

Perceptions of PR: A Semiotic Analysis of The "Samantha Syndrome" and its Impact on Indonesian Female Public Relations Students

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzed the character Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City* which created a phenomenon called "Samantha Syndrome". "Samantha Syndrome" is defined as the misrepresentation of Public Relations as a glamorous job caused by Samantha Jones character. This paper examines how "Samantha Syndrome" applies to Indonesian female Public Relations students, using Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies, also Charles Peirce's semiotics approach. Analytical units for this research is scenes or clips from *Sex and the City* the movies that show the Samantha Jones' portrayal and behaviors as a Public Relations Executive, that leads to Samantha Syndrome based on Jane Johnston's findings. The scenes taken from online movie streaming website Netflix. To deepen the analysis, eight Indonesian female Public Relations students were interviewed to get their perspectives deeply about how The Samantha Syndrome theory implications to Indonesian female PR students towards their chosen profession.

KEYWORDS

Semiotics,
Students, Film,
Public Relations,
Perception.

INTRODUCTION

Dr Jane Johnston, an associate professor of Journalism and Public Relations from Bond University, Australia, created a phenomenon called "Samantha Syndrome". It is coming from analyzing the character Samantha Jones from *Sex and the City*. *Sex and the City Movie 1* and *Sex and the City Movie 2* (released in 2008 and 2010) are spin-off movies based on American rom-com drama series with the same title, *Sex and the City*, created by Darren Star for HBO. *Sex and the City* series air August 23 1998, for 6 seasons in total. *Sex and the City* revolves around the stories of 4 New Yorker women, which are Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker), Samantha Jones (played by Kim Cattrall), Miranda Hobbes (played by Cynthia Nixon), and Charlotte York (played by Kristin Davis). Both in the film and the series, one of 4 core characters, Samantha Jones is portrayed as a Public Relations Executive. Samantha Jones are described as a Public Relations professional with a very luxurious life. In *Sex and the City*, Samantha Jones always wears designer clothes, expensive stuff, always full of parties, and seems like she has very flexible work hours that she always able to ditch her work.

Quoted from Publicrelationsydney.co.au, an article posted by Noel Turbull in June 2012, discusses about the misconception of Public Relations by people. The article states that Dr. Jane Johnston, a professor of journalism and PR at Bond University, is the one who named the misconception of Public Relations as "The Samantha Syndrome". The Samantha Syndrome refers to the stereotypical way that the mass media, movies and TV industry have in portraying their female PR professionals character as a single, middle class, attractive woman, whose responsibilities are only attending events and parties, drinking cocktails, travelling, and hanging out with famous people for their work, that leads to the misperception that Public Relations is a glamorous job to the audience and among of them are female Public Relations students. The name "Samantha Syndrome" itself is inspired by Samantha Jones from *Sex and The City*. Samantha Jones' portrayal in *Sex and the City* as a Public Relations executive clearly brings such a huge influence to the audience, especially female audience. Johnston (2010), stated that Samantha Jones is the only woman of the group who is single who illustrates many post-feminist literature characteristics, who has entirely happy life as a single woman, and has full control of her personal, sexual, and business needs. It is not a surprise that Samantha Jones' character portrayal as a Public Relations Executive whose life is always fabulous has drawn huge responses as a PR role model among the audience, even from Public Relations students (Johnston, 2010).

Pre-research was conducted to find out information about current audience of *Sex and the City* movies among Indonesian female students in Public Relations. Researcher wants to know how relatable *Sex and the City* is to the current Indonesian female Public Relations students, even though the movies are not released recently. The pre-research is done by sharing a questionnaire targeted to 55 Indonesian female students who are currently majoring Public Relations. The result shows that 85,5% of the respondents, or 47 of the respondents have heard about *Sex and the City*. The rest 14,5%, or 8 respondents have never heard about *Sex and the City*. The result shows that *Sex and the City* is common among most Indonesian Female Public Relations students. Majority of the respondents have watched *Sex and the City*. 36,4%, or 20 of the respondents have watched the movies, 20% or 11 of the respondents have watched both the movies and the series, and 10,9% of the respondents, or 6 of them have watched the series. The rest, which is 32,7% of the respondents (18 people) have never watched *Sex and the City*. The result shows that mostly, Indonesian female students who are currently majoring in Public Relations have ever watched *Sex and the City*, and majority of them (36,4%) have watched the movies compared to the series. This shows that despite *Sex and the City* movies are not released recently (the first movie is released in 2008, the second movie is released in 2010), *Sex and the City*, mostly the movies, is still relatable and relevant to the Indonesian female students who are currently majoring in Public Relation.

Misperception about Public Relations can cause a misunderstanding about the real meaning and value of Public Relations itself because instead of understanding the true nature of Public Relations from the professionals or academics, audience, including future

or current PR students tend to believe more in what they see on the television or movies and how the mass media also entertainment industry portray Public Relations through stereotypical portrayal of Public Relations in movies and television instead. In *Sex and the City*, Samantha might be portrayed as a PR Executive who has a really fabulous and glamorous life. But the reality is not always the same with how the movies portray. There has not been any research on how stereotypical ways that the mass media, movie and television industry does in portraying women in Public Relations, more specifically based on Jane Johnston's "Samantha Syndrome", have impacted Indonesian female Public Relations' perspectives and attitudes toward their chosen profession. So, this research is focusing on Indonesian female PR students' perspective towards their chosen profession and whether or not they are impacted by Samantha Jones' character portrayal as a glamorous Public Relations.

METHOD

The applied method for this study is qualitative, using interpretative approaches through semiotic analysis to elaborate more about Samantha Jones' behaviors that create misconceptions on Public Relations. To be more specific, in this research, the material object is Samantha Jones character from *Sex and The City the Movie*. Analytical units for this research is going to be some scenes or clips from *Sex and the City the movies* that show the Samantha Jones' portrayal and behaviors as a Public Relations Executive, that leads to Samantha Syndrome based on Jane Johnston's findings. The scenes will be taken from online movie streaming website Netflix. Also, 8 Indonesian female Public Relations students are going to be interviewed in order to get their perspectives deeply on how The Samantha Syndrome theory implications to Indonesian female PR students towards their chosen profession. Eight participants above are chosen based on qualifications set by researcher in order to get a deep and complete information through the interviews that are going to be conducted for them. The qualifications are: Indonesian, female, currently studying Public Relations (age range 18 -22), have ever watched *Sex and the City* movies and remember the storyline, pay attention to Samantha Jones character, and understand the movies.

This research is focused on finding how Samantha Syndrome theory from Dr Jane Johnston applied to Indonesian female students in Public relations, and how the implications of Samantha Syndrome for them, and analyzing on scenes from *Sex and the City* movies scenes that show the misrepresentations of Public Relations image as a glamorous job. The analysis of Samantha Syndrome is aimed for college students who are studying Public Relations because as student, there are many expectations that are built about the real professional work of the field that they study that they are going to face and those expectations are not only obtained through classes in the university or college that they get, but also affected by the mass media including the way movies and tv series portray several profession.

Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies, also Charles Peirce's semiotics approach which elements, in this research, there are two main data sources, primary data and secondary data. Since this research uses a semiotic approach by Piercen, through researcher's analysis, some scenes from the movie will be broken down and identified based on the audio and visual. Also, researcher is going to do in-depth interviews with chosen participants. Primary data is the kind of data that is obtained directly from the source or field. In this resarch, the primary data is obtained through the first and the second movies of Sex and the City observation and documentation from an online movie streaming platform called Netflix. In-depth interview is also going to be conducted to selected participants in order to obtain data about Indonesian female PR students' attitudes toward their chosen profession based on Samantha Syndrome theory. In-depth interview is done to gain people's perspectives, opinions, feelings, and attitude about certain issue, and the information is going do be deep and detailed (Descombe, 2010, p. 173-74). While the secondary data is collected from mostly websites, e-book, pdf-book, previous researches, previous journals, also books that are relatable to this research topic, and can be used as additional information that support this research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Samantha Jones Character Analysis from Indonesian perspective with Semiotic

Samantha Jones represents a strong, bold, and independent woman, who has a strong opinion and she knows what she exactly wants. Her personalities represent modern women these days. But, as quoted in publicrelationssydney.co.au, Dr Jane Johnston defines Samantha Syndrome as how women in PR are mostly depicted as white, single, beautiful person, and PR profession is a job that only involves glamorous lifestyle of partying, travelling, planning events, meeting famous people, and all of those things are represented through Samantha Jones character from Sex and the City the movies, and based on a research from Gleeson (2010), Samantha Jones character creates expectations towards female Public Relations students in Australia University that PR is a glamorous job. Based on researcher' analysist, the way Samantha Jones is portrayed as a woman in Public Relations is very stereotypical as mentioned above. Most of the time, Samantha Jones is always seen to have a glamorous lifestyle because of her job as a Public Relations executive. Everything she does in her job is attending exclusive events, meeting famous people, shopping, travelling, etc. It is really shows being a Public Relations executive makes Samantha Jones able to have a lot of leisure times, but still get a high pay.

We can see it from the scene where Samantha comes to New York from L.A to meet her friends, just to attend an exclusive auction to get a diamond ring that she wanted, also, her shopping habit as her coping-mechanism shows that she has a strong financial ability though she is never seen to do hard work as a PR. Being a Public Relations executive also gives her a lot of privilege and easy access such as front row at New York Fashion Week not only for her but also for her best friends, paid business trip to Abu

Dhabi also for her and her best friends with luxurious hotel and accommodation, etc. Samantha Jones character is also not able to be professional as a Public Relations executive. She often can't differentiate between her professional work, and her own personal needs. She uses her job as the way to get sex with a person she wants, and she also seems like she doesn't care about her reputation as a Public Relations professional either by acting inappropriately in her office. The way Public Relations is portrayed through Samantha Jones character in *Sex and the City* movies might be harmful to the image of PR itself. As Gleeson (2013) and Johnston (2010) 's research that Samantha Jones creates wrong expectation about Public Relations as a glamorous job to the audience in Australia and the U.S and among of them are female PR students, this might also happen in Indonesia. Those wrong expectations about PR that are built among students or future PR students because of Samantha Jones character, might make them regret or trapped by their decision to take PR as their major If they don't feel the reality is the same with what is portrayed in movies.

Interview Result Analysis through Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies

As this research also uses interview method to 8 Indonesian female PR students to see their attitude towards their profession as PR student based on Samantha Jones character, researcher connects the interview result to Stuart Hall's cultural studies. Stuart Hall's cultural studies focuses on how the media has the ability to shift even shape audience's perspective on issues, one of it is through pop-culture (Griffin, 2012, p.349). To analyze the interview result, researcher see it from one of the concepts in cultural studies, which is the way how audience decode messages from television. Hall stated in cultural studies there are 3 ways of how audience; dominant code, negotiable code, and oppositional code. As for Nadita, she is inside the dominant code. She mostly accepts the whole concept of how Public Relations professional is portrayed through Samantha Jones character. She is really inspired to be like Samantha Jones later in her career, she feels relatable to the character, she believes that Samantha is the real representation of woman in Public Relations. While for Techa, Ninda, Chelsy, and Audrey, researcher can conclude that they are in the negotiable code since from their interview result, they are able to find the similarity between their own perspective on Public Relations and see the Public Relations that is represented through Samantha Jones character, but there are some differences that they also find, for example, as quoted from Techa, she said that she can relate to Samantha's job as a Public Relations, but she can't relate to Samantha's sex life. So is Ninda, Chelsy, and Audrey's about Public Relations as a glamorous job. Somehow, they agree that Public Relations is a glamorous job because it indeed involves meeting famous people, coming to events, and a Public Relations professional has to always look representative and attractive. But behind everything, there are also many struggles that a Public Relations have to go through based on their experience as a PR student for example; creating campaign, making communication strategy, and handling press releases. Dalilah, Putri, and Elma are the oppositional encoders. They tend to debunk or disagree with Public Relations representation through Samantha Jones character. They totally disagree that Public Relations is a glamorous job and people see Public Relations

in that way because it is only the outer part of a Public Relations professional who always seem to have good appearance, when actually Public Relations is a hard work that involves creative thinking and high professionalism.

From the interview result, half of the interviewees stated their opinion on how Samantha Jones is one of reason why they chose to major in Public Relations (Dalilah, Nadita, Chelsy, Audrey). Majority of the interviewees are actually concerned about how Samantha Jones character represents Public Relations in that way, since it may create misconception about the true nature of Public Relations itself. Especially to future PR students. Even some interviewees feel trapped because turns out their experience as a public Relations students is not the same with how they see it from Samantha Jones character. Most interviewees do not feel they are represented by Samantha Jones character as females in Public Relations, since Samantha always seems to have a good time and fabulous life because of her profession, while as PR students, interviewees feel they are burdened by many assignments that require high creativity and professionalism. As Elma said, unlike Samantha, Public Relations is a profession that needs deep thinking, and makes us sit in front of a laptop to finish our work.

Some interviewees talk about how Samantha Jones doesn't care about professionalism and her image when doing her work, and she always mixes work and her sex life, especially in the 2nd movie when she was in Abu Dhabi. Dalilah, Chelsy, and Putri see it as the lack of integrity of Samantha Jones to her work because she doesn't think about her reputation and it doesn't make her a good Public Relations professional. All interviewees agree that the reason why people think Public Relations is a glamorous job is because from the outside, Public Relations might seem like it is a job that only requires us to talk and communicate to famous people, and we have to look good all the time as a PR professional that is represented through the media (movie or tv series) for the sake of entertainment. Interesting statements came from Nadita and Chelsy. They both see the glamorous representation of Public Relations because of Samantha Jones character as a positive thing, because they see it to be something that attracts many people to join Public Relations industry. It is the opposite of most interviewees especially Elma, Dalilah, and Putri's perspective which is the glamorous image of Public Relations is actually misleading.

It can be understood that Samantha Jones character has influenced the participants in how they see their profession. For majority of them, Samantha doesn't really represent Public Relations professional in the right way, and they don't feel represented by Samantha Jones character. The glamorous image of Public Relations is also created wrong expectation about Public Relations for them after they experience being a PR student since in the movies, Samantha's job as a PR seems so easy and so fun, makes her able to have luxurious life without having to do hard job, while the majority of interviewees can't relate to it since they have so many assignments. All interviewees agree that Samantha is a bold, fashionable and independent woman. But most of the interviewees think

Samantha Jones is not professional in doing her work. Based on Stuart Hall's cultural studies, Samantha Jones character has created a certain idea or stereotype towards Public Relations profession that turns out is not in line with the reality based on the interview result. This is in line with what Stuart Hall said in his cultural studies, which is the media has a huge power in creating cultural dominant ideology or stereotype through pop culture, including movies. Samantha Jones, as a character from *Sex and the City* movies who is portrayed as a PR professional, is the tool of mass media to create a stereotypical image of Public Relations as a glamorous job that is constructed in the audience and among of them are Indonesian female Public Relations students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of 8 movie scenes from *Sex and the City* movie 1 and 2 using Pierce's semiotic approach, also primary data from interview to 8 Indonesian female Public Relations students applying Stuart Hall's Cultural studies to the next, this research concludes that Samantha Jones is a confident, sassy, and independent person who represents a modern woman. She always knows what she wants and is never afraid to tell everyone her opinion. But, when it comes to representing woman in Public Relations, she only portrays Public Relations profession from a very small angle, which is as a glamorous job where she is able to have a luxurious lifestyle because of her job, she can travel for free, go to exclusive events, get connection and easy access to restaurants all over the town, without having to do a hard job. She seems to have a lot of leisure time to hang out, and it makes Public Relations job seems like an easy job with high pay. It is in line with interview participants' perspectives about Samantha Jones character that Samantha Jones doesn't represent woman in PR in a proper way because she lacks of professionalism and integrity since she often mixes her personal needs and her professional job.

While this research also finds out whether Samantha Syndrome applies to Indonesian female students who study Public Relations by interviewing 8 Indonesian female Public Relations students, it can be concluded that Samantha Jones construct certain expectations to them about Public Relations that it is a glamorous job that only require us to have communication skill and good look, and will gives a lot of the benefits with easy job. Samantha Jones also became one of most participants' reasons why they chose to major in Public Relations, and most of them feel like the reality that they are going through as a Public Relations students is not the same with the expectation that they got about Public Relations. They have to do a lot of assignments that requires critical and creative thinking, and they don't have a lot of leisure time unlike Samantha. Most participant think that Public Relations is not as glamorous as how Samantha portrays it in the movies and mostly the reason why people think Public Relations is a glamorous job is because as of the appearance of a Public Relations professional that is usually always good and ready.

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