
Fan forums, breast cancer and *Sex and the City*: Insight for health communicators

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Abstract

Entertainment media have a long history of using health issues in storylines. Soap operas, television dramas, movies, and even comedies integrate health issues in a variety of ways with varying impact on viewer responses to information about the health-related topics. This study is an audience analysis of discussion about Sex and the City's breast cancer storyline on HBO's online message board. Findings suggest that the issue sparked considerable discussion and debate about breast cancer and other health topics and provoked some fans to take action for their own health. Observing fan response to health-related content can help health communicators understand viewer response to health-related stories, the meaning these stories have for fans beyond the on-screen narrative, and how they talk about it with each other. Understanding popular media in this context provides health campaign planners a unique opportunity to address public concerns, perceptions, and misconceptions.

Introduction

Americans get health information from a variety of sources. The Internet is a main source for those seeking health information, however, television news and entertainment television are the primary sources for unsolicited information (Brodie, Kjellson, Hoff, & Parker, 1999; Brodie, et al., 2001). Researchers note that prime-time programming contains approximately one scene with health-related content every four minutes, including scenes peripherally portraying negative behaviours (e.g., smoking, drinking) as well as clear-cut storylines containing discussions of health behaviour and health issues (Byrd-Bredbenner, Finckenor, & Grasso, 2003; see also Larson,

1991). Entertainment media have a long history of using health issues in storylines (Brodie, et al., 2001; Turow, 1996). Soap operas, television dramas, movies, and even comedies integrate health issues in a variety of ways to enrich plots, and more frequently, with educational objectives (Brodie, et al., 2001; Howe, Owen-Smith & Richardson, 2002).

For some programmes, like medically focused programmes such as *Grey's Anatomy* or the older *ER*, health issues are naturally and frequently integrated into scripts (Brodie, et al., 2001; Turow, 1996). For other programmes, health issues often come in the form of plots that have significant effects on a main character. For example, the popular sitcom *Friends* introduced information about the fallibility of condoms when one of the characters became pregnant despite using a condom during sex (Collins, et al., 2003); and cancer has touched numerous television characters, from *thirtysomething's* Nancy Weston who was diagnosed with ovarian cancer (Sharf, Freimuth, Greenspon, & Plotnick, 1996), to title character Murphy Brown who had breast cancer (Collins, 1997), the breast cancer diagnosis of *Sex and the City's* Samantha (Battaglio, 2004), and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in *Desperate Housewives'* character, Lynnette (Murphy, Frank, Moran and Patnoe-Woodley, 2011). In 2010, Showtime introduced *The Big C*, an entire show about a woman diagnosed with melanoma.

Traditionally, research on television programming that takes on social issues has been content-focused (see e.g., Larson, 1991; Signorelli, 1990; Turow & Coe, 1985; see also, Byrd-Bredbenner, et al., 2003; Turow, 1996). More recent studies look at what audience members learn (see e.g., Brodie, et al, 2001), the meaning audiences derive from such

content (Sharf, et al., 1996), and what viewers do as a result (Lemal & Van den Bulck, 2010). This study is an analysis of fan discussion surrounding the breast cancer storyline in HBO's *Sex and the City* on an online message board, HBO Community Forums. Such fan analysis can help programmers and health communicators understand viewer response to health-related stories, the meaning these stories have for fans beyond the onscreen narrative, and how they talk about it with each other. Studies analysing fans' response to and engagement with entertainment-education storylines can gauge how the health message is perceived and where messages should be modified, improved and reinforced. Social media provide a distinctive view of how fans are using and spreading information. Understanding popular media in this context provides health campaign planners a unique opportunity to address public concerns, perceptions, and misconceptions.

Literature review

This study uses as a frame literature from media studies, media effects, and audience studies. The following review of literature emphasises research on the impact of health-related messages embedded in entertainment programmes, followed by audience studies literature focused on the meaning audiences make from media messages.

Media as guide

Media effects research indicates that media provide "frames for understanding life concerns and experiences" (Lindlof & Meyer, 1987, p. 13). People use vicarious experiences from television to help guide their actions in similar 'real life' situations (Janis, 1980). Health issues embedded in television programming can have an impact on viewer knowledge and behaviours (Brodie, et al., 2001; Collins, et al., 2003; Howe, et al., 2002). For example, Howe, et al. (2002) found that screening for cervical cancer increased in the United Kingdom after a character on a soap opera was diagnosed with and subsequently died from the disease. The power of the narrative to evoke positive responses to health messages was supported by a study by Lemal and Van de Bulck (2010) who

found a health-related message embedded in a narrative had a greater effect on subsequent health behaviours than did a non-narrative message about the same health concern. The researchers used web-based messages for the experiment. The non-narrative group showed no difference from a control group.

Health communicators must be cautious, however, about relying on embedded health narratives. While studies show some immediate impact on viewer knowledge and behaviour, how much and how accurately health information is retained and how it is used are somewhat ambiguous. In an experiment, Brodie, et al. (2001) surveyed regular viewers of *ER* and found that after two specific vignettes about emergency contraception and the human papilloma virus (HPV) aired on the programme, viewer knowledge about those subjects increased; however, viewers did not retain the information when surveyed a few weeks later. Consistent with the findings in the *ER* experiment, Collins et al. (2003) found that viewers of the *Friends* episode about the failed condom remembered the message about condom effectiveness in the short term, but the long-term effect was not significant. In both of these studies, the health information was embedded in single episodes, and although the consequences of the failed condom were played out in the pregnancy and birth of a child as the season progressed, the specific health-related issue was left behind.

It is possible that a prolonged storyline covering multiple episodes is more effective (see e.g., Sharf et al., 1996; or Murphy et al., 2011). Storylines like the ovarian cancer drama in *thirtysomething* and the non-Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis in *Desperate Housewives* are drawn out through multiple episodes, giving viewers a multi-faceted perspective of the disease. Sharf et al. (1996) noted that *thirtysomething* emphasised the "chronic, everyday problems that this disease may engender in the context of home, family, and friends", and devoted a substantial amount of time to the subject (p. 158). Through in-depth interviews of *thirtysomething* viewers, the researchers looked at how the audience responded to a life-threatening disease portrayed dramatically through the experience

of a character on the show. They analysed audience viewing processes, content interpretation, and the real-life implications of that interpretation. Among their findings, the researchers reported that viewers used the text of the show as something of a model, or reference point from which to develop coping strategies if faced with similar situations, a finding consistent with earlier scholarship on how audiences use mass media (Janis, 1980; Lindlof & Meyer, 1987). Through the in-depth interviews, they were able to uncover the contexts in which viewers placed the story in their own lives and the multiple interpretations evident because of the variety of individual factors influencing meaning (Sharf et al., 1996).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is widely used to explain the relationship between television narratives and viewer modelling of character behaviours (Bandura, 1986; 2004). People will model what they see on television, but the effects are not direct, depending on those individual factors, including how engaged they are with the narrative and characters. For example, viewers are more likely to model behaviour they see on television if the behaviour has positive consequences (or avoid the behaviour if consequences are negative), if they identify with or are similar to the character, and if they are able to and/or are motivated to perform the behaviour. Viewers may resist persuasive messages if they are not sufficiently motivated (Bandura, 2004).

Recent research in entertainment-education (E-E) highlights the complex relationships among viewers and programmes with pro-social messages. Researchers have investigated constructs that are perceived to be the mediators on whether viewers adopt healthy behaviours, including character involvement and narrative involvement (see, e.g., de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, Chung & Jain, 2011; Murphy et al., 2011). Findings from these studies offer valuable insight into the persuasive power of E-E programmes. According to Moyer-Gusé (2008), messages embedded in E-E programmes may be more persuasive than traditional persuasive messages because they get less resistance from the audience involved in, or transported by the story.

Moyer-Gusé (2008) examines ‘involvement’ through the SCT lens and defines narrative involvement as audience engagement with the storyline, and character involvement as how viewers interact with characters. Character involvement, says Moyer-Gusé (2008), is the amalgam of identification with characters (experiencing the narrative as the character), wishful identification (wishing to be the character), similarity (to the character), parasocial interaction (having an unreciprocated social relationship with character), and liking (positive evaluations of the character). Narrative involvement relates to the level to which viewers feel they have been ‘transported’ into and through the story.

Moyer-Gusé also uses the Extended-Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM) to explain how involvement in the narrative or character can reduce counterarguing. E-ELM “posits that when viewers are absorbed into the dramatic elements of an entertainment program they are less motivated to counterargue with the embedded persuasive messages” (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010, p. 28). Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) tested the constructs using a teen pregnancy storyline from *The OC*, and a non-narrative news story on unplanned teen pregnancy. Identification with characters decreased counterarguing, but contrary to their hypothesis, transportation into the narrative did not.

The complexity of relationships among the constructs is also evident in other research findings. Murphy et al. (2011) examined viewers’ involvement with the character and the narrative and viewers’ emotional response to the narrative of a lymphoma storyline in the drama *Desperate Housewives*. The researchers found a complex relationship among the predictors on change in knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. They found viewers’ involvement with the narrative that reached transportation status was most predictive of increased knowledge, attitude, and behaviour change. However, based on their analyses, the relationships among the concepts are not easily parsed. Viewers experience the story in varied ways that may make isolating these concepts less important than understanding the

“nuanced” outcomes of E-E efforts (Murphy et al., 2011, p. 426).

Moyer-Gusé et al. (2011) conducted an experiment using *Sex and the City* narratives to understand how identification with characters influenced viewer attitudes and behaviour. They found participants who saw behaviours modelled in the television show by characters with which they identified were more likely to model those behaviours. Specifically, when the characters discussed sexually transmitted infections, participants were more likely to engage in similar conversations. The researchers suggest the television narratives “provide social scripts for difficult interpersonal discussions by fostering identification with characters who model this behavior” (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011, p. 400). Surprisingly, Moyer-Gusé et al. (2011) did not find a link between identification and vulnerability. Viewers did not perceive themselves more vulnerable the more they identified with affected characters.

Communication as a social process – audience studies and fans

Media effects research has naturally evolved to include audience-centric analysis beyond effects. That is, in addition to asking what effects media messages have, researchers are exploring how audiences use and interpret those messages. Audience-based mass communication research has evolved as scholars have begun to understand the role media play in shaping people’s understanding of the world (McQuail, 1994). Much effects-based research approaches the idea of communication as message dissemination or transmission (Carey, 1975). The media send out information about issues in various ways and people gain knowledge, change or maintain attitudes and behaviours, and interpret meaning based on that information. Thus, health information conveyed in whatever media format or genre must be accurate. While the accuracy of health information portrayed through the media is vital, research shows that conveying accurate information does not necessarily translate into knowledge gleaned by the audience (Brodie et al., 2001; Howe et al., 2002; Sharf et al., 1996). Rather than viewing such content as transmitted knowledge,

researchers must also study such communication from the perspective of communication as a social process, or ritual (see Carey, 1975). This may be particularly true for content intended to entertain, especially a series in which the health-related storyline becomes intertwined with the relationships the audience has with the characters.

Research from a ritual perspective is grounded in a cultural studies approach to studying communication (Carey, 1975). It necessitates an understanding of how an audience interprets the communication, going beyond the source and intended meaning to the audience’s negotiated meaning. While the message creator and the message are important factors, the implications of the communication as a social force are best understood through the audience interpretation (Carey, 1975; see also, e.g., Fiske, 1986; Hall, 1980; Newcomb, 1984). Reception studies (see, e.g., Acosta-Alzuru, 1999; Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Radway, 1984; Vargas, 1995) embody the communication-as-social-process approach to studying audiences, starting with the premise that communication and audiences exist within a complex social structure, and therefore must be studied within that structure.

One way researchers have begun to look at audiences within a social structure is through online fan communities where viewers gather electronically to discuss programmes and the meaning they derive from those programmes (Baym, 2000; see also Scodari, 1998; Scodari & Felder, 2000; Wakefield, 2001). Studying media fans has a strong tradition in cultural studies literature (see, e.g. Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). As Costello and Moore (2007) note, fandom sparks ordinary viewers to go beyond merely consuming the media product to taking action. Depending on the level of fandom, action may be merely lurking, for example, reading online fan forums, or on the more extreme, the superfans, who take the media text and create their own fan fiction. Technology in today’s media environment allows researchers who want to learn more about what an audience is doing with media text to ‘listen’ to virtual discussions via online fan forums or social media. Engaged fans gather in fan communities to discuss

programmes and the meaning they derive from those programmes. They use the forums to post their thoughts about the primary texts, engage with others, and create meaning collectively. The collective engagement enriches the meaning making, which has more potential for social impact than do individual interpretations (Condit, 1989). Scodari (1998) notes that within the culture of soap opera fans, "Discussion groups are merely one type of outlet, allowing fans to publicly post instantaneous and/or reflective negotiations with the primary text(s)..." (p. 170). Fans can post their own thoughts, respond to others, or "lurk" on the discussion boards, "perusing the sentiments of others and, perhaps, considering those views in light of their own negotiations" (p. 170). Scodari emphasises the potential power of the community discussion, citing Condit's (1989) argument. With the growth of social networks like Facebook and Twitter, online message boards may be declining (Mullaney, 2014; Whiteman & Metivier, 2013), however, forums are still popular among fans who want to opine more than 140 characters and for those seeking information or anonymous interaction with like-minded people (Andrejevic, 2008).

Sex and the City as a Case Study

This study is an audience analysis of discussion about *Sex and the City's* breast cancer storyline on HBO's online message board. *Sex and the City* is an HBO original production that aired for six seasons on the premium channel. The show was especially popular among women aged 18 to 49, and the season finale garnered 10.6 million viewers, with stronger ratings among the 18 to 49-year-old demographic than any of the main broadcast networks (Battaglio, 2004). In the show's final season, one of the four main characters, Samantha, was diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer. Although the show often addresses serious issues (e.g., AIDS, abortion, infertility), it is considered a comedy, therefore, the potentially life-threatening diagnosis of a primary character was somewhat unexpected. The diagnosis was made when Samantha went to a doctor for a breast augmentation consultation. The story followed her diagnosis, progressed through her treatment decisions, subsequent chemotherapy

and physical side effects, and included the impact of the disease on personal relationships, and feelings of the other characters. One episode also addressed potential causes of the disease, including lifestyle choices.

Like the *thirtysomething* study, this research is intended to uncover ways fans made sense of the story and information contained in the show (Sharf et al., 1996), and, further, how they made sense of it together as an online community. Looking specifically at the breast cancer story, this study investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: How do fans interpret the breast cancer storyline?

RQ2: How do fans discuss it with one another?

RQ3: What impact does the story have on fans' attitudes and behaviours regarding breast cancer?

Methods

The focus on the audience and the meaning it derives from media content has created a critical shift in how some scholars approach mass communication research. Rather than using traditional quantitative methods and analysis techniques, researchers are employing a naturalistic approach, using qualitative data collection and analyses to gain a depth of understanding not available through surveys and experiments. Although Sharf et al. (1996) began their study intending to use content analysis on the interviews, they found the initial analyses lost "the nuances and richness of viewer responses and did not uncover the richer meaning imbedded in the interview text" (p. 161). By using qualitative analysis techniques like those employed by cultural studies scholars (see, e.g. Acosta-Alzuru, 1999; Collins et al., 2003; Scodari, 1998), they uncovered the "constellation of contextual factors, social interactions, and intrapersonal responses that belie the seemingly simple act of 'turning on the tube' at night and shape how program content is interpreted by individuals" (Sharf et al., 1996, p. 170).

While Sharf et al. (1996) interviewed viewers, Collins (1997) used viewer letters sent to *Murphy Brown* to investigate meaning

viewers ascribed to the show and the character. By using audience letters, Collins was able to tap into audience interpretations without researcher intervention, allowing viewers to “tell it their way” (p. 113). Although this method is limited by the fact that only the aspects viewers want to reveal are included, this is true in other methods, as well, and Kasper (1994) identifies this as the first stage in qualitative analysis in which participants reveal what they think is important. This assumes participants are not merely subjects, but rather contributors in the research process.

This project is similar to data from viewer letters, however, rather than a one-way, somewhat private communication between viewer and programme producers/writers, the data are asynchronous conversations between and among viewers of the show. Technology has enhanced the ability for researchers to capture this information. Participants write both to the programme producers and to each other through an online community devoted to the programme. Like viewer letters, these conversations “provide an opportunity to examine what the audience reports as effects on their lives and what they claim to be their individual uses and gratifications of a specific television program” (Collins, 1997, p. 113).

The data

Use of online data collection is growing. Researchers utilise online surveys, conduct virtual focus groups, and observe (and sometimes facilitate) discussions through social media outlets, among other methods (Sweet, 2001). This research study is qualitative, combining observation with asynchronous focus group-like discussion as found on Internet bulletin boards. To study the communication between and among *Sex and the City* viewers, I looked at the online discussions of participants in HBO’s Community Forums, specifically, those devoted to *Sex and the City*. I observed the discussions beginning in January 2004 through March 2004, the timeframe of the breast cancer storyline. The forums, including archives are publicly accessible. To post to the boards, participants must ‘join’ the forum, providing HBO.com an email address and user name that is used to identify posts. (Email addresses are

not publicly available unless posted by the user.)

On the forums, fans of the show engage in discussion about the show, its characters, the storylines, and other issues. Online forums are much like traditional focus groups in that they allow interaction among discussants and provide thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that evolve from collective discussion. Unlike focus groups, in which a facilitator leads discussion, I was merely an observer. That is, I did not post anything myself or ask questions, nor did I email participants separately. This allowed the discussion to flow naturally without contamination from the researcher. (The study protocol received IRB approval.) The *Sex and the City* bulletin boards have several discussion groups, including: one for general conversation; one for each of the main characters; and one each for music and fashion. These groups are variable, as HBO and users add new discussions and archive older discussions over time. The above-mentioned groups are archived and existed during the first-run of shows in the final season. Each group contained multiple discussion threads on numerous topics. I concentrated the data analysis on only those discussions about the breast cancer storyline and related comments.

The participants of the discussion groups identified themselves as viewers with varying involvement with the show. Most appeared to be highly involved as indicated by the number of posts they had made to the forum since becoming a member, shown beside the user name on each post. Occasionally new viewers would identify themselves to ask questions of the veteran fans. I could only obtain demographic data participants chose to share in posts. Occasionally, discussants would reveal age. Most appeared to be women, based on self-identification and names, although some men were identifiable in the messages. Clearly, all had computer access and were sophisticated enough to participate in a computer-mediated message board.

Analysis

Analysing qualitative data requires immersion in the data and time for findings to emerge. The process is interpretive but rigorous. This study adapted Kasper’s (1994) five-stage approach to

interview data analysis for use on the bulletin board discussions. The five-stage technique moves from an individual interpretation to a larger theoretical framework (Kasper, 1994). In the first stage, the discussants chose the discussion topics and patterns. Patterns were revealed through the different discussion thread headings and topics, although these were not always clear. The second level of analysis involved careful reading of each thread to clarify the topics and find those related to the breast cancer storyline. Postings were read in real time as they appeared and the transcripts were re-read multiple times later, for immersion in the data. At this point, facts and meanings revealed by the discussants were identified. After the initial reading, the text of the conversations was imported into a qualitative data analysis programme (QSR N-Vivo) to ease the analysis process.

In the third level of analysis, relationships between the facts and meanings identified in stage two emerged. For example, individuals posted their concerns about what would happen to Sam, why she had the disease. Having identified these ideas in stage two, I was able to put these individual concerns together and identify, for example, relationships between concerns about the plot, the character, and how it affected the viewers' perceptions of the disease. The fourth stage of analysis involved taking the individual relationships and putting them into perspective as collective data. Links among the different postings revealed areas within which ideas converged or diverged with other postings. Finally, in stage five, the collective meanings became patterns and themes that formed the basis of the findings (Kasper, 1994).

Findings

This study began with three research questions: How do fans interpret the breast cancer storyline; How do fans discuss the storyline (breast cancer) with one another; and, What impact does the story have on fans' attitudes and behaviours regarding breast cancer? It became clear in the analysis stage that the interpretation process was inextricably linked with viewers' discussions with one another.

Therefore, the findings as discussed below blend the first two questions and illuminate the negotiation of individual and collective interpretations.

RQ1 & RQ2: How do fans discuss and interpret the breast cancer storyline?

Fans discussed the storyline from perspectives of character and narrative involvement (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and extended their interpretations to their own lives, *Why breast cancer? Why Sam?*

One of the themes evident immediately after the early episodes revealing Samantha's breast cancer diagnosis was consistent with strong character involvement (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and what happens during personal diagnoses. Fans wanted to know, "Why Sam?" Questions prevailed about why Samantha was chosen to bear the burden of breast cancer, and even why breast cancer had become a plot in the comedy. The conversation occasionally blurred the lines between fiction and reality, evidence of fans' parasocial interaction with the characters. Some postings asked for or offered reasons why the writers chose Sam, while others seemed to query the larger picture, more akin to asking a higher power, "Why me?" The latter posts did seem to understand that it is "just a show," but other posts indicated a true confusion when they queried whether the actress, Kim Cattrall, actually had the disease (which she did not; fans were quick to respond to such queries and dispel those rumours). These early posts also noted the possibility and concern that Samantha, the character, may die.

In their discussions, contributors to these threads offered possible reasons for breast cancer entering the series, indicating strong narrative involvement (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) as they justified or vilified the producers' decisions. Fans had mixed feelings about the series' inclusion of such a darkly perceived topic. Some were offended that *Sex and the City* would try to incorporate humour with a deadly, "ugly" disease. Their sense of escape through the show had been violated because cancer was too "real" a topic. A breast cancer survivor rebuked HBO, writing, "[T]his show helped me escape reality for 30 minutes a week and now the BREAST CANCER is shoved

right back in my face”. Another viewer announced to the board:

To me, SATC is like candy... Each week I live for ½ hr. with the characters. Sunday’s show was a little upsetting for me. I have known many people with breast cancer and it kind of just destroyed the fun time I have with the show... I don’t see how they can make humor out of cancer. It will put a cloud on all the remaining episodes...

Despite posts like this, others responded that they were anxious to see how the writers used humour to create an upbeat message about dealing with cancer. Postings surmised that the show had given women ways to deal with the men in their lives, so perhaps this was another area in which writers could contribute coping strategies to the audience (which will be discussed further below). In addition to the “wait and see how it plays out” group, another group emerged that was enthusiastic about the scenario. For example:

I think it was a brilliant move to introduce a serious storyline like Sam’s breast cancer in the finale of the series. It gives the writers a chance to present different character arcs as the girls deal with Sam and the effects of her disease... It is also a great way to increase awareness about breast cancer and to show inspiration and hope to those and their loved ones who are stricken...

Another person wrote, “I just think that the show wants to send a message out there that breast cancer is real and it can happen to anyone...”

That breast cancer did happen to the Samantha character created a unique exchange about the series writers’ motivations. Fans described the character using words such as promiscuous, strong, independent, beautiful, sexy, fun, free-spirited, older, and even stoic (because she didn’t cry when she was diagnosed). These characterisations came into play as they discussed why the writers saw fit to strike Samantha with the disease. Posts ranged from conjecture that writers were making a statement about how such a woman

coped with a life-threatening, body-changing disease, to a tongue-in-cheek supposition that it was a right-wing conspiracy intended to punish the “bad girl”. For example, an initial post prompted a discussion thread debating writers’ motivations:

Initial viewer post: The one thing that bothers me about Sam’s cancer is the reason the writers chose her. It almost smacks of some ridiculous far, right wing hardliner saying “See...the ‘bad’ girl is getting punished for her promiscuity.” ...

In response, another fan suggested rather than a conspiracy, the writers were using a literary device to create drama:

Response: Sam isn’t being punished for promiscuity, she’s being jostled by fate because she’s the most confident and proud, and tragedy occurs when a king falls from a great height, not when a peasant stumbles on the curb...

Another respondent noted that Samantha is the oldest of the four main characters, therefore, more likely to be diagnosed with the disease. And one countered that the writers were going for the irony in that Sam is extremely body conscious.

Conjecture about how the series would proceed post-breast cancer revelation created a slew of fearful postings: Sam could die. But, as the discussion developed, postings reasoned that while she *could* die, it was unlikely. Beyond the fact that the show is a comedy, therefore, unlikely to kill off a main character for reasons other than the actor wanted release from the show or had actually died, participants offered statistically backed optimistic prognoses for Samantha. She caught the cancer in the early stages. She has a good attitude and is health conscious. One posting is particularly reflective of others’ arguments:

I sincerely hope they don’t kill her off...It would be okay with me as a story line...but I think it would be really hopeful and even more realistic to show her beating [cancer]. Survival rates for breast cancer when caught in its early stages are quite good...and treatments

have come a long way. This is true ESPECIALLY for women who don't smoke and live healthy lifestyles. Add her natural-born fighter attitude (which is also...proven to increase survival rates) and Sam's character is tailor-made to be a breast cancer survivor.

This post shows how fans began to rationalise the breast cancer diagnosis, sharing knowledge of the real-life disease and blending reality with fiction in their hope this character for whom they cared would survive. This discussion naturally began to expose fans' real-life experiences with cancer, and other life-changing illnesses, and revealed how these individuals identified with the narrative.

Interpreting through the lens of personal experience

Fans clearly identified with the storyline, either through personal breast cancer battles, friends and family who had had breast cancer, caregivers of breast cancer patients, or even the possibility that breast cancer may touch their lives. These discussions manifested themselves in numerous ways, and were often revealed through either praise and appreciation or disapproval of how breast cancer was portrayed on the show. Breast cancer survivors, patients and their friends and loved ones voiced opinions about the breast cancer plot line on a continuum ranging from vociferously angry to fervently enthusiastic about the story. For quite a few, the storyline appeared to have prompted their entry into the online discussion.

As the story progressed through each episode, support for it gained strength as fans began to discuss the meaning they constructed from the onscreen messages. Perhaps different from narrative involvement/transportation, the fans seemed to be doing the audience equivalent of breaking the fourth wall – pulling the show into reality. After one of the last three episodes, discussion participants noted how Samantha's speech at a breast cancer fundraiser "struck a chord in many survivors". One breast cancer patient, now in her third recurrence, stated, "I was becoming afraid they were going to just gloss over this part of Sam...glad to see they gave this...story line some meat... I'm glad to see the issue addressed in a less 'proper'

manner. There are so many things about the disease that just are plain improper, and insane. Let's talk about it." And, in one very poignant commentary, a man confided to the board in what was his first post:

Sunday before last...I had my wife die in my arms of metastatic breast cancer. Obviously, I did not see the episode where Samantha removed her wig until it was rebroadcast later in the week. The impact was truly dramatic to all in my house. My daughter, who had been with her mother for [a year and a half] of treatments rose and cheered. I, frankly, sobbed out loud. ...

Repeatedly, these kinds of statements showed how cathartic the show was for fans who faced the challenges of cancer and other crises. At the end of his post, speaking to both the people on the bulletin boards and to HBO, the man quoted above took the meaning of the show and his own experience the next step, encouraging people to take action: "My wife only missed ONE yearly mammogram. Please be sure your loved ones and friends remember theirs. Thank you for the courage in showing that episode."

RQ3: What impact does the story have on fans' attitudes and behaviours?

"Hey...if the medium can be used to entertain and provoke action and discussion, so much the better." (Post on the *Sex and the City* online forum.)

In addition to filtering their responses to the storyline through involvement with the character and narrative, fans recognised the power of the story to trigger a variety of responses.

Personal impact: Thought and action

Fans in these discussions were personally touched by the story in several ways. For some, it was about the show, how they had come to care for the characters and now one of them was facing a life-threatening crisis. For others the story elicited more personal comments on the forum, indicating the cathartic and therapeutic impact of the show. The conversations about breast cancer evolved into discussions about friendship and love, as discussed above, and about what fans learned

and believed about body image and beauty. One of the most profound findings on the forum was in the posts about what fans learned and were doing about breast cancer.

Samantha was diagnosed after a consultation for breast augmentation, not from a regularly scheduled mammogram or breast self-exam. It was one of many actions the character took through the course of the series to ensure her body looked good, but somewhat out of the ordinary, as noted by one viewer who wrote of her shock Sam would consider breast enlargement, “She has shown that being sexy is not in breast size”. One of the first posts written after the first breast cancer-related show aired began a discussion about body image that developed over time. The writer surmised that Samantha’s characteristics would force the show to delve into beliefs about beauty:

I think the issue will be more about Samantha’s emotional investment in her looks, and how the rug can be pulled out from under any woman, or any person, who is a beauty. It will be in any case, if we live long enough, but for Sam it’s a sudden shock, and an intimation of beauty’s mortality she wasn’t expecting. Plus, the need to be alert for a recurrence is bound to affect her boundless self-confidence.

This post sparked talk about breast implants and prompted a lively discussion about how they work, the need to “maintain” them over time, the inconvenience, and discomfort of the procedure. The discussion was consistent with the postings throughout the bulletin boards, in which viewer conversations led to statements of conviction about self-confidence and self-acceptance gained through both the show and through support from others in the forum.

The most powerful indication of the show’s ability to impact its audience was when two forum participants revealed that the show motivated them to do a breast self-exam and they found lumps. The purpose of the first seemed to be to tell her story and thank the show for prompting her to action:

Thanks to the episode with Samantha detecting a lump in her breast it reminded me to do my self-exam and

found a lump. My doctor has confirmed the lump and also found out I am pregnant and because of the pregnancy I am not able to go any further in finding out if the lump is cancer...I thank the show and its cast for reminding me of what I as a 30 year old woman am supposed to do to keep safe. Thanks, ladies.

She only posted once, despite supportive notes from others on the board who encouraged her to seek a second opinion and shared similar stories with positive endings. The second woman seemed to truly be reaching out to the community:

Thursday night, for whatever reason, while watching my newly purchased SATC Season 5 on DVD, I started probing around and I found a lump on my left side. Actually, there may be two or more going up into my arm... I suspected something (small) was there [two months ago] but I let it go. Now it’s about the size of a nickel. I’m not sure why I posted this. I’ve told my boyfriend...and today a friend via email. I haven’t had the heart to tell my mother yet... I guess I just needed to tell someone else.

The support for these women from others in the forum is noteworthy. Posts were optimistic while also being realistic about the possibility that both these women could have cancer. They gave statistics and facts about breast cancer and treatment options. They offered advice. They told their own stories. And they vehemently advocated for assertive action. When the second woman posted on a Friday, noting her doctor didn’t have Friday office hours, one person wrote: “Call your doctor’s office [Monday] and INSIST upon speaking to your doctor...not his staff...[I]f your doctor is worth anything he will have you in IMMEDIATELY!!!” When she did see the doctor, the woman updated the board with the good news that it was likely not cancer, but that she was having some more tests just to be sure.

While these are rather dramatic examples of the impact of the programme, other people posted examples of how they and their friends

had taken to heart the implications for their own lives. Some were merely internalising the lessons and taking action by discussing them on the bulletin board. The interaction with other fans seemed to help them sort out their feelings about the show, breast cancer, their bodies, their relationships. Rarely were posts about the breast cancer storyline limited to comments about the show. Most often they included observations or anecdotes about real-life experiences. And sometimes they conceded the effect the series can have:

I can name a dozen women friends who were spurred by the storyline to get their first mammograms and who shook their heads in amazement that it took something like a TV show to reach them. Hey...if the medium can be used to entertain and provoke action and discussion, so much the better.

These fans came together on the forum with a common interest – *Sex and the City* – and on these specific threads, the breast cancer storyline. They supported each other, cared for one another, and shared things that they admittedly had not broached with close family members. Their fan community consisted of people they were unlikely to meet elsewhere.

Discussion

Audiences vary in intensity of their relationships with programmes ranging from no involvement to fanaticism (Russell & Puto, 1999). This study used a naturalistic approach to observing online discussion about a television show. Participants in interpretive communities (Lindlof, 1987) seek a place to both share their understandings and voice their opinions about the media texts, creating a multi-dimensional television viewing experience (Scodari & Felder, 2000). Russell and Puto contend that when individuals have an intense relationship (parasocial interaction) with a television programme that extends beyond the viewing experience into their personal and social lives, viewers are ‘connected’. The concept of connectedness is predicated on viewers’ commitment to the show and identification with characters on the show (Russell & Puto, 1999).

Most viewers who engage in discussion on online fan bulletin boards are clearly connected to the show with strong character and/or narrative involvement (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Many of those posting about the breast cancer storyline were veterans on the forum. Some of them had made thousands of posts on varying threads. What is noteworthy are the numerous people who joined the discussion after the breast cancer storyline was unveiled, and whose input was almost exclusively about that story. For many of these bulletin board contributors, they seemed to become more connected to the show through this storyline as it touched something in their own lives. For a few, their participation was to voice their frustration to the show’s producers for inserting breast cancer into a show they liked. Such intrusion seemed to interrupt the narrative involvement and incite counterarguing, which is unlikely to occur if the audience is deeply involved in the narrative (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Still, though negative, breast cancer clearly struck a chord with these fans, prompting them to action, even if it was to turn off the television. Fans who were upset that Samantha’s bout with breast cancer may have skimmed the surface of the realities of the disease and its treatment may have a point; however, these findings suggest that, at the least, the issue sparked considerable discussion and debate about breast cancer and other health topics, and at most, it provoked some fans to take action for their own health. Such counterarguing expressed openly in social networks or online forums can be valuable tools for sparking further conversation among highly involved fans and casual viewers, alike.

As Sharf et al. (1996) observe, audiences do not have uniform understandings of health-related content of television shows. Their interpretations are “filtered through their own experiences and interactions with one another” (p. 170). This study is a clear demonstration of the filtering process. Observing online community interaction can help health communicators and programme producers better understand how health messages are being used and discussed and where these discussions lead to other important issues that may not be central to the storylines, for example, other health issues the participants

discussed. As health communicators work more with Hollywood producers to integrate pro-social health messages into entertainment programming, scanning response on social media is imperative to gauge interpretations. Further, knowledge of these discussions may help medical professionals talk to patients more colloquially and address common concerns and questions and correct misinformation. Health communicators, especially on the local level, may want to start online or face-to-face groups specifically related to the media prompt and use social media to carry the discussion further. Although online forum use is declining, people are more likely to use online communities when the community platform works well and information is considered high quality (Lin & Lee, 2006). Further, though perhaps not as content rich, exploring social network posts like those on Facebook and Twitter and instigating groups through these outlets can be powerful tools for health professionals and communicators. These groups could also enhance future research.

In the future, research through focus groups and individual interviews may uncover a deeper understanding about how viewers internalise the information they get through entertainment television and how that information interacts with other media and life experiences. Sharf et al. (1996) warn that formative research needs to be done during script development to minimise and prevent miscommunication. I would argue that such research should be ongoing during the course of a season-long narrative, and scripts developed to address misconceptions caught after earlier episodes. Further, health communication professionals must be aware of outside influences like television programmes that incorporate relevant health issues into the narrative. While some storylines are generated in collaboration with health organisations, others are merely plotlines to create drama or carry the story. Such popular culture influences can have significant impacts on how health communication campaigns are perceived. Scanning social media outlets and fan forums for comments/discussions may reveal areas where health information can be improved or reinforced. Observing social media interactions can also provide confirmation if the

information is being used – as it was in these forums – with participants providing factual data and supportive suggestions in their postings.

This study was limited to only those fans who posted to the HBO discussion forums. While some admitted to posting for the first time, prompted by the storyline, most would probably be considered superfans (Costello & Moore, 2007). Casual fans may have different, less positive perspectives. Also, other outlets and social media groups may offer different data about how viewers perceived and used information from the show. It was also limited to the first run of the show on HBO; the show is now available to a wider and possibly different audience in reruns on TBS. Nevertheless, it offers a glimpse into the thoughts and actions of active *Sex and the City* fans and can help health campaign planners create messages based on a better understanding of the myriad factors that influence the public's understanding of health issues.

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