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Settling the Sexual Dust:
Portrayals and Restrictions of Female Sexuality
in 1980s Lifestyle Magazines

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Master of Arts in Women's History

Submitted in partial completion
of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College

May 2019

Abstract

This thesis explores the treatment of female sexual pleasure throughout the second half of the twentieth century, specifically through an analysis of women's lifestyle magazines. I begin my discussion with an overview of important historical moments from the 1950s through the 1980s, highlighting their relationship to social constructs of sex and pleasure. Then, I examine the role of psychoanalysis, consumerism, and the culture of self-help. These influences created a cultural dependency on self-improvement, which lifestyle magazines relied on to maintain reader dependency. Not only did the magazines proliferate cultural sexual norms, but they had the power to determine them as well. To further support this argument, I refer to the importance of sex and marriage manuals from the 1950s to the 1970s. Ultimately, I discuss popular lifestyle magazines in the 1980s, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, and *Playgirl*. I analyze specific articles and determine how their conversations on sex and pleasure appropriated liberal tones of the previous decades as a way to strategically reprioritize restrictive and conservative sexual practices. I examine the treatment of race, gender, and sexual orientation within the magazines. The conversations in these magazines emphasized monogamy and heteronormativity, while also prioritizing male sexual pleasure.

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It is safe to say that I would not have made it this far without my advisors, cohort, family, and friends. They offered infinite support, advice, and encouragement. They listened to me rant endlessly about misogynistic perceptions of female sexuality, which I am sure was equally annoying as it was informative.

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Last but definitely not least, thank you to my family and friends. To my parents, thank you for supporting me in every possible way. To my Mom, my passion for women's

empowerment comes from you. You inspire me every day with your endless strength and compassion. Thank you to my sister and my friends for their encouragement and companionship throughout this process. From supportive text messages to distracting nights with great conversations and a much-needed glass of wine, I couldn't be more thankful for your existence and support.

Setting the Sexual Dust:

Portrayals and Restrictions of Female Sexuality in 1980s Lifestyle Magazines

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Introduction

As the dust kicked up by the sexual revolution settles, celibacy is gaining some respectability, and several women I interviewed did admit to leading sexless lives.”¹

Sue Browder, “When He Doesn’t Want Sex,”
Cosmopolitan, June 1985

Browder’s article provides information on male sexual dysfunction and attempts to help female readers remedy and cope with their male partners’ lack of desire. She instructs female readers to consider their role in their partners’ dysfunction: Have they been too domineering? Must they be more sensitive to their man’s fragile ego? At the end of the article, Browder explains sometimes there is simply no cure for male sexual dysfunction, and in turn, women must find ways to deal with that reality. She suggests two options; an affair or celibacy. She disregards the possibility for dissatisfied women to vocalize their sexual frustration or to end the relationship

Discussions like Browder’s were common in women’s lifestyle magazines in the 1980s. They had a distinct influence on female readers and their perceptions of sexuality and pleasure. Consider the experience of Susan, twenty-eight-year-old white woman who recently married Greg. Susan was in her early twenties and attended college during sexual revolution in the 1970s. Yet, her strict Catholic upbringing led her to wait until marriage to have sex. While she remained a virgin until marriage, Susan was not oblivious of her need for sexual pleasure. She read erotic fiction, masturbated, and daydreamed about her future sex life. She could not wait to be intimate with her new husband, but, when the day finally came, she was less than satisfied. Greg held an erection long enough to quickly satisfy himself, leaving her confused and wanting more. As Greg

¹ Sue Browder, “The New Chastity,” *Cosmopolitan*, June 1985, 265.

gathered himself, she laid there thinking, “is this it?” She couldn’t help but remember the women in her novels, overcome as their male partners drove their bodies to fits of carnal frenzy, transcending into new worlds of ecstasy.

After the honeymoon, their already disappointing sex life took a turn for the worse. Greg never initiated sex and was seemingly unaffected by their lack of intimacy. Susan tried eagerly to arouse her husband; she wore sexy lingerie, wrote him explicit love notes, and woke him up with a surprise attempt at oral sex. No matter what Susan did, Greg disregarded her attempts without as much as a slight erection. Desperate for satisfying sex and true intimacy with her husband, Susan sought answers. She felt a sense of relief when she came across “When He Doesn’t Want Sex” while reading *Cosmopolitan* at her kitchen counter while her husband was at work. She read Browder’s list of “Nine Reasons for Male Lack of Desire That Aren’t Your Fault,” listing various options such as naturally low libido, fear of intimacy, and pressure to perform. At this point she was optimistic, and thought, “Maybe Greg suffers from the Madonna-prostitute syndrome, and just thinks I’m too good. Maybe he’s just really stressed at work! Or... Could he be frigid?” Although overwhelming, these sexual problems were possible to overcome.

However, her optimism was quickly disappeared when she read the next section titled “Relationship Problems: Anger, Power and Control.” In this section, Browder writes to Susan, “It would be nice to believe that when a man withdraws sexually, it’s never your fault, but unfortunately, at times, it is.” Immediately, a sense of anxiety rushes over Susan as she begins to believe that the entire problem, could in fact, be *her* fault. In this section, couple’s therapist Lonnie Barbach establishes that “Lack of interest in sex can be a powerful position. It can make the more interested partner feel not only deprived and powerless but unattractive and

undesirable.”² Here, Susan is led to believe that her assertive tries at seduction have left Greg feeling powerless. She begins to feel that she was too eager for her own sexual pleasure. Clearly, her husband was turned off by her forward, domineering approach. Susan blamed herself and believed that perhaps she would be happier if she gave up her search for orgasm and intimacy.

This article, further discussed in Chapter Four, represents the increasingly moralistic perspective of the 1980s. Similar to the 1950s and the Cold War, American society in the 1980s depended on important cultural events, such as the AIDS epidemic, to redefine socially acceptable sexual experiences. The government became progressively conservative in the 1980s with the presidency of Ronald Reagan and his close connections to the religious New Right. These factors all contributed to the reprioritization of the nuclear American family and depended on conservative sexual norms and heteronormativity.

Before the internet, Americans relied on other resources such as film, television, books, newspapers, and magazines to access information relevant to their lives and culture. Americans turned to popular culture, hoping to better understand sexual situations and relationships. Lifestyle magazines, and more specifically, women’s lifestyle magazines, discussed topics of sex and pleasure directly. Lifestyle magazines were a social and cultural determiner, they not only reproduced social norms on sex and pleasure but defined them as well. The magazines of the 1980s were even more capable of determining and reproducing sexual norms because they appropriated liberal ideas of sexual empowerment and autonomy. They used these ideas, which were more socially acceptable in the previous decade, to portray an accepting stance on sexual freedom. Yet, they simultaneously prioritized a conservative necessity for heteronormativity, monogamy, and sexual repression.

² Browder, “The New Chastity,” 227.

Appropriation of sexual liberation is clearly seen in another 1985 *Cosmopolitan* article titled, “Great Sex,” by Alexandra Penney. The subheading of the article says, “Can you possibly learn more about pleasuring and being pleased? The best-selling author of How to Make Love to Each Other brings bulletins from the erotic front that will have you both ashiver with tasty new delights.”³ By simply reading the title and subheading, a reader could easily assume that the article provides tips and information on how to increase sexual pleasure for both partners. Although this is true, Penney does so in a way that implies that truly great sex can only be experienced within heterosexual and monogamous romantic relationships.

Within the first few paragraphs, the author says, “Great sex is between two people, not just two bodies. It’s an *understanding of the other person*, it’s sex with that most overused, least practiced word: communication. Great sex is *intense, passionate, magical*. Great sex is, above all, *sex-with-love-and-romance*.”⁴ This discussion romanticizes sex and pleasure by maintaining that the greatest sex occurs within love and romance. Penney states the importance of communication, which does not necessarily occur only between two people in love. Yet, her emphasis on an intimate understanding the other person does imply a relationship that goes beyond a one-night-stand or a casual sexual encounter.

Although most mainstream magazines were geared towards white female readers, the use of the liberation movement to prioritize patriarchal and conservative sexual norms was not limited to a white audience. *Essence*, the lifestyle magazine created for Black American women, took a similar approach. The magazine was framed through Black power rhetoric and was situated as an empowering source for Black women. While it did enlighten and inspire Black women, it also instituted underlying patriarchal and masculinist tendencies. Black feminist

³ Alexandra Penney, “Great Sex,” *Cosmopolitan*, July 1985, 167.

⁴ *Ibid*, 167.

author Alexis Pauline Gumbs explains the juxtaposition of Black power in *Essence* when she says, “Though framed in the language of Black power, *Essence* actually privileged articles and advertisements that spoke to the nonrevolutionary tasks of looking good, finding a man, and keeping house, tasks conveniently attuned to the marketing and advertising of cosmetics and household products.”⁵ The tasks that Gumbs mentions contribute to a clear patriarchal agenda.

Throughout the first year of publication, the magazine headlined stories titled, “Black Man: Do You Love Me?” “Black Man: White Woman,” “What Black Men Want from Black Women.”⁶ These articles posed the idea that Black women’s primary concern should be finding and pleasing a man. Black female readers were encouraged to believe that their societal role is primarily sexual and reproductive.⁷ Editorials about politics, women’s power and Black consciousness, buried by articles that emphasized patriarchal ideals.⁸ Black nationalist tendencies within *Essence* attempted to constrict and control Black women’s bodies to adhere to their conservative standards.

Lifestyle magazines’ prioritization of sexual morality represented broader societal expectations that were common in 1980s American culture. This thesis looks directly at the discussions within these lifestyle magazines. It is not an attempt to understand how individual women engaged in sex and experienced pleasure, but rather to better comprehend the reinforcement of sex and gender norms in American culture through magazines. The conservative nature of the 1980s meant that previous ideas about sexual liberation were disregarded, especially due to their perceived threat on the stability of the white nuclear family.

⁵ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America* (University of Rochester Press: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 98.

⁶ *Ibid*, 98.

⁷ *Ibid*, 98.

⁸ *Ibid*, 98.

In an attempt to redirect Americans towards a more conservative lifestyle, monogamy, heteronormativity, and a more male-centric emphasis on sexual pleasure were reprioritized. Lifestyle magazines, as reflectors and producers of cultural attitudes, are therefore worthy of critical analysis and discussion, as a way to better comprehend how standards on sex and pleasure circulated throughout American culture.

Primary Source Methodology

Although a variety of secondary sources discuss women's lifestyle magazines, they prioritize advertisements and how magazines reinforced beauty and fashion standards. This research looks more specifically at the lifestyle magazines' treatment of sex, sexuality, and pleasure, overlooked in other studies. In order to particularly study content that discussed sex and pleasure, it was necessary to access printed and electronic versions of the magazines in their entirety, similar to how a reader would experience them in the 1980s. *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, and *Playgirl* focus on readers ranging from 17 to 30 years old, and all include a wide array of content pertaining to sex and relationships.

Considering the demographics of *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, and *Playgirl*, it makes sense that so much of their content discussed sex and relationships. In addition to the articles, each magazine included monthly advice columnists, who respond to questions and concerns from readers. The advice columns are particularly insightful because editors specifically chose which letters they would include. They portray the authors' and magazines' perspectives on acceptable concepts of sex. They also give a better understanding of trends over time because they are written by the same authors and discuss similar topics each month.

Initially, this thesis topic included a focus on men's lifestyle magazines. Conversations on sex and pleasure, intended specifically for male readers, could have provided particular insight on how sex was presented to men in comparison to women. Specifically, the assessment would have portrayed how society treats sexual men and women differently, upholding different social standards for each. However, within the many 1980s issues of *Esquire*, *GQ* and *Details*, there was barely a single mention of sex and pleasure. Although unfortunate, the nonexistent conversation is impactful in itself. Men's magazines did not need to include articles on sex because men were not socially conditioned to be concerned with their sex lives or sexual ability. Evidently, in the 1980s, the burden of ability and pleasure was placed solely on women.

Historiography

As mentioned, the social and political atmosphere of the 1980s veered considerably from that of the 1960s and 1970s. In a way, the 1980s were actually much more comparable to the 1950s, especially in terms of sex and what was considered socially acceptable. To support this argument, I begin Chapter One with a concise historical background on the treatment of sex, sexuality and pleasure from the 1950s to the 1970s. This depended on many historical sources that discuss social, political, and economic trends in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Additionally, Chapter Two and Three discuss the history of lifestyle magazines during the twentieth century. The historical background was established by historians before me, including Nancy Walker and Mary Ellen Zuckerman.

Historian Nancy Walker edited and collected primary sources for *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, published in 1998. Walker has written many books on women's lifestyle magazines including *Shaping Our Mothers' World: American*

Women's Magazines written in 2000. However, this book focuses on the middle-class ideal for American women and the insistence on the “happy homemaker” and domesticity of midcentury women.

Women's Magazines, rather, discusses how lifestyle magazines which were influenced by important moments of social change, including World War II and post-war society. Walker conducted five years of research on magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen*, among many others. She sifted through years of publications, and found common “thematic groups” throughout, including World War II, women and the workplace, marriage and motherhood, homemaking and consumerism, and fashion and beauty.⁹ She organizes her book by these themes, and includes an array of primary source evidence, mostly focusing on nonfiction articles. She argues that her work highlights magazines' philosophies and contents, an approach similar to that of this thesis. In that way, her work is extremely helpful as inspiration for methodological approaches, in addition to framing the historical background of lifestyle magazines. Although Walker does not include a great deal of content on *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, and *Playgirl*, her work still provides a basic understanding into the belief systems of 20th century women's lifestyle magazines.

Mary Ellen Zuckerman builds on Walker's work, discussing women's lifestyle magazines in the second half of the twentieth century. She historicizes women's magazines in her 1998 book, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1972-1995*. She pays close attention to the relationships between the magazines, and their publishers, advertisers, editors, writers, and readers. Her in-depth methodology contributes to an extensive history of lifestyle magazines and covers their transformation over time. She reviewed hundreds of

⁹ Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1998), vi.

women's magazines and conducted content analyses. Zuckerman's work pays particular attention to how magazines were influenced by historical events such as the World Wars and women's suffrage. She studied biographies and manuscripts of writers, editors, and publishers, and thoroughly researched the influence of advertising companies. She also conducted interviews with various people in the advertising and publishing industries.¹⁰ Zuckerman's content analyses focus more specifically on the Seven Sisters (Better Homes & Gardens, Family Circle, Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, McCall's Redbook, and Woman's Day), but her historical content and methodology have served as a great resource for this research. Despite the consumerist and reproduction of strict gender roles, Zuckerman argues that these publications "recognize and discuss female experience"¹¹, and "exude intimacy and a kind of sisterhood."¹² The book's outlook on women's magazines is positive, more so than any other source utilized here.

In addition to the histories on lifestyle magazines, this thesis also incorporates a discussion on the influence and importance of sex and marriage manuals. The relevance of the manuals highlights America's dependence on lifestyle magazines, and also helps contextualize American society's maintenance of strict specifications on sex and gender norms. In 1999, historians M. E. Melody and Linda M. Peterson published *Teaching America About Sex: Marriage Guides and Sex Manuals from the Late Victorians to Dr. Ruth*. In their introduction, they note that until recently, scholars and historians have been restricted in their discussions of sex, because of "inbred reserve or justifiable fears of tenure committees."¹³ Their book is

¹⁰ Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), xvi.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 241.

¹² *Ibid*, xvi.

¹³ M. E. Melody and Linda M. Peterson, *Teaching America About Sex: Marriage Guides and Sex Manuals from the Late Victorians to Dr. Ruth* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1.

positioned on this notion of American sexual ignorance and silence, stressing the medical influence and a conservative confinement of sex, while also analyzing sexual politics inherent to sex and marriage manuals throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries.

The authors acknowledge the goal of their book is to “discern the evolving pattern of permissions and prohibitions and to note mechanisms of enforcement, from God to electroshock... [and] accepts Foucault’s basic insight that ‘sexuality [is]... produced by the production of knowledge about it.’”¹⁴ Each chapter is dedicated to a decade, beginning with the 1880s all the way through the 1980s. They note important social moments in America and connect them to the messages portrayed in specific sex and marriage manuals popular in those moments. Most of the manuals were written by medical doctors, including Theodore Van de Velde and David Reuben, but they include a few by psychiatrists as well. The justification for their study of sex and marriage manuals contributes to the similar argument made in this thesis. They state,

Marriage/sex manual, in this sense, provide an example of the penetration of disciplinary power into the most intimate details of life. Power constructs of the gender binary and stigmatizes difference. In marking certain activities as approved, the advice literature makes the intimate visible and subjects private activities to scrutiny and classification. These norms become inscribed in consciousness and largely self-enforcing.¹⁵

Furthermore, Melody and Peterson find another trend in the “disciplinary power” of magazines with their connection between sex, reproduction and marriage. Their work looks specifically at sex and marriage manuals, but there is a fundamental relevance between manuals and lifestyle magazines, making Melody and Peterson’s work essential.

¹⁴ Melody and Peterson, *Teaching America About Sex*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

One year after the publication of Melody and Peterson's work, historian Jessamyn Neuhaus published her article, "The Importance of Being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender, and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963" in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. Her article builds on Melody and Peterson's book, using it to comprehend social trends that were influenced by certain manuals including Van de Velde's 1930 manual and Michael Gordon's manual published in 1971. Her reasoning for the importance of sex and marriage manuals also mirrors that of Melody and Peterson, noting that the "genre's longevity, the number of titles, and the sales figures for particular books do indicate the presence of such manuals in peoples' lives," but she additionally notes that they cannot "accurately reflect the lived experiences of men and women."¹⁶ Neuhaus also recognizes the elitist nature of these sex and marriage manuals, describing them as "commentators of the bourgeoisie."¹⁷

Neuhaus primarily argues that a noticeable change occurred within the sex and marriage manuals after World War II, noting that post-war manuals instituted a new level of ambivalence towards female pleasure. Additionally, she argues that in pre-war context, a lack of sexual pleasure was framed as a man's inability to lead a woman to orgasm. After the war the woman became responsible for her own pleasure. She states that "this shift did not signal the textual 'liberation' of women's sexuality, but rather the construction of women's sexuality as problematic, neurotic, and faulty."¹⁸ Her recognition of female sexual responsibility is supported with an additional mention of the medicalization of sexual pleasure and the preservation of male sexual ego, all of which are mentioned in the context of women's lifestyle magazines within this thesis. Neuhaus specifically notes the instillation of anxiety and insecurity over sexual norms,

¹⁶ Jessamyn Neuhaus, "The Importance of Being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender, and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (October 2000): 448.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 448.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 450.

which was created through 1950s sex and marriage manuals. Those same uncertainties were reestablished in 1980s sexual norms, and similarly manifested in lifestyle magazines.

The social preoccupations over sexual norms were partially due to the continued societal maintenance of sexuality and pleasure in American culture. Feminist historian Jane Gerhard has published multiple works on the continuation of sexual norms, especially those pertaining to female pleasure. In 2000 she published an article that looks back at the profound work of feminist Anne Koedt, and the influence she had over societal perceptions and treatment of female pleasure. “Revisiting ‘The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm’: The Female Orgasm in American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism,” was published in *Feminist Studies*, and uses Koedt’s 1969 article as “a moment of feminist sexual thought,” and discusses female sexuality by comparing meanings and perceptions before and after the emergence of Koedt’s article.

More expansively, Gerhard published *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought 1920 to 1982* in 2001. Both publications historicize female sexuality, building on Anne Koedt’s article, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm.” Gerhard began her research by rereading Koedt’s work, reading the sources mentioned in Koedt’s footnotes, and so on until “everyone I read was speaking to each other and I could understand all the intertextual references.”¹⁹ She discusses sex experts and their use of Freudian concepts of sexuality, particularly on female orgasm, and connects them to societal restrictions of female pleasure in the 20th century. Gerhard’s extensive research and analysis were irreplaceable, not

¹⁹ Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 10.

only as inspiration for my specific focus on female sexuality, but also in terms of the historical context in this thesis.²⁰

In an equally revolutionary and inspiring manner, Naomi Wolf's work created new insight into social and sexual norms and how they were continuously positioned in American culture. She published her first book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* in 1990 and then *Vagina: A New Biography* in 2012. *The Beauty Myth* was profoundly popular and inspired millions of American women in the 1990s. However, it looks at how traditional images of femininity and womanhood in the twentieth century afflict more modern women during the time the book was written. While *The Beauty Myth* provides a somewhat historical background, *Vagina* is positioned more so as a history of female sexuality.

In her introduction, Wolf discusses the process of writing *Vagina*. She states that when she began researching for the book, she thought, "if I looked at the vagina from these different historical perspectives, I would learn a great deal about women, both as sexual subjects and as members of communities."²¹ She specifies social constructs, and hoped to prove them as either true or "deeply inaccurate," yet, she found that all of them are only partially true, and "are thoroughly subjective and full of misinformation."²² While other work on female sexuality tends to scrutinize the medicalization of sex, Wolf seems to embody it. She highlights connections between the female brain and the vagina and mentions a "possibly crucial relationship of the vagina to female consciousness itself."²³ The first part of Wolf's book is dedicated to the ways that the vagina has been misunderstood throughout history.

²⁰ After reading Jane Gerhard's book on Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," and having the pleasure of discussing it with her in a first-year class in graduate school, I was inspired and intrigued by her other work. "Revisiting the Female Orgasm" and *Desiring Revolution* inspired the basis of this thesis.

²¹ Naomi Wolf, *Vagina: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 1.

²² *Ibid*, 1.

²³ *Ibid*, 3.

The second part of Wolf's book supports her argument for "how social control of the vagina, and of women's sexuality, has been a vehicle to control women's minds and inner lives throughout the history of the West."²⁴ This section was especially helpful in this thesis, providing another resource for understanding the situation of female sexuality in American history. The last two sections take a more contemporary approach, looking at modern pressures in American culture, and then brainstorming ways to "reframe our sense of the vagina."²⁵ Although inclusive, Wolf does specify that her work is primarily focused on heterosexual intercourse and heteronormative experiences of sexual pleasure. Additionally, she does not acknowledge differences in experience between white women and women of color. Wolf's work is important, nonetheless, because it takes a different approach to female pleasure by focusing specifically on mind-body connections and physiological understandings.

Chapter Outlines

The first chapter, titled "The Nuclear Family, Sex, and Gender Norms" lays historical groundwork necessary for the overarching arguments in the thesis. It covers important historical moments from the 1950s through the 1980s and links them to social constructs of sex and pleasure. Many of the sexual standards set for Americans during the second half of the twentieth century were established as a way to uphold the importance of the white nuclear family. Monogamy and heteronormativity, in addition to morally conscious sexual practices like abstinence until marriage, were prioritized in the 1950s and again in the 1980s.

Chapter One specifies historical moments from the 1950s to the 1980s that contributed to social standards on sex, gender, and pleasure. The goal of the chapter is to emphasize the power

²⁴ Wolf, *Vagina*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

of American society and highlight the interconnection between society, the nuclear family, and expected sex and gender norms. The historical background supports the thesis and recognizes how standards for American women's sexuality and pleasure were created and maintained through social intervention. Building on the discussion in Chapter One, Chapter Two looks more specifically at the ability for societal expectations' to actually infiltrate the lives of Americans. It begins with a discussion on the influence of psychoanalysis and continues with a discussion of America's reliance on sex and marriage manuals. The advice provided in these manuals directly reflects psychoanalytic beliefs and common social standards for sex and pleasure. A discussion of sex and marriage manuals is essential because they emphasize the relevance of sexual norms in the everyday lives of American couples, rather than just the existence of norms within a general societal consensus. Additionally, their popularity, reliance on the status quo, and treatment of sex and gender norms reflect those in lifestyle magazines.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of sex education in the United States. The United States has consistently lacked a comprehensive approach to sex education, which has contributed to the culture's dependence on other informational resources such as sex and marriage manuals and lifestyle magazines. Overall, the goal of Chapter Two is to establish lifestyle magazines' distinct cultural relevance and dependence, and furthermore, for their position as a source of socially acceptable concepts of sexuality and pleasure.

Chapter Three discusses lifestyle magazines more directly, beginning with the management and analysis of everyday life, which eventually incorporated sexual experience. American postmodernism took precedence in the 1960s and emphasized self-management and improvement. More specifically, psychoanalysts prioritized emotional connection and intimacy as the foundation for healthy sexuality. Together, psychoanalysts and postmodernists framed

healthy sexuality and intimacy as aspects of personal life that should be consistently critiqued and improved upon. Chapter Three uses theoretical work of Michel Foucault to illuminate sex experts' scientific authority and discusses on how that authority contributed to the medicalization of sexual dysfunction. Postmodernists' emphasis on self-improvement and the medicalization of sexual dysfunction contributed to a cultural anxiety over sexual performance.

The conversation in this chapter builds off the work of author Melissa Tyler, who uses Critical Management Studies to theorize lifestyle magazines and their relationship with sexuality. Magazine editors and authors used articles about sex and pleasure to prioritize certain sexual experiences deemed socially and morally acceptable. The theoretical framework for lifestyle magazines is followed with historical background of magazines in the second half of the twentieth century. As American culture changed during the mid 1960s, editors took a more modern approach in order to appeal to the new American woman. Chapter Three continues with historical discussions on *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, and *Playgirl*, and how they targeted and appealed to the revolutionized woman of the 1960s and 70s. Despite more liberal and open-minded perceptions of sex and pleasure, all three of the magazines were framed by a patriarchal influence. This continue throughout the 1980s and contributed to a lack of sincerity and understanding when approaching female sexual experience and pleasure.

Chapter Four looks at specific magazine articles in *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, and *Playgirl* published in 1985. Close readings provide insight into the many ways that conservative perspectives on female sexuality and pleasure were reinforced through a seemingly liberal rhetoric. To begin, the chapter discusses the influence of advice columns, which were specifically useful in creating a sense of insecurity and anxiety among female readers. Then, the chapter looks at editorial content and specific magazine articles such as "Fantasies: What They

Mean, What They Do for You,” “What Turns You On?” and “When He Doesn’t Want Sex.”

From a mere glance, the magazines would seem to provide female readers with tips and information on how to find sexual autonomy and increase their personal pleasure. However, the articles use more open-minded language while simultaneously prioritizing more conservative sexual morals. In all, this chapter provides the primary source evidence that this thesis is based upon. They highlight the magazines’ insistence on heteronormative, monogamous, and conservative sexual experience, and the prioritization of male sexual pleasure.

Overall, the goal of this thesis is to emphasize the social relevance of female sexuality, and to better understand how 1980s American culture, despite scientific and social advancements of sexuality and pleasure, has attempted to restrict and control the ways that American women experience sexual pleasure. Sex experts, social commentators, and conservative politicians saw female sexual pleasure as an important factor to the preservation of American morality, which was consistently prioritized throughout the twentieth century. American morality became even more prevalent in the 1980s, as an attempt to direct social norms away from the liberal mindset of the 1960s and 70s, and also in response to historical moments such as the AIDS epidemic and an increasingly conservative government. Magazines used sexual topics to establish interest and a representation of liberal modernity, and then provided information and advice that enforced a more conservative perspective. They confined readers’ ability to explore that sexual pleasure to conservative situations like love, romance, monogamy, and heterosexuality. Magazines were successful in this because they were able to inconspicuously reinforce the status quo by positioning themselves as empowering and trustworthy resources for women.

Chapter 1: The Nuclear Family, Sex, and Gender Norms, 1950-1989

That basic unit without which few societies can survive – the family – depends upon discipline and control of sexual behavior... Without such control, the family soon breaks down, and soon thereafter the whole society comes crashing down – like the mighty Roman Empire, which is no more.

William F. Sheeley, January 1966²⁶

As outrageous as psychiatrist William F. Sheeley's association between sexual exploration and the fall of the Roman Empire seems, attacks like these against sex and pleasure pervaded the 1950s and 60s. American society and concepts of sexuality and pleasure are deeply intertwined. While attempting to restrict the relationships and techniques in which sex and pleasure could be enjoyed, psychotherapists, sex and marriage counselors, authors, and public figures forced the discussion of sex and pleasure into the everyday and public lives of Americans.

This chapter outlines the intrinsic relationship between American culture, the nuclear family, gender norms and sex from the 1950s to the 1980s. Throughout the twentieth century, social and sexual expectations promoted monogamy, heteronormativity, and the nuclear white family. White women in particular, embraced moments of empowerment throughout the twentieth-century, particularly during World War II and the liberation movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. However, following those moments, more conservative and restrictive norms returned to mainstream culture. The cultural attitudes attempted to determine women's sexual autonomy and capability for pleasure by emphasizing how national stability and American morality depended on conservative sexual activity.

²⁶ Carolyn Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality: Sexual Citizenship in the Cold War Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1.

The Cold War, Consumerism, & Containment

The end of World War II signaled the rise of the United States as a global power. The United States and the Soviet Union, two prominent world powers, battled for global influence and control. This grew into what became known as The Cold War. In attempt to preserve capitalism in the U.S. and abroad, the U.S. government exclaimed their fear of communism. They rallied the country together in a social fight against the Soviets and claimed that the strongest weapon was a powerful and healthy (white) nuclear home. White, middle-class suburban existence was depicted as the ideal ‘American way of life’, and family-centered consumerism promised to alleviate uneasiness created by Cold War tensions. United States officials used these portrayals of American family life to show the rest of the world how wholesome, patriotic, and stable the country was.

The American government’s Cold War approach very clearly gave precedence to white middle-class American families and their consumerist lifestyle. It neglected all people of color and working-class individuals. Political scholar Andrew Grossman defines this situation as “segregated liberalism.”²⁷ He writes that the Federal Civil Defense Administration insisted that its defense plans protected all citizens. However, he acknowledges that in practice, “the agency ignored large groups of people, not only for operational reasons, but because planners viewed the social order in both racial and geographic terms.”²⁸ To the U.S. government, white, heterosexual middle-class people were the “ideal imperial subject.”²⁹ They were systematically prioritized, protected, and used to visually represent the national defense.

²⁷ Deepa Kumar, “National Security Culture: Gender, Race, and Class in the Production of Imperial Citizenship,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2157.

²⁸ Andrew Grossman, “Segregationist Liberalism: The NAACP and Resistance to Civil-Defense Planning in the Early Cold War, 1951-1953,” *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society* 13, no. 3 (March 2000): 479. Cited in Kumar, “National Security Culture,” 2157.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 2157.

The emphasis on social order is clearly visible through government backed propaganda films in the 1950s, such as “The House in the Middle.” The U.S. government depended on propaganda in order to maintain public support and convince Americans that their daily lives were imperative factors in national security.³⁰ “The House in the Middle” was a short documentary film created in 1954. It begins with visual shots of a picture perfect middle-class suburban neighborhood and then continues with images of a working-class home. A narrator describes the home as “rundown, neglected” and where “trash litters the house and yard.”³¹ Then, the film shows a nuclear test done on a row of three houses; two rundown and dirty houses on the outside, and a clean and freshly painted house in the middle. After the bomb, only the middle house is left standing. Considering the influx of white flight to the suburbs, the film offers a clear racial motivation. It suggests that the poor, working-class and people of color were “contaminants on the white national body.”³² In addition to the racism in the film, it also emphasizes the importance of suburban domesticity and commercialism in the Cold War defense.

The racist and elitist propaganda also contributed to social containment of Cold War society. Historian Carolyn Herbst Lewis argues that the goal of the U.S. government and businesses alike was to,

Contain panic through consumer comforts and defense preparations. Contain dissent through an emphasis on conformity and maintaining the status quo. Contain brewing shifts in gender roles and sexual morality by making marriage and family life patriotic duties. The white American home was the institution that promised to make this work.³³

³⁰Kumar, “National Security Culture,” 2157.

³¹ Ibid, 2159.

³² Ibid, 2159.

³³ Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 5.

The constant fear of the Soviet Union's power and the spread of communism left Americans desperate and eager to do what was necessary to stifle this looming threat. They came to believe that it was necessary for them to conform to acceptable social norms and white flight; now was not the time to question the ideals that promised to keep them and their families safe. White middle-class families migrated in mass numbers to the suburbs.³⁴ With rows of almost identical houses, owned by families insistent on conforming to expected American roles, these neighborhoods came to represent American 'normalcy' in the 1950s. This conformist setting was where masculine and feminine spheres were enforced, and high moral standards were expected.

It became the people's patriotic duty to contribute to the foundation for America's fight against the Soviets. Historian Elaine Tyler May explains the Cold War's emphasis on the American home; "Americans were well poised to embrace domesticity in the midst of the terrors of the atomic age. A home filled with children would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation."³⁵ Men were the breadwinners, while women remained in the house to create supportive and strong environments for their families. Both men and women were expected to have multiple children, who should be raised to be morally conscious men and women who will contribute to society in a positive way.

Talcott Parsons, a postwar sociologist, explained, "A mature woman can love, sexually, only a man who takes his full place in the masculine world. Conversely, a mature man can only love a woman who is... a full wife to him and mother to his children."³⁶ Acceptable sexuality and pleasure were directly linked to specific gender roles, heteronormative ideals and whiteness.

³⁴ From 1940 to 1970 four million Black families migrated to industrial cities in the North and West. Consequently, the fraction of white metropolitan households dropped from two-thirds to one-third. Cited in Leah Boustan, "The Culprits Behind White Flight," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2017.

³⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1999), 17.

³⁶ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 55.

The woman could only channel her sexual energy into marriage if the husband provided for the family and stood in command of the household. Likewise, when women obeyed societal expectations and played the part of dutiful and submissive housewife, it meant they could then focus their full energy on providing for their children and sexually pleasing their husbands.³⁷

Marriage and family life were seen as the basis for the ideological Cold War battle. Successful marriages meant that Americans were committed to their families and further, to their nation. Clearly, the prioritization of stable family life meant that strict heteronormativity and abstinence until marriage were encouraged and normalized in the 1950s. Containment and Cold War threat permeated American bedrooms and established themselves within female libido. As mentioned, a healthy marriage involved a woman who was dutiful and submissive to her husband, an expectation that followed her into the bedroom as well. According to the time, a marriage could only be truly successful if both the husband and wife experienced sexual satisfaction.³⁸ However, the ways in which women were able to experience sexual pleasure were restricted as a way to further enforce American morality.

1950s medical professionals depended on Freudian theories of psychosexual development to argue that how a woman experienced sexual pleasure represented her gender and sexual well-being. It was vital that a woman's sexuality "reinforced her sexual passivity," and was dependent on male participation.³⁹ Although pleasure was encouraged, the notion of sex as an act for conception was still prevalent. So, in order to contain female sexual pleasure strictly from male penetration and with the possibility of pregnancy, it was essential that the clitoris be disregarded. Medical professionals and psychoanalysts were aware of the power of clitoral

³⁷ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 84.

³⁸ Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 38.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 38.

orgasms; they did not require male penetration and could be achieved through masturbation or sexual experiences between two women. Through Freud's transfer theory, 1950s professionals were able to not only disregard the clitoris, but also to categorize it as an aspect of unfemininity and mental and physical dysfunction.⁴⁰ The vagina was described as the embodiment of female sexuality, because of its "passive, physical embrace of the penis."⁴¹ The negative connotation of the clitoris and the praise of the vaginal orgasm was a way to ensure a woman's sexual passivity and dependence on male sexual authority.

In 1953, sexologist Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Together with his 1948 study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* they were known as The Kinsey Reports. Kinsey argued that men and women's sexuality were actually incredibly similar, despite social norms of the time. He countered Freudian restrictions on female sexuality, dismissed the validity of the vaginal orgasm, and legitimized the clitoral orgasm. Although he did not outwardly validate homosexuality, he did state that both men and women were sexually restricted by society's heteronormativity and reproductive norms and argued that humans sexual response expanded beyond hetero sexual stimulation.⁴² Kinsey's report did establish new precedence for female pleasure and sexual pleasure beyond heteronormativity. Yet, it is important to note that he represented American womanhood and female sexuality as universally white and middle-class, making no mention of women of color whatsoever.⁴³ Ultimately, Kinsey's work provided information that countered the 1950s' emphasis on sexual containment.

⁴⁰ The transfer theory argued that in order for a girl to fully transform into a woman, she had to transfer her focused erotic zone from her clitoris to her vagina. A woman who continued to seek sexual pleasure through clitoral stimulation was going against her "biological, social, and sexual destiny." Cited from: Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 40.

⁴¹ Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 41.

⁴² Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 57.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 56.

Though it was not until the mid 1960s that his work found its way into mainstream American thought.

Kinsey's report was revolutionary in the way that it discussed sexual pleasure. However, it followed 1950s societal expectations by romanticizing pleasure and specifying sex only within marriage. Kinsey reported that 63 percent of women reached orgasm in their first year of marriage, and 81 percent reached orgasm by their fifteenth year of marriage.⁴⁴ These statistics infer that women are more likely to experience orgasm within a marital relationship. Historian Jane Gerhard notes, contrastingly, that Kinsey did not actually specify the behaviors that led these women to orgasm. She finds that many of the interviewed women experienced orgasms infrequently.⁴⁵ Additionally, Kinsey argues that much of women's sexual stimulation and satisfaction comes from "social aspects of a sexual relationship." This included intimacy, love, and simply knowing that men experienced pleasure.⁴⁶ His statistics and claims for female sexual pleasure, however groundbreaking, still concluded that female sexual pleasure was best experienced within monogamous and heterosexual relationships.

When discussing the regulation of sexual pleasure and its role in Cold War society, it is impossible not to mention Joseph R. McCarthy. The Wisconsin senator made a name for himself during the 1950s as the leading force behind the "Red Scare," the hysterical fear that communism was infiltrating the State Department and eventually every aspect of American life. In February of 1950, McCarthy gave an infamous speech at a Republican women's club in West Virginia. He held up a piece of paper and confidently stated, "I have here in my hand a list of 205 that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and

⁴⁴ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 59.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 60.

who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy of the State Department.”⁴⁷ By this time, Americans were well aware of the apparent threats that communism entailed, but because McCarthy claimed to have tangible evidence, containing hundreds of names of apparent Soviet sympathizers and/or spies in the State Department, the fear skyrocketed.⁴⁸

McCarthy continued on his concerted campaign when he presented his findings on the Senate floor. His political rhetoric connected communist ties to sexual deviance, arguing that homosexual federal employees were under greater risk of being targeted by Soviets, who would use sexual orientation to blackmail them into providing government secrets.⁴⁹ The U.S. State Department’s Deputy under Secretary at the time, John Peurifoy, stated under Congressional questioning that the State Department had dismissed over a hundred employees due to claimed communist ties. Ninety-one of them were homosexuals.⁵⁰ Historian David K. Johnson argued that Peurifoy’s testimony was actually part of a larger Republican operation that intended to reshape McCarthy’s attack on communism into a more “politically promising issue:” homosexuals in the U.S. Government.⁵¹ Homosexuality within the State Department meant more than just a threat of political loyalty. State officials believed that homosexuals were weak, due to their inability to refrain from improper and immoral sexual indulgences. ‘Weak’ sexual deviancy contributed negatively to America’s incessant need to be seen as a genuine threat to the Soviet

⁴⁷ Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present, Revised and Updated* (New York: Alyson Books, 2006), 234.

⁴⁸ The list of federal employees with communist ties that McCarthy claimed to possess was questioned by the media, and he later edited it to contain only 57 risks, then 81. However, by that time the damage was done.

⁴⁹ David K. Johnson, “America’s Cold War Empire: Exporting the Lavender Scare” in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression* ed. Meredith L. Weiss, Michael J. Bosia (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 56.

⁵⁰ Johnson, “America’s Cold War Empire,” 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 57.

Union. Additionally, homosexuality was considered immoral, and conflicted with the strong nuclear family imposed onto American society.

Containment and control of sexual behavior was the theme of this time period. In the midst of the heightening fear of communism and the atomic bomb, government officials and psychotherapists both wholeheartedly believed that communism was directly linked to moral weakness and sexual degeneracy.⁵² In what became known as the “Lavender Scare,” tensions were amplified for all queer Americans. Gay men and lesbians, in addition to alcoholics, social deviants, and any person with even the slightest tie to the Soviet Union, were identified as “degenerates” and “security risks,” and were subject to dismissal from their government jobs.⁵³ When Eisenhower took office in 1953, he signed an executive order that codified “sexual perversion” as grounds for dismissal.⁵⁴ In the first two years following Eisenhower’s order, 400 federal employees per year were either terminated or resigned as a result of “sexual perversion.” Despite a lack of evidence to support the claim that homosexuality posed serious security risks, author David K. Johnson estimates that over 5,000 gay or lesbian federal employees lost their jobs in the early Cold War years.⁵⁵

The State Department initiated an in-depth investigation intended to identify homosexuals, which included a compiled master list of three thousand alleged homosexuals. During interviews with possible new State Department employees, investigators took note on “any unusual traits of speech, appearance and mannerisms” that could indicate sexual perversion.⁵⁶ They checked credit and police records, and even incorporated ‘guilt by

⁵² Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 86.

⁵³ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 239.

⁵⁴ Johnson, “America’s Cold War Empire,” 58.

⁵⁵ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 238.

⁵⁶ Johnson, “America’s Cold War Empire,” 60.

association,' which noted if the applicant had any friends or associates that were known homosexuals. Even further, any person who was identified as a possible homosexual was subject to surveillance, to determine if they attended "known homosexual places."⁵⁷ By 1953, the Eisenhower administration created "Miscellaneous M Unit," a special investigative branch intended to handle all homosexual and morality cases. Possible homosexuals were regularly subjected to polygraph tests and often even coerced into confessing to sexual immorality.⁵⁸ Johnson labels the security against homosexuality during the Cold War as, "a de facto sex squad."⁵⁹ Investigators were given training sessions on how to successfully identify homosexuals, and were then sent to every branch of the U.S. Government in search of sexual deviancy.

In addition to the gross discrimination against homosexuality in the federal government, many state governments took on similar witch-hunts. Gay and lesbian bars were consistently raided and hundreds of patrons arrested and charged with misdemeanor crimes.⁶⁰ Faculty and students at Florida State University underwent intense interrogations without the opportunity of advice of counsel, as the Florida Senate Committee searched for rumored homosexuals on campus.⁶¹ In Iowa, after the horrendous sexual murders of a young boy and infant girl, twenty gay and bisexual men, unrelated to the crime, were taken against their will to a mental hospital to undergo treatment for their sexuality.⁶² It was inevitable that this government-initiated discrimination would cause social backlash against the homosexual communities across the

⁵⁷ Johnson, "America's Cold War Empire," 60.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 60.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 60.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 248.

⁶¹ Johnson, "America's Cold War Empire," 62.

⁶² "WILL HOMOSEXUAL ACTS CEASE TO OCCUR AMONG IOWA'S 2,700,000?," *ONE*, February 1956. In Miller, *Out of the Past*, 249.

United States. Many gay men and lesbians, out of fear of job security, physical safety and social status, hid their sexual identities from the outside world.⁶³ They relinquished their personal happiness and sexual pleasure to conform to heteronormative standards in order to keep their jobs and protect themselves from ostracization by an increasingly homophobic society. The stigma of gay men and lesbians as ‘perverts’ permeated American culture and was reinforced through heteronormative expectations and the insistence on strong, nuclear American families.

Through McCarthy’s actions, sex became an institutional part of combating the Cold War threat, as clearly evident in the U.S. government’s constructed connection between communism and ‘sexual deviancy.’ The definition of ‘sexual deviancy’ extended beyond homosexuality, and incorporated any person who did not conform to gender expectations or for those who did not practice sexual restraint outside marriage.⁶⁴ It was presumed that any age appropriate and able individual who chose not to marry and have children risked being identified, as Tyler May describes it, “perverted, immoral, unpatriotic, and pathological.”⁶⁵ They were often shunned by their community and even investigated by the government.⁶⁶

For married couples, mainstream logic meant conforming to rightful gender roles. It argued that satisfying sex lives were more likely to have happy marriages, which lead to stronger family homes and thus, a stronger Cold War defense. The fear of sexual deviancy, specifically among women, became incredibly evident in a Massachusetts Society for Social Health meeting in 1951. The meeting featured a panel discussion titled, “Social Hygiene in Total Mobilization,” which included physicians, clergy, social workers, military officers, and civil defense

⁶³ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, xxiii.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 86.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 83.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 83.

administrators.⁶⁷ The panel expressed a concern over the escalating expression of female sexuality and a growing number of single and married women in the workforce. They argued that “inside as well as outside the home, women who challenged traditional roles placed the security of the nation at risk.”⁶⁸ Despite the meeting’s profound warnings over career-focused women, many women maintained their positions in the workforce. This further increased public anxiety over national stability. Americans began to fear that white working women would opt out of motherhood.

Containment and control invaded American bedrooms and imposed strict regulations on intercourse and arousal. In addition to homosexuality, moral weakness and sexual degeneracy included any sexual pleasure that did not contribute to the possibility of conception. White middle-class couples were expected to support the national defense by following strict gender roles, having multiple children, and ensuring a happy and secure home. These expectations were reproduced by structuring sex as a way to create and maintain strong and gender conforming American homes.

The Liberation Movement & The Clitoral Comeback

The attitudes of the 1950s, which depended on sexual repression, containment, and strictly enforced gender roles, became progressively outdated as the 1960s emerged. The birth control pill became available in 1960, allowing a sexual freedom without overarching fear of conception. Post-war containment was questioned by a new generation of young adults, who found enjoyment and pleasure in expressing themselves more freely. The importance of autonomy, wholeness and selfhood emerged, and with it came sexual freedom and expression in

⁶⁷ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 86.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 87.

the public world.⁶⁹ Feminists, scholars and activists of the time deeply impacted the revolution; they politicized sexuality and associated social restrictions with greater influences of social repression. Activists and scholars built off the work of radical psychoanalysts such as Herbert Marcuse, who provided a “political analysis of pleasure and its role in overturning the mind-numbing effects of conformity.” Together they “promoted sexual expressiveness, unencumbered by the ‘hang ups’ of romance and monogamy, as a key value of the new society.”⁷⁰ Feminists and activists emphasized and celebrated the body, liberating it from post-war containment and repression. Their work on the constructs of (white) sexuality and gender and origins of patriarchy provided a new outlook on the expectations and roles of white middle-class women in the US.

One of the most influential feminist texts on the roles of women and images of femininity was Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. Although implicitly intended for white and middle-class women, Friedan built a platform that publicly highlighted the oppressive roles and expectations that had been forced on all women since the early 1900s, but particularly from the 1940s on. Her book has continued to influence and mobilize feminists throughout the 21st century. Friedan was born in 1921 and graduated from Smith College in the midst of World War II. Her experiences as a young adult were directly influenced by the major growth of the middle-class and postwar consumerism, observing firsthand the inflictions placed on middle-class suburban housewives and the deep unhappiness they endured. Although Friedan recognizes her position as a housewife in *The Feminine Mystique*, she actually had a much more liberating role as a college graduate and successful journalist before becoming a wife and mother.⁷¹ Her

⁶⁹ Jane Gerhard, "Revisiting: The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm: The Female Orgasm in American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 2 (2000): 463.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 464.

⁷¹ Gail Collins, "Introduction" in *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2013), xvi.

experiences gave her the unique position of simultaneously experiencing and critiquing the roles of the American housewife and the many restrictions and expectations that coincided with them.

Friedan's work covered a variety of social issues on femininity and womanhood, but most beneficial to this discussion was her work on female sexuality. She was troubled by how strictly middle-class women were so restricted to domesticity and motherhood, roles that she claimed were inhibiting the true potential of womanhood. Friedan argued that because of this domestic restriction, women had become obsessed with sexual performance. She went so far as to recognize sexual performance as the "only frontier open to women."⁷²

In her chapter titled "The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud," Friedan blamed Freud directly for replacing women's human potential with overly sexualized views of femininity. She did not attempt to discredit him completely: she expressed her gratitude for his work on psychoanalysis and the benefits it has provided for American culture. She dove deep into Freud's mind and early life, associating his theories with his personal relationships and specific life experiences. She continued with a discussion on his influence throughout the 20th century and worked through many of his theories, which she argued were all deeply embedded with his "traditional prejudice against women."⁷³ She concluded her chapter with a powerful statement on the influence of Freud,

The Feminine mystique, elevated by Freudian theory into a scientific religion, sounded a single, overprotective, life-restricting, future-denying note for women. Girls who grew up playing baseball, babysitting, mastering geometry – almost independent enough, almost resourceful enough, to meet the problems of the fission-fusion era – were told by the most advanced thinkers of our time to go back and live their lives as if they were Noras, restricted to the doll's house by Victorian prejudice. And their own respect and awe for the authority of science – anthropology, sociology, psychology, share that authority now-kept them from questioning the feminine mystique.⁷⁴

⁷² Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 88.

⁷³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2013), 132.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 138.

This paragraph, with the recognition of smart and proactive young girls and the unavoidable influence of science, had the power to inflict a strong and emotional response on readers, even decades later.

In her chapter titled “The Sex-Seekers,” Friedan discussed her interviews with various housewives, gynecology and obstetrician specialists, and psychologists, which led to her realization of the “exaggerated unreality about sex today.”⁷⁵ She examined the work of Alfred Kinsey, and his recognition of America’s growing obsession with sex and fantasy. Friedan attributed American housewives’ preoccupation with sex to growing popularity of sexually explicit novels, magazines, and sex manuals. She encouraged women to create identities for themselves outside domesticity, motherhood, and sex, arguing it as the only way for American women to find self-fulfillment and actualization.⁷⁶

Friedan’s work shed light on how exactly society was able to influence women’s thoughts and experiences with sex and pleasure. Three years later, a more scientific look on sex and pleasure was established. Sexologists William Masters and Virginia Johnson emerged in 1966 with their progressive and controversial study, *Human Sexual Response*.⁷⁷ Rather than a study with a question-and-answer and discussion-based format, Masters and Johnson took a more scientific and technical approach. They wanted to understand how male and female bodies reacted during orgasms induced by masturbation by hands, fingers or vibrator, sexual intercourse

⁷⁵ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 311.

⁷⁶ As a 21st century sex-positive feminist, it’s difficult for me to totally agree with Friedan and her insinuation that women cannot be sex-seekers and find self-fulfillment and empowerment outside the home simultaneously. In addition to her idea that the overly sexual woman made it difficult for both men and women to truly embody their gender identities and enjoy genuine sexual love together. However, I recognize and understand the point she attempted to make, and I appreciate her work, which influenced generations of feminists and contributed to the politicization of female sexuality that occurred in the mid 1970s.

⁷⁷ Masters was a MD specializing in obstetrics and gynecology, and Johnson initially worked as Masters’ research assistant, where he trained her, and they eventually worked together to produce this study. Cited from Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press), 64.

with the woman on her back, sex with the man on his back, stimulation of just the breasts with no genital contact, and vaginal penetration with an “artificial coition,” named Ulysses.⁷⁸ Ulysses was a probe developed by Masters and Johnson with a camera and light at the end, and allowed them to be the first to see inside a woman’s vagina during orgasm.⁷⁹ After conducting their study using 694 participants and observing thousands of orgasms, Masters and Johnson developed a “human sexual response cycle.” The development included a four-phase cycle for understanding consistencies between male and female orgasms.⁸⁰ They associated the role of the clitoris to that of the penis. They intended this to be an updated portrayal of heterosexuality.

Although Masters and Johnson claimed their work brought new parallels of similarity between female and male orgasms, much of their data countered that exact position. In a section dedicated entirely to female sexual response, Masters and Johnson described the physiological and psychological factors of the female orgasm and compared them to male orgasmic reactions. In their discussion on the physiologic factors in the female orgasm, Masters and Johnson pointed out distinct differences between male and female orgasms. They state,

Aside from ejaculation, there are two major areas of physiologic difference between female and male orgasmic expression. First, the female is capable of rapid return to orgasm immediately following an orgasmic experience, if restimulated before tensions have dropped below plateau-phase response levels. Second, the female is capable of maintaining an orgasmic experience for a relatively long period of time.⁸¹

The physiologic differences, mentioned above, were discovered for the first time by Masters and Johnson. Never before had scientists accessed such intimate details on the physiologic, psychologic, and social factors of the human orgasm.⁸²

⁷⁸ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 66.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 67.

⁸¹ William H. Masters and Virginia Johnson, “Human Sexual Response” in *Sexual Revolution* ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), 81.

⁸² Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 69.

Masters and Johnson insisted that their research was “color-blind,” meaning that their findings were inclusive of all sexually active humans, regardless of race, class, country of origin, culture or religion.⁸³ However, they only included eleven Black couples in their sample, out of a total participation of 276 couples.⁸⁴ There were fundamental issues with their study, yet their work was revolutionary and continues to stand as one of the most important works on female orgasm today.

In 1970, Masters and Johnson published another study titled *Human Sexual Inadequacy*. According to sociologist Janice Irvine, Masters and Johnson’s 1970 work situated sex therapy as “the most visible, lucrative and widespread enterprise of sexology.”⁸⁵ Their study identified several categories of sexual dysfunction, including premature ejaculation, primary and secondary impotence, and ejaculatory incompetence for men. For women, the dysfunctions included dyspareunia (painful intercourse), vaginismus (tightening of the vaginal muscles that prohibits penile penetration), and several orgasmic dysfunctions.⁸⁶ These new recognized problems were later adopted by the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R)*, which further established them as genuine disorders.⁸⁷ Many men and women were ‘cured’ by the mere existence of this type of sexual education provided by Masters and Johnson, and rendered many difficulties as obsolete by the end of the 1970s. This caused new sexual difficulties to emerge, with sexologists and psychoanalysts diagnosing new issues in a way that

⁸³ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 66.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 66.

⁸⁵ Janice M. Irvine, “Regulated Passions: The Invention of Inhibited Sexual Desire and Sex Addiction,” *Social Text* 37 (Winter 1993): 204.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 204-205.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 204.

proliferated conservative sexual and gender constructs.⁸⁸ The cultural and social significance of sex therapy and sexual dysfunction is further discussed in Chapter Three.

In a direct attack on Freud and his misogynistic theories, Radical feminist Anne Koedt published *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* in 1970. Her work was groundbreaking, and worked from Masters and Johnson to advocate for women to use new techniques for more intense sexual pleasure.⁸⁹ Koedt was concise in her essay; She explains Freud's theory of the vaginal orgasm, then swiftly debunks it by discussing his lack of evidence and the anatomical evidence supporting her argument, offering an explanation on why men insist on maintaining the vaginal orgasm. She sympathetically expresses how destructive the myth was to women's mental health, stating,

Again, perhaps one of the most infuriating and damaging results of this whole charade has been that women who were perfectly healthy sexually were taught that they were not. So in addition to being sexually deprived, these women were told to blame themselves when they deserved no blame. Looking for a cure to a problem that has none can lead a woman on an endless path of self-hatred and insecurity. For she is told by her analyst that not even in her one role allowed in a male society – the role of a woman – she is successful. She is put on the defensive, with phony data as evidence that she'd better try to be even more feminine, think more feminine, and reject her envy of men. That is, shuffle even harder, baby.⁹⁰

Koedt's frustration is clearly evident in this passage. She acknowledges the negative role that psychoanalysts played in the promotion of the vaginal orgasm, directly attacking the sex and marriage manuals of the time. She, and many other feminists, argued that the idea of the vagina as the "locus of true femininity" was preposterous, and simply a patriarchal plot to contain female sexuality for their own benefit.⁹¹ In 1991, progressive feminist Naomi Wolf explains the

⁸⁸ Irvine, "Regulated Passions," 205.

⁸⁹ Jeffrey Escoffier, *Sexual Revolution* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003), 100.

⁹⁰ Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" in *Sexual Revolution* ed. Jeffrey Escoffier (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003), 106.

⁹¹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 177.

patriarchal scheme, “If women could be persuaded of this... then they would be brainwashed into dependency on men – and men would have carte blanche to be lazy, and to ignore women’s needs for attention to the clitoris.”⁹² The concept of the sexually lazy man was one that many American women could relate to. It existed beyond the bedroom and represented the domestic role that many women, working and homemakers, were forced to take on. Koedt’s essay was wildly popular which meant that, whether men liked it or not, women were becoming increasingly sexually aware.

Sex educator Shere Hite published the book *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality* in 1976. She worked directly with women and documented their experiences with sex, with little to no emphasis on medical and anatomical language. Rather than forcing expectations on women about what they *should* be experiencing during intercourse, which was common in Freudian sex manuals and books prior, she listened to women’s experiences and let them speak for themselves. Her work directly challenged the work of Freudians. She concluded that a majority of women she worked with (two-thirds to be exact) were unable to experience orgasm solely through penetration.⁹³ Hite’s book was eye-opening and profound: it allowed the majority of women reading sex manuals or receiving psychoanalytical treatment for sex issues to realize that they were seeking a cure for a ‘disease’ that never actually existed.

While most of these sex experts did not outwardly exempt women of color from their work, they did not consider the specific sexual experiences that Black women endured. Historically, the treatment of Black women, in terms of sex, differed drastically from that of white women. Throughout the eras of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, Black women were sexually attacked and abused by white men. Historian Danielle L. McGuire defines this

⁹² Wolf, *Vagina*, 177.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 176.

horrific abuse as “a ‘weapon of terror.’ It was used to dominate the bodies and minds of African-American men and women” by white men in order to sustain their white patriarchal power.⁹⁴ The white men who engaged in the violence were seldom held responsible for their actions. For the few white men who were charged, the trials were systematically in favor of the abusers, and convictions were put the hands of all white and male juries.

Despite the patriarchal attempt to intimidate and repress Black women, victims of abuse did not remain silent. Throughout the twentieth century, Black women such as Recy Taylor and Joan Little told their stories and raised public awareness; they published their experiences in local and national NAACP reports, newspapers, and letters to the Justice Department.⁹⁵ Civil rights campaigns were held in countless cities across the country, they forcefully denounced the sexual violence and interracial rape that so many endured. Black women were stereotypically portrayed as innately promiscuous, a characteristic that was used by white men to justify their actions. The Jezebel stereotype, in addition to the innately racist American society, caused Black women to feel apprehensive about vocalizing their abuse.

The label of sexually abused Black women as predatory Jezebels is clearly represented in the story of Joan Little. In 1974, Little escaped jail after murdering a white guard out of self-defense after he raped her. Little was charged with first-degree murder. If found guilty, she would face the death penalty.⁹⁶ Many of the white people in the community quickly assumed that Little had lured and seduced the guard into her cell and murdered him so she could escape. As expected, the prosecutor, William Griffin, situated Little as “a seductive and calculating killer

⁹⁴ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), xviii.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, xix.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 246-247.

who murdered [the guard] as part of a plot to escape.”⁹⁷ There was an incredible amount of public support for Joan Little. Women’s rights and civil rights groups around the country came together in support of her innocence. After a long and excruciating trial, the jury voted to acquit Joan Little. After the trial, Joan Little told reporters that testifying was the “toughest thing,” saying, “I spent many months trying to force it from the bottom of me, to try to tell people what happened. I knew people would think that I must have enticed him.”⁹⁸ Joan Little’s experience is just one example, out of millions, where a Black woman was sexualized as a justification for their abuse and lack of autonomy. While Black and white women alike fought for their right for sexual autonomy, Black women endured a lack of autonomy that went beyond a lack of sexual pleasure. They were fighting for their safety and their lives. American Black women had the courage to speak out, despite possible consequences, to force society to recognize the systematic abuse they endured because of nothing more than the color of their skin.

An entire generation of inspiring scientists, feminists, and activists encouraged more liberal mentalities on sex and pleasure. Each of them brought noteworthy ideas and scientific data that provided Americans with a new outlook on sex, autonomy and personal pleasure. In addition to individuals that contributed to a more liberal society in the 1960s and 70s, there were also many profound historical turning points. This included the 1972 Supreme Court case, *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, which established the right for unmarried couples to possess contraception and the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision to legalize access to abortions. These decisions further allowed Americans to freely indulge in sexual pleasure and provided women with even greater autonomy.

⁹⁷ McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, 265.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 277.

The Sex Wars, Feminist Backlash, & The AIDS Epidemic

At the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, growing divisive opinions caused greater disconnect among feminists. The two most explosive issues causing the feminist divide regarded pornography and sadomasochist (S/M) relationships. The ongoing disagreement created two separate groups that harbored two very different opinions; anti-porn and pro-sex. These clashing ideologies are often referred to as the “sex wars.” In what began as a simple acknowledgment of the use and harm of sexualized violence in mainstream media and popular culture, the sex wars quickly transformed into an irreconcilable dispute among feminists.

In the mid-1970s, as the sexual revolution was coming to an end, many feminists began to feel as though the revolution had actually done very little to create a more balanced power dynamic between men and women.⁹⁹ Also during this time a more prominent discussion on sexual violence emerged. Feminists began to question why, even after such public and radical fights for equal rights and sexual autonomy, men continued to use patriarchal constructs of sex and power to situate control over women. Susan Brownmiller brought the problem of sexual violence to light with her book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* published in 1975. She set the tone for 1980s radical feminism and used Second-Wave feminist beliefs to explain how American culture created standards for male superiority and allowed men to use that superiority over women. She stated that American culture simultaneously enforced female inferiority and taught women to be submissive to patriarchal aggression.¹⁰⁰

American culture’s standards for male superiority and aggression, presented by Brownmiller, were arguably visible through the growing popularity of the commercial sex

⁹⁹ Lyn Comella, “Review: Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars” in *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (Feminist Studies, Inc.: 2015), 443.

¹⁰⁰ Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, 175.

industry. More overtly sexualized images of women *and* men were publicly displayed through all areas of popular culture. Feminists specifically targeted media that they felt portrayed American culture's "inability to take women's pleasure seriously."¹⁰¹ This included content such as a *Hustler* cover of a naked woman held upside down and being put through a meat grinder, Rolling Stones' *Black and Blue* advertisement of a woman beaten and bruised, tied up with rope, and her legs spread wide, and films such as *Deep Throat*.¹⁰² Feminists used these examples to highlight how violence against women was not only accepted, but proliferated throughout American culture.

Many feminists were growing tired of the continuous cycle of images and actions of violence against women. In response a group of women in California founded Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) in 1976. Although historians often recognize the organization as the beginning of the anti-pornography movement, media scholar Carolyn Bronstein argues that members were actually very careful not to define the group as anti-pornography. They never intended for their focus to transform into the pro-censorship and strictly anti-porn movement it ultimately became.¹⁰³ WAVAW's mission was to target all sexist and violent portrayals in media, arguing that it had the power to "teach men that women liked to be dominated while simultaneously conditioning women to accept their subordination."¹⁰⁴ In order to accomplish this, members of WAVAW focused on educating consumers on the effects

¹⁰¹ Comella, "Review: Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars," 445.

¹⁰² Although a pornographic film, *Deep Throat* gained mainstream attention. It tells the story of a woman, Linda Lovelace, who goes to a psychiatrist for help on how to achieve an orgasm. The therapist discovers that Linda's clitoris is actually located in her throat, and he then helps her with her oral sex ability. She gives various men oral sex, until she finds one to marry.

¹⁰³ Comella, "Review: Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars," 445.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 445.

of this type of media. They encouraged consumers to take action against the large corporations responsible for distributing them.

As WAVAW worked to change the portrayal of female sexuality in popular culture, a new group, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) emerged. This group of feminists, founded in the Bay Area in 1976, borrowed many of WAVAW's structures and tactics, yet they drastically differed in a crucial area: their position on pornography. Not only did WAVPM direct their attention to the pornography industry, they structured it as the *cause* of rape.¹⁰⁵ They staged various anti-pornography protests at theaters showing porno films, held consistent events touring North Beach's various adult stores and porn theaters, and picketed stores that sold magazines like *Hustler*.¹⁰⁶

In the same year, the third and most profound anti-porn feminist group, Women Against Pornography (WAP), was established and led by Susan Brownmiller. At this point, the more general feminist focus on anti-violence had completely diminished, and WAP put all of its resources and attention into dismantling the pornography industry. Part of the group's popularity and success was due to the support they received from well-known feminists such as Gloria Steinem, Adrienne Rich, and Robin Morgan.¹⁰⁷ In addition to their popularity and successful media techniques, WAP partnered with government and local law enforcement to battle pornography in a legal setting. 1980s American politics was becoming increasingly more conservative, making state legislatures unusual allies for anti-porn feminists. Anti-porn activist Andrea Dworkin and feminist lawyer Catherine MacKinnon worked together with legislatures to outlaw pornography through city ordinances and were successful in the cities of Minneapolis and

¹⁰⁵ Comella, "Review: Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars," 447.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 447.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 449.

Indianapolis.¹⁰⁸ Pro-sex feminists were outraged by WAP's work with State legislatures, arguing that their narrow idea of permitted sexual behavior simply benefitted the political interests of religious conservatives.¹⁰⁹

Growing disagreements between feminists became even more evident at the 1982 Barnard Conference in New York City. Organizers created the conference as a platform for pro-sex feminists to discuss apprehensions of the anti-porn rhetoric and to develop possible solutions for redirecting 1980s feminist goals. Anti-porn feminists were intentionally not invited. Organizers felt that they often controlled conversations only to benefit their own anti-porn agenda and were consistently unwilling to consider a compromising feminist approach.¹¹⁰ As expected, members of WAP did not accept this exclusion without a fight; they bombarded Barnard organizers with constant phone calls, denounced the event, and protested outside Barnard throughout the conference.

Despite the tension surrounding the Barnard conference, it was a huge success for radical and pro-sex feminists. Gender studies scholar Lynn Comella has done extensive work on the sex wars, and celebrated the Barnard conference for its creation of "a new 'social formation,' a coalition of sex radicals and pro-sex feminists who were committed to sexual freedom, autonomy, and anticensorship, and who were willing to go to that mat to protect those things."¹¹¹ The conference successfully mobilized pro-sex feminists and was productive in countering anti-porn hegemony.

¹⁰⁸ Lynn S. Chancer, "Pornography to Sodomasochism: Reconciling Feminist Differences" in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 571, "Feminist Views of the Social Sciences (Sage Publications: 2000), 81.

¹⁰⁹ Comella, "Review: Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars," 451.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 452.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 453.

Anti-porn criticisms targeted the city ordinances banning pornography, creating an anticensorship rhetoric. Pro-sex feminists worried about how anti-porn city ordinances would affect the first amendment right of free speech. Due to the continued patriarchal and progressively conservative control of the U.S. government, feminists argued that the ordinances could allow sexual content that victimized women, while banning more empowering content such as sex manuals and media that portrayed female sexuality in a positive light.¹¹² Additionally, they argued that many American women would experience the anti-porn movement as a form of personal sexual repression. Anti-porn feminists had no ability to understand that many women and men found sexual pleasure in ways that did not conform to their “sanitized and idealized version,”¹¹³ thus forcing a sense of insecurity and ill-health on women with different sexual needs.

Certain aspects of 1980s American culture provide insight into why feminists became so harshly divided.¹¹⁴ Sociologist Lynn S. Chancer discusses the major issues that polarized feminists. She focuses on pornography and sadomasochism, in addition to issues that arose in the 1990s like sex work and violence against women. She pinpoints the beneficial and negative aspects of both arguments and attempts to understand the reasons for the initial 1980s feminist divide. She references Todd Gitlin and Stuart Hall’s notes on the cultural nature of the press, and its need to portray “antagonist oppositions between issues and spokespersons.”¹¹⁵ Chancer also refers to cultural critic Susan Faludi and her profound concept of the 1980s backlash against feminism.

¹¹² Chancer, “Pornography to Sadomasochism,” 81.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 83.

¹¹⁴ It’s impossible to know exactly why feminists found it so difficult to find a common ground in the 1980s, especially considering strong divisions within feminism still exist today.

¹¹⁵ Chancer, “Pornography to Sadomasochism,” 85.

Susan Faludi looks at many aspects of the 1980s in order to understand how feminism was treated throughout. She covers, extensively, the anti-feminist culture in America throughout the 1980s, a phenomenon she identifies as “Backlash.” Her book, published in 1991, is a close analysis of many aspects of American culture. Faludi begins her introduction with the media’s depictions of the social position of women in the early 1980s. She summarizes the media’s message as, “You may be free and equal now, it says to women, but you have never been more miserable.”¹¹⁶ Faludi identifies women’s liberation and the sexual revolution as the targets of American backlash. She summarizes the backlash rhetoric as, “Women are unhappy precisely *because* they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation... The women’s movement, as we are told time and again, has proved women’s own worst enemy.”¹¹⁷ In the 1980s, she argues, media laid the groundwork for a variety of phenomena that portrayed women’s liberation as inherently destructive to women, and they used that theory to instill repressive ideals of American womanhood. Faludi does not attempt to argue the concept of backlash as a coordinated conspiracy against feminism. She acknowledges that many of the manifestations of backlash were not intended to provoke a more anti-feminist ideology but were simply influenced by American culture.

Faludi’s chapter on American politics and the emergence of the “New Right” gives an understanding of the political setting of the 1980s and its treatment of women and sexuality. The foundation of backlash against women, she attests, can be traced directly to New Right leaders and their emergence into American politics.¹¹⁸ She conveys,

¹¹⁶ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991), ix.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, x.

¹¹⁸ The New Right was a conservative political movement mostly consisting of rural fundamentalist ministers and evangelical Christians. The movement relied heavily on conservative religious beliefs and fought for political

The New Right leaders were among the first to articulate the central argument of the backlash – that women’s equality is responsible for women’s unhappiness. They were also the first to lambaste the women’s movement for what would become its two most popularly cited, and contradictory, sins: promoting materialism over moral values and dismantling the traditional familial support system.¹¹⁹

Although Faludi recognizes that the intense misogynistic and dated perspective of the New Right was often rejected by the mainstream, their message endured and successfully influenced social trends.

Paul Weyrich, coined the “father of the New Right” and founder of the conservative think tank, the Heritage Foundation, found a new opportunity for political influence with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981. The Heritage Foundation created the New Right’s plan for the Reagan administration, titled the Family Protection Act, and introduced it to Congress in 1981. The anti-feminist message was evident in the act’s proposals, including the elimination of federal funding that supported equal education; the requirement of marriage and motherhood to be taught as proper career for girls; the repeal of all federal laws protecting abused wives; and banning all federally funded legal aid for women seeking abortion counseling or divorce; and new tax incentives to encourage married women to have children and not enter the workforce. Additional proposals drafted by The Heritage Foundation included a total ban on abortion even if it meant the woman’s death, censorship of all birth control information until marriage, an overturn of the Equal Pay Act, and defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment.¹²⁰ The Heritage Foundation and New Right advocates framed these measures as a way to help families, with hopes of incentivizing the wholesome (patriarchal, white, and middle-class) American family.

reform such as anti-abortion laws, budget cuts to the welfare system, and the reinstatement of a strong, nuclear patriarchal home.

¹¹⁹ Faludi, *Backlash*, 230.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 236.

In 1982, in the midst of the New Right political takeover, political scholar and feminist activist, Zillah R. Eisenstein, published an article, “The Sexual Politics of the New Right: Understanding the ‘Crisis of Liberalism’ for the 1980s.” Eisenstein argues that the New Right’s view of the welfare state as undermining the traditional American family was actually a “misreading of history.”¹²¹ The welfare state adapted in response to changes in family dynamic, and the New Right’s false identification provided Americans with outdated perceptions of the American family, she asserts. The New Right’s family protection legislation intended to restore the dominance of the traditional patriarchal and white family which clearly insinuated that the woman be kept out of the workplace. Eisenstein states that the New Right feared women in the workplace because they had “potential to transform society,” and working outside the home might encourage women to be more politically aware and active. She argues,

The New Right focuses its attack on both liberalism *and* feminism precisely because mainstream feminist demands derive from promises of liberalism as an ideology – individual autonomy and independence, freedom of choice, equality of opportunity, and equality before the law – and because they threaten to transform patriarchy, and with it capitalism, by uncovering the ‘crisis of liberalism.’ Feminist demands uncover the truth that capitalist patriarchal society cannot deliver its ‘liberal’ promises of equality or even equal rights for women without destabilizing itself.¹²²

She expresses her uncertainty on whether liberals and feminists will be able to find a productive way to promote nonpatriarchal forms of the American family. This is unless they realize that New Right politics intentionally attempt to control the sexual and familial structure of American society. Eisenstein ends her article with a hopeful message for feminists and liberals. She sees the power and potential of the feminist consciousness as the greatest fear of the New Right and

¹²¹ Zillah R. Eisenstein, “The Sexual Politics of the New Right: Understanding the ‘Crisis of Liberalism’ for the 1980s,” in *Signs* 7, no. 3 *Feminist Theory* (The University of Chicago Press: 1982): 567.

¹²² Eisenstein, “The Sexual Politics of the New Right,” 569.

argues that it needs to be utilized as the main defense in the assault against patriarchal conservatism.

What Eisenstein could not prepare liberals and feminists for was the fear and fury of the AIDS epidemic that swept the second half of the decade. The first case was recognized in 1981 and the virus was finally identified in 1983, but it was not until 1985 that the U.S. FDA licensed a test to detect it.¹²³ The disease was quickly associated with the gay community, for many of the first people diagnosed were men who frequently attended a New York gay club. It was further revealed that hemophiliacs, Haitian immigrants, recipients of blood transfusions, intravenous drug users, and the sex partners (and sometimes children) of those carrying the virus, in addition to millions of heterosexual men and women around the world also carried the virus.¹²⁴ However, the association of AIDS with the gay community remained forever intact.

The reaction within the gay community began with confusion and denial. As the 1980s progressed, and the Reagan administration did little to support the gay community and the epidemic in general, people turned to anger and protest.¹²⁵ The epidemic hit the gay community the hardest, both physically and mentally, because such a large aspect of gay identity and culture revolved around sex. Novelist Andrew Holleran, a gay man who found comfort in New York City's gay community, expressed how the very basis of his life had changed because of the epidemic. He said, "Sex was such a big part of our identity. You have to redefine things. I had a fairly comfortable self-image and lifestyle that has been radically altered. As it turns out, the things I have changed to are a lot more enjoyable. Still, I am in mourning..."¹²⁶ The changes he refers to include the shutdown of gay clubs and sex parties, a necessity to practice safer sex, have

¹²³ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 411.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 410.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 411.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 418-419.

fewer sexual partners, and the institution of gay communities free from sex, such as gay sports leagues, churches synagogues.¹²⁷

After the 1960s and 70s, gay men and lesbians both experienced greater acceptance in mainstream culture, however that acceptance was affected by the AIDS epidemic. The conservative and religious powers of the 1980s used the fear of AIDS to their advantage by associating homosexuality with disease. For example, *Moral Majority Report*'s July 1983 cover showed a white American family with a mom, dad and two children, all wearing surgical masks, with a headline stating, "AIDS: HOMOSEXUAL DISEASES THREATEN AMERICAN FAMILIES."¹²⁸ Conservatives used that rhetoric to marginalize nonheteronormative people and reprioritize sexual morality and conservative family life.

The goal of this chapter is to showcase the interconnectivity of American culture and politics, sexuality and pleasure, and the status of women in society from the 1950s through the 1980s. A strong (white) American family is a common theme throughout the century, its roots obviously embedded in heteronormative concepts of sex and pleasure. American society has attempted to control sex and pleasure by portraying them as the foundation for strong American family life. By reiterating the importance of the family, politicians, analysts, and scholars were able to influence how men and women acted sexually.

Society's ability to determine and enforce such specific notions of sex and gender came in part from America's reliance on psychoanalysis. This study of self-focused on introspective criticism and self-improvement and induced a sense of anxiety among Americans. The influence of psychoanalysis and consumerism is discussed in Chapter Two. Following psychoanalysis and consumerism, the importance of sex manuals is discussed. The manuals provide insight into how

¹²⁷ Miller, *Out of the Past*, 419.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 421.

the social norms of the twentieth century depended on the control of sex, sexuality, and pleasure for men, but more significantly, women.

Chapter 2: Psychoanalysis, Consumerism, and Sex Advice Literature

For, through intelligence and hard work, I have become a Sensuous Woman.

And that's what every man wants

More than beauty

More than brilliance

More than great housekeeping abilities

More than a model mother to his children

He wants a Sensuous Woman

Because she makes him *know* that he is the most remarkable man that ever lived... Even if you are knock-kneed, flat-chested, cross-eyed and balding, you can learn to make him feel that way and, in doing so, reap wonderful benefits for yourself.¹²⁹

“J,” *The Sensuous Woman*, 1969

The 1969 sex manual, *The Sensuous Woman*, featured this declaration on the book's jacket copy. The author, who went by the pseudonym of “J,” refers to herself as “not especially pretty,” and uses that identity, or lack thereof, to convince women of the power of her knowledge and advice. Even in the jacket copy, there is a clear prioritization of male pleasure. “J” essentially states that women should become sensuous to attract men, uplift them, make them feel confident, and provide them with amazing sexual pleasure. When the author says, “... in doing so, reap wonderful benefits for yourself.”¹³⁰ She frames women's pleasure as a positive outcome, rather than the ultimate goal of embodying “the sensuous woman.”

Women's, gender, and sexuality scholar Meryl Altman discusses the techniques used by “J” and other sex literature authors. She boldly states, “This is propaganda for psychiatry, propaganda for marriage, and propaganda for female dependency on male authority. Through

¹²⁹ “J,” *The Sensuous Woman* (Dell, 1969), 9-11. Cited in Meryl Altman, “Everything They Always Wanted You to Know: The Ideology of Popular Sex Literature,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc, 1984), 121.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 121.

short fables or parables, female sexuality is represented in terms of disease for which proper re-socialization is the cure... in which docile heroines are led through a therapeutic process to a resolution of conflict and are rewarded with a happy ending – a good marriage.”¹³¹ Altman highlights the interlace of psychoanalysis and sex, gender and social norms, and notes their existence and prioritization within sex advice literature.

As mentioned in Chapter One, family life, sex, and gender norms were understood as deeply intertwined within American society. Sex was used to reinforce specific social norms. The growing anxiety over sexual activities, which was created and solved by psychoanalysis, directed many couples to find advice and relief in sex advice literature. This came in the form of sex and marriage manuals, which established themselves as essential resources for couples consistently throughout the 1900s. The manuals’ influence on the American public was unprecedented. Aware of the connection between psychoanalysis, social norms and sex manuals, this discussion provides an understanding on how expectations influenced the ways couples experienced sex and pleasure.

In the second half of the century, physicians heralded themselves as leading experts on Americans’ sexual well-being. They believed that in order to ensure overall health of their patients, body, mind and sexual activity must be integrated and considered together.¹³² Physicians were responsible for defining sexual standards and believed that those standards were imperative to the maintenance and success of the family. The importance of American families was consistent throughout the 20th century, and always relied on accepted sexual practices to maintain that stability. Sex was utilized to lead Americans towards moralistic ideals that contributed to the supposed overall well-being of society.

¹³¹ Altman, “Everything They Always Wanted You to Know,” 120-121.

¹³² Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 2.

Physicians' authority increased drastically in the 1950s. The Cold War mentality caused anxiety and led many people to believe that America was straying too far from conservative cultural and political authority.¹³³ This perception came from evidence of rising rates of premarital sex, teen pregnancy, divorce and public visibility of homosexuality, beginning in the 1950s. Rather than accepting these trends as changes in American society, Historian Carolyn Herbst Lewis states that the medical community, 'translated [them] into an ideological entrenchment that denied any validity to nonmarital or non-heterosexual sexual practices.'¹³⁴ Thus, physicians did not transform and use more liberal approaches to ensure American well-being, but instead, depended on restrictive practices to reestablish conservative sexual and social morality. Herbst Lewis touches on physicians' cultural authority, stating, "By rooting gender identity in concepts of physical, psychological, and emotional health, physicians made it difficult to challenge these naturalized visions of gender and sexuality, particularly as they became linked to citizenship and national identity."¹³⁵ As discussed in Chapter One, sexual deviancy was a deeply rooted fear of the Cold War society, and was connected to beliefs on what it meant to be a dedicated American with gender and sexual identity.

Once American expectations of gender and sexual identity were established, physicians, and more specifically, psychoanalysts, created anxiety and insecurity over the same identities they created. In addition to national identity, sex and gender were associated with personal identity, which was framed by psychoanalysis as an area in need of constant analysis and improvement.¹³⁶ Together, sex, gender, psychoanalysis, and national and personal identity worked to force anxiety and insecurity into the minds of Americans.

¹³³ Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

¹³⁶ Because of their authority in American society, physicians had considerable social influence.

Psychoanalysis and Consumerism

In 1899, Freud created the study of psychoanalysis, which sociologist Eva Illouz describes as “the privileged site for the expression of the inner self as well as the site that encouraged introspection, a focus on feelings, and most of all, a search for the lost and true self.”¹³⁷ Coinciding with the advent of psychoanalysis, the second industrial revolution initiated the rise of mass production and consumption in early twentieth century America.¹³⁸ Together, practices of personal independence were constructed by psychoanalysts, and encouraged Americans to seek individuality and a ‘personal life’ outside the family in the early twentieth century. Historian Eli Zaretsky defines early twentieth century capitalism as “a historically specific experience of singularity and interiority sociologically grounded in industrialization and urbanization. The separation (both physical and emotional) of paid work from the household, which is to say the rise of industrial capitalism, gave rise to new forms of privacy, domesticity, and intimacy.”¹³⁹ Rather than being defined by one’s place in the family and community, individuality and self-creation and expression became directly obtainable through consumption.

The aspect of psychoanalysis that encouraged free thinking and originality and helped consumerism flourish in the early 1900s was overturned and replaced by a more conservative definition after WWII. With Cold War tensions growing, American national security planners were fixated on the portrayal of the United States as a global power, and they believed that the

¹³⁷ Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and The Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 50.

¹³⁸ Prior to the 2nd Industrial Revolution (late 1800s through the early 1900s), American society revolved around a much more family and community centered way of living. Self-denial, thrift, and frugality were seen as necessary to supporting and maintaining the American economy. Cited from Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 17.

¹³⁹ Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 20.

power began with the American public. In order for the United States to be a legitimate threat to the Soviet Union, they needed the nation to at least *seem* like it was capable of winning a nuclear war. National security planners did not have much confidence in the American public's ability to endure the dangers of a war with the Soviet Union. Guy Oakes, a professor of social policy in the 1980s and 90s, describes the American government's perception of the public as, "Childish and selfish. Because of their addiction to pleasure, they had become frivolous and irresponsible. A life of mindless consumption had led to moral corruption and decadence. Americans were soft and weak. They lacked the toughness and determination necessary to oppose a powerful and ruthless enemy in the hazardous world of the Cold War."¹⁴⁰ American government officials believed that if they could deter the public from pleasure and internal self-interest, then they could position the nation as a legitimate contender in foreign affairs, an international force to be reckoned with.

This redirection came in the form of the maturity ethic,¹⁴¹ a psychoanalytic term that insisted on family-based consumption, the rejection of radical politics, and the necessity to conform to a conservative status quo.¹⁴² The American public was expected to worry less about individual expression through consumerism, and instead focus on how the public would contribute to the country's Cold War stance. They must be willing to sacrifice their dependency on materialism and individuality, because the only form of self-expression that mattered was their national identity.¹⁴³ The new focus on self-control did not threaten the culture of

¹⁴⁰ Guy Oakes, "The Cold War Ethic: National Security and National Morale" in *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 6 no. 3 (Springer, 1993): 390.

¹⁴¹ Zaretsky quotes Philip Rieff, and explains how he structures 'maturity' as, "'an attitude of ironic insight on the part of the self toward all that is not self,' and required withdrawing from 'the painful tension of assent and dissent' in relation to society in order to more affirmatively to one's depths. Cited from Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 149.

¹⁴² Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 30.

¹⁴³ Oakes, "The Cold War Ethic," 392.

consumerism, for it was already deeply embedded in the American way of life. However, it did overthrow the psychoanalytic that situated consumerism as a way to express individual identity and autonomy. Now, freedom of expression was socially restricted, and Americans were expected to live more a more wholesome and frugal way of life.

Individuals' sexual practices and sexual identities were targeted by psychoanalysts and were also directly connected to America's portrayal of national strength. In the midst of a heightening fear of communism and the atomic bomb, government officials and psychotherapists both saw moral weakness and sexual degeneracy as legitimate targets for communist influence.¹⁴⁴ Not only were gay men and lesbians prone to communist blackmail, but any person who let their sexual ethos run free subjected themselves to the possibility of being seduced, and thus manipulated, by a communist. This meant that Victorian ideals, such as the importance of women's domesticity, 'ethical' and repressed sexuality, and heteronormativity were reestablished as essential to the Cold War way of life.¹⁴⁵

Containment and conservative lifestyles depended on female sexuality and pleasure. 1950s culture rallied behind Freudian concepts of sex, specifically with the vaginal orgasm as the only acceptable outlet for female pleasure. As mentioned briefly in Chapter One, a woman's lack of sexual response from strict vaginal stimulation rendered her mentally and physically unwell. This was supported by Freud's concept of frigidity, which was used to diagnose women who did not experience appropriate sexual responses.¹⁴⁶ Any woman who recognized her inability to experience orgasm through vaginal penetration was likely to feel a sense of trepidation over her sexual capabilities, and even more so, over her general mental and physical health. 1950s

¹⁴⁴ Tyler May, *Homeward Bound*, 86.

¹⁴⁵ A more extensive explanation on the Cold War way of life and its effect on sexuality and pleasure is discussed in Chapter One of this thesis.

¹⁴⁶ Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 45.

physicians were aware of women's inability to experience vaginal orgasms, yet continued to define it as the sexual norm, which consequently induced a sense of anxiety and insecurity among women.

Psychoanalysts' encouragement of female sexual concern through the vaginal orgasm is quite evident in physicians William Kroger and S. Charles Freed's 1950 *JAMA* article titled, "Psychosomatic Aspects of Frigidity." In the opening paragraph, the authors declare that 75 percent of American women suffer from frigidity. Although following studies questioned the exact statistic, all noted that frigidity among American women was exceptionally high. There is no doubt that many of the women who read this declaration felt a sense of angst over their own ability to reach orgasm. Furthermore, Kroger and Freed's article continued with a list of possible outcomes of frigidity, which included neurosis and extramarital affairs.¹⁴⁷ If a woman was not able to provide her husband with sexual gratification, he may just seek another woman who could. Now, not only was a woman insecure about her own sexual satisfaction, but she was encouraged to doubt the stability of her marriage.

The widespread obsession over personal life was further established with psychoanalysis' 'problematization' of marriage. 'Problematization' is a term coined by sociologist Michel Callon and defined as "posing problems in such a way that scientists become necessary to solve them. In other words, psychoanalysts created certain problems within marriage and family life, which they were only capable of fixing. In this way, psychologists emphasized distress within family relationships, highlighting marital anxieties and unhappiness.¹⁴⁸ Subsequently, a field of marital counseling was established as a solution for couples, where they could go to remedy these

¹⁴⁷ Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 45-46.

¹⁴⁸ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 115.

problems.¹⁴⁹ This field of psychoanalysis had become fairly well established, to the point where a national professional organization (The American Association of Marriage Counselors) was created in the early 1950s. The twentieth century abandoned Victorian marital beliefs, which focused exclusively on procreation and family stability. Now, couples were encouraged to seek true intimacy, and they were directly responsible for the success or failure of their relationship.¹⁵⁰

Eva Illouz explains,

By claiming that the traditional rules of traditional marriage were now useless, that marriages were inherently complicated, and that good marriages ought to satisfy the emotional needs of women and men, psychologists could now redefine marriage in terms that suited their expertise.¹⁵¹

Marital anxiety naturalized conflict, rendering it as a normal part of any relationship. In order to work through marital conflict, couples must look intrinsically, and critique, evaluate and question their identities and needs within their marriages. The critical attitude created uncertainty over marital roles, which returned to the necessity for psychoanalytic counseling and guidance.

The perceived importance of domestic conformity, matrimony, and ethically repressed sexuality ended abruptly as the 1960s progressed. Liberal activists began to speak publicly on the oppressive nature of sexuality and societal expectations. They believed that the pursuit for individuality and self-worth was not meant to be confined and controlled. Young people wanted to break free from conformity and create space for all Americans to find sexual and personal identity in the public sphere. It was this sexual revolution that politicized sex and pleasure and forced a more collective focus on the importance of personal well-being and sexuality.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 115.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 117.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 116.

¹⁵² Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 161.

Sexuality thus became a distinct facet of Americans' public identity, an important part of a journey to one's search for self-fulfillment. This ideological shift created space for women in the workplace, more diverse definitions of family life,¹⁵³ and the exploration of self.¹⁵⁴ Feminist scholar Anna Ward discusses this transformation and recognizes the power that feminist discourse had on this moment in history. She asserts that feminists situated sex and sexuality as "fundamentally political, encouraging women to challenge sexual and gender norms and interrogate their own sexual selves through feminist inquiry and techniques of self-exploration."¹⁵⁵ The liberation movements reinstated the importance of self-expression in the public sphere, a concept that had been denounced since the early 1950s.

Many scholars have dated the 1960s as the beginning of the end of psychoanalysis, which coincidentally occurred at the same time as the reinstatement of a freer consumerist mindset. Although many of the liberation movements were anti-capitalist, their push for self-expression (unintentionally) contributed to the societal mindset that expression was accomplished through consumerism, an idea that was prevalent before World War II and the Cold War. Historian Eli Zaretsky acknowledges three ways in which the 1960s directly challenged Cold War psychoanalysis and arbitrated it as irrelevant. Previously, psychoanalysis was utilized as a way to introspectively focus on one's self, an analysis that Zaretsky explains often led to a "stigmatization of madness, deviance, and femininity."¹⁵⁶ However, the 1960s demonized this stigmatization as an outcome of objective authority, and argued that therapy should not denounce certain traits but should be sensitive to difference and encourage an authentic exchange between

¹⁵³ Including two-earner families, same-sex couples, and female-headed families. Cited in Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 33.

¹⁵⁴ Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 33.

¹⁵⁵ Anna E. Ward, "Sex and the Me Decade: Sex and Dating Advice Literature of the 1970s," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43 no. ¾ (New York City: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2015): 133.

¹⁵⁶ Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 34.

“open and socially aware individuals.”¹⁵⁷ Secondly, narcissism was seen as a stage in ego development, an element that people must overcome in order to achieve a “health-and-maturity-morality.”¹⁵⁸ Members of the 1960s movements rejected the negative view of narcissism, and in turn framed it as an inherent aspect of expressing one’s true self. Finally, and most profoundly, feminists and scholars turned to Freud’s intrapsychic theory, which identifies interactions between the id and superego.¹⁵⁹ Together, id and superego make the ego, defined as the compromising balance between the two. The need for this type of mental and physical control was now transformed into a theory of societal oppression, and feminists reinforced a social perspective that prioritized “acting out” as a natural form of expression.¹⁶⁰ In this way, feminists and activists saw “acting out” as a simple expression of genuine personal identity (id) without the constriction of social norms (superego).

The social and psychoanalytic transformations that occurred in the 1960s carried into the ‘70s. Many scholars associated the reinstated necessity for self-exploration and transformation with social changes initiated by capitalism and modernity. The previous insistence on consumer constraint was deeply embedded in the maturity ethic and resulted in drastic consumer savings throughout the 1950s and part of the 1960s. However, the maturity ethic was rejected by the New Left for its role in social repression, consumerism was unintentionally revamped.¹⁶¹ The revolutions created drastic economic, political, social and cultural change in the United States.

¹⁵⁷ Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 34.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 35.

¹⁵⁹ The Id is the human’s aggressive and pleasure-seeking drives, and the superego consists of a more moral controlling perspective.

¹⁶⁰ Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 36.

¹⁶¹ The “New Left” was a general term used to describe the broad political movement of the 1960s and 70s, and included activists and government officials who supported civil and political rights, feminism, gay rights, abortion rights, and gender role reform.

Those changes, in addition to the reinvigorated importance of self-exploration and identity, caused Americans to experience increased anxieties and a constant need for self-improvement.¹⁶²

The growing anxieties caused by the promotion of self-exploration were also heightened by the liberation movements' prioritization of sexual autonomy and pleasure. Sex advice literature was incredibly beneficial to Americans who were in search of information and advice on sex and pleasure, though it also caused increased anxiety over sexual performance and dysfunction. The angst over sexual dysfunction had long been established, however the necessity for personal transformation forced new levels of sexual anxiety onto men and women that continued throughout the 1980s.¹⁶³ Sexual anxieties and the importance of improvement further solidified the medicalization of sexual dysfunction and encouraged Americans to seek medical treatment, sometimes unnecessarily.

Twentieth Century Sex and Marriage Manuals

Sex and marriage manuals provide a unique insight into the sexual expectations placed on American society throughout the twentieth century. Scholar Ronald Walters supports the relevance of manuals, stating, "Although a sex manual tells nothing about how particular individuals behaved, it can tell a great deal about how moralists believed individuals ought to act and it can place sex in its network of cultural norms far more successfully than even an extremely revealing diary could."¹⁶⁴ This distinction, between cultural norms, societal expectations and actual human experience, is necessary to establish. The goal behind the discussion and analysis of sex and marriage manuals is not to paint a picture of American sexual

¹⁶² Ward, "Sex and the Me Decade," 133.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 134.

¹⁶⁴ Ronald Walters, *Primers for Prudery* (New York, 1974), 11. Cited in Neuhaus, "The Importance of Being Orgasmic," 448.

experience. Rather, the manuals provide an additional example of society's use of sex and pleasure to further define social and gender norms.

According to historian Jessamyn Neuhaus, sex and marriage manuals became increasingly popular during the 1950s. She bases this observation on a survey which showed that middle-class married couples placed much more importance on fulfilling sex lives compared to couples in previous decades.¹⁶⁵ What Neuhaus does not consider is the Cold War anxiety and the social push towards stable marriages and family life. The political and social atmosphere additionally contributes to sex manuals' increased popularity during the time. At this point, sex was understood as a learning experience. Couples were expected to learn how to engage in mutually satisfying sexual experiences by accumulating knowledge provided in advice manuals. This allowed for the sex experts to define what was seen as 'normal' sexual behavior, thus defining what was sexually acceptable for American couples.

Notably, there seems to be no distinct differentiation between 1950s and 1960s sex and marriage manuals, even given striking cultural changes. Weinberg, Swensson, and Hammersmith, in addition to Neuhaus, and Melody and Peters all discuss sex and marriage manuals comprehensively and recognize a uniformity among 1950s and 1960s sex manuals. However, not one of the studies attempts to understand why sex manuals continued to harbor such a conservative rhetoric. Although seemingly, mid 1960s American culture accepted a much more liberal perspective on sexual and social norms. In response, authors and physicians attempted to use their outdated rhetoric to redirect Americans back towards conservative and moralistic mentalities. When it became clear that liberation had become an inherent aspect of American culture, sex and marriage manuals eventually adapted.

¹⁶⁵ Neuhaus, "The Importance of Being Orgasmic," 462.

It comes to no surprise that manuals in the 1950s and 1960s not only emphasized the importance of sex solely within matrimony, but outwardly condemned premarital sex as morally wrong. As Neuhaus explains, “highly detrimental to good marital sexual adjustment.”¹⁶⁶ They often romanticized sex in the manuals, portraying it as something that is reserved for that “one true love.”¹⁶⁷ One of the most popular 1950s manuals, *A Marriage Manual: A Practical Guidebook to Sex and Marriage*, was written by husband-and-wife physician team, Hannah Stone and Abraham Stone. Their work was in a question-and-answer format, and very conservatively discusses sex and reproduction.¹⁶⁸ In a discussion on sex, the Stones advise readers that if they are thinking about having sex, they should first consider whether or not the person is right for marriage, love, companionship, and sexual intimacy.¹⁶⁹ This emphasis on love and marriage as a basis for sex was common in this era of manuals.

Many manuals from the midcentury reflected Freudian theories of sexuality, which, as noted earlier, demonized the clitoris and rendered the clitoral orgasm as irrelevant.¹⁷⁰ The need for women to experience orgasm was downplayed and portrayed as less important than the man’s orgasm. In Robert Blood’s 1955 manual, *Anticipating Your Marriage*, he provides an in-depth discussion of male impotence, which is problematized and framed as an issue that must be resolved. He continues with a discussion on female sexual dysfunction, by undermining its importance, because, he notes, the “lack of climax in the wife is far less of a handicap to sexual

¹⁶⁶ Neuhaus, “The Importance of Being Orgasmic,” 462.

¹⁶⁷ Martin S. Weinberg, Rochelle Ganz Swensson and Sue Kiefer Hammersmith, “Sexual Autonomy and the Status of Women: Models of Female Sexuality in U.S. Sex Manuals from 1950 to 1980,” *Social Problems* 30, no. 3 (February 1983): 316.

¹⁶⁸ Melody and Peterson, *Teaching America about Sex*, 123.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 123.

¹⁷⁰ Ward, “Sex and the Me Decade,” 123.

satisfaction.”¹⁷¹ Some manuals actually did recognize the possibility for women’s pleasure and even often encouraged it. However, female sexual response was only prioritized because of the belief that male sexual arousal and ego depended on a sexually stimulated woman. Another husband-and-wife duo, Charlotte Clinebell and Howard Clinebell, depict this perfectly, while simultaneously romanticizing sex and marriage in their 1970 book, *The Intimate Marriage*.

Although written fifteen years after Blood’s manual, the tone has not changed. They write,

The rejection of the Victorian idea that sex is man’s privilege and woman’s duty has... freed her to respond and relate to her husband in ways that make sex more fulfilling to him. The active, passionate wife is much more fun in bed than the passive, dutiful object of a man’s desire.¹⁷²

Here, while the authors praise society’s detachment from Victorian notions of sex, it is in the service of providing the man with even more sexual pleasure. There is no actual recognition of female orgasm, only an emphasis on the woman’s permission and ability to *act* like she is enjoying sex. Hence, there was less of an emphasis on genuine female sexual pleasure, and more so a necessity for women to passionately “respond” and “relate” to their husbands’ sexual needs.

As seen, there was a necessity for mutual pleasure in this era of sex advice literature. Previously, men were expected to bring their wives to orgasm using the techniques and tips given in sex manuals. If a woman was unable to experience a vaginal orgasm, it was the husband who needed improvement. However, the burden of sexual satisfaction was transferred to women in the second half of the twentieth century. Manuals targeted men’s inexperience and inattention as the reason for women’s lack of sexual pleasure, but the problem was redirected to women’s physical, mental and emotional well-being.¹⁷³ For example, the 1946 manual *Marriage Before*

¹⁷¹ Robert O. Blood, Jr., *Anticipating Your Marriage* (Glencoe, Ill., 1955), 294. Cited in Neuhaus, “The Importance of Being Orgasmic,” 463.

¹⁷² Howard J. Clinebell and Charlotte Clinebell, *The Intimate Marriage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 146. Cited in Weinberg, Swensson and Hammersmith, “Sexual Autonomy,” 316.

¹⁷³ Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 45.

and After by Paul Popenoe asserted that women were responsible for their own sexual enjoyment. He said, “This sexual inadequacy of hers may not be exactly her fault – we’ll call it her misfortune – but if it exists and she does not take prompt and energetic steps to improve it by consulting an expert, then she is certainly guilty of negligence.”¹⁷⁴ This relates to the social emphasis on frigidity and the medicalization of female sexual inadequacy and unresponsiveness. Manual authors remarked that a woman had to learn how to enjoy sexual intercourse, and “combat her spoiled, neurotic, inadequate self.”¹⁷⁵ This made it impossible to blame men for women’s lack of sexual response, and thus, further instilled sexual insecurity and anxiety onto women.

This redistribution of sexual fault extended even further: women’s sexual responsiveness was deemed the culprit in male impotence. In Herman Rubin’s 1952 manual, *Glands, Sex, and Personality*, he discusses sexual dysfunction and claims that “not infrequently a husband’s impotency reflects a wife’s frigidity. If she is cold, indifferent, or averse to intercourse, he is likely to be overwhelmed by feelings of futility and frustration which may lead to impotence.”¹⁷⁶ This perspective was common among manuals in this era. It reflected the social link between male sexuality and his self-worth.¹⁷⁷ Women were given instructions on how to be considerate of a man’s feelings; men were very sensitive sexual beings and their fragile male egos relied on their sexual satisfaction, and the belief that they had successfully satisfied their wives.¹⁷⁸

By the early 1970s, manuals and advice literature began to recognize the radical and necessary social changes that were occurring because of the social revolutions of the 60s and

¹⁷⁴ Paul Popenoe, *Marriage Before and After* (New York, 1946), 200. Cited in Neuhaus, “The Importance of Being Orgasmic”, 465.

¹⁷⁵ Neuhaus, “The Importance of Being Orgasmic”, 465.

¹⁷⁶ Herman H. Rubin, *Glands, Sex and Personality* (New York, 1952), 110. Cited in Neuhaus, *The Importance of Being Orgasmic*, 465.

¹⁷⁷ Neuhaus, *The Importance of Being Orgasmic*, 465.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 466.

70s. Progressive studies and literature on sex and pleasure countered many of the concepts that these earlier manuals relied on. Authors such as Alex Comfort (*The Joy of Sex*, 1972,) Paula Newhorn (*Primal Sexuality*, 1973), and Dominick Barbara (*Loving and Making Love*, 1975), now acknowledged the importance of explorative sexuality and mutual and empowering sexual pleasure.

Dominick Barbara acknowledges the previous sexual norms and encourages readers to look beyond them. He reveals,

If men and women are to begin to enjoy sex, they must... learn to break free of their neurotic shackles and rid themselves of their inner restraints and conforming disciplines. For sex to flourish it is essential that emotions be free, spontaneous and without moral or prejudiced attitudes.¹⁷⁹

Barbara states that if men and women want to truly experience sexual pleasure, they must dismiss their previous conservative perspectives. This included the importance of vaginal orgasms, heteronormativity, and the notion that sex is first and foremost an act of procreation. Sex is no longer framed merely as a tool to foster healthy marriages and resilient families, but as a basic and necessary aspect of human life.

While these manuals were still intended for mostly middle-class white Americans, some publications did include or even strictly focus on gay men and lesbians.¹⁸⁰ This included manuals like Emily Sisley and Bertha Harris' *The Joy of a Lesbian Lifestyle* (1977) and Charles Silverstein and Edmund White's *The Joy of Gay Sex: An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasure of a Gay Lifestyle* (1977).¹⁸¹ Additionally, mainstream culture included a few titles dedicated to disability and sex, such as *Toward Intimacy: Family Planning and Sexuality*

¹⁷⁹ Dominick Barbara, *Loving and Making Love: A Psychiatrist's Guide to Happiness and Pleasure* (Rockville Centre, New York: Farnsworth, 1975), 32. Cited in Weinberg, Swensson and Hammersmith, "Sexual Autonomy," 317.

¹⁸⁰ Ward, "Sex and the Me Decade," 131.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 131.

Concerns of Physically Disabled Women by Katie Venables in 1978.¹⁸² However, the expansion of intended audiences did not include mainstream manuals targeted explicitly towards Black men and women. In all, the new frontier of advice literature encouraged white women to find sexual pleasure, empowerment and control of their bodies.

Stemming from the powerful women's liberation movement of the time, many 1970s manuals understood sex as a fundamentally political force. Women's pleasure and sexual politics were important topics. Women chafed against previous structures, and feminists strongly reiterated the inevitable connection between women's sex lives and the "realities of a pervasive culture of sexual objectification, harassment, and violence."¹⁸³ Sex was recognized as one of the many situations where the oppression of women *could* and *did* occur, but also as an opportunity for liberation and empowerment to prosper.

Feminism, gender and sexuality scholar Anna E. Ward argues that although many of the manuals discussed the politicization of sex negatively, the fact that they recognize feminist rhetoric represents a cultural inability to ignore the feminist opinions on sex and pleasure. The politicization of sex, established by feminists, refers to unequal distributions of power between men and women, both in the bedroom and in the outside world. Carmen Kerr touched on the issue of gendered power in her 1977 manual, *Sex for Women – Who Want to Have Fun and Love Relationships with Equals*. She says, "Women's sexual power and woman power as a whole are inseparable and complementary. When we learn to take care of ourselves sexually, we become independent in a part of our lives that has always been traditionally dependent on men."¹⁸⁴ Kerr, whose manual is specifically heteronormative, wanted readers to find autonomy in sex. The

¹⁸² Ward, "Sex and the Me Decade," 131.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 124.

¹⁸⁴ Carmen Kerr, *Sex for Women – Who Want to Have Fun and Love Relationships with Equals* (New York: Grove, 1977), 5. Cited in Weinberg, Swensson and Hammersmith, "Sexual Autonomy," 319.

opinion that women needed to break free from sexual dependency on men was common in sex manuals of this era.

Instead of depending on men for pleasure, or even more, attending to a man's sexual needs and satisfaction rather than her own, Kerr encouraged her readers to focus on their own sexual desires and to even take matters into their own hands. The sexual autonomy that she and many other authors such as Lonnie Garfield Barbach and Judith Silverstein mention had the effect of "uncoupling" women, allowing them to experience pleasure without monogamy, heterosexuality, or even another partner.¹⁸⁵ Masturbation was recognized by feminists, activists, and authors as a perfectly normal sexual outlet. It was actually encouraged as a way for a woman to further understand her own body and what pleases her.

The idea of sexual autonomy, encouraged by many authors, wasn't intended to remove a partner completely from the experience of sexual pleasure. Instead, sex experts simply wanted to inspire women to say and do what they needed to reach a sexual climax.¹⁸⁶ Author Patricia Raley explains this well to her readers in her 1976 publication, *Making Love: How to Be Your Own Therapist*. She states,

There is an old saying that there are no frigid wives, just inept husbands. Although that sounds rather comforting from the female point of view, it was probably made up by some male who thought he could make any woman come. Nowadays most women like to think that they have something to do with their own orgasms and that they are not dependent on a man for sexual fulfillment.¹⁸⁷

Here, Raley connects with readers who were experiencing drastic changes in the realm of sex and pleasure. She understands the previous attitudes about the roles of men and women in a sexual relationship, but also acknowledges the patriarchal tendencies of said roles. Readers

¹⁸⁵ Weinberg, Swensson and Hammersmith, "Sexual Autonomy," 319.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 319.

¹⁸⁷ Patricia Raley, *Making Love: How to Be Your Own Therapist* (New York: Dial, 1976), 140. Cited in Weinberg, Swensson and Hammersmith, "Sexual Autonomy," 318.

gained insight on how their pleasure had once been controlled by men, and they are given the option to take control of their orgasm.

In order for women to take care of themselves sexually, as Kerr says, they needed to understand their bodies and discover what exactly brought them pleasure. This generation of sex manuals empowered women to take personal pleasure into their own hands, rather than depending on men to bring them to orgasm and remaining silent when they were unsuccessful. Many manuals of the time used a sex-positive education framework.¹⁸⁸ Sex-positive education incorporated an attitude towards human sexuality that respects all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable. It encouraged all forms of pleasure, experimentation and lifestyles, and provides students with a well-rounded understanding that is free from stigmas and taboos. Sex manuals of the time recognized that if women were to fully explore and understand their sexualities and libidos, a more extensive sex education must be included.

Many feminists and authors noticed the lack of sex education. For example, the 1971 Workshop Resolutions of the First National Chicana Conference dedicated an entire section on sex. They urged the importance of sex education, declaring, “Women should go back to the communities and form discussion and action groups concerning sex education.”¹⁸⁹ Part of America’s lack of sexual awareness came in the form of unfamiliarity of women’s reproductive and sexual anatomy. In order to successfully achieve female orgasm, feminists and scholars argued that women *and* men should be familiar with the vulva and understand areas of erotic stimulation.

¹⁸⁸ Sex education in any form, let alone sex-positive sex education, have never been incorporated within American society. I argue that this is part of the reason why sex manuals, and by extension lifestyle magazines, have consistently been such popular resources for Americans seeking extensive information and advice on sex and pleasure. Many Americans are never exposed to a comprehensive sexual education, and often collect information through popular culture, pornography, and social norms.

¹⁸⁹ Ward, “Sex and the Me Decade,” 127.

Authors and feminists recognized the importance of understanding female anatomy and attempted to rectify it by incorporating information in their manuals and workshops. Written and published by Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Women and Their Bodies: A Course*, included a section titled "Anatomy and Physiology," and prompted readers to "take a mirror and examine yourself. Touch yourself, smell yourself, even taste your own secretions. After all, you are your body and you are not obscene."¹⁹⁰ The Boston Women's Health Collective wanted to bring genital self-exams and women's understanding of their bodies to the forefront of female sexuality with hopes of removing stigma and reducing ignorance.¹⁹¹ This ignorance came in the form of the sheer lack of knowledge of female erotic zones, in addition to the perception that women could not rely on their own bodies to find sexual pleasure. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective hoped that if women explored their bodies, they would find sexual emancipation and indulging sexual pleasure.

In an even more confrontational manner, artist, feminist author and sex educator Betty Dodson ran sex workshops for women, incorporating vibrators and masturbation to achieve peak orgasms. She began her work with erotic art shows in New York City. The shows included life-size images of people having sex, women masturbating, and drawings of female genitals.¹⁹² This was the beginning of her work and activism on the necessity for women to understand their bodies, especially through masturbation. In 1973, Dodson held two-hour workshop sessions for groups of up to eighteen women, where she taught masturbation techniques that led to incredibly intense orgasms.¹⁹³ The women at these workshops were instructed to sit in a circle, naked, while

¹⁹⁰ Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Women and Their Bodies: A Course* (Boston: Boston Women's Health Book Collective and New England Free Press, 1970), 14.

¹⁹¹ This Course, *Women and Their Bodies: A Course* was later renamed *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

¹⁹² Escoffier, *Sexual Revolution*, 148.

¹⁹³ Wolf, *Vagina*, 178.

simultaneously using vibrators and listening to Dodson's guidance on how to prolong orgasm until it became most satisfying. Her hope for the workshops was to help women, as Wolf says, to "appreciate the beauty of their genitals as well as to explore the varied experience of orgasm through practicing masturbation skills."¹⁹⁴ The workshops hoped to foster a healthy relationship between women, their genitals, and their sexual needs. When women were intimate with their own bodies, they could better understand their sexual needs and communicate those needs to their partners.

Dodson's work gained national attention and was often highlighted in mainstream magazines such as *Ms.* In 1974, she published an article in *Ms. Magazine* titled, "Getting to Know Me." The article is an incredibly personal and honest account of Dodson's path towards sexual freedom and self-love, a journey led by masturbation. She discusses her childhood in the Bible Belt, where masturbation caused her feelings of shame and guilt, through her first marriage, divorce, and post marital affair. Dodson eventually found intense pleasure, confidence and identity through masturbation. She explains how sexual repression was socially vital in order to keep women in their 'proper' role. She says, "I think that one of the best ways to make women accept and conform to this double standard is to deprive us of direct sexual self-knowledge – especially masturbation. In other words, deprive us of our own bodies and of a way of discovering and developing orgasmic response patterns."¹⁹⁵ Her sex workshops, in addition to her extensive coverage in *Ms.* magazine, inspired American women to explore their sexuality through masturbation and thus become empowered and confident in their bodies.

Previous traditionalist attitudes on sex relying on stability, conformity and morality were rejected by the new generation of young people in the late 1960s and 70s. Society directed its

¹⁹⁴ Wolf, *Vagina*, 178.

¹⁹⁵ Betty Dodson, "Getting to Know Me," *Ms.*, August 1974. Cited in *Sexual Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey Escoffier, 151.

efforts towards equality, civil rights, and the fight against Vietnam, while also establishing their right to personal and sexual freedom of expression. Freedom of expression included the ability for women to seek sexual satisfaction without being seen as frigid or sexually deviant. “M,”¹⁹⁶ who published *The Sensuous Man* in 1971, Alex Comfort and his book, *The Joy of Sex* (1972), David Reuben’s *Any Woman Can! Love and Sexual Fulfillment for the Single, Widowed, Divorced... and Married* (1972), and *My Secret Garden* (1973) by Nancy Friday all acknowledged the presence and importance of the clitoris and encouraged couples to work together to find pleasure through a variety of techniques and experimentation.¹⁹⁷ Clitoral orgasms were no longer portrayed as a taboo or threat to American stability, but as an important aspect of mutual sexual pleasure.

The vaginal orgasm was definitively discredited, and clitoral pleasure took over as the ultimate goal of female pleasure in the 1970s. Although sex manuals highlighted the clitoris as the route for orgasm, they did not deny the role of penetration in achieving pleasure. Anna Ward defends the inclusion of penetration in sex manuals when she says, “The focus on variety in these guides meant that the body as a whole was situated as a potential source of pleasure, with certain zones of the body producing pleasure in some, indifference or disgust in others.”¹⁹⁸ The goal was to show women that they did not need to rely on penetration to achieve an orgasm, but in a way that did not denote penetration as oppressive and controlling. Manual authors understood that such a distinct focus on clitoral orgasms was new territory for many American couples. For that reason, authors often used a step-by-step model to assist women in reaching an

¹⁹⁶ “M” was the author of *The Sensuous Man* published in 1971. The identity of “M” was later revealed to be Joan Garrity, John Garrity, and Len Forman.

¹⁹⁷ Ward, “Sex and the Me Decade,” 126.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 128.

orgasm. They included exercises involving masturbation, fantasy, and manual stimulation by partners as options for women to easily reach an intense orgasm.¹⁹⁹

During the 1970s, then, sex became directly linked to self-exploration and identity. This is partially due to the increase in humanistic psychology as an approach for understanding interpersonal relations, thus another move away from Freud.²⁰⁰ When couples, and especially women, learned about their bodies and understood how they personally reached sexual pleasure, they also learned about their most intimate and authentic selves.²⁰¹ Sex was now a way for men and women to express themselves in an intimate way, and no longer used as an act of procreation or even love. Previous manuals reinforced a conservative perspective. Yet, in the 1970s, they offered options for couples to explore at their discretion. Alex Comfort represents this well in his 1972 renowned book *The Joy of Sex: A Cordon Bleu Guide to Lovemaking*, as he describes it as, “a menu, not a rulebook.” New and liberal notions on sex and pleasure allowed women and men to have pride in their sexual selves, to include their sexuality as part of their identity, and to focus on themselves and their own sexual pleasure. However, this also induced a sense of anxiety for men and women who could not achieve orgasm.

The drastic transformation of sex and marriage literature occurred because of evolving and radical studies, touchstone events in history, and authors and activists who countered the previously restrictive sexual status quo. Feminist and sexual politics were established in mainstream American thought in the late 1960s and 1970s. Once sex and marriage manuals finally adapted in the 1970s, they politicized sex and created space for female sexual autonomy where female pleasure was positioned. Additionally, feminist authors created space for

¹⁹⁹ Weinberg, Swensson and Hammersmith “Sexual Autonomy and the Status of Women,” 318.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 317.

²⁰¹ Ward, “Sex and the Me Decade,” 129.

themselves in sex manual publications, presenting feminist and sex-positive messages. The popularity of sex advice literature, including sex and marriage manuals and content in lifestyle magazines, shows that by the 1970s, Americans were curious about sex, eager to improve their sex lives, and fairly unaware of how to do so.

Sex Education in the U.S.

It's difficult to provide an extensive discussion on public school sex education²⁰² in the United States because each school district in the country determines what sex information they will present to students, and how they will present it. However, historians and sociologists have attempted to understand overall trends in sex education, in part by focusing on larger political and social ideologies and how they have shaped implied discourse around the country. Additionally, various surveys have polled students and teachers on the content and prevalence of sex education in their schools. These resources provide a general discussion on sex education in the U.S. and the cultural ideologies that influenced it, from the 1950s to the 1980s. Insight on American sex education provides a more conclusive understanding as to why Americans, especially in the 1980s, often turned to sex advice literature for questions and concerns regarding sex, sexuality, and pleasure.

In the 1950s, the importance of strong and healthy families could not be emphasized enough, or too early. This era saw a rise in home economics classes, also known as 'family life education,' where students learned about character building, relationships, money management,

²⁰² From this point on I will refer to 'public school sex education' as simply 'sex education.' Although it is argued that all sex advice literature can be broadly defined in this way, I use the more general term 'sex education' to refer to sex education in the public-school setting. All other forms of 'sex education' are referred to as sex advice literature.

marriage, and childbearing.²⁰³ All aspects of life that would positively contribute to the wholesome American family that the students were expected to create and maintain. Moral guidance was enforced by stressing the importance of pre-marital abstinence and faithfulness within marriage. 1950s curricula consistently taught heteronormative gender ideals and middle-class conformity and morality, in addition to portraying sexuality as biological and excluding important details of sexual intercourse.²⁰⁴ However, educators often encouraged their students to ask any questions that came to mind, allowed for open and candid conversations about sex, and occasionally even broadened their topics to include a variety of opinions on gender and sexuality.²⁰⁵

In 1964, Dr. Mary Calderone founded the Sex Information Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). Calderone was the former medical director of Planned Parenthood, and she later created SIECUS as a coordinating agency that provided training on comprehensive sex education to educators around the country.²⁰⁶ SIECUS was seen as ‘value-neutral,’ however its primary goal was simply to fight sexual ignorance around the country.²⁰⁷ Calderone intended to provide students with ‘straight facts’ that would contribute to their sexual well-being, including information on pregnancy, contraception, child-rearing, and virginity.²⁰⁸ It was inferred that most SIECUS trained educators framed sex in a way that supported a traditional and conservative morality, but it was ultimately up to the students to determine their own sexual moral standards.

²⁰³ Valerie J. Huber and Michael W. Firmin, “A History of Sex Education in the United States Since 1900,” in *International Journal of Educational Reform* 23, no. 1 (2014): 36.

²⁰⁴ Susan K. Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s* (University of Illinois Press: 2008), 47.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 47.

²⁰⁶ Jeffrey P. Moran, “Sex Education and the Rise of the New Right, Reviewed Work: Talk About Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States by Janice M. Irving” in *Reviews in American History* 31, no. 2 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003): 284.

²⁰⁷ Janice M. Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battle Over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 37.

²⁰⁸ Moran, “Sex Education and the Rise of the New Right,” 284.

SIECUS was represented as fairly morally neutral when it came to sex, encouraging neither a liberal nor conservative stance. SIECUS was able to further their efforts with federal funding in grant money from the U.S. Office of Education.²⁰⁹ They did experience some backlash with their sex education program, but nonetheless, they received hundreds of applications from schools nationwide.

Sex education resistance was most apparent in an incident that became notoriously known as the Anaheim battle of sex education in 1968 to 1969. The Anaheim school district incorporated a Family Life and Sex Education program (FLSE) into the school curriculum for grades seven through twelve in 1965.²¹⁰ It was celebrated as one of the most progressive in the nation and had little to no opponents in the first four years of its existence. In 1968, Anaheim mother, local activist, and aggressive anti-communist Eleanor Howe saw sex education as a violation and a program intending to “change the values of our society.”²¹¹ Howe recruited incredible support and assembled an entire anti SIECUS/FLSE agenda which provided alternatives to the original sex education program. The new agenda proposed alternatives based on Christian moralism and minimal scientific information. Howe also included statements from outside ‘experts’ testifying that FLSE “was a product of brainwashing by a sexualized society, and apocalyptic promises of children surreptitiously receiving gonorrhea treatments and abortions while contraceptives were dispensed in the school cafeteria.”²¹² After a year of debate, Howe and her followers had won, and the FLSE structure was replaced by a “birds and bees” type course.²¹³

²⁰⁹ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*, 37.

²¹⁰ Natalia Mehlman, “Sex Ed... and the Reds? Reconsidering the Anaheim Battle over Sex Education, 1962-1969” in *History of Education Quarterly*, 47 no. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2007): 204.

²¹¹ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*, 53.

²¹² Mehlman, “Sex Ed... and the Reds?,” 226.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 227.

This sex education debate in Anaheim gained national attention. Activists on both sides of the battle watched and even participated in the debates. National conservative groups such as the John Birch Society and the Christian Crusade were said to have actually manipulated circumstances in Anaheim in order to further their national agenda.²¹⁴ Many studies examine the conflict in Anaheim in great detail. Although a focus on one city in the country seems incomplete, scholars and historians argue that this controversy is representative of national trends and ideologies on sex education in the United States.

People in the late 1960s experienced new levels of conflict over the sex education debate. National conservative programs led the crusade against sex education programs like SIECUS. The John Birch Society, whose membership consisted of mostly middle-class, conservative Christian Republicans, was known for their strict anti-communist agenda.²¹⁵ The notoriously extremist group followed in the footsteps of the Christian Crusade, one of the most powerful right-wing organizations in the 1960s. The Crusade was founded by Reverend Billy James Hargis, who was incredibly vocal in his anti-communist stance and worked together with the John Birch Society to undermine every concept and institution that did not align with their right-wing, anti-communist, conservative Christian mentality. This, of course, included sex education. These groups fought tirelessly against sex education because it could not teach Christian morality because of the Supreme Court decision to ban prayer and Bible reading from public schools. Sex education activists fought back by explaining that although strict Christian morality could not be enforced, the sex education system did encourage a sense of moral right and wrong.²¹⁶ Ultimately, the conservative New Right could be considered victorious, not due to

²¹⁴ Mehlman, "Sex Ed... and the Reds?," 205.

²¹⁵ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*, 44.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

their actions and arguments in the sex education debate, but because of the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The liberation movements had a surprising effect on sex education in the 1970s. The previous necessity of preventing teenage pregnancy by teaching teens to not engage in sexual activity was replaced with a more lax initiative to prevent pregnancy as a result of sexual experimentation.²¹⁷ Many schools even incorporated lesson plans emphasizing the importance of pleasure and sex equity.²¹⁸ In response, the New Right simply created their own sex education alternatives that included topics such as adoption counseling, “ex-gay” ministries, talks on “Christian sexuality,” and heterosexual marriage.²¹⁹

The election of Ronald Reagan allowed the conservative New Right’s opinions on sex education to proliferate the nation. They lobbied profusely for the incorporation of abstinence only sex education, arguing that abstinence until heterosexual marriage was the only true solution to ‘society’s sexual problems.’²²⁰ In 1981 abstinence only sex education became federally funded through The Adolescent Family Life Act. Reagan saw the act as a productive way to “promote self-discipline and other prudent approaches to the problem of adolescent premarital sexual relations.”²²¹ With their abstinence-only discourse, Reagan and the New Right attempted to control adolescent sexual behavior. In turn, they hoped to create a more moral society and reprioritize the nuclear American family.

The conservative rhetoric was strategically and powerfully forced into the realities of many Americans throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Their relevance in the

²¹⁷ Huber and Firmin, “A History of Sex Education,” 39.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

²¹⁹ Moran, “Sex Education and the Rise of the New Right,” 285.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 286.

²²¹ Huber and Firmin, “A History of Sex Education,” 41.

media, schools, and politics made their opinions and ideas incredibly well known and arguably, it made them more accepted. The lack of regulated and extensive sex education forced many Americans to rely on the content in sex advice literature to learn about a variety of different concepts and experiences pertaining to sex and pleasure.

Sex and marriage manuals were an irreplaceable tool in the reinforcement of accepted sexual experiences. They provided immense historical insight into the changing social and moral acceptance of certain sexual practices throughout the century. Lifestyle magazines, which include a variety of advice on sex and pleasure that is often cited from sex manuals and studies, were frequently utilized by women in the 1980s. Women's lifestyle magazines actually had a greater influence on American women because they combined their tactics for encouraging consumerism with aspects of psychoanalysis to provide discussions on sex and pleasure and present specific expectations of women's sexual roles. The next two chapters provide a detailed look at the regulations of gender, sexuality and pleasure in everyday life, and further, how lifestyle magazines assisted in normalizing and even encouraging those regulations.

Chapter Three: Contextualizing Lifestyle Magazines: Sexual Insecurity, Anxiety, and Exploration

In our culture, both disease and desire are medical events, individual experiences, and social signifiers... The content of medical diagnoses is shaped by social, economic, and political factors. And both specifically medical and broader cultural ideologies operate in the construction of individual experiences of sexual desire. Not simply a biological urge, sexual desire is a culturally constructed composite.²²²

Janice Irvine, 1993.

This declaration reflects how American culture, medical diagnoses, and social constructs of sex, gender, and pleasure worked cohesively to specify and uphold acceptable sexual practices for both men and women. By the 1970s, sex had become a central part of one's selfhood and identity. The psychoanalytic nature of American culture meant that in addition to personal identity, sex was also subjected to critique and improvement. This sexual analysis was amplified with the medical and social recognition and diagnosis of sexual dysfunction in the late 1970s. Together, the medicalization of sex and the inclusion of sexuality as an entity of self-expression, anxiety, and personal identity put further social emphasis on sexual experience.

The cultural role of sexual experience was recognized and utilized by lifestyle magazines. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, authors and editors appealed to readers by presenting their magazines as resources for empowered and independent women. However, they simultaneously enforced sex and gender norms and by providing advice and conservative opinions on how sex and intimate relationships could and should be improved.

The Normalization and Medicalization of Sex

²²² Irvine, "Regulated Passions," 215.

Sociologist Melissa Tyler uses Critical Management Studies (CMS) as a way to understand the social and cultural forces in lifestyle magazines that influence sexual experiences. Although Tyler's work on the role of sex in lifestyle magazines focuses on publications in the 1990s and early 2000s, her discussion on theory is relevant to lifestyle magazines in the 1980s as well. She begins her article by acknowledging America's need to consistently manage and improve aspects of everyday life, including self-growth and personal relationships. Tyler touches on the work of sociologists Paul Du Gay and Graeme Salaman, and their concept of living one's life as an 'entrepreneur of the self.'²²³ According to Du Gay and Salaman, "this means that all social relations come to be perceived as exchange relations in which social subjects are 'reimagined as customers.'²²⁴ They see America's growing dependency on production and consumption as a negative influence on the ways Americans understand and engage in self-management. Similar to Du Gay and Salaman, organizational theorist Christopher Grey speculates the perception of one's class as an intrinsic part of the self and argues that this integration presents self-management and improvement as more manageable than the more disciplinary power of self.²²⁵ The 'power of self' referred to Victorian notions of control and the 1950s' dependence on sexual containment and control.

During the mid 1960s and 1970s, liberation movements forced sex into the social and public realms of everyday life. This created a new social acceptance of sex and pleasure. Tyler acknowledges the rise of post-modernism as a prominent influence on perceptions of sex, sexuality and pleasure. Postmodernists rejected scientific and biological definitions of sex and created space for people to incorporate sex as an aspect of their personal identity. Tyler discusses

²²³ Melissa Tyler, "Managing between the Sheets: Lifestyle Magazines and the Management of Sexuality in Everyday Life" in *Sexualities*, 7 no. 1 (London: Sage Publications, 1998): 85.

²²⁴ Tyler, "Managing between the Sheets," 85.

²²⁵ Ibid, 86.

author William Simon's work on postmodern sexualities, explaining his perspective on sexuality as, "an aspect of social life which is increasingly multiple, fragmented, diffuse and contested, forged out of the contingent circumstances of choice, pluralism and complexity that ultimately link together in the creation of a sexual self."²²⁶ Sex experts disassociated sexual identity from heterosexual, monogamous, and procreative expectations, and finally recognized sexual identity as a facet of acceptable social expression for all couples.

An acceptance of experimentation and personal expression emerged in the 1970s. The postmodernist inclusion of sex and sexuality as a part of public identity, combined with Americans' reliance on psychoanalysis, meant that sex and pleasure were now fragments of oneself that could be analyzed and improved upon. Sociologist Eva Illouz illuminates psychoanalysis' influence on sex, stating, "Sexuality came to stand for a master metaphor of healthy and intimate bonds and perhaps most of all for a liberated self. And liberation took the form of a delicate work of emotional sharing."²²⁷ She further explains that emotional awareness and expression were key to a healthy sexuality.²²⁸ Sex was positioned as an aspect of identity and a contributing factor to finding intimacy, emotional expression and healthy sexuality. Further, it was seen as an aspect of life that should be improved on in order to gain a more fulfilling personal life and relationships.

By this time, sexologists, psychoanalysts, and medical doctors had finally recognized the liberalization of social and sexual norms that began in the late 1960s.²²⁹ It was clear that these changing mentalities could risk their scientific authority, which depended on the continuation of

²²⁶ Tyler, "Managing between the Sheets," 90.

²²⁷ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 127.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 127.

²²⁹ From this point on, I refer to sexologists, psychoanalysts and medical doctors as 'sex experts.'

gender specific and conservative social norms. Sociologist Janice Irvine extensively studied the scientific authority of sex, and writes,

Feminism and lesbian/gay liberation... challenged power inequalities between men and women and questioned the very concepts of maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity... They presented alternatives to tradition and to expert power and authority. Therein lay threat to American sexology.²³⁰

The scientific authority over sexuality, gender and sexual pleasure depended on a heterosexist and patriarchal society, a dependency that can be better understood by Foucault's "repressive hypothesis." His hypothesis argues that society insistently defines open discussions about sex as morally wrong, which further fuels a sexual desire to discuss sex.²³¹ In this way, sex is framed as repressed and unconscious, and encourages people to seek medical intervention in order to better understand their sexual selves and libidos, and cure possible sexual problems.²³² However, Foucault argues, that rather than encouraging sexual exploration, understanding, and resolution, the experts actually aim to "assimilate us into socio-sexual norms and pathologize us insofar as we fail to conform."²³³ Considering Foucault's theory, it is understandable that sex experts felt increasingly threatened by the growing acceptance of sexual autonomy and understanding of sexual experience.

Women's and gender studies scholar Chloe Taylor also recognizes sex experts' position when she acknowledges their stature as the "authorities of normalcy."²³⁴ She builds on Foucault's later work, *Abnormal*, which identifies a shift in psychiatrists in the late nineteenth

²³⁰ Janice Irvine, *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology*, rev. ed (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press: 1990), 101. Cited in Chloe Taylor, "Female Sexual Dysfunction, Feminist Sexology, and the Psychiatry of the Normal," *Feminist Studies* 41, no 2 (Feminist Studies, Inc. 2015): 260.

²³¹ Chloe Taylor, "Female Sexual Dysfunction, Feminist Sexology, and the Psychiatry of the Normal," *Feminist Studies* 41, no 2 (Feminist Studies, Inc. 2015): 274.

²³² *Ibid*, 274.

²³³ *Ibid*, 274.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 282.

century, venturing from a focus on mental illness and towards the medicalization of abnormalities. Taylor argues that in the mid to late twentieth century, psychiatry underwent another shift when they expanded their authority of the pathological and abnormal to further include the normal.²³⁵ She argues that this inclusion of normalcy can be found in sex experts' treatment of sexual dysfunction, and primarily in Female Sexual Disorder (FSD). It became sex experts' authority to determine whether or not a woman's sexual activity was considered normal.

In the 1970s, two new developments emerged in the medical and social worlds of sexuality and pleasure. Two diagnostic categories of sexual dysfunction, Sex Addiction and Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD) were invented and used to diagnose both men and women.²³⁶ Sex addiction applied to patients described as harboring "sexual unmanageability" to the point where anything would be sacrificed for sex. It also includes people who felt as though "compulsive masturbation, compulsive heterosexual or homosexual relationships, pornography, prostitution, exhibitionism, voyeurism, indecent phone calls, child molesting, incest, rape, and violence" have taken over their lives and have become unmanageable.²³⁷ When sex addiction was first established, many patients were encouraged to 'get sober,' and turned to recovery processes similar to substance abuse twelve-step programs. Groups such as Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous emerged around the country beginning in 1977, and quickly became an incredibly profitable industry.

Two sexologists, Harold Leif and Helen Singer Kaplan, first recognized ISD in their respective studies in 1977. The disorder emerged after both sex therapists noticed an increase in patients expressing frustration over low libido, which the therapists attributed to chronic failure

²³⁵ Taylor, "Female Sexual Dysfunction, Feminist Sexology, and the Psychiatry of the Normal," 282.

²³⁶ Irvine "Regulated Passions," 203.

²³⁷ Ibid, 213.

to initiate or respond to sexual stimuli.²³⁸ The exact diagnosis of ISD was incredibly broad. Sexologists explained the diagnosis strategy as, “you know it when you see it.”²³⁹ In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized ISD as an official mental illness when they included it in the DSM-III-R. They further defined ISD by dividing it into two specific disorders: Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder and Sexual Aversion Disorder.

The diagnoses of these sexual dysfunctions further revealed sex experts’ instillation of strict sex and gender norms. For women, sexual dysfunction was used to specify which types of sexual behavior were permissible and socially acceptable. For example, ISD reflected earlier diagnoses of frigidity; it focused on sexual unresponsiveness and an inability to achieve sexual pleasure. Sex addiction in women constituted risk of victimization or the use of sexual encounters to gain a false sense of power.²⁴⁰ Psychologist Charlotte Kasl recognizes the inherent gendered differences in sexual dysfunction, stating, “Sex addiction in women reflects an internalization of male norms of sexuality involving power, aggressiveness, and control.”²⁴¹ In this way, both ISD and sex addiction were established and utilized by sex experts in order to reinforce a conservative sociosexual order. When people, and especially women, practiced sexual norms, they often experienced a lack of genuine sexual pleasure. Consequently, sexual dissatisfaction caused many individuals and couples to seek medical and psychological support from sex experts. Strategically, sex experts created sexual dysfunction, and then established themselves as the ultimate source for its relief.

²³⁸ Irvine, “Regulated Passions,” 205.

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 213.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 221.

²⁴¹ Charlotte Kasl, *Women, Sex, and Addiction: A Search for Love and Power* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989): 43. Cited in Irvine, “Regulated Passions,” 222.

Irvine acknowledges that by the 1980s, many women found that their expectations for sexual freedom, fostered by the liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, were often thwarted because of continued sexual double standards and a lack of satisfying sexual encounters.²⁴² She argues that these realizations caused a “glaring disjuncture between expectations of an easy sexual pleasure and the realities of failed sex [that] helped create a cultural basis for the successful development of clinical programs of sex therapy.”²⁴³ This validation of sex therapy, in addition to the AIDS epidemic, increasing political and societal power of the New Right, and feminists’ direct attack on sexual violence, further created and reinforced sexual restraint in the 1980s.

The necessity for ceaseless personal growth, sex as an aspect of everyday life, and sex therapy’s grasp on sexual dysfunction, caused many Americans to feel as though their sexual ability could always be improved. The constant need for progress was used by lifestyle magazines to reiterate anxiety over sexual performance and efficiency. Cultural theorist Angela McRobbie looks specifically at contemporary lifestyle magazines’ reflections of romantic love, connecting them to an increasingly critical reflection of sex.²⁴⁴ She recognizes lifestyle magazines’ diverse and extensive discussions of gendered sexuality, and suggests that the wide array of sexual content created ‘a new form of sexual subjectivity, based on knowledge and self-reflexiveness... in a social environment where the politics of sexuality – though by no means resolved – are at least part of everyday life.’²⁴⁵ In this way, McRobbie identifies lifestyle

²⁴² Irvine, “Regulated Passions,” 221.

²⁴³ Ibid, 221.

²⁴⁴ Tyler, “Managing between the Sheets,” 92.

²⁴⁵ Angela McRobbie, “More! New Sexualities in Girls’ and Women’s Magazines” in: David G. Morley; James P. Curran and Valerie Walkerdine, eds. *Cultural Studies And Communication* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1996) 193. Cited in Melissa Tyler “Managing between the Sheets,” 92.

magazines as another social influence which framed sex as something to be managed and improved upon.

Similar to McRobbie, Irvine also specifies the “popular imagination” of sex and pleasure. Specifically, within the realm of sexual dysfunction, she acknowledges the power of popular culture and its ability to further distinguish socially acceptable forms of sexual experience. Although Irvine limits her discussion to newspaper articles and books such as Erica Jong’s *Any Woman’s Blues*, her critical analysis can be similarly attributed to lifestyle magazines. She recognizes the inclusion of sexual dysfunction in popular culture, and argues, “Through their widespread dissemination of the concepts of inhibited sexual desire and sex addiction, these popularizations continually reassert and legitimate the idea that cultural ideologies about appropriate sexual expression are valid and medical conditions responsive to individual intervention and cure.”²⁴⁶ Her argument clearly emphasizes the power that lifestyle magazines possessed, and further recognizes their alignment with sex therapists and the social institution of conservative sex and gender roles.

In 1984, sociologists William Simon and John H. Gagnon created the sexual scripting approach, a theoretical perspective which argued that “sociocultural processes are fundamental in determining what is perceived as sexual and how individuals behave sexually.”²⁴⁷ They were inspired while working for the Institute for Sex Research, where they felt they needed a better way to understand the sex research that came before them, including Kinsey and Freud. Additionally, their work was established in order to create and rationalize a new research

²⁴⁶ Irvine, “Regulated Passions,” 217.

²⁴⁷ Laura M. Carpenter, “From Girls Into Women: Scripts for Sexuality and Romance in *Seventeen* Magazine, 1974-1994,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 35, no. 2, (May 1998): 158.

approach to sex.²⁴⁸ The scripting approach interprets discussions about sex, and how those discussions influence perceptions of sex, and how individuals act out sexual encounters. When people read about sexual experiences, they absorb that knowledge, and eventually use it in social and sexual interactions.²⁴⁹ The scripting approach contains three levels of sexual scripts: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. Cultural scenarios occur in public spaces such as school, religious doctrines, sex education, and mass media. The effect of cultural scenarios is limited without interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts, for it provides only basic knowledge and understanding of sexual encounters.²⁵⁰

Once cultural scenarios are integrated with interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts, individuals can better articulate sexual encounters, and act on their own personal desires. Interpersonal scripts involve interactions in social situations, where individuals use concepts of sex that they learned from various cultural scenarios. They pay attention to others' responses, and use those situations, responses, and cultural scenarios to create sexual desires, fantasies, and intentions.²⁵¹ Their work contributed to an entirely new perspective on sex and pleasure, one that distinguishes difference between representations, interpretations and actions of sex.

Editors for lifestyle magazines use different scripts for different sexual practices and topics, depending on how socially acceptable they are. Sociologist Laura Carpenter uses this approach to interpret *Seventeen* Magazine from 1974 to 1994. She identifies *Seventeen*'s ability to emphasize certain sexual topics while disregarding others, by using different cultural scenarios to discuss each. She concludes her study by stating,

²⁴⁸ William Simon and John H. Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts: Origins, Influences, and Changes," *Qualitative Sociology* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 491.

²⁴⁹ Carpenter, "From Girls into Women," 159.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 158.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 158.

These scripts may enable readers to resist gender and sexual subordination through agency, traditionally denied to women. At the same time, the potential effects of these new scripts are limited, especially as editors continue to depict dominant sexual scripts as preferable to available alternatives. Restricting sexual options may be a way of protecting the vulnerable – women, teens, or both – from danger. As Rubin points out, however, it may also constitute a maneuver to protect society from women’s sexuality and power. Though perhaps, unintentionally, the editors of *Seventeen* accomplished the latter.²⁵²

Carpenter’s work, although specific to *Seventeen* Magazine, can be used along with Simon and Gagnon to conceptualize magazines’ representations of sex and pleasure. Sexual scripting provides tools to further understand how magazines were able to include topics ranging from abstinence until marriage to one-night stands, while still maintaining a conservative stance on sex and pleasure.

Women’s Lifestyle Magazines in the 20th Century

Until the mid to late 1900s, women’s lifestyle magazines were primarily concentrated on woman in the domestic sphere, recognizing and profiting off their roles as homemakers, wives and mothers. Publications like *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman’s Day* used a majority of their editorial and advertising content to promote domesticity, motherhood, and the dutiful and loyal wife. An article published in *McCall’s* in June of 1960 titled, “My Love Affair with the Washing-Machine Man” is a humorous yet eye opening example of how societal expectations were reinforced through these magazines. The author, Joyce Lubold, begins the article by reiterating the first and most important role of the American housewife: fidelity to her husband and her wedding vows. She says, “Although [the All-American housewife] may enjoy reading those novels of suburbia that turn every residential street into a beehive of amorous intrigue, she

²⁵² Carpenter, “From Girls into Women,” 167.

knows very clearly the difference between that kind of fiction and her own kind of reality.”²⁵³

She continues with a description of her additional roles as the homemaker, and satirically discusses the love affairs she has with her home repairmen.

There’s Charlie, the washing machine man, Huck the man who fixes her television set, and Gus the electrician. She discusses her encounters with these men as if she were actually engaging in deep and wildly sensuous affairs. She describes the day that her washing machine broke, and she quickly dialed Charlie’s number which is “etched on [her] heart.” After she hears the doorbell ring she says,

My feet have wings. “Hel-lo, Mr. Gant,” I carol as I open the door. He walks silently into the house. I walk behind him. We reach the kitchen and stand face to face. Then bittersweet flows about us. As he stands there, so long-awaited, I find myself in the second stage of the affair. For love is akin to hate, and joy lies closest to sorrow. We are caught in the inexplicable surge of antipathy that lovers know when they try, too hurriedly, to reknit old ties. We glare at each other, helpless in the everchanging current of our relationship. “Machine’s still full o’water,” Charlie says with strong distaste.²⁵⁴

Anticlimactically, the story ends with Charlie fixing her washing machine and the two ‘lovers’ going their separate ways. Readers understand that these affairs are not actually of a romantic or sexual nature.

The story uses satire to discuss women’s inherent domestic duty. The author is so physically and emotionally tied to her role as the homemaker and her time saving devices that she is aroused and sensually fulfilled by her encounters with various repairmen. It also humorously represents the lack of sexual pleasure that many women in the 1960s endured. If the author was so easily aroused by her repairmen, then clearly, she was not sexually fulfilled by her husband. According to Nancy Walker, this kind of dialogue was frequent in women’s lifestyle

²⁵³ Joyce Lubold, “My Love Affair with the Washing Machine Man,” *McCall’s* June 1960, 42. Cited in Nancy A. Walker, *Women’s Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998), 189.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 191.

magazines before the women's liberation movement. It not only restricted American women and femininity to the household, but also emphasized the importance of the loyal and monogamous marriage.

By the 1960s, feminists, scholars, and a new generation of working and more autonomous American white women pushed back against lifestyle magazines.²⁵⁵ Millions of women were inspired by Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, where she openly challenged magazines and their emphasis on American women simply as mothers and homemakers.²⁵⁶ Friedan writes casually about her days spent at the New York Public Library, sifting through old bound volumes of women's magazines, and how in the midst of her research, she found a drastic change occur in women's lifestyle magazines. She realized, while reading 1939 publications of *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Home Companion*, that these magazines presented American women in a way that was drastically different than current magazines.²⁵⁷ Friedan found that the magazines presented a new and empowered woman, a woman with a determined spirit, creating a life of her own.²⁵⁸ These women were focused on individuality, they had fulfilling careers, and they worried less about finding a man, and more on making a difference in the world.²⁵⁹

Yet, after the second World War, femininity was once again restricted and repressed in lifestyle magazines. Friedan noted that the last mention of a strong female character was an

²⁵⁵ It's important to note that the 1960s were not the only decade where women experienced a rise in autonomy. During WWII, women entered the workforce in drastic numbers, whether out of access or necessity, and created fulfilling lives for themselves outside the domestic realm.

²⁵⁶ Friedan focuses on women's lifestyle magazines and their depiction of and influence over American housewives in the early to mid 20th century in her second chapter, "The Happy Housewife Heroine."

²⁵⁷ By current magazines I mean current for the time that *The Feminine Mystique* was published – in the early 1960s.

²⁵⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 29.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 30.

article in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1949. The article tells the story of Sarah, a young girl learning to fly a plane without her mother knowing. Sarah finally gets to fly the plane by herself, and while in the air she finds pride in being an autonomous woman and expresses her eagerness to learn more about herself. Friedan describes the article in detail with a sense of euphoria; she follows the narrative with a note that powerfully represents the end of the autonomous and individualistic woman in lifestyle magazines. She says, "And then suddenly the image blurs. The New Woman, soaring free, hesitates in midflight, shivers in all that blue sunlight and rushes back to the cozy walls of home."²⁶⁰ Friedan mentions that in the same year that *Ladies' Home Journal* published the story on Sarah, they also began to publish stories that became central to 1950s and early 1960s magazines; the housewife.

During this time, American culture constructed a specific definition of femininity, limiting it to "sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love."²⁶¹ Friedan expresses her frustration;

But the new image this mystique gives to American women is the old image: "Occupation: housewife." The new mystique makes the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women; it presupposes that history has reached a final and glorious end in the here and now, as far as women are concerned. Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence – as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children – into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity.²⁶²

The chapter continues with close readings of a variety of articles in 1960s women's magazines. The power comes from the fact that many women who read Friedan's book probably also read many of the lifestyle magazines she dissects. It wasn't until Friedan offered a new perspective on

²⁶⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 33.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 36.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 36.

the rigid portrayals of femininity did American women begin to fully understand how magazines represented womanhood. This is not to say that female readers were previously unaware of restrictive depictions of femininity in these magazines. However, Friedan's perspective brought increased social awareness and her platform allowed for greater social change. Friedan's work, in addition to growing numbers of women in the workplace, and the popular countercultural mentality of the 1960s, caused a drastic decline in women's magazine readership.²⁶³

Editors were not oblivious to the change in American attitudes and actively worked to keep their publications from becoming obsolete. They had to find new ways to attract female readers and to encourage a consumerist agenda. They did this by attempting to control and constrict the ways American women lived their lives. In response to political movements of the time, they asked, what other aspects of American womanhood could be commodified and sold to the masses? What virtues and characteristics were still consistent with what it meant to be an American woman? The answer was simple: beauty, appearance, and their relationships with men.

As magazines modified their message to target the "new American woman," *Cosmopolitan* took its transformation one step further. In 1965 Helen Gurley Brown, the notorious author and outspoken supporter of sexually active career women, took over as editor of the magazine. Her notoriety came from her enthusiastic and direct presence and her somewhat revolutionary stance on American women. She used her personal experiences, including many affairs with men - some being her bosses - to establish a new and more free reality for single women, their careers, and sex lives.

²⁶³ Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines from Mademoiselle to Ms.* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 174.

In the early 1960s, Americans were just beginning to recognize the social and sexual changes that were occurring. Many found Gurley Brown's opinions to be immoral, unnatural, and detrimental to American women. However, millions of women were inspired by her, and many historians recognize the power her work had on the liberation movement. She wrote two books in the early 1960s, which author Julie Berebitsky believed, "exposed the reality that many unmarried American women liked men, money, work, and sex, and wanted to feel good about rather than ashamed of the life choices they made or contemplated."²⁶⁴ *Sex and the Single Girl* included thirteen chapters dedicated to topics like the right for single women to "indulge in their libidos" free from relationships or even romance, sex with married men, and men and money. Gurley Brown took the same approach to *Cosmo*, and completely transformed the magazine into a guidebook for a new kind of woman, the "Cosmo Girl."²⁶⁵

Before her reign as editor of *Cosmo*, Gurley Brown began her career as a secretary for an influential advertising executive. She was given the opportunity to write an ad copy, and thereafter was quickly became one of the highest paid female copywriters on the West Coast.²⁶⁶ She was passionate about helping women advance their careers and create opportunities for themselves that would otherwise be restricted due to their gender. She was well aware of the gendered hierarchy that was so prevalent in the office, in addition to gender expectations that limited women's ability to sexually pursue men.²⁶⁷

In 1962 Gurley Brown published *Sex and the Single Girl* followed by *Sex and the Office* in 1964. Her first book was highly controversial but millions of unmarried American women

²⁶⁴ Jennifer Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere: The Life of Helen Gurley Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 58.

²⁶⁵ Julie Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire* (Yale University Press, 2012), 177.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 179

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 187.

flocked to buy it, making *Sex and the Single Girl* an instant best-seller, published in over twenty-eight countries and reaching multiple best-seller lists. Her work was profound, for she incorporated topics of female sexuality and sexual autonomy that did not adhere to social and sexual norms. For example, she encouraged women to explore their sexuality with multiple partners and to use their sexuality to further their careers and quality of life. Her exceptionally liberal perspective caused social uproar and underwent intense critique. Many negative reviews contributed her work to the “breaking down of moral values” that was “leading Western civilization into a decline.”²⁶⁸ Despite harsh reviews, Gurley Brown had, and continued to establish herself as a valid spokesperson for single women everywhere. She believed that the single American woman should feel sexually free and should use her sexuality for professional and personal gain.²⁶⁹ She encouraged women to take their careers seriously while simultaneously experiencing sexual freedom and argued that work leveled the sexual and romantic playing field.²⁷⁰

After she published her books and received endless feedback and gratitude from young American women, Brown was a guest on multiple talk shows, where she continued to reiterate her message: “single girls have lots to live for and no apologies to deliver.”²⁷¹ She briefly appeared on the daytime television talk show *Outrageous Opinions* where she hosted a number of impressive guests, but never gained any real popularity. After her brief television career, she, her agent, and her husband, David Brown, decided she would edit a women’s magazine. When considering magazine options, Gurley Brown recognized that most traditional magazines such as

²⁶⁸ Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 58.

²⁶⁹ Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office*, 178.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 195.

²⁷¹ Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 140.

the Seven Sisters, focused on a domestic and family-oriented demographic.²⁷² Clearly, that was not the type of woman that would be attracted to Gurley Brown's work. Instead, she recognized that her magazine needed to attract a demographic that author Jennifer Scanlon identified as, "younger, unmarried, even unsettled 'girl,' helping her mark her territory in the modern world."²⁷³

After someone mentioned to the Browns that Hearst Corporation was considering closing down *Cosmopolitan*, because of falling sales and advertising, Gurley Brown jumped on the opportunity. Previously, *Cosmo* had focused on topics such as world news, fashion and home material, which Gurley Brown felt was dull and outdated. She presented her vision to management, which was to completely redo *Cosmo* to target young career women.²⁷⁴ In her proposal to management she expressed,

Everything in *Cosmopolitan* should be upward and onward, not in a goody-goody sense but in a realistic sense. I personally don't feel that the world is going to the dogs or that younger people are inferior to their counterparts of a previous generation... When one puts down a copy of *Cosmopolitan*, he or she should feel better, if not downright wonderful. There should be lots of self-help, specific advice on how to do things; not so many global and cosmic pieces. The magazine should be closer to where modern women live than it is now. We should take cognizance of the fact that our nation is undergoing a cultural as well as social revolution, but even an article on pop art can have a lot of you in it.²⁷⁵

Gurley Brown's passion is clearly evident in her statement. She wanted to incorporate a message that communicate to readers an "optimism designed to encourage, even enable, readers to feel better about themselves and the world around them."²⁷⁶ What is important to note is the way she

²⁷² Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 144.

²⁷³ *Ibid*, 144.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 145.

²⁷⁵ Helen Gurley Brown, "Proposal to *Cosmopolitan* Magazine." Cited in Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 148.

²⁷⁶ Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 147.

connects her emphasis on the reader feeling “wonderful,” with self-help and advice literature. Considering what we know now, this content often made readers feel quite the opposite.

Gurley Brown took her vision to *Cosmopolitan* when she was tapped to become lead editor in 1965. She made certain to make a consistent emotional connection to her readers: she tried to address them as individuals and not as a cohesive mass.²⁷⁷ Her “unshakable and contagious optimism about women’s place in the world” made *Cosmo* a comeback success and created a dedicated readership. Her message was progressive, yet it continued to define how women should look and act in order to be sexually appealing to men and professionally successful. She urged female readers to take control of their bodies and their sexualities, and in that way, they established themselves as powerful beings in personal relationships and in the workplace.

Helen Gurley Brown’s work with *Cosmo* was not without harsh criticism, especially from contemporary liberal feminists like Betty Friedan and Naomi Wolf. Wolf touches on the role of *Cosmopolitan* within the social phenomenon she coined as “The Beauty Myth.” She discusses the negative implications of the *Cosmo* formula,

Their formula includes an aspirational, individualist, can-do tone that says that you should be your best and nothing should get in your way; a focus on personal and sexual relationships that affirms female ambition and erotic appetite; and sexualized images of female bodies that, though only slightly subtler than those aimed at men, are meant to convey female sexual liberation. But the formula must also include an element that contradicts and then undermines the overall pro-woman fare: In diet, skin care, and surgery features, it sells women the deadliest version of the beauty myth money can buy.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Scanlon, *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*, 148.

²⁷⁸ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 69.

Helen Gurley Brown was the first editor to include such an array of sexual content. Although she was seriously and understandably scrutinized, her work on the magazine made it the success it continues to be today.

In hindsight, lifestyle magazines' focus on female beauty, appearance and heterosexual relationships only made sense. Women's liberation and the sexual revolution were utilized and manipulated by editors to appeal to the ostensibly liberated American woman. It was imperative that magazines portray an empowering and freeing for women, even as they found different ways to undermine and restrict. Wolf discusses magazines' role in American culture. She identifies magazines' new fixation on beauty and appearance as "beauty pornography" and argues that women's discovery of their sexuality "artificially linked a commodified 'beauty' directly and explicitly to sexuality – invaded the mainstream to undermine women's new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth."²⁷⁹ The sense of sexual self-worth that Wolf mentioned was made accessible due to new reproductive rights for women, which gave them more control over their bodies and sexualities. However, she argues for its vulnerability because popular culture tended to exhibit women's sexual self in ways that were unobtainable for real life women. Women consumed these unrealistic images of femininity, womanhood, and female sexuality through popular culture. Consequently, they were conditioned to use those portrayals as personal goals, rather than seeing them for their true purpose, which was to create insecurity and encourage consumerism.

Previously, magazines made women feel insecure about their roles as mothers, wives, and homemakers, and simultaneously restricted them to home and family life. Comparatively, the lifestyle magazines of the 1960s convinced readers that the liberated woman was beautiful,

²⁷⁹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 11.

put together, and sexually appealing to men. The topics and restrictions changed, yet the tactics remained the same. Editors and advertisers now focused their attention on marketing images and products that would make women feel apprehensive about their appearance and their ability to attract, sexually please, and hold onto men. This allowed them to sell products and trends, and whether consciously or not, influence how women experienced romantic relationships and sexual pleasure.

More often than not, women of color did not find themselves represented in the popular mainstream magazines. The advertisements and articles were targeted towards a white audience, which consequently disregarded an entire population of possible female consumerists. Four Black businessmen, Jonathan Blount, Cecil Hollingsworth, Clarence Smith, and Earl Edward Lewis recognized a consumerist potential in Black women. In response, they created the *Essence* magazine in 1970. The founders were curious to see if post-civil-rights Black middle class had a strong enough market to sustain relationships with mainstream advertisers. Although they wanted to promote revolutionary Black liberation, they also intended to profit off it while also portraying their ideal of the American Black woman.²⁸⁰

Sociologists Jennifer Bailey Woodard and Teresa Mastin take a Black feminist approach to their content analysis of *Essence* in “Black Womanhood: ‘Essence’ and its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women.” They recognize the importance of *Essence* as a voice for Black feminism but recognize its portrayal of stereotypical images of Black womanhood. They identify four common stereotypes of Black women found throughout *Essence* publications: the mammy, the matriarch, the sexual siren, and the welfare queen.²⁸¹ Woodard and Mastin argue

²⁸⁰ Gumbs, “Black (Buying) Power,” 96.

²⁸¹ Jennifer Bailey Woodard and Teresa Mastin, “Black Womanhood: ‘Essence’ and its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women” in *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no 2 (Sage Publications, 2005): 270.

that the sexualized image was consistent with the portrayal of Black women as the sexually aggressive Jezebel and was, “central in this nexus of elite White male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression. White males fostered this image of Black women during slavery to excuse their sexual abuse and rape of Black women.”²⁸² That same justification for the abuse of Black women still remains and is perpetuated through sexualized images of Black women in lifestyle magazines.

Africana and feminist scholar Noliwe M. Rooks discusses *Essence* frequently in her book *Ladies’ Pages: African American Women’s Magazines and the Culture That Made Them*. She recognizes the importance of the publication as a resource for and representation of Black women. However, she also argues that the one shortcoming of *Essence* was the image of the Black woman as influenced by Black nationalism. She writes,

The magazine positioned African American female readers within a 1970s Black nationalist rhetoric and discourse that drew upon varying aspects of their identity. They rejected feminism. They were warriors, at the forefront of political struggles for racial advancement. They were strong women who stood by their men. They were queens unable to understand why their kings slept and married white women. They were women who were Black, and race mattered greatly to them. They did not wish to embrace dominant constructions of femininity.²⁸³

The editorial content used these messages of Black liberation and empowerment to impart the belief that “acquiring wealth was revolutionary.”²⁸⁴ Editors promoted consumerism and encouraged their readers to buy certain products that aligned well with what it meant to be an empowered Black woman in America. Advertisements established straight hair as “good hair”

²⁸² Bailey Woodard and Mastin, “Black Womanhood,” 272.

²⁸³ Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies’ Pages: African American Women’s Magazines and the Culture That Made Them* (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 144.

²⁸⁴ Gumbs, “Black (Buying) Power,” 102.

and often disregarded darker and more African-looking women by using light-skinned models.²⁸⁵ These ads were situated next to images of Afro-wigs. Black feminist author Alexis Pauline Gumbs argues that the position of the hair advertisements “suggested that Black women could adapt to a Black power persona by covering their chemically straightened or short hair. These ads delivered the message that Black power could be bought for the low, low price of looking the part, rather than by the sweat equity required to build and transform one’s community.”²⁸⁶ The strategic situation of advertisements in *Essence* reveals its obligation to both capitalism and a cultural nationalist agenda.

The manipulation of empowerment to promote and sell products was not the only similarity between *Essence* and white women’s magazines. Hints of patriarchy and strict definitions of womanhood and sexuality are also evident. The magazine was ridden with patriarchal and Black nationalist mentalities that were subtly and not so subtly presented throughout. Editorial content often promoted the patriarchal nuclear family as the only acceptable way of life by publishing a variety of articles about how to find and keep a man. These articles were accompanied by advertisements indicating that certain products would help women in their pursuit of loving husbands and wholesome family lives.²⁸⁷ This directed readers to believe that even the most empowered and enlightened of Black women still needed the acknowledgement of Black men to feel entirely fulfilled.

Gumbs recognizes the specific use of Black female bodies to ‘serve patriarchal ends – capitalist or otherwise.’²⁸⁸ She honors *Essence* as a space for Black women and female writers and acknowledges the power it had to challenge stereotypical ideals placed on Black women.

²⁸⁵ Gumbs, “Black (Buying) Power,” 104.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 105.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 98.

²⁸⁸ Woodard and Mastin, “Black Womanhood,” 100.

However, she also criticized it for promoting Black consumption and allowing for the Black nationalist agenda to control the reproductive role of women's bodies thus "recreating the patriarchal form of nationalism itself."²⁸⁹ *Essence* was required to walk a very fine line between exploiting and empowering Black women. They needed to please their readers while simultaneously solidifying contracts with advertisers. The *Essence* business plan, established in order to sell Black female sexuality for profit, came under even more scrutiny as rumors arose that publishers had sold the magazine's ownership over to *Playboy* in 1971. *Playboy* was considered a publication intended for white men. Considering this, both Black feminists and nationalists were worried that *Essence* would use Black women's bodies as just another tool used to aid the white male fantasy.²⁹⁰ In reality, *Playboy* only purchased a 10% stake in the magazine, but it was enough to cause uproar and controversy within the magazine.

Publishers of *Essence* rectified the *Playboy* controversy by representing themselves as Black revolutionaries battling against 'bankers and bigots' on behalf of their female readers.²⁹¹ They hired Marcia Ann Gillespie as editor in chief, and in eight years she was able to increase readership to over 500,000, accumulating \$3.7 million in ad revenue.²⁹² She settled the *Playboy* controversy by expanding *Essence*'s mission to include more issues concerning Black women and empowered them to feel proud of their history and culture. She included stories by powerful Black women like Alice Walker and Gayl Jones, and incorporated discussions on birth control, abortion, and relationships with men.²⁹³ Jennifer Bailey Woodard and Teresa Mastin recognize Gillespie's influence on *Essence* was when it "began to truly develop a distinct voice."²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ Woodard and Mastin, *Black Womanhood*, 100.

²⁹⁰ Gumbs, "Black (Buying) Power," 101.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, 103.

²⁹² Zuckerman, *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States*, 230.

²⁹³ *Ibid*, 230.

²⁹⁴ Woodard and Mastin, *Black Womanhood*, 269.

Gillespie reflected on her time as editor in 1995 in the “25 Years Celebrating Black Women” edition of *Essence*. She said,

I wasn't interested in what other women's magazines did, because women's magazines have been developed for a whole other kind of woman; one who had not come up through slavery, one who had not had to work, always work. One who had not been independent as Black women have been independent and on their own.²⁹⁵

This vision added to the portrayal of *Essence* as a magazine by Black women, for Black women. However, considering the gross increase in ad revenue, she also successfully incorporated consumerist messages using the Black power rhetoric.

Similar to *Essence*, *Playgirl* also harbored a lingering white male presence. *Playgirl* was first published in January 1973. The magazine included photos and centerfolds of full-frontal nude men, following similar methods as men's *Playboy*, in an attempt to expand the options available for women to find sexual fulfillment and erotic escape. There is no doubt that *Playgirl* contributed to the larger cultural movement that recognized and prioritized women's sexual pleasure. However, the magazine's ability to provide genuine sexual pleasure for its female readers was thwarted due to the overwhelming number of men that contributed to the magazine. This is not to say that women were not involved, considering that during the 1980s the Senior Editor, the Managing Editor and many of the contributing editors and artists were women. However, many of the editors and directors were male.

The male influence over the magazine was evident in the June 1985 issue. This marked the twelfth anniversary of *Playgirl*, which prompted the magazine to include a publisher's statement in the forefront. Many publishers contributed to the magazine, including the Senior Vice President and Executive Editor, Dianne Grosskopf. However, white male publisher Ira Ritter was the one to write and sign the statement. The article is situated around a central and

²⁹⁵ Woodard and Mastin, *Black Womanhood*, 269.

prominent photo of Ira Ritter, posing straight faced in his business suit, with a phone to his ear, almost serving as a reminder of the white male presence in the article and throughout the magazine.

Ritter begins his statement by saying, “As we review our own history, we are struck also by changes in the women’s movement. The voices of feminism seem quieter today, less likely to be raised in anger or to call for a polarization of the sexes. Today, many women are focusing on their personal ambitions and channeling their energy into individual dreams rather than the group cause.”²⁹⁶ The statement discusses the growth and direction of the women’s movement throughout the 1980s, stating that “feminism has entered a new era in the eighties and that women as a political group are leaving behind adolescent tactics for the full sophistication of adulthood.”²⁹⁷ Ritter continues with a list of the various positive outcomes of women’s liberation, including increased job opportunities, women’s study departments, legalized abortion, and acknowledgment of equal pay for equal work. This letter to female readers concludes with the statement, “Is the ‘women’s movement’ losing steam in America? Probably – if what we are talking about is a radical, organized protest group. Should women be upset? Probably not. After all, the best campaigns erase their own reason for being.”²⁹⁸

It takes a bold man to not only address an audience of women and feminists, who turn to *Playgirl* in search of empowerment, but even more so to outwardly express such privileged and white-male-centric perceptions of the women’s liberation movement. His approach situates women’s liberation as a radical and immature outlet, where women channeled their pent-up aggression and frustration. His perspective belittles the hard work and passion of feminists and

²⁹⁶ Ira E. Ritter, “Publisher’s Statement,” *Playgirl*, June 1985, n/a.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, n/a.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid*, n/a.

tells readers the very magazine they turn to for sexual pleasure and a sense of autonomy perceives their equality as irrelevant. Ritter does acknowledge the movement for its ability to increase women's consciousness, however he frames it as a "maturation," and identifies feminist activists Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug as "leaders of the gang."²⁹⁹ The word "gang" had intense cultural significance. During the 1980s, gang violence was especially prevalent. There were daily news stories showing the horrendous murders and violence carried out by rival gangs. Because of this, Ritter's particular choice in words is significant, and displays how negatively he perceived the feminist activists. His writing on the women's movement signifies a widespread white male perspective, and in a way, it tells female readers how they should look at the history and the future of the women's movement.

Playgirl has always positioned itself as a magazine intended for the pleasure of female readers. Although the magazine provides readers with visually sexual content, Alfred Kinsey, in his research on earlier sexual response, found that women were aroused by erotic literature five times more often than by nude photos. By relying on the tactics used for male sexual pleasure, such as those found in *Playboy*, much of *Playgirl*'s content may have failed in its attempt to sexually please its female readers. However, female editors and contributors to *Playgirl* defended the magazine's 'centerfold sexuality,' arguing that these images contributed to sexual equality for women.³⁰⁰ Thus, the ability for the male centerfolds to provide sexual stimulation and pleasure simply depended on personal preference and pleasure, but the patriarchal presence still existed.

²⁹⁹ Ritter, "Publisher's Statement," n/a.

³⁰⁰ Chadwick Roberts, "Consuming Liberation: *Playgirl* and the Strategic Rhetoric of Sex Magazines for Women 1972-1985" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina Wilmington), 7.

The male perspective was consistent throughout much of *Playgirl* and was evident not only in the June 1985 Publisher's Statement. As mentioned, it was apparent in articles with fully nude men, which were intended to provide sexual stimulus and pleasure. The articles that incorporated nude photos were not supplemented with explicit excerpts. Instead the images were positioned alone, making it difficult to connect them to sexual fantasy. This is not to say that some women did not find enjoyment from the nude male models, however the way the images were situated is taken from a male perspective of sexual pleasure. With more consideration of a wide range of sexual responses, *Playgirl* did also include sections of erotica. This came in the form of short stories which offered readers satisfaction through graphic sexual expeditions. Considering Kinsey's findings, this portion of the magazine was probably more successful at contributing to female readers' sexual response.

The patriarchal and consumerist agendas of *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence*, and *Playgirl* restricted the information and opinions expressed in the magazine articles. Especially in the 1980s, when newfound morality took over mainstream society, lifestyle magazines created and proliferated information and ideas that aligned especially well with a conservative patriarchal agenda. Expectations of sexual restraint, monogamy, heteronormative existence, and prioritized male sexual pleasure were abundant throughout the magazines.

Chapter Four: Sex and Gender in Women's Lifestyle Magazines: A Critical Analysis

No need to change partners! Learn how sensual *surprises* can enhance pleasures... add zest to your lovemaking!³⁰¹

Katherine Merlin, *Cosmopolitan*, 1985.

This declaration, however brief, is overflowing with restrictive expectations on sex and pleasure. It is a subtitle to a 1985 *Cosmopolitan* article titled, “The True Secret of Sexual Variety.” Simply from the title, the article would seem to provide readers with information on how to explore sexual experiences and find pleasure in a variety of ways. Yet, the subtitle tells a very different story. Author Katharine Merlin uses the subtitle to clarify; by sexual variety she meant specifically within a monogamous loving relationship. The article continues by stating that many extramarital affairs are the result of a ‘hunger of variety,’ and explains, “The prevalent belief is that novelty can *only* be found in a succession of partners, never with one – but the experts disagree.”³⁰² Merlin supports her claim by citing psychiatrists and authors, including Barbara DeBetz, M.D. who states, “The true range of our sexual natures can be best explored within the context of a trusting, long-term bond.”³⁰³ People who seek sexual variety, with a variety of partners, are portrayed as ‘emotionally immature,’ and willing to sleep with just about anyone. Merlin then provides tips on how to add variety to their monogamous sexual relationships; she advises readers to consider technique, sexual spontaneity, acting out fantasies, and ‘getting in harmony with each other’s feelings.” The article acknowledged the necessity for a person to experience sexual variety, but negatively discusses sexual habits outside of monogamy.

³⁰¹ Katherine Merlin, “The True Secret of Sexual Variety,” *Cosmopolitan* May 1985, 100.

³⁰² *Ibid*, 100.

³⁰³ *Ibid*, 100.

This *Cosmo* article is a single example of the ways in which conservative morality was infused with a perception of sexual empowerment and freedom. This was a common theme found among sex articles in 1980s women's lifestyle magazines. In a way, this integrated a sense of 1950s social conservatism with a 1960s and 70s liberal mentality. Writers enticed readers with notions of sexual empowerment, a sexual empowerment they were capable of achieving, as long as it fit within conservative norms.

In historian Ellen McCracken's book, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.*, she describes the framework used by women's lifestyle magazines to appeal to readers, while also ensuring that social standards remained intact. She says,

The multiple mini-narrative segments that begin on the front cover and extend to the ads and features inside combine to foreground a pleasurable, appealing consensus about the feminine. Readers are not force-fed a constellation of negative images that naturalize male dominance; rather, women's magazines exert a cultural leadership to shape consensus in which highly pleasurable codes work to naturalize social relations of power.³⁰⁴

The phrase, "naturalize social relations of power" refers especially well to 1980s lifestyle magazines. They incorporated more conservative perspectives of sexuality as a way to "naturalize" social norms and counter the exploratory and free mentalities that took precedence in the 1960s and 70s. Her statement depicts how women's lifestyle magazines strategically balanced positive content with information meant to encourage specific social norms. The representation of lifestyle magazines as innocent providers of advice, entertainment and comradery is far from the truth. Morality proliferated throughout the publications and left little room for women to define their own social and sexual standards. Many earlier scholars have focused a great deal on lifestyle magazines and their use of beauty and fashion to create social norms and institute insecurity and anxiety. Yet, they neglect to recognize magazines' regulation

³⁰⁴ McCracken, *Decoding Magazines*, 3.

of female sexuality and sexual experience. The relationship between magazines and sexuality and pleasure is of equal importance and shines light on the social expectations of women during the 1980s.

Insecurity and the Advice Column

McCracken's book provides great insight into the relationships between advertisement companies, editors and readers. The entire first part of her book, "Advertising Texts," looks how editors maintained the attention of readers while subtly encouraging consumerism and ensuring their profitable contracts with advertisement companies stayed intact. Consumerism and consumption were encouraged in advertisements and advice columns by "playing on readers' desire to be accepted, normal members of society. Advice columns helped shape popular opinion about what is normal" in order to promote specific social ideals.³⁰⁵

The role of insecurity is clearly evident in the advice column. Readers sent letters to lifestyle magazines with questions and concerns about a variety of topics pertaining to their daily life as American women. Undoubtedly, thousands of women sent in letters to women's lifestyle magazines. This gave editors the opportunity to pick and choose which they would highlight in their publication. The control over which topics would be included instilled a preconceived bias, regardless of how the topics were discussed. In addition to control over content, editors and writers used the advice column to influence readers' personal and social expectations. Advice often led readers to believe that their peers were experiencing specific problems, and if a reader hasn't considered similar issues, she should start if she wants to fit in and share the same concerns as her peers.³⁰⁶ As mentioned, editors and writers provided advice and

³⁰⁵ McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines*, 51.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

recommendations to readers through ‘presumed impartiality,’ appearing to come from a ‘spirit of friendship,’ as if the magazines genuinely hoped to help readers fix real problems.³⁰⁷

Scholars such as McCracken, Zuckerman, and Kates and Shaw-Garlock provide necessary insight on advice columns. However, their analysis does not extend beyond beauty and fashion. Each magazine included advice columns specifically pertaining to sex, sexuality and pleasure. Specific columns did not always emphasize a consumerist mentality, but the same tactics were used to create insecurity among readers and perpetuate morally strict ideals on definitions of sex and pleasure for 1980s American woman.

The need for female readers to experience self-doubt through lifestyle magazines was two-fold. First of all, when readers felt insecure about themselves, they were more inclined to purchase products that were advertised to cure those uncertainties. When female readers learned about the issues other women had in their relationships and sex lives, they began to wonder if those same issues existed in their own lives. For example, in *Cosmopolitan*’s February 1985 “Agony Column” by Irma Kurtz, one reader writes that she discovered her husband frequents a strip club. She expresses, “I am hurt and confused, I feel very badly about myself now. I always thought of myself as attractive and desirable, but now I feel as though my body is not what it should be.”³⁰⁸ Presumably, millions of committed men in the 1980s occasionally went to a strip club. Moreover, there were many women who may be understanding of that fact. However, this one woman’s feelings present a very singular perspective on the matter, which is reinforced through Kurtz’s advice.

Kurtz tells the insecure wife that her husband should see a therapist, and that his strip club visits could be “deeply intertwined with his attitudes towards sex, and it is absolutely no

³⁰⁷ McCracken, *Decoding Women’s Magazines*, 57.

³⁰⁸ Irma Kurtz, “Agony Colum,” *Cosmopolitan*, February 1985, 48.

comment on your desirability.”³⁰⁹ In this way, female readers who were in relationships were encouraged to consider that their men may also be secretly visiting strip clubs, and they see this activity as something that is morally wrong and worthy of psychoanalytic analysis. Kurtz was right to point out that the husband’s activities do not correlate with the woman’s ability to seduce and satisfy her husband. However, she continues her advice by saying, “You could do worse than to buy gorgeous underwear and bring the strip club into your bedroom.”³¹⁰ This advice counters her earlier statement, and additionally promotes consumerism as a way to mend the marriage.

Not so coincidentally, less than ten pages after this advice column, there is an advertisement for Maidenform lingerie. The advertisement shows a photo of a beautiful woman posing delicately in a satin bra and underwear, with a caption stating, “Just slipping into satin and antique lace makes my life more beautiful...”³¹¹ The advice suggests buying sexy lingerie, with the reinforcement of an advertisement selling lingerie, suggests to female readers that purchasing satin bras and underwear will remedy their romantic problems. Additionally, the advertisement takes an individualistic approach with the emphasis that the lingerie makes “my life” more beautiful. This makes the advertisement more intimate and personal and encourages readers to consider how the lingerie would make their own lives more beautiful.

The necessity for insecure and dependent female readers extended far beyond magazines’ obligation to consumerism and their need to sell products. Dependent and insecure readers also meant lifestyle magazines could impose specific expectations onto American womanhood. Readers were more likely to take on specific social and gender roles when they were conditioned to believe their current way of life was inadequate or not socially acceptable. Despite the fact

³⁰⁹ Kurtz, “Agony Colum,” 48.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 48.

³¹¹ Advertisement, “The Maidenform Woman,” *Cosmopolitan*, February 1985, 57.

that women gained new levels of autonomy and empowerment, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, magazines continued to ensure a more conservative status quo stay intact.

The topic of the ‘new chastity’ in 1980s culture was a common topic in women’s lifestyle magazines. It is discussed in a positive light and encourages readers to believe that it is something that *all* women should practice at least once in their lives. Although there is nothing wrong with abstaining from sex in order to learn more about one’s personal identity and one’s sexual wants and needs, the magazines pose ‘new chastity’ as the only option for personal growth and sexual understanding. This is made clear in *Essence*’s additional advice column titled, “Just Between Us,” by Dr. Gwendolyn Goldsby Grant. The June 1985 article issues advice to a woman who defines herself as, “a healthy, active 30-year-old single parent of a 4-year-old daughter.”³¹² She explains that she loves men and enjoys sex but has been celibate by choice for the past two years. She says, “I have wonderful, sensuous, fantasies, but physically my sexual appetite is nil, and I don’t mind at all,” and asks Dr. Goldsby Grant, “Is it unusual to go through such periods of abstinence?”³¹³

Dr. Goldsby Grant’s response applauds the reader’s ‘selective celibacy,’ and reiterates that there is nothing unhealthy about it. She says, “If more people practiced sexual abstinence once in a while, we might have – among other things – less venereal disease and fewer unwanted pregnancies. The sexual revolution of the seventies did not win everybody over; some sisters are sexual conservatives, and that’s fine. Many have stopped settling for ‘one-night stands.’”³¹⁴ In this way, the article renders *all* sexual activity as spontaneous, singular, and unsafe. Dr. Goldsby Grant considers women who do engage in one-night stands, as “settling.” She does not

³¹² Dr. Gwendolyn Goldsby Grant, “Just Between Us,” *Essence*, June 1985, 6.

³¹³ *Ibid*, 6.

³¹⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

acknowledge that a one-night stand in itself, may be an important aspect of a woman's sex life, one that may bring self-discovery or sexual autonomy. Further, this choice of language urges readers to consider that if they do have one-night stands, perhaps they are not practicing self-love, and instead they are indulging in unhealthy and dangerous sexual activities.

The advice concludes by stating, "Many women are choosing celibacy – taking time out to discover a sense of self-love and self-esteem. They are not permanently forsaking love relationships but rather are realizing that abstinence is a viable option that does not prevent one from enjoying a fulfilling life. Instead of seeing men only as objects of desire, they have begun to see them as people first and have developed solid friendships with them."³¹⁵ This last chapter contains a lot of expectation and singular perspective. First of all, female readers are urged to believe that many of their peers have chosen to practice abstinence, and if they personally have not done so, they must be lacking self-love and self-esteem. The article does not offer other ways for women to better appreciate their bodies and find self-love. For example, the article could supplement the praise for abstinence by encouraging other acts of sexual self-love that don't include intercourse, such as masturbation. The woman acknowledges her sensual fantasies, which Dr. Goldsby Grant could have used to advise her to indulge in those fantasies with self-stimulation. Instead, she simply acknowledges that abstinence does not prevent one from living a fulfilling life.

Furthermore, the article only acknowledges one type of sexual relationship: "love relationships," which are also specifically heterosexual. It does not consider the possibility that many women may have sex with people who they are not in love with, or possibly even with people who are not men. This constitutes the expectation that if women *are* indulging in sexual

³¹⁵ Dr. Goldsby Grant, "Just Between Us," 6.

activities, those activities must be with men with whom they are in love. The article provides only two possible outcomes: either have sex and see men only as objects of desire or abstain from sex and develop friendships. This poses the idea that women cannot indulge in sex and also have genuine friendships with men. Overall, this article not only imposes a sense of self-doubt among female readers but constitutes very specific notions on how sex should be experienced.

Despite the reiterated praise for the 1980s' 'new chastity,' the advice columns often included letters from women who were having consistent sex. *Cosmopolitan's* monthly article, "Agony Column," most often discusses sex and romantic relationships. Some of Kurtz's advice seems quite persuasive for 1985. She often encourages divorced, widowed, and sexually abused women to find independence, confidence, and self-love. However, much of her advice also encourages conservative perceptions of sex, pressing a sense of anxiety among readers, and limits the acceptability for sexual pleasure.

In the May 1985 article, for example, a reader expresses anxiety over her habit of masturbation. She explains that "she cannot help masturbating each night when [she] thinks of sex," and is worried that if her and her boyfriend decide to get married, she will never be able to stop.³¹⁶ Kurtz begins her response by saying, "How do you know you won't be able to stop masturbating?" This leads readers to believe that masturbation must stop once women find a man to provide sexual pleasure. She continues by stating that if her man cannot bring her sexual satisfaction, she should wait to get married until she can "identify the problem and solve it with a therapist."³¹⁷ Furthermore, masturbation *and* the inability to experience total satisfaction through heterosexual sex are presented as issues that must be analyzed and medically cured. This concept mirrors Freudian theories of female pleasure and heterosexual dependency.

³¹⁶ Irma Kurtz, "Agony Column," *Cosmopolitan*, May 1985, 80.

³¹⁷ *Ibid*, 80.

Kurtz concludes the article by saying that if the reader's sexual needs are simply greater than her husband's, she, "would not be the first wife who made love to her husband and discreetly masturbated as well."³¹⁸ Kurtz does end on a somewhat accepting note, however, by using terms like 'discreetly,' she portrays masturbation as a shameful act that should be practiced in secret. Kurtz's repressive discussion on masturbation cannot be attributed to a sexual ignorance of the time. A plethora of scientific studies, sex manuals and sex therapists had identified masturbation as a positive form of sexual pleasure. Women reading this article may be inclined to feel insecure or embarrassed and insecure about masturbation, rather than acknowledging it as a completely normal way to experience sexual pleasure.

In addition to the condemnation of masturbation within marriage, advising the woman to masturbate 'discreetly' is an example of the prioritization and preservation of the man's feelings. By masturbating secretly, the woman's husband will never know that he is not capable of satisfying her sexually, which would be detrimental to his male ego. This protection of the male ego is similarly executed in the August 1985 "Sex Talk" column in *Playgirl*. The monthly sex advice article is written by Dr. Ruth Westheimer, a well-known sex therapist, author and radio host who dedicated her work to providing sex knowledge and advice to Americans. A reader writes to Dr. Ruth, explaining that she has been happily married for over eight years. Her husband is in the navy and she stays home to take care of the house and children. Her dilemma is that she was invited to a party that is going to have a male stripper, and her husband refuses to let her go, even though she knows that he and his friends often go to female strip shows. She says, "I plan to go to this party, but am I wrong?"³¹⁹ The reader is uncertain about her decision, which is made clear when she asks Dr. Ruth if it is wrong that she has decided to go. The fact that she is

³¹⁸ Kurtz, "Agony Column," 80.

³¹⁹ Dr. Ruth Westheimer, "Sex Talk," *Playgirl*, August 1985, 7.

seeking further validation from a magazine advice column shows how readers truly did depend on lifestyle magazines as a source of advice and for further confirmation of their actions that may go against common social norms.

Dr. Ruth insists that the woman is not wrong, and she should definitely attend the party. Although she encourages the woman to go, which is empowering and important in itself, Dr. Ruth continues by explaining that military families “have special problems.” Since her husband is gone for months at a time, she writes that it is understandable that “he may be more worried about his wife’s sexual interests than the live-at-home husband.”³²⁰ She advises the woman,

give your husband plenty of tender, loving care. Make it plain that there will be lots of women at this party, and that no one will be alone with the stripper. Tell him all your friends are going to the party for a lark and you will, too. Afterward, play it down. Don’t rave or joke about the stripper’s body or the size of his genitalia. Treat the whole thing lightly, as if you and your friends had gone on a fun shopping trip.³²¹

While Dr. Ruth encourages the woman to attend the party, she seems more preoccupied with reassuring the husband of her commitment and love for him. The woman is aware that her husband goes to strip shows frequently, and she does not seem insecure or nervous about it. However, when the woman decides to do the same, it becomes necessary for her to stroke his ego and refrain from discussing the experience with him, out of fear that he will become jealous or insecure. Through this advice, the priority is not for the women to practice her autonomy within her marriage, but it is for her to make sure, above all else, that she preserves her husband’s feelings and sexual ego.

A majority of magazines’ advice columns discussed sex in a strictly heteronormative manner. While the discussions were often restrictive, they still acknowledge heterosexual sex as a genuine and acceptable act. The magazines did occasionally discuss homosexuality; however,

³²⁰ Dr. Westheimer, “Sex Talk,” 7.

³²¹ *Ibid*, 7.

it is treated in a drastically different manner. They created feelings of insecurity by failing to take readers' sexual orientations seriously and by encouraging them to be more open to heterosexual relationships. Although these magazines posed themselves as trustworthy and open-minded, the neglect of genuine homosexual relationships poses a very different reality.

In the July 1985 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, a twenty-six-year-old reader expresses that she has known she was a lesbian since she was eighteen. She explains that she has recently moved to a new city and has finally gained the courage to go to gay clubs and mingle with other lesbians, however she has a deep fear of rejection, and is uncertain of her ability to attract women. Kurtz acknowledges the readers' sexual orientation and reassures her that many people feel shy about sexual desire. However, she continues her advice by saying, "Keep seeing the people you like, male and female, and mixing with those whose company you enjoy. Look at every new person of either sex as a potential friend, and sooner or later one of them will emerge, perhaps to your surprise, even, as a lover."³²² Kurtz seems to accept that the reader is a lesbian, however she *still* advises her to be open to the possibility of a heterosexual relationship. She uses phrases like "male and female" and "new person of either sex" to suggest that the reader should still consider men as both friends and possible lovers. In this way, Kurtz disregards her sexual orientation as something that can change, all the reader must do is keep an open mind. This type of response has the ability to make the reader feel as though her sexual identity is not enough, and to question her innate desire for women.

Essence's column "Sexual Health," by Lillian Frier Webb, contributes to a similar rejection of genuine lesbian existence. In the April 1985 issue, a forty-year-old woman discusses

³²² Irma Kurtz, *Cosmopolitan*, July 1985, 42.

her true love for a girlfriend, although they both are in heterosexual relationships with men. She says,

Her man knows that she loves me, and I've told him that I love her too. I think my man knows about us because he said he didn't like her very much. I've traveled all over the country and had many other relationships, but none have been like this one, which grows stronger every day. What should I do when my heart says, 'I love you'?³²³

Webb identifies this relationship simply as a deep connection between two female friends.

Although it seems fairly clear that this readers' connection and relationship is far past the point of friendship, Webb encourages the reader to show her man the type of 'love, compassion, and trust' that she gives to her female friend. She does not acknowledge the fact that this relationship may be something worth pursuing. In that way, she denies the existence of either fluid or lesbian sexuality. The only acknowledgement of the possibility that these women *may* be more than platonic friends comes at the end of the advice. Webb recommends further reading material including "Sister Love," an article in *Essence* in October 1983, and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker.

As previously mentioned, Americans in the 1980s became increasingly anxious over the thought of sexually transmitted diseases, especially due to the discovery of AIDS in 1983. Conservative leaders and government officials used the fear of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS to shine light on the importance of practicing sexual control and limiting sexual activity to heterosexual monogamous and trusting relationships. In this way, they believed, the risk of STDs would be limited, and sexual morality could be reinstated.

Out of all the magazines analyzed throughout this research, *Playgirl* establishes itself as the most sexually liberal and openminded publication. In the September 1985 issue, Dr. Ruth offers advice to a woman who has recently found out that the man she lives with, who is

³²³ Lillian Frier Webb, "Sexual Health," *Essence*, April 1985, 20.

bisexual, has been unfaithful with a male business associate. The subtitle of this particular section is, “Fear of AIDS” in large bold font. Meaning, before readers even begin to read the article, they recognize and associate fear with AIDS. The woman expresses, “I refuse to have sex with him, letting him think it is just because I am hurt and jealous. The fact is, however, I am afraid of AIDS. Should I break up with him?”³²⁴ Dr. Ruth’s first piece of advice is for the woman to get a complete examination for all sexually transmitted diseases, and for her to avoid sex with her man until he has also had a complete checkup.

The reader is then encouraged to, “Tell your lover, ‘Look, since the onset of the AIDS epidemic, thousands of gay men have given up promiscuity. I have the right to ask the same of you because I am afraid of AIDS and you should be, too...’”³²⁵ To be fair, the panic of contracting AIDS, especially in the 1980s, is completely justified. There is nothing about Dr. Ruth’s advice that portrays AIDS in an inherently negative light. The lack of knowledge of AIDS meant that nonheteronormative couples *did* have to exercise additional caution in their sexual relationships. However, the mere inclusion of this question has the ability to generate a sense of insecurity and fear. These feelings are not necessarily only due the possibility of AIDS, but of nonheteronormative relationships and the possibility of infidelity. The advice provides monogamous and heterosexual relationships as the only safe option for avoiding the possibility of contracting AIDS.

Insecurity and anxiety were often found in the advice columns through conversations on pregnancy. The messages surrounding pregnancy differed among magazines; some magazines directed their advice towards women hoping to get pregnant, while others provided advice on how to prevent pregnancy. Regardless of the approach, every article about pregnancy relied on

³²⁴ Dr. Ruth Westheimer, “Sex Talk,” *Playgirl*, September 1985, 4.

³²⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

advice that directly portrayed society's prioritization of the stable and nuclear American family. *Essence*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Playgirl* all included a variety of advice for women who were attempting and hoping to get pregnant and start a family. The reintroduction of conservative lifestyles went hand in hand with a seeming necessity for motherhood and the importance of the nuclear family life. These conversations imparted an insecurity among female readers who may not have been ready for pregnancy and motherhood, by introducing the idea that if other women similar to them were dealing with these issues, then perhaps they should be considering them as well.

In July 1985, Dr. Ruth's "Sex Talk" gives advice to a single executive woman in her late twenties. The woman expresses that she has a difficult time finding men that she likes and wants to keep in her life, but she explains that she really wants to have a family one day, and fears that she may become desperate to find a man to marry and have children with. Dr. Ruth tells the woman she will know that she found the right man for her when "you find him taking your mind off business a good deal."³²⁶ She says, "This shouldn't prove harmful to your career; it should give you a beneficial change of preoccupation for part of every day."³²⁷ At this point, the advice is supportive of the woman's career and encourages her that the right man will eventually come along. Yet, Dr. Ruth then advises the woman to keep an eye on her female biological timetable and reiterates the importance of not waiting until thirty-five to start dating and trying to get pregnant.

The article concludes with, "Now is certainly when you should be setting time aside for a social life and for meeting men."³²⁸ Dr. Ruth's advice is fairly valid, for women in the 1980s did

³²⁶ Dr. Ruth Westheimer, "Sex Talk," *Playgirl*, July 1985, 5.

³²⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

not have as many options for having children as they grew older. However, Dr. Ruth insistence on the looming presence of a woman's biological clock could signal to female readers that other women their age are becoming increasingly worried over the possibility of not having children. It poses the idea that even if a woman who is passionate and driven by her career is worried about having children, then perhaps *all* women should be more worried about settling down and starting a family.

Advice columns in women's lifestyle magazines were an incredibly popular resource for women who may have been embarrassed or hesitant to ask for advice from friends, family, or medical professionals. The authors are seen as friends, and their position as well-informed professionals allowed readers to follow their advice. There is no doubt that some of the advice provided was beneficial to women and their overall well-being. However, it did instill feelings of insecurity, and posed anxiety over acceptable modes of womanhood. The advice columns reinforced morality and conservative ideals and left little room for the acceptance of sexual exploration and alternative lifestyles.

1980s Conservative Language in Editorial Content

The advice columns provide an intimate look at how editors and authors conversed with readers on a variety of relationship and sex issues. However, the specific topics discussed were not limited to one corner of the magazine; they were deliberated in the editorial content of lifestyle magazines as well. These articles, like the advice columns, provided limited perspectives and imposed self-critique and improvement as an intrinsic aspect of sexuality and pleasure. They imposed a sense of insecurity and self-doubt onto many readers, who were conditioned to believe that their sexual ability and lifestyle choices were inadequate. The

editorial content differed from advice columns because they discuss certain topics within sexuality and pleasure more extensively. Although advice columns are beneficial because they portray a more intimate relationship between readers and editors, they are usually no more than seven to eight sentences and are brief in their explanations. Comparatively, editorial articles make up multiple pages in the magazine. The information is more thorough, and they often quote sex experts and medical professionals to support their claims.

As noted previously, the 1980s lifestyle magazines appropriated feminist and liberation rhetoric from the 1960s and 1970s in order to sell readers a mindset of empowerment and liberation.³²⁹ Editors and advertisers used manipulative schemes to direct readers and maintain a balance between moments of sexual, political and social empowerment and messages of consumerism, constraint and 1980s conservatism. While portraying a liberal and explorative stance, they incorporated editorials and advertisements that ensured a more conservative mindset and obligation to a moral status quo.

At this point, sex and pleasure expanded beyond the strict realm of heteronormativity and marriage that existed in 1950s culture. Sex advice literature had transformed in order to help all couples explore and seek sexual satisfaction in a variety of ways. This included publications like Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex, Women and Their Bodies; A Course* by Boston Women's Health Book Collective, and Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden*. The liberation movements in the 1970s influenced how lifestyle magazine authors and editors discussed sex and pleasure. Women influenced by this movement were conscious of feminist mentalities, rendered relationship status as irrelevant, and occasionally included advice for gay and lesbian couples.³³⁰ However, as the

³²⁹ Melissa Tyler makes a similar argument in her article, "Managing Between the Sheets," which I cite often throughout this chapter.

³³⁰ Ward, "Sex and the Me Decade," 126.

1980s commenced, this liberal perception of sex quickly diminished. American culture reverted back to more conservative attitudes of sex and pleasure in the 1980s, attitudes that mirrored containment and the strict status quo of the 1950s. This sexual backtrack was due to a political and religious backlash against feminism and the AIDS epidemic. Yet 1980s American culture embodied an increasingly restrictive and conservative perspective on sex and pleasure, lifestyle magazines often portrayed themselves as empowering and sexually liberating for women.

Each of these magazines incorporated two total polar opposite conversations on sex, yet both contributed to the subsequent preservation and moral constriction of sexual experiences. On one end of the spectrum, articles discussed sex in a way that would seem to be enlightening and progressive. They incorporated topics such as fantasies, sexual variety, and ways to ensure that women got what they wanted in bed. Yet, within every article that encouraged pleasure and sexual exploration there were stringent scenarios for which the exploration was acceptable.

In a direct attempt to develop sexual fantasy as one of the few acceptable forms of exploration, *Cosmopolitan* discussed the topic head on in its February 1985 issue. Freelance author and second-wave feminist, Sue Browder wrote an article titled, “Fantasies: What They Mean, What They Do for You.” It begins by reassuring readers that *all* fantasies are completely normal. Browder references two extremely outrageous fantasies such as “being tied to a bedpost and raped,” or daydreaming about having sex with a “friendly Russian wolfhound named Rasputin.”³³¹ By immediately referencing violent and irrational fantasies, the author lays the groundwork for the reiteration of sexual fantasies as simply that, fantasies. The authors frame sexual fantasies as activities that one would never contemplate actually doing.

³³¹ Sue Browder, “Fantasies: What They Mean, What They Do for You,” *Cosmopolitan*, February 1985, 171.

The article continues with a quote from sex therapist Sandra Scantling who explains, “They come from that active, playful, imaginative part of you that makes sex fun. If you feel guilty or insecure about fantasies because you fear you’ll act them out, relax. Thinking isn’t doing. Go ahead and enjoy daydreaming about a ménage a trois. *Any* fantasy is okay.”³³² The sex therapist reassures readers that “thinking isn’t doing,” expressing an understanding and tolerant tone. All within the first three paragraphs of this article, there is a perceived acceptance of the most repressed sexual thoughts. However, while framing all fantasies as socially acceptable, the article simultaneously forces sexual acts such as threesomes onto the same level as the yearning for rape and bestiality, and consequently deems *all* fantasies as unacceptable to actually act upon.

Browder mentions Masters and Johnson and their studies on sexual fantasies. The five most common among women, they discovered, included the other man (meaning adultery), rape or sexual force, watching others make love, sexual encounters with complete strangers, and sex with other women. Browder lists and describes each of these fantasies. She quotes women who have expressed each fantasy and explains the psychological meanings behind them. Browder does take time to address the question of acting on sexual fantasies. She expresses that ultimately each person must decide for themselves on whether their fantasies are worth acting on. She quotes Nancy Friday, the author of *My Secret Garden*, a published collection of women’s fantasies, who says, “Some women have told me that just talking about their secret desires – forget about living them – was not only disappointing, but ruined the effectiveness of the fantasy forever.”³³³ Rather than acting on fantasies, readers are encouraged to “experiment with *parts* of your scenarios,” and are prompted to consider options such as stripteases, wearing provocative costumes and engaging in roleplay, or having sex in the rain with their current lovers. Browder

³³² Browder, “Fantasies,” 171.

³³³ *Ibid*, 225.

quotes multiple sex experts and psychologists, all of whom suggest seductive alternatives rather than actually manifesting various fantasies.

The goal of the article is not to suppress the use of fantasy for sexual pleasure. Browder consistently encourages female readers to indulge in their sexual thoughts and even find inspiration through magazines and novels such as *Penthouse*, *My Secret Garden*, *Forbidden Flowers*, and *Men in Love*. Browder reiterates the normalcy and acceptance of all sexual thoughts, and quotes Barbara Hariton, a psychologist who did extensive research on sex fantasies, saying, “Frequent fantasizers, Hariton finds, tend to be independent, imaginative, artistic, and creative.”³³⁴ In this way, women who consider sexual acts that positioned outside the realm of social and moral acceptability - experimenting with women or engaging sexually with strangers or men outside their relationships - are encouraged to redirect those desires intrinsically as a way to enhance their sexual pleasure *within* societal expectations for monogamous heterosexual relationships.

In a similar focus on sexual pleasure, Bebe Moore Campbell writes “What Turns You On?” in the *Essence* February 1985 issue. The article’s subtitle states, “When it comes to erotic pleasure, part of being equal is having the freedom to get what you want and say no to what you don’t. In a society without sexual limits, the love-wise woman sets her own.”³³⁵ Simply from this description, there is a noticeable comparison in the tone and language used to discuss pleasure and sexual freedom. Although it is more encouraging, Campbell’s mention of “a society without sexual limits” is an implied critique of society’s lack of sexual limits. She specifies that “wise” women must create their own limits, which infers that women free from sexual limits are foolish.

³³⁴ Browder, “Fantasies,” 224.

³³⁵ Bebe Moore Campbell, “What Turns You On?,” *Essence*, February 1985, 59.

Immediately, readers understand that it is *their* right and their obligation to set their own sexual expectations and limits.

The article begins with a short story about a couple who enjoy a pornographic film in bed together and use it to inspire their ‘own intense love scenes.’³³⁶ It continues with another story of a woman who is absolutely disgusted by a pornographic film she saw with her boyfriend.

Campbell uses these short excerpts to support her statement that what may turn some couples on may make others feel uneasy and turned off, and that this is perfectly acceptable. She strongly states,

In an era when more and more women are demanding equality one thing is very clear: No woman should be forced to take part in any sexual practice she doesn’t want to participate in. And she has a right to object to any sexual material or erotic device – be it pornographic films, edible panties or vibrators – that make her feel uncomfortable, is unsafe, or goes against her moral or political grain. The obvious corollary is that being an equal sex partner and a human being demands that women begin to ask for the things they want in bed.

Not only does Campbell distinguish a woman’s right to stand up for herself and speak out against sexual practices that make her feel uncomfortable, but she also reiterates women’s right to ask for what she *does* want. This is powerful and noteworthy, because this is one of the few magazine articles that commands this type of sexual autonomy. Carolyn See’s article, “The New Chastity,” written the same year, attributes the products of women’s liberation - such as birth control and legal abortion - to ‘new chastity,’ which is made clear in her argument that they made it more difficult for women to say no to sex. Comparatively, Campbell distinguishes birth control and legal abortion, in addition to erotica literature and toys, as ‘tokens of the new sexual equality.’³³⁷

³³⁶ Campbell, “What Turns You On?,” 59.

³³⁷ Ibid, 58.

Although the sexual revolution provided women with a sovereignty to pursue any and all sexual experiences, Campbell recognizes the intrinsic racial privilege that runs deep within the movement. She explains that despite the historical image of Black women as ‘loose, wanton, hot-blooded wenches,’ many Black women have not ventured beyond strict sexual morality. Black women who matured during the 1960s and 70s are quoted explaining that they were raised to remain incredibly sexually conservative due to the typical social perceptions forced upon them. More conservative women did not rely on pornographic movies, toys, and literature to be turned on. Campbell states that instead, they were attracted to, “The shape of a man’s beard, the size of his biceps, the way he walks and talks,” and acknowledges that these features, “arouse far more women than anything the world of commercial sex has to offer. And good old-fashioned lovemaking has always been very much in style.”³³⁸ Her word choice, such as “good old-fashioned lovemaking,” suggests that sex without pornography, toys and literature is just as satisfying, if not more so. Moments such as that are indications of a subtle emphasis of conservative sexual pleasure.

In any of the other magazines, this discussion may have stopped then and there. However, Campbell goes on to state that, “In more recent years, many Black women have adopted a more liberated attitude about their love lives. More and more are taking off the shackles that made them submissive, subservient, conservative love partners and are going for the gusto.”³³⁹ Previous conservative notions are countered with this emphasis of sexual autonomy. The mention of “taking off the shackles” has significant historical and cultural importance. It references Black women’s liberation from slavery, which also controlled their

³³⁸ Campbell, “What Turns You On?,” 58.

³³⁹ Ibid, 58-59.

sexuality and restricted their ability to experience pleasure. This is by far the most empowering and open-minded approach found within women's lifestyle magazines of the 1980s.

Campbell then discusses various sexual experiences, including pornographic films, sex toys, and anal intercourse. While she does mention the physical risks of engaging in such activities, she does not do so in a way that instills anxiety or insecurity. She does not list off a number of possible horrific scenarios, but, rather, gives tips on how to successfully enjoy such experiences, and encourages readers to simply consult their gynecologists before engaging in sexual practices or using paraphernalia that could be potentially harmful. Mental and emotional health is also discussed, in a similarly positive and uplifting way. Campbell tells her readers,

...because we live in a world that – sexual revolution or not – so often tells us to repress our own search for the sexual satisfaction we deserve, women need to consider whether they've ruled out some forms of sexual satisfaction because they've been taught that 'nice girls don't do that' or become repressed by less-than-responsive lovers... It's perfectly proper that your own pleasure should be of utmost importance to you. Any sexual practice that you engage in should be for your enjoyment, not just your man's.³⁴⁰

She explains that far too often, women are manipulated and emotionally abused by men, which not only oppresses their pleasure, but is also detrimental to their sense of self-worth and identity. Campbell does not use sexual autonomy as a scapegoat for manipulation and abuse, but rather, directly blames toxic men and relationships. Readers are empowered to prioritize their own sexual satisfaction and emotional health, in whichever way works best for them.

The article situates open communication and firmness as the most important aspects of a sexual relationship. Campbell includes interviews with multiple women, discussing their relationships and how sexual expression and communication led them to their most successful and pleasurable sex lives. The closing paragraphs in this article reiterate, once again, the capability and right of Black women to find genuine sexual pleasure. It says,

³⁴⁰ Campbell, "What Turns You On?," 60.

Integrating that sexy feeling with everyday life is part of getting in touch with your erotic self. Love-wise women know that everyday sexuality – positive, unhung-up and free – is the key to getting what they want in the bedroom... Sisters of the eighties are stepping away from the negative images of the past and tossing aside many of their inhibitions in order to explore their sexuality with a new sense of freedom and equality. Black women are beginning to realize that part of being equal is to be able to ask for what you want and say no to what you don't want... When women learn to communicate with their partners, it is easier to let imagination and spirits run free. And that is when women experience the true joy of sex.³⁴¹

Campbell is consistently honest, open, and emboldening throughout her article: she inspires readers to recognize and communicate their sexual needs and desires. She does not specify the relationships in which this sexual exploration is acceptable. It is clear, however, through her discussion, that sexual empowerment and autonomy is meant to be experienced within monogamous relationships. For example, Campbell emphasizes the importance of communication in a sexual relationship. She says, “communication with your lover is a must in determining whether a sex act is one that you want to participate in. Part of making love should be talking about making love.”³⁴² Consequently, the monogamous expectation also insinuated heteronormativity as well.

As noted, *Essence* was created by four Black men.³⁴³ Other studies on *Essence* have recognized the founders' Black nationalist and patriarchal agendas, and scholars have argued that those mentalities seeped into the magazine's literature. *Essence* editors were capable of incorporating this kind of sexual autonomy into the magazines in the 1980s, as long as it contributed to patriarchal expectations of womanhood and relationships. This meant that Black women *should* find sexual pleasure, as long as it was in committed relationships with men whom they loved. The discussion of sexual autonomy provided in “What Turns You On?” is regulated

³⁴¹ Campbell, “What Turns You On?,” 116.

³⁴² *Ibid*, 114.

³⁴³ Which is comparable to the male management in *Playgirl*, and *Cosmopolitan*

by a sense of monogamy and patriarchal perspective. However, the mere fact that this type of dialogue was incorporated at all, positioned *Essence* as fairly more empowering than the other women's mainstream lifestyle magazines available in the 1980s.

In addition to articles that provided tips and advice on sex and pleasure, lifestyle magazines also incorporated fiction that allowed readers to indulge in sexual escapades and empowerment. These more explorative narratives included topics such as a woman's experience with a string of emotion free sex with random men, experimenting with S&M, prostitution, and various sexual fantasies. These storylines allowed readers to indulge in their most outrageous sexual fantasies without ever actually stepping outside the realm of morally acceptable sexual experience.

This type of erotica can be found consistently in *Playgirl*, in its monthly section titled, "Ladies' Home Erotica."³⁴⁴ Essentially, these stories were soft-core porn intended as a sexual outlet for women. However, many used language and situations that would seem to contribute more to male sexual desire. The August 1985 issue of "Erotica," includes a story titled "Mexican Holiday" written by an anonymous author by the name of "Lee." It tells the story of a sheltered southern young woman, who leaves her conservative family life to attend an eastern women's college. The identity of the protagonist remains anonymous throughout the story. Although written in first person, the woman's lack of identity contributes to her lack of presence throughout the story.

The woman is still a virgin, but she finds satisfaction "alone in her dormitory bed."³⁴⁵ The story continues as the protagonist embarks on a Spring break vacation to Mexico, and encounters a local man named Diego. After spending the day together, Diego insists on walking

³⁴⁴ In August 1985, "Ladies' Home Erotica" was renamed "Erotica."

³⁴⁵ "Lee," "Erotica," *Playgirl*, August 1985, 77.

her to her hotel and ‘squeeze[s]’ his way into the room. Although he begs to stay, the woman forcefully instructs him to leave. Despite her demand, Diego does not leave. At this point, the woman gives in, and, “hesitantly, [she] reached to stroke Diego’s hot cheek.”³⁴⁶ The encounter heightens when both of them undress, and the woman describes Diego as, “pure male desire seizing and claiming me.”³⁴⁷ The language used here does not necessarily hold a negative connotation; many women find sexual pleasure in a sexually submissive role. However, it is followed with the author wanting Diego to “squeeze me harder, to bite my lips yet more passionately, to blot out all the strangeness and fear.”³⁴⁸ Diego’s desire to ‘seize’ and ‘claim’ her, paired with the woman’s desire to lose feelings of ‘strangeness’ and ‘fear,’ inexplicably portray a sense of resistance and apprehension. Again, this is not to discredit women who find pleasure in this type of sexual encounter. Yet, there is no doubt that this storyline contributes to the notion that women should be willing to submit to men’s sexual advances.

The characters continue with foreplay, and the author confesses that she “spread my legs before him like a willing sacrifice.” The intensifying moment is then halted when Diego realizes that she is a virgin. He is hesitant, but is reassured when the woman says, “‘I want you, Diego,’ I pleaded between clenched teeth. ‘You’re the one I want, no one else ever made me feel like this. Take me, open me, tear me apart. I don’t care what you do to me.’ I turned my head away and opened my legs still wider.”³⁴⁹ The couple continues to have sex, and when the woman wakes up in the morning, Diego has disappeared. The anonymous woman began with such strong feelings of doubt and fear, however, by the end of the story she is laying with her legs wide, begging Diego to have sex with her. Yet, while the woman begs Diego to penetrate her, she does so with

³⁴⁶ “Lee,” “Erotica,” 78.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 78.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 78.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 78.

‘clenched teeth.’ This word choice infers feelings of hesitation and anxiety and signifies the woman’s apprehension about having sex. Furthermore, she mentions that she turns her head away as she spreads her legs wider. She could not even look Diego in the eyes as he began to penetrate her. This body language clearly indicates coercion and manipulation.

The narrative, which begins with such hesitation and concludes with begging and yearning, promotes a skewed perception of how sex should occur. It is reasonable to consider that many of the women reading *Playgirl* are hoping to either enjoy pleasure through the sexual exposés, or they are seeking valuable information on sex and pleasure. Either way, what they find within the pages of *Playgirl* are stories that often neglect their needs. They are also conditioned to believe that forced sexual encounters, such as the one between the anonymous woman and Diego, are common and acceptable. Although these stories may be exactly what certain women are looking for, it is difficult to ignore the coercion and the lack of focus on the woman’s pleasure that is threaded into the story.

The articles discussed above are framed as sexually explorative; the authors insist that they are contributing to a more free and liberal perspective on sexual experience. While these articles do depict sex in a positive light despite more conservative undertones, many other articles are more explicit with their promotion of morality. In the more conservative narratives, explorative sex is more outwardly denounced and portrayed as something that will only bring unhappiness and guilt.

In *Cosmopolitan*’s November 1985 issue, author Carolyn See asks the question, “Sex is supposed to be fun, *freeing*, yet too many partners can sometimes make you feel disconsolate, unsatisfied. Why are so many young women suddenly swearing *off* the world of ‘junk-food

sex’?”³⁵⁰ The article, titled, “The New Chastity,” begins by considering three scenarios of commitment free sex, all of which end with dissatisfaction. See follows the disappointing sexual scenarios by stating,

You suddenly think you’d sell your own mother into slavery rather than have to go through all that hassle [sic] again. And not that sex isn’t swell and wonderful and nice! But just as chocolate cookies are swell and wonderful, and poached salmon is nice, there comes a time when – especially if you’ve had too much of either one – you *know* you’re going to have to taper off for a while, or risk getting turned off forever.³⁵¹

See acknowledges sex as an enjoyable experience, but also suggests the importance of sexual disengagement. The hypothetical situations offer readers many possible things that can go wrong during a sexual encounter. This reminds them of their own personal experiences and incites a level of anxiety over possible new ones. See uses “you” to speak directly to the readers. She positions them within the situation, driving those feelings into the minds of readers. In this way, they assume that this is how they *should* feel about commitment free sex.

The article continues with a brief history of the 1960s, and how, “suddenly, women were apt to be in this game just for pleasure. It became apparent that they might be using men for fun and, even more shocking, for their own physical release.”³⁵² There is a sense of humor in this sentence. See acknowledges how the tables have turned, and women now use men and sex for their own sexual pleasure. This section celebrates the importance of birth control, antibiotics, and legal abortions for the modern woman. Yet, See also argues that before women held this new sexual freedom, they could say no to sex because they ‘weren’t that kind of girl,’ they were saving themselves for marriage, or ‘even that you’d love to but people might talk.’ She says that now, “the only real excuse was simply that you disliked the person in question (which he could –

³⁵⁰ Carolyn See, “The New Chastity,” *Cosmopolitan*, November 1985, 380.

³⁵¹ *Ibid*, 381.

³⁵² *Ibid*, 381.

and *did* – reply to with a complaint that you were frigid, old-fashioned, and not in step with the times).”³⁵³ This argument poses the idea that simply not wanting to have sex with a man was now considered an unsatisfactory reason. It also insinuates that saying no was, and continues to be, an invalid excuse that men will not respect. In this way, See believes that the new sexual freedom encouraged women to feel a sense of sexual obligation, and she argues that it caused women to question what exactly they really wanted.

See notes that new chastity, “is more accurately described as ‘enlightened monogamy,’” and cites multiple books written about the modern woman, including *Smart Women, Foolish Choices*, *Telling Lies*, and *Sexual Choice: A Woman’s Decision*, and uses them to make the argument that,

*our own bodies are trying to tell us something: They don’t necessarily want to be tossed around like lost luggage on a round-the-world plane trip. That’s why, maybe, after a night of good times – six orgasms, say – with a Nick Nolte look-a-like, when you get up and weigh yourself and find you’ve even lost two pounds from exertion, and he left at five in the morning, but he *did* say he’d call, and you even work in the same office with him, so... But you go out for coffee in the kitchen, and something, someplace in your body, feels like if it *could* cry, it would cry. It’s not your genitalia feeling bad, it may not even be your ‘heart.’ It’s in the vicinity of your lungs, your solar plexus, where some Eastern religions suggest your soul resides. In other words, recreational sex is not soul food.*³⁵⁴

This excerpt, briefly mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, depicts the casual sexual scenario as less than appealing. Although having multiple orgasms with a good-looking man is not a worst-case scenario, the feelings of uncertainty that follow render the idea of sexual experience outside of monogamy and romance as undesirable. See totally disregards women’s sexual autonomy and the possibility for sexual freedom as an empowering endeavor. In parts of this excerpt, such as “someplace in your body, feels like if it *could* cry, it would cry.,” and the reference to the soul, See insinuates that heartbreak and anxiety come from sex outside the realm

³⁵³ See, “The New Chastity,” 382.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 382.

of monogamy. Additionally, the reader weighs herself immediately after the sexual encounter. The fact that after six orgasms the first thing on a woman's mind is to weigh herself emphasizes women's preoccupation with weight and appearance. Rather than focus on the clearly pleasurable night, women were conditioned to consider sexual activity as a form of exercise. It's perplexing to think that *Cosmo* editor, Helen Gurley Brown, the same woman who advocated so intensely for women's sexual autonomy and the power of female sexuality, incorporated such nuanced and insidious notions of sex in her magazine. This perfectly portrays the grip that conservative powers had over women's popular culture throughout the 1980s.

Through interviews with various women, See prioritizes chastity over exploration. Many of the women provide justified reasons for abstaining from casual sex, which included taking time to focus on their careers and finding self-worth free from men. Another woman explains, "I'm still working on the old kind! Save yourself for a man you love or at least one who makes your heart flutter. Otherwise it's meat loaf, under Brand X catsup."³⁵⁵ See portrays 'sexual adventurism' solely as a risk, and chastity only as an escape and a safety net for women.³⁵⁶

This perspective is incredibly evident in the article's last paragraph. See tells the story of a woman named Jenny Berry, who in her younger years was adventurous and sexually free. Jenny eventually marries a musician, and See describes the last moments of the ceremony, after the minister introduces the couple as Mr. and Mrs. and, "you could see a girl who had come bravely, not out of bondage but out of freedom, to go for perhaps the highest, most far-out fantasy of all: to choose a man you like best, and take everything you know about sensuality and common sense and all the rest, and use it to make that person, and *yourself*, happy... Of course,

³⁵⁵ See, "The New Chastity," 383.

³⁵⁶ Part of the beauty of sexual autonomy is the freedom for a woman to decide, for herself, on *if* she will have sex, and *when* she will have sex, with no outside influence or opinion. However, See neglects to offer that definition to readers.

having the courage to go after that fantasy wouldn't be possible without the new chastity, would it?"³⁵⁷ Jenny's story, her journey from sexual freedom to marital bliss, incorporates a plethora of societal expectations. It reminds readers that although it may be acceptable to indulge in sexual exploration, the ultimate female fantasy is to fall in love and find comfort in monogamy and hence, heteronormativity. Furthermore, the only way for a woman to be truly loveable and worthy of marriage is if she changes her lifestyle and practices this new chastity.

The articles discussed above portray the many ways that sex and pleasure were constricted in lifestyle magazines. There is a visible lack of empowerment and autonomy free from patriarchal and conservative definitions of sexuality, and the articles often neglected women's specific needs and pleasure. Furthermore, these lifestyle magazines found opportunity in the growing medicalization of sex and sexuality, which reiterated the importance of self-improvement in American culture. Because of America's reliance on psychoanalysis, people were conditioned to believe that every aspect of their lives and self was subject to critique and improvement. This of course, included sex. Many of the articles were resources for sexual improvement, and thus, provided readers with the ability to improve their overall well-being. The aspect of self-improvement is evident in most of the articles, but it is most evident in ones that specifically discuss sexual dysfunction.

A number of articles in women's lifestyle magazines discuss male sexual dysfunction. Yet, even after deep analysis of four women's lifestyle magazines, and within all issues published in the year 1985, not a single article was dedicated to female sexual dysfunction.³⁵⁸ This reality reflects a similar phenomenon found in sex and marriage manuals from the 1950s to

³⁵⁷ See, "The New Chastity," 383.

³⁵⁸ It should be noted again that although I do not include them in this thesis, I also studied multiple men's magazines, including *GQ*, *Details*, and *Esquire* in the year 1985. Not a single one discussed male sexual dysfunction. Yet, women's magazines were riddled with them, and I only researched one year of magazines in the 1980s.

the early 1970s. Not only was the woman's libido and sexual pleasure deemed as her responsibility, so was the man's. A woman was expected to at least act sexually satisfied, or she risked ruining her man's ego and inhibiting his sexual enthusiasm. Despite many social and scientific advancements that prioritized female sexuality, such as Masters and Johnson, the liberation movements, and feminist activists like Anne Koedt and Betty Dodson, this contradiction portrays a continued limitation on female pleasure.

In June 1985, Sue Browder, the same author who wrote the *Cosmo* article on fantasies, wrote another article titled "When He Doesn't Want Sex." The subheading to the article states, "Myth holds he'll be ever amorous, but facts show men's lust to be a *fragile* thing, easily dissipated, sometimes defeated outright! Here are reasons why his libido may lag, plus smart ways to *restore* it."³⁵⁹ This is an immediate assertion that a man's libido and sexual ego are delicate. Further, the subheading implies that it is the woman's responsibility to restore his sexual energy and coddle his ego, a mentality consistent with the earlier discussion on Dr. Ruth's advice for the woman whose husband did not want her to attend a party with a stripper.

Browder discusses inhibited sexual desire (ISD) which, by definition can occur in both men and women. However, when defining the problem and explaining the symptoms, she only discusses its occurrence in men. She says, "The major symptom is baffling: A once-lusty man (frequently involved with a woman he loves) just loses most or even all of his interest in sex... Men suffering from selective ISD lose interest only in their wives or regular sex partners; those with *global* ISD lack all sexual appetite and don't even masturbate."³⁶⁰ The article is specifically about male sexual dysfunction, but Browder neglects to even mention that the dysfunction can

³⁵⁹ Sue Browder, "When He Doesn't Want Sex," *Cosmopolitan*, June 1985, 224.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 226.

also occur in women. This contributes to the sexual expectation that women should *always* be in the mood to have sex if the man is.

The next section of the article is titled, “Nine Reasons for Male Lack of Desire That Aren’t Your Fault.” The recognition that the issues are not the woman’s fault is important, however, when Browder introduces this section she says, “Let’s look, then, at the key reasons for a man’s prolonged abstinence and see what you, as a sensitive lover, can do to help.”³⁶¹ The issues that Browder discusses includes naturally low libido, medical disorders, ‘he misses the thrill of conquest,’ ‘he thinks you’re too good,’ ‘he sees you as his mother,’ fear of intimacy, pressure to perform, he’s homosexual, and he’s frigid, a word that tends to be coded female. While Browder does recognize that these issues are not the woman’s fault, she does state that it is the woman’s duty to be a ‘sensitive lover’ and help her man overcome his sexual obstacles. It is ironic that the concept of frigidity is included in this list. Browder mentions that frigidity, which she defines as a man being “cold, aloof, and unable to enjoy lovemaking,” was once thought to only afflict women. In the 1950s, when thousands of women were diagnosed with frigidity, their mental and physical well-being was thought to be to blame, and it was the woman’s sole responsibility to seek help and resolve the issue. However, now, when frigidity also occurs in men, women are expected to assist in the remedy.

Following the list of male sexual issues that are not the woman’s fault, but seemingly her responsibility, Browder discusses a different set of sexual problems. The section is titled “Relationship Problems: Anger, Power, Control,” and the first sentence says, “It would be nice to believe that when a man withdraws sexually, it’s never your fault, but unfortunately, at times it is.”³⁶² Browder states that there is an underlying problem of anger in almost half of all ISD cases.

³⁶¹ Browder, “When He Doesn’t Want Sex,” 226.

³⁶² *Ibid*, 227.

She writes to readers, “If your man seems to be smoldering in angry silence, ask yourself, ‘have I been too domineering?’”³⁶³ Not only does Browder’s question position women as the underlying cause of a man’s sexual dysfunction, but it also infers that women must be sexually submissive and refrain from initiating sex because it may ruin the man’s libido.

Browder continues with the story of a “shy bear of a man” named Steve, who is terrified he will lose his wife, Norma. So, in addition to his full-time job, Steve does the chores, does all the cooking, and takes their son on camping trips while Norma spends the weekends sailing with her friends. Browder writes, “Lately, though; Steve has lost all desire for sex – hardly surprising since he has no control anywhere else in the relationship. ‘A man married to an overly controlling woman like Norma may withdraw sexually out of self-defense,’ Sandra Scantling at the University of Connecticut Health Center explains.”³⁶⁴ First of all, the story of Norma and Steve encourages female readers to believe that a man who works a full-time job, in addition to being a father and helping around the house, is at greater risk of sexual dysfunction. In this way, the commentary prioritizes women’s domestic duty, in addition to burdening them with their husband’s sexual problems. Browder provides a very limited window into Norma and Steve’s marriage. But with the information she does include, it seems unreasonable to deem Norma as an overly controlling woman. It should also be noted that *Cosmopolitan* was a magazine intended for *working* women. These women often had full-time jobs, came home, did all the chores, made dinner, in addition to spending time with their children. Browder describes Norma, whose husband did the same thing as many of the women reading this magazine, as domineering and controlling. Yet, when thousands of working women did the exact same thing, it was simply the way life was.

³⁶³ Browder, “When He Doesn’t Want Sex,” 227.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 227.

Browder suggests therapy to couples who cannot resolve the man's ISD, but ultimately, she explains that there are some cases of ISD that simply cannot be cured. For those situations, she says that drastic action may be necessary. The possibility of an affair is introduced, and San Francisco sex therapist is quoted saying, "At times discrepancy is so great that an affair may be the only way of preserving the relationship. I've seen cases where nothing else worked."³⁶⁵

Browder then provides another alternative, "Your opposite choice is celibacy. As the dust kicked up by the sexual revolution settles, celibacy is gaining some respectability, and several women I interviewed did admit to leading sexless lives."³⁶⁶ She quotes one of these women, who explain that despite her sexless marriage, she believes that she is much happier than most of her friends. The only two options that the article provides are extramarital affairs and celibacy. Browder does not once suggest that if a woman is truly unhappy, there is also the possibility of divorce. In this way, the article subtly aligns with the social importance of family life.

The article concludes by saying, "With your patience, understanding, and caring, a formerly ardent man can rebound... Love really does conquer all."³⁶⁷ This statement reinforces – with the last lines - that the man's issues with sex are the woman's responsibility. It infers that regardless of how the woman feels, it is her duty to remain in the relationship and help her ailing husband back to sexual health. The article consistently discusses sexual dysfunction specifically within romantic monogamous relationships, and disregards divorce as a viable option for couples who face incurable issues in the bedroom. Love is portrayed as the ultimate healer, and happiness and sexual needs are deemed irrelevant.

³⁶⁵ Browder, "When He Doesn't Want Sex," 265.

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 265.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, 265.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that the primary role of feminist history has not been to produce women as subjects but to explore and contest the means and effects of that subject production as it has varied over time and circumstance. To rest content with any identity – even one we have helped produce – is to give up the work of critique.³⁶⁸

Joan W. Scott, 2004.

When discussing history and critiquing moments and cultures that occurred before us, it is necessary to differentiate between expectation and individual experience. As historian Joan Scott writes above, the production and assumption of women as subjects in history fails to recognize individual experience and identity. The examination of women's lifestyle magazines, for example, cannot provide understanding on how individual women experienced pleasure. However, it can offer insight on how the magazines attempted to tell women how they *should* experience pleasure.

In what Scott terms as “evidence of experience,” there is a tendency to understand experience as uncontested. She problematizes evidence of experience when she says, “[It] then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.”³⁶⁹ Lifestyle magazines represent a single viewpoint of experience with no acknowledgment of individual circumstance. By analyzing their discussions of sex and pleasure, the reproduction of ideological systems is made clear. However, to assume the views of sex and pleasure in lifestyle magazines as representative of all women's experiences is to “reproduce rather than contest given ideological systems.”³⁷⁰ With Scott's arguments in mind, this thesis

³⁶⁸ Joan W. Scott, “The Future of Women's History,” *Journal of Women's Studies* 16, no. 2 (2004): 23.

³⁶⁹ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1991): 777.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 778.

does not accept the social organization of sex and gender. Rather, it attempts to understand how socially acceptable meanings of sex, sexuality and pleasure, particularly within the pages of lifestyle magazines, were used to maintain social organization and drive cultural attitudes.

Cultural attitudes are powerful, and it is important to recognize their relevance and effect. However, their existence does not determine individual experience. There is also power in experience; despite the potential influence of cultural expectations, many women ignored the voices telling them how they *should* act and feel. Women everywhere demanded freedom of sexual experience and autonomy, regardless of gender, race, or class. Women who read lifestyle magazines were not always blind followers of the advice and information given to them. If that were the case, it would not be possible that today, we as women are able to express and experience our sexuality so openly and honestly. Women like Betty Friedan, bell hooks, Anne Koedt, Erica Jong, and Betty Dodson recognized the gender and sexual restrictions in society, and instead of accepting them, they dedicated their lives to eradicating them.

The autonomy and recognition of experience is established in Woodard and Mastin's analysis of *Essence* magazine. Although *Essence* is a capitalist enterprise that often promotes patriarchal beliefs, it does highlight the work of many Black women writers and editors whose work intentionally refuted mainstream stereotypes.³⁷¹ Black female writers like Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Bebe Moore Campbell were all featured in the magazine. Woodard and Mastin argue that despite *Essence*'s overarching patriarchal and consumerist agenda, the inclusion of these powerful Black authors established the magazine as a 'possible voice for Black feminism.' They further explain Black feminist thought by stating "[it] contend[s] that there can be no separation of ideas from experience and that Black feminism is

³⁷¹ Woodard and Mastin, "Black Womanhood," 267.

not a set of abstract principles, but is a set of ideas that come directly from the historical and contemporary experience of Black women.”³⁷² Therefore, the inclusion of Black feminist thought allows ‘contemporary experiences of Black women’ to shine through and influence readers. Woodard and Mastin’s argument supports the opportunity for autonomy and individual experience in relation to lifestyle magazines.

Again, through the words of Joan Scott, I reiterate the importance of continued critique. She emphasizes our responsibility, as historians and feminists, to endlessly analyze our knowledge and social definitions. Scott argues that knowledge exists beyond our ideas, it also refers to “institutions and structures, everyday practices as well as specialized rituals, all of which constitute social relationships.”³⁷³ Knowledge, in this sense, is directly connected to social organization.³⁷⁴ An acceptance of knowledge is an acceptance of social constructions, and has the capability to further confine consciousness and experience. Consciousness is fluid; it changes with historical and cultural conditions. For that reason, consciousness, knowledge, and social constructions must be critiqued, and never taken as self-evident.

With continued critique in mind, I encourage feminists and historians to use my work as a basis for further analysis and understanding. Although I include a discussion on *Essence* magazine and highlight how Black women’s sexuality was treated in comparison to white women, there is much more comprehensive work to be done on women of color and their sexual pleasure. My work, while inclusive, primarily refers to social perceptions and treatment of white women’s sexuality. Most secondary sources that discuss lifestyle magazines do not include very thorough discussions on race. This is partially due to the fact that twentieth-century lifestyle

³⁷² Woodard and Mastin, “Black Womanhood,” 268.

³⁷³ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

magazines targeted a predominantly white audience. They rarely represented women of color and did not include articles about their lives and experiences. Therefore, the further analysis into race, sex, and lifestyle magazines would rely on extensive primary source research.

In addition to a more intersectional historical analysis of the relationship between sex and lifestyle magazines, I believe this work can be used to better understand the role of magazines (and their online counterparts) in our current society and culture. Thankfully, women today benefit immensely from the tireless work of feminists before us; we live in a society that is increasingly open to sexual exploration and identity than that of previous generations. However, similar to the 1980s, we are currently experiencing a backlash against women's rights, the LGBTQ community, and people of color. There are people in our society, in our government, and in the public eye who harbor an irrational amount of hate, stemming from the realization that their social constraint is loosening. A better understanding of how popular culture is responding to the dichotomy within our society is necessary.

Recently, our society has experienced moments of empowerment such as the "Me Too" movement, the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, and the push for greater representation of all races, genders, sexual orientations, religions, and classes in mainstream media. However, we have also endured many negative moments, including the presidential election of Donald Trump. The president, and the conservative politicians who support him, have passed bills in attempt to repress women's reproductive rights, marginalized people based on race and religion through boarder control and travel ban lists, and created a social atmosphere that accepts and encourages misogynistic, racist, and homophobic beliefs.

The argument made in this thesis, that 1980s lifestyle magazines appropriated messages of sexual freedom from the 1960s and 1970s in order to subtly reinforce conservative and

morally conscious beliefs, can be applied to a present-day analysis. It seems as though our society is taking a step backwards, politically and socially. Arguably, this phenomenon can be compared to the 1980s and its feminist backlash and reprioritization of morality. By analyzing popular culture and how it discusses and portrays sexuality and pleasure, we can better understand our society's current cultural expectations. In this way, we honor the request of Joan Scott, and continue to critique our knowledge, consciousness, and culture.

The final goal of this thesis is not to do with research, theory, or historical analysis. Rather, it comes from a place of comradery and an ever-growing passion for sexual autonomy, consent, and our right, as women, to sexual pleasure. While researching and writing this historical discussion on women's sexuality and pleasure, I gained a greater appreciation for my own autonomy. Society has attempted to intrinsically link our ability for sexual pleasure to the penis and penetration, establishing women's sexual dependency on men. Furthermore, precedence is often given to male pleasure. This realization encouraged me to prioritize my own sexual pleasure. I learned to disregard society's expectations on how I should express my sexuality and experience pleasure. I can only hope that other women will use this history and analysis to gain greater autonomy of their own sexuality.

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