploration of changes in the representation of women, their activities and perceptions, now described as postfeminist. Third, is exploring what has been called in the empirical chapters "the contemporary experience of being a woman" examining whether the female audience of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are socially and demographically different from previous audience studies focusing on women. Fourth, considers the context of viewing *Ally McBeal* and Sex *and the City* within the mediascape and explores other media consumption. Following these sections is a reflection on the research process by the researcher.

**1. An Empirical Study**

The first key contribution this study has achieved is offering data and results from an empirical study based on a specific case of women's experiences watching *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. This study explored both series with the young female audience aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old within the context of a wider mediascape. A textual analysis may have revealed some ideas in how the text positioned the female

audience but asking the actual audience using a range of methods and accessing different kinds of talk gave a clear idea as to how the female respondents evaluated, related to and enjoyed *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*.

**2. The Representation of Women in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City***

The second key area of contribution the study has achieved is exploring the changes in the representation of women, their activities and perceptions, now described as postfeminist. Previous studies exploring the representation of women on screen focused on the relationship the female characters had between their careers and personal lives (feminism and femininity). The focus for this study was how this relationship was portrayed on screen in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and if it could be seen in keeping with this postfeminist movement.

The empirical chapters focused on key areas of both series including: characters, genre, narrative, realism and fantasy and humour. These highlighted key ways in which the female respondents evaluated the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and how they made sense in the programmes in relation to the narrative, realism and humour. These key areas are identified below.

Female Characters

While *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* do have similarities with earlier popular texts for women, they are distinctive as important postfeminist texts, understood here both as texts from the historical period following second wave feminism and texts which attempt to relate femininity and feminism. Moseley and Read (2002) argued that most popular postfeminist texts focus on an attempt to resolve the tensions between women's paid work

and family life as a way of dealing with this. Female characters must negotiate between personal life and career, one often suffering for the pursuit of the other. *Ally McBeal* is more concerned with recognising the tensions and contradictions between feminism and femininity, without attempting to resolve them. Contemporary programmes like these depict women's lives as complex and contradictory. It is this that explains the particular appeal for a young female audience who take second wave feminism for granted but who may not feel that femininity is something to be rejected.

This study shows that *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* provide a focus for women to think through and talk about issues relating to feminism and femininity. Respondents rejected a version of feminism which excluded the pleasures of femininity (dressing up, wearing make-up, liking men, being "girlie") but expressed their approval of characters' strength, independence and success. They took particular pleasure in "unruly" characters who most clearly resisted some norms of femininity- the outrageously promiscuous Samantha in *Sex and the City* and the assertive, confident Ling in *Ally McBeal.* We can also identify a focus on alternative families of women, particularly in *Sex and the City* where female friendship is absolutely central. This was extremely important to women in the study.

It has also been argued that the series such as *Sex and the City* can be understood in relation to third wave feminism, particularly due to the celebration of femaleness and femininity. The emphasis on sexual pleasure and individual choice in *Sex and the City* also links it to popular versions of third wave feminism (Henry: 2004). In the study, women seemed to take particular pleasure in the way sexual agency, independence and choice is celebrated, a relatively rare representation of female sexuality in mainstream culture.

Genre

Respondents understood the series as a distinctive mixture of different genres. Some mapped the series onto other genres they knew which helped to frame their understandings and expectations. Just as Radway (1984) found in her study, genre was important in framing the understandings the female respondents had of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*.

In understanding the mediascape the term "glossy genre" was also identified to describe the way *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* fit into a collection of different media texts in the sphere of celebrity, show business, fashion and glossy magazines. This will be discussed further in the section on mediascape.

Narrative

The emotional core of the series is absolutely crucial for audience engagement. Narratives were understood as event centred. Respondents focused on particular scenes or dialogue because of their emotional pull. Sometimes a storyline or episode would be recalled by viewers because it paralleled situations or emotions they had themselves experienced

There was common acknowledgment of the emotional experiences of maintaining heterosexual relationships and the process of sharing these experiences with friends. *Ally McBeal* was experienced as providing a contemporary take of traditional ideals of heterosexual romance, while *Sex and the City* was understood principally in terms of its sexual narratives, its breaking of sexual taboos and the humorous sharing of sexual experiences. Respondents appreciated the series as sexualised romances combined with

situation comedy, dealing playfully with relationships, romance and sex and engaging with shifting definitions of intimate culture.

Illouz (1998: 176) argues that in modern fictional narratives for women a romantic sensibility where love is seen to triumph over all is replaced by the search for sensations. Love in the twenty-first century is about "several affairs- self contained "local" narratives..[that] occur in the course of a life", and the experience of love is fragmented into sensations and emotions (1998: 176-177). *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* combine a "romantic quest" for Mr. Right with "affairs" and a focus on sensation. Traditional romantic narratives are subverted as the romantic quest is unfulfilled and "affairs" prove fleeting. As Di Mattia notes,

> By deconstructing this classic romantic quest, *Sex and the City* opens a space to rearticulate what and who makes romance a meaningful pursuit. Carrie's paradoxical desires remind us that no one archetype can fulfil both classic rescue or seduction fantasies. Ultimately, this dilemma exposes an irreconcilable gap between the fantasies and realities of romance. *Sex and the City* repositions Mr. Right as a constantly appealing figure, yet a fantasy that requires individual negotiation and redefinition (2004: 31)

Ultimately, however, traditional narratives are restored; for example, in the finale of *Sex and the City* all four main female characters are in relationships or marriage.

These features of the series were important to the respondents. They discussed the way the *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* incorporated both romance and sex, often in tension. The understood the series as poking fun at relationships and the search for Mr. Right. They sympathised with the female characters' often unsatisfactory experiences with men. They recognised the ideal of the perfect relationship with the perfect man as unattainable, yet remained fascinated by the lure of the quest.

By contrast, female friendships endure. In *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, romantic heterosexual relationships are not as stable as, and less significant than, female friendship. The respondents appreciated female friendship as being the heart of the series, especially in *Sex and the City*. As Henry notes, the focus on a "family of friends" is not new to television but *Sex and the City* is "relatively unique in its focus on women's friendships" (Henry, 2004: 67), a point noted by the respondents.

Realism and Fantasy

Here and elsewhere respondents related to and understood the series in terms of emotions. The situations might be absurd, or in *Ally McBeal* surreal, but the emotions were perceived as real. This confirms the validity of Ang's concept of "emotional realism" where the audience "experienced as real" (Ang, 1985: 47) the emotional intensity of the characters, even when their lifestyle and the narrative are otherwise far removed from their experience.

Realism was assessed in relation to genre and location. The inclusion of singing, dancing and the use of CGI in *Ally McBeal* appealed to the respondents and led them to evaluate it as surreal. *Sex and the City* was considered in terms of a "perceived contextual realism". Though far removed from their own lives, respondents accepted the series as a legitimate depiction of a glamorous, affluent, New York, American lifestyle.

Characters and narratives made sense in this location. The British and European respondents aspired to the character and lifestyle of the American protagonists, much as they did in Stacey's study of British fans of American films stars in wartime Britain. During wartime, American femininity signified excitement and glamour which intensified the desirability of these feminine ideals. The cinema allowed the audience to escape to

another world (Stacey, 1994: 112/14). This idea of America as more glamorous, affluent and stylish than anywhere else was evident in this study sixty years after the period examined by Stacey.

Such experiences above are all emotional. Moseley and Read argue that part of the appeal of *Ally McBeal* lies in an emotional realism presented within a fantasy format. They argued that the organisation of mise-en-scene in *Ally McBeal* presents a feminine address. This is achieved by the use of voice-over, music and the visual expression of Ally's inner thoughts, expressed in fantasy sequences that although not dramatically realistic are emotionally real (Moseley and Read, 2002: 243). The world of Ally is presented as utopian as it does not distinguish between reality and fantasy (Moseley and Read, 2002: 246). This study confirms that this is part of the appeal to the audience.

Humour

Both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* resemble contemporaneous situation comedies such as *Friends* and *Frasier*, but they differ in their approach to humour. *Ally McBeal* includes elements of singing, dancing and the use of CGI that enhances the narrative humour for the respondents. In *Sex and the City*, it is the exploration of sexual practices and taboos through women's talk that is crucial to the humour.

Gray (1994) has argued that situation comedy has traditionally explored women's experiences and reflected changes in women's roles. Moseley and Read have claimed that series such as *Ally McBeal* dramatise the problems, struggles and contradictions facing contemporary young women (Moseley and Read, 2002: 239). Humour enables female audiences to recognise their common fate. The study found that from the respondents point

of view, both series offer an exploration of the roles of women in relation to motherhood, sexuality, family, domestic life and social pressures. They challenge women's traditional roles and break taboos around acceptable female behaviour. Respondents aspired to be as assertive as the characters whilst aware that their own personalities were altogether more vulnerable.

As Porter argued, "comedy.... often exults in the breaking of taboos and canonical attitudes regarding the body, sexuality and social behaviour" (Porter, 1998: 66). Through the humour in the series respondents recognised events and emotions relevant to their own lives, not least the endless and seamless talk and laughter. Akass and McCabe have noted that the depiction in *Sex and the City* of women who tell their own stories about sex and relationships gives women a voice and allows them to poke fun at patriarchal roles and expectations (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 187). Henry has argued that the series humour works as a strategy for addressing difficult and complex issues and provided a rare opportunity to see on television women laughing with women and talking to each other (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 67). The female respondents in this study appreciated the opportunity to laugh with and at women talking about the things which concerned them as women, and they recognised this as a typical yet rarely presented experience for women. Women's talk, particularly about sensitive and sexual experiences, was a major source of the series appeal for respondents.

While the series were understood as playful and entertaining, women in the study also took them seriously, were often moved by them, entered into complex discussions of the characters expectations, aspirations and experiences, and contextualised these in relation to broader questions about women's representation in the media. While a number of

commentators have publicly criticised the series as trashy and lightweight, women in the study regarded them as distinctive, significant and important

The conclusions outlined above offer two important points for the representation of female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City.* First, is that the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* offered new and exciting female characters for the female respondents that break the accepted social behaviour of women. The female characters explore many aspects also discussed by postfeminist theorists and suggest that the female characters in both programmes are "of this time" or this contemporary moment and so suggest a further stage in the dramatic history of the representation of women on screen. Second, is that because the study focused on aspects such as narrative and genre, not just the female characters in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, the respondents gave a clear picture on how the characters functioned within the programmes, how they were evaluated and understood.

**3. The Contemporary Experience of Being a Woman**

The third contribution the study made was exploring *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* with the young female audience, aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old. Whereas earlier studies were concerned with women in domestic roles, where they are predominantly in the home with no paid employment, this study considered a social and demographic shift in the female audience, in terms of more women in paid employment and as having a different relationship to second wave feminism than older women. In these older research studies relationships between text and female audience were centred on pleasures within a domestic or daily routine, however this study considered the fact that female social roles had changed and these were being reflected in and recognised by respondents in *Ally*

*McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in a postmodern and reflexive way. The pleasures of both series could therefore be placed in recognising the experiences of the female characters. Early feminist research with female audiences took place in a context of contempt for women's popular culture, based on a view of the audience as passive. Since then there have been various shifts to more complex approaches to the audience, focusing on media texts, spectatorship and the view of the audience as actively negotiating meaning (Ang and Hermes: 1991). Key studies of female audiences suggest that women's engagement with popular texts is pleasurable and compensatory, offering an escape from problems, drudgery, the family and everyday life. Janice Radway's (1984) study suggested that readers choose stories that keep to a particular themes- monogamy, heterosexual love and the transformation of men. These provide the formula for a "happy ending". Similarly, Hollywood films present spectators with a vision of a better world and offer a fantasy of becoming like the feminine ideal on screen through identification with characters, commodities and lifestyles (Stacey: 1994).

However, popular texts are not simply about escapism and they do not always celebrate the status quo. Andrea Press (1994) has shown how the portrayals of women on television have shifted over time, against a background of changes, both real and representational. Following the second wave women's movement, strong female characters and women as workers appeared on screen. Later still, images of women became more varied.

Contemporary images of women may be understood as related to tensions and pressures in a postfeminist society where women are expected to compete with men in the workplace and live up to traditional ideals of romantic love and family life. Press proposes that these pressures are felt particularly strongly by young women.

Both Press (1994) and Gray (1994) argue that television sitcom is a genre that has traditionally focused on women's lives and portrayed changes in women's social roles, from the representation of women's attempts to combine work and family in *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s to the alternative families of women depicted in *The Golden Girls* in the 1980s and 1990s. This kind of comedy seems to function differently from romance and Hollywood film as it pokes fun at women's traditional roles, breaks taboos around gender and celebrates the "unruly woman". However, like them, it addresses its audience as an "audience of women sharing an experience of the world" (Gray, 1994: 78).

This study is similar to these earlier pieces of research. It too focuses on popular texts which dramatise women's experiences in contemporary life. The key difference this study highlights is that women's experiences have changed. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* illustrate what Margaret J. Heide (1995) argued that *Thirtysomething* did in "mirror[ing] the temperament of a generation grappling with a profound sense of ambivalence and confusion in relation to the values of the past" (p150). *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* similarly mirrors the feelings of a specific generation of women in contemporary society trying to negotiate between ideas of second wave and third wave feminism and femininity. Second wave feminism for this specific generation of women is as Baumgardner and Richards write "like fluoride. We scarcely notice we have it. It is simply in the water." (2000: 71). This generation of women have different concerns, are socially and demographically different from women in these previous studies. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, as Whelehan notes [referring to *Bridget Jones's Diary*] "speaks[s] to some deep-seated angst at the heart of many young women's life, and whatever the true source of that angst its expression gradually starts to crop up, not just in Fielding's chick lit successors but in other areas of popular culture" (Whelehan, 2005: 175).

This exploration of contemporary experience for women, appears in other media texts and *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* approach it in a postmodern and reflexive way. As the spheres of personal and public life become blurred both for female characters and the female respondents so it is more difficult to argue that the pleasures of watching programmes are related to domestic routines of women, as their roles diversify.

Identification and Consumption

As Stacey explains, in film theory, identification refers to "engaging with the character" (1994: 130). However, she proposes a broader and more flexible account of identification as the "match or mismatch between the self and the ideal" (Stacey, 1994: 128). Drawing on the work of Andrew Tudor, she distinguishes between the cinematic and extra-cinematic contexts. Cinematic identificatory practices such as devotion, adoration and worship involve the denial of the self and praise for the star (Stacey, 1994: 159) and extra-cinematic identificatory practices such as pretending, resembling, imitation and copying involve the loss of the self in a fantasy world and merging the self with the star (Stacey, 1994: 159).

This study uses the terms "identification" and "recognition" to describe the respondent's relationships to the series, although they are not mutually exclusive. Following Stacey, the study defines "identification" as the match or mismatch between the character and viewer. A viewer may identify because she shares something- a job, an opinion- with the character. 'Recognition' is used to explain a different process whereby characters are understood as acting out experiences which are common to all women, for example, having a baby. Viewers may not identify with the character but recognise parallel or equivalent experiences as a woman. We can think of these terms as a continuum. At one end there is close and personal identification, where respondents relate to the characters through

personal experiences while at the other is a gendered recognition of things that women experience. There are multiple positions between the two points and the audience can move between these.

Stacey argued that commodities allowed the audience access to items that promised they would become more like the ideal on screen (Stacey, 1991: 212). Jane Arthurs' (2003) suggested that *Sex and the City* takes a consumerist approach to sexual identity showing "commodification of the individual's relation to the body, self and identity" (Arthurs, 2003: 87). The study found that it was not consumption or the specific consumption of the characters that was important but the act of consumption that was crucial: the recognition of the act of shopping as a leisure activity, usually with friends. Respondents focused more on the process of consumption than the products consumed by the characters. The activities of buying, purchasing and wearing were a source of recognition, even though the scale of the characters' consumption was beyond that of the respondents. Respondents associated their own consumption of food and drink with leisure practices and female friendship, likening their own practices of meeting friends for coffee and gossip to those of Carrie and her friends meeting for breakfast.

Female friendship portrayed in the series was also an area of identification ("I have a friend just like that") or recognition ("That is how women talk to each other"). Henry's stress on the importance of a female bond was also confirmed here. She argued that one of the most "important theme[s] of *Sex and the City* is the value of female friendships and the role of these friendships in helping each of the women characters to understand herself and her life" (Henry, 2005: 67). Friendship was a major part of the series appeal and a source of both identification and recognition for many of the female respondents.

What the study showed was that there are many routes to identifying with the series. From close personal identification ("I work as a secretary just like Elaine in *Ally McBeal*") to the other end of the continuum, gender recognition ("Miranda had a baby and I may have children in the future"). Within this continuum the key dimensions of gender experiences are friendship, consumerism, emotions and talking and laughing with others.

**4. Mediascape**

The fourth key area of contribution the study made was in what was considered to be a new stage in audience research that sees the audience in the wider context of media consumption, called the mediascape.

Textual analysts have stressed how the *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* need to be located, as the audience would locate it, within the wider mediascape: television programmes, magazines, cinema, newspapers, music and so on and as part of the "cultural fabric of everyday life" (Jermyn, 2004: 202). In particular, a series like *Sex and the City* can be understood as re-mediating the forms of television sitcom and glossy women's magazines (Arthurs, 2003: 83). Brand identity is established across interlocking circuits of media, celebrity and fashion. The central themes of the series are also related to other media consumed by women like films, the Internet and books. The respondents' mediascape was a women's mediascape.

The term coined was "glossy genre" to describe how the central themes of the series- consumption, relationships, emotions, romance, sex, friendship, appearance- parallel the concerns of the glossy magazine and its presentation of an "integrated lifestyle to be emulated" (Arthurs, 2003: 90). In this study many respondents bought similar items to

those portrayed on screen, not to copy the characters but to reproduce their lifestyle. This suggests that in contemporary media culture individuals are simultaneously members of the audience and consumers (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 36). Consumption is not only part of the identification process it is part of the mediascape.

As Hollows argued, audiences bring their own experiences, value systems and knowledge to their readings of popular culture texts (2000: 79). Some of these originate elsewhere in the mediascape. Generic expectations, gossip about actors, the detail of production processes frame the audience's engagement with the series. Respondents in this study discussed the development of narrative and character and demonstrated their knowledge of television conventions. They also drew on the mediascape for their knowledge of place. For example, media representations of Manhattan were used as a measure for the realism of the world depicted in *Sex and the City*.

Many of the series central themes in *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* can be found in other media but one aspect that is not adequately represented elsewhere in the mediascape is women's relationships with each other. This focus on female friendship was noted by the respondents as important in the series' distinctiveness, as was humour. Both series draw on a female comic tradition in television sitcoms. In *Sex and the City*, the humour also derives from the pleasures of women's talk; story-telling, confessions, inventiveness with language- the characters even invent a glossary of words to describe their experiences (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 185-187). This draws on the modes of address found elsewhere in the "glossy genre" of women's magazines. Friendship, women's talk and transgress humour around women's sexuality were key sources of pleasure for the respondents and were extremely important in the series' success.

Alasuutari has claimed that an appreciation of the way media consumption is consumed in and informed by a context of other media products in necessary for an understanding of contemporary "media culture" (1999: 6/ 7) as a whole, acknowledging that every media product is consumed in and informed by a context of other media products. There appear to be different levels of audience engagement with the mediascape. Some respondents were much more active than others in this respect.

The talk accessed in this study was also an important part of showing how the mediascape worked. Each stage of the research explored a different kind of "talk". The message boards looked at "naturally occurring" internet talk. The questionnaires and interviews focused on "prompted" talk, exploring verbal responses to questions designed by the interviewer. The focus groups looked at "spontaneous but staged" talk where the respondents were set a creative task to complete. At each stage, respondents' talk about the series was intertwined with other kinds of talk about television conventions, personal experiences, the real world, consumption and other media. This illustrated the vast recourses and knowledges the respondents drew on in understanding the programmes.

We could argue that to some extent *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* can be considered as escapist in their portrayal of successful, glamorous women living affluent lives in sophisticated surroundings. However, the women in this study identified closely with the female characters and their lives, recognising their experiences as "real", even while they showed their awareness of, and pleasure in, the glamour and fantasy offered by the series (they are "fabulous and real", "hilarious and true"). The respondents made numerous links between their own lives and the lives of the characters, in terms of their preoccupations, dilemmas, pleasures and relationships. Gender appears to be extremely important to their

interest in the series, whether this is at the level of personal identification with and recognition of other women's situations or emotions, or an awareness of the place and significance of the series' representation of women in a wider mediascape.

The study has shown that the relationship between the audience and text is much more complex than a simple two way interaction.

**Reflections on the Research Process**

This section of the thesis offers an insight into "behind the scenes" of the project. It explores some key decisions in the process and reflections on the research process itself.

Choosing What to Study

As mentioned in the Introduction, the main motivation for studying *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* was due to my own enjoyment and experiences of the programmes. Both programmes seemed to create a stir both amongst audiences and in the popular press. Comments were both positive and negative, but I was particularly interested in first, the appeal to a specific generation of young women and second, way the programmes were referenced and linked to other media texts and cultural practices.

In the early stages of the project I had initially considered comparing *Sex and the City* to BBC drama *Linda Green*. However the first questionnaire made it clear *Linda Green* was not as widely watched or considered such a phenomenon as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. The very small amount of data I got from the first questionnaire however, did suggest that a comparative study between *Sex and the City* and a British equivalent would be very interesting and suggested scope for further research.

The decision to focus on both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* was born out of this idea for a comparative study. I felt the study might yield more data if respondents had two programmes to talk about and compare in their minds. Usefully the respondents did consider the programmes as similar, possibly due to them both being shown in Britain around the same time period, being American programmes and focusing on similar themes of single women and relationships. This was also how they were positioned in the popular press. On reflection I think this approach was useful and many respondents could identify more clearly what was distinctive about each programme. One drawback of this approach however, was that it doubled the amount of data to process as the majority of respondents did watch both programmes. This meant that careful coding was important as well as entering the data into software like Microsoft Access was a painstaking process.

As well as allowing respondents to consider the similarities, it also meant they could identify the differences between them. Although *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* seemed to focus on similar themes of single women and relationships, their approaches were seen by the respondents as quite different. *Ally McBeal* was seen by the respondents to focus on the female characters' balance between career and personal life. Respondents also noted the address to fantasy with the use of CGI, singing and dancing, all of which were part of the appeal of the programme. *Sex and the City* was seen by the respondents as focusing on the female characters leisure practices and personal satisfaction. The personal and public lives of the characters were much more blurred.

Choosing the Research Methods

I felt the best way to understand the relationship the female audience had with *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* was to explore how they talked about them, both individually and in

groups. This would help to understand how the mediascape worked and what other information and knowledge's were being drawn on to discuss the programmes.

I decided on a multi-method approach in order to access different kind of "talk" about the programmes. Each stage was designed to explore different levels of the audience, both engaged and less engaged viewers and to encourage both group and individual talk around the programmes.

I tried to use research methods that complimented each other and improved on the strengths and weaknesses of each method. The message boards gave access to in-depth information without researcher guidance. However the posters were largely anonymous. Therefore the questionnaires gave information from a specific set of people. However, this information was general and on a large number of topics. Therefore the interviews allowed more in-depth information from this specific set of the audience. However this was at an individual level. Therefore the focus groups allowed a group interaction on loosely based direct topics.

I hadn't set out for the research to be so attached to using the Internet and e-mail as it was, but with new technology and people's increasing knowledge of how to use it, it became both a source of research and a distribution method. As discussed in the methodology chapter, this had positive and negative aspects. It did mean that respondents were given choices about how to receive their information and was a quick and cheap method of distributing the questionnaires and interviews. On the down side a certain amount of face-face interaction was forfeited, which may or may not have been beneficial.

The message boards offered the opportunity to explore talk about both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* without any influence or agenda setting by the researcher. This was not without its problems due to the sheer amount of messages and message boards available on both series. The key here was getting enough data to give results to work with, but not more than one researcher could feasibly manage to analyse on their own. The message boards however, convinced me that both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were worthy of academic attention and proved fascinating in understanding the complex relationships the posters had with *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. They showed how intertwined "talk" on the programmes were and illustrated that the audience felt these programmes were important. They were also important in showing the different levels of engagement the respondents could have with the mediascape, from using message boards, to reading magazines, to tracking actors across different media. The message boards definitely suggested scope for further research in understanding the pleasures of being part of the on-line community and suggesting the role of technology in expanding the text/ audience relationship.

In the next stage of research, I wanted to access a different kind of talk but also wanted to follow up key ideas raised from the message boards. Questionnaires and interviews seemed a way forward to get direct comments and opinions on a wide range of topics of interest and then more in-depth opinions on specific topics. On reflection the first questionnaire was not really needed, and perhaps if I were to do this research again I would not have done it. It gave a clear idea that both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were popular with young women aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old but really served no other purpose than to recruit respondents for the second questionnaire.

The second questionnaire itself also had a major design flaw as it was too long. The pilot sessions showed that this did not put people off in answering the questions and so I decided to keep it that length. However, if I were to do another questionnaire I would ensure it would be much shorter. The problem I faced was that the message boards had raised so many interesting points that the chance to follow up specific areas was irresistible. I tried to split up the questionnaire so it was in sections that were easy to come back to and felt in using e-mail and post it allowed respondents to finish sections and return to it as and when they could. These methods were useful in giving opinions of the respondents on a wide range of subjects.

For the final part of the research I wanted a method that would effectively combine the sentiments of the previous methods in terms of the group talk of the message boards and the focused questions of the questionnaires and interviews. Focus groups offered that face-to-face group context but with opportunity to set an agenda with regards to topics. I had used the method of mood boards in previous research studies and felt that letting respondents create collages on *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* would be useful for two reasons. First, was that the previous stages of research suggested both series were very visual for the respondents and second, that it would allow me to observe and listen to the talk by the respondents.

The pilot sessions suggested that the collage creation would work well and the groups themselves were very exciting in gaining an insight into how women talked, in groups, about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and what links they made to other media and experiences. The respondents seemed to enjoy the process so much that they often wanted to continue when the session ended. I was disappointed that not all the respondents who

had agreed turned up to the sessions but this was expected. The "talk" the collages produced proved so interesting that I would use this process again in further research projects. The main surprising aspect of the focus groups was that none of the respondents referred to the humour in either programme. This had been highlighted as a key aspect in the appeal of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in the previous stages of the research but was absent here. The only explanation I could offer to explain this were that the collage process focused mainly on two specific characters and that these particular characters themselves might not have been considered humorous, but other characters or narratives were. On reflection it was an aspect that warranted further investigation.

The Research Process

On the whole I found the research process challenging but rewarding. In setting out to explore these different segments of the audience (more and less engaged viewers) I had expected there to be a difference in their relationships to *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. However, the responses showed that on the whole the different kinds of viewers were engaging at an emotional level. The main differences between the respondents were actually in the interaction with the mediascape, and the different levels of knowledge the respondents built up about the programmes. I found this a surprising aspect of the study as I expected more engaged viewers to have a different relationship with the programmes then those who were less engaged in terms of how regularly they watched. I thought more regular viewers would have a greater knowledge of characters, narrative and plot and in some cases this was true. However, the overarching appeal of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* was the links to the respondents own lives and experiences, not how well they knew the characters. I think this interaction with the mediascape does suggest that the lines between fan and so called "ordinary viewers" are much more blurred and that new

technology has allowed for more participation and greater access to information about television programmes and texts more generally. This study has certainly given food for thought on new approaches to audience studies and considering the wider context of the audience/ text relationship.

In my approach to the study I felt the literature review pulled out questions from key audience research studies and analysis on *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* and this study had the chance to weave them and explore them altogether in understanding the contemporary female audience. This study gave the opportunity for a case study in linking up the audience, text and medisacape to understand what the contemporary experience of being an audience can be like. My interest here was in exploring a joined up approach in understanding the female audience along with the changing landscape of television and the changes of the social landscape relating to women. Radway's ideas on genre, Stacey's ideas on identification, Press's ideas on generation and Gray's ideas on humour all seemed relevant in suggesting a framework to understanding the contemporary female audience.

I hope this study has shown that not only do the respondents take these series' seriously but that it is important to take both the programmes and women's talk about the programmes seriously. I have used different empirical data to situate women in the context of the mediascape. I hope this study has shown how people relate to programmes within an intertextual context and has contributed to the shifting audience paradigm that seeks to explore media culture and the audience.

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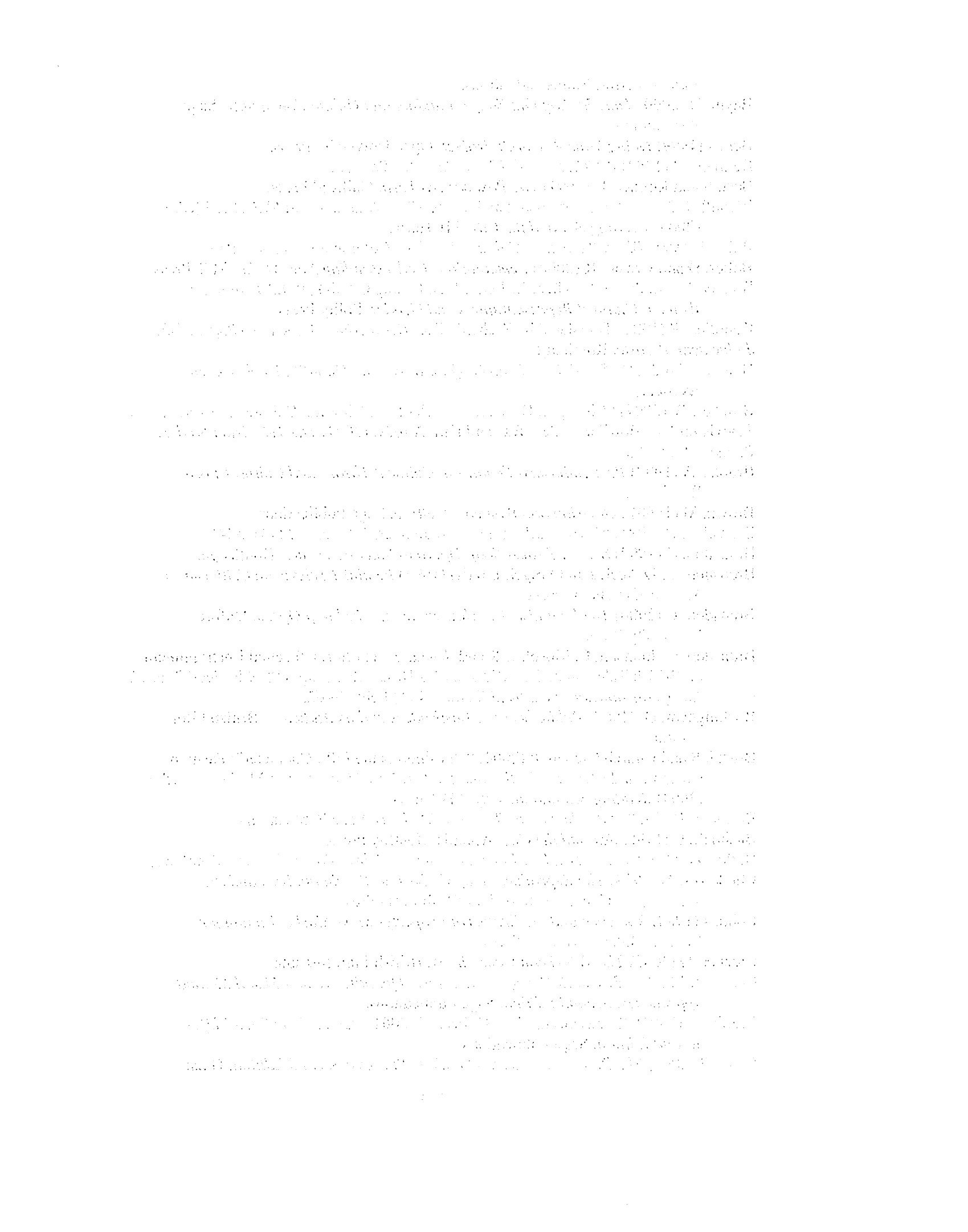

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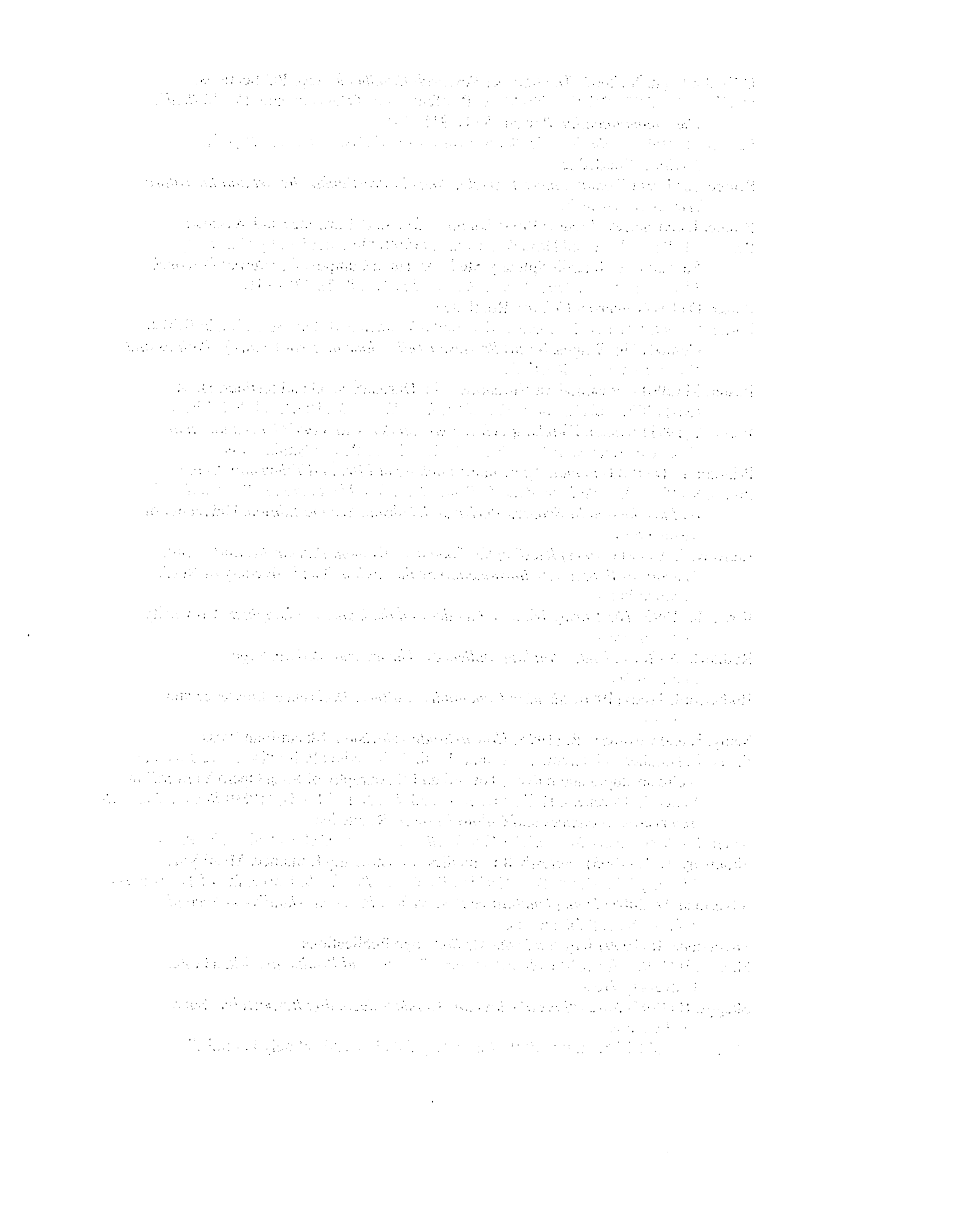

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# **Appendix 1** Series outline and character names

**Ally McBeal**

Cast

| Character | Actor | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Calista Flockhart | Ally McBeal | Lead female character |
| Billy Thomas | Gil Bellows | Ally's childhood sweetheart- now married to Georgia |
| Richard Fish | Greg German | Partner of the law firm Cage and Fish |
| John Cage | Peter MacNichol | Partner of the law firm Cage and Fish |
| Georgia Thomas | Courtney Thorne- Smith | Lawyer and Billy's wife |
| Elaine Vassal | Jane Krakowski | Ally's Secretary |
| Renee Radick | Lisa Nicole Carson | Ally's best friend and flat mate |
| Nelle Porter | Portia de Rossi | Lawyer- known as the Ice Queen |
| Ling Woo | Lucy Lui | Lawyer |
| Larry Paul | Robert Downey Jnr | One of Ally's long term boyfriends |

*Ally McBeal* centres on the career and relationships of the central character Ally McBeal. In the first series Ally is a 28 year-old graduate of Harvard Law School who, after telling the partners in her law firm she is being sexually harassed is sacked. She is then employed by an old law school colleague (Richard Fish). The programme incorporates action from the courtrooms specialising in cases dealing with sexual discrimination, as well as Ally's relationships with friends, colleagues and (sexual) male partners.

**Sex and the City**
Cast

| Character | Actor | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Carrie Bradshaw | Sarah Jessica Parker | Writer and main character |
| Samantha Jones | Kim Cattrall | Owns own PR Company and is one of the four main central characters |
| Charlotte York | Kristin Davis | Art Curator and is one of the four main central characters |
| Miranda Hobbs | Cynthia Nixon | Lawyer and is one of the four main central characters |
| Mr. Big/ Big | Chris Noth | Carrie's on-off boyfriend |
| Aiden Shaw | John Corbett | One of Carrie's major relationships |
| Steve Brady | David Eigenberg | Father to Miranda's baby |
| Trey MacDougal | Kyle Maclachlan | Charlotte's first husband |
| Smith Jerrod | Jason Lewis | Samantha's most long term boyfriend |
| Harry Golden-Blatt | Evan Handler | Charlotte's second husband |
| Stanford Blatch | Willie Garson | Carrie's gay friend |
| Anthony Marentino | Mario Cantone | Charlotte's gay friend/ wedding planner |

*Sex and the City* is based on the book of the same name written by Candice Bushnell. The show focuses predominantly on Carrie Bradshaw, a newspaper columnist for her local paper writing a column entitled "Sex and the City". The episodes are structured around the particular issue Carrie features in her column that week. They are explored from Carrie's point of view but also focus on her three friends, Miranda Hobbs (a lawyer), Charlotte York (an art gallery curator) and Samantha Jones (PR executive for her own firm) living in New York and searching for that perfect (sexual) relationship.

# Appendix 2 The filter questionnaire

The following questions offer room for answers on both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. If you watch both shows please answer all the questions. If you only watch ***either*** *Ally McBeal* ***or*** *Sex and the City* then just fill in the answers for those particular shows. Please answer as fully as possible. It takes 2- 4 minutes to complete.
Tick all appropriate boxes and specify were necessary. Please do not write in the shaded boxes. All information is kept confidential and anonymous.
Thank You.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 | Are you...? | Male [ ] Female [ ] | |
| Q2 | How old are you? | 16- 20 years [ ]<br>21- 25 years [ ]<br>26- 30 years [ ]<br>31- 35 years [ ]<br>36- 40 years [ ]<br>41-45 years [ ]<br>46- 50 years [ ]<br>51- 55 years [ ]<br>56 years plus [ ] | |
| Q3 | Ethnicity | White British [ ]<br>White other [ ]<br>Please specify_____<br>Black African [ ]<br>Black Caribbean [ ]<br>Black other [ ]<br>Please specify_____<br>Indian [ ]<br>Bangladeshi [ ]<br>Pakistani [ ]<br>Chinese [ ]<br>Other [ ]<br>Please specify_____ | |
| Q4 | Are you....? | Single [ ] With a partner [ ] | |
| Q5 | Do you have children? | Yes [ ] Number____ No [ ] | |
| Q6 | Are you employed? | Yes [ ]<br>No [ ]<br>Student and employed [ ]<br>Student and not employed [ ] | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q7 | What is your job title? | | |

**Television**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q8 | Do you have..? | Terrestrial TV [ ] Digital TV [ ]<br>Satellite TV [ ] Cable TV [ ]<br>If digital/ satellite/ cable which company/ package? _____ | |
| Q9 | Do you or have you ever watched any of the following programmes when they were being shown? | *Ally McBeal* (C4) Yes [ ] No [ ]<br><br>*Sex and the City* (C4) Yes [ ] No [ ] | |
| Q10 | If yes, how often do you or did you watch it when it was being shown? | *Ally McBeal*<br>Every week [ ]<br>Every other week [ ]<br>1-2 times a month [ ]<br>Hardly ever [ ]<br><br>*Sex and the City*<br>Every week [ ]<br>Every other week [ ]<br>1-2 times a month [ ]<br>Hardly ever [ ] | |
| Q11 | If the answer was no or you do watch but "hardly ever" can you explain why this is? | *Ally McBeal*<br><br>*Sex and the City* | |
| Q12 | Did you find that your viewing of these programmes changed over time? For example, did you watch more as the series' went on or less? | *Ally McBeal*<br><br>*Sex and the City* | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q13 | Do you/ did you video the programme(s)? | *Ally McBeal*<br>Yes [ ] No [ ]<br>Was this because....?<br>You missed an episode [ ]<br>You wanted to watch it again [ ]<br>Other, please specify<br>*Sex and the City*<br>Yes [ ] No [ ]<br>Was this because....?<br>You missed an episode [ ]<br>You wanted to watch it again [ ]<br>Other, please specify | |
| Q14 | Do you own any of the series on video? | *Ally McBeal* Yes [ ] No [ ]<br>*Sex and the City* Yes [ ] No [ ] | |
| Q15 | Have you ever watched *Linda Green* (BBC)? If yes, how does it compare to *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal*? | Yes [ ] No [ ] | |

Q16. Further Help

Would you be interested in helping in this research further? This may include a detailed questionnaire, a group discussion or a one-to-one chat on these programmes.

Yes [ ] No [ ]

If yes please include your details. All information is kept confidential.

Name:_____

Address:_____

_____

_____

Telephone Number:_____

E-mail:_____

_____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

# Appendix 3 The main questionnaire

In order to answer this questionnaire click "reply" or "reply with quote" (depending on your e-mail) to this e-mail and then type in your answers and return it to me

IMPORTANT- ensure the address the e-mail will be sent back to is:
allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

The following questions offer room for answers on both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. If you watch both shows please answer all the questions. If you only watch ***either*** *Ally McBeal* ***or*** *Sex and the City* then just fill in the answers for those particular shows. Please answer as fully as possible. It takes about 10- 15 minutes to complete. Delete the answers not relevant to you and type your explanations in where required. For example, on the first question if you are male delete the word female to leave the answer as male. All information is kept confidential and anonymous.
Please return by December 31st 2003.
Thank You.

**Personal**

**Q1. Are you:** Male / Female

**Q2. Age:**
16- 20 years
21- 25 years
26- 30 years
31- 35 years
36- 40 years
41- 45 years
46- 50 years
51- 55 years
56 years plus

**Q3. Ethnicity:**
White British
White other Please specify
Black African
Black Caribbean
Black other Please specify
Indian
Bangladeshi
Pakistani
Chinese
Other Please specify

**Q4. Would you describe yourself as...?** (Answering this question is optional)

Heterosexual / Homosexual / Bi-sexual

**Q5. Are you?** Single / With a partner
**Q6. Do you have children?** Yes Number: No

**Q7. Are you employed?** Yes / No / Student and employed /
Student and not employed

**Q8. What is your job title?**

**Television**
**Q9. Do you have...?**
Terrestrial TV (Channels 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) / Digital TV / Satellite TV / Cable TV
**If digital/ satellite/ cable which company/ package do you have?**

**Q10. Do you or have you ever watched any of the following programmes?**
*Ally McBeal* (C4) Yes / No
*Sex and the City* (C4) Yes / No

**Q11. If yes, how often do you watch it?**
*Ally McBeal*
Every week
Every other week
1-2 times a month
Hardly ever

*Sex and the City*
Every week
Every other week
1-2 times a month
Hardly ever

**Q12. If the answer is no or you do watch but "hardly ever", can you explain why?**
*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q13. Have you ever watched *Linda Green* (BBC)? If yes, how does it compare to *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal*?**
Yes / No

*If you " don't watch" or "hardly ever watch" **both** Ally McBeal and Sex and the City this questionnaire is no longer applicable to you so thank you for your time.*
*If you watch one of the programmes continue answering the questions just about that one.*
*If you watch both programmes then continue answering questions on both programmes.*
*Thank You*

**Q14. Did you find that your viewing of these programmes changed over time? For example, did you watch more as the series' went on or less?**
*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q15. Do you/ did you watch it most often..?**
*Ally McBeal*
On your own
With family
Which members?
With friends
What gender are they?
Can you comment on why this is?

*Sex and the City*
On your own
With family
Which members?
With friends
What gender are they?
Can you comment on why this is?

**Q16. Do you/ did you video the programme(s)?**
*Ally McBeal*
Yes / No
Was this because....?
You missed an episode
You wanted to watch it again
Other, please specify

*Sex and the City*
Yes / No
Was this because....?
You missed an episode
You wanted to watch it again
Other, please specify

**Q17. How often would you watch it on video?**
Once
Twice
3-4 times
More

**The Programmes**
**Q18. Who is/are your favourite FEMALE character(s) in the programmes you watch?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q19. Why do you like them especially?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q20. How would you describe them?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q21. Who is/are your favourite MALE character(s) in the programmes you watch?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q22. Why do you like them especially?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q23. How would you describe them?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q24. Which character (male or female) are *you* most like and why?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q25. Which character's style do you like the most?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q26. Which character's style is most like your own?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q27. Have you ever bought any items of clothing, footwear, accessories, gadgets etc. the same or similar to the ones the characters have on these shows, after seeing them on screen? If so what were they?**

*Ally McBeal* Yes / No

*Sex and the City* Yes / No

**Q28. Do you have a favourite episode? Can you describe the plot and why you like it?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q29. What do like most about the show(s) as a whole?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Q30. What do you like least about the show(s) as a whole?**

*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

**Other Media**

**Q31. What are your five most favourite television programmes since the age of 16?**

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

**Q32. What types of television programmes do you tend to enjoy?**

Science-fiction
Documentaries
Soap Operas
Factual
Drama- Crime
Medical
Romance
Action
Make-over shows
Reality Television
Decorating

Situation comedies
History
Fantasy
Music
News
Cookery
Sports
Gardening
Other, please specify

**Q33. What types of television programmes do you tend to like least?**
Science-fiction
Documentaries
Soap Operas
Factual
Drama- Crime
Medical
Romance
Action
Make-over shows
Reality Television
Decorating
Situation comedies
History
Fantasy
Music
News
Cookery
Sports
Gardening
Other, please specify

**Q34. Do you use the Internet?**
Yes / No

**Q35. What do you use it for?**
E-mail
Message boards
Chat rooms
Quizzes and games
Music
Newspapers
Information on films
Information on television
Shopping eg. CD's DVDs, books etc
Shopping eg. Supermarket
Listen to radio
Other, please specify

**Q36 Do you regularly read a newspaper? If so which one(s)?**
Yes / No

**Q37. Do you regularly read a magazine? If so which one(s)?**
Yes / No

**Q38. Have you read, seen, listened to anything recently either in newspapers, magazines or on the Internet specifically on *Ally McBeal* or *Sex and the City*? If so what was it about?**
*Ally McBeal* Yes / No

*Sex and the City* Yes / No

**Q39. Do you look for or buy magazines including gossip on Sex *and the City* or *Ally McBeal*?**
*Ally McBeal* Yes / No

*Sex and the City* Yes / No

**Q40. Have you bought any products/ merchandise related to these programmes, like T-shirts, keyrings etc?**
*Ally McBeal* Yes / No

*Sex and the City* Yes / No

**Q41. Do you own any of the series' on video or DVD? If so how many?**
*Ally McBeal* Yes / No

*Sex and the City* Yes / No

**Q42. Have you ever visited any websites about these programmes? (Either the official ones or others?) Was there a particular reason for visiting the site?**
*Ally McBeal* Yes / No

*Sex and the City* Yes / No

**Q43. Have you ever contributed to or joined chat rooms or message boards about these programmes?**
*Ally McBeal* Yes / No ]

*Sex and the City* Yes / No

**Further Help**

**Q44. Would you be interested in helping in this research further? This may include a group discussion or a one-t-one discussion on these programmes.**

Yes / No

If yes, please fill in the details below. All information is kept confidential.

Name:

Address:

Telephone Number:

AND/ OR

E-mail:

**Q45. Would you be prepared to be quoted in my research findings?**

Yes/ No

If yes would you prefer this to be:

With your name / Anonymously

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

# **Appendix 4** The Interview Questions

In order to return this questionnaire you can either:
1).Copy the questions from this e-mail and then paste them into the new e-mail message
OR
2). Open the questions as a file, save your answers either to disk or hard drive and then attach it as a file and send it back to me
OR
3). If you prefer I can telephone you or if you have MSN messenger we could arrange a time so I can ask you the questions personally

**IMPORTANT**- ensure the address the e-mail will be sent back to is:
allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

The following questions allow for answers on both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. If you watch both shows please answer all the questions. If you only watch ***either*** *Ally McBeal* ***or*** *Sex and the City* then just fill in the answers for those particular shows. Please answer as fully as possible. Simply type your answers after the questions. It takes about 20-30 minutes to fill this out and all information is kept confidential. Once you have sent the answers I may e-mail you again (only once) with further questions about your answers you have given. If you do not wish to be contacted again in relation to your answers make this clear on the e-mail you return to me.
Please return your answers by Monday 3rd May 2004.
Thank You.

Age-
Gender-

1. What kind of programme would you say *Ally McBeal* and/ or *Sex and the City* are?
*Ally McBeal-*
Situation Comedy
Romantic drama
Soap opera
A combination of several
Other? Please state.

*Sex and the City-*
Situation Comedy
Romantic drama
Soap opera
A combination of several
Other? Please state.

2. Do you think the programmes are romantic? Please explain your answer.

3. In *Sex and the City* there is open and honest discussion on sex. Do you think that sex and love are shown as the same thing or different in this programme? Please explain your answer.

5. Please give any instances that have made you laugh the most from these programmes (any series) and explain why. (These can be specific lines that have made you laugh or storylines)
*Ally McBeal*

*Sex and the City*

6. Do you think that men find *Ally McBeal* and/ or *Sex and the City* funny? Why?

7. Read the following opinions people have given about *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City.* Would you agree with them? Please write under each one your opinion on what has been said.
***Ally McBeal***
"Ally is a ditsy mini-skirted anorexic heroine" (John Sutherland: 26/04/99: *The Guardian*)

"[Ally] gives the idea we are all desperate, hapless Bridget Jones clichés at heart" (21/ 07/99: *The Guardian*)

"I think she's [Ally] far too weird and dysfunctional. She seems to have far more crises than normal people, and the office is nothing like a real law firm" (21/07/99: *The Guardian*)

"*Ally McBeal* is really all about hair" (Jacques Peretti: 06/07/00: *The Guardian*)

"Ally is the best character since Diane in *Cheers*" (hollie: 04/08/00: Gist.com)

"Ling is the best bitch of the bunch" (Loupee: 25/08/01: coffeerooms.com)

***Sex and the City***
"The whole rationale of *Sex and the City* is that these women want pleasure, know how to get it and are determined to do so" (Madeleine Bunting: 09/02/01: *The Guardian*)

"The great big stud myth is toppled as these women analyse and judge men's performance" (Madeleine Bunting: 09/02/01: *The Guardian*)

"*Sex and the City* is all about men, not women" (Madeleine Bunting: 09/02/01: *The Guardian*)

"Often there is a genuine wisdom to her [Carrie's] words, which stop and make you think" (Gareth McLean: 22/02/01: *The Guardian*)

"Its basic premise is "all men are bastards" (Charlotte Raven: 09/02/99: *The Guardian*)

"The programme shows that all women are interested in is getting a man and having designer clothes" (Aitkenhead: 05/ 02/99: *The Guardian*)

8. Did *Ally McBeal* and/ or *Sex and the City* end the way you expected/ wanted? What would you have changed?

9. What time are *Ally McBeal* and/ or *Sex and the City* shown where you live?
*Ally McBeal-*
*Sex and the City-*

10. If you could change the time these programmes were shown at, would you? What time would you prefer them to be on?

11. Do you think that the female characters in these programmes can be considered as feminine?

12. What qualities do you see as feminine?

13. Do you think that the female characters in these programmes can be considered as feminist?

14. What qualities do you see as feminist?

15. Would you describe yourself as feminine and / or feminist? Why?

16. Is there anything else you would like to say about these programmes?

17. Are you willing for your answers to be quoted in my research findings?
Would you prefer this to be anonymously or with your name?
If you want your name included please put you name here.

*Thank you for all your help with this research. It is most appreciated.*

**Appendix 5** The advertisement used to recruit respondents for the focus groups (scaled down)

# SEX AND THE CITY and ALLY MCBEAL

I am a research student at Sheffield Hallam University who is setting up some one-off group discussions about **SEX AND THE CITY** and **ALLY McBEAL** for my course. Would you be interested in coming and sharing your views?

If you are female between 16- 35 years, live in the Worksop/ Sheffield or surrounding area and want to come to a discussion or want more information please contact me:

Anne-Marie

E-mail: allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

If you have a friend who watches these series you can bring them too and you don't have to have seen every episode!

All information is kept confidential

(I can offer no payment but your help will be greatly appreciated! Deadline– End of June)

Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

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Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

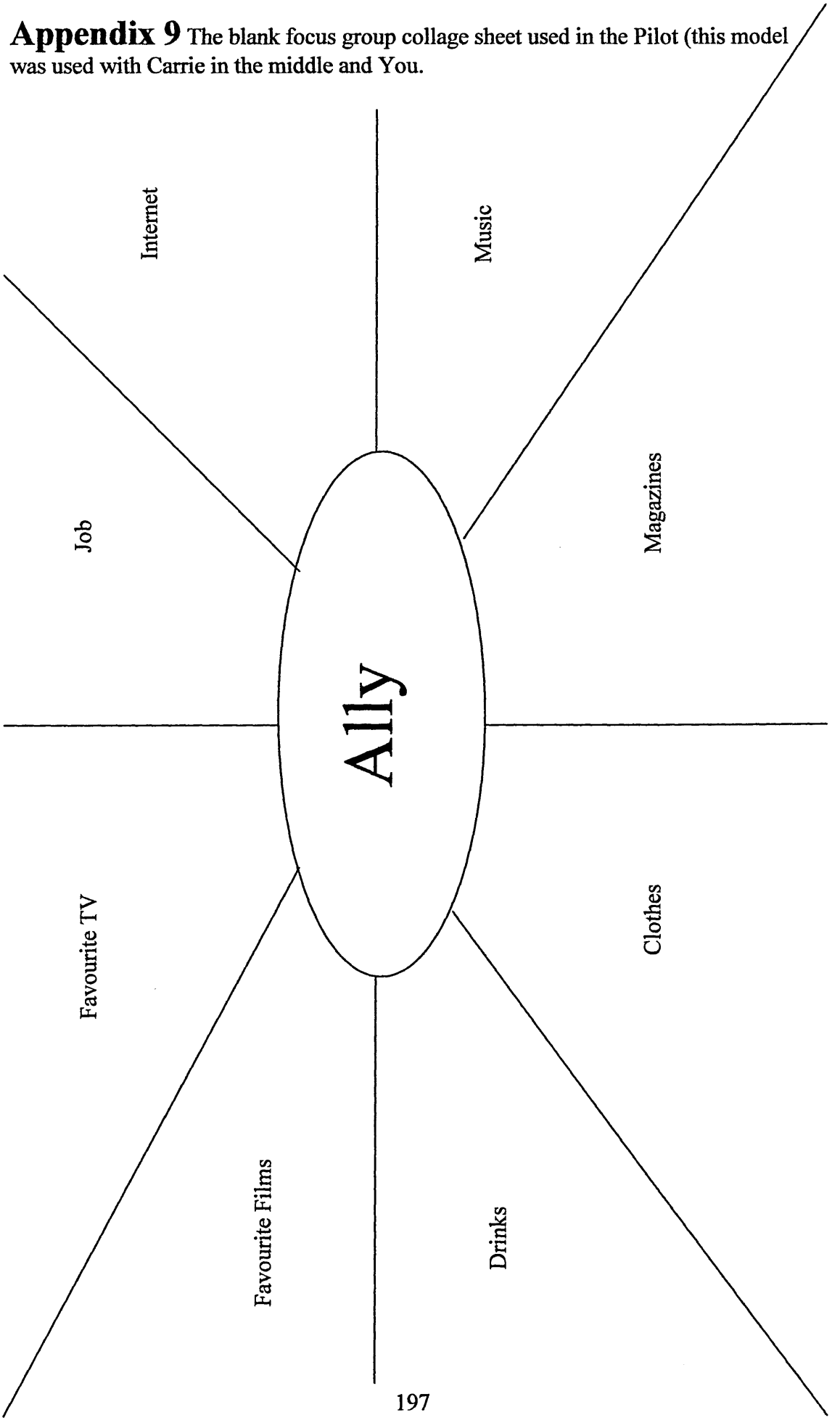
Anne-Marie allyandcarrie@hotmail.com

**APPENDIX 6** The blank focus group collage sheet– Ally

**APPENDIX 7** The blank focus group collage sheet– Carrie

**APPENDIX 8** The blank focus group collage sheet– You

**Appendix 9** The blank focus group collage sheet used in the Pilot (this model was used with Carrie in the middle and You.



# Appendix 10 Message Board Extracts

**(a)**- Complete message

Primogal 8/27/02 9:42AM PDT Re: Miranda

THANK YOU for allowing Miranda to be a REAL new mommie facing REAL challenges. It's about time that we show women what it is REALLY like to be a new mom. And, especially if you have been a career-minded, independent woman. Having a baby changes EVERYTHING!! And, yes you are a better person for it. But, come on mom's, let's be more honest. It's hard work!! And, you will feel more challenged than you ever have in your life.

Yes, I'm a new mommie and my baby is already 10 months old. She brings me a new sense of purpose and joy like I have never felt before. But, the first month with all the crying and sleep deprivation...it rocked my world. Also, having someone NEED YOU SO MUCH...that too was an adjustment for me. So, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU SATC for FINALLY showing America that having a baby is a blessing AND challenging. (hbo.com)

**(b)**- Complete message

04/17/2003 | 9:48PM [ 20/21 ] Ilana (*Ally McBeal*)

I love Elaine. I do the same job as her and wear the same things as her. In fact I could be her. Although I can't sing! I am nosey but I love my friends and well... if I've had a few boyfriends then it's not my fault! (coffeerooms.com)

**(c)**- Complete message

02/18/2001 | 9:42PM [ 17/18 ] Dnice@Philly (*Ally McBeal*)

I love Ally even more now. I have gotten to know her a lot more over the years (that sounds weird as if I know her - lol) and she has gone through though times and I went through them right with her. She's still quirky and funny and hopless romantic and I love her. She's great. I'm a little like her so I sympathize with her a lot. (www.gist.com)

**(d)**- Complete message

10/26/2000 | 7:29PM [ 12/12 ] Cowgirlcool (*Sex and the City*)

I am most like Charlotte. Not in the fashion sense, but in the every day things that Charlotte does. Like her, I believe in a fairy-tale ending. I was raised hearing tales of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty and stories of that nature. It is only natural to want them. I believe that there is one person out there in the world that is meant for me and when I meet that person, we will know it. Charlotte is an art dealer. I enjoy artistic things such as poetry and things of that nature. But, I am also like Carrie. Who hasn't had a MrBig in their life? (www.gist.com)

**(e)**- Complete message

The_Sexy_Kitten- Sat, Aug 17, 2002 at 1:04 AM EDT (*Sex and the City*)

I think the show is a hit because it reaches women of all ages, races, and shoe sizes. Personally, my friends and I identify with some of the characters. It's almost like they're broadcasting your thoughts ie. Miranda not being friends with an ex. It's too uncanny sometimes. (etc) (hbo.com)

**(f)**- Complete message

Mattison05/07/21/02 8:20PM PDT Re: Miranda (*Sex and the City)*
I can totally relate to how Miranda is feeling - scared that she will drift away from the life that she has/had with the other girls....I had a baby 14 months ago and have slipped away from my old life (which was not unlike the life portrayed on the show - just a bit less stylish and not in NYC.) BUT.....the reward I've gotten in return is beyond description and far outweighs the great things about the other (old) life. Although it was a bittersweet parting, I've had to say goodbye to that carefree lifestyle and make room for the wonders of motherhood. But like Carrie said at the end of the "Anchors Away" episode. (www.hbo.com)

**(g)**- Complete message

todallycrazy2001 2002-05-16 21:27:02 (*Ally McBeal*)
I think this sucks!!!!!!! I really like Ally McBeal.....I've watched it since the beginning. In the mist of reality shows, and non-realistic comedies, I've looked forward to her world of craziness, and her never ending soap-opera. (www.tvtome.com)

**(h)**- Complete message

Posted by Laura20 on 23:19 8/31/2000: (*Sex and the City*)
I cried for a good half hour even after it was over. It was all so real for me. Took me back about seven years when I was DUMB enough to do the same thing! [Carrie tells Aiden she has been cheating] Not the telling part but, the whole other thing. You know what I mean. Anyhow, I'm glad that Charlotte decided to stick it out. And Miranda kills me.
I really cried too at the end when she said she had found 3 friends who loved her unconditionally. I also felt sorry for Aiden. Can't wait 2 weeks for new episodes. What am I going to do!!!??? (www.coffeerooms.com)

**(i)**- Complete message

Marygrace 9/16/02 8:25AM PDT (*Sex and the City*) Re: Samantha
Some women NEED Samantha to stay Samantha. I am personally have almost no Samantha in me. I am a blend of Charlotte and Carrie with a little Miranda. However. I wish HBO would continue to portray her as a woman who is completely content on her own. Maybe bring in a strong relationship. One where Sam can still be strong and independent.

PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE DO NOT MAKE HER UNHAPPY BECAUSE SHE DOES NOT HAVE CHILDREN. Women who choose not to have children are always portrayed as secretly unhappy. Can we PLEEEEASE have just ONE woman on television who truly does not regret her decision to have a full life without children? (hbo.com

**(j)**- Complete message

Arbygirl 7/21/02 7:31PM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
Ok, I've got to say this, after seeing this epidose...Am I the only one who thinks Sam is turning into a MEGA-BITCH?! I mean, damn, she all but threw her best friend and her child into a cab, just because she doesn't "do" babies. I"m sorry, but

that's NOT real friendship. All i could think was, what a bitch!!! If one of my friends did that, i wouldn't be calling them a friend anymore. I was just wondering if i was the only one who thought that seemed kinda nasty. (www.hbo.com)

**(k)**- Complete message

Verysexy 9/10/02 7:42PM PDT Re: Miranda (*Sex and the City*)
STEVIE IS A NICE GUY, MIRANDA IS JUST TOO HARD ON THE POOR GUY. LOOK SOMETIMES WHEN HE WANTS TO DO SOMETHING SHE JUST SNAPS AT HIM. I KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING A SINGLE MOM. DO U GUYS THINK THAT BECAUSE STEVE'S JOB IS LESS UP IN SOCIETY AND BECAUSE HE IS NOT AS EDUCATED AS MIRANDA THAT IS THE REASON WHY SHE IS NOT FOLLOWING HER HEART?

YOU KNOW WE GIRLS ALWAYS TEND TO GO FOR THE GUYS THAT WE THINK WE ARE ON PARR WITH US, YOU KNOW WE BOTH HAVE DEGREES AND WE THINK THAT IF WE DATE A GUY WHO HAS A CERTIFICATE THEN SOMETHING IS WRONG. BUT FUNNY ENOUGH THOSE ARE THE GUYS THAT NORMALLY RESPECT AND MAKE US HAPPY.DONT GET ME WRONG SOME GUYS WITH DEGREES ARE NICE TOO.LOL (hbo.com)

**(l)**- Complete message

ladymarmalade
9/21/04 3:45PM PDT (*Sex and the City*)
Yes SATC isn't the real world....it's the reel world.....however, the reel is modeled after the real and therefore in both instances changes occur...once again, it may or may not be welcome, but it is definitely a constant. People and characters cannot be stagnant.....they do have to change and they may change in a way people expect and like or not.....that's just how it is! The writers need to show progression and the characters need to progress. Like Miranda for example having a baby will change her. Having a baby changed me and I didn't know if my single friends would cope. But just like on the show they helped out and I couldn't have done it without them. (www.hbo.com)

**(m)**- Complete message

Posted by Annie on 08:39 8/14/2000: (*Sex and the City*)
I read a little editorial piece (by Ben Stein?!) about the show, saying the show is too unreal because women never talk the way the characters do. Said that it was originally written for four gay men, but that the producers didn't think viewers would accept gays talking about their sexuality openly so they changed it to women. I think he's wrong. The women I know tend to be extremely open and frank about their sex lives when talking to girlfriends. But maybe I know an odd group... what do you think, are their conversations real-sounding on the show? Maybe, but my friends and I did talk that way when we were that age. I love that about the show. They talk just how we did! (www.coffeerooms.com)

**(n)**- Complete message

James Bond 12/10/01 (*Ally McBeal*)

NEW YORK TIMES- December 10, 2001
In 5th Season, 'Ally' Seems to Be Stalling By BILL CARTER
Ally McBeal," the Fox comedy series that in its first four seasons generated big ratings, numerous male-female sociological discussions and, most memorably, a Time magazine cover story, is now generating mostly shrugs. That is bad news for Fox, which considers the show one of its premiere attractions for the younger-adult audience advertisers covet.

During a season when television's established hit shows have become areas of refuge for viewers buffeted by grim news of terrorism and war — "comfort food" is the standard term — "Ally McBeal" has suffered a precipitous fall from favour.

For its first six episodes this season, it has lost a weekly average of about 2.8 million viewers from the comparable period last year. Its overall rating is down 23 percent, to 6.8 from last year's 8.8.

More alarmingly for the Fox network, the show has fallen sharply in the audience that always flocked to it — younger adults. Among advertising's demographic sweet spot, viewers 18 to 49, the show is down 26 percent. And in the even more desired subset, 18 to 34, it is down 30 percent.

The economic consequences for Fox could be significant because the show is falling well short of the rating it guaranteed advertisers this season. When that happens, networks must offer advertisers compensating commercials — known as make-goods — to make up the difference.
Reuters- The producer, David E. Kelley, and the star, Calista Flockhart, are in the fifth season of ``Ally McBeal." (gist.com)

**(o)**- Complete message
7/18/ 02 4:28PM PDT Sf girl (Sex and the City) Re: Miranda - Staying abreast "Sex and the City" had the mother of all premieres Tuesday night. And do we mean mother.
Cynthia Nixon, who is expecting her second child at the end of the year, was at the American Museum of Natural History party looking radiant. Her pregnancy came in handy, since her character, Miranda, breast-feeds her TV baby, Brady, in the season opener.
But those aren't really Nixon's assets on the tube.
"It cost $11,000 to build the prosthetic [breasts], and it took hours to attach it," the actress explained. "It's glued to you, and you spend the entire day with a makeup artist painting or fixing it. The huge fake silicone breasts inside get very heavy. It's very unpleasant."
Nixon also worried that the tot would take a liking to her latex chest. "But he was in no way fooled," said Nixon. (A mommy-double was used for closeups of the nursing.)

No artificial bosoms were required for other scenes in the mammocentric first episode. But in the second, Kristin Davis' character, Charlotte, flashes one of hers at a sailor. And Kim Cattrall's oversexed Samantha pulls down her dress for a room of men in uniform. (In the season finale, Cattrall gets into a topless catfight with a

bustier woman at a Hamptons pool party, New York mag reports.)

"Kristin and Kim have the cutest boobs!" Patricia Field, the series' costume designer, told the Daily News' Alev Aktar.

"Sex" star Sarah Jessica Parker keeps her top on in the show, but the six-months-pregnant actress exhibited some impressive cleavage at the party.

Parker has also been busy tamping down Chris Noth's claims that he's the father of her child. Noth, who plays her ex-boyfriend Mr. Big and is a friend of Parker and her husband, Matthew Broderick, has "been making trouble," Parker says. "Whenever we go out in public, he tells everybody, 'You know whose that baby is? It's mine!' I hope no one believes him!" (hbo.com)

**(p)**- Complete message

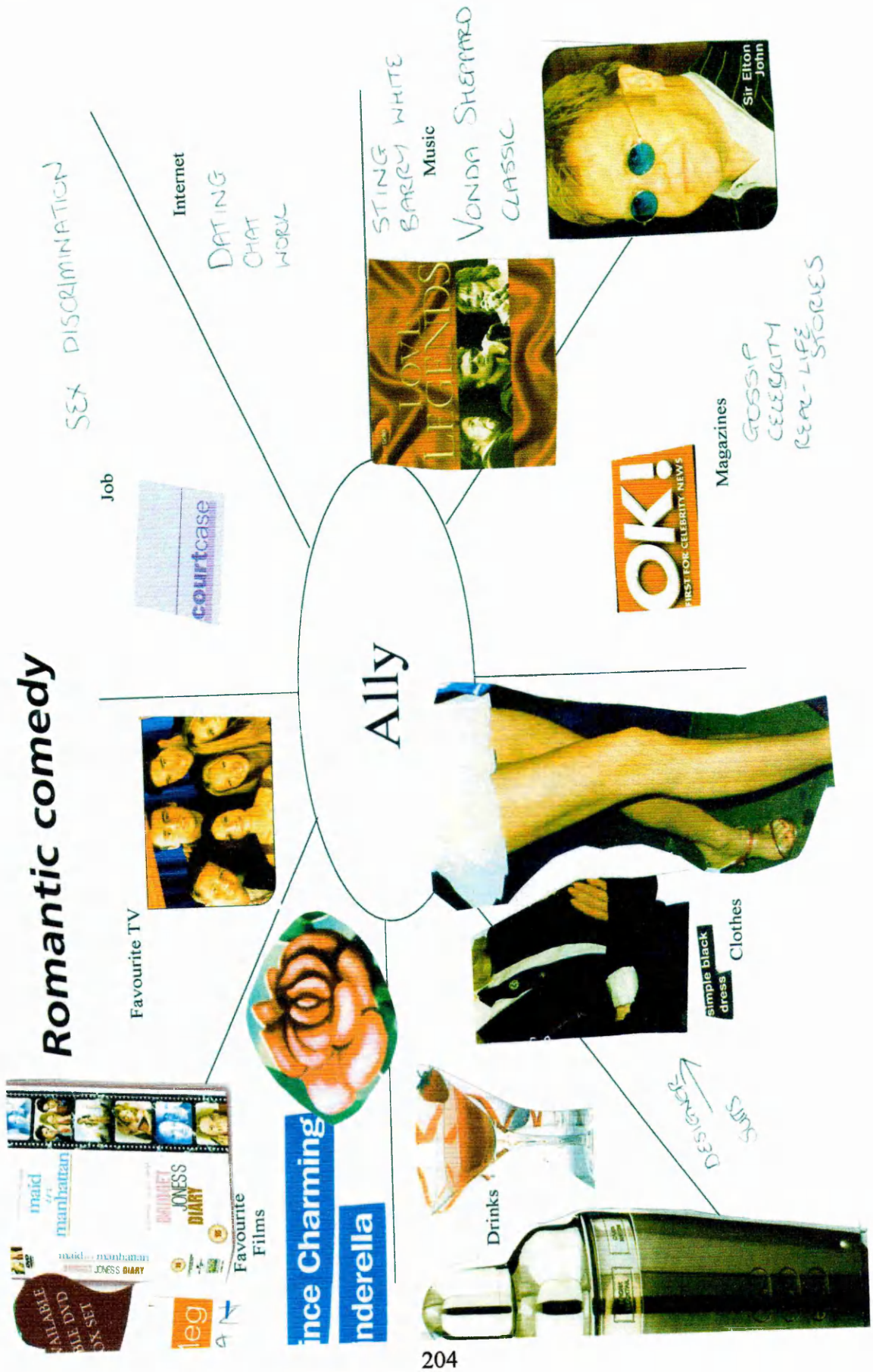
Posted by Lucy0 on 18:41 7/9/2002: (*Ally McBeal*)
The story goes that men have bigger brains than women but women have more nerves. Men might think a lot, and maybe that is why they have bald spots. We women, however, know how to appreciate things better than men, such as a great show like AM. My favourite character in the show is ling, and I love Lucy Liu. Though it might be unnerving to see someone so comfortable in her own skin, it is also refreshing and encouraging. I am glad that Lucy's movie career is taking off. Along with her CA part, she also has a new movie coming out called Ecks vs' Sever (http://www.ecksvssever.com). It is refreshing to see someone, especially an Asian person, not typecasted (she plays a super weapon in this movie). As much as men and women differ, I think we can all appreciate Lucy and her new movie. (coffeerooms.com)

**Appendix 11** The popularity of different genres. This is taken from Chapter Four's discussion on genre.

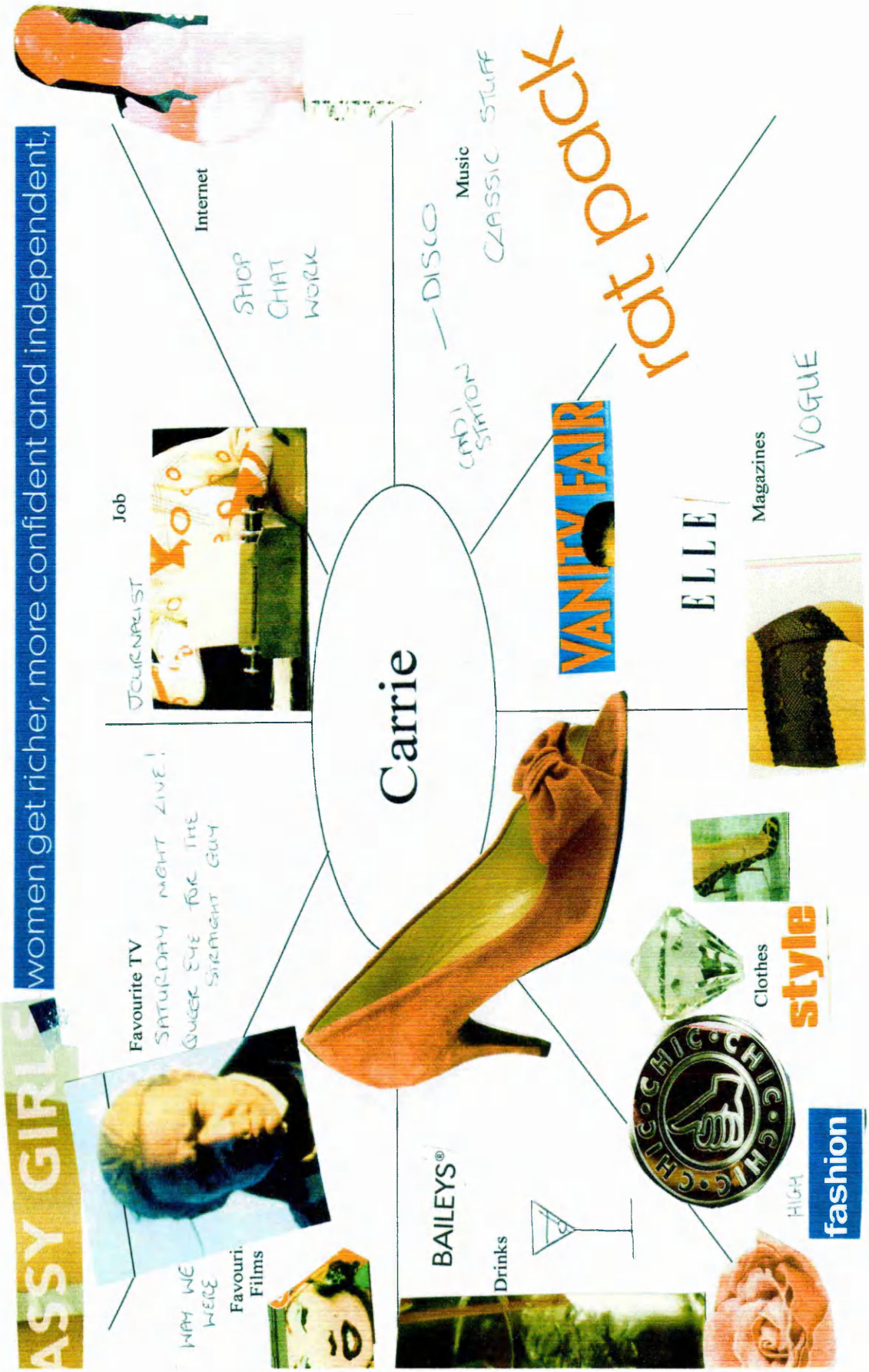
| Genre Type | Number of Respondents |
|---|---|
| Drama- Crime | 22 |
| Situation Comedy | 21 |
| Music | 21 |
| Drama- Romance | 21 |
| Soap Opera | 20 |
| Documentaries | 18 |
| Drama- Medical | 17 |
| Reality Television | 17 |
| Make-overs | 17 |
| Factual | 16 |
| News | 15 |
| Decorating | 15 |
| Drama- Action | 13 |
| Sports | 12 |
| History | 11 |
| Science Fiction | 9 |
| Fantasy | 9 |
| Cookery | 7 |
| Gardening | 2 |
| Costume | 1 |
| Police | 1 |
| Other | 0 |

This collates the responses of 31 people to the questionnaire.

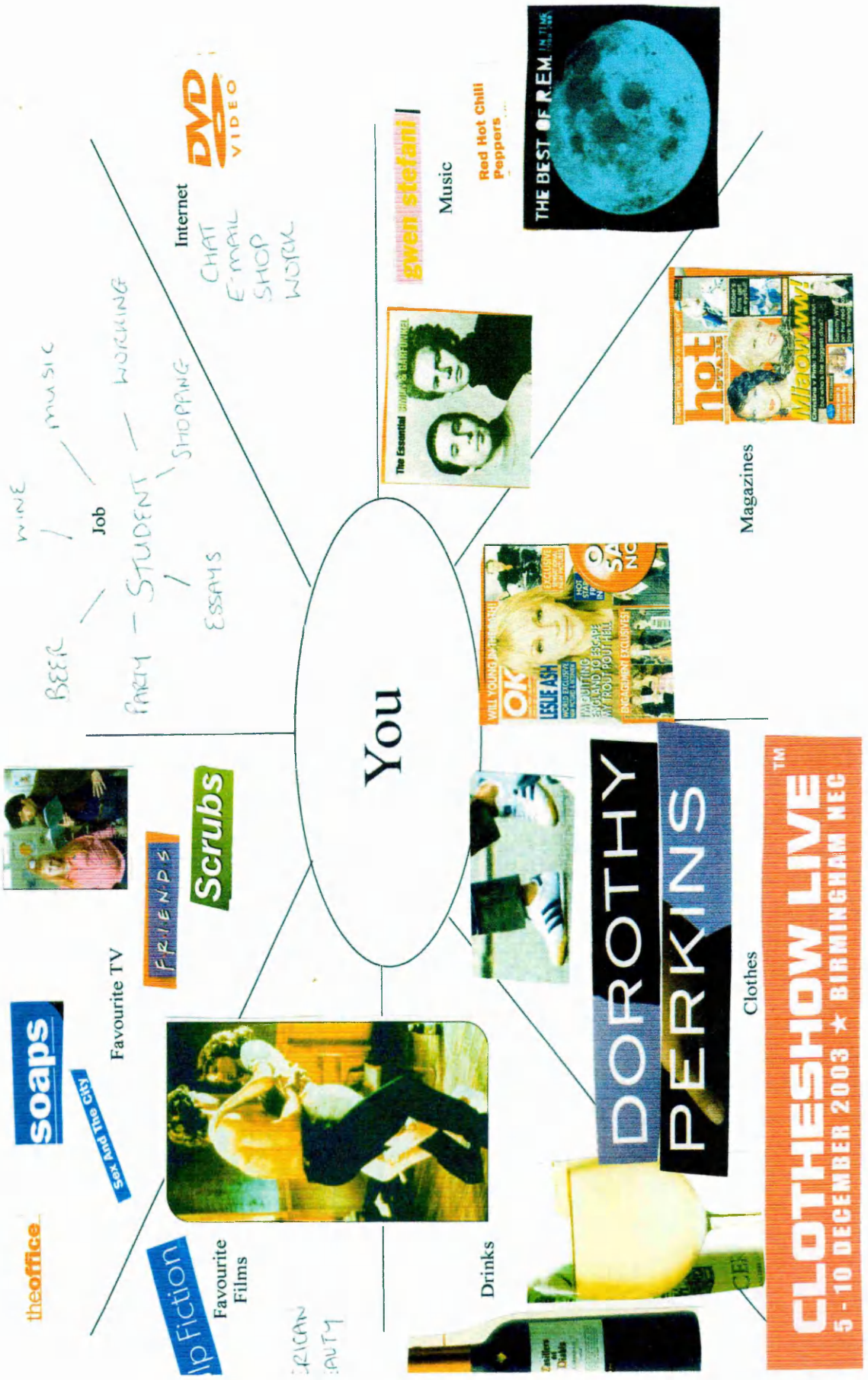
**Appendix 12 (a)**– Pilot Focus Group Collage- Ally Collage



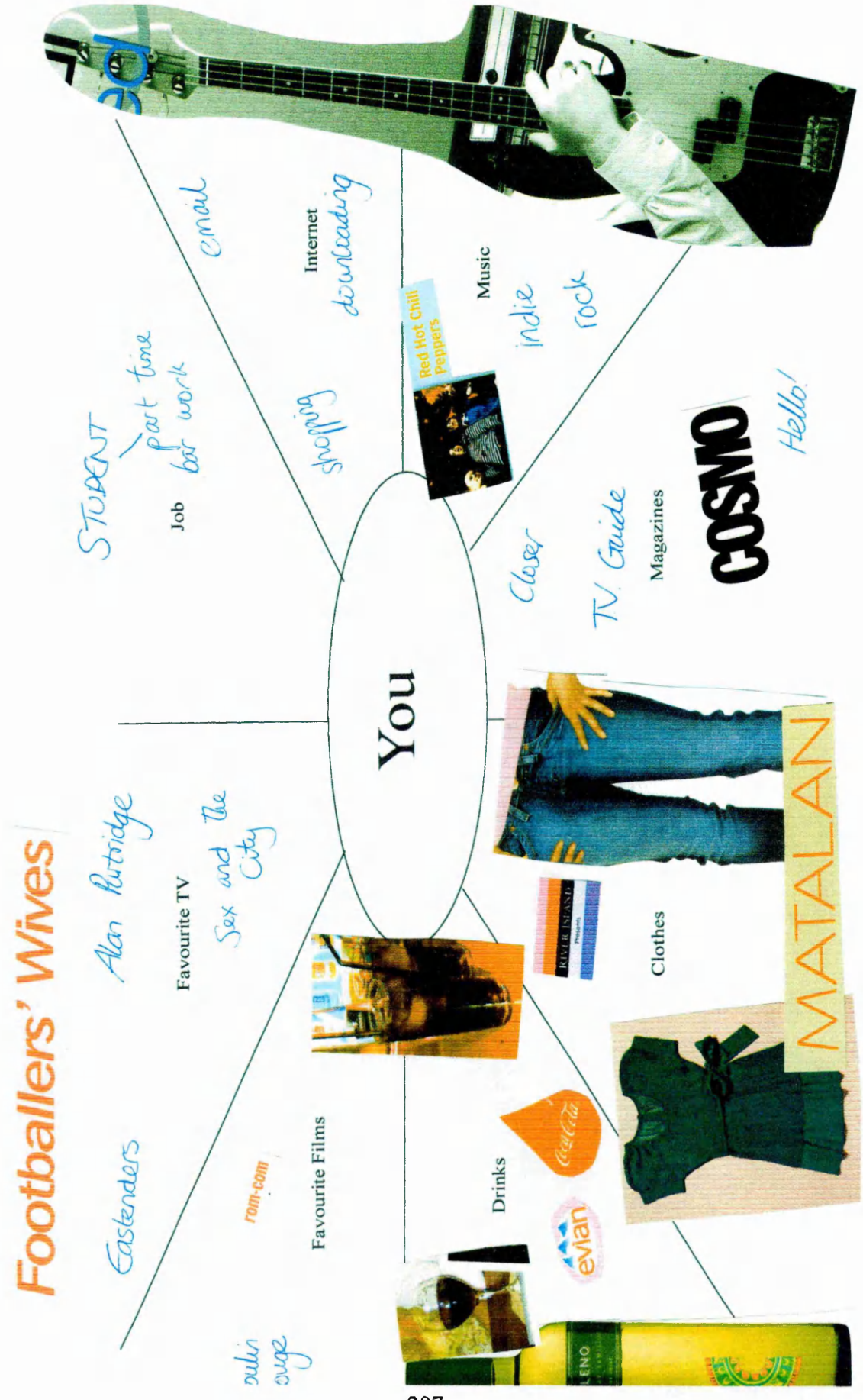
**Appendix 12 (b)**– Pilot Focus Group Collage– Carrie Collage



# Appendix 12 (c)– Pilot Focus Group Collage– Respondent One

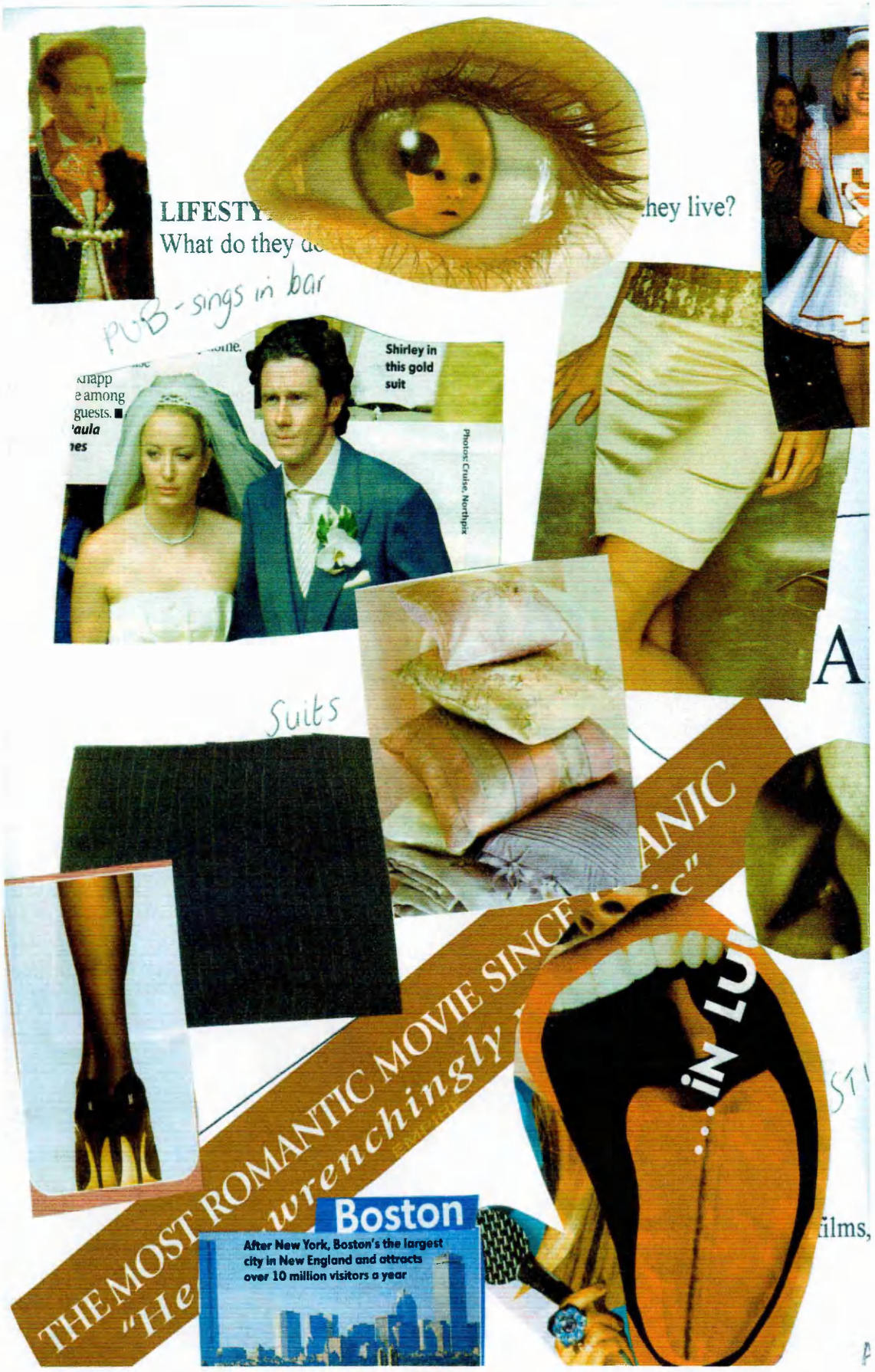


**Appendix 12 (d)** Pilot Focus Group Collage– Respondent Two



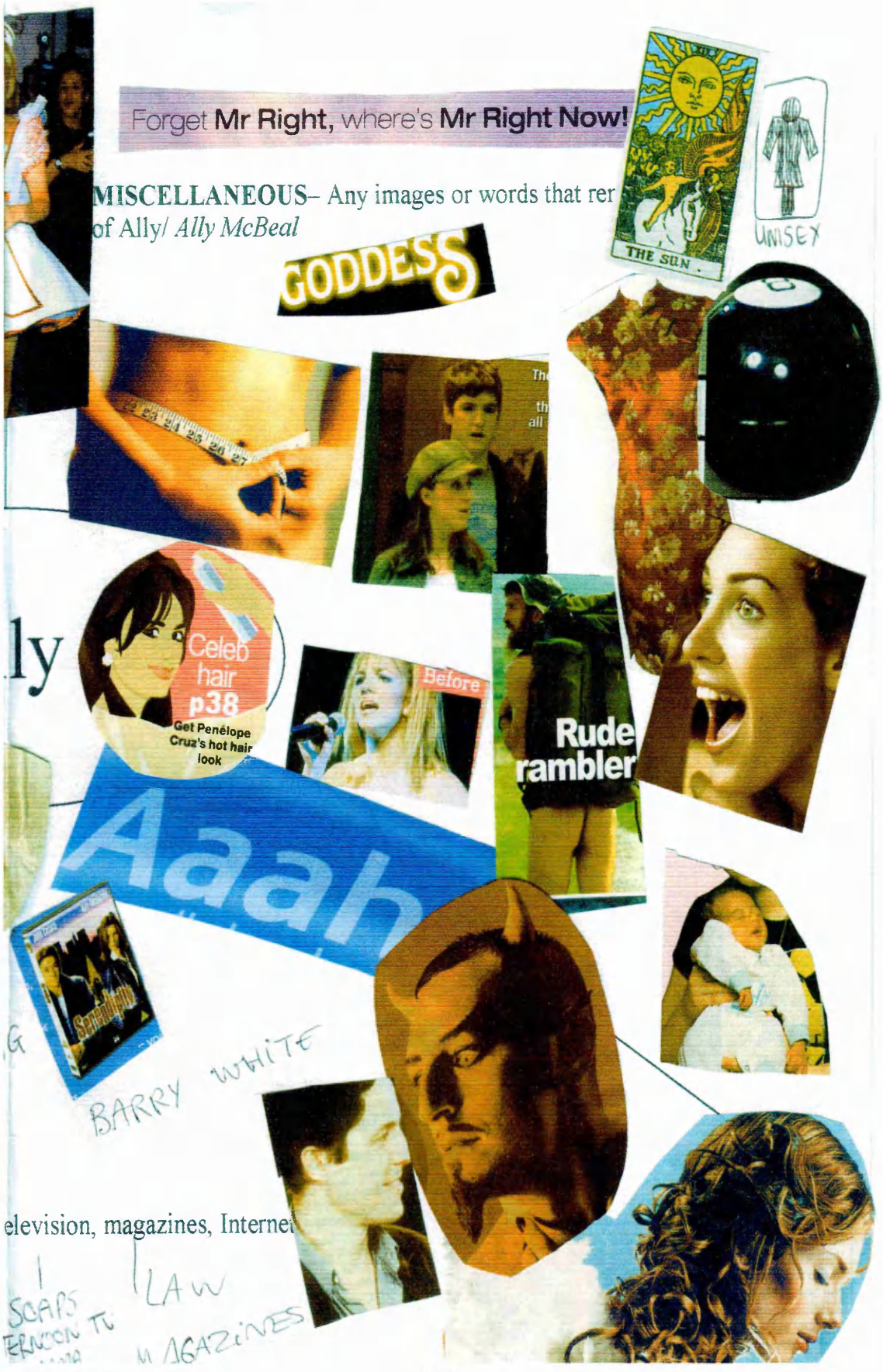
**Appendix 13**– Focus Group One Collages and Explanations

**(a)** Focus Group One– Ally Collage



# Appendix 13– Focus Group One Collages and Explanations

## (a) Focus Group One– Ally Collage



**Appendix 13 (b)** Focus Group One– Carrie Collage

**Appendix 13 (b)** Focus Group One– Carrie Collage

LIFESTYLE– What do you wear? Where do you live? What do you do? Etc.
MISCELLANEOUS– Any images or words that you think say something about you
THE HAMPTONS DIET
Diet secrets of the rich, famous and thin
Freemans OF LONDON
fashion
LIVE
LIVE
Dove
Party Feet
coolfinger.co
RINGTONES · GAMES · GRAPHI
You
celebrity gossip, fashion and life
COSMOPOLITAN
DIANE LANE
UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN
Red Bull
STIMULATION
SIX FEET UNDER
The Complete Second Series
MEDIA–What music, films, television, magazines, Internet etc. do you like?
News
Comedies
Shopping
E-Bay
PopIdol

DOROTHY PERKINS
LIFESTYLE– What do you wear? Whe
What do you do? Etc.
MISCELLANEOUS– Any imag
something about you
Cairns
QUEENSLAND
Alice Springs
Perth
AUSTRALIA
Adelaide
Sydney
NOKIA
CONNECTING PEOPLE
You
Jamelia
GARNET POINT
6 Kill Bill: Vol 2 (18)
Director: Quentin Tarantino
Uma Thurman is magnificent and Tarantino is at his best in this gloriously gory martial arts revenge picture, with even more quick-witted dialogue than Vol 1.
MEDIA–What music, films, television, magazines, Internet etc. do you like?
SOME CHART STUFF
NORAH JONES
WILL YOUNG
ANYTHING ABOUT STARS + CELEBRITIES
Friends
Will & Grace
Cutting It
SIMPSONS
BREEZER

Comfy clothes
superdrug
MARKS & SPENCER
EXCLUSIVELY FOR EVERYONE
Weight Watchers
Chicken & Lemon Risotto
LIFESTYLE– What do you wear? Where do you live? What do you do? Etc.
MISCELLANEO
something about you
TOBLERONE
You
slimmers
MILLIONAIRE
WHO WANTS TO BE A
STARBUCKS COFFEE
queer eye FOR THE STRAIGHT GUY
celebrity gossip
soap
LONDON BOROUGH OF WALFO
ALBERT SQUAR
Big Brother
MEDIA–What music, films, television, magazines, Internet etc. do you like?
Women Take a Break
Heat

**Appendix 13 (f)** Focus Group One– Respondent Four

**Appendix 13 (g)** Focus Group One– Respondent Five

**(h)** Focus Group One- Ally Collage Explanations
Biscuit- He's a male Ally, kooky and in his own world
Pub- they are always singing in the bar they go to after work
Bride and groom- This is the ideal that Ally hopes for and the first thing she thinks of when she meets a new man
Short skirt- Ally was famous for her short skirts
Pin stripes and stilettos- this represents the business suits Ally wears. She has to be smart but is still sexy and designer
Pink cushions- You can imagine them in Ally's bedroom as they're feminine but not immature
"The most romantic movie ever.."- That's what she'd watch. She'd enjoy the romance and the happy ending
Boston- I think this is where Ally is set
Big mouth and a microphone- They sing all the time in the bar and the big mouth represents the way they use computers like when her mouth becomes animated and her tongue hangs out when she sees a man
Kiss- It's all bout romance and emotions, mainly her romance and her emotions
Sting and Barry White- they have been on the show and I associate them with the show
Film Serendipity- She believes in all that fate and destiny stuff of fining Mr. Right and chance meetings are all in the stars.
Law Magazines- Reads them for work
Hugh Grant- The ultimate rom com hero- It just screams Ally and everything she is
Devil/ Angel- In the court cases there's always some kind of moral
Baby- This is her ultimate goal
Aaaahh- Just the way she is. Everything's a crisis
Rude rambler- This represents the weird cases they try in court. A man's right to hike nude seems like it could have been on the programme
Britney- represents Vonda Sheppard the resident singer. Has a great voice and does good versions of songs that capture Ally's feelings
Woman's surprise face- Gossip angle like Elaine
Chinese dress- reminds me of Lucy Lui
Martina and Sonia- She's always looking for that perfect relationship and they have what she wants
Tape measure- Ally always gets comments on her weight/ size. She is really skinny
"Goddess"- This refers to the way Ally has therapy all the time. It's quite all about my emotions with her
Unisex- everything happens in the loo there. They sing/ dance/ do gymnastics have secret rooms gossip, confide etc.
Mr. Right- She has this ideal in her head and never looks in front of her nose
Nurse outfit- This just reminded me of Ally- being kooky, having a sense of humour, wacky court cases and so on.

**(i)** Focus Group One- Carrie Collage Explanation
Dress- it's all about fashion and she's the most fashion conscious
Hair dye- This stands for her ever changing hair styles
Drinks- (one put over another over another) Cocktails is what they drink
Shoes- Well obviously
Wedding (bride and groom)- This is an idea that she plays with and ultimately can't handle
Ewan and Nicole- This represents kissing which also means sex which is what the programme is mainly about
Mobile- Carrie always wears hers round her neck and is always chatting on the phone to the others
George Clooney- He is her male fantasy (before Russell Crow was famous) and they all say they use him for inspiration in you know what I mean
Cold Feet- If she could watch Cold Feet I think she would as its all about relationships which is what she writes about but its also funny
Barbara Streisand- she likes big emotional music "Jazzy crap"
Sleepless in Seattle- Its an classic rom com that they can all watch together and slag it off
Vogue- she would definitely read this for the fashion
Soppy films- she would watch them for research on relationships or if she was having a night in with chocolate
Premiers- She is always going to the opening of a new club or a promotion
Chat rooms- she would use chat rooms to get ideas on columns, argue her points on relationships and so on. She just likes to discuss these kinds of things
Vanity Fair- likes gossip and fashion
Semi-naked people (from Big Brother)- The show is all about sex which is quite open and for everyone to see like on BB its analysed and so on
Cigarettes (word)- Carrie battles with smoking. She tried to give them up to be with Aiden but she couldn't change. Man trying to change the woman and so it could never work really.
Person smoking cigarette- Carrie smokes
Renee Zellwegger- She represents someone at a premier and this is what the girls do. They get dressed up and go out
Bra/ underwear- it's a sexy show and sex should be seen as fun and feeling sexy yourself
Shopping bags- Carrie is very good at this but not so good with managing her money- remember when she worked out how much money she had spent on shoes?
Corsage- this is an iconic Carrie fashion accessory
Computer keyboard- she's a journalist and always types her articles
Chris Noth- Big is a major part of Carrie's life
Yellow Cabs- They are always hailing cabs and using them In fact do any of them actually know how to drive?
Heeled sandals- Carrie just always has the strappy sandals on
Trinny and Susannah- Carrie would watch this programme and slag them off saying what they are doing wrong.
Quality Street- She turns to chocolate like most of us when upset and "mum" is another idea they play with as most of them didn't want kids to begin with
Cappucino- They always meet for drinks/ breakfast and for us its like having a coffee with a friend and a gossip
Pregnant woman with a bag hiding her bump- SJP was pregnant and they used big bags and floaty materials to hide it
Posh black dress and Dior- designer outfits

Quote- sums up SATC

Friendship and sharing jokes are an important part of the programme
(Carrie has not TV in her apartment)

**(j)** Focus Group One- Respondent One- Personal Collage
Nail jewellery- Love to get pampered, nails, and facials and so on
Hair spray- I take my hair very seriously. I look after it and like to change it and my image all the time
Hair dye- Like I said I like to change my image very so often and so I am always changing the colour. I've been everything from blonde to ginger! It makes me feel good to just reinvent myself every so often
Dior bangle- I love designer labels, Can't really afford them but I like finding things that look similar but are more of a bargain. I loved SATC for the fashion
Rubber gloves- I'm a neat freak and like everything tidy
The Hamptons Diet- I am always dieting and trying out new diets.
Heeled sandals- I love heels. They make me feel sexy. I'm also a bit sensitive about my height
Dove- I use this as it's fantastic. It's ridiculously expensive you need to look after your skin
Gordon Ramsay- I love food and cooking. Not really posh stuff but I like to have a go
Red Bull- I'm an energetic and motivated person
Six Feet under- I love the programme. The subtle mix of humour but also serious. Just so clever. I love programmes like that.
Zoe Lucker- Adored Footballers Wives. It was trashy and not really set in the real world but it was great. I didn't have to think and just enjoyed it
Cosmo- Addicted to this magazine
News/ Comedies- What I like to watch
Shopping/ E-Bay- I think E-bay is great. You can get some great bargains
Pop Idol- I like reality shows like that. I suppose I'm nosey. Loving Big Brother at the moment
Under the Tuscan Sun- Really good film
Celebrity gossip, fashion and life- sums me up. Like I say I'm nosey and love to read all the gossip
Jogger- I do try to exercise I should do more but I've taken up running
Coolfinger.com- I can't imagine life without my phone
Party feet- I like a good party and a dance. These look like a really clever idea as well
Kylie- I like her music and I hope I look that good when I'm her age. (Also can I have a French boyfriend?)
Sea- I love the ocean- the sound and everything
Freemans- I do a lot of shopping from a lot of catalogues
Fashion- I just love clothes

**(k)** Focus Group One- Respondent Two- Personal Collage
Dorothy Perkins- I like their clothes. They're not too expensive and they do sensible sizes
Beach- I love a good beach holiday. There's nothing like a good relax next to the sea to unwind
Australia- I did some travelling in Australia and thought it was a lovely place. I'd love to retire there one day
Steak- I adore steak. It's one of my favourite meals and on the Atkins you can eat it all day!
Bottle of wine- There's normally a bottle of wine in my fridge half open for me to sip on whilst I cook, eat or relax
Jamelia album- I loved her thank you song it was really empowering
Fruit- I try to eat my five portions a day and usually manage it. I love strawberries and pears.
Cardigan- It may sound silly but I feel really comfy in a cardy, not a granny one but a bright one. They go with everything. (ok I am pathetic!)
Bacardi Breezers- If I'm not on the wine I like the pineapple or watermelon Breezer. They remind me of holidays
Kill Bill Vol. 2- I really liked the Kill Bill films even if they were a bit violent. Everything was just amazing from the acting to the music they just really worked on all the different levels
Justin Timberlake- I just LOVE him! His music is great. My favourite song has to be Cry me a River. I know it was a dig at Britney but it was just so unlike anything
Chart stuff, Norah Jones, Will Young- I also like Chart stuff but also older music from the sixties onwards. I have a really big mix of tastes
Magazines- Anything about stars or celebrities- I prefer magazines with photos and gossip in to like Elle where it's just all clothes
Simpsons- This is the best programme ever. It always makes me laugh and Homer is just the best
Friends, Will & Grace, Cutting It- I like a lot of dramas on TV at the moment. My video is always set for something
ER- I have watched this from when it began and have seen characters come and go but Carter remains my favourite. If he ever leaves I will have to stop watching.
Catherine Zeta-Jones- I just think she is just stunning looking. She looks like an old fashioned movie star and I love her films
Necklace- I have a massive collection of jewellery and always seem to buy more wherever I go. It's almost addictive
Carrie- I thought SATC was the best ever programme.
Car- I have a small nippy car and love being able to go for drives
Jamie Oliver- I recently tried some of his recipes and they were lovely. I don't normally cook but it was fun
Nokia- I am one of those text addicts you hear about. I am always texting
Sunbather- When I go on holiday I like to go out and about but I love to just sit and soak up the sun as we never get it here
Arc D'Triumph- I love to travel and can speak French ok
Johnny Depp- This doesn't need explaining surely
Hair straighteners- I can't leave the house until my hair is done. Straighteners are the best invention since sliced bread.

(I) Focus Group One- Respondent Three- Personal Collage
Jeans- I live in jeans they are so comfy
Comfy clothes- I go for comfy clothes, casual but not scruffy
Dog- I have a dog called Trixie and he's gorgeous
Trainers- I normally wear trainers. Again they're really comfy
Ryvita- I try to go for health food when I'm shopping and I always buy this with good intentions until I get to the chocolate aisle
Baby- I have two children and one is 8 months old
Starbucks coffee- I love coffee. I think I drink too much but I gave it up when I was pregnant so now drink even more. I wouldn't go to starbucks though they charge way too much
Who Wants to be a Millionaire- I like answering the questions for this. I like most quiz shows
Lipstick-I like to look nice and make up makes me feel sexy
Celebrity gossip- I love reading about who's getting up to what with who
Big Brother- I can't get enough if this years BB. It's on all the time as well so if I'm up early or feeding or whatever I can just switch it on
Queer Eye for the Straight Guy- I accidentally watching this one week and now I never miss it. The guy who does the clothes has me in stitches. I am sure Carrie and Co. would watch this!
Peter Andre- I liked I'm a Celebrity. How did they eat those bugs. Jenny Bond actually folded a stick insect in half!
Soap- I like my soaps but I tend to watch on and off
Bridget Jones- I can't wait for the next film. Hugh Grant and Colin Firth were brilliant
Albert Square- EastEnders is my favourite soap
Woman, Take a Break, Heat- I like magazines with a mixture of gossip and real life. I like reading about other people
Jonathan Ross- I think he's hilarious
Slimmers- I joined a slimming club after I gave birth and I try to go but it doesn't always fit in with what I'm doing
Toblerone- Chocolate is my downfall
Terry Wogan- I like listening to the radio
Blackpool- I have good memories of holidaying here with all my family
Tin of paint- I ma trying to get my husband to decorate our house but he's not easily persuaded
Weight Watchers Risotto- I joined weight watchers and try to buy their products
Marks and Spencer- I like the clothes and food in here
Superdrug- It does good offers and is much cheaper than Boots

**(m)** Focus Group One- Respondent Four- Personal Collage
Mind- I am reading books on having a healthy body and mind
Car- Speed- I love speed and driving fast
Jumper- I like winter when you can wear big jumpers and get all warm
White top- I am always wearing a white top for work and I've got to like it now
Fish- I try to eat healthily and as I am from Spain I adore fish dishes
Sport- I like to keep active and like swimming
Camera- I am really into photography
Raspberries- I like to eat properly and try to eat healthy
Eggs- I just love eggs. I'd eat them all the time if I could
Watermelon- this is one of my favourite foods
Couple hugging- I like hugging my boyfriend and feeling secure
Asda- I shop here. It's so cheap and I end up buying everything from clothes to bread
Matalan- I like this shop because its cheap and its good for both work clothes and casual stuff
Beach- I love the beach and I'm going on holiday this year and I can't wait to be there
Fit for your Shape- I think I am or am trying to be
Anastacia- I really like her music and think she was really inspirational in tackling her cancer
Barbara Streisand- I like the big strong voice
Films- Action, romance- This is what I tend to like watching the most
T.V- ER, SATC, Decoration programmes, Healthy Programmes, Hollywood programmes- I love to watch TV. I especially like the Hollywood channel, finding out about all the celebrities
Magazines- Baby ones, Closer, Hello!, OK!, Decoration- I read a lot of magazines. I don't have a baby but I like to read those magazines as one day I will have one
Internet- Hello magazine, Hotmail- I like to use the Internet, especially to keep in contact with my family
Computer keyboard- I seem to be always on the computer, especially for work
Girl and cat- I have a cat and I love her to death
Jogger- I like to keep fit and have been known to jog before
DVD- I prefer DVD's now. I like to watch all the extra bits
Body- Like I said I am reading a book on how to get a healthy mind and body
Salad- I actually like salad eat it quite a lot
Star style- I love fashion and clothes and so love to see what the celebrities are wearing
Maternal- I am quite a maternal person and definitely want children at some point
Celebrities- I like to read about them
The Emmys- I like watching award shows, mainly for the fashion
The Oscars- I prefer these to the Emmy's but I love watching them
Complicity- Life is complicated
Intimate conversations- I like talking to my boyfriend and really getting to know him
Carrie= Friendships- Like in SATC I think friendships are really important and I like just talking and being with all my friends

**(n)** Focus Group One- Respondent Five- Personal Collage
Church- I try to go every Sunday but don't always manage it
Frizzy hair- My hair is a frizz bomb in the morning
Nigel Harman and Tamzin Outhwaite- Soap news and romance
Boots with the heel cut off- I like boots but I can't stand heels they make my feet really ache
Person with power drill- I am doing up my house at the moment and really like DIY
Salad- I am on weight watchers and so am trying to loose weight
Mini car- This is my car. I love driving it
2DTV- this programme is hilarious
Nigel Harman- I love soaps
Justin from The Darkness- I think their music is fantastic ( I also really like the Streets but that's a bit sad isn't it?)
Elton John- Is that really sad that I like ton John?
(Johnny Depp and Kiera Knightley) Pirates of the Caribbean- My favourite film. I also love Johnny Depp
Award ceremony- I hate award shows they're so crap and boring but I do like to see what people are wearing and who they're with and everything
Love actually- How lovely is that film? I really like films with a good story and one that really tugs on your emotions
I'm A Celebrity- I like reality shows
Weight lifter- I need to do more exercise
Tree scene- I like really nice quiet holidays with nice scenery and no rushing around or stress
Sun lotion- I am so pale, too pale
So remember- I have a terrible memory
Gossip- I like these magazines I love knowing what's going on. Is Jordan pregnant does anyone know?
Bride and groom- I have just recently got married

**Appendix 14**– Focus Group Two Collages and Explanations

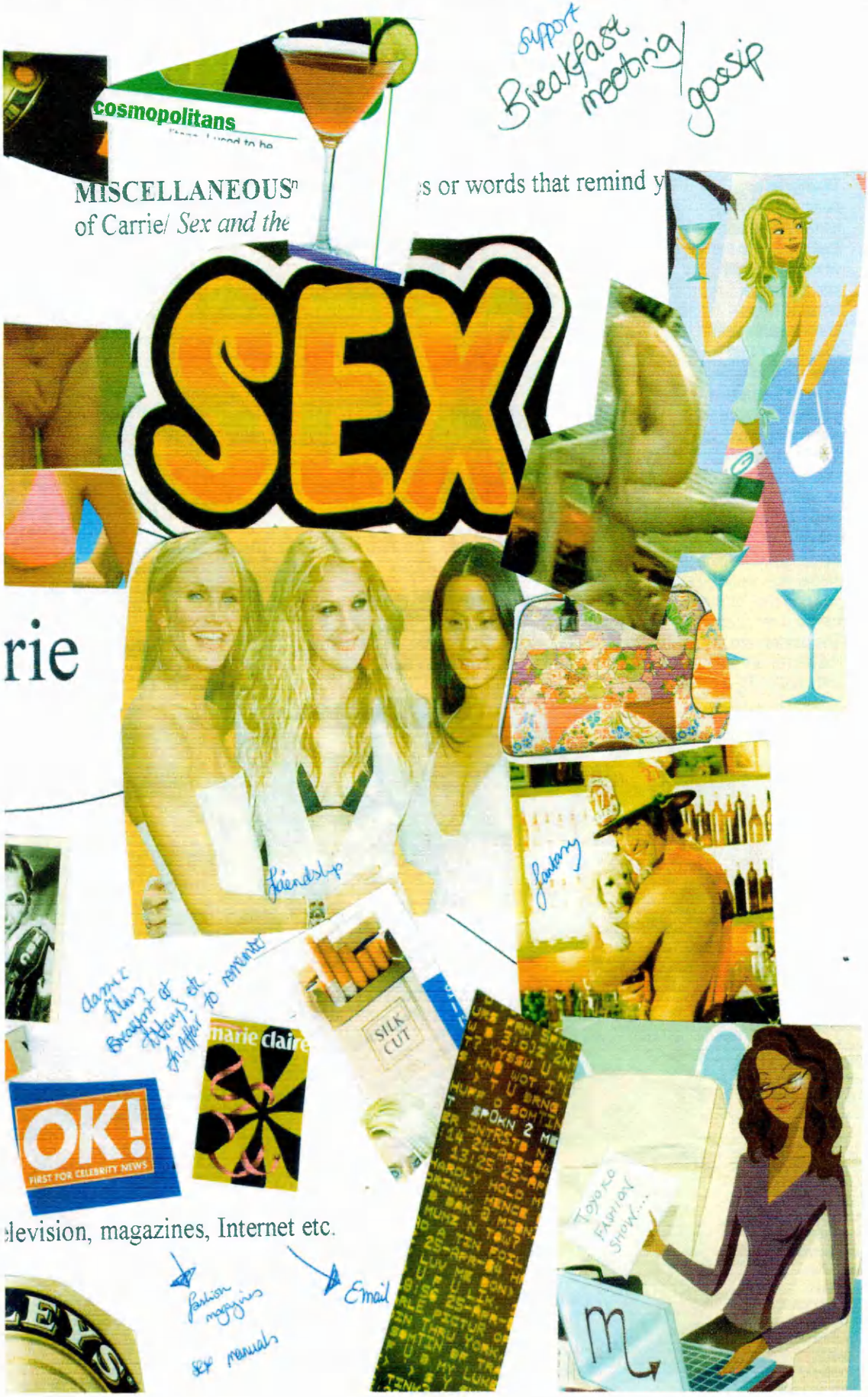
**(a)** Focus Group Two– Ally Collage

**Appendix 14**– Focus Group Two Collages and Explanations

**(a)** Focus Group Two– Ally Collage

**Appendix 14– (b)** Focus Group Two– Carrie Collage

**Appendix 14– (b)** Focus Group Two– Carrie Collage



**Appendix 14– (c)** Focus Group Two– Respondent One Collage

**Appendix 14– (d)** Focus Group Two– Respondent Two Collage

**Appendix 14– (e)** Focus Group Two– Respondent Three Collage

**Appendix 14– (f)** Focus Group Two– Respondent Four Collage

**(g)** Focus Group Two- Ally Collage Explanations
Life, Love- This is what Ally is mainly about life and love or even her love life.
Heeled Shoe- This says Ally as it's sexy but also businessy as well.
Woman in suit- She wears a suit to work
Cartoon woman in suit- This looks like her, kind of stylish and co-ordinated but formal
Legs- People always comment of the fact she has her legs out and a sort skirt
Roses- I would say she's a romantic person and would appreciate flowers when someone is trying to woo her
Moulin Rouge- I remember she told Victor she judges people of whether they LOVED Moulin rough or hated it.
Danielle Steele novel- You'd expect her to read this kind of thing, enjoying the romance and the story and love unfolding. There also tends to be tragedy and drama in those books and she's like that I think.
Squiggles- This represents they way she's quite mixed up and goes to therapy to untangle herself. Carrie analyses herself but then applies it to others but Ally's analysis is all about herself and how she feels
Ewan and Renee (Down with Love)- I think she's like these kind of more up to date love stories as well as the older novels. There's a big twist in this film and you realise that the women isn't a victim but strong and manipulative
Kate Winslet crying- I put this on because I thought it showed how emotions can get the better of you and that Ally is quite an emotional person
It's a Wonderful Life-I think she'd like that film at Christmas and enjoy the sentiment
Bart Simpson- This is more to represent humour than The Simpsons. She'd probably like the Simpsons as it's clever but I think she also likes to laugh when she watches TV
Magazines- problem pages- I would think she's one of those people who buys a magazine and turns straight to the problem page to see what problems are similar to hers and what advice there is
Internet- dating, love advice, Law info-I can see her using the Internet as a tool for romance as well as work
Chick Flick CD- You'd assume she'd like watching chick flicks and the music to them
Love Legends CD- Barry Whites on here and he just is part of the programme for me. Plus she's like love songs even if they only made her cry
Big Eye- This crazy big eye shows the way that the programme like morphs Ally's eyes or tongue. It almost goes animated for a bit.
Signpost- This sign post shows what Ally has problems with. She has dreams and wants love and has a good career but she's pulling herself in all these different directions instead of going with it
Tape measure- People are always saying things about her size
Woman's figure and tape measure- She's naturally skinny and people always talk about her and anorexia. I read the other day that Portia De Rossi (Nelle) did actually have an eating disorder and yet they focus on her.
Mascara eye- The characters and Ally are also quite glamorous and even though we see them at work most if the time they do have designer suits and everything
"How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days"- Again she'd like that kind of new rom com with a happy ending
Baby- I used to love the dancing baby. I thought it was hilarious
Cinderella- I think she sees herself as a victim waiting for someone to pull her out of it. She should just get on with her life and do what she wants and not worry about others.
Family scene-This is what she wants. A family - the mum, dad, and baby package.

Stars- I think she believes in her star signs
Destiny- She believes that you'll meet someone at the right time and everything. It as like that with Billy but it all ended in tragedy
Bride and groom- This is what she wants. A wedding and I'm not sure she's thought about the marriage part the hard work it takes to keep it going.
Jimmy Stewart- I think she's like an old fashioned gentleman. Good looking and polite but also successful and everything.

**(h)** Focus Group Two- Carrie Collage Explanations
Compact- This just is SATC. They take care in their appearance but do it with style using a nice compact.
Lipstick- Carrie isn't afraid to experiment with colour and style
D&G- Carrie did a fashion show for them but she likes most designer stuff
Photo frame and candle- It's they way the candle and the frame match its stylish and Carrie's apartment is quiet stylish in an understated way.
Roses- Carrie made wearing corsages famous and so it just symbolises her
Phone- Carrie is always talking to the girls or Mr. Big in the phone or getting messages on the answer phone. Usually at inappropriate times
Heeled shoe- I don't think it's Manola Blahnik but you get the idea. Carrie in particular but they all wear heels
Stiletto- Just another example of the kinds of shows they all wear
Lady shaper- I remember when Carrie went for a bikini wax and ended up with a full Brazilian. It was so funny. But she did bring to everyone's attention the importance of looking after your bikini line.
Chanel No5 Perfume- This is a classic glamorous perfume for and the kind of Hollywood vintage glamour that Carrie would go for
Corsett dress- I'm sure SJP wears corset dresses a lot for the parties I've seen picture from. I think Carrie wears them as well. They show your figure and make you feel sexy
Statue of Liberty- The show is set in New York and they've been over to Staten Island in the show. I think it's quite relevant that the statue is of a woman as well. New York as a female domain!
Red heeled shoes and fishnets- This is the kind of fashion statement Carrie could make and get away with it.
Coupling- I really like this programme and I think Carrie would. It's really funny and all about the complexities of relationships
Bag of makeup-This is to show how important appearance is in SATC. They all always seem to look for and strive for beauty even if they aren't really what you'd call naturally beautiful
Baileys- The show is sponsored by them and I think it's a drink they'd have in their cocktails. I certainly do!
In Style- This magazine is all about your style and creating a style so Carrie would definitely read this. I don't know whether she'd agree with it or not though.
OK!, Marie Claire- She'd read this for the gossip and to see what then celebrities are wearing.
Frank Sinatra- She likes that kind of Brat Pack style and the glamour that goes with it.
Magazines- fashion, sex manuals- I think she'd mainly read magazines for the clothes and advice on relationships
Internet- E-mail- She used e-mail to get back in contact with Aiden
Classic films- Breakfast at Tiffany's, An Affair to Remember- I think they all like those classic films and classic way of looking at love which all seemed so simple then
Text- I imagine Carrie to be always texting people and getting texts on her phone with all her journalistic experience
Cigarettes- Carrie is addicted and I like the way they haven't censored that.
A cartoon woman with laptop - Carrie writes her columns on her laptop normally in her room but she could take it anywhere
Fireman and puppy- fantasy- The fireman represents their sexual fantasies. Sam had a thing with a fireman but they are all open about their desires.

Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore, Lucy Lui- friendship- This represents the importance of friendship between the characters. They support each other and are there for one another
Patterned bag- Accessories generally seem important in SATC and Carrie's patterned coat was a huge hit. I love that style.
Cartoon woman with cocktails- This is the way the girls meet up for a gossip and a cocktail
Naked people having sex-The show is mainly about being open and honest about sex and shows what everyone gets up to
Sex- A main part of the show is sex but in this highlighted big way and making it ok to talk about
Bikini top- Boobs, body image and sex
Man covering his penis with his hands- Its all about being comfortable with sex and nakedness not hiding it away
Support- breakfast meeting/ gossip- I love the way the girls meet up for breakfast. It seems so American
Cosmopolitan- These girls made these cocktails famous
Champagne- I'm sure they drink only the best as well!

**(i)** Focus Group Two- Respondent One- Personal Collage
Frizz ease- My hair can be a bit unruly but this makes it calmer. It does mean I have to take time in the morning to sort it out.
Actimel- I like to think I'm helping my good bacteria with this
Red wine- Apparently this is meant to help your heart so I'm trying to make more of an effort to drink it now.
Quorn- I'm vegetarian (except sausages) as I don't agree with the way animals are slaughtered
Fruit- Because I'm vege I have to try and come up with other ways to get my vitamins so I always eat a lot of fruit and veg
Tennis racket- I loved watching Wimbledon and tried a bit of tennis and now I love it
Salmon- I do still eat fish and salmon is my favourite
Yogalates- I tried this combination of yoga and pilates and it really calms me down and de-stresses me
Dirty Den- I love Eastenders, especially the old ones and thought it was inspired to bring back Den
Spicy- I like all spicy food. It has to have flavour and be hot
Shameless- I though this series was fantastic and I love Paul Abbott's work
Tanya and Jason (Footballer's Wives) - Against all my sense I do like this programme. It's that mix of magazine gossip and trash
Daily Express, OK!, Hotstars- I like to read and watch the news but I also like a bit of gossip
Friends- Although I haven't always liked it I have watched this programme from its beginning. Some of it's not been great but I felt like I'd seen it through.
Earring and material- I like that kind of ethnic look with natural materials
I'm a Celebrity- I do get strangely addicted to reality shows, although it probably shows my life isn't that interesting!
Linda Green- Another Paul Abbott series I liked. It was so much more British than SATC or Ally and I understood Linda more
Salad- I eat lots of salad and have to be creative with it
Cut Carbs- I wanted to go on the Atkins but really couldn't face it. I tried to cut out carbs but really as a vege you need all the food groups you can!
Fox's Low Fat range- I do have a sweet tooth so I try to be healthy but chocolate is just too nice.
Car- I'd love a little car like this to potter about in but I haven't taken the test. It's on my things to do before I'm thirty list!
Tesco- I love supermarket shopping. You can get everything now in one place, even the clothes are cheap.

**(j)** Focus Group Two- Respondent Two- Personal Collage

Live like a Celebrity- It would be great if money was no object and you could just spend and enjoy whatever you like. I do try to treat myself as life is too short not to.

Top Shop- I really like this shop and a lot of celebs shop there now too so you can use their style in your own

H&M- This shop is fantastic. It's quite cheap but everything looks very designer.

White wine glass-I like a glass of wine in the evening to unwind

White wine bottle- Me and my friends usually have wine when we go out. We'll go to a wine bar and share a bottle whilst we chat

Shoe- I do like to get dressed up when we go out and that does mean heels. I mean these ones look like Carrie might wear them but they're from Dottie P's, perfect!

Kim and Aggie- I like a lot of TV and Kim and Aggie are just part of the reality type programmes I like

Cilla Black- I am a fan of Saturday night TV. We go out on a Friday and then Saturday is a time for being at home with the boyfriend watching TV, with a takeaway then snuggling up.

Love designer stuff, Hate paying loads- I do like designer clothes but can't see the point in paying for them so shops like TK Maxx are ideal

Magazines- TV Quick, Red- I like to know what's on TV and I like to read what will happen in the soaps so even if I don't watch them I still know.

Watch anything- I do watch a lot of TV, or rather I have it on a lot even if I'm not watching. It's comforting to be in the background.

Noah Wyle (E.R)- I've watched this programme since the days of George Clooney and still love it

Jack from Will and Grace- Jack particularly just has me in stitches. I love a good comedy

Ricky Gervais- *The Office* was fantastic. I love the way you laughed were you wanted to

Cif- I'm a cleanaholic. I almost have OCD as I like everything to be disinfected and smelling nice

Fruit- You're meant to have five a day aren't you? It was one of my New Years Resolutions that hasn't really happened yet!

Pencil holder- I work in an office

Seafood- I adore seafood. I went to France with an ex-boyfriend and he introduced me to Fruit D'Mer and I was hooked.

Beach- I am going on holiday in about three weeks for a week in the sun and can't wait. I want a proper all over tan

Sandal- I love wearing bright colours and this sandal is just right. Where can you buy this?

Couple kissing- I am an affectionate person and me and my boyfriend are quite touchy feely.

**(k)** Focus Group Two- Respondent Three- Personal Collage
Pringles- I love all kinds of crisps and I'm quite a savoury person but I like getting the snacks in and watching a DVD or a film.
Paint- I'm quite artistic and like to paint and do crafts. I have been on those adult night courses at a college doing life drawing, still life and pottery
Crossword- I like to keep my brain active and so do the crossword in the paper everyday. I can't always finish them but I have a go.
We've got the pics….."- I prefer magazines with info on stars and stories rather than fashion
Eastenders gossip- I do like the soaps and like to know what's going to happen
Coffee mug- I like a mid morning break with a coffee and a chat with the girls from work
Pint of Beer- I always considered myself quite ladylike, but me and the family tend to go out on a Sunday for a walk and a pub meal and I quite like having a pint!
Chips, Burger, Prawn curry, Cake - Unfortunately all the foods I adore are fattening (hence the walking on Sunday's) and it's harder when you have kids and they like that stuff too.
Black and white film- I like curling up on a Saturday afternoon and watching the old films they show
Chocolat- This is one of the few recent films I've seen that I liked. I also liked the book. Its beautifully cast.
Legally Blonde- This is one of my daughter's favourite films and I must have seen it about a million times with her!
Music- lots, old stuff- I don't listen to music very often but I have a wide taste and prefer older sixties music
TV- soaps, The Bill, My Family- I like family shows as well as comedies and dramas. I never watched *Sex and the City* until the girls at work said to watch it and I enjoy it as it's not what I would have usually picked
Magazines- Bella, Woman- I like magazines with a mixture of real life stories and gossip
Internet- Gossip, TV web sites- I've got quite good on the Net. You have to when you've got kids and I like reading the soap gossip and ding quizzes
Dusty Springfield- I think she was a fantastic singer and Preacher Man is a favourite song
Trainer- I like to dress comfortably is casual clothes although I do like to make the effort every now and again
Enrique- Again my daughter listens to him a lot and I actually quite like him
Night Nurse- I'm a restless sleeper and can't always sleep very well so night nurse does the trick.

**(l)** Focus Group Two- Respondent Four- Personal Collage

Pink breast cancer ribbon- My mother died on breast cancer and so it's a cause I support whole heartedly

Next Directory- I love Next as a shop and like the way I can also order from the catalogue. I'm always there in the queue when there's a sale

Karate- I took a series of self defense classes recently as I wanted to be more aware of my personal safety. I think every woman should do them

Lamp- My taste is quite contemporary and minimal. I like smooth clean lines and chrome is a nice finish to light wood.

Latte coffee- I love coffee and am always popping in to Costa or AMT for a mocha

Cocktail- When we go out I do like a cocktail. They also remind my of holidays and being on the beach

Malibu- This has to be my favourite drink. It just says sunshine

Cake- I have a sweet tooth and love steamed puddings. I would rather go out for pudding than a meal! (I have been known to do that)

Kiefer Sutherland (24)- I like really good drama with a twist and 24 was excellent. Nobody was who you thought.

Bambi (Scrubs)- I accidentally watching this one day and thought it was really funny

Nate- (Six Feet Under)- This is my kind of programme. It's clever, moving, funny and emotional.

The Matrix- This is one of my favourite films. I love that whole idea of messing with reality. I've seen it loads as my boyfriend loves it as well.

Will and Grace- Again I love the humour

Magazine- Empire, Total Film, Heat- I love reading about films and TV, not just the gossip but the technical aspects as well

TV- America's Finest, Drama- As I say I like things with good stories and the America's Finest selection on Five is great

Internet- E-mail, CDs, DVD's, Clothes, furniture- I do like going on the Internet. The possibilities are endless and you can do everything and anything on-line.

Fruit- I like fruit but can't stand salad. It's just so boring

Without a Trace- This is a relatively new drama and I have been glued every week.

Palm Tree- Holidays are soon here and I am planning to book a last minute bargain with some luck

Easel- I think of myself as an artistic and creative person

Pool- I like to pamper myself and heaven would be a health spa!