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An Insider’s Look Into Self Identity

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Captivating drama, extravagant vacations, society gatherings and brand name gowns draw millions of viewers to make time on their Monday nights to watch the teenage TV drama *Gossip Girl*. *Gossip Girl* was first created by American author Cecily von Ziegesar in the form of a thirteen book young adult series that Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage transformed into a successful TV show. Schwartz and Savage stayed true to the original premise and gave viewers a glimpse into the luxurious world of Upper Eastside teenagers. Serena van der Woodsen, Manhattan’s “it girl”, is presented as a charismatic socialite, struggling to leave her bad girl ways behind. *Gossip Girl* also predominately features Serena’s ambitious best friend Blair Waldorf whose competitive and unsympathetic nature propels her to claim queen bee status at Constance Billard High School. Throughout the series, these two best friends face the challenge of coming of age and discovering their personal identities, all while dressed to the nines and made up like movie stars.

Even though the premise of this show seems designed to appeal to teenage girls, American journalist Jason Gay comments that “the reaction to the show feels much larger than the audience” (Gay 42). Not only has *Gossip Girl* impacted how teenagers choose to interact with each other, it has created global fashion trends followed by all age groups. In fact, Entertainment Weekly writer Tim Stack noted that “they [viewers] don’t just watch *Gossip Girl*, they live it” (Stack 34). Because of the significant impact it has on the world, especially with its predominately female audience, I think that it is important to understand the message it sends in regards to how women should behave. After contrasting key characteristics of feminism and postfeminism, I argue that even though *Gossip Girl* is filled with female characters that strive to gain personal fulfillment through achieving status and economic power, the inability for these women to resist conforming to androcentric society makes it a postfeminist TV show.

The Inability to “Have It All”:

The concept of “having it all” came about during the second-wave of feminism when women were fighting to gain access to equal opportunities with men. Rather than being forced to choose between being committed to family life or a career outside of the home, second-wave feminism strived to allow it to be socially acceptable and possible for women to have both. Even after the second-wave of feminism concluded, this value continued to define future generations of feminists. Linda Hirshman, American lawyer, author and self-declared feminist, argues that society still has expectations for women to choose between family and work, forcing them to “[let] their careers slide to tend to the home fires” (Hirshman 20). Even though there is still the societal expectation that women should tend to the home, Hirshman believes in the feminist ideal that women should not be so easily swayed to give up their dreams in the workforce.

This concept contrasts with beliefs of postfeminism. Because postfeminist ideology argues that the goals of feminism have been accomplished, it also states that women have the choice to pursue whatever profession they want. The point in which feminism and postfeminism split is that postfeminism suggests that having it all is unattainable because it is too difficult to balance being a mother, a wife and a working woman. Award winning author and Professor of Communication at The University of Michigan Susan J. Douglas notes women who do try to have it all must work twice as hard to fulfill the role of a mother in order to prove they are not neglecting this role (Douglas 5). Because this process of attempting to balance motherhood and work is so difficult, many postfeminist thinkers come to the conclusion that it is more attainable to live in the domestic sphere.

Even though both Serena and Blair strive to be successful students, prominent figures in society, and happy girlfriends, both girls receive messages
from their mothers that indicate that they cannot have it all. Serena’s mother Lily van der Woodsen’s strong suit is being a presentable society wife and mother, but she is also head of a business in later seasons. Despite her efforts to balance all three, she becomes labeled as a bad mother when she lets Serena recklessly act out. Her business strategies are also scrutinized because she listens to others’ advice without thought. In the end, she sells the business and settles with being viewed as a bad mother and completely commits to being a prominent wife in society. Blair’s mother Eleanor Waldorf sets a similar example and fights to balance her roles of being a wife, mother, and successful fashion designer. Even though Eleanor puts a lot of effort into all three roles, Blair complains that Eleanor chooses her work over her family often. Eleanor feels offended by this criticism and puts more effort into her job because she feels she has already failed at being a family woman. These examples from their mothers send the message to Serena and Blair that they can’t have it all even if they try.

Throughout the series, Serena and Blair’s struggle to have it all mirrors their mother’s struggles. Serena struggles with balancing her role as the “it girl” with her personal desire to excel in college. Although she is ambitious and strives to go to an Ivy League school, she feels pressure to fit into the “it girl” role that has been assigned to her. Unfortunately, this role does not include a passion for education. Blair has the desire to be a powerful figure in society, but fights to balance this wish with her craving for a passionate romance. She struggles with committing to be a strong and independent leader because this role excludes any dependence on a man. At different points in the series each girl fully commits to one of their desires, but ends up switching to the other because they both feel dissatisfied with their lives. Throughout the series, even though both girls would find it preferable to balance their desires and pursue both, they ultimately choose to follow the postfeminist way of thinking and accept that they can’t have it all.

Competition Between Women:
Feminism and postfeminism view the way relationships naturally occur and form between women in a very contrasting manner. In feminism, women viewed each other as allies. By encouraging other women to work together, feminism transformed into a larger movement that reached more women. Although it did not initially start this way, feminism has developed into a process where women of more privilege fight for the rights of women who cannot do so. bell hooks, American author, social activist and feminist, also explains how the action of consciousness raising brought awareness to the oppression of women, and once this was made apparent, women could actively engage with fighting against the norms of the patriarchal society (hooks 8). This process of female interaction explicitly illustrates how women viewed each other as teammates.

Postfeminist thought conflicts with feminist thinking in that it corresponds to the belief that women are each other’s competition. Postfeminism highlights personal change as a more powerful way of finding happiness, emphasizing individualism. That, combined with the fact that American society and the society of Gossip Girl are an androcentric society, creates conditions where women are put into direct competition with one another. Sandra Liptiz Bem, a noted American psychologist, defines an androcentric society as one where the identity of women is based on their relationship with men (Bem 42). In addition to the United States being an androcentric society, it is also a society where the male gaze is prevalent. English art critic and writer John Berger defines the male gaze as the process of women viewing themselves and other women through how a man would look at them (Berger 46). By combining the male gaze, individualistic thinking and the definition of women in an androcentric society, it is only natural that postfeminist women would view each other as competition.

At first glance, it may appear that Gossip Girl is promoting the idea that women must get over their competitive nature to work together to find happiness
in a world that is fueled by male privilege. Alessandra Stanley, an American journalist who is known for her critiques of television shows, makes a case for this argument and claims that *Gossip Girl* “celebrates girlish women who join forces – ‘Us against the world’ – in the pursuit of success and happiness” (Stanley 1). Although there are moments in *Gossip Girl* where this seems true, the majority of the show features friendships that are infiltrated by social climbing and catty behavior. I argue that this makes the show’s portrayals of relationships between women postfeminist. Wendy J. Glenn, an American critical writer who focuses on critiquing young adult fiction, notes “all friendships in this novel are founded and maintained not out of love or desire for a confidant or support system but out of fear of being taken advantage of and desire to benefit from another’s success” (Glenn 39). This idea can be applied to Serena and Blair’s friendship due to the strong influence of the male gaze in their lives. Blair understands that through the male perspective, Serena is far more desirable than her because of her beauty. Blair’s fear of being taken advantage of becomes a reality when she finds out that her boyfriend Nate cheated on her with Serena. For the remainder of the series Blair tries to outshine Serena in all of her endeavors to silence her insecurities of being inferior to Serena. The competition between women in *Gossip Girl* and the strong influence of the male gaze are evident in the relationship between Serena and Blair.

**Sexuality:**

Traditionally, the role of women has been determined by men and by societal expectations. Up until the second-wave of feminism began in the 1960s, the acceptable roles of mother and wife were widely practiced by women out of fear of fighting against the societal norms. These traditional characteristics are clearly synthesized in historian Barbara Welter’s *Cult of True Womanhood* that was published in the mid 1800s. The value of piety, purity, submission and domesticity, were widely expected of women up into the 20th century (Welter 2). While women were expected to conform to these expectations, they were also supposed to accept their role as being an object of desire. At the same time women were expected to be pure, there was a double standard that women were inherently sexual creatures that tempted men with their sexuality (Bem 45). Because these expectations of women were so limiting, women of the second-wave of feminism tried to challenge these gender roles in order to prove that women could create their own destiny that was not defined by their relationship to men. Within feminist ideology, women embrace their sexuality with the intent of exuding personal confidence, not impressing men.

Postfeminist ideology also includes the idea of embracing sexuality, though for different reasons. When postfeminism rose into the public eye in the 1980s, there was also a surge of exposure to the female body (Gill 4). This movement was fueled by the rise of pop idols like Madonna and fashion trends like the miniskirt, that revealed more skin than ever. Postfeminists believed that this simple act of breaking out of the traditional image of women was a form of empowerment. But what differentiates postfeminism from feminism is that the motive behind this act of exposure was not relevant in their eyes. As long as a woman was fighting against the traditional conservative image of women, it was considered empowering, no matter if their true intention for doing so was for the benefit of men. But because the male gaze is a crucial part of postfeminist thought, although it may be subconscious, this influence can suggest that the motivation for acting in a sexually liberated way is attributed to trying to please the male gaze.

Young women embracing their sexuality in order to attract men is a prevalent theme of *Gossip Girl*. 15 year-old viewer of the show Amanda Krzepicki recalls “Every girl in the show – they either have a boyfriend, they’re having, like relations with some guy or they really, really want a boyfriend” (qtd. in Masters 1). “It girl” Serena has no shame in showing her body and is often found running
around New York City in tiny rompers or short and tight skirts and dresses. Even the way she styles her Constance Billiard School uniform has a sexy spin on it with over the knee boots, a casually untucked blouse and a purposely loose tie. This style of dress brings into question whether she is dressing this way for herself or for the attention of men. But because of the desperation to be in a relationship, it seems apparent that Serena’s motivations for dressing in a sexy manner is connected with her desire to be wanted by a man.

This motivation is also evident through the character of Blair as she struggles in the first season to capture bad boy Chuck Bass’ attention. Blair initially becomes involved with Chuck in the episode “Victor, Victrola” when her relationship with Nate begins to fall apart. Blair finds out that Nate is still trying to pursue Serena. Because of this, it sends her into a state of vulnerability and into the arms of Chuck. Previously, Chuck had teased Blair that once she got rid of her good girl act they would be a suitable match. Desperate to feel desired, Blair seeks out Chuck. Blair decides to perform a spur of the moment strip tease for him, which can be interpreted as an action to prove her sexual appeal. This event explicitly showcases how Blair’s desperation for male acceptance influences her decision to act in a sexual way. She was not strip teasing to embrace her body as a woman, but was really using her body as an object to seduce Chuck. Because of Blair’s actions of degrading herself for male attention, it can be argued that Gossip Girl is an antifeminist TV show because this instance promotes the idea that women are inferior to men and must use their sexuality to please men. But I argue against this by pointing out that Blair realizes her mistake in the next episode. She withdraws from Chuck and pursues her desire to be well thought of in society by planning an extravagant birthday party that affirms her social status. However, because the motivation for both Blair and Serena to embrace their sexuality is based upon male attention, it further affirms that they are willing to conform to androcentric society.

Consumerism and Fashion:

Although consumerism and the fashion world are not always considered as a force that has contributed to feminism in a positive way, these fields used marketing strategies to associate themselves with feminism to appeal to the growing number of women who valued feminist thought, but did not necessarily label themselves as feminist. Feminists were stereotyped as nonconformist and man haters by the general androcentric society, which led people to shy away from this label. Nina Powers, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Roehampton University in England, points out “no one wants to be associated with something that is seen as uncool and unattractive,” so the fashion world had to find a way to market female empowerment without it taking on the unappealing face of feminism (Powers 35). Fashion designer Cynthia Vincent responded to this dilemma by using catch phrases like “Smart is Beautiful” to suggest knowledge is attractive even though a thin and traditionally good-looking model is in the ad (Cynthia). The combination of empowering words with images of beautiful women created a widely marketable version of feminism that connected with postfeminism. Elizabeth Bullen, Senior Lecturer of Communications at Deakin University in Australia, explains that “advertising is successful because it shows people who they want to be and what they should buy to be that person” (Bullen 500). This smart fusion of inspiring words and visual beauty approved by the male gaze made an image that many women would aspire to be. But even though they used feminist language, they continued to promote the narrow idealized image of beauty through the lens of the male gaze. Consumerism and fashion are postfeminist aspects of society because their marketing conforms to the desirability of women to men.

Fashion is a strong influence and theme in Gossip Girl. The New York Times even goes on to claim that it “probably is the first [TV show] to have been conceived, in part, as a fashion marketing vehicle” (qtd. in Stein 118). The message that fashion in Gossip Girl sends is important to understand, because
as Tim Stack notes, “trend-happy kids are spending their disposable incomes to get that GG look” (Stack 36). Fashion contributes to an underlining and identifying aspect of all of the character’s identities. Serena’s style is casual, fun, effortless and sexy, but always brand name. Her style exudes the carefree nature that many people wish they could obtain. Because of this, Serena’s style is often featured in magazine spreads, making it more attainable, for a certain price, for viewers. Blair’s style depicts a woman who is strong and driven. Blair exudes poise through her classic pieces with a modern spin, almost always paired with her signature accessory, the headband. Blair explains to Dan Humphrey, a Brooklyn outsider, that fashion “shows the world who we are and who we’d like to be” in a season four episode titled “Damien Darko”. Because Gossip Girl promotes the idea of fashion as a component of identity, it encourages viewers to use their money to create their own looks that are representations of their personalities. The prevalence of fashion in Gossip Girl truly reflects its consumerist nature and further affirms that it is a postfeminist TV show.

Conclusion:

Because Gossip Girl has had a significant impact on current culture, it has become increasingly important to understand the message it sends to its female viewers about the sensitive subject of female self-worth. Although it features girls who show desires and flashes of self-confidence and drive, their inability to consistently live this way makes Gossip Girl a postfeminist TV show. Also, by presenting fashion and sexuality as key actions of self-expression, it skews viewer’s impression of the importance of linking these topics to forming a personal identity. Although the postfeminist nature of Gossip Girl promotes women conforming to society, there are positive messages that can be taken away from watching this show as well. Despite the difficulty for women to excel in an androcentric society, both Serena and Blair strive to succeed even though they are not the privileged gender. Although Blair likes being with Chuck, she demands a change in their relationship in order to allow her more independence to follow her dreams. As Blair says in the season 4 episode “The Witches of Bushwick,” “as long as I’m with you [to Chuck], I’m Hillary in the White House. And I want to be Hillary, Secretary of State. Except with better hair.” Despite the postfeministic messages it sends in regards to the image of women, Gossip Girl effectively communicates that there is no shame in women being ambitious. Because of themes like this in the show, viewers should feel content that watching this irresistibly addictive TV show does promote some positive messages. But, although these empowering messages are hidden within each episode, it is important to still keep in mind that the dominant messages conform to postfeminist thought.

Works Cited


**Works Cited (Continued)**


Writing a deep analysis using theory drawn from secondary sources can be one of the most difficult types of writing First-Years encounter at Denison. Juggling maintaining a strong thesis, providing enough descriptive detail to make the subject manageable, and smoothly incorporating the words and ideas of others can make even experienced writers tremble. And yet Carolyn Donaldson tackles her paper head-on, choosing to use headings to break down a complicated topic into manageable sections. Using headings can be tricky, but Carolyn did a great job with making them work for her paper. With any paper of this type, balancing analysis and description is always a challenge; this is perhaps the one area I think Carolyn could continue to work on. The current balance is quite good, especially since Carolyn must deal with the fact that most in her audience are not actually familiar with the show, but it would be an area to push herself further. One approach is to try to focus on specific episodes or details, instead of relying on generalized descriptions of a chosen piece in order to address broad issues. Pick a particular scene or interaction that best exemplifies the general point and provide enough description for the reader to fully understand the basis for a claim. By keeping focused, one can avoid over-summarizing, while still providing necessary support.

-Amy Yoder, Writing Center Consultant