Consumption and gender identity in popular media: discourses of domesticity, authenticity, and sexuality

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To cite this article: Linda Tuncay Zayer, Katherine Sredl, Marie-Agnès Parmentier & Catherine Coleman (2012): Consumption and gender identity in popular media: discourses of domesticity, authenticity, and sexuality, Consumption Markets & Culture, 15:4, 333-357

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2012.659437

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Consumption and gender identity in popular media: discourses of domesticity, authenticity, and sexuality

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The goal of this research is to compare contemporary representations of masculinity and femininity in two HBO television series, \textit{Entourage} and \textit{Sex and the City}, and illustrate how these representations intersect with consumption. In the analysis, the authors discuss how gender fluidity gives the characters the freedom to be multifaceted in their performances — performances with regard to three emergent themes: domesticity, sexuality, and authenticity. Characters in both programs negotiate the tensions between more traditional gender roles and the assumption of contemporary roles through consumption. The characters find ways to simultaneously re-establish and reinforce their gendered identities as they create new roles, often with the aid of consumption. On the other hand, it is the consumption itself that is sometimes complicit in creating new tensions.

Keywords: identity; consumption; gender; masculinity; femininity; media; television; \textit{Sex and the City}; \textit{Entourage}

Introduction

Gender norms are often expressed and reiterated in the media (Stole 2003; Schroeder and Zwick 2004), as well as in other elements of popular culture. In fact, researchers have examined contemporary media outlets to identify emergent themes related to gender (Hirschman 1988; Gill 2007). The goal of this research is to compare representations of masculinity and femininity in two HBO television series, \textit{Entourage} and \textit{Sex and the City} (hereafter \textit{SATC}), and illustrate how these representations intersect with contemporary discourses of gender and consumption.

Similar to prior scholarship in consumer behavior and cultural studies, we work from the perspective that popular culture, media, and television programming, in particular, provide a framework for understanding cultural discourses (Cramer 2007; Kjeldgaard and Storgaard 2010). Our research looks at changing gender norms at the turn of the twenty-first century as reflected in \textit{Entourage} and \textit{SATC}. For the unfamiliar reader, \textit{Entourage} showcases the life of a young actor, Vince, and his entourage which includes his childhood friends, his half-brother, and his agent, as they navigate the highs and lows of a Hollywood lifestyle. \textit{SATC} chronicles the life of sex columnist, Carrie, and her close-knit circle of friends as they negotiate love and work in
New York City (see the appendix for more information on each of the characters, the setting, and the main plot lines).

We are interested in the ways that the media we have selected represent everyday experiences of men and women in a post-feminist era. SATC approaches femininity and relationships differently from other cultural products on the screen (Gill 2007). For example, much of popular culture targeted at women reiterates themes akin to the movie Pretty Woman (1990), which repeats the mythology of Prince Charming (Kelley 1994). SATC, however, is based first on female friendship and second on heterosexual relationships and professional success in a post-romance New York City. Similarly, Entourage focuses primarily on friendship among men and heterosexual relationships and professional success secondarily. These shows present an opportunity to extend findings on the relationship between consumption, market forces, and gendered culture.

In examining these two programs, we note that the constructions of gender we observe are not static, nor are they clearly delineated. Instead, they provide a rich context in which to observe the fluidity of gender as it is performed (Butler 1990). Performance is a “reiterative and citational practice” (Butler 1993, 2). The subject itself is constituted through performance and its reiteration both “produces and destabilizes” (Butler 1993, 10; Bode 2010). The concept of gender performance resonates with and further refines the tension between the performed behavior and the “original” model of identity. Borgerson (2005, 68) further illuminates this notion through Butler’s work:

Performative iterations are not simply the acting out of ways of being in the world: rather each iteration, “a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (Butler 1993, 95), plays the role of producing identities and foreclosing others, maintaining the illusion of natural categories of behavior, including gender.

Our project explores the tensions between models of gender and the gendered performances of the characters. Moreover, we hope to understand the ways in which these contemporary performances of gender are linked to consumption. Given this context, our research question is: What themes of gender emerge in Entourage and SATC, and how do they relate to consumption? We find that these television programs express a contemporary form of gender fluidity as the characters cross traditional gender role boundaries. Moreover, we point out the tensions that develop as the characters face the outcomes of navigating cultural polarities of gender. In our analysis, we demonstrate how the tensions play out through emergent themes of domesticity, sexuality, and authenticity, all related to consumption.

This research is important for several reasons. First, because these performances act as sources of information for the men and women who watch these programs, it is clear that this research holds implications for societal discourse at large, and consumers’ identities in particular (Snow 1983). Representations in the media can serve as constraining or barrier-breaking forces in consumer’s lives. Indeed, as Schroeder and Zwick (2004, 27) remind us, dualisms, “although contested and culturally influenced, have not disappeared. Despite gender bending, queering, and androgyny, gender remains a fundamental social, psychological, and cultural category.” Thus, Entourage and SATC may provide consumption and identity guides for consumers.

Next, we examine what the shows tell us about femininity and masculinity in relation to each other. Despite calls for more research on men as gendered beings (Kimmel and Messner 2001), until recently, male consumption and representations
of men and masculinity in the media have been given less attention than women and femininity (notable exceptions include Jones, Stanaland, and Gelb 1998; Ottes and McGrath 2001; Patterson and Elliott 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004; Schroeder and Zwick 2004; Elliott and Elliott 2005; Aidan and Ross 2006; O’Barr 2006; Ostberg 2010; Zayer 2010; Zayer and Neier 2011). The limited amount of inquiries in past research on masculinity in the media may be due to the fact that many initial advances in gender research and media were conducted by feminist scholars and tended to focus on women’s experiences. In addition, research on masculinity and popular culture tends to focus on hegemony and marginalized masculinities (e.g. Williams 2003; Ta 2006; Cheung 2007). Our concern, however, is with finding the ways that Entourage and SATC may represent new forms of masculinity and femininity and how these notions are linked with consumption and the market. The comparative approach of our research also facilitates the emergence of interesting parallels (and differences) in our findings.

It is important to note that both SATC and Entourage aired on HBO. Arthurs (2003) argues that, unlike mass-market network television, HBO does not need to normalize the content of their programming for the masses; instead, HBO caters to a segment of viewers that is specific in its tastes and its demographics. For example, SATC was developed to appeal to younger, middle and upper-middle-class Caucasian women, similar to the characters in the program. In addition, the show breaks convention by showing flaws in the characters or offering frustrating episode endings. The shows present a level of performativity unique to HBO that allows for the characters to both challenge and live within realistic character types.

To explore our research question, we provide a review of the literature on gender and consumption as it relates to the media. We focus particularly in the areas of marketing, consumer behavior, and gender and cultural studies because these fields have most often examined these topics. Next, we discuss our methodology and findings and offer potential contributions.

Gender, consumption, and media

Gender, in large part, is a social construction that is imbued with symbolic acts. Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander (2006, 173) point to researcher Gherardi’s (1995) description of “doing gender” to illustrate these performances. The authors state that men’s and women’s enactments of gender “can reify or destabilize the social beliefs that legitimize gender differences and inequalities. In essence, doing gender involves the manipulation of symbols to manage the dual presence of femininity and masculinity in any given situation.” Moreover, masculinity and femininity are evolving constructs and consist of multiple masculinities and femininities that are culturally, historically, and geographically constructed (Beynon 2002).

There are rich research traditions within marketing, consumer behavior, and cultural studies that examine the complexities of gender (see, e.g. Friedan 1963; Mishkind et al. 1986; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998; Vigorito and Curry 1998; Patterson and Elliott 2002; Rohlinger 2002; Attwood 2005; Caldwell, Kлеппе, and Henry 2007; Gill 2007; Ourahmoune, Nyeck, and Roux 2008). For instance, past research has documented how gender is often intertwined with consumption (Hirschman 1988; Franco 2008). Scholars in consumer behavior have explored the role of consumption in constructions of gender while examining contemporary femininity in relation to masculinity (Costa 2005; Caldwell, Kлеппе, and Henry 2007). Some researchers have also investigated consumption contexts and subcultures such as subversive gender expressions in the
Goth lifestyle (Goulding and Saren 2009), mountain men masculinity (Belk and Costa 1998), retail shopping encounters and gendered ethnic identity (Friend and Thompson 2003), the juggling lifestyles of mothers (Thompson 1996), and male and female Harley bikers (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006). Other consumer researchers have explored masculinity and consumption with regard to intersections with class (Holt and Thompson 2004), work (Nixon and Crewe 2004), and sexuality (Kates 2002).

Much recent research has also begun to reveal the representations of gender, particularly those salient in film and television (Williams 2003; Ta 2006; Tropp 2006; Cheung 2007; Cramer 2007; Stevens and Maclaran 2012). Cramer’s (2007) analysis of the constructions of sexual morality as expressed in *SATC* and *Queer As Folk*, Tropp’s (2006) exploration of motherhood in *SATC*, and Stevens and Maclaran’s (2012) examination of the carnal feminine in the two *SATC* movies all explore sexuality, gender, and related discourses as they relate to media. Similarly, research in this area on masculinity often pursues deep analyses of marginalized masculinities in comparison to hegemonic masculinity. For example, Williams (2003, 215) examines Vietnam War films and finds representations of the virile, white American masculinity juxtaposed to representations of the Vietnamese as the effete “Oriental” enemy.

Gill (2007) points to the contradictions and conflicting discourses of gender as constructed in today’s media. Of *SATC*, in particular, she argues that an evocative aspect of the program is the way in which “the bold, sophisticated and knowing voices of the protagonists mask their very ordinary, traditionally feminine, desires” (2007, 242). Further, in those episodic spaces where traditional femininity is fragmented and challenged through sexual exploration, it is replaced by commodified, aesthetic boundaries that foreground consumption as a means of expressing gender. Moreover, scholars argue that media is important because consumers glean prescriptive information about consumption behavior from it (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997). Franco (2008) explores the politics of gender in her study of *Extreme Makeover*, a reality television series centered on transformations due to the consumption of plastic surgery. She holds that self-help reality television programs influence the “making of the feminine subject,” which is “a project that is intimately linked with consumption” (2008, 471). Thus, through plastic surgery, the “characters” in the program come one step closer to their desired gendered identities.

In summary, gender “is a basic cognitive construct, cultural category and political concept that intersects with the entire realm of consumer behavior” (Schroeder 2003, 1). Media serves as an important area in which to observe social constructions of gender that, through repetition, legitimize certain performances of gender (Hirschman and Stern 1994). Within the context of two popular programs, we illuminate the relationship between consumption and gender performance.

**Methodology**

We selected the television series *Entourage* and *SATC* because of their tremendous popularity among the public and the press. For instance, with regard to viewership, *Entourage* maintained an average Nielsen rating of 1.2 (2.7 million viewers in its third season premiere) while *SATC* had an average rating of 1.6 (7.9 million viewers) (Beggs 2006). These programs are culturally acclaimed (Yogaretnam 2010) and have been praised for their respective ability to capture the essence of today’s
men and women. Moreover, they are complementary in that *Entourage* has been labeled the “*SATC* for men” (Strauss 2006). We also note that the programs are both rich in content about gender and marketplace issues, making them ideal sites to observe the interplay of gender and consumption.

We follow the hermeneutic analysis method of prior research in the area of television and consumer research (Hirschman 1988; Sherry 1995; Humphrey 2009). As such, we view the series’ narratives as expressing a broader system of cultural values, meanings, and beliefs. Specifically, our analysis focuses on the first three seasons of each series (available on DVDs at the time of analysis). Consistent with our research approach, we also consulted additional sources of data about the series: books such as that of Sohn (2002), the HBO website, among others, and magazine articles (e.g. Hymowitz 2007). Our procedure was as follows: we divided into two subgroups with one group examining *SATC* and the other *Entourage*. Every element of the programs, including overarching storylines, character narratives, episodic plots, interaction between primary and secondary characters, sets and props, was examined by each researcher separately. While all of the researchers were familiar with both of the series, each only formally coded her respective program. Descriptive notes were taken on all episodes, producing more than 131 pages of notes in total. Following a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998), the notes for each program were coded for themes, categories, constructs, and relationships between constructs. The team, composed of four female professors extensively trained in qualitative research methods, engaged in comparison between the two series and between the individual elements mentioned above. Emergent themes and constructs were refined through an iterative process of discussions, while referring back to the overall data set and the literature.

Different steps were followed to ensure the quality of the analysis. First, an intercoder reliability process was used at the beginning of the project. Each member of the two teams coded three to four episodes independently and then compared results to identify items that were coded differently. Disagreements were resolved through discussions between team members. Next, all four researchers compared and contrasted their respective coding scheme to develop consensus codes to be later used for the coding of the entire data set. Second, versions of the analysis were shared with both male and female colleagues knowledgeable about gender and consumer research and familiar – from a lesser to a greater extent – with the two programs. Their feedback was incorporated into revisions of the paper. As is true in any research, these steps can by no means ensure that the analyses produced are not open to alternative interpretations; they can only help to reduce the chances that biases go unchallenged, that important themes and concepts are not overlooked, and that oversimplified accounts are not rendered.

**Findings**

Our analysis is driven by the following research question: What themes of gender emerge in *Entourage* and *SATC*, and how do they relate to consumption? In this analysis, the link between gender and consumption is evident. Characters in both programs negotiate the tensions between more traditional gender roles and the assumption of contemporary roles through consumption. Scholars argue that the women of *SATC* neither exemplify the pursuit of an ideal femininity (Kim 2001), nor do they experience certain “real-life” tensions from their roles, such as balancing work and home, with the
exception of Miranda (Arthurs 2003). However, our research shows that gendered tensions do exist in the programs. Furthermore, consumption plays a dual role as a coping mechanism for these tensions and in generating new tensions.

Past research has suggested the media (specifically advertising) “helps provide consumer solutions to gender tensions and struggles over representing idealized masculine consumers” (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 23). Yet we find in the case of *Entourage* and *SATC* that the move from traditional to contemporary gender norms is presented as a point of tension for men and women. These tensions are at times eased by and at other times caused by consumption. The characters regularly move beyond and between the essentialist distinctions of feminine (female) versus masculine (male), blurring the line between traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity when they consume homes, engage in consumption related to sex, and grapple with materialism in their search for authenticity. However, this gender fluidity is not without its consequences as the characters face tensions as they move across these lines. We explore these tensions in the three emergent themes of domesticity, sexuality, and authenticity.

**Domesticity and the home**

The home has been a central site of some of the most memorable and perhaps socially important television situation comedies in the USA, including *Leave it to Beaver, The Cosby Show, Seinfeld,* and *Friends.* Previous inquiries in consumer research have explored how notions of home are socially, culturally, and historically constructed (McCracken 1989; Hill and Stamey 1990; Hill 1991). The home is full of contradictory meanings that often arise from gendered notions of the domestic sphere. For example, researchers have demonstrated how norms about gender, power, and age are reflected in who prepares meals in households (Mallett 2004). Even within the home, production and consumption activities historically have been clearly demarcated, with men purchasing the home and women purchasing for the home and conducting the work to keep it running efficiently. Thus, critical work has focused on the home as a site of oppression and patriarchic domination (Friedan 1963). Given the view of the home as the feminine sphere, multidisciplinary research on the home and gender has tended to make women’s experience of the home seem more important, politically and culturally, than men’s (Mallett 2004).

However, more recent work has suggested that the binary gendered views of the home neglect to acknowledge the opportunity for the home to act as a space in which members of the household can subvert, conform to, or negotiate ideas about gender (Caldwell and Kleppe 2006). Traditionally, single women without children have not been included in the market as homebuyers (Hymowitz 2007). Yet, data on homebuyers compiled by the National Association of Realtors reports that in 2010 single females represented 23% of the buyers, up from 15% in 2001; single males represented 15% of the buyers, up from 7% in 2001 (National Association of Realtors 2009, 2010).

**The Entourage family**

In *Entourage,* the blurring of gendered spaces occurs in the nexus of their living arrangement and in the relationships amongst the characters sharing the home. The main characters are four men in their 20s and 30s living together as roommates, but functioning more as a family despite the fact that only two characters are biologically
related. The collective nature of the men’s household structure in *Entourage* is particularly interesting given that prior research demonstrates traditional masculine discourses are associated with themes such as self-reliance and individualism (Brannon 1976). Men are also linked to the pursuit of agentic rather than communal goals (Meyers-Levy 1988). In depictions on television, men are “found more in the world of things as opposed to family and relationships” (Fejes 1992, 12).

While on the surface, four grown men living together may not seem to reflect traditional masculinity, this lifestyle is not necessarily contrary to all masculine codes. In the genre of westerns, such as *Bonanza*, we often see groups of men on the range together, setting up camps, but this domesticity is transient and outside of the everyday. A recent phenomenon among men is called “buddydom,” or enacting masculinity through building relationships with other men (Beynon 2002). Contemporary films of the “bromance” genre, or advertising campaigns such as Budweiser’s “Wazup” campaign replicate the male friendship trend (Holt 2004). Although the characters in *Entourage* may seem to break traditional codes of masculinity, they alternatively engage in a type of male bonding that, for the characters, is normalized and justified through family roles and the enactment of family rituals.

Not only do the characters refer to each other as family, but they are also recognized and celebrated as such by others. As a convention of *Entourage*, real celebrities guest star as themselves in situations reflective of real events and places, amplifying the sense that the relations among the characters imitate real-life relationships. For example, when the guys move into a new home, neighbor Bob Saget drops by to welcome them (S2, “Neighbors”). And when Vince rekindles an old flame with pop singer and actress Mandy Moore (S2, “Blue Balls Lagoon”), this relationship brings her briefly into the family fold. Vince and his friends set up an intimate birthday celebration at The Geisha House in her honor, complete with food, drinks, and gifts. Mandy says, “I feel so bad. You guys did not have to get me gifts,” to which Turtle responds, “Oh, we wanted to. And maybe you’ll want to get me gifts when our birthdays roll around, say, August 6.” Vince’s gift to Mandy is, of course, the culmination—the last given, the biggest and the most expensive (a painting by Moore’s favorite artist). Mandy is moved by the gesture of this celebration: “You guys, I just really want to thank you so much for being a part of tonight. I really forgot what a family you guys are. I’m just very happy.” In response, Johnny raises a sake carafe to family, and they proceed to toast to Mandy and Vince as the scene pans out and the episode concludes. Moreover, just as the “entourage” celebrates as a family, they also rally in crises as a family would. When faced with a potential problem with Vince’s career (on which they are all dependent), Johnny gathers everyone for a family get-together at home, complete with a roast (S2, “Good Morning Saigon”).

**Peter Pan and the lost boys**

The portrayal of men living together is reflective of the broader shifts in the USA, as household structures have moved away from primarily married couples to other “non-traditional” arrangements. According to an analysis of census data, men are twice as likely as women to have at least one roommate of the same sex, even after excluding homosexual couples. This trend of communal consumption of housing is particularly salient in the 24–35 age group (Lavigne 2008). Thus, the relationships and the living situation depicted in *Entourage* do seem to mirror social trends of consumption among some men.
Although the living arrangements reflect the dynamics of American households, the characters on the show sometimes feel a sense of anxiety as they express new forms of masculinity through living together as a family. This is akin to the female Harley riders’ feelings of angst as they cross long-held traditional gender boundaries (Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006). Multiple episodes in Season 2 touch on these anxieties. In “Exodus” the characters in *Entourage* question if they are too old to live together. Poignantly, in “My Maserati Does 185” Eric’s girlfriend describes Eric and his friends as, “Peter Pan and the Lost Boys,” leaving him to ponder the appropriateness of his lifestyle. Finally, in “Chinatown” Johnny begins to question his manhood because he is living off Vince’s income. To ease this tension, he measures the square feet of his room and calculates exactly how much rent he must pay Vince (although this never materializes). Thus, the men’s uncertainty regarding their masculine performances suggests that traditional notions of gender persist, yet are in flux.

It is evident that in the program, competing discourses are prevalent and the characters simultaneously bend strict gender codes (living off the income of another man) as they reiterate others (presenting the appearance of earning one’s keep). Even in decidedly intimate conversations about the bedroom, the characters sometimes portray a hypermasculine front. In one illustrative example, while Johnny cooks everyone breakfast, a nurturing ritual that he performs frequently and that helps solidify his role in the entourage, the men discuss the topic of cuddling (S3, “Strange Days”). Johnny clearly demarcates to Eric, “men spoon, women snuggle.” While the characters delve into the seemingly stereotypically feminine, private sphere through cohabitation, domestic roles and intimate conversations around the kitchen table, this dependency on each other is not without its costs. That is, the men feel distinct tensions in consuming the home together. To cope with the tension of breaking traditional masculine codes that comes from living together, the characters redefine their relationships. They view themselves and each other as trusted family members (i.e. not as roommates or venturing into “gay” territory) and quickly dismiss the notion that it may be unusual for them to live together. The men use the family as a metaphor to label the intimacy of their relationships. They do so to alleviate the tension that comes from breaking traditional norms of masculinity and adopting new contemporary forms of masculine friendship and family.

“It’s just you?”

Although the male characters of *Entourage* share a home together in Los Angeles, the female characters of SATC live on their own in New York City. While living alone is a significant trend of modern cities (Lury 1996), single women have been included only recently in the market as homebuyers (Hymowitz 2007). To a large degree, discourses on home ownership are still linked to the marriage of a man and woman, and to adulthood. In SATC, home ownership sets the women free to navigate the expectations that come with traditional gender roles in the home and their own desire to determine new gender roles as single women, without children, consuming living spaces. Two characters, Miranda and Samantha, buy real estate in the first three seasons of the program. For both of them, gender fluidity means encompassing the power roles of women and men: as professionals, lovers, and homeowners. Yet Miranda and Samantha experience tensions as they face the vestiges of traditional gender structures when purchasing and maintaining their homes.
Miranda, a corporate lawyer, has a career in an aggressive profession. In Season 2 ("Four Women and Funeral"), she decides to buy a home by herself and for herself. She soon discovers the exasperation of purchasing real estate as a single woman with no children. She claims to her friends: “I’m telling you, if I was a single man, none of this would be happening… I’ve got the money, I’ve got a great job, and I still get from loan officers ‘It’s just you?’” Carrie feels this reaction must be the result of the male loan officers feeling threatened by a woman who does not need a man to pay for the house. Charlotte, the more traditional character disagrees and says, “Everyone needs a man. That’s why I rent. If you own and he still rents, then the power structure is all off. It’s emasculating. Men don’t want a woman who is too self-sufficient.”

Though Miranda’s thoughts on real estate and relationships are not directly discussed, in one scene she is shown in a condominium with a realtor. Her eyes illuminated, she seems to be imagining a sense of accomplishment that would come from home ownership. She tells the realtor: “I’ll take it.” Perhaps naively, the expectations and fantasy that come with her consumption help her envision how she is fulfilling a certain identity — an independent single woman who has succeeded. The reality of buying her home, however, is infantilizing and filled with sexism – male mortgage bankers inquiring about the source of her down payment, assuming it must be from her father. The cultural assumption is that a woman without children or a husband would not have the money to buy her own house, would not have the savings, would not think of investing, and would not want to buy her own home alone. And while Miranda wants to be unapologetic about her independent ways, the contradictions between her success in the traditionally masculine, public world of work as an attorney and her more ambiguous success in her private life leaves her confronted with perceptions of being short on femininity, long on masculinity. For instance, she hires a maid, yet struggles with how her lack of domestic abilities must appear. Ultimately, she is unsure about her performance of womanhood.

Unanticipated realities

Samantha similarly experiences the contradictions of gender roles and real estate consumption. SATC displays notable violations of traditional gender roles and has been discussed in the press for the sense of sexual freedom demonstrated by the female main characters. Samantha’s gendered performances are some of the most poignant examples of this. In her work and in her sexual expression, she is used to being in charge; she owns a public relations firm and her sexual charm seems intrinsic to her professional and sexual success (Arthurs 2003). Her attitude toward sex and relationships is, in her own words, “like a man.” In Season 3 (“Are we Sluts?”), her sexual behavior becomes the source of tensions between her and her neighbors. In response, she decides to move from her rent controlled Upper East Side apartment. Her rent control has become life control and she decides to move to more libertine pastures.

Shortly after moving (S3, “All or Nothing”), she hosts a housewarming party with her friends. Reveling in her accomplishments of independence, she opens the large window to her new home and proclaims, “You hear that New York, we have it all!” In this sense, she is talking about independence, professional accomplishment, power, money, sex without ties: everything she ever desired, including her own home. However, the next morning, Samantha wakes up with the flu and encounters the unanticipated realities of home ownership. Her shades are broken. She has neither the skills to fix this problem nor a handyman to help her. A scan through her
little black book demonstrates the consequences of sex without ties, as no one is available to help her. She experiences a moment of vulnerability and isolation, contradicting her feelings of empowerment of the previous night.

The internal struggle Samantha feels by being torn (at times) between two roles that are seemingly at odds with one another is also captured by Cramer (2007) in her study of sexual morality in *SATC*. Cramer finds the characters experience ongoing ambivalence about marriage versus the freedom and thrill of singlehood. Thus, in the case of *SATC*, it is economic independence (versus dependence in *Entourage*) that causes anxiety and frustration in the women’s lives.

*Discussion of domesticity*

Blurring of gendered spaces, away from distinct private feminine spheres and public masculine spheres, has been highlighted by prior work (McDowell 1999; Kim 2001). Other scholars have also illustrated the prevalence of gender bending in television. Marinucci (2005) describes, in her analysis of the television program *The Brady Bunch*, how the character of Marcia delves into masculine roles. Yet, the bending of strict gender rules is often momentary, and ultimately, gender essentialism is reinforced throughout the series. Unlike Marinucci’s findings, we find that in *Entourage* and *SATC*, the gender bending is not a transgression, it is not momentary, and it is part of adult rather than adolescent life. In addition, it is not presented in a context in which “normal” life is suspended (Goulding and Saren 2009), but in the everyday lives of the characters. Our findings serve to extend Marinucci’s study. We suggest that the difference between our findings and prior research reflect the evolving construct of gender in the USA from *The Brady Bunch*, set in the 1970s, to *Entourage* and *SATC*, filmed in the late 1990s and 2000s.

The men in *Entourage* clearly articulate doubts about their communal living arrangement; however, they quickly dismiss their concerns as they redefine their roles to be more like family members. This is because ultimately the consumption of a common home – that is appropriate for a family – allows them to remain living in a luxurious mansion that is necessary for the maintenance of their high-class lifestyle. That is, like in many instances in *Entourage*, it is consumption that aids in easing any tensions that may have been caused by the prevalence of competing discourses. Moreover, by taking on distinct duties around the household, the men feel they are contributing to the maintenance of the home, and earning their keep. Ultimately, any tensions related to economic dependence the characters may experience as a result of the financial support or the gifts they receive from Vince is overlooked as the money and the goods themselves allow the men to perform their desired gender identities.

The notion of women juggling different aspects of their lives has been discussed by prior research (Thompson 1996), often in the context of motherhood. Through our research on *SATC*, it is evident that women have struggles, even when they are single and not mothers. The characters must negotiate the gains of feminism with more traditional feminine ideals, much as the characters in *Entourage* balance traditional roles with alternate masculine ideals. In *Entourage*, as the men co-consume the home, they must reframe their relationships into family in order to feel comfortable with their gendered selves. For the women of *SATC*, buying houses without men is the challenge to the norm. It is part accomplishment and part frustration, requiring them to debate their performance of femininity.
In summary, this research highlights new forms of consumption related to domesticity and the home and how it is represented in the media as simultaneously liberating and full of conflicts with gender norms in everyday life. Tensions transcend to other areas in the characters’ lives as well, and emerge in the themes of sexuality and authenticity, which we address next.

**Sexuality**

Another theme that emerges in the data is how gender and consumption discourses are intertwined with the boundaries of sexuality. Fracher and Kimmel (1995, 367) discuss the intimate connections between sexuality and gender, noting, “Gender informs sexuality; sexuality confirms gender.” Moreover, some researchers contend that, with some exceptions (Kates 2002), research on sexuality and consumption is a neglected area (Walther 2010). However, past scholars have noted the intersection of sexuality, identity, and consumption. Schroeder and Zwick (2004, 34) states that “…consumer choices about clothing, hairstyle, piercings and sexual products all contribute to notions of sexuality, lifestyle, and identity.” In both series, themes of sexuality are closely intertwined with gender and consumption discourses although the cultural messages imbued in the consumption choices are neither essentialist nor straightforward.

**Playboys**

The four men in *Entourage* perform the Playboy lifestyle, a life filled with self-indulgence and sexual conquests, made popular by Hugh Hefner in the 1950s (Osgerby 2001). Although there is one homosexual character on the program – Lloyd, the assistant of Vince’s agent, Ari – he is not part of the “entourage,” and is often marginalized by Ari for his sexual preference (Yogaretnam 2010). And while Vince can use his good looks and celebrity status to accomplish his heterosexual pursuits with ease, Turtle and Johnny usually rely on Vince to live the life of a Playboy. Vince happily aids in their performance. He often engages in gift-giving to his friends, with goods such as clothes and shoes (e.g. limited edition “Fukijama” Nike shoes for Turtle, S3), cars (e.g. Aston Martins, S3), and even plastic surgery (S2). Much as the male informants in a study of heterosexual shopping behavior (Tuncay and Otnes 2008), the men use goods (usually gifts from Vince) as tools to achieve their sexual goals. For example, when the characters shop together to buy designer suits in preparation for a social outing, it is understood that they are doing so in order to create a polished appearance that will aid them in meeting women at a party.

Similarly, in Season 2 (“Aqua Mansion”), in the ultimate homage to the original Playboy himself, the characters attend a “slumber party” at Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Mansion. Preparation for the party is an important part of the storyline – the characters shop together for expensive pajamas; Johnny worries about what he ate before the party; and Turtle tries to return a gift he purchased for Vince at the iMac store so that he can afford appropriately expensive pajamas for the party. During a scene set in the men’s department at Barney’s, Turtle asks Vince for an advance to buy $1200 cashmere pajamas for the party. Vince points out the ones he picked for himself were only $400, but Turtle replies, “You could go to the mansion in Underoos (brand for children) and still get laid Vince!” This brief exchange reinforces the idea that while Vince uses his charm, Turtle must turn to consumption in order to
accomplish his sexual goals. Shortly after, the group is shown in a restaurant where Johnny explains his “pre-mansion regime” of lemon water and lettuce so that he may look “lean for the ladies.” The tension that otherwise might be evident for these men as they shop together for pajamas and maintain a pre-party diet is alleviated by the understanding that they are doing so in the pursuit of sexual conquests at the Playboy mansion. Indeed, their efforts pay off as the episode closes panning away from a shot of the guys sitting amongst beautiful women, while topless Bunnies and scantily clad models dance to the music and frolic in the pool.

In two other episodes, Vince considers paying for Johnny’s plastic surgery for calf implants (S2, “An Offer Refused” and “My Maserati Does 185”). As Johnny seeks to normalize his body (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), he spends a great deal of time examining other men’s legs. At a Lakers basketball game, his attention is focused on the players’ calves rather than the game. After the game, the entourage attends celebrity Jaime Presley’s beach party, where Johnny spends the evening obsessed with a party-goer’s legs and refuses to swim when everyone else does because he is worried about how his calves look. Subsequently, he justifies this behavior and the desire for the invasive surgery by explaining to the plastic surgeon that he is an actor and, thus, it is necessary for his livelihood.

Davis (1995) discusses the unique connections between plastic surgery and heterosexual masculinity. She states that cosmetic surgery cannot be considered masculine in a traditional sense because it “signifies a symbolic transgression of the dominant norms of masculinity” (1995, 127). Thus, it must be counterbalanced with traditional markers of masculinity. For example, as Franco (2008) explains, the men who appear in the plastic surgery makeover series, Extreme Makeover, could be emasculated if not for the fact the program highlights the men’s occupations as war veterans and firefighters, and the functional reasons needed for the surgeries. Similarly, Mishkind et al. (1986) point to the pursuit of the ideal of a mesomorphic body as an instrumental way to reap benefits associated with attractive individuals, as well as to assert mastery and control — two characteristics that align with masculine codes. Much in the same manner, Johnny justifies his desire for cosmetic surgery as instrumental to his career as an actor, although it is clear that he is just jealous of other men’s sculpted bodies. Further, one of the ways in which Johnny tries to obtain the money to pay for the augmentation to his calves is to challenge someone to a boxing match (S2, “An Offer Refused”). Instead of reinforcing his masculinity, he loses the match and the opportunity to afford the surgery.

Because the characters of Entourage are situated in a world of performativity (i.e. Hollywood), the enactment of gender roles can become humorous. Johnny’s performances of gender generally serve as comedic components of the show, as when he enrolls in an acting class in which he must perform The Vagina Monologues as part of a gender reversal exercise. He embraces the role, rehearsing “My vagina is a shell, a round, pink, tender shell, opening and closing and opening. My vagina is a flower...” (S1, “The Review”) as he cooks a breakfast of eggs scrambled with soymilk for lactose-intolerant Vince. Johnny, who is frequently retracting from his own expressions of femininity, ultimately rejects the performance of The Vagina Monologues, saying he is not a “fag” (S1, “The Review”). Ultimately in this situation, the acting class and Johnny’s efforts to make himself a more versatile actor are not powerful enough reasons for Johnny to accept this gendered performance, even if it is only on stage.

At first glance, the gift-giving, shopping, the consideration of plastic surgery, and dialogues about vaginas among the men seem at odds with a traditional heterosexual
masculine persona, or perhaps are exemplary of gender tourism (Thompson and Holt 2004). While scholars have demonstrated that gift-giving is a means to reaffirm relationships (Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999), gift-giving and shopping are most often associated with femininity (Otnes and McGrath 2001). When shopping and fashion are associated with men, it is often done so with regard to metrosexuals (Simpson 2002), or gay men (Kates 2002). In fact, some of the heterosexual male informants in the study by Tuncay and Otnes (2008) on shopping behavior displayed anxiety and diligent maintenance of boundaries to avoid seeming gay or feminine. Brownlie and Hewer (2007), Kimmel (1994), and Brannon (1976) argue that part of hegemonic masculinity is living with the fear of signaling even the smallest of signs that might suggest a heterosexual man is homosexual or effeminate. These characters avoid this problem by framing consumption as part of male conquest.

The men in Entourage experience anxieties about “crossing” the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity in consumption: receiving gifts from another man, shopping, and consuming appearance-related goods and services. Yet the consumption of these goods and services is instrumental in the characters’ performance of masculinity as typified in the Playboy lifestyle. Indeed, consumption also plays a part in decidedly hypermasculine and heterosexual pursuits. In Season 3 (“Three’s Company”), Eric’s girlfriend, Sloan, makes a drunken phone call to him suggesting a threesome with her friend, Tori. As the men discuss the possibility of the threesome (around the kitchen table where Johnny has cooked them breakfast), Eric is convinced it will never materialize. In fact, he almost seems to hope it will not, stating, “It will never happen.” Turtle and Johnny challenge Eric, telling him to pressure Sloan, or “push her a little,” asking, “Are you man enough to push?” They continue their hypermasculine line of approach to the situation by telling Eric to forgo wearing a suit jacket and that there is no need to wine and dine the ladies, teasing him that this is not his senior prom. Instead of Eric’s vision of maintaining a sense of gentlemanliness, the guys take him to purchase sex toys at the sex shop Hustler Hollywood, where mannequins in various sexual positions line the window display. They lend him pornography from Turtle’s “private reserve,” and even commemorate the day by taking a picture of him. During their trip, Eric explains that his girlfriend has set up ground rules for their sexual experiment, to which Johnny objects: “A threesome with rules is not a threesome, it’s a nightmare.” When Eric begins to question why he shared these details with the guys as it is something between him and his girlfriend, Turtle jumps in and exclaims, “Of course you tell your best friends!” In summary, the men cross the boundaries of traditional heterosexual and masculine consumption behavior through gift-giving, shopping, and plastic surgery. At other times, they turn to consumption to play up hypermasculine pursuits, such as planning a ménage à trois and visiting the Playboy mansion.

Single girls

In SATC, as the title suggests, the theme of sexuality is central. Whereas the men in Entourage live the Playboy life, the women of SATC live a contemporary version of Brown’s 2003 [1962] “single girl.” There are many differences, however, between the “single girl” and the women of SATC. We discuss how these differences suggest a new archetype for contemporary women, one that is less anchored in pursuing marriage as an ultimate goal but more focused on career and relationships. For instance, the characters do not perform clerical work, but occupy top positions in more liberal professions. They are also older than Brown’s 20-something (Richards 2003) and, with the
exception of Charlotte, are ambivalent about putting energy into finding the perfect relationship. Samantha explains it best, “Until he says ‘I love you’, you’re a free agent” (S3, “All or Nothing”). Throughout the first seasons, their careers tend to evolve. Brown’s single girl, however, sees her looks as her prime asset in “making it,” that is, marrying her boss.

Research has found that media representations of women in television and advertising, both in the early twentieth century and in the 1950s, tend to display stereotypically feminine traits such as passivity and helplessness (Behling 1997; Stole 2003). We find that, in comparing SATC to prior narratives of single girls, norms of femininity have changed substantially over time.

Contrasting Charlotte’s view of marriage to that of the other characters demonstrates some of these changes. For her, singledom, work, sexuality, and consumption are performed for the goal of marriage. Her outlook is informed by her White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) upbringing. She frequently expresses exasperation in that, despite her best efforts, and having started to date at the age of 15, she still has not found a husband. She even wonders desperately, with exhaustion, to her friends: “Where is he?” (S3, “Where there’s smoke...”). We seldom see the men of Entourage thinking of marriage in their struggle to perform contemporary masculinity.

In the early episodes of the first season, Charlotte often daydreams of her life beyond the single girl stage, urging, for example, her friends to rent a cottage in the Hamptons one summer, as this could be their last one together. After all, she says, one of them – really meaning her – could be married or with child the following season (S2, “Twenty Something Girls vs. Thirty Something Women”). Charlotte may be a dreamer but she is a woman who takes the matter of finding Prince Charming into her own hands. To do so, she follows a set of rules that involve consumption of products that relate to the upper-class lifestyle she envisions for her perfect family. Such things as her date’s taste in china (S1, “Bay of Married Pigs”), or the sound of his initials – to be embroidered on their monogrammed towels (S2, “The Freak Show”) – are important cues to help her decide on the suitability of a man’s potential as her husband. On that basis, she refuses to experience anal sex with a boyfriend she really likes as she dreads being stigmatized by respectable men. She explains that she is someone who wants children and nice bedding, not some “up-the-butt” girl that no man would marry (S4, “Valley of the Twenty-Something Guys”).

For Carrie, dating can mean trying out men as she would try on different outfits to find the one that suits her best. She says of one of her disappointing dates: “He was like the flesh and blood equivalent of a DKNY dress – you know it’s not your style, but it’s right there, so you try it on anyway” (S1, “Bay of Married Pigs”). The almost infinite range of fashion choices is for Carrie the equivalent of finding, if not the right husband, the right date: an exciting but at times also daunting task. The performance of relationships in SATC is reflective of the characters’ introspection and focuses on the experience and meaning of the sexual performance; in contrast, while the characters of Entourage do not completely neglect the meaning, they tend to focus more on the performance itself and how tools (or toys) aid in the achievements (e.g. pleasing the female) and expressions of masculinity. The characters in both shows use consumption as a metaphor to give experiences meaning or to qualify them.

For Samantha, living as a single woman and being the oldest of the four women means preserving her youth and her sex appeal by performing aesthetic labor (Pettinger 2004) such as wearing provocative outfits and flawless makeup, exercising, dieting, and frequenting spas. But in Season 2 (“The Freak Show”), Samantha is forced to recognize
her own limits. Used to dominating and playing tough “like a man,” the high standards she has established for herself prove to be unsustainable in light of a grueling experience at the plastic surgeon’s office. While she, at first, shows enthusiasm about the idea of surgery – comparing the experience with a trip to Barneys where one can shop for different things as many interesting options are offered (S2, “The Freak Show”) – she ultimately decides against surgical intervention. The crude experience of looking in the mirror and seeing all the red pen marks signaling where plastic surgery should be performed gives her the uneasy feeling of being in a fun house, where everything looks distorted and grotesque, including herself.

The narrative of Samantha struggling with aging and worrying about her changing sexuality is a constant throughout the series. In the end, she determines that she can have beauty, but perhaps not youth. Her self-esteem and pride are shown to be stronger than the influence of images of female sexuality she is surrounded with both as a fashion consumer and as a decision-maker in the PR field. For Samantha, performance of female sexuality involves an aesthetic that changes as she matures, physically and emotionally. If the aesthetic links female sexuality and power, then the show frames the aesthetic and its associated power to be about Samantha’s power to create and use it. The tension comes when she must let go of youth and accept her power to determine beauty at this age. Unlike Johnny in *Entourage*, she can afford the surgery. The tension for Johnny is between a body he has and a body he cannot afford, but that he believes could make his career. Samantha’s introspection determines that she will not have surgery, while Johnny’s limitations in earning money prevent him from achieving an aesthetic of powerful masculine sexuality. Thus, for her, avoiding consumption ends in a certain satisfaction, but for him it ends in frustration.

For Miranda, living as a single girl signifies hiring help around the house and having the freedom to pleasure herself – while dating or not. In one episode, Miranda becomes irritated with Magda, the housekeeper, as she lectures her on the inappropriateness of keeping a vibrator in the drawer of her night table (S3, “Attack of the Five Foot Ten Woman”). The clash of opinions between the two women seems rooted in the function that each sees in the sex toy. For Magda, it conflicts with the idea of having a relationship with a man who, she claims, would never marry a woman who keeps a vibrator next to her bed. For Miranda, the point of having a vibrator is not related with the man she shares her bed with, or the goal of marriage, but rather with the ability to please herself as she wants. In other words, Miranda’s view of the performance of female sexuality is not grounded in intimacy with a man, or with marriage. She echoes Samantha who comments, in another scene critiquing a neck massager she claims is in fact a vibrator, that if women wanted to work really hard (to reach an orgasm), they would get themselves a man. The exchange between Miranda and Magda regarding the vibrator points to the tension between traditional and contemporary versions of female sexuality or between sexual performances for pleasure as a single woman, or for pleasing a man as a wife, as a girlfriend, or for conception.

Miranda and Samantha demonstrate that performances of female sexuality are related to feeling pleasure. The pleasure may or may not include sharing that pleasure with a man, either because men cannot provide it, or women want to experience pleasure alone. The tension of experiencing pleasure through masturbation is that it challenges norms of a woman’s role in sex with a man, as Magda points out.

As Walther (2010) demonstrates in her research on the consumption of sex toys in *SATC*, some heteropatriarchal norms still persist in the program. We argue that they persist because the norms, especially notions of male power and predatory sexuality,
and the association of sexual performance as part of marriage and dating that will culminate in marriage, also persist in society at large. The characters thus experience tensions related to these norms in their consumption of goods related to the performance of sexuality.

Discussion of sexuality

In *Entourage*, the men cross the boundaries of a seemingly heterosexual masculine performance as they accept gifts from Vince, shop together, and even consider plastic surgery – typically associated with women and gay men. However, they do so within the context of decidedly heterosexual pursuits. In *SATC*, some of the same themes of gender, sexuality, and performativity emerge: sexual boundaries, sexual pleasure, and relationships with men. Moreover, these themes are again intertwined with consumption and marketplace behaviors such as shopping for and buying sex toys and consideration of plastic surgery.

For instance, both the men in *Entourage* and the women in *SATC* actively use consumption – whether it be Carrie’s Manolo Blahnik high heels or Vince’s Rolls Royce – to create their desired gender identities. While the consumption of sex toys for Eric in *Entourage* means possible tools to aid him in his sexual escapades with two women, for Miranda in *SATC*, a vibrator has little to do with her performance and more to do with self-satisfaction and pleasure. Both shows discuss plastic surgery in ways that pinpoint the contemporary tensions of gender fluidity. Johnny must justify plastic surgery through the claim that it is for his career as an actor. He cannot perform the surgery because he cannot pay for it: he is too dependent on Vince’s money. Samantha has no need to justify her desire for plastic surgery. It is acceptable for an aging woman to try to maintain her youthful appearance through surgery. However, she decides not to succumb to the pressure and forgo surgery, accepting herself as she is, for the moment, although it is a tension that stays with her throughout the entire series. But she can always afford the surgery because she is a successful working woman.

Questions of authenticity

The last theme observed in the media text is the tension between the quest for authenticity and the desire for material objects. The tension is a central part of the lives of the characters in both programs. Lionel Trilling, author of one of the first contemporary books on authenticity, asserts the notion that authenticity is a reaction against modernity and a seemingly lost sense of a meaningful life (Potter 2010). However, Potter (2010, 4) contends that while authenticity has its roots in the eighteenth century and has remained “one of the most powerful movements in contemporary life,” it is a false ideology. Discussing consumption, Potter holds that authenticity and the consumption of authentic artifacts (he points to yoga and organic food, for example) is about individualism, a movement away from the masses. Ultimately, authenticity is a game of seeking social status. Consumption can never lead to the sought-after authenticity because artifacts are inauthentic. Other scholars have also examined the relationship between authentic selves (McCracken 2008; Parmentier and Fischer 2011), social mobility, and the performance of gender. Working from the assumption that gender is socially constructed as “natural and precultural” (McCracken 2008, 186), the pursuit of social mobility, often enacted through consumption and material markers of status, may require the sacrifice of an “authentic” self (McCracken 2008). Although performances
of gender fluidity may offer opportunities for self-transformation and development, it may also require the shelving of an authentic self. Thus, the search for a seemingly authentic life involves tensions that are expanded and abridged through consumption and gender performance.

**Consumption of toys and the authentic self**

As discussed above, one of the central pursuits of the characters in *Entourage* is the acquisition of “toys,” including expensive clothes, cars, and even plastic surgery. For example, in Season 2, “Chinatown,” like many men, Turtle spends much of his free time playing video games and even plays in an *Electronic Arts* video game tournament. However, instead of experiencing a triumphant moment akin to Vince Vaughn’s winning play in the movie *Dodgeball* or the infamous crane kick by Ralph Macchio in the movie *Karate Kid*, Turtle unfortunately loses the game, and a part of his manhood, to a young boy. The characters in *Entourage* exemplify what Fiske (1987) defines as telemasculinity, or the enactment of masculinity through adventure, competition, and consumption of “male toys” such as cars and guns. It is also akin to Peter Pan masculinity, or the notion of men engaging in play and fun, dating back to the 1930s (Register 2001). Masculinity, in this sense, offers men a never-ending childhood of play, games, thrills, and personal satisfaction, accessed through consumption.

Interestingly, in *Entourage*, it is the consumption of these toys that at times causes an internal conflict in their performances of gender. This is particularly true with regard to Vince, because it forces him to question his notions of an authentic self. And it is not surprising that Vince strives for authenticity as it is a salient theme of masculinity among Gen X men in the USA (Tuncay 2006). Unlike the scenarios discussed above whereby consumption aids the characters in resolving tensions in their identities, or at least masks their insecurities for a short time, in this tension, consumption is a distinct source of anxiety. Vince often has to resolve the tension between maintaining his status as an actor in Hollywood and as the provider for the group, and his desire to remain authentic as an actor. For example, Vince wants to take on meaningful acting parts in independent films, but this is at odds with giving into commercialized, yet lucrative film roles. In a plot line that spans Seasons 2 and 3, Vince struggles with his desire to explore the complexity of the film, *Medellin*. He deems it to be characteristic of an authentic film script, versus lucrative films like *Aquaman*, a movie about an underwater superhero produced by Warner Bros (and meant for the masses). When he realizes he cannot afford the $5 million mansion he wants, Vince accepts the *Aquaman* role. Yet in Season 2 (“Boys Are Back in Town”), he states, “As much as I like all the toys, I don’t need them.” For Vince, status and celebrity cannot be achieved without compromising his perception of authenticity. Reflective of Vince’s internal struggle with concepts of authenticity, there are several instances in which all of the characters struggle to strike a delicate balance between maintaining their materialistic lifestyle and staying true to their roots back in Queens, New York, illuminating important class distinctions.

Several episodes center on overcoming obstacles in the pursuit of consumption, such as the purchase of a home (e.g. S2, “Aquamansion”), a sports car (S2, “My Maserati Does 185”), and a painting for one of Vince’s love interests (S2, “Blue Balls Lagoon”). In one poignant example, Eric’s loyalty to his buddies is tested when he is asked to buy his friends expensive watches (S2, “Exodus”). The characters are also introspective about their affluence and consumption. Eric comments that the
Rolls Royce Vince buys is more expensive than the homes in which they grew up (S1, “The Review”). In fact, it seems that all of the characters, particularly Vince, struggle between an authentic self, exemplified by Queens, and the lure and materialism of an inauthentic Hollywood.

Competing masculine discourses of authenticity (Tuncay 2006; McCracken 2008) and the consumption of toys and play (Fiske 1987; Register 2001) emerge in the character’s lives throughout the series. It is not surprising that the characters of *Entourage* struggle between the desire for material objects and the need for authenticity simultaneously, as both are necessary to enact their desired masculinities. Ultimately, the desire for authenticity prevails in later episodes, as the characters risk everything, including their luxurious mansion, to obtain the rights and thus artistic control, of the *Medellin* script. In their quest for authenticity, the *Entourage* characters shed the veils of their commercialized lives, at least temporarily.

**Fake versus real; Los Angeles versus New York City**

*SATC* frames female authenticity as a real self and real love. The pursuit of authenticity involves discerning between the fakes and the real along the way: fake love (friends, men that do not quite fit) and fake self-knowledge (making mistakes with friends and lovers, and with fashion). Through consumption, the characters face the fake and the real. In the episodes, “Escape From New York,” and “Sex and Another City,” (S3) a film studio in Los Angeles invites Carrie to discuss an option of her column, “SATC.” She travels to Los Angeles, accompanied by Miranda and Samantha, with Charlotte soon joining them. Much like in *Entourage*, the women in *SATC* experience Los Angeles as a contrast to New York City. The trip gives them an opportunity to contemplate the meaning of their New York City authentic selves in contrast to their brief pursuit of authenticity in Los Angeles. Charlotte thinks of her frustrations in pursuing authentic love, for her, marriage, through following “the rules” of how to get married, and pursuing her class-based view of marriage and femininity. Namely, the rule is that a woman should not have sex with her boyfriend before marriage. Recently married Charlotte has discovered that her husband is impotent. Her frustrations suggest to her that her pursuit of love through following rules may have been inauthentic. For Carrie, the escape, through talking about potential changes to her columns in order to make them less sad and more mainstream romantic comedies, means pondering who she is and how she pursued authenticity through relationships with boyfriends Big and Aiden. She determines that, although both relationships have recently fallen apart and broken her heart, inside her “it’s all real.” For Charlotte and Carrie, real relationships are rocky, they are not scripted.

In Los Angeles, fashion is a central part of the characters’ pursuit, just as it is in New York City. However, in New York City, the contrast tends to be between expressing their own style or a designer’s, while in Los Angeles, it is between real and fake goods. When Carrie and Samantha drive to the Valley in a hunt for counterfeit handbags, Carrie is immediately disgusted by the sight of the fake designer bags wrapped in plastic in the trunk of the dealer’s car. But Samantha’s struggle does not come until later. When the ladies go to a Playboy mansion party, Samantha accuses a Bunny of stealing her handbag. She confesses her handbag is a counterfeit in order to prove that it is hers, but it turns out that the Bunny has a real Fendi, and she is left embarrassed. Carrie narrates that Samantha was blinded by the fakery of the situation: the purse, the Bunny, and the Playboy Mansion as a whole.
Restaurants serve up another test of authenticity in consuming food and in treatment of the body. During their visit, Miranda meets for dinner with an old friend who moved from New York City to Los Angeles. She had always relied on him to spot and chastise what they judge as other people’s phoniness. At first, Miranda marvels at his happiness that has come from shedding New York City cynicism. Later in the meal, however, she discovers his surprising new meal routine. Her friend does not eat his food but rather chews and spits it into his napkin. The friend says he is “tasting” his food because, in Los Angeles, he cannot afford the calories. Miranda is shocked at this admission. In a moment of shared food consumption, Miranda comes to see her real body and self, imperfect and inauthentic in Los Angeles, as authentically her own.

Discussion of authenticity

The characters in SATC try to cast aside fantastical identities that come, for example, in the form of fake purses, plastic sexiness at the Playboy Mansion, storybook romantic endings, and the perfect Los Angeles physique. This is in contrast to the men in Entourage, for whom a visit to the Playboy Mansion is an opportunity to perform hegemonic masculinity in socializing and flirting with the Bunnies and other beautiful women. For the women of SATC, Hugh Hefner and the mansion epitomize notions of fantasy: sexual freedom and an idealized, luxurious lifestyle, particularly for Samantha. But their visit to the mansion ultimately signifies, for them, that flawed reality is better.

In Entourage, the men simultaneously enjoy their new found pleasure in living a high-class Hollywood life and all that comes with it – a beautiful home, fast cars, and plenty of toys and women to fulfill their Playboy indulgences. However, these pursuits come at a cost as they struggle with a loss of an authentic identity. Moreover, in both programs, the authentic is exemplified by New York City and contrasted against the superficiality of Los Angeles, although for the men in Entourage it is more specifically their working-class backgrounds and their prior lives in Queens, New York.

Conclusion

Researchers argue that understandings of reality are influenced by constructions in the media (Hirschman 1988; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997; Bonsu, Darmody, and Parmentier 2010). Furthermore, these constructions are valuable as points of analysis because they legitimate certain performances and reflect broader discourses in society. Many of the themes of SATC revolve around questions of womanhood and freedom in a changing social landscape. As the title suggests, the program is about “sex” and freedom in a world that is not yet secure with changing notions of female sexuality. In some respects, SATC opened the doors for Entourage, which reflects many of these same themes and includes men in this agenda. By examining these two programs in parallel, we were able to provide insight on contemporary performativity of masculinity and femininity in relationship to consumption.

As the notions of family and work have changed in the USA, so has our thinking of gender roles. SATC represents 30-something, single women who exemplify the “new” independent woman. However, it is clear that while these women break traditional roles, they still struggle with some of the same issues prevalent in traditional notions of gender. Entourage represents 20- and 30-something “Playboys” living large in Hollywood. Yet, these men redefine notions of gender, reflecting various new roles and
relationship norms, while at the same time adhering to some traditional masculine ideals.

In our research on Entourage and SATC, we asked: What themes of gender emerge in these shows, and how do they relate to consumption? Our analysis sought to explore the similarities and differences in how women and men experience gender fluidity in a post-feminist era, as portrayed in the experiences of characters in the two shows. We focus on gender fluidity to answer a call by scholars to explore mainstream masculinity and femininity in relation to each other (Bristor and Fischer 1993). We believe gender is a relational concept that is best explored when representations of both masculinity and femininity are examined together. Gender fluidity gives the characters the freedom to be multifaceted in their performances – performances with regard to domesticity, sexuality, and authenticity. For example, they are given the ability to move between the masculine and the feminine and the private and the public spheres. In Entourage, the men are often portrayed in private and traditionally feminine spaces. In SATC, the women are often depicted in public and traditionally masculine spheres. As Richards (2003) points out, the program is rife with shots of public spaces, including many instances of Carrie walking the streets of New York City, and scenes in which the women are out on the town. Private spaces are for suburban moms who are frustrated with their lives (Richards 2003). However, we note that this fluidity is often times fraught with tensions between traditional models of gender and the gendered performances of the characters, such as in consumption of real estate for the women of SATC or the consumption of a home in Entourage.

We maintain that tension between old and new norms is part of contemporary gender performance. The characters in both shows find ways to simultaneously re-establish and reinforce their gendered identities as they create and occupy new roles. They do so often with the aid of consumption. Indeed, researchers posit that consumption plays a crucial part in easing tensions (Holt and Thompson 2004). Yet we find that consumption, at times, leads to a sense of anxiety as well. The characters often experience tensions that result not only from complex negotiations of gender expectations but also from consumption itself – consuming the home (in economic and social terms), experiencing sexuality, and maintaining and projecting an authentic self, rooted in the material world.

Further, we note that the tensions in Entourage are more understated than in SATC. One reason for the difference may be that Carrie, when she is playing the role of narrator, articulates the frustrations of the women; thus, the show provides more opportunity for reflection. Another reason may be that the women of SATC have lived in New York City longer than the men have lived in Los Angeles, and have dealt with their struggles for more time. Moreover, at times, anxiety related to feelings of dependence and independence is intertwined in these tensions. Themes of dependence/independence are multifaceted and are reflected in emotional, economic, and physical relationships. These constructs, although not the central focus of this study, seem promising and should be explored in future research examining gender and consumption discourses. In addition, although our research did not explore how viewers of Entourage or SATC mirror or imitate the values or experiences of the characters on the two shows, this could be an avenue for future research.

In summary, in our analysis of Entourage and SATC, the characters operate in a world of competing discourses of gender that play out in domesticity, sexuality, and authenticity. The discourses are grounded in prior notions of masculinity and femininity, especially the Playboy and the “single girl,” respectively. Consumption, at times,
provides an opportunity for the characters of the shows to perform the new gender fluidity of post-feminism. Through these performances, they also experience tensions, demonstrating that changes to gender norms come slowly. While the idea of equality has transformed gender roles, it will take some time for consumers to perform a more fluid notion of gender in the marketplace without anxiety. The dissolution of clear-cut role models or frames of references inherently creates anxiety. Perhaps more salient media representations of the multiplicity of gender roles can help consumers through the anxious process of changing assumptions, in a marketplace that welcomes new roles. However, we also acknowledge that presenting a variety of “gender” options – something that occurs in both shows – also can be confusing and exhausting. Perhaps this is the reason that same-sex friendship plays an important role in the shows. That is, for example, Carrie is not just trying out dresses and men, she is also trying out the kind of “woman” she can or wants to be, with the help of friends.

One limitation of this research is that it is restricted by the urban settings of the programs and the cultural markers of the characters. Constructions of gender may be quite different in media texts such as Desperate Housewives, Two and Half Men, or the George Lopez Show. They portray life outside of urban America and reflect ethnicities, social classes, and marital status that are not part of our shows. Further, the analysis presented here has focused solely on the gender representations of fictional characters as opposed to “real” ones that may star in reality television programs, for instance. Exploring gender representations in a variety of programs would likely reveal new insights and, therefore, should be another area for future research.

Acknowledgements
The authors thank Detlev Zwick, Shona Bettany, and Cele Otnes for their feedback on drafts of this manuscript.

Note
1. However, all the characters live with a significant other at some point during the series.

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**Appendix. Description of programs**

*Entourage*, an HBO series which aired from 2004 until 2011, centers on the life of New York-born Vincent Chase (Adrian Grenier) as a young actor in Los Angeles. Vince is a rising star in Hollywood who surrounds himself with his half-brother, Johnny “Drama” (Kevin Dillon), also an actor, and his childhood friends, including his best friend and manager Eric (Kevin Connolly), friend and personal driver Turtle (Jerry Ferrara) and his aggressive and over the top agent, Ari Gold (Jeremy Piven). The show chronicles the lives of this single group of young men (although Ari is married and has children) as they live the celebrity lifestyle as result of Vince’s on again, off again fame.

*Sex and the City*, also an HBO series, ran from 1998 until 2004 and is based in part on writer Candace Bushnell’s book of the same title. The narratives of the show center on the life and relationships of Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), a sex columnist, and her best friends, Charlotte York (Kristin Davis), a conservative and romantic art dealer who feels the best way to get a man is to play by the rules, Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), an exuberant PR executive who believes women can have sex like men, and Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), a no-nonsense corporate lawyer frustrated by the dating game, defiant of the ideas of domesticity and dependence, and reluctant to settle for someone who is less than she deserves.