Stripping Down Sexual Scripts: A Sexual Analysis of Female-Authored Novels from Time's "100 Must-Read Books of 2019"

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STRIPPING DOWN SEXUAL SCRIPTS: A SEXUAL ANALYSIS OF FEMALE-AUTHORED NOVELS FROM *TIME*'S "100 MUST-READ BOOKS OF 2019"

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Abstract

Most research on sexual content in the media has focused on visual media such as television and film, often overlooking novels. Likewise, research studies on sexual content have not studied the role of authorship. The pattern of accepted sexual scripts in novels, particularly those written by male authors, and the impact that these scripts have on the reader's understanding of sexuality and sexual behaviors merits further research. This study analyzed sexual content in eight female-authored literary fiction novels from *Time*'s "100 Must-Read Novels of 2019." Results found that fiction novels depict a plethora of sexual behaviors. Across the eight books, there were 642 instances of sexual behaviors, including sexual intercourse (15%), sexual affection (28%), verbal references (46%), and sexual ideation (11%). Of the 99 instances of sexual intercourse, 44% of initiation of intercourse was unknown, 15% was mutually initiated, 23% male-initiated, and 18% female-initiated.

Key words: sex scripts, fiction novels, representations of sex and sexuality in literature

> "Even dead, Drenka gave him a hard-on; alive *or* dead, Drenka made him twenty again. Even with temperatures below zero, he would grow hard whenever, from her coffin, she enticed him like this."

The above excerpt from Philip Roth's 1995 novel *Sabbath's Theater* (p. 50) describes a sexual encounter between two main characters. This excerpt depicts a traditional sexual encounter, consistent with sexual scripts and scripting theory (Gagnon, 1977; Gagnon and Simon, 1973, 1987; Simon and Gagnon, 1986), in which the male character is aroused and sexually dominant and the female character is depicted as the object of desire, even in her death.

Although sexual portrayals appear in several media types, most research has focused on digital media, particularly television and film. With the growing popularity of fiction novels and the ever-changing world of sexual scripts, fiction novels are an

interesting and important field to analyze when discussing sexual portrayals. Specifically, multiple studies (Kollath-Cattano et al., 2018; Leistner & Mark, 2016; Sun et al., 2014) have acknowledged that media viewing can influence a viewer's understanding of sex and the viewer's own sexuality.

According to the Association of American Publishers (AAP) 2019 Statshot Annual Report, the U.S. book industry logged $25.63 billion in revenue. Adult fiction books accounted for $4.26 billion (AAP, 2019). The NPD Group reported that 67% of unit sales for the top 100 fiction novels in 2019 came from books written by female authors. A Statista survey (Watson, 2019) found that 81% of adults aged 18–29 had read a book of any format in the previous year. Gender surveys from Statista (Watson, 2018) found that 11% of U.S. women read 31 or more books that year, compared to 5% of male responders.

RQ1: What are the sexual behaviors of male and female characters in female-authored fiction novels?

RQ2: Do modern-day female fiction authors follow gendered sexual scripts in their novels?

Of all the research already conducted on sexual portrayals and sexual scripts in the media, the main themes that arise concerning the research questions are sexuality in the media, sexuality in novels, sexual characters, sexual scripts, and the role of the author in portraying fictional sexual behaviors.

Sex and Sexuality in the Media

Between 1999 and 2005, the Kaiser Family Foundation released four *Sex on TV* reports, which collected and analyzed sexual messages and depictions on screen over a composite week sample. In 2005, the fourth installment of the report was released, covering 959 programs from 10 channels, including ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, and other public and cable channels. The study coded different sexual messages, including sexually suggestive behaviors, talking about sex, and depictions of sexual activity. Seventy percent (70%) of the programs sampled included sexual content, with an average of five sexual scenes per hour (Kunkel et al., 2005).

The most expansive study on sexual scripts on screen (Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018) examined the situational context of sexual content for 200 episodes of television and found that 9.14% of scenes included sexual behaviors. Notably, this study analyzed television shows that depicted emerging adults, which provides an updated analysis of media aimed toward or involving adults. Such statistics aid in

understanding the current landscape of media portrayals and assist in analyzing fiction with an adult target audience and adult characters.

Overall research (Dempsey & Reichart, 2000; Kim et al., 2007; Ward, 2003) on American television programming suggests that male and female characters act consistently with gendered sexual double standards. Existing studies (Clawson, 2005) have also found that male characters are often portrayed as sexually dominant and more sexually experienced than female characters.

Interestingly, Timmermans and Van den Bulck's analysis of casual sexual scripts on screen challenged past research on gendered sexual scripts by finding that female characters (35%) initiated casual sex more frequently than male characters (25%). Researchers also studied mutual initiation (16%) and unknown initiation (26%). This information is particularly relevant for current studies analyzing media and the changes seen in sexual scripts over the years.

Sex and Sexuality in Novels

There has been no sweeping content analysis of novels like the *Sex on TV* report to provide a thorough look at novels' sexual content. Although research on television provides a basis for studying novels, the research is limited. Current studies (Cabrera & Ménard, 2011; Callister et al., 2012) have looked at the portrayals of sexuality in literature with a focus on romance novels (Cabrera & Ménard) and the influence of young adult novels on an adolescent's thoughts and behaviors surrounding sex (Callister et al.). No research has been conducted on sexual content in novels outside of the romance genre directed toward adults. The lack of research completed within the past 10 years provides little information to compare to earlier studies.

A content analysis of 20 romance novels found that the number of sex scenes per book ranged from zero to six and that 20% of the books "had no fully described sex scenes at all" (Cabrera & Ménard, 2011, p. 246). Coded characteristics of male (77.3%) and female (86.4%) characters in the sample were found to be consistent with sexual scripts. Likewise, 77.3% of sexual scenes in the sample fit hypothesized sexual scripts, with most sex scenes in novels released between 1989 and 1999 initiated by male protagonists (63%) versus their female counterparts (33.3%) and few examples of mutual initiation (3.7%).

A similar 2013 study by Cabrera and Ménard examined depictions of orgasms in contemporary romance novels. The study looked at book blocks between 1989–1999 and 2000–2009, coding for orgasm type and frequency. The investigation found traditional sexual scripts, with female characters reaching orgasm quickly and descriptions of helpless characters. They also found "no changes in the characteristics of orgasm for male and female romance novel characters"(p. 208).

A 2012 study by Callister and colleagues looking at sexual activity in adolescent novels identified frequent sexual behaviors and physical demographics of sexual characters. The authors utilized the 2005 *Sex on TV* report to break down 452 acts of sexual content and behaviors into similar groups: sexual intercourse (implicit/explicit), sexual affection (passionate kissing, intimate touching, playful sexual behavior), verbal references (talk about sex, sexually suggestive innuendos, sexual physical description), and romantic sexual ideation (sexual intercourse and sexual affection). These most common types of sexual content were ranked at 37% for verbal sexual content, 31% for sexual affection, 1.75% for ideation, and 12% for sexual intercourse. Interestingly, this study found that female and male characters were equally likely to initiate sex, challenging the expected traditional sexual scripts.

Who Is Having Sex?

The average age for first intercourse by gender in the U.S. is 16.8 for men and 17.2 for women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). More than 50% of respondents aged 18–24 indicated their most recent sexual partner was a casual or dating partner. A similar study (Ueda et al., 2020) of U.S. adults found that sexual inactivity increased among men aged 18–24 years and 25–34 years and among women aged 25–34 years.

With the statistics on the sexuality of the U.S. population revealing little information on sociometric status, attractiveness, and socioeconomic status, looking at fictional portrayals is instrumental in understanding common beliefs and norms about sex, specifically about who is having sex and the opinions that individuals hold against themselves or other sexually active individuals. Callister and colleagues (2012) found that books targeting adolescents averaged 11 instances of sexual content per book. Approximately 64% of the characters who engaged in sexual activities were minors, 23% were adults, and approximately 13% were elderly. Similar studies (for example, Pardun et al., 2005) looking at demographics of sexual characters in literature targeted toward early adolescents found that 76% of sexual relations involved couples who were not married.

Although there is a clear relationship between who has sex and character demographics, studies provide different results, mainly resulting from the fact that researchers are looking at different genres and target audiences for novels. Callister and colleagues' study (2012), however, suggests that the sexual activity of fictional characters is linked directly to physical attributes, popularity, self-esteem, and socioeconomic status. They found that characters who engaged in sexual behavior were likely to be of "popular or controversial status, physically attractive, and of higher socioeconomic status" (p. 483).

In the portion of Cabrera and Ménard's (2011) study focused on character analysis, their research shows that the average romance novel character is in his or her

late twenties or early thirties and is "heterosexual, attractive, single, able-bodied, and childless" (p. 244). Attractiveness, in most cases, was often depicted through dramatized versions of attractiveness, such as "ravishingly beautiful or incredibly handsome" (p. 247). Younger (2003) suggests that young adult literature valorizes "monogamy over multiple sexual partners," putting social constraints on an individual's sexual freedom (p. 50).

These three studies (Callister et al., 2012; Cabrera and Ménard, 2011; and Younger, 2003) were extremely valuable with coding for the research questions for this study; however, these studies looked at novels from various authors, not solely at male- or female-authored literature. Looking at traditional sexual scripts will help in understanding how gendered authorship plays a role in sexual portrayals.

Sexual Scripts

Gagnon and Simon (1973) and Gagnon (1977) suggest that contemporary sexual scripts function as explicit and implicit rules for sexual behavior and emphasize spontaneity rather than foresight in sexual encounters; in society, men and women conform to complementary but different sexual roles. For example, Gagnon and Simon (1973) found that sexual scripts often depict heterosexual characters engaging in penile-vaginal sex.

Gagnon and Simon's (1973) scripting theory provides a basis for understanding the different sexual roles that male and female characters play in media. For example, several studies (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Rosen & Leiblum, 1988; Wiederman, 2005; Zilbergeld, 1999) have found that gender distinctions appear in the format of sexual goals and motivations, emphasis on relational context, an appropriate level of assertiveness, and focus on the genitalia. Similar research looking at sexual scripts and sexual agency (Cabrera & Ménard, 2011) found that men are expected to be assertive and responsible for their partners' pleasure, with female characters being more likely than male characters to be the receptive parties for sexual touching above and below the waist (p. 249).

Curtain et al. (2011, p. 53) found that lack of sexual agency can present as less comfort talking about sex and the likelihood of using condoms. Similarly, Greene and Faulkner (2005, p. 241) suggest that the sexual double standard in Western sexual scripts can be associated with less assertiveness in initiating sex and talking about sex or talking during sexual intercourse. Although sexual scripts for men and women and male and female characters differ, there are shared experiences that can be linked to sexual scripts and sexual norms. It is important to note that although sexual scripts have remained over the years, advances have occurred, specifically in the realm of sexual initiation. Although looking at sexual scripts is essential in understanding characters' sexual behaviors, it is equally important to understand who is writing those scripts.

Male and Female Authors

Callister et al. (2012) suggest that author gender correlates to the prevalence of sexual activity in a novel. For example, their research found that female authors were "more likely to include sexual affection, intercourse, and ideation than male authors" (p. 484). Novels targeting girls were also more likely to include sexual content than those targeting boys or that were non-gender-specific.

Hite's (1998) research on authorship found that male writers often portray female characters as objects of desire and not as sexual beings (p. 125). Hite also suggests that female authors have been influenced by the surge of feminist consciousness, writing from the woman's perspective to stray away from being the object of desire and instead of being sexually autonomous themselves (p. 121).

Allison (2014) and Chute (2010) have examined female authors in the graphic memoir space. Allison suggests that "what has been marginalized is brought to the centre and given a privileged place in these stories" (2014, p. 74). The authors studied in Allison's (2014) essay include Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi, and Tutu Modan, who, she suggests, challenge traditional marginalized themes seen in more popular male-authored graphic novels. Similarly, Chute (2010) discusses the way women's work, often feminist work, is underrecognized in the comic field. Chute (2010) analyzes the work of Marjane Satrapi and graphic authors who depict the reality of life as females, focusing on factors usually left undiscussed in public discourse.

Although there has been minimal research on the role of authorship in novels, several studies analyzing on-screen representations of women by male directors provide an updated look at how women are portrayed in the media. A content analysis of female characters in 100 top-grossing films of 2018 (Lauzen, 2019) found female characters (47%) were more likely to have known marital status than were their male counterparts (36%). Male characters were more likely to be seen with work-related goals (70% vs. 30%), with female characters seen mainly in personal life-related roles (48% vs. 30%).

For films with one or more female directors or writers, females accounted for 57% of protagonists, 47% of main characters, and 43% of characters with speaking roles. In comparison, in films created exclusively by men, 21% of protagonists, 32% of major characters, and 32% of characters with speaking roles were female.

A study comparing male and female pornography directors (Sun et al., 2008) analyzed 44 of the most popular rented VHS and DVD pornographic titles. Sun and colleagues found that women were more likely to direct scenes containing positive behaviors, including kissing, terms of endearment, and concern for their partner. Notably, male-directed scenes were twice as likely to include aggressive male characters. In female-directed scenes, 60% of aggressive acts were perpetrated by female characters versus 21.3% in male-directed scenes; however, 81.1% of female-

directed aggressive scenes had female perpetrators and female targets. Female targets were often spanked and gagged; degraded by being called "slut," "whore," or "bitch"; and almost always (97.3%) responded with pleasure.

How Past Research Affected the Study

Lessons and criticisms are taken from existing content-analysis studies of novels and on-screen portrayals (Cabrera & Ménard, 2011; Kunkel et al., 2005) showing that media often adhere to traditional Western sexual scripts; however, similar studies found that female characters in casual sex scripts on screen were more likely than male characters to initiate sex (Timmermans & Van den Bulck, 2018) or were equally likely to initiate sexual activities (Callister et al., 2012), challenging the norm of male initiation. Casual sex scripts also challenge traditional sex scripts, suggesting that sexual acts in committed relationships differ from those between two casual partners.

Few studies analyzing the role of authorship and direction in sexual and feminist portrayals include varying results. Hite (1998) suggests that female authors often set out to write about the body and sexuality from the woman's point of view as a sexual being instead of the object being desired. Similarly, studies on graphic novels and comics suggest that female authors are more likely to provide realistic representations of sex and feminism; however, Sun et al. (2008) found that female-directed porn did not challenge traditional gender roles and argue that "money, rather than gender, dictates vision" (p. 322). Because of the growing number of realistic sexual portrayals in literature, especially in which female characters break traditional romance scripts or sexual scripts, a multitiered content analysis of female-authored novels was performed to identify scripts and themes.

Methods

A content analysis was performed to discover how sexual behaviors and sexual characters are portrayed in novels by female authors. This section describes the research process, including sample selection, unit of analysis, coding instrument design, administration, and analysis.

Sample

A sample of eight realistic fiction novels from *Time*'s "100 Must-Read Books of 2019" was chosen. The year 2019 was chosen because research for this project began in November 2020, before lists of the top books of that year were released. *Time*'s list of recommended books was chosen over lists from more literary-focused publications such as the *New York Times* "Critics' Top Books of 2019" and Goodread's "2019 Best Books of the Year," based on the number of recommendations. The *New York Times*

list featured 30 books, half of which were nonfiction. Goodreads included 20 books in their Top Fiction Novels of the Year category. In comparison, *Time* included 28 novels in the realistic fiction category, providing a larger range of novels for the sample.

Realistic fiction novels were chosen rather than suspense novels and novels set in altered worlds, literature in translation, short stories and poetry, memoir and essays, history and politics, society and science, and true crime and journalism because fiction novels may elicit stronger and more emotional beliefs than nonfiction novels (Goldstein, 2009). The *Time* website contained the original sample list of 23 female-authored realistic fiction novels (Bajekal et al., 2020).

Fourteen novels were excluded from the sample because *Time*'s description of them did not include reference to sex, relationships, love, or marriage; they were unavailable to the researcher; or they did not feature young adults, adults, or adolescents as the main characters. The 14 novels removed were *Doxology*; *Ducks, Newburyport*; *The Dutch House*; *Girl, Woman, Other*; *Lost Children Archive*; *Miracle Creek*; *Mostly Dead Things*; *The Other Americans*; *Searching for Sylvie Lee*; *Supper Club*; *The Revisioners*; *The Shadow King*; *The Unpassing*; and *Women Talking.* Six novels were unavailable to the researcher: *Doxology*; *Girl, Woman, Other*; *Mostly Dead Things*; *Supper Club*; *The Revisions*; and *Women Talking*. Three novels—*The Dutch House, Lost Children Archive*, and *The Unpassing*—feature main characters who are children. *Miracle Creek, The Other Americans*, and *Searching for Sylvie Lee* are mystery novels without relationships or sex in the descriptions, and *Ducks, Newburyport* is written in an untraditional fictional style, formatted as a run-on sentence. After the removal of these 14 novels, the final sample of eight novels included *Patsy*; *Queenie*; *The Man Who Saw Everything*; *Fleishman Is in Trouble*; *Trust Exercise*; *Red at the Bone*; *Olive, Again*; and *All This Could Be Yours.*

Unit of Analysis

Because the research question focused on sexual behaviors, the unit of analysis for the content analysis was sexual activities for the eight novels. For this study, sexual activities are defined according to Kunkel and colleagues' (2005) Kaiser Family Foundation *Sex on TV* report: any depiction of sexual activity, sexually suggestive behavior, or talk about sexuality or sexual activity.'

Coding Instrument

The coding instrument individually coded each sexual activity or sexual behavior in all eight novels and contained five categories and 21 variables: (1) page number, (2) scene description, (3) characters involved, (4) sexual activity (including 15 variables), and (5) initiator (including four variables). All variables are described below.

Sexual Activity Variables

This section coded four sexual activities and their descriptions: (1) intercourse (explicit intercourse, implicit intercourse), (2) affection (passionate kissing, intimate touching, playful sexual behaviors), (3) ideation (implicit intercourse, explicit intercourse, mild kissing, passionate kissing, intimate sexual behaviors, playful sexual behaviors), and (4) verbal references (implicitly talking about sex, explicitly talking about sex, suggestive innuendos, sexual physical description). Kunkel and colleagues' (2005) definitions were adapted to fit a sample of books rather than visual samples such as television shows or films. Further descriptions of sexual behaviors were based on Callister and colleagues' 2012 content analysis study.

Intercourse

Implicit sexual intercourse was coded when sexual intercourse was not literally described but could be inferred by narrative devices, such as descriptions where characters are waking up together and putting on their clothes. Explicit sexual intercourse was coded when there was a literal description of the sexual intercourse.

Affection

Passionate kissing is kissing that conveys a sense of sexual intimacy. Intimate touching includes touching another's body in a way that is intended to be sexually arousing. Playful behavior includes gestures or conversations meant to arouse sexual interest.

Ideation

Romantic sexual ideation is the term used for fantasizing, formulating plans, or having ideas for romantic or sexual behavior without the action actually being carried out. Ideation was divided into two subcategories: sexual intercourse (implicit and explicit) and sexual affection (mild kissing, passionate kissing, intimate touching, and sexual playful behavior).

Verbal References

Verbal references to sexual activity were coded according to characters talking about sex, characters making suggestive innuendos, or sexual descriptions of or by the character. Talking about sex includes making comments about one's own or others' sexual actions, interests, sexual advice, and sex-related crimes. When characters talked about sex they had had or were having, however, this was coded as explicit sexual intercourse. *Sexually suggestive innuendos* refers to remarks implying a sexual

double meaning in the expression. Sexual physical description is a character's or the narrator's description of someone's body parts or features in a sexually evaluative way.

Initiator Variables

The gender of the individual initiating sexual encounters contained four self-explanatory variables, including *male, female, unknown,* and *mutual initiation*.

Administration

All eight novels were read and coded by the researcher, who served as the primary coder.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

Results

Frequency and Type of Sexual Content

RQ1, which asked about the frequency of sexual behaviors in female-authored literature novels, yielded 642 instances of sexual content across eight novels. Novels ranged from having 10 instances as the least sexual content, in *The Man Who Saw Everything*, to having 290 instances in *Fleishman Is in Trouble*, averaging 80.25 instances per book across the sample. These fiction novels depict many sexual behaviors, which can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Sexual Activity by Type

Type of sexual content	Activity	Number of instances	Percentage
Verbal references	Talk about sex	85	13.2%
	Suggestive innuendo	94	14.7%
	Sexual physical description	117	18.2%
	Total	296	46.1%
Sexual affection	Passionate kissing	48	7.5%
	Intimate touching	108	16.8%

|	Sexual playful behavior	20	3.11%
	Total	276	27.4%
Sexual intercourse	Implicit intercourse	8	1.3%
	Explicit intercourse	91	14.2%
	Total	99	15.4%
Initiation of intercourse	Male	23	23.2%
	Female	17	17.2%
	Mutual	15	15.2%
	Unknown	44	44.4%
Sexual ideation	Passionate kissing	11	1.7%
	Intimate sexual behavior	28	4.4%
	Sexual playful behavior	1	0.2%
	Sexual intercourse	31	4.8%
	Total	71	11.1%
	Grand total	642	

The most common type of sexual behavior was verbal references, accounting for 46% of all sexual behaviors, most of which were sexual physical descriptions (18%), suggestive innuendos (14%), and talk about sex (13%). The next most common behavior was sexual affection (27%), including intimate touching (16%), passionate kissing (7%), and playful sexual behavior (3%). Sexual intercourse (15%) was next common, including implicit intercourse (1%) and explicit intercourse (14%). The least common behavior was sexual ideation, at 11%, including sexual intercourse (4%), intimate sexual behavior (4%), passionate kissing (1%), and playful sexual behavior (0.1%).

Intercourse Initiation

Because of RQ2's relation to sexual scripts, assessing the initiator of sexual encounters seemed important to understand whether sexual behaviors in the samples were consistent with traditional sexual scripts with typical male initiation. An

analysis of sexual intercourse instances was coded for initiator as male, female, unknown, or mutual. Of the 99 instances of sexual intercourse identified, unknown initiation was most common (44%), followed by male initiation (23%), female initiation (17.2%), and mutual initiation (15.2%; Figure 1).

Figure 1. Intercourse Initiation
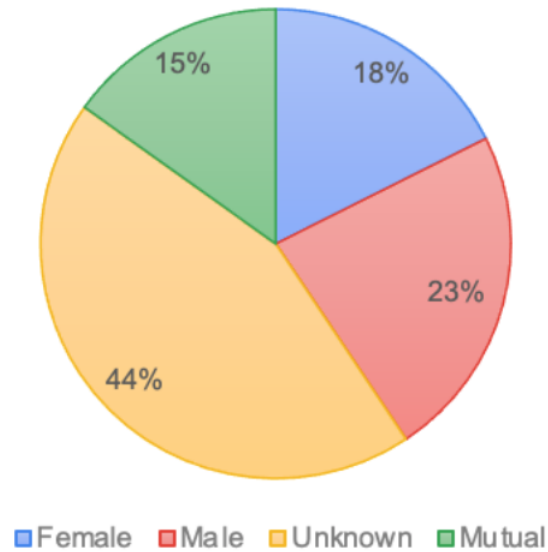
Discussion

This study provides an analysis of sexual behaviors in female-authored literary fiction novels. Almost half of all instances (44%) across the eight novels were verbal references, including talk about sex, sexual physical descriptions, and suggestive innuendos. About another quarter (27%) of instances were of sexual affection, ranging from passionate kissing to intimate touching and playful sexual behavior. Female-authored books in the sample had an average of 80.25 sexual references and/or interactions; however, sexual encounters ranged from 10 in *The Man Who Saw Everything* to 290 in *Fleishman Is in Trouble*.

Across the eight novels, there were 99 instances of sexual intercourse. Of those 99, almost half (44%) had unknown initiation, in which it was not clear which party initiated intercourse. Approximately one quarter (23%) of instances of intercourse were male-initiated, with female initiation occurring 18% of the time.

In summary, the sample of novels did follow traditional western sexual scripts, with male initiation more common than female or mutual initiation. The numbers of instances of female and mutual initiation were close to that of male-initiation instances, suggesting that female and mutual initiation are on the rise and more popular than traditional sexual scripts in which male initiation is more common; however, the number of unknown instances (44%) suggests that although initiation is not clearly stated, there is an opportunity for female or mutual initiation to be shown more frequently in novels.

Findings from this study echo findings from Cabrera and Ménard's 2011 study, in which they found that between the years 2000 and 2009, the number of male sexual initiations in novels decreased to 31.6%, while female initiation increased slightly to 42.1%, compared to 1989–1999, when male initiation was at 63.0% and female initiation at 33%. Using this past research as a guide would confirm slight increases in the numbers of mutual and female initiation in literature.

While the findings from this study suggest that female initiation may be more common in the future, they still support traditional sexual scripts, because women characters are more likely to be pursued versus being the ones in pursuit. Although looking only at initiation gives us a minimal idea of the use of traditional gender roles in female-authored novels, this is under the assumption that all sexual encounters followed heteronormative expectations of one male and one female character. Likewise, the context of the couples involved would clarify results, factoring in same-sex depictions or relationships involving nonbinary characters. The study on sexual behavior frequency provided results consistent with that of similar studies (Cabrera & Ménard, 2011; Callister et al., 2012).

These findings support Cabrera and Ménard's (2011) prediction that there will be fewer sex scenes in romance novels, contradicting that romance novels focus mainly on sexual intercourse. Like Callister and colleagues' (2012) study, which found intercourse to occur 12% of the time, the total number of sexual intercourse instances (15%) was low compared to other behaviors. These findings may suggest that instances of explicit intercourse, in which intercourse is clearly described or stated, may conform to traditional sexual scripts where detailed intercourse, and not a description of intercourse, is not usually shown. More often shown is talking about sex, thinking about sex, and an overall sexual environment in a novel compared to true depictions or instances of sex.

Timmermans and Van den Bulck (2018) found that within romantic relationships on screen, passionate kissing and intimate touching (76%) were seen more than intercourse (24%), and within casual sexual experiences, intercourse was seen more frequently (77%) than other sexual behaviors. Further analysis of the content of relationships in novels studied may align with Timmermans and Van den

Bulck's findings and confirm the fact that casual sexual relationships challenge traditional sexual scripts.

Strengths and Limitations

The sample in this study was relatively small, consisting of eight novels and 642 sexual encounters. A larger sample of novels would generate a larger sample of sexual encounters and lead to more statistical significance. Studying male-authored novels would allow for comparison with findings from female-authored novels. The study sample consisted of novels published in 2019; however, the time spent writing and publishing a novel must be considered when comparing current and earlier works of fiction. Using novel blocks, similar to the ten-year blocks seen in the research of Cabrera & Ménard, may provide a better overview of changes in sexual scripts and patterns of sexual behaviors.

The sexual behaviors analyzed give us a basic understanding of the frequency of sexual encounters in novels; however, only the initiation analysis provided insight into how novels followed or strayed from traditional sexual scripts. Further analysis of characters and more details on sexual encounters would aid in better understanding of the prevalence or omission of traditional sexual scripts.

Future Research Recommendations

Investigators in this area might want to consider using a mix of female- and male-authored novels to better understand the relationship between sexual script prevalence and gendered authorship. It would be important to compare male- and female-authored novels to achieve statistical significance. It would also be important to use a mix of novels from the years 2010–2021 to get more insight and a larger sample of novels compared to novels published only in 2019. It would also be valuable to have a team of researchers work on this project to ensure coder reliability. Further research on the role of authorship and its impact on the prevalence of sexual scripts and traditional stereotypes would allow for a more well-rounded study when comparing results to previous literature. Investigators should also consider analyzing characters in the novel(s) to understand who is having sex and not only how frequently sex is depicted or described. Further analysis on sexual encounters should include the time of day, contraception uses or lack thereof, and other demographic variables.

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